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**The Representation of Subjectivity in the Diary Films and Videos of
Jonas Mekas**

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Tom Smith

January 18, 2016.

Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of subjectivity in the diary films, videos and online projects of Jonas Mekas. In Chapter 1 the intersection of avant-garde and documentary practices are traced to establish that avant-garde filmmakers prioritised subjective representations of the historical world before it became more widely adopted by documentarians. Chapters 2 and 3 then focus on the representation of Mekas' subjectivity in film, while Chapters 4 and 5 focus on video and the Internet. By employing this chronological and technological structure the theoretical and historical debates around subjectivity in film is established in the first three chapters, then re-explored through the prism of new technology. The chapters also operate in pairs that bridge the technological divide to emphasise the different ways that the textual representation of subjectivity is fragmented: Chapters 2 and 4 both focus on the articulation of subjectivity at the moment of shooting, while Chapters 3 and 5 explore the organisation of that material, where new layers of self-inscription are applied. The chapters therefore expand and complicate issues of split subjectivity within new technological frameworks, while remaining focused on attempting to understand Mekas' diary practice.

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I dedicate this thesis to my sister Katie Smith (March 17, 1987 – June 20, 2014).

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Introduction

“One Thousand Painful Pieces”

In the first part of this introduction I will provide biographical information on the filmmaker Jonas Mekas and state the focus of my research on his film, video and online productions. In the second section I will provide an in-depth discussion on the theoretical assumptions of post-structuralism, which will underpin my analysis of his work. The third section will then clearly state the focus of each of the ensuing five chapters of this thesis and their applicability to my main argument.

Background and Research

Jonas Mekas (b.1922) began filming his life in 1949, the year that he arrived in New York. He had fled his homeland of Lithuania in July 1944 (along with his brother Adolfas) to escape German authorities who sought their arrest for publishing articles in an underground anti-Nazi newspaper.¹ To escape, the brothers forged student papers and boarded a train to Vienna, but their carriage was unexpectedly attached to one carrying Russian and Polish prisoners to a forced labour camp near Hamburg, where they too were interned.² They managed to escape eight months later in March 1945, hiding on a farm until the end of World War Two.³ After the war they lived in various displaced persons camps across Europe -- Flensburg, Hamburg, Wiesbaden, Kassel -- between 1945 and 1949.⁴ They were eventually sent to America by the United Nations Refugee Organization in October 1949, as the displaced persons camps in Germany were being

¹ Jonas Mekas, “The Diary Film,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 190.

² David E. James, “Introduction,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

³ David E. James, “Jonas Mekas: Autobiographical Notes,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 316.

⁴ Scott MacDonald, “Interview with Jonas Mekas” *October* 29, no.1 (Summer 1984), 84.

dissolved and it was still too unsafe for them to return home, as the brothers had also criticised Soviet authorities, who retained control of the country after the war.

In Lithuania Mekas was a writer, but during his time as a displaced person he decided to become a filmmaker.⁵ This is because in the U.S. run displaced persons camps Mekas was exposed to a wider range of films than in his homeland, where films were heavily regulated by the authorities, first the Soviets, then the Germans, both of whom imposed their official cinema on the country.⁶ A formative experience was seeing Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* (1948), which Mekas felt represented displaced persons so inaccurately that he wanted to make his own film that challenged that representation and reflected his own experiences.⁷ He began writing scripts in collaboration with his brother while still in the displaced persons camps, but upon arriving in New York they began sending them to Hollywood directors including Zinnemann and Stanley Kramer, only to have them sent back unread.⁸ The brothers also borrowed money and bought a 16mm Bolex camera within two weeks of their arrival in New York, using it to shoot home movie footage of their new life and a number of abandoned documentary projects that revolved around the experience of Lithuanian exiles.⁹

⁵ In 1942 he wrote for a local weekly newspaper called *Biržų žinios*, becoming its editor in 1943. In 1944 he worked as an assistant editor at the literary weekly *Panevėžio balsas*. During his time as a Displaced Person he edited a daily newspaper in the Wiesbaden Displaced Persons Camp called *Camp News Bulletin* and a literary journal called *Žvilgsniai*, which published Lithuanian avant-garde poetry and literature. It was also during his time of displacement that he published a play for children called *Trys broliai* (1946), a book of literary sketches and poems called *Knyga apie karalius ir žmones* (1947), a book of poetry called *Idylls of Semeniškiai* (1948) and a short story published in the magazine *Proza I*.

⁶ MacDonald, "Interview," 89.

⁷ Brian L. Frye, "Interview with Jonas Mekas" *Senses of Cinema* (November 20, 2001), accessed March 31, 2015, http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/17/mekas_interview/.

⁸ MacDonald, "Interview," 89.

⁹ MacDonald, "Interview," 84.

When Mekas arrived in New York on October 29, 1949 he described feeling like, “I wasn’t one piece any longer; I was one thousand painful pieces.”¹⁰ This feeling of fragmentation was due to his experience of internment, displacement and exile, which revealed that he did not possess an essential or natural self, but one that was open to redefinition by outside forces. The cinema was part of the process of putting the pieces back together and grounding himself in a new country, language and culture. Upon his arrival he immediately started attending Amos Vogel’s Cinema 16 and various other screening spaces across the city, where he was exposed to an even wider variety of films. In 1955 he launched the film magazine *Film Culture* and in 1958 he started writing a weekly film column called “Movie Journal” for the *Village Voice*. In this column he wrote about a diverse range of subjects including Michelangelo Antonioni, Marilyn Monroe, Robert Aldrich and Alain Resnais, but it eventually evolved into a space for Mekas to explore and champion avant-garde film. He tirelessly promoted the avant-garde in a writing style that was more polemical than analytical, as his main concern was gaining attention for filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Maya Deren, Andy Warhol, Ron Rice, Jack Smith and Gregory Markopoulos.

In 1960 Mekas cofounded the New American Cinema Group as a way of finding a sustainable model for the exhibition and distribution of avant-garde films. The prioritising of first-person expression was one of the key beliefs of the New American Cinema Group, as in 1960 they released a “First Statement” outlining their belief that cinema was “indivisibly a personal expression” rejecting censorship, high budgets, and the “official cinema.”¹¹ They proposed to set up alternative forms of financing, distribution and exhibition to challenge the Hollywood structure, aligning themselves with other movements from around the world, particularly the French New Wave, as the major ideas endorsed by both groups were low budget films by first time directors

¹⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

¹¹ Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

exploring new aesthetic strategies.¹² In this early formation the focus was not exclusively on avant-garde film, but independent narrative features that possessed a personal style by the filmmaker, linking it with the tradition of European art cinema.¹³

It was around this time that Mekas shot his first and only narrative feature film *Guns of the Trees* (1962), which follows Gregory (Adolfas Mekas) and his suicidal wife Barbara (Frances Stillman), while another couple called Ben (Ben Caruthers) and Argus (Argus Spear Juillard) try to alleviate her depression.¹⁴ The project involved writing a script, hiring crew, actors, and using equipment such as 35mm film, tripods, track and lighting. After completing the film Mekas realised that he would not have time to make another film as it distracted him too much from his commitments on behalf of the New American Cinema. Mekas had been shooting home-movie footage of his apartment, city streets, friends, nature and the changing seasons since his arrival in New York in 1949, but he only became aware that this footage could take the form of a diary in the early-1960s after shooting *Guns of the Trees*. When he started filming his existence it was not with the intention that it would become his life's work, with Mekas claiming that filming was merely a way for him to practice using a camera until he could make a "real film."¹⁵ Having made a "real film" he realised that documenting his life allowed him to be a filmmaker and fulfill the New American Cinema's core value of personal expression.

There is an interconnection between art and life in Mekas' practice, as the film scholar Marjorie Keller has described watching how Mekas documented his life when he came to her house for dinner. He kept the camera next to him at all times for whenever he was

¹² Mellencamp, 2.

¹³ Mellencamp, 2.

¹⁴ The film cost under \$10,000 and went on to win the top award at the 1962 Free Cinema Festival in Italy, where the jurors included Vittorio de Sica and Cesare Zavattini, beating out competition from Francois Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962).

¹⁵ Mekas, 190.

motivated to film something, but normally he filmed in the gaps between any duties he had to fulfill. If he wanted to participate in an activity such as joining in a toast at the dinner table or playing a game with her young children, he would give the camera to someone else to film it. If a conversation started to take place on a subject that interested him on art or life he would leave a tape recorder unobtrusively on a bookcase to record the discussion. Keller describes the fluidity of the way he shifted between experience and its representation as, “dancing between domestic life and artistic production.”¹⁶ In the 1960s it was an unusual practice for an individual to have a camera with them at all times consistently recording their life, but due to technological and cultural shifts, cameras are now omnipresent in everyday life through mobile phones, computers and affordable Digital Video cameras. Mekas has moved with these technological shifts, adopting video in 1989 and setting up his own website to distribute his footage in 2006, meaning that he has documented moments from his life for over sixty-years.

In this thesis I will explore how subjectivity is represented in the work of Jonas Mekas through a detailed analysis of his diary film, video and online projects. Mekas’ productions and life will be used to trace the trajectory of the diary film from its emergence in the American avant-garde filmmaking community of the 1960s into the explosion of video diaries in the 1980s and 1990s and then finally into the current prominence of online diaries. He is one of the few filmmakers whose work can help track the dynamic shifts in first-person representation over such a prolonged period.¹⁷ Instead of a comprehensive examination of all Mekas’ films and videos I will explore

¹⁶ Marjorie Keller, “The Apron Strings of Jonas Mekas,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 93.

¹⁷ The only other filmmaker to document his life for such a prolonged period is Joseph Mordor, who was eighteen-years-old when he began using a Super8 camera in 1967. His work now totals over 900 autobiographical works that employ Super 8, 16mm, 35mm, video and camera phones. Unlike Mekas, who has predominantly worked in the mode of the diary film, Mordor has worked in a variety of autobiographical formats including mock-diaries, letters and journals, film portraits, auto-fictions and autobiographical found-footage films. Dominique Bluher’s forthcoming book *Joseph Morder – le filmateur* will rectify this gap in scholarship on Mordor and his extensive body of work.

specific works that illuminate the different ways he textually constructs his subjectivity, which will bring in issues of authorship, selfhood, representation and the boundary between avant-garde and documentary filmmaking.¹⁸ In his book *The Subject of Documentary* Michael Renov collects essays written over twenty years that cover issues of self-representation in film, video and online, but this is through the prism of a variety of practitioners, in this thesis these dynamic shifts will be traced through an individual.¹⁹

This study of Mekas' work shares two of the main characteristics that Alisa Lebow identified in her study of first-person Jewish filmmakers. First, "the unity of the author/subject is always, in some way, at issue in the work, challenging the monologics of the unitary self." Second, "generic ambiguity: they operate on the borders of documentary, fiction, and experimental filmmaking."²⁰ The non-unitary representation of subjectivity in Mekas' work is foregrounded through a style and approach that never proposes a direct connection to history through a deliberately fragmented representation of historical events. The strategies of fragmentation vary in his films, videos and online productions, which this thesis will explore. The second aspect that his practice raises is the intersection between avant-garde and documentary filmmaking. Mekas accepted subjective practices before its more widespread adoption in documentary, so the study of his work can reveal the variety of approaches to subjective representation as it emerged from the avant-garde into documentary, with the documentary theorist Bill Nichols noting that, "documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction."²¹

¹⁸ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

¹⁹ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

²⁰ Alisa Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 149.

²¹ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1.

The influence of Mekas' work on documentary is far reaching. The diary film was at the forefront of first-person filmmaking practices, which has subsequently become one of the most widely used forms to engage with social reality. There are a number of key overlaps with Mekas' practice and the first-person documentaries that gained prominence in the 1980s. The focus on the lives of the friends and family as a source for historical understanding, which can be seen in the personal documentaries of Alfred Guzzetti, Ross McElwee and Ed Pincus, while an acknowledgment of the filmmaker's presence in shaping the interaction can be seen in the work of Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield. There have been a number of names applied to mark this shift, including the "New Documentary,"²² "Performative Documentary" and "Reflexive Documentary,"²³ but what Mekas' work ultimately shows is that the self can complicate representations of the historical world and that formal experimentation can help modify attitudes about what constitutes a "documentary."

Post-structuralism and Subjectivity

My understanding of subjectivity in Mekas' work is informed by post-structuralist theory. In this section I will explore the key ideas of post-structuralism, which covers a broad range of trends, methods and orientations, but the consistent theme that Caroline Williams identifies is "the concept of the subject," as in post-structuralism "it is the production of subjectivity and the way(s) in which the subject is dislocated and repositioned that is important."²⁴ In post-structuralism the subject is positioned by social structures, which rejects the notion that subjectivity is synonymous with consciousness,

²² Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and The Thin Blue Line," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 379-396.

