

The Revolutionary Cinema of Jonas Mekas



Jonas Mekas was born Christmas Eve, 1922, in a small Lithuanian village of roughly a hundred people. His childhood was split between attending school in winter, and tending fields, sheep, and cattle in summer. By thirteen, he was a published poet, and his poetry would attract increasing attention in Lithuania and among the Lithuanian diaspora in the coming years. His life in Lithuania would be forever ruptured, however, by two invasions: the Soviets in 1940 and the Germans in 1942. Attention drawn to his writings for a clandestinely-operated anti-Nazi newspaper was the cause of his going underground for the first time. It would not be the last.

Fleeing with his younger brother Adolfas across Europe, they found themselves at first in a German-run labor camp, then in a series of post-war camps for Displaced Persons, in which they were exposed to German neo-realist films, and consequently developed a mutual passion for the possibilities of disseminating enlightenment, or at least social consciousness, through this mode of cinema. While still interned they began to write scripts and, upon emigrating to the US, hit the ground running. Immediately making contacts and attending screenings, they were within a few years squarely in the center of the New York film community. Jonas used his factory wages to purchase a Bolex and began "practicing" for "real" film production by documenting the goings-on around him, footage which would eventually find itself both in his feature production *Guns of the Trees* and in his mature diary film practice.

Jonas's cinematic efforts became a frenzied whirlwind of activity. While continuing to hold down a job and attend virtually every film shown on New York screens, he founded *Film Culture* in 1955, one of the first serious film magazines in the US, a glossy publication financed on a shoestring (and prayer), in which most of the major themes of American critical thought on cinema would first see the light of day. In 1958, he began his weekly column *Movie Journal* in the recently-founded Village Voice, in which he would excoriate, propagandize, rhapsodize, muse, and philosophize in regards to specific films and cinema in general, as well as champion tendencies in accord with his increasingly radical aesthetic position.

At first falling under the influence of Edouard de Laurot, whose Marxian-inflected theories of the social responsibility of cinema served as the default philosophy of *Film Culture*, Mekas, responding to the lure of American sensibilities, especially as found in the developing movements of Beat and American experimental cinema, went native. Earlier, he had published screeds against this type of filmmaking and its supposed homosexual influences--a position he later described as "Saint Augustine before the conversion". Now he was the avant-garde's premiere advocate, openly reveling in its lyricism, sensuality, solipsism, micro-scale, and the Beat commitment to the immediate.

It was at this point, shortly after evangelizing the new narrative cinema of Frank and Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* and Cassavetes's *Shadows* (he famously lauded the first version and derided the second), Mekas could hold himself back no more. Quickly writing the script for *Guns of the Trees*, he immediately plunged into production, no small task given that he had no money and was shooting in the fantastically expensive "professional" format, 35mm. Equipment and filmstock were borrowed and scrounged from every possible source. A guerrilla band willing to suffer dire privation formed around the production as crew. This was filmmaking as revolutionary act, made from a belief that art could transform the world.

Guns of the Trees is a vision of a world in desperate need of transformation. Pitched somewhere between de Laurot's proto-Social-Constructionism and avant-garde revelry in the Self, *Guns* revolves around the tragedy of a woman unable to distinguish between personal desperation and the woes of the world. As her mate is played by Adolfas, it is easy to see her as semi-consciously symbolic of Jonas' dying European *anima*, in the process of being replaced in this role by Argus Spear Juillard, the woman of the contrasting life-affirming black couple, who are perhaps on the verge of conceiving the "New Man" who will enact the gravely needed world metamorphosis. *Guns of the Trees* is a work of raw naked emotion, and delicate beauty, its exquisite cinematography the work of Mekas himself.