²³ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

²⁴ Caroline Williams, "The Subject and Subjectivity," in *Politics and Post-structuralism: An Introduction*, ed. Alan Finlayson and Jeremy Valentine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 23.

an idea encapsulated by philosopher Rene Descartes' assertion "I think, therefore I am," which prioritises the subject's thought processes rather than the historical or cultural circumstances they live in.²⁵ The subject is positioned by forces outside of it, which means it cannot be considered unified or stable, as the forces outside the subject are always changing. Although I will not be using any specific theorists in conjunction with Mekas' work, the chronological and technological structure of this thesis enforces the idea that Mekas is a subject who is historically contingent, dependent on social, cultural, technological and economic structures that determine the conditions for his self-representation, which is indebted to the ideas outlined in post-structuralist theory.

The understanding of the divided self can be traced back to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth-century, who challenged the idea of subjectivity defined by Christianity. This influenced twentieth century philosophers like Michael Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. In "On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense" Nietzsche puts forward the importance of language in constructing truth as he claims that truth is a "moving army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations, which were poetically and rhetorically intensified, transmitted, elaborated, and which after long use seem canonical and binding to a people: truths are illusions which one has forgotten are illusions."²⁶ As Paul Jay has noted, there is a demystification of the subject of the self as "a natural, privileged, and potentially unified psychological condition," with Nietzsche recognising the self as "a historically constituted set of ideas and assumptions whose referents are complexly dispersed within the very language we must use to think about social being."²⁷

²⁵ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism, Second Edition* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 1.

²⁶ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 233.

²⁷ Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 28.

Michel Foucault was heavily indebted to the writings of Nietzsche, as he shifted focus away from the interior processes of the hypothetical individual to explore extensively the effects of the external world on the interior. He did this through analyzing institutions such as prisons (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*), psychiatry (*Madness and Civilization*) and medicine (*The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*). Foucault argues through his analysis of these specific institutions that there is no essential inner self, but that the self is shaped by historical conditions, with the concept of a deeper or “true” self being derived from Christianity. This is outlined in his essay “The Subject and Power” where he analyses how human beings are turned into subjects. This is achieved through a method Foucault terms “dividing practices,” where the definitions that exist within society, for example, the distinction between madness and sanity, shape the subject’s perception of themselves, with Foucault’s main contention being that, “we have to know the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualisation.”²⁸

Foucault’s approach locates and asserts conclusions within specific historical formations, but does not state methods of resisting power. Judith Butler, however, proposed a form of resistance for subjects through performance. If the self is mediated by outside forces then there is no central or “true” identity, as what we consider to be “normal” is only due to the repetition of certain types of behaviour. The way Butler proposes to resist gender categorisation is through parody as “the parodic repetition of gender exposes the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance.”²⁹ Another theorist influenced by Foucault is Nikolas Rose, who highlighted that in the twentieth-century self-understanding was mediated through the language of “professionals,” such as psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychiatric social workers,

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Readings in Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Kate Nash (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 9.

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 147.

management consultants, market researchers, opinion-pollers, and counselors.³⁰ He traces “psy” techniques to the early twentieth century at the point where it shifted from being simply a discipline to it becoming a profession, which meant that economic considerations came to the forefront, with the results from its research being used by the military and advertisers, which helped evince “the birth of a new type of person,”³¹ as the language determines the way we understand our psychological selves.

Of course, the attempt to understand subjective experience involves a complex negotiation between external and internal factors, as there is always a biological component to subjectivity. The focus on external factors rather than internal ones is understandable given that the mechanics of society can be analysed much more easily than the processes of the human mind, which is only steadily being understood as technological developments occur. Nonetheless, it is still important to remember that biology is always a constant factor in any discussion of subjective experience, even when it is not made explicit by the author, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has stated: “there is not a form of behaviour that does not owe something to purely biological being.”³² So although most contemporary Western writers have now rejected Christian ideas of a core self, it is still important to remember that people are equally constrained by the limitations of their own body as the society and historical circumstances in which they exist.

The representation of subjectivity in language is only ever a textual representation. The unity of textual signifiers was questioned by Roland Barthes in his “autobiography” *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), where he subverted the major assumption of

³⁰ Nikolas Rose, “Assembling the Modern Self,” in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter. (London: Routledge, 1997), 224-248.

³¹ Rose, 234.

³² William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 64.

autobiography by discarding the first-person singular and instead used multiple-subject positions ('He', 'R.B', 'You', 'I') to discuss his past, a technique that reinforced the distance between writer and written text.³³ Barthes distinguishes between the subject of the speech-act and the one who conducted the actions being reconstructed in language, arguing that, "when a narrator recounts what has happened to him, the I who recounts is no longer the same I as the one that is recounted."³⁴ There is a difference between the "I" that acts and the "I" that represents that experience in thought, speech, or writing, with there also being another remove of the "I" that edits those words days, weeks or years later. The speech-act is an illusion of unity because each person is comprised of many 'subjects' within one body. They are not the same subject, yet they are understood this way because it is the same body speaking those words. When Barthes published *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* five years after *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he embraced the first-person pronoun exclusively to reflect on photography. When he discusses photographs he speaks of the sense of loss as the self in a photograph is equated with seeing a "specter"³⁵ that is neither subject or object, but Barthes is willing to accept the documentary value of the image when he is confronted with a photograph of his late mother, whose death means that he is willing to accept that the photograph is a confirmation of her existence.

In Gilles Deleuze's two books on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*³⁶ and

³³ Anderson, 70.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in *The Structuralist Controversy: Languages of Criticism*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 140–1.

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2008)

*Cinema 2: The Time-Image*³⁷ he mainly focuses on fiction films, but what interests him is that “cinema does not have natural subjective perception as its model.”³⁸ The most influential philosopher on Deleuze’s engagement with cinema is Henri Bergson, particularly his book *Matter and Memory* (1896), despite the fact it was written before the invention of moving images. In it Bergson argues that, “all consciousness *is* something,”³⁹ which is in opposition to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who argued that, “all consciousness is consciousness *of* something.” Husserl believed that space and time were centered in consciousness, whereas Bergson moved away from this assumption, which is why Deleuze believed Bergson’s ideas were so applicable to cinema, as filmmakers use the camera to explore “acentred” spaces that are not connected to anyone’s point of view.⁴⁰ A photographed image is independent from the perceiving consciousness, so when it is projected it allows viewers to see the alternative flows of time that surround us but that we cannot experience in our bodies.⁴¹ As subjects we are divided by time, which means that subjectivity is always changing.⁴²

What can be applied from these post-structuralist theorists in my approach to the diary films and videos of Jonas Mekas is that, as a subject, he is historically and culturally contingent, and the process of self-representation is simply another form of fragmentation, as he is confronted with the problem of how to refer to the self when it is separate from embodied experience. In his work Mekas foregrounds the difference

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985) trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2008)

³⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 66.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 58.

⁴⁰ John Rajchman, *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze’s Film Philosophy* ed. D.N Rodowick (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 287.

⁴¹ Rajchman, 287.

⁴² D.N Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 140.

between lived and filmed experience by emphasising the act of representation, however, avant-garde theorist P. Adams Sitney has connected this practice to Romanticism, where authorship refers to the communication of an individual's inner state.⁴³ Sitney refers to Mekas' diary films as "exercises in Romantic Autobiography,"⁴⁴ as he views all avant-garde filmmakers as acutely aware of film traditions and that they are attempting to work through the problems of representation within this tradition, creating coherent representations of their internal states.⁴⁵ This was criticised from a post-structuralist perspective by Lauren Rabinowitz as it "placed textual meaning in the author's statements,"⁴⁶ where the artist is a "free-agent who accomplishes a design and endows an object with meaning. The author becomes a means for classifying a unified subjective voice acting directly on the audience."⁴⁷ Rabinowitz engages with the avant-garde by using Barthes idea that the author does not precede the text, but is "born simultaneously"⁴⁸ with it, meaning that filmmakers do not define the ultimate understanding of their work, as meaning is written into the text itself.⁴⁹ This frees up questions of intentionality, as by eliminating the author as the site of ultimate meaning the process of analysis is never complete, as the text is opened up to dynamic social,

⁴³ Cecilia Sayed, *Performing Authorship: Self Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2013), xiii.

⁴⁴ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 339.

⁴⁵ Michael O'Pray, "The Persistence of the Avant-Garde," in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald and Michael Renov (SAGE Publications: Los Angeles and London, 2008), 337.

⁴⁶ Lauren Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-1971* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 19.

⁴⁷ Rabinowitz, 20.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stepen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 145.

⁴⁹ John Caughie, "Authors and Auteurs: The Uses of Theory," in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald and Michael Renov (SAGE Publications: Los Angeles and London, 2008), 416

historical and cultural factors that change the viewing subject's understanding of the text.⁵⁰

The romantic understanding of subjectivity outlined by Sitney does not dominate all avant-garde film theory. Dana B. Polan's *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* focuses on the social and economic factors in shaping avant-garde practices.⁵¹ Rabinowitz's study of female avant-garde filmmakers *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71* explores the marginalisation of Maya Deren, Shirley Clarke and Joyce Wieland within the avant-garde due to their gender despite these filmmakers making significant formal contributions to American independent cinema. In *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* David E. James emphasises geographical location in defining avant-garde practices by focusing on how the city of Los Angeles has shaped the production of experimental films and videos.⁵²

The most important book by James on this thesis, however, is his edited collection *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, which attempts to understand the avant-garde filmmaking community in the 1960s through Mekas' various activities. This is currently the only English book-length critical study on Mekas, with the essays covering his activities as poet,⁵³ archivist,⁵⁴ exhibitor,⁵⁵ film critic⁵⁶ and

⁵⁰ Caughie, 416.

⁵¹ Dana B. Polan, *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).

⁵² David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (London: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵³ Vyt Bakaitis, "Notes on Displacement: The Poems and Diary Films of Jonas Mekas," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121-137.

⁵⁴ Bob Harris, "Video at Anthology," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 286-292.

filmmaker, but it also incorporates a variety of first-person accounts of people who knew Mekas in the period, including George Kuchar, Stan Brakhage, Richard Leacock, Nam June Paik and Andrew Sarris, who give valuable insights into the tensions and dynamics of the avant-garde filmmaking community.

The most influential essay from James' book on this thesis is Michael Renov's, which connects Mekas' avant-garde strategies to documentary practice. He applies the label "essay film" to account for the tension between the "outward gaze" of the camera onto social reality and the use of that material for introspection and "self-examination," which he parallels with sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, who wanted to couple "the measure of sight," with "the measure of things."⁵⁷ The other influential idea from Renov on this thesis is that filming is only one moment of self-inscription, with the addition of new layers of subjective representation in voiceover, inter-titles and narrative structure complicating the representation of subjectivity, with these multiple layers of subjective representation working in tension with one another to undercut a representation of the subject as coherent.⁵⁸ The documentary theorist Catherine Russell has also applied a post-structuralist approach to Mekas, using the term "autoethnography" to emphasise that as an historically positioned subject, the representation of subjectivity in his films are "rendered de-stabilised and incoherent, a site of discursive pressures and articulations."⁵⁹ Like Renov, Russell also highlights that

⁵⁵ David Curtis, "A Tale of Two Co-ops," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 255-265.

⁵⁶ John Pruitt, "Jonas Mekas: A European Critic in America," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 51-61.

⁵⁷ Michael Renov, "Lost, Lost, Lost: Mekas as Essayist," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 216.

⁵⁸ Renov, 215.

⁵⁹ Catherine Russell, "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self," in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 276.

avant-garde and documentary practices are interlinked, but claims that, “autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes.”⁶⁰

Russell’s label has been adopted but modified by Lebow for her study on first-person Jewish filmmakers by, “shifting the emphasis onto the act of reception rather than the intentionality of the filmmaker.”⁶¹ The historical value of the images goes beyond the significance of what the person thought they were documenting at the time of filming, with Lebow emphasising the cultural formation of the subject in non-fiction films.⁶² The majority of first-person film and video scholarship is primarily focused on the Western subject, but there is emerging research on the representation of subjectivity in other parts of the world. Sabeena Gadihoke has addressed Indian first person filmmaking,⁶³ while Rachel Gabara notes the different cultural and national conceptions of the subject in African autobiographical films.⁶⁴ Tianqi Yu has analysed Chinese first-person videos that reflect the shifting notion of the individual in contemporary China, which she connects to the post-socialist de-collectivisation process giving the individual greater precedence within the country than in previous generations.⁶⁵ What this discussion on post-structuralism has shown is that the representation of subjectivity in film and video is marked by the interrelationship between style and social context.

⁶⁰ Russell, 274.

⁶¹ Lebow, xv.

⁶² Lebow, xii.

⁶³ Sabeena Gadihoke, “Secrets and Inner Voices: The Self and Subjectivity in Contemporary Indian Documentary,” in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 144-157.

⁶⁴ Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ Tianqi Yu, “‘My’ Self on Camera: First Person DV Documentary Filmmaking in Twenty-First Century China” PhD Dissertation, University of Westminster, 2012.

Thesis Structure

In Chapter 1 “The Intersection of Avant-Garde and Documentary Practice” I will explore the intersection of avant-garde and documentary practice. In the first section I will use Bill Nichols’ modes of representation to trace the broad historical shift from documentary films being considered objective representations of the historical world to a more subjective understanding of the form. In the second section I will challenge this pattern by arguing that the avant-garde had an important role in documentary history since its inception, but that it was suppressed because formal experimentation and foregrounding the subjectivity of the filmmaker was viewed as antithetical to the form, but that these assumptions re-emerged in the 1960s and have only intensified since then. The third part will then show that the American avant-garde used first-person writing practices as a source of inspiration for the representation of subjectivity, but that in film the subjectivity of the filmmaker is articulated differently from the “I” of written language.

In Chapter 2 “The Diary Film: *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969)” I will analyse Jonas Mekas’ approach to subjective representation in film. As shown in the previous chapter, subjective representation is a key component of the avant-garde, which only later became more important in the historical development of documentaries. In order to explore *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* this chapter will be divided into three parts. The first will focus on issues of the diary film, including the work of both Mekas and other filmmakers. The second will then enter into a deeper discussion about *Walden*, exploring how Mekas developed his techniques of subjective representation at the moment of filming, arguing that his approach foregrounds the significance of memory in understanding historical reality. The third part will then explore the new layers of self-inscription Mekas applies to his footage in post-production of structure, inter-titles and sound.

In Chapter 3 “Trauma Cinema: *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976)” I argue that the sound and image relationship in Mekas’ diary

films reflect a subjectivity shaped by trauma. The two films I will use to explore this idea are *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), which deal with Mekas' experience of internment, displacement and exile. In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* Mekas not only returns to his homeland after twenty-seven years of forced exile, but also the forced labor camp in Hamburg where he was interned during World War Two. In *Lost, Lost, Lost* we see his life in exile between 1949 and 1963, where he establishes a new identity through the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. This will extend the discussion of the previous chapter, which showed that Mekas' practice integrates multiple subject positions of filming, voiceover, inter-titles, music and narrative structure, but in this chapter I argue that the tension between these layers are part of Mekas' attempt to reflect traumatic memory, which is beset with contradictions, uncertainties and inaccuracies. I will divide the chapter into three parts. The first will consider Janet Walker's theory of "trauma cinema" and its applicability to Mekas' practice. The second will analyse the tension between sound and image in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, while the third part will focus on *Lost, Lost, Lost*.

In Chapter 4 "The Diary Videos of Jonas Mekas" I will explore how Mekas represents his subjectivity in video, a format he has shot on exclusively since 1989 but that remains a largely unexamined area of his work. The representational strategies he employs are completely different from his films, with there being three major differences from his filmic self-representation that I identify. First, he eliminates any concern with using visual strategies that reflect conscious states. Second, he adopts synchronous sound, which removes the disjunctive sound and image relationship from his films. Third, he frequently talks directly into his camera or from behind it, which collapses the act of speaking and recording into the same temporal moment. In order to explore these new techniques I will divide my analysis into three parts. The first will present other examples of the video diary and its theorisation. The second will explore Mekas' new visual approach to subjective representation. The third will then focus on the new sound

and image relationship in Mekas' video practice and how it instigates a new relationship to memory.

In the final chapter "The Online Diary: *365 Day Project* (2007)" I will explore how the Internet has affected Mekas' approach to self-representation by engaging with his ambitious *365 Day Project* (2007), which involved him releasing one short video for every day of the year on his website. This chapter will be divided into three parts. The first will explore the online diary and how digital and online platforms have created new methods of production, distribution and engagement with first-person footage. The second part will be an in-depth analysis of the *365 Day Project*, focusing on how his personal archive of footage is re-defined and re-shaped within the structure of the project, highlighting that audio-visual records of the historical world are always open to redefinition. The third will focus on the database documentary, focusing particularly on how the viewer has a greater role in forging personal connections between Mekas' footage. What this chapter will explore is how the online diary provides multiple ways of entering the material without the need of linear development that accentuates fragmented representations of subjectivity.

The final two chapters on Mekas' video and online projects represent the most original contribution of this thesis, with there currently being no in depth study of either of these aspects of his work. The lack of scholarship on them is particularly surprising given that his films have been instrumental in the theorisation of cinematic first-person representation. In Sitney's most recent book on avant-garde cinema he devotes two chapters to Mekas, but does not discuss any of his videos.⁶⁶ Hamid Naficy uses Mekas' films as a key example of exilic cinema, but makes no reference to his videos.⁶⁷ Russell uses Mekas' diary films to explore the intersection of experimental and ethnographic

⁶⁶ P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁷ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

practices, but does not mention any of his videos. Even recent scholarly essays on Mekas continue to return to his films, such as Efrén Cuevas' focus on *Lost, Lost, Lost* as an example of immigrant narratives⁶⁸ and Christian Quendler's exploration of the relationship between Mekas' diary films and written diaries.⁶⁹ This thesis will therefore provide an original contribution not only to the study of Jonas Mekas, but first-person filmmaking in general.

⁶⁸ Efrén Cuevas, "The Immigrant Experience in Jonas Mekas's Diary Films: A Chronotopic Analysis of *Lost, Lost, Lost*" *Biography* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 54-72.

⁶⁹ Christian Quendler, "A Series of Dated Traces: Diaries and Film" *Biography* 36, no .2 (Spring 2013): 339-358.

Chapter One

The Intersection of Avant-Garde and Documentary Practice

In this chapter I will explore the intersection of avant-garde and documentary practice. In the first section I will use Bill Nichols' modes of representation to trace the broad historical shift from documentary being considered an objective representation of the historical world to a more subjective understanding of the form. In the second section I will challenge this pattern by arguing that the avant-garde had an important role in documentary history since its inception, but that it was suppressed because formal experimentation and foregrounding the subjectivity of the filmmaker were viewed as antithetical at this early historical juncture, even though these assumptions re-emerged in the 1960s and have only intensified since then. The third part will then show that the American avant-garde used first-person writing practices as a source of inspiration for the representation of subjectivity, but that in film the subjectivity of the filmmaker is articulated differently from the "I" of written language.

Modes of Representation

In this section I will use Bill Nichols' "modes of representation" to trace the historical shifts that have taken place in documentary practice, particularly the increase in subjective strategies. Nichols developed his "modes of representation" across a number of essays and books, starting with his 1983 essay "The Voice of Documentary,"¹ which he developed further in his books *Representing Reality*² and *Blurred Boundaries*,³ until reaching the final iteration of the modes in *Introduction to Documentary*, where Nichols

¹ Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary (1983)," in *New Challenges for Documentary: Second Edition*, ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 17-33.

² Bill Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation," in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32-75.

³ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 92-106.

asserts six modes: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative.⁴ Each mode is attributed to a particular decade in which it emerged and dominated, with poetic connected to the 1920s, expository to the 1930s-1950s, observational and interactive to the 1960s and reflexive and performative to the 1980s. The poetic mode was the last to be added by Nichols in acknowledgement of the importance of the avant-garde in documentary history and practice, which I will expand upon in the next section, but in this section I will focus on the other five modes.

In “Expository” documentaries the historical world is filmed to impart knowledge or make an argument, using an authoritative “voice-of-god” narrator who states the meaning of the footage we are seeing. This creates a sense of objectivity through the narrator’s tone of voice, as they speak in a way that suggests “distance, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience.”⁵ This approach can be seen in the films made during World War Two by Hollywood filmmakers such as John Ford, John Huston and Frank Capra that were made to inform both soldiers and the American public about the war effort. Capra’s seven-part *Why We Fight* (1943) series combined newsreels and re-enactments to inform troops of the events that led up to the United States entering the war. Because the films were made to gain support for the war they are marked by an emphasis on voice-over narration to impose a clear point-of-view to determine the meaning of the images, an approach that can also be seen to *The March of Time*, a monthly news series that began in 1935.

The staging of events was a necessary practice, which was not due to reasons of transmitting deliberate misinformation, but mainly as a result of the strictures of technology. For example, the cameras of the 1920s were heavy and temperamental, which meant it was unfeasible for Robert Flaherty to have filmed *Nanook of the North* (1922) without careful planning, so he used fiction film methods of directed action and

⁴ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁵ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 107.

multiple camera set-ups to attain matching shots for spatial and temporal continuity.⁶ The director lived with an Inuit family for a number of years, shooting on location in harsh Arctic conditions, but Flaherty could not capture events as they happened, so he asked his subjects to re-enact events for him. The rituals he asked them to recreate, however, did not reflect the current practices of the Inuit family, such as using spears to hunt even though they now used rifles. Flaherty was interested in filming an idealised past rather than the reality of their present, but the significance of *Nanook of the North* was that Flaherty integrated fictional elements like having a central protagonist (the eponymous Nanook) within a narrative framework at feature-length. The success of the film at the box-office was also significant as it evinced a change in audiences expectations of what a documentary could be.

One of the dominant documentary practices of the 1960s was the “Observational” mode, where filmmakers adopted lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronous sound recording technology to observe events unobtrusively, without the need of staging events for the benefit of the camera. It was this approach, marked by long takes and the absence of voiceover narration that derived its sense of objectivity, with the most famous examples of this practice including *Primary* (Robert Drew, 1960), *Don't Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) and *Gimme Shelter* (Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970). The movement emerged from the Drew Associates *Close-Up!* series, which aired on the American network ABC. The filmmakers acknowledged that selecting subjects and situations was determined by their subjectivity, but once they began filming they did not believe that they were influencing the action in any way, contending that the subject became comfortable in their presence and would often forget about the cameras.⁷ The subjects chosen usually had more pressing concerns than how they appeared on

⁶ Jack C. Ellis and Betsy L. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 209.

⁷ Ellis and McLane, 215.

camera and were involved in situations that had a predetermined structure of a beginning, middle and end, such as a rock tour, rock concert or election campaign.⁸

As stated earlier, documentary representation is interlocked with the technological possibilities. The development of lightweight 16mm camera meant that shooting on location was much easier and faster film stock meant that natural light could be used. The Nagra tape recorder (introduced in 1958) allowed 1/4 inch magnetic tape to be synchronised with the camera, but then soon after that crystal synchronisation was introduced, which meant that there was no longer a cable between camera and recorder.⁹ The use of sync sound was an integral part of Direct Cinema practitioners belief that they could gain access to reality, with filmmaker Richard Leacock claiming that, “The only way you can [capture life as it really is] with human beings is to record the way they communicate, that is, talking,”¹⁰ Sound was not a representational choice for filmmakers until 1927, and it took a number of years to perfect, so the dominant approach to sound in the earlier modes was to shoot silent, then add voice, music and sound effects in post-production, with examples of this practice including *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, 1936). The Direct Cinema movement avoided voiceover in counter-distinction to this previous approach to documentary, but direct sound created problems about the levels of subjectivity that could be revealed in their practice. This is revealed in a disagreement between Robert Drew and D.A. Pennebaker about whether to include the sound of the camera recording Jane Fonda in her dressing room in *Jane* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1962).¹¹ Drew did not want to include the sound as it would reveal that Fonda was not sitting alone, which Pennebaker wanted this to be acknowledged.

⁸ Ellis and McLane, 216.

⁹ Ellis and McLane, 210.

¹⁰ Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 242.

¹¹ Michael Renov, “New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verité Age,” in *The Subject of Documentary* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 175.

Unlike the Direct Cinema filmmakers who debated about whether the camera should be acknowledged, the “participatory” mode fully acknowledged its presence. This is represented by *cinéma vérité*, which is the French translation of Dziga Vertov’s title for his newsreels of Soviet society, *Kino Pravda*. The filmmakers Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin coined the term in an attempt to capture the idea that the truth they gained in their films was contingent on the circumstances of people having a camera pointed at them.¹² In *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) they interview various subjects including a student, a factory worker and a Holocaust survivor living in Paris during the summer of 1960 in an attempt to understand their culture and position within it.¹³ The filmmakers are seen on screen engaging with their subjects to ascertain their feelings predominantly within an interview format, which Nichols claims “gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result.”¹⁴ The Direct Cinema approach is often mislabeled as *cinéma vérité*, as they are both attempting to gain a “truth” through their practices, but through divergent means.