The repeated calls for a "New Man" in *Guns* have their origins in musings along these lines in Mekas's personal diaries, and after *Guns*, his life's trajectory was to celebrate this "New Man" in others, and to embody him in his own life and work. Key values would be receptivity, responsiveness, and spontaneity. As champion and organizer of the burgeoning Underground Cinema movement, and the New American Cinema Group, as founder of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, eventually as leading practitioner of the Film Diary, Mekas's whole life was a commitment to freedom as experienced in the possibilities of the present moment.

In *The Brig*, Mekas's *cinema-verite* response to Kenneth Brown's nightmare-vision play set in a Marine-base prison in Japan, we see the old world confronted by the new. If the closed world of the brig is reminiscent of Mekas's WWII-era prison camp experiences, Mekas now approaches this world in a manner free, open, spontaneous. In Storm De Hirsch's *Newsreel: Jonas in the Brig*, we watch as Mekas, though loaded with a heavy camera rig, bobs, weaves, dances. He was, at last, the "New Man".

FROM JONAS MEKAS'S VILLAGE VOICE COLUMN: MOVIE JOURNAL

February 4, 1959: CALL FOR A DERANGEMENT OF CINEMATIC SENSES

Every breaking away from the conventional, dead, official cinema is a healthy sign. We need less perfect but more free films. If only our younger film-makers – I have no hope for the old generation – would really break loose, completely loose, out of themselves, wildly, anarchically! There is no other way to break the frozen cinematic conventions than through a complete derangement of the official cinematic senses.

November 25, 1959: SHOOT THE SCREENWRITERS

There is no doubt that most of the dullness of our movies is concocted in advance in the so-called heads of the so-called script-writers. Not only the dullness: they also perpetuate the standard-ized film constructions, dialogues, plots. They follow closely their textbooks of "good" screenwriting. Shoot all scriptwriters, and we may yet have a rebirth of American cinema.

October 6, 1960: ON FILM TROUBADOURS

Films will soon be made as easily as written poems, and almost as cheaply. They will be made everywhere and by everybody. The empires of professionalism and big budgets are crumbling. Every day I meet young men and women who sneak into town from Boston, Baltimore, even Toronto, with reels of film under their coats – as if they were carrying pieces of paper scribbled with poems. They screen them at some friend's loft, or perhaps at the Figaro, and then disappear, without making a big fuss about it. They are the real film troubadours. This is about the best thing that has happened to cinema since Griffith shot his first close-up.

March 2, 1961

...As long as the "lucidly minded" critics stay out, with all their "form," "content," "art," "structure," "style," "clarity," "importance," and all that crap – everything will be all right; just keep them out. Because this new soul is still budding, going through a most dangerous, most sensitive time. Keep out all those strong wills with their preconceived, worked out ideas.

...American culture began with the groans of James Dean and Brando and Carruthers. It is nonsense that we have to uphold the "American way of life": there was no true American way of life until James Dean – there was only a bastardized Europe. It is true that the new man is in a mess. And so is his art. ("Natural processes are *uncertain*, in spite of their lawfulness. Perfectionism and uncertainty are mutually exclusive" – Wilhelm Reich.) But he is not in a frantic search for a "single significant note" – he doesn't even care about significance – he is in search of the meaning of life itself.

January 25, 1962

...It is the insignificant, the fleeting, the spontaneous, the passing that reveals life and has all the excitement and beauty.

March 26, 1964: ON SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Yes, the social engagement! It seems the artists are changing the direction of engagement. It took a long time (for some of us) to see something we knew from the very beginning: That it is no use criticizing the existing order or the bad state of man's soul; that you can't change or improve or save man from outside; that the real work must be done inside; that others can be reached only through the beauty of your own self; that you can't protect humanity by "changing the world"; one change can be as bad as another (since the world began, man keeps changing the world); that the work, therefore, the real work must be done first in your own self (my self); any change must begin within you (me); that only the beautiful and truthful souls can change the world and bring or transfer beauty and truth into the others; that, further, a single brush line can do more for man, exalt his soul and reach and change him more deeply than all the socially-morally conscious art; that there is the beauty of the souls which manifests themselves in pure and absolute forms, colors, tones, movements, and that man always knew about it but keeps forgetting it and then remembering it again, and we are beginning to remember it again.

FROM THE DIARIES OF JONAS MEKAS:

10 December 1954

Still looking for money. Last week our books showed that we have only \$120. The sum needed to pay for the next issue of *Film Culture* is \$700. During last few days I've approached at least thirty people, in film business, for sponsorship. I got mostly the names but no money.

While preparing the first issue, I was mostly concentrating on the contents. Money seemed such a secondary thing. But now I am facing the reality.

11 December 1954

I am continuing the money odyssey. Perry Miller said she spent all her money on a trip to Europe, she owes money to her mother. We called dozens of people without any results. I tried to get to see Marlene Dietrich, but I was thrown out by the doorman.

18 August 1958

We were shooting the gas station sequence, for Edouard's [de Laurot] film. As Edouard was driving, with Adolfas [Mekas] sitting on the hood, with an Arri, against the traffic, a police car came out of nowhere. They were waiting, hiding. "I am arresting you," said one cop.

They left us on the roadside, and took Edouard to the station. He came back an hour later. "They couldn't understand," said Edouard, "why we were making a film without being paid, just for the love of making it. The cop even called his superior, on the phone, and told him all about our case, asking if such a thing was possible that someone would make a film without being paid."

FROM THE DIARIES OF JONAS MEKAS: on shooting *GUNS OF THE TREES*

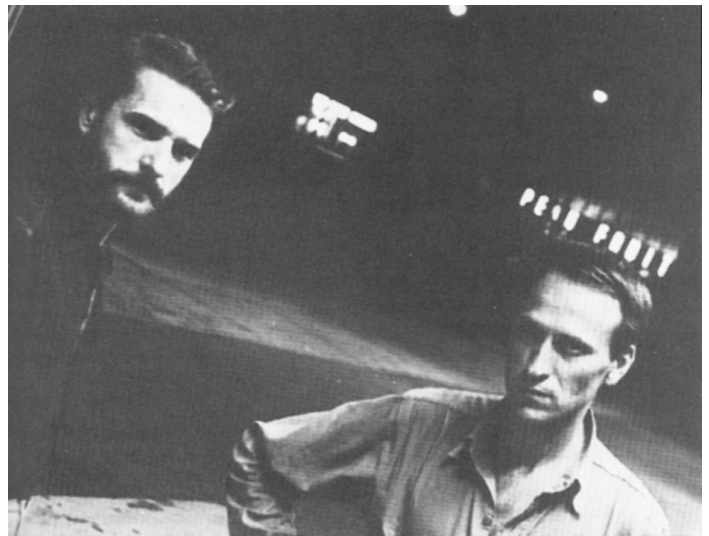
14 July 1960

Every day a dozen envelopes with photographs, credits on the other side, etc., came in, from actors, sending their pictures. So they think we are making a movie about actors? They can't play anything but actors. They look like actors, they speak like actors, they behave like actors, and they are actors. And I hate actors!

Had two weeks of shooting. Today we were scouting for new locations in Conn. Got arrested, all six of us, for trespassing, at a public lake. "I'll slap your asses all over the place," shouted the cop at the police station. He was particularly tough with Adolfas because he thought he was a "beatnik". Adolfas had to grow a beard for his part, so now, wherever we go, we are treated as "beatniks". The cop became as mild as a cherry blossom when Barbara [Stone] told him that her brother was the Connecticut State Attorney General. He immediately ordered to let us free, law or no law.

25 July 1960

Sheldon [Rochlin] told me: "I cut my hair for your film. My father told me that my hair was too long. I said, I spent my money on film – the film needs money more than haircutters do. So he said, cut your hair and I'll buy a share. So I did, without waiting to hear it twice." We now have \$500 to continue shooting.