In the 1980s there was a widespread shift towards the ideas outlined in *cinéma vérité* of acknowledging the subjectivity of the filmmaker. The modes Nichols labeled to mark this shift include the “Performative” and “Reflexive,” which he attributes to the technological possibilities opened up by video and the social context in which it emerged.¹⁵ An example of the reflexive mode is *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982), which interrogates the conventions of ethnographic film to highlight that documentary is a construct of representation by the filmmaker, whose choices of who to represent and in what way affects how the viewer perceives the material being

¹² Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 118.

¹³ Ellis and McLane, 213.

¹⁴ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 116.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 35.

presented.¹⁶ The performative mode shares similar traits to the “Reflexive,” which “underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions,”¹⁷ with examples of this practice including *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1988), *The Body Beautiful* (Ngozi Onwurah, 1991) and *Bontoc Eulogy* (Marlon Fuentes, 1995). These works use expressive techniques that render subjective states of mind, such as Marlon Rigg’s conveying the experience of black, gay men in *Tongues Untied* through a multiplicity of voices both on and off camera reciting poetry, stories, sketches and re-enactments about their experiences.¹⁸

The production of first person films only increased in the 1990s and continues to this day.¹⁹ Filmmaker and theorist Michael Chanan has connected the documentary turn toward subjective representations of the historical world to the collapse of what cultural theorist Jean-François Lyotard called “grand narratives” like scientific truth, universal history and technological progress that led to the proliferation of personal perspectives. This helped move the focus from an objective understanding of the world to a subjective one that emphasised the constructed nature of reality.²⁰ Many documentaries started to foreground that they were representations of the world, such as Michael Moore appearing on camera in *Roger and Me* (1989). Another social shift that documentary theorist Michael Renov identified was the change from the politics of social movements (anti-war, civil rights and student movements) to the politics of identity, which also emphasised an individual rather than collective engagement with the world.²¹

¹⁶ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 125.

¹⁷ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 131.

¹⁸ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 18.

¹⁹ Alisa Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.

²⁰ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: BFI, 2007), 241.

²¹ Renov, “New Subjectivities,” 176.

Moving beyond Nichols modes, another term that has been applied to this shift in documentary practice is Linda Williams' "New Documentary" or "postmodern documentary." Williams notes that truth is presented in these films as a construction, often foregrounded through self-reflexive techniques that acknowledge the filmmakers part in the process of making meaning, but that it does not negate their relationship to the real world, as the images still have the "power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth."²² In her study Williams focuses on the "problem of figuring traumatic historical truths inaccessible to representation by any simple or single 'mirror with a memory.'"²³ Her key example is Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), which interrogates the evidence that led to the conviction of Randall Adams for the murder of a police officer in 1976. In an interview with David Harris, the man who accused Adams of the murder, inconsistencies become apparent in his story, leading to Harris confessing to the murder on tape, a piece of evidence that led to Adams release. The inconsistencies in the eyewitness testimony are foregrounded by Morris through the use of re-enactments that adopt techniques from fiction filmmaking, particularly film noir's expressive use of lighting and shadows, to emphasise that these are reconstructions of memories of the event, not the event itself (fig. 1).

Morris was highly critical of the Direct Cinema movement, accusing them of holding back documentary as an art form through its limited idea of what reality is and how it can be accessed through cinematic means, stating that, "there's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression, it isn't guaranteed by anything."²⁴ Werner Herzog was also vocal in his condemnation of Direct Cinema,

²² Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 380.

²³ Williams, 382.

²⁴ Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 127.

asserting that by mixing spontaneous and constructed events in his documentaries he was able to express an “ecstatic truth,” which is a truth that is not reliant on facts. The publication of *The Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*, a twelve-point denunciation of Direct Cinema released in 1999 marked the moment when Herzog expressed his frustrations most clearly. In it he declares that, “it reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants”²⁵ and that there is a “deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylisation.”²⁶



Fig. 1 *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988)

Herzog produced exclusively works of documentary between 1992 and 1999, but he deliberately blurred the boundaries between documentary and fiction by incorporating staged events and getting his subjects to read from scripts he himself has written. In *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971) Herzog has freely admitted that a scene where Fini Straubinger (the deaf and blind subject of the film) recounts her childhood memory of seeing the faces of ski-jumpers is pure invention, but done so with Straubinger’s full

²⁵ Paul Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 301.

²⁶ Cronin, 301.

approval.²⁷ There are numerous examples of this type of practice to be found in other Herzog documentaries such as *The White Diamond* (2002), *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997) and *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1973), but he constructs his films so that fact and fabrication are integrated so seamlessly that they cannot be distinguished within the films themselves. For example, in *Lessons of Darkness* Herzog opens the film with a quote attributed to Blaise Pascal, which reads: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur – like creation – in grandiose splendour.” In an interview Herzog admitted that he wrote it and that he attributed it to Pascal in order to give the statement more weight, which exposes the conventions of why we accept the veracity of certain statements.²⁸ The film also shows that historical footage can be used for personal expression. It shows the burning Kuwaiti oil fields at the culmination of the Gulf War, but in the voiceover the war is never mentioned, simply presenting aerial shots of the burning oil wells (fig. 2) and footage of those attempting to fight the blazes on ground level. Herzog adopts the viewpoint of an alien from outer space, an idea that has been used by other documentary filmmakers, such as Patrick Keiller in his two films *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997), but Herzog uses the technique to show that historical footage does not have an inherent meaning, but is negotiated by those who appropriate it.

²⁷ Cronin, 243.

²⁸ Cronin, 243.



Fig. 2 *Lessons of Darkness* (Werner Herzog, 1992)

Avant-Doc

Nichols modes have been useful in acknowledging that subjective practices have gradually become more widespread in documentary, but this has been criticised by documentary theorist Stella Bruzzi for implying that documentary, “has pursued a developmental progression towards greater introspection and subjectivity,”²⁹ which imposes a “false chronology.”³⁰ In this section I will complicate this chronology by connecting the subjective elements of documentary practice back to the avant-garde, whose role in documentary history has often been ignored. There is no universally accepted definition of avant-garde or documentary, with them both being highly inclusive terms that denote a range of practices and techniques. The term avant-garde translates as “advanced guard” or “vanguard,” and derives from military tactics.³¹ There have been a number of alternative names used at different historical junctures, including

²⁹ Stella Bruzzi *New Documentary: Second Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

³⁰ Bruzzi, 3.

³¹ Lauren Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71 (Second Edition)* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 14.

“underground,”³² “experimental”³³ and “artists film and video,”³⁴ but all of these terms broadly denote a concern with perception, abstraction, fragmentation and formal techniques that challenge dominant cinematic norms.³⁵ The term documentary was coined in the 1920s by the theorist and filmmaker John Grierson, who applied it to Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926) and went on to define documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality.”³⁶

Both avant-garde and documentary films often share an emphasis on documenting the historical world, but Grierson believed that formal innovation should be rejected from documentary practice. As one of the key proponents of the form, he is one of the main reasons that avant-garde films were erased from the documentary tradition for so long. Nichols has connected Grierson’s standpoint to two main influences: neo-conservatism and the elitist aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group.³⁷ Grierson’s neo-conservatism is articulated in his views on the state, which he believed should move and persuade rather than inform and explain.³⁸ The aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group rejected realism as a transparent style, which would seemingly make the avant-garde a natural element of documentary practice, but his distrust of the mass audience meant that the only formal

³² Sheldon Renan, *The Underground Film: An Introduction to Its Development in America* (London: Studio Vista, 1968).

³³ A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

³⁴ David Curtis, *A History of Artists’ Film and Video 1897-2004* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

³⁵ Charles Wolfe, “Straight Shots and Crooked Plots: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 235.

³⁶ John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber, 1979), 11.

³⁷ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *The Critical Enquiry* 27 no. 4 (Summer 2001): 582.

³⁸ Nichols, “Documentary Film,” 603.

innovation he accepted was to persuade the viewer rather than allow them to enter into self-reflection.³⁹

This led to an obfuscation of the role of the avant-garde in the development of documentary practice, as the modernist avant-garde of the 1920s engaged with social reality, but shattered the assumptions of realist representation through disruptive visual techniques and editing patterns.⁴⁰ In city-symphony films *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1926) and *Rien que les heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926) filmmakers documented the world through the perspective of modernism, which encouraged the values of abstraction, fragmentation and questions of perception.⁴¹ It was not only “city-symphony” films but also what Nichols has called “poetic documentaries,” such as *Rain* (Joris Ivens, 1929), *A Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1929) and *Land Without Bread* (Luis Bunuel, 1932) that sacrificed “the conventions of continuity editing” to “explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions.”⁴² The Lumière’s actualities, newsreel, scientific, ethnographic and public education films also possessed a “documentary value,⁴³ but an even earlier precedent of documenting historical reality through moving images is Eadweard Muybridge’s Zoopraxiscope, which investigated the motion of animals, birds and human beings by combining drawings of his motion study photographs to give the

³⁹ Nichols, “Documentary Film,” 603.

⁴⁰ Nichols, “Documentary Film,” 592.

⁴¹ Laura Marcus, “The Creative Treatment of Actuality’: John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and ‘Fact’ in the 1930s,” in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2009), 193.

⁴² Nichols, *Introduction to Documentarty*, 102.

⁴³ Brian Winston, “Introduction: The Documentary Film,” in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 4.

illusion of motion, which involves a mixture of scientific knowledge and formal inventiveness, predating the invention of the moving image camera.⁴⁴

There is now emerging scholarship that is retracing the historical intersection of avant-garde and documentary practice, both in the past and in the present. The term “Avant-Doc” derives from a conference conducted at the University of Iowa entitled “Avant-Doc: Intersections of Avant-Garde and Documentary Film” (2009), where the keynote speakers were Scott MacDonald and Alexandra Juhasz. In his book *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* MacDonald extended his lecture by speaking to filmmakers and assembling their “commentaries, conjectures and memories,”⁴⁵ on the interaction of avant-garde and documentary practice in their work. Alfred Guzzetti’s *Family Portrait Sitzings* (1975), Ed Pincus’ *Diaries* (filmed from 1971 to 1976; completed in 1981), and Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1986) all have their origins in the avant-garde’s emphasis on documenting the personal life of the filmmaker, but combined this with the importance of direct sound from Direct Cinema. Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2004) consciously imitates the stylistic techniques of avant-garde films such as Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963).⁴⁶ Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab joins ethnographic subject matter with the formal experimentation associated with the avant-garde, with examples of this practice including *Sweetgrass* (Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009) and *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012).⁴⁷

In his book MacDonald does not attempt to make “Avant-Doc” a rigorous theoretical category, but the usefulness of the term is that it does not prioritise one mode over

⁴⁴ Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4

⁴⁵ MacDonald, 15.

⁴⁶ MacDonald, 21.

⁴⁷ MacDonald, 24.

another, which would otherwise minimise the importance of the interaction. A prime example of this is Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), which exists in both documentary and avant-garde histories, but by calling it either a documentary or an avant-garde film reduces the complexity of its aims, influences and achievements. There are alternative terms to "Avant-Doc" that account for the hybridity of practices, such as Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography*, which brings together experimental and ethnographic film practices to examine a broad range of films and videos, from Bill Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986) to Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1977). What traditionally divides these two practices is the assumption that experimental works focus on form and subjectivity, while ethnographic films avoid formal innovation to attain a scientific objectivity. The term "experimental ethnography" instigates a greater focus on the cultural significance of experimental works and expands the visual vocabulary of ethnographic films.⁴⁸

The fluidity of boundaries highlights that stylistic and formal strategies cannot be used to guarantee truthful representation, which is why some theorists use the context of exhibition, funding and distribution.⁴⁹ Noël Carroll has called this process indexing, where "films are indexed by their creators, producers, and distributors as belonging to certain categories."⁵⁰ Of course, no matter how a film is indexed viewers can reject the categorisation if they do not believe it to match their expectations of the form.⁵¹ Using Carroll's approach of indexing, Jonas Mekas is undoubtedly an "avant-garde" filmmaker, as a producer, distributor, exhibitor, archivist and critic he was acutely aware

⁴⁸ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2005), 7.

⁵⁰ Noël Carroll, "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Nonfiction Film," in *Theorising the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 232.

⁵¹ Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21.

that the label of avant-garde was essential to its survival as a marginal practice.⁵² In the late-1950s the terms personal, individual and independent film started to be used by avant-garde filmmakers and critics, but the emergence of the auteur theory meant that these labels no longer distinguished them from mainstream practices, which was essential to their economic survival and why Mekas created the term “New American Cinema” in 1960.⁵³ Using this approach, however, does not account for the complexity of Mekas’ formal strategies, which mix a number of filmmaking modes.