3 August 1960

We set up our cameras by a small lake, in L.I. Just when we were ready to start shooting, a cop came and told us to move. Private Property. He told us, the place belonged to a movie theater chain owner.



Got terribly hungry. No bread, no nothing. Stopped at Almus', in Great Neck, but he himself had nothing. Bought some food in a store and ate it in front of a synagogue, late at night. A rabbi came out to check, so we all fell on our knees, pretending we had come to pray, shouting lines in five different languages, including Latin, which as we later realized, was a wrong way to do it. But we finished our meal in peace. Sheldon went to a nearby house for bread and succeeded in getting some: they thought he was one of the college boys, trying to do something crazy to get into one of the fraternities, or something. They didn't believe he was really hungry.

31 August 1960

For the second week now we are living on one meal a day. Once every day we all go to the 77th and Amsterdam corner restaurant to get our one dollar meal. The rest of the day everybody's on his own – to steal, to get from friends, girlfriends, or live on water and air. Sheldon walks to the icebox every ten minutes, opens it, and closes it again. He knows damn well there is nothing in it. Still, he keeps doing it.

30 September 1960

A Few Advices to a Beginning Filmmaker:

1. Mistrust every living filmmaker; respect the dead ones.
2. Stay away from the advices of all professional editors. They are all “cutters,” literally cutters: they are no editors.
3. Snarl at the criticism and advices of professional cameramen, laugh at “right” or “proper” exposures, focus.
4. Ignore scripts. Shuffle pages around, like Orson did with the script of *Arkadin* [Confidential Report].
5. Invent cinema from the beginning, as if nobody had done it before you.

6 October 1960

No shooting since Monday. Out of money again. Sent Sheldon to Baltimore, to comb his relatives. Borrowed \$50 from [Dan] Talbot. Projector broke down, we can't screen our rushes. Adolfas has been fixing it for last two days, machine parts are all over the place – screws, bolts, springs, wheels. To change one small part he had to take the entire machine apart. The repair man wanted to charge us hundreds for the job.

12 December 1960

Now even the weather turned against us. For a month I was planning a screening for today, for possible investors. But yesterday it started snowing. Today New York looks like Alaska, the snow is all over the town. None of the seven investors showed up from their seven hideouts. I spent my last money to pay the projectionist – who came... Then we all got into a bus, paying only for three, and went to 87th street, to Diane's place, to see if there is anything in her icebox. There was nothing in it. We collected between all of us 45 cents and sent Sheldon out to buy some bread and tea. He came back with ham and eggs and butter. He managed to steal it all. So we ate and then went to the New Yorker, our last refuge, to see some old Hitchcocks. Dan gave us five bucks to begin life anew. So we walked through the cold, snowy New York streets shouting and singing.

26 December 1960

We tried a new method of editing. We have cards for every shot. We layed them out on a huge reflector. We caught a roach and let it crawl through the cards. But, somehow, the beast chose a very straight line, not interesting at all.

17 January 1961

Shirley [Clarke], that good woman, she arranged that now, nights, when she is not working, we can use her moviola. She is till working on *The Connection*, shuffling and reshuffling it again. “You know where the key is,” she said “so come and work.” Just like that. So we brought out footage and worked all night. We'll continue tomorrow night.

20 January 1961

Harrison Starr managed to swing our tapes into Pathe, for a free transfer, so now we are listening and checking our dubbing. We dubbed it right here, in our room, running the film, silently, on moviola, the actors watching their lips, and then immediately after the moviola stops, saying the lines. It worked. Shirley thinks it's a fantastic solution, she'll do the same: no expenses.

16 May 1961

We are in the middle of the moviola tournament fever. Last night Peter [Bogdanovich] came and discovered a new, improved method of turning the frame counter, he almost beat us. The thing is, who will spin more numbers in one turn. Adolfas keeps the record with 137. I come next with 133, which is still a good major league.

We are switching from beans to oatmeal. Gregory [Markopoulos]'s discovery. He said he made his film (*Serenity*) on oatmeal. Our beans are popping out through our ears and eyes.

29 May 1961

Saturday we locked ourselves up on 43rd Street and with Dan Drasin's and Chuck's help, in one long marathon session, we edited the negative. Hungry and without sleep, but we did it. Chuck fell asleep in the car, on our way to Panna, whom we persuaded to feed us.

FROM JONAS MEKAS'S VILLAGE VOICE COLUMN: MOVIE JOURNAL

December 21, 1961: A RENDEZVOUS WITH THE FBI

“*I dreamed J. Edgar Hoover groped me in a silent hallway of the Capitol...*” - ALLEN GINSBERG in *Guns of the Trees*.

Two days after the Cinema 16 screening of *Guns of the Trees* I received an early morning telephone call.

“My name is Schwartz, from the FBI,” said a voice at the other end of the phone. “I want to ask you a few questions.”

Schwartz. A good name, I thought. FBI. I was sort of thrilled. I remembered the novels of Mickey Spillane. We agreed to meet on Avenue B. I had always wanted to meet an FBI agent. Or a detective. I wondered if I'd be able to spot him on the street. Spot him I did; there was no mistake about that. Nobody could have missed him on the Lower East Side. A face right out of a Carol Reed movie, with black hat and raincoat.

“You don’t have to talk to me, you know,” said Mr. Schwartz, as he flashed his card.

“I don’t mind at all,” I said. “I’m thrilled. I’m glad.”

Still, I looked around. I was entering a dark conspiracy. And although I knew I wasn’t guilty of any crime, I felt the huge power of the entire State Department behind this Carol Reed man.

Mr. Schwartz didn’t waste any time: “Have you seen any Soviet citizens lately?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. There was no point in denying my contacts with film-makers or film critics of any country.

“Did you see them professionally? You know, as a photographer?”

I looked at him. There was a queer smile on his face. It was very clear what he was driving at: photographs, secret documents, cameras – all the spy stuff. I remembered *Five Fingers*.

“No,” I said. “I saw them on personal matters.”

I thought that was vague enough. Mr. Schwartz walked along silently for a moment. It was cold. He looked into a coffee shop, but I preferred the cold morning air.

“Did they ever offer you any money?” he asked suddenly.

Money! I had better deny it, and fast, I thought. This was a dangerous question.

“No,” I said. “I haven’t received any money from any Soviet citizen and you needn’t worry about it, if that’s what you were afraid of.”

That should do it, I thought. It didn’t.

“I have information that you’ve received money from Soviet citizens in this country,” said Mr. Schwartz.

We walked on silently. If he doesn’t believe what I say, why does he bother asking me, I thought. It was insulting. What had seemed at first an innocent adventure, a game, suddenly became disgusting.

“I’d be glad to get some money from somebody,” I said. “I could use some.”

The joke didn’t come off. Mr. Schwartz was waiting for a direct answer or a sudden confession. I had made a mistake, I thought. You should never say that you need money – that may be proof that you accepted money. You are forgetting your movies, I thought.

“You are avoiding the answer,” said Mr. Schwartz. I found myself wondering: Is he recording, taping down what I say? “But the question is ridiculous,” I said.

“It’s my duty to find out the facts,” said Mr. Schwartz.

“But how are you going to do that if you don’t believe what I say? It’s useless,” I said. “You are wasting taxpayers’ money with useless investigations.”

“Do you pay taxes?” the agent asked.

I shut up. Hell, I said to myself, he may dig into my taxes. He probably has a book on me, ten inches thick.

“Did you receive the money, yes or no?” insisted the man from the FBI.

I was in it, but good. I wanted to say “No,” but the sound disappeared in my mouth. My “No” was completely meaningless by now. I knew that if I said “No” it would sound exactly like “Yes.”