Mekas’ diary films provide a useful example of hybrid filmmaking practices. When Mekas first arrived in New York he made a number of documentary projects on the lives of Lithuanian exiles as he wanted to draw attention to the fact that the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were given to the Soviet Union by the West, which meant he was unable to return to his homeland.⁵⁴ As the stated intention of the project makes clear, persuasion and argument were at the centre of his concerns, as he was influenced by Grierson’s theory and practice.⁵⁵ In the documentation of his everyday life the other mode he worked in was the home movie, but once he became conscious of the diary film within the context of the avant-garde film his practice was transformed. There is a stylistic similarity to home movies in Mekas’ avant-garde practice that has been suggested by Jeffrey Ruoff, such as flash frames, in-camera editing, rapid camera movements, abrupt changes in time and place, variable exposure and focus, and jump cuts.⁵⁶ However, the majority of the footage Mekas shot between 1949 and 1960 does

⁵² Jonas Mekas, “Independent for Independents” *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* ed. Chris Holmlund, Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35.

⁵³ Mekas, “Independent for Independents,” 35.

⁵⁴ MacDonald “Interview,” 84.

⁵⁵ MacDonald, “Interview,” 84.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey K Ruoff, “Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 301.

not conform to this description of home movies, as his style is mainly composed of steady shot compositions that were achieved using a tripod.⁵⁷ As Patricia R. Zimmerman's research has shown, amateur filmmakers often strive for professional standards as in photography magazines published between the 1950s and the early 1960s articles predominantly emphasised how amateur filmmakers could attain professional results in their shooting style, as, "writers assigned compositional stability to amateurs" and "preached tripods, no panning, details and close-ups."⁵⁸

The shooting style Mekas adopted was the opposite of these concerns, with it being incredibly gestural and erratic. These are deliberate choices and not a mistake like in home movie practice, where amateurs strive for professional standards but fail. Mekas demonstrates his ability to compose traditional shots that are exposed "correctly" -- particularly in the close-ups of flowers -- in combination with shots that contain "mistakes," such as lens flares, erratic camera movement and out-of-focus shots, which means the stylistic techniques are not errors but consciously fostered aesthetic strategies. The use of a 16mm Bolex camera had been promoted as an amateur format from the mid-1920s onwards.⁵⁹ The 35mm format was associated with Hollywood filmmaking, while 16mm was aimed at families or hobbyists, creating a clear distinction between professional and amateur practice, but as an avant-garde filmmaker Mekas wanted to overturn those values and reject the notion that only professional films could be shot on 35mm.⁶⁰

The majority of diary filmmakers used visual techniques that reflected internal states such as dreams, memories, fantasies and imagination, but Mekas was part of a wider

⁵⁷ Mekas, 192.

⁵⁸ Patricia R. Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 124.

⁵⁹ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 122.

⁶⁰ Chanan, 123.

trend in the American avant-garde of inscribing authorship through style rather than presence, as one of the major changes P. Adams Sitney identifies between American avant-garde films of the 1940s and the 1960s is from the filmmaker appearing in front of the camera to articulating their personal connection to the images through camera movement and stylistic techniques. The “trance” films of the 1940s, such as Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), has Deren as the protagonist of the film to self-realize autobiographical themes that reflect her own experience of dreaming.⁶¹ In contrast, the “lyrical film” of the 1960s, exemplified by the work of Stan Brakhage “postulates the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film.”⁶²

This approach has its roots in the work of Marie Menken, whose first film *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945) documents her experience of Isamu Noguchi’s sculptures using a handheld camera that employs rapid sweeps, tilts and pans to foreground Menken’s subjective reaction to his work.⁶³ In subsequent films like *Glimpse of the Garden* (1956), *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961) and *Go! Go! Go!* (1963) unpredictable rhythms are created through the confidence of her loose, handheld camerawork that Sitney claims redirected “the energy of the film from its ostensible subject to the subjectivity observing and intervening in it.”⁶⁴ Menken came from a background in painting and sculpture and was more focused on formal concerns like surface, frame and montage rather than finding techniques that were analogous to mental processes, with Melissa Ragona stating that Menken was not “engaged in exercising the

⁶¹ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000, Third Edition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

⁶² Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 160.

⁶³ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 160.

⁶⁴ P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31.

internal world of the film diary, its registering of the unadulterated subjective view of the filmmaker.”⁶⁵

When diary filmmakers describe their style they equate it with conscious states. For example, Howard Guttenplan has stated that the subject of *European Diary '71* (1971) “is in essence my consciousness”⁶⁶ Stan Brakhage, although not exclusively referring to his diary films, claimed that, “I am always struggling to get an equivalent on film to what I actually see.”⁶⁷ Mekas’ commitment to the documentation of his immediate experience is offset by visual strategies such as lens flares, superimpositions and erratic movements of the camera that acknowledge that there is no direct access to reality and that the perception captured is ultimately medium specific. There was an economic benefit to working in this way, as film stock was expensive and Mekas had limited resources. These values were fostered within the avant-garde filmmaking community, which prioritised the representation of internal states such as dreams, memories and fantasies, but this expressiveness was still connected to a representation of the historical world, which is why it can still be considered documentary.⁶⁸ It is for this reason that Michael Chanan believes that first-person documentary emerged out of several currents, one of which was the “experimental diary film in the style of Jonas Mekas.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Melissa Ragona, “Swing and Sway: Marie Menken’s Filmic Events,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 24.

⁶⁶ Alister Sanderson, “The Diary Cinema of Howard Guttenplan,” *Millennium Film Journal* 1 (Winter 1977): 107.

⁶⁷ Michael Renov, “Art, Documentary as Art,” in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 348.

⁶⁸ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 14

⁶⁹ Michael Chanan, “The Role of History in the Individual: Working Notes for a Film,” in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow. (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 24.

The documentary theorist Michael Renov has used Mekas' third diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) to argue that the film belongs to a documentary tradition because it reveals the immediate reaction of an individual living through social and historical circumstances.⁷⁰ As there is no core definition of documentary Renov suggests four tendencies that mark all documentaries to varying degrees: 1) to record, reveal or preserve; 2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; and 4) to express. These can all be found with Mekas' approach, but he also makes the point that the expressive visual techniques that dominate the latter part of the film connect back to the modernist avant-garde films of the 1920s and 1930s, which embraced formal experimentation to engage with social reality. There is also a key moment in the film when Mekas foregrounds his personal interest in renegotiating the perceived separation of avant-garde and documentary practice when he attempt to gain entry into The Flaherty Seminar, which is an annual week-long symposium of new documentary works. This is seen in "Rejected by the Flaherty Seminar We Sleep Outside in the Cold Night of Vermont," where Mekas and filmmaker Ken Jacobs attempt to screen a print of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Jacobs' *Blonde Cobra* (1963) as works of "documentary,"⁷¹ but they are not allowed entry into the seminar, so instead they are forced to remain outside to film each other. The way we see Mekas filming his experience outside the seminar is confidently swinging his Bolex camera over the grass (fig.3), confirming his allegiance to the avant-garde, but also documenting the world around him.

⁷⁰ Michael Renov, "Lost, Lost, Lost: Mekas as Essayist," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 216.

⁷¹ Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Doc: Eight Intersections" *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 55.



Fig. 3 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)

The documentary scholar Jim Lane has claimed that the American avant-garde's approach in this period was "a reaction against the popular form of 1960s observational documentary,"⁷² but this characterizes the avant-garde as purely reactionary and obscures the similarities that the two groups shared. The subjects of Mekas' diary films and Direct cinema documentaries of the 1960s were both public performers or celebrities, a choice of subject that emphasized an enactment of self before the camera.⁷³ In the Direct cinema films politicians (*Primary*), musicians (*Gimme Shelter*, *Don't Look Back* and salesmen (*Salesman*) are seen. In Mekas' diary films we see filmmakers, artists, painters, writers and performance artists, but the difference between Mekas' diary films and Direct Cinema documentaries is that the celebrities were part of his social circle, while the Direct Cinema subjects were often not friends of the filmmaker, but chosen

⁷² Jim Lane, *The Autobiographical Documentary In America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 12.

⁷³ Paul Arthur, "No Longer Absolute: Portraiture in American Avant-Garde and Documentary Films of the Sixties," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies. (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 96.

because of their sense of public interest.⁷⁴ The distribution of many of these films on television converged with many of the networks demand for celebrity profiles.⁷⁵

The filmmaker Richard Leacock, a key figure in the Direct Cinema movement, was a friend of Mekas, yet he disliked the New American Cinema Group, branding them “an effete group of snobs, anchored along with the self-proclaimed ‘scholars’ of academia, fiddling around with the myopic drivel of early Soviet cinema.”⁷⁶ Yet both the avant-garde and Direct Cinema filmmakers in this period were critiquing dominant modes of filmmaking that prioritised the immediacy of lived experience. When Mekas established The Independent Film Award for *Film Culture*, the third award went to Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A Pennebaker and Albert Maysles for *Primary* as it “revealed new cinematic techniques of recording life on film.”⁷⁷ The criteria for Mekas’ praise is similar to the values he embraced in his diary film practice, as they “have caught scenes of real life with unprecedented authenticity, immediacy and truth. They have done so by daringly and spontaneously renouncing old controlled techniques.”⁷⁸ The first Independent Film Award was awarded to John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1958) for similar reasons, where it was praised for “the improvisation, spontaneity and free inspiration that are almost entirely lost in most films from an excess of professionalism.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Arthur, “No Longer Absolute,” 100.

⁷⁵ Arthur, “No Longer Absolute,” 97.

⁷⁶ Richard Leacock, “I Feel Passionate About the Film Journals of Jonas Mekas,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 293.

⁷⁷ Jonas Mekas, “Appendix: The Independent Film Award,” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 425.

⁷⁸ Mekas, “Appendix: The Independent Film Award,” 425

⁷⁹ Mekas, “Appendix: The Independent Film Award”, 423.

Mekas' adopted the value of immediacy from the Beat movement, which viewed spontaneous actions as a way to escape reigning social and cultural conventions.⁸⁰ The Beats' uninhibited self-expression opposed a post-World War Two corporate America that valued social conformity and political apathy.⁸¹ Jack Kerouac's literary manifestos "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose"⁸² and "Belief and Technique For Modern Prose"⁸³ shares many parallels with Mekas' practice and critical writing. In Kerouac's manifestos and novels he embraced spontaneity over careful revision, an approach that rejected craft and grammatical correctness, which finds an approximation in Mekas' polemical articles on film, where he encouraged spontaneous filming of daily life with techniques that are often considered "mistakes," such as out of focus shots, shaky camera movement and overexposed footage.⁸⁴ In a 1962 column entitled "The Changing Language of Cinema" Mekas states that, "even the mistakes, the out-of-focus shots, the shaky shots, the unsure steps, the hesitant movements, the overexposed and underexposed are part of the vocabulary. The doors to the spontaneous are opening; the foul air of stale and respectable professionalism is oozing out."⁸⁵ This approach brought him under fierce criticism from the older generation of avant-garde film critics, but it

⁸⁰ Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties" *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 43.

⁸¹ Robert Bennett, "The Beat Generation and the Culture of Spontaneity," in *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons and Impact* Ed. William Lawlor (San Diego: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 340.

⁸² Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. Ann Chambers (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 57.

⁸³ Jack Kerouac, "Belief and Technique For Modern Prose" *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. Ann Chambers (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 58-61.

⁸⁴ Ryan Shand, "Theorizing Amateur Cinema: Limitations and Possibilities" *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*. vol. 8 no. 2 (Fall, 2008), 42.

⁸⁵ Jonas Mekas, "The Changing Language of Cinema (January 25, 1962)," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema* (New York: Collier, 1972), 49.

was all part of his belief in capturing the immediacy of the present moment and rejecting pre-existing aesthetic standards.⁸⁶

Autobiographical Practices in Film

The American avant-garde accepted first-person representation before it was embraced as a documentary practice. In Sitney's book *Visionary Film* the representation of subjectivity is viewed as the defining characteristic of the American avant-garde cinema, with its history being seen as a persistent search for new ways of representing consciousness on film. In his 1977 essay "Autobiography and Avant-Garde Film" Sitney also noted that avant-garde filmmakers frequently turned to subjective writing practices, such as autobiographies, journals, memoirs and diaries to engage with their personal worlds. In 1978 John Stuart Katz's edited catalogue *Autobiography: Film/Video/Photography*⁸⁷ listed more than fifty works of filmic and video autobiography, but defined autobiographical film as a sub-genre of Direct Cinema documentaries where viewers experience the lives of others.⁸⁸ Unlike the Direct Cinema approach, which assumed a direct engagement with the historical reality being documented, Sitney noted that avant-garde filmmakers were in a similar position to writers, as they were both attempting to reconcile "the contradictions, the gaps, the

⁸⁶ This included such writers as Dwight MacDonald, John Simon, Stanley Kauffmann, Amos Vogel and Parker Tyler, who derided what they saw as indiscriminate praise for any film made within the underground community. In an article entitled *Thirteen Confusions*, Vogel connected what he saw as the declining quality of avant-garde films to the declining quality of its criticism, complaining; "the American film avant-garde suffers today, for the first time in its history, from an ominous new ailment: over attention without understanding, over-acceptance without discrimination. Crime of crimes, it has become fashionable." Parker Tyler was also a vocal opponent of the new direction underground filmmaking and criticism was taking, with his book *Underground Film: A Critical History*, essentially being a prolonged attack on what he saw as its declining standards.