I saw the East River in front of me. But I smelled the Un-American Activities Committee, the Gestapo, the NKVD, and all the secret agents, cops, and armies that I’ve already been through – The Flies of the 20th century.

“No,” I said, “I refuse to answer this question. I think I’ve had enough of this. And then to tell you the truth, I hate agents. All agents.”

I stopped. I looked at Mr. Schwartz and could clearly see that he no longer had any doubt: I was guilty. I had refused to answer; that meant I was evading the truth, that I was guilty. I had received money from Grigori Chukhrai, perhaps, or Sergei Bondarchuk, or Tatjana Samailova.

“Yes, I hate agents,” I said. I thought I would repeat it for the sake of the East River. “And then, do you think that by answering yes or no, it would change anything? Do you mean to tell me that you will burn my file after this? My answer will change nothing. Once you satisfy your suspicions you’ll stick to them. So I may as well tell you right here and now that I refuse to cooperate with the FBI.”

Suddenly I felt like a crusader. “Who is going to tell me what to do and say? I’m free to exchange artistic knowledge I have with whomever I please – whether he’s Russian, Greek, or Chinese. My knowledge is universal.”

“No,” interrupted Mr. Schwartz. “I’m the one who knows what you can and what you can’t tell to others. I’m paid for it, this is my profession, this is my field. I am the authority on it.”

That shut me up. I was astounded.

“But I’m an artist,” I said, “and you’re only an FBI agent. I have knowledge that is not available to you. I have knowledge of the arts and human experience. I myself will decide how and where to use my experience and my knowledge. O.K.? You should think about it, I’m telling you this as one human being to another.”

“You are wrong,” said Mr. Schwartz.

The street was cold as Hell. The chimneys of the Con Edison plant were cold. The agent’s face was cold.

Suddenly everything seemed so stupid. Here I am, walking with an FBI agent on this cold December morning, on the lower East Side, with Christmas wreaths hanging in the store windows, talking to him, trying to prove something – to prove what?

“O.K.,” I said finally, “I admit it. I’m working in a huge munitions factory and I have files and files of secret materials and I am selling them for money to the Russian film-makers – you know, one has to eat...”

We walked on silently now. Communication was breaking down rapidly.

“This is stupid,” I said. “I am going home.”

Mr. Schwartz didn’t look at me.

“Do you refuse to cooperate?” he asked. The voice was cold as metal. “You don’t want to help the government? You know, you are making a mistake by not cooperating.”

“Yes, I refuse to cooperate because the whole thing makes no sense. That’s what you should say in your report.”

The agent turned away and walked toward Avenue A. I bought a loaf of bread and walked home. What the hell did he want, I thought. What is behind all this? What kind of scheme? How the hell do they get such ideas? And how many people, how many are being harassed like this, every day, with stupid suspicions, senseless questions?

Or perhaps I’m guilty? Maybe I’ve sinned in my sleep? And who left the tip after that vodka with the Russian director (I don’t dare mention his name now)? Or perhaps I revealed the secret about the size of our Cinemascope screen? You never know. I was searching through my memory.

The telephone rang. Is it tapped? Has it been tapped for weeks now? I thought I heard a strange click in it. I sat by the table. The telephone rang again. I stared at it.

June 24, 1965: SHOOTING *THE BRIG*

Since this is summertime and there isn’t much else to do, I’ll give you the full account of *The Brig*. I thought this should be done as a supplement to the recently published book on *The Brig* and The Living Theatre.

I went to see *The Brig*, the play, the night it closed. The Becks were told to shut down and get out. The performance, by this time, was so precisely acted that it moved with the inevitability of life itself. As I watched it I thought: Suppose this was a real brig; suppose I was a newsreel reporter; suppose I got permission from the U.S. Marine Corps to go into one of their brigs and film the goings-on: What a document one could bring to the eyes of humanity! The way *The Brig* was being played now, it was a real brig, as far as I was concerned.