⁸⁷ John Stuart Katz, ed, *Autobiography: Film/Video/Photography* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978).

⁸⁸ Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 70.

failures involved in trying to make language (or film) substitute for experience or memory.”⁸⁹

It is this understanding that subjectivity is always split in the act of representation that was ignored by literary theorist Elizabeth Bruss, who focused on the fact that film creates a different textual construction of the self from language. Bruss viewed this difference as a failure, asserting that, “there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography.”⁹⁰ Bruss adhered to theorist Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography being predicated on a single author producing a narrative account of their own life, which creates a “unity of subjectivity and subject matter” through the “implied identity of author, narrator and protagonist.”⁹¹ Film disrupts that unity by creating a dispersion of authorship between actors, directors, cinematographers and technicians. What Bruss fails to acknowledge is that the subject is also divided by language, as the pronoun “I” masks the temporal gap between an experience and its representation, uniting past and present selves into a single enunciative act. Bruss did acknowledge that first-person writing contains this element of fragmentation, but believed it was superior to film because “the trick comes off in language.”⁹²

Many of the labels applied to nonfiction films and videos that foreground the subjectivity of the filmmaker are taken from writing practices, with the term “autobiographical documentary” used by scholars including Lane,⁹³ Renov⁹⁴ and Rachel

⁸⁹ Sitney, 200.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth W. Bruss, “Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 297.

⁹¹ Bruss, 297.

⁹² Bruss, 307.

⁹³ Lane, *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*.

Gabara.⁹⁵ Alisa Lebow prefers the much broader “first-person film,” which she defines as a “mode of address” where the work “speaks from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position,”⁹⁶ a stance that acknowledges that the subjectivity of the filmmaker does not always equate with an autobiographical practice. The subcategories of autobiographical film take their name from writing practices, such as the essay, notebook, self-portrait and diary film. In *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* Laura Rascaroli devotes the first half of her book to exploring the essay film, while the second half explores the much less theorised subcategories of the notebook, self-portrait and diary film, with Rascaroli labeling them as examples of “Personal Cinema.”⁹⁷

There is a contract between writers and readers in autobiographical writing that the narrating “I” is an actual person to whom the “I” refers.⁹⁸ In writing this has been identified as the “autobiographical pact” by Lejeune, where the confluence of author and textual narrator verifies the generic status for the reader.⁹⁹ For example, Charles Dickens’ novel *David Copperfield* uses the first-person pronoun for a fictional character trying to understand their past, so the incongruence between author (Dickens) and

⁹⁴ Michael Renov, “The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video,” in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 104-119.

⁹⁵ Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person*.

⁹⁶ Alisa Lebow, “Introduction,” in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 1.

⁹⁷ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009).

⁹⁸ Shirley Neuman, “Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences,” in *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 213.

⁹⁹ Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Contract,” in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzveten Todorov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193.

narrator (Copperfield) alerts the reader that it is a work of fiction.¹⁰⁰ The tenuous connection between the embodied subject and their textual representation is therefore based on nothing more than sincerity of the writer. An example of this practice in film is Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), a "mock documentary" that combined Direct Cinema's style and the avant-garde's emphasis on everyday life but applied it to a fictional story and characters (fig. 4).¹⁰¹ The eponymous protagonist (L.M Kit Carson) attempts to understand his life through the close documentation of it, with the film combining Holzman talking into camera about his life, filming his girlfriend and friends with synchronous sound and applying voiceover to his silent footage of city street scenes. By violating the pact with the spectator it reveals that there is no inherent truth to the style being employed.



Fig. 4 *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967)

¹⁰⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide For Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2001), 8.

¹⁰¹ Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 161-67.

There is an ignorance of avant-garde film in Bruss' essay, where she is seemingly unaware of Sitney's essay and the existence of the filmmakers he mentions, as Bruss' examples are predominantly fiction films by Woody Allen, Francois Truffaut and Federico Fellini where experiences from the director's lives are recreated. Although Bruss is describing filmmakers working with a crew and actors, the problem of inscribing presence exists in both fiction and non-fiction films. For example, in a fiction film a subjective shot corresponds to a character's point-of-view, meaning that the camera assumes the spatial position of the subject to show us what they see.¹⁰² The most extreme example of this is *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947), a film that is shot entirely from the point-of-view of the protagonist Robert Marlow. This means that the camera is the protagonist of the film rather than the body of the actor, as in the few moments we see Marlow (played by Robert Montgomery, who also directed the film) it is as a shadow or reflection.¹⁰³ The first person film involves the subject articulating their subjectivity from behind the camera rather than in front of it, but the dependence on filming others to reflect the self is not a contradiction, as Alisa Lebow points out that this "merely literalises and makes apparent the fact that self-narration—not to mention autobiography—is never the sole property of the speaking self."¹⁰⁴

The examples Bruss uses of mainstream filmmaking practices possess a greater dispersion of authorship than avant-garde films, which are often made by individuals who fulfil every role in their production, but the division of the subject between the person in front of the camera and behind it still occurs when the camera operator, director and editor are the same person. Bruss preferred strategies that masked the textual construction of subjectivity, but film and video scholars have embraced the

¹⁰² Edward Branigan, *Point-of-View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (New York: Mouton, 1984), 103.

¹⁰³ Chapter Three of Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) explores the difference between embodied experience versus the technological representation in the film.

¹⁰⁴ Lebow, xii.

obvious split as presenting new ways of understanding the autobiographical subject, with the division of subjectivity in film and video being an accepted foundation for investigation. There is always a dispersion of subjectivity in any form of self-representation, but documentary scholars have identified a variety of layers of self-inscription. Russell identifies four “levels” of filmic self-inscription: voiceover, origin of the gaze, and body as image and editor or alternatively she labels them as speaker, seer, seen and avant-garde collagist.¹⁰⁵ The interview format has been discussed by Susanna Egan, focusing on Michael Apted’s *35 Up* (1991), where a tension arises between how Apted’s off-screen questions shape the narrative the interviewees create about their lives and what they themselves want to express. Apted’s control extends to the editing, where he can highlight contradictions and inconsistencies that are beyond the interviewees control, meaning that Apted is “inviting but controlling subjective response.”¹⁰⁶

In what Michael Renov termed “new autobiography” subjectivity is dispersed across multiple layers -- filming, voiceover, inter-titles and narrative structure -- so the representation of subjectivity is fluid. The key example he provides is Mekas’ third diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost*, which asserts the “construction of subjectivity as a site of instability -- flux, drift, perpetual revision -- rather than coherence,”¹⁰⁷ as Mekas juxtaposes the “I” that filmed the footage and the “I” that speaks about it in the voiceover. This creates a tension between the attitudes expressed at the time of filming and those at the time of speaking, providing a representation of subjectivity that is unstable and open to redefinition. In the next chapter I will extend this discussion on multiple layers of self-inscription by looking at Mekas’ first diary film *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969).

¹⁰⁵ Russell, 277.

¹⁰⁶ Susanna Egan, “Encounters in Camera: Autobiography as Interaction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no.3 (Fall 1994): 606.

¹⁰⁷ Renov, “The Subject in History,” 110.

Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter I used Bill Nichols modes of representation to highlight the prevalence of subjective modes of documentary in the 1980s. These practices are connected to technological possibilities, but how technology is used is negotiated by cultural, social and historical contexts. *Nanook of the North* was dependent on heavy and temperamental camera technology, which meant the camera could not be moved easily while Direct Cinema filmmakers were facilitated by lightweight cameras and synchronous sound recording equipment that gave them different compositional choices. The Direct Cinema was also shaped within the institutional framework of television, which provided distribution, funding and exhibition to their films because they had celebrity subjects. Documentary theorists have also acknowledged wider social shifts, with Renov connecting the change from collective movements to the politics of identity that placed greater emphasis on the individual rather than the group. There is also a greater emphasis on the difference between experience and representation. In Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* the filmmaker uses fiction film techniques to highlight the process of reconstruction and in *Lessons of Darkness* Werner Herzog uses historical footage for the purposes of personal meditations and emphasise their status as images.

In the second part I complicated the boundary between avant-garde and documentary practice by emphasising that the role of the avant-garde was suppressed due to the influence of John Grierson. The subjective practices of contemporary documentary were actually present from its very inception, such as the Lumière's footage of daily life and city symphony films such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* that documented the historical world but through the prism of modernism. Film scholars have created terms to acknowledge the complexity of this intersection, such as Scott MacDonald's "avant-doc" or Catherine Russell's "experimental ethnography," which provide examples of these interactions in both the past and the present day. The historical juncture of the 1960s was explored through Mekas' diary films to show that his approach emerged from home-movie practice, but mixed with cultural influences

such as Beat Poetry and the avant-garde. I acknowledged a similarity between diary films and Direct Cinema practices as they both emphasised capturing immediate experiences and challenging dominant cinematic modes of representation. The main difference was that Mekas acknowledged his subjectivity and the act of recording, while Direct Cinema obscured it.

In the final section I showed that the representation of the self in film is different from language. The American avant-garde frequently used subjective writing practices as a source of inspiration, but literary theorist Elizabeth Bruss believed that it was impossible for autobiographical practices to occur in film because the subject is dispersed across multiple layers of the filmic text. I then showed that this fragmentation was a source of inspiration for documentary theorists, who argued that non-unified representations of subjectivity are a much more accurate depiction of lived experience as the self is always formed within a social context.

Chapter Two

The Diary Film: *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969)

In this chapter I will analyse Jonas Mekas' approach to subjective representation within the mode of the diary film. As shown in the previous chapter, the avant-garde was ignored from documentary history because of its formal innovation and emphasis on subjectivity, but in this chapter I provide an in depth example of how an avant-garde film documents the historical world in a way that would now be considered documentary. In order to explore *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969) this chapter will be divided into three parts. The first will focus on issues of the diary film. The second will then enter into how Mekas developed his techniques of subjective representation at the moment of filming, arguing that his approach foregrounds the significance of memory in understanding historical reality. The third part will then explore the new layers of self-inscription Mekas applies to his footage in post-production of structure, inter-titles, and sound.

The Diary Film

Mekas' first diary film *Walden (Diaries Notes and Sketches)* (1969) depicts his life between 1964 and 1969, which mainly involves his various activities within the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. There are also wedding ceremonies (a total of four in the film), parties, visits to friend's houses (Stan Brakhage, Timothy Leary and Hans Richter) and footage of New York road workers and people in Central Park. With a total running time of three hours, all of this material is organised into six "reels" and structured by inter-titles that establish the context of the images, with Mekas offering voiceover narration intermittently (usually while playing his accordion) to present his thoughts on what we are watching. The score is by John Cale, a repetitive, continuous piece that contains small variations on a theme, but no climax.¹ It goes on for close to twenty minutes in some parts, corresponding thematically to the lack of hierarchy in the

¹ Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Jonas Mekas," *October* 29 (Summer, 1984), 107.

imagery. There is also extended use of sound recordings of subway and street noises that Mekas captured with his tape recorder as he walked around New York, while other sections incorporate fragments of music by Chopin, The Velvet Underground and Buddhist chants.

Mekas' attempt to create a new model of distribution, exhibition, funding, and preservation for avant-garde films meant that he did not have time to make films in a traditional mode of production where writing, shooting and editing would take away from these commitments. His diary film practice therefore involved him recording in the few spare moments he had between these commitments. The scope of his activities is revealed in a written diary entry from 1966, where Mekas lists all the groups and organizations he was involved with up until that point: The New American Cinema Group (1960), Filmmakers' Cooperative (1962), Film Culture Non Profit Organization (1963), Filmmakers' Cinematheque (1964), Filmmakers' Workshop (1964), Filmmakers' Lecture Bureau (1964), Friends of the New American Cinema, and the Filmmakers' Distribution Center (1964).² As film theorist Paul Arthur has pointed out, this list does not even cover the full extent of his activities, eliminating the co-founding of *Film Culture* magazine in 1955, The Anti Censorship Fund (1964), The New American Cinema Exposition (1964), and his own filmmaking activities.³

Mekas pioneered the mode of the diary film. Although there are diary films that pre-date the release of *Walden*, these were mainly fiction films that adopted a diaristic structure, such as G.W Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929), Jean Renoir's *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946) and Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and as works of fiction they set up a different spectatorial pact. The diary film's emergence within the avant-garde parallels the assumption that written diaries are a marginal

² Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24.

³ Arthur, 24.

practice, as in the nineteenth-century autobiographies were mainly written by male public figures giving accounts of their lives, while marginalised groups like women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities were limited to what was perceived as non-literary modes of writing like letters, journals, diaries and memoirs.⁴ Mekas' engagement with diary practices precedes his involvement with film and reflects his concern with gaining self-representation through the limited means he had available to him, but other filmmakers were resistant to accept the label.⁵ Andrew Noren resented Mekas referring to his film *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse, Part One: Huge Pupils* (1968) as a diary film, claiming that he "never thought of it as diary."⁶ Warren Sonbert also rejected the label, asserting "I am totally adamant that I don't make diary films. Diary films always imply that it's just like it came out the camera,"⁷ which negated the careful compositions and editing patterns of his films. Mekas did not view his practice as simply documenting his daily life, which is why he distinguished between writing, where "diaries are prose statements" and avant-garde diary films, which are "closer to poetic feeling and form."⁸

⁴ Natalie Edwards, *Shifting Subjects: Plural Subjectivity in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 12.

⁵ At six-years-old Mekas kept a visual diary as he did not learn to read or write until relatively late, as he worked on the family farm and was unable to attend primary school until the age of nine. He learnt quickly, however, and began writing poetry and keeping a diary almost immediately. At ten-years-old he read a Lithuanian translation of the nineteenth century Italian novel *Heart: An Italian Schoolboy's Journal* by Edmondo De Amicis, which encouraged him to continue writing his own diary. Mekas continued to keep a diary during his period in forced labour camps and as a Displaced Person. Once he moved to New York the diaristic approach continued in his film columns for the *Village Voice*, poetry, prose, manifestos and films, as dates, locations, and times are inscribed into all of his work.

⁶ Scott MacDonald, "Andrew Noren," in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 187.

⁷ David Ehrenstein, "Warren Sonbert Interview," in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 272.

⁸ Jonas Mekas, "On Andrew Noren, the Master of Texture (January 15 1970)," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema* (New York: Collier, 1972), 369.

The name of the film in the opening titles refer to it as *Diaries Notes, and Sketches (aka Walden)* as Mekas originally intended to call all of his films “Diaries, Notes, and Sketches,” with the individual film title in parenthesis, but when he attempted to use this technique again it caused confusion at the film lab, as they wrote on the canister, “Diaries, Notes and Sketches” and left out the name of the specific film in the cycle. Mekas therefore abandoned labeling the films in this way, but he still considers the overall project of shooting and releasing footage from his life as collectively constituting one cycle of films called “Diaries, Notes and Sketches,” he just refrains from using this term explicitly in the opening titles. The title of the film is taken from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden, Or Life in the Woods*, which details Thoreau’s experience living in a cabin near Walden Pond, situated in woodland owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁹ Mekas had first read the book in German translation as a displaced person in 1948, but he re-read the book in English when his friend Peter Beard gave him a copy during the shooting of his brother Adolfas Mekas’ film *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963).¹⁰ The choice of title for his first feature length diary film is an important connection, as both Mekas and Thoreau are engaging with experience using the first-person. In the book *Walden* Thoreau notes that, “in most books, the I, or first person, is omitted: in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.”¹¹ Mekas intersperses pages from *Walden* throughout the film to emphasize the connection with Thoreau.

The representation of the self is very different from the “I” of language. Mekas is mainly behind the camera, so his physical presence is usually represented through shadows or

⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ MacDonald, “Interview,” 105.

¹¹ Scott MacDonald, “Walden,” in *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), 231.

reflections. For instance, in the segment “Morbid Days Of New York & Gloom” he films himself in a wall length mirror as he eats in a diner. On a train journey to visit Stan Brakhage he films himself in the reflection of the train window. Also, during a moment alone in the park he looks down from a bridge to capture his shadow on the concrete below (fig.5). Maureen Turim has acknowledged that in Mekas’ practice “the representation of the self is largely dependent on absence and metaphor.”¹² Using film style to inscribe authorship relies on an implicit pact with the spectator that Turim has identified as, “I was there behind the camera. I chose this image. I chose this transformative process of registering the image to mark my presence as filmmaker. I inscribed myself through the ways I manipulated the camera.”¹³ The very first shot of *Walden* is a tight close-up of Mekas’ eyes, which makes clear that the proceeding images are being seen through the eyes of Jonas Mekas



Fig. 5 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

¹² Maureen Turim, “Reminiscences, Subjectivities, and Truths,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 194.

¹³ Turim, 194.

In the voiceover for *Walden* Mekas states “I make home movies -- therefore I live/I live -- therefore I make home movies.” The emphasis on domestic and personal activities can be connected to home movie practice and like home movies, the majority of the film focuses on positive events rather than negative ones.¹⁴ Unlike home movies, however, *Walden* is filled with the key public figures of the 1960s countercultural movement: avant-garde filmmakers (Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Marie Menken, Gregory Markopoulos, Peter Kubelka) writers and critics (Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, P. Adams Sitney, Amy Taubin, Annette Michelson), musicians (Lou Reed, Nico, John Lennon, Yoko Ono) and artists (Andy Warhol, George Macunias, Nam June Paik, Richard Serra). The whole approach of releasing private footage for public scrutiny also overturns the understanding of home movies being for a small group of people, predominantly the filmmaker’s family and friends. The dedication to Lumière that opens the film (fig.6) re-emphasizes cinema’s origins in the representation of daily life, as Louis and Auguste Lumière’s films depicted events such as a train entering a station, street scenes, workers leaving a factory and a baby eating breakfast, but these type of simple events were sidelined by fiction and narrative. The dedication suggests that there is no reason why the simple documentation of daily life cannot become the norm again.

¹⁴ The home-movie has become a heavily theorised field since the 1980s. The *Journal of Film and Video* 38 no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1986) dedicated an entire issue to home movies in 1986, with the majority of its contributors going on to expand their research into book-length studies, including William C Wees’ *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), Patricia R. Zimmerman’s *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), James M. Moran’s *There’s No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.) and Michelle Citron’s *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.)

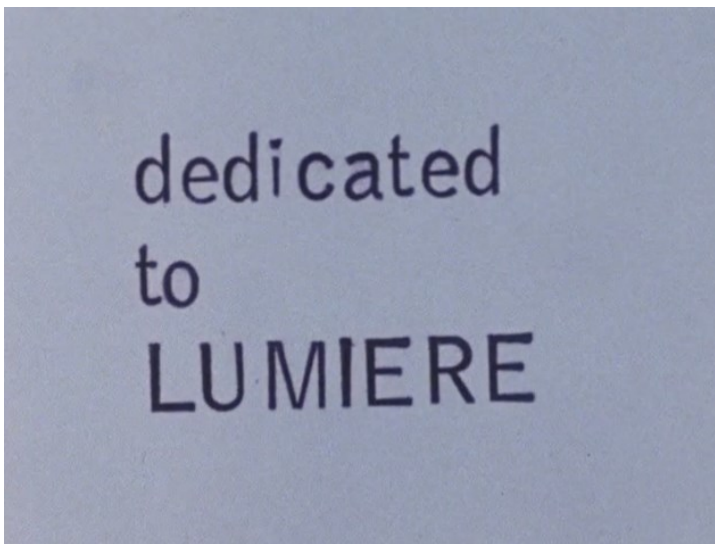


Fig. 6 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

Mekas does not represent activities such as sex, bathing, masturbation or going to the toilet, aspects that were represented in other diary films from this period, which was interconnected in the climate of the 1960s where the sexual liberation was viewed as revolutionary challenge to pre-existing social values.¹⁵ Andrew Noren's *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse* (1967) shows intimate domestic activities including bathing, masturbating, love-making, sleeping and getting dressed.¹⁶ Stan Brakhage filmed personal activities like masturbating (*Flesh of Morning* (1957)), sexual intercourse (*Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959)) and childbirth (*Window Water Baby Moving* (1959)). Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964-7) depicts sexual intercourse with the filmmaker's partner James Tenney, but the film negative is painted, scratched and dyed to give the footage an expressive force to represent the emotions and perceptions being

¹⁵ B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 111.

¹⁶ Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: The Poetics of Obscenity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 255.

felt by the participants.¹⁷ In the next section I will establish the visual strategies Mekas employs in conjunction with his interest in non-sexual aspects of daily life.

Filming *Walden*

In this section I will explore how Mekas developed his approach to documenting his life. David E. James claims that he was the first filmmaker to “articulate this combination of imperatives -- the need to respond immediately with the camera to and in the present, and the need to subjectivise that recording -- as the essential conditions for the film diary, and the first fully to turn them to advantage and eventually invest filmic attention to daily life with religious significance.”¹⁸ This approach grew out of concerns that started in his writing, as during his time as a Displaced Person he published a book of poetry called *Idylls of Semeniškiai* (1948).¹⁹ It was written between 1947 and 1948 and was an attempt by Mekas to recapture his childhood in the rural farming community of Semeniškiai where he grew up. His aim with the book was to achieve a “documentary poetry” that incorporated factual descriptions of the people and activities of the village, but also capture his emotional response to those memories.²⁰ It was written in Lithuanian, with the English translation done by Mekas’ brother Adolfas, who in the translator’s introduction notes that it was a difficult task due to its mixture of regional dialects, containing words that are specific to Semeniškiai and some only used within Mekas’ family. The poem also contains unusual sentence structures, punctuation, abrupt

¹⁷ M.M. Sera and Kathryn Ramey, “Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2007), 110.

¹⁸ David E. James, “Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in *Walden*,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 154.

¹⁹ Jonas Mekas, *Idylls of Semenskiai*, trans. Adolfas Mekas (New York: Hallelujah Editions, 2007.)

²⁰ MacDonald, “Interview,” 93.

transitions, unfinished sentences and shifts in tense and perspective. An example of this can be seen on the opening page:

And of the fields, yellowing barley and oats,
and cowherd fires wetblown in lonesome autumn.
of potato digs,
heavy summer heat,
white glare and sleigh-din down an unending winter road.
Of heavy timber hauls, the fallow to be cleared,
red brick ovens, the outlying limerock.
And – by the evening lamps, in autumn, while fields turn gray –
of wagonloads ready for tomorrow’s market,
the roads, in October, washed out and swamped,
the potato digs drenched.²¹

The dramatic shifts between years and seasons translates the associative logic of memory, but reveals a connective tissue through the emphasis on sensuous details such as texture, light and weather, but the activities all revolve around farming and how these details impact on life in the village. The emphasis on how recollections are fragmentary is also present in his written diaries as a Displaced Person, where he attempted to document his immediate experience. There are descriptions of various events he has observed, creating a disconnected and impressionistic sense of his experience, which his filmmaking style attempted to imitate.²² For example, in a diary entry from May 17, 1949, written in the Schwaebisch Gmuend Displaced Persons camp, Mekas describes an interaction between two men:

8 P.M
Two drunks are walking along the street.
“Let’s go, let’s go...”
“Where do you want to go?”
“What?” It’s raining.”
“Let’s go to the Truman Street, joptvaimat (a Russian curse)”

²¹ Mekas, *Idylls*, 1.

²² MacDonald, “Interview,” 94.

*They have a silent exchange, I can't hear it.
"You told me that you have it, you prick."
They both walk away.*²³

Despite using these techniques in his writing, Mekas was initially resistant to American avant-garde filmmakers who embraced and helped construct a connection with poetry through their filmmaking practice and critical writings, such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos. In 1955 he co-founded the magazine *Film Culture* and in the third issue wrote an essay (or, as P. Adams Sitney has called it “an attack in the guise of a survey”²⁴) entitled “The Experimental Film in America,”²⁵ In it he is critical of the experimental filmmaking community, claiming that the filmmakers were too, “fascinated by their personal worlds”²⁶ and that the films “betray a conspicuous absence of artistic discipline,” meaning that the filmmakers should “acquire a more solid technical and theoretical background.”²⁷ These assumptions would be completely overturned by Mekas within a few years, but the stylistic approach to his own filmmaking practice from this period conform to dominant modes of representation that obfuscate the role of the filmmaker through steady shot compositions achieved using a tripod.

When Mekas reviewed the footage he shot between 1949 and 1960 for the first time around 1961-1962 he became aware that despite the neutral style he employed he was heavily influenced by his past in the present moment of filming, noticing the repetition of certain imagery: “I kept coming back to the same subjects, the same images or image

²³ MacDonald, “Interview,” 94.

²⁴ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 324.

²⁵ Jonas Mekas, “The Experimental Film in America,” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 26.

²⁶ Mekas, “The Experimental Film in America,” 22.