This idea took possession of my mind and my senses so thoroughly that I walked out of the play. I didn't want to know anything about what would happen next in the play; I wanted to see it with my camera. I *had* to film it.

As I sat outside, waiting for the play to end, I relayed my thoughts to Judith and Julian Beck. They were as excited about the idea as I was. We decided to do it immediately. Actually we had no other choice: They had to leave the theatre the very next day. David and Barbara Stone, who came to see the play with me, realized they too had no other choice: They got stuck with another production. "I suspected it before coming," said Barbara. "We'll never take you to another play," said David.

Next day I got the film and equipment. The theatre was already locked up by the owner. We got the cast and equipment into the theatre through the sidewalk coal chute, late at night. (We left the place the same way at three or four in the morning.) We found part of the sets already taken down. The cast put it all back into place. There was no time for any testing of the equipment or lights. The lighting remained the same as during the regular stage performance. I placed two strong floods on the front seats of the theatre so I could move freely around without showing the seats. I had three 16mm. Auricon cameras (single-system, with sound directly on film) with ten-minute magazines. I kept changing cameras as I went along. The performance was stopped every ten minutes to change cameras, with a few seconds overlaps of the action at each start. I shot the play in ten-minute takes, twelve takes in all.

I remained inside the brig, among the players, constantly stepping in their way, disrupting their usual movements and *mise-en-scènes*. My intention wasn't to show the play in its entirety but to catch as much of the action as my "reporter" eyes could. This kind of shooting required an exhausting concentration of body and eye. I had to operate the camera; I had to keep out of the cast's way; I had to look for what was going on and listen for what was said; I had to make instantaneous decisions about my movements and the camera movements, knowing that there was no time for thinking or reflecting; there was no time for reshooting, no time for mistakes: I was a circus man on a tightrope high in the air. All my senses were stretched to the point of breaking. (I had the camera, the mike, and the batteries on me, a good eighty pounds of equipment in all; the size of the stage didn't permit any other people than the cast and myself; I envied the Maysles and Leacock their lightweight equipment.) I became so possessed by what I was doing that it literally took me weeks to get my body and all my senses back to normal.



One of the ideas that I was pursuing – or getting out of my system – was the application of the so-called *cinema verite* (direct cinema) techniques to a stage event. I wanted to undermine some of the myths and mystifications of *cinema verite*: What is truth in cinema? In a sense, *The Brig* became an essay in film criticism. *The Brig*, the play, was perfect material for such an experiment; the performance was so automatized, so perfectly acted that it moved like a ballet of horror. I threw myself into it, and I used it as raw material, as it happened, as if it were a real event – which, in truth, it was. My approach wasn't too kind to Kenneth Brown's play: I was a parasite sucking on his blood.

The editing followed the same principle. Now I have seen the play, I said to myself; now I have ideas about it; now I can't edit this footage without dragging in my post-thoughts and post-considerations. But there were passages that dragged, I knew, as far as the camera work and the play went. So I said to my brother, Adolfas: You haven't seen the play; you haven't seen the shooting (he was in Chicago at the time, editing *Goldstein*); so now you come and edit it, as a total stranger and without any pity (my brother is a sadist, a very cruel man, and has no heart). I treated Brown's play like a piece of raw material, with no attempt to get into its "true" meanings. Judith Malina almost cried whenever I missed some of her beautiful and subtle touches – they were happening on the left of the stage when I was on the right; and some of the lines were gone; but I said: Don't worry, Judith, don't worry – just think how much we miss in real life. I'll catch what I catch. (Really, I should tell you here that a week later, after the shooting, persuaded by Malina and Brown that a number of "key" lines were missing, we went through great pain and risk to get back into the theatre once more. We rebuilt the set and shot the missing bits. But when I saw the new footage on the screen, I realized that it didn't have the spontaneity of the first night's shooting. I already know the action, I knew the movements, and often, even against my own will, I began anticipating the action. It turned out lifeless, so I threw the footage out.) Now you take this footage, I said to my brother, and treat it with disrespect and cruelty; cut out whatever isn't worth looking at; forget there ever was a play – we both hate plays anyway; do unto me what I did unto Brown and the Becks.

So that's what he did. We screened the footage and my brother made notes and he cut chunks out of the film. Really it was more complicated than that. During the shooting, two cameras out of three conked out. Sometimes the film was running thirty frames per second, sometime twenty. The sound came too fast, or too slow. During the editing we often found that the distorted sound was more effective than the "real" – so we often left it that way; in other places, where lines were important, we used the "protection" sound track, cutting it to little pieces and "tape dubbing"; in other places, again, we overlapped both sound tracks at the same time. (Two sound tracks were recorded during the shooting: one directly on film, magnetic; another separately, on a beat-up Wollensak machine.)

And there I lay, that morning, on the floor, exhausted, waiting for Pierre to come back with the truck, to take out the equipment. Everyone was gone. The theatre was empty and dead now. This was the last time the Becks gave a performance in New York. It was suddenly so sad. I thought I was completely alone. But then I opened my eyes and I saw a girl, seventeen, I guessed, or sixteen, or she could have been fourteen or twenty – I was too tired to figure it out – and she walked around in the empty theatre and I asked her what she doing, and she said, I live here, I am an actress, and this is my home. But the theatre is closed, I said. I know how to get in, she said. And she showed me her things, in a dark corner, in the cellar, a suitcase, a blanket, and a few books. Then I fell asleep and when I opened my eyes again I saw her sitting there in the dim light of an empty theatre and reading a play. She looked like a stray cat, alone, sad, and small. Then the truck came, and we got out and the rats came back and everything was over. She stepped into the street – we decided to have some coffee – and it was spring slush and she wore thin summer sport shoes and the water came in immediately and took possession of her feet – but she said nothing, she was all part and blood of the Living Theatre, she was the last one to leave it. Watching her there that night I suddenly understood why the Living Theatre survived all these years and why it will survive again: They were as mad as I was; their devotion to their art and their work was fanatic and beyond reason; that girl taught me that, and as far as I know she may still be living there, underground, or in the sewers – she may not even be real, she may have been the underground angel.

Next day, the literary agents got all upset: Why didn't you ask our permission, they said; you can't do things like that! Film unions jumped on me: How dare you make a movie without unions! Oh, hell, I said. If anyone still wants to make a "real" movie out of Brown's play, to "adapt" it to cinema – he may as well do it. Brown once told me he had an idea for a million dollar production of *The Brig*, with thousands of prisoners. It should be done. The point of cruelty done by one man to another can never be overstressed. I, myself, I am not interested in adapting plays, I always said so and I am repeating it here again. *The Brig*, the movie, is not an adaptation of a play: It is a film play; it is a record of my eye and my temperament lost in the play. And then, in the first and last place, *The Brig*, the movie, is my gift to the Becks, those two beautiful human beings. My own share in all of this, really, is the pain in the neck which every cinema verite filmmaker feels most of the time – and I can tell you, pains in the neck can be as bad as those of the heart.

By the way: This film cost me \$1200 to make.

Film Series: Radical Strategies

As part of its mission, the Film on Film Foundation seeks to showcase exciting and unusual celluloid motion-picture film works which have rarely been screened locally, unleashing some for the very first time. Our debut series, 'Radical Strategies', represents the opening salvo in this part of our undertaking. Each film in this series of experimental narratives questions the nature of cinema itself, and in its realization, each proffers potential answers to the questions of what cinema is, can, or should be.

A concurrent thematic: the 100-plus years of film's existence have been aligned with dramatic international political upheaval. Experimenters in form have often seen their work as connected to a fundamental recreation of the social/political world, and this adds an additional, sometimes explosive, resonance to the ideas of 'Radical Strategies.'



www.filmonfilm.org