²⁷ Mekas, “The Experimental Film in America,” 25.

sources,”²⁸ which included snow, trees and flowers. The emphasis on nature in the predominantly urban environment of New York City made Mekas aware that the imagery he prioritised reflected his childhood in Lithuania. These motifs insinuate into almost every one of his encounters that we see in *Walden*. In “Sitney leaves New Haven, Goes to New York,” P. Adams Sitney is seen looking up at the rows of trees that line the street, the camera tilting from Sitney’s gaze to the top of the trees. In “Brakhage crosses Central Park” and “Stan goes too town” we only catch brief glimpses of Stan Brakhage as Mekas instead pans away to the surrounding environment. Even a culturally significant moment such as John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “bed in,” which occurs in Reel Six (fig.7), is not exempt from Mekas’ personal agenda, as for the majority of the time he zooms in on the boxes of flowers behind their bed. Central Park is a key location throughout the film, as it is the space with the most visual resonances to his rural homeland. The film is bookended with test footage of young girls walking around Central Park that was intended for a diary film of a teenage girl that he eventually abandoned.²⁹

²⁸ Jonas Mekas, ““The Diary Film (1972),” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 191.

²⁹ It was to follow a variety of girls entering adolescence. He conducted a great deal of research for this project, amassing a collection of diaries and letters by girls of that age. Instead of one film, he intended it to be a series of three or four films of people as they got older, starting with a fifteen-year-old girl, following her through the ages of twenty-five, forty-five and sixty-five.



Fig.7 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

Unlike Mekas' earlier approach, the stylistic techniques created visual approximations of the methods he used in *Idylls of Seminiskai*, which foregrounds the importance of memory in his comprehension of the present moment. The differences from writing practices was explored by Mekas a 1972 lecture where he noted that as a filmmaker he could only register present moment events with his camera, as unlike a writer, he could not reconstruct them later in language. Memory is central to the moment of composition in writing, as it also involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present.³⁰ The act of self-representation in writing creates a split between the experience and its representation in language, with Nicola King identifying a threefold process: 1) The event; 2) the memory of the event; and 3) the writing of (the memory of) the event, with this third stage being the only one that the reader has access to.³¹ The previous neutral style revealed that “everything is determined by my memory, my past. So that this

³⁰ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 16.

³¹ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 5-6.

‘direct’ filming also becomes a mode of reflection.”³² A writer is dependent on memory to reconstruct past events in language, but his style attempts to approximate the uncertainty of memory rather than using film to clarify or fix it.

The style he employs has been called the single frame approach, as it creates intricate rhythmic structures that alternate between rapid and longer shot durations, with unexpected image combinations of close-ups and wide shots connected through superimposition and juxtaposition. The editing is conducted in-camera, so no manipulation of the images occur in post-production: superimpositions are achieved by winding the film back and re-exposing the negative, the lens flares through pointing the camera into sunlight, the kinetic speed by only shooting a few frames at a time. It imbues meaning through speed and by only allowing glimpses of natural motion results in the images going by at such a rate that it becomes impossible for the viewer to contemplate every shot, as you instead get led by the visceral experience of the rhythms of the images passing by. The single-frame technique is not used exactly the same way for everything he documents, as the faces of friends and colleagues often result in slightly longer takes as he contemplates their features, but as Paul Arthur has eloquently described, through his style, “Mekas inscribes a structural tension between preservation and erasure, a clinging to and an erasure of the past that inevitably colours the terms by which the immediate present is captured.”³³

Mekas’ films are informed by the demands of capturing everyday situations, but he does not push the single-frame technique to the point of abstraction, where images would become a blur of colours, lines and shapes. The indexical relationship is important, as his films are invested in feelings, emotions and ideas that are connected to the objects and people he decides to document. The bold gestural movements of the camera can be

³² Mekas, 191.

³³ Paul Arthur, “Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 22.

connected to Abstract Expressionist painting, but unlike a painter using a paintbrush, the result of these hand movements are not lines, but photographed images.³⁴ Mekas wanted to “capture reality as closely as possible to how my Self is seeing it,”³⁵ but the perception captured is ultimately medium specific, which is why Mekas embraced chance as part of his representational strategy, as the meaning of the footage was not ultimately defined by the intentions of his movements at the time of shooting, but was dependent on whatever quality image was captured by the camera. For example, “A Visit to Brakhage’s” was shot on outdated Kodachrome film given to Mekas by Stan Brakhage when he ran out of stock, giving this segment a different look from the rest of the film.³⁶ It was also a common occurrence that if he ran out of colour stock he would just switch to black and white and accept whatever happened to the footage at the lab as part of the representation of the event.³⁷

An example of the gestural movement of the camera can be seen in “A Wedding.” We see a bride walking down the aisle, where instead of holding a steady master shot, which would emphasise the slow pace and the grace of the bride walking towards her husband-to-be, is instead filmed with a crash zoom into the bouquet of flowers she is holding, a crash zoom out into a brief master shot and then zooms in again onto the flowers and tilts the camera up her body into an intense close up on her face. What these camera movements reveal is Mekas’s personal interest in detail as opposed to trying to represent what the bride is feeling by creating a coherent sense of space. When Mekas films the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer sitting in his hotel room next to a table with a window behind him. Mekas’ camera fragments his body into a series of close ups, with one hand placed flat on the table revealing his perfectly trimmed fingernails, and a

³⁴ James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 63.

³⁵ Mekas, “The Diary Film,” 192.

³⁶ MacDonald, “Interview,” 103.

³⁷ MacDonald, “Interview,” 104.

repetition of pans across his face showing his slicked back, thinning white hair. Mekas is reacting emotionally with his camera to an important figure in the history of cinema, capturing his impressions from the moment, but not attempting to provide a definitive portrait of Dreyer.

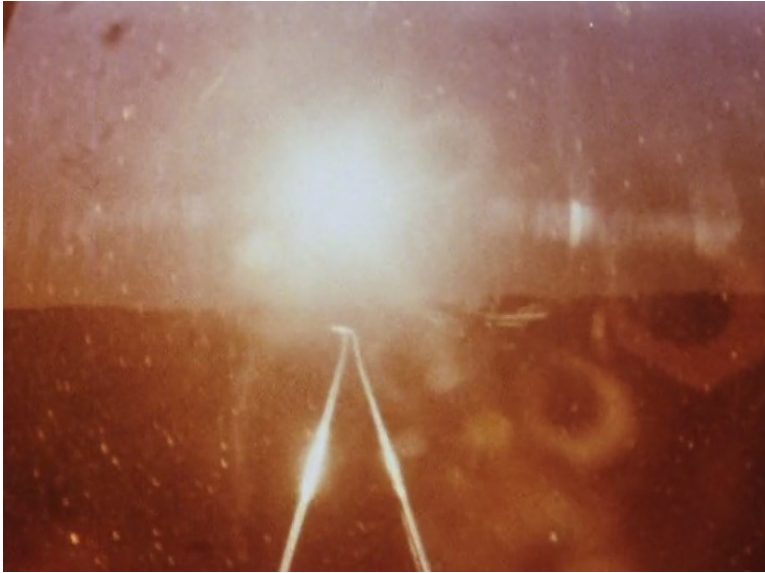


Fig. 8 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

The use of lens flares and the distorting effect of bright light is seen in the long journeys that are depicted in the moments when Mekas leaves New York and returns. For example, in “A Visit to Brakhage’s” in Reel Four Mekas records the view out of his window on his journey to Colorado. But he frequently points his camera directly into the sun, which means that the landscape is occasionally completely obscured by light (fig.8). The same technique happens on his return journey when we see the New Jersey skyline, smoke stacks and chimneys. In “Cassis” a camera is positioned in a master shot over a harbor in the south of France. Cassis condenses three hours of filming of a harbor in the South of France into four minutes. The camera is positioned in a master shot over the harbor and the footage is sped up to reveal the currents of the tide, the comings and goings of boats as well as the shifting light. This formal exercise creates a counterpoint to the single-frame footage. The inclusion footage serves to emphasise that life is

continually in flux, which Mekas is able to represent metaphorically through the properties of the film camera and transform his own understanding of the space around him in a way that can only be revealed by the camera.

The visual techniques are all acknowledgments that memory informs his present moment, but there are only oblique references to his exile from Lithuania in *Walden*. The first is the Lithuanian word for “meadow” appearing on the inter-title “Laukas, A Field, As Wide As Childhood,” accompanied by images of a girl playing in a meadow. The second occurs one hour later on an inter-title that mentions his Lithuanian heritage directly, “At Tabor Farm Lithuanians Danced Till Sunrise.” This is not Mekas making clear that he himself is Lithuanian and it fails to mention the significance of Tabor Farm, which hosts a Lithuanian festival every year.³⁸ The only direct indication that New York is not his first home is seen in an image of Mekas trying to get to sleep in his bed at the Chelsea Hotel, where Mekas lived between 1967 and 1974 in Room 725, a transitory space that makes the attempt to reconnect with his home more all the more poignant. This image is then followed by an inter-title that reads “I Thought of Home,” which then cuts to idyllic images of boats calmly floating across the surface of a lake in Central Park, which seem like they are from a dream (fig.9). The reliance on this footage is because Mekas does not have any images of his homeland to directly represent it, so he is forced to use an approximation that corresponds to his memory rather than reality. It is therefore unsurprising that Central Park is a key location in *Walden* and throughout his films, as it contains the most visual approximations of rural Lithuania.³⁹

³⁸ P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89.

³⁹ MacDonald, *Garden in the Machine*, 235.



Fig. 9 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

The device of superimposition is another oblique indication of his exilic status. It is a visual technique that replicates the experience of exile, as Mekas must hold two understandings of himself within the same body, a Lithuanian (1922-1944) and an exile (June 1944-present) and the coexistence of time frames in superimposition dismisses the urge to consider the present as a totally isolated moment. The explicit connection between superimposition and exile is made in the closing narration of Mekas' third diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), where refers to himself in the third person and states, "sometimes he didn't know where he was. The present and the past intermingled, superimposed." In *Walden* Mekas uses this technique extensively in "Notes on the Circus," where we see animals, acrobats, trapeze artists and jugglers combined in superimposition. It is the most abstract part of the film, but the extensive use of superimposition reveals that he is experimenting with the technique to see the distorting visual effects of combining to moment into one frame, such as combining out-of-focus shots with an intense close up. Later in the film we see film critic Amy Taubin standing next to a tree, which is then superimposed with the image of a lake in Central Park. The

tree branch and water evoke the rural landscape of Lithuania, acting as surrogates of the past, but Mekas then formally evokes the unreliability of memory by allowing the light refracting from the surface of the water to wash out the middle of the frame, emphasising uncertainty about the present moment by embracing the distorting effects of the imagery.



Fig. 10 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

Another example of a superimposition is early in Reel One. Mekas' friend Barbara Stone is seen combing the hair of her daughter Alexandra by the window, but superimposed over this image are a variety of other temporal moments, including an extreme close-up of a flower and other children (fig.10). This combines two key visual motifs of children and flowers, as in situations where adults and children are present Mekas will usually focus on the children rather than the adults. This is demonstrated in the segment "Co-op Directors Meet," where Mekas, Ken Jacobs, David Brooks, Gregory Markopoulos and Storm De Hirsch meet to discuss matters related to the Filmmakers Cooperative, but instead of focusing on their discussion the images show Amy Rice and her six-month-old son Christopher playing together. The emphasis on children is a

natural outgrowth of his visual motifs that reconnect him to his own childhood before exile, but the coexistence of time frames reveals that there is no unmediated return to his life before exile.

The film theorist Hamid Naficy who focuses specifically on the cinematic representations of exile, has pointed out that the repetition of motifs from the homeland involves a contradictory process, as on the one hand the ‘old’ identity is confirmed while the ‘new’ identity in exile is also affirmed.⁴⁰ When Mekas returns to Central Park to film the grass, leaves and trees he is documenting memories of his childhood, a time before he was forced to leave Lithuania, but he is also documenting grass, leaves and trees that are located in New York City, which affirm his exile status. The thread between past and present is shifting in Mekas’ imagery as his relationship to the past is constantly evolving. It would be too simple to say that the imagery of nature in his work represents “Lithuania” (past) while all the people and activities he films document “America” (present). The fragmentary presentation of his life acknowledges that the representation is incomplete and that a present moment activity will ultimately become past.

Editing *Walden*

In this section I will move on from Mekas’ visual techniques at the moment of shooting to consider how he arranges this footage. The diaristic subject in film is a very different textual construction from its written form, as a written diary is constructed as it goes along, but a diary film requires that the footage be edited for the purposes of exhibition. It is this tension that James addressed when he distinguished between a “film diary,” which is the unedited footage, and a “diary film,” which is the version edited and screened to the public.⁴¹ James believed that when the “film diary” footage was transformed into a “diary film” the addition of inter-titles, music and voiceover

⁴⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 559.

⁴¹ James, 147.

compromised the original meaning of the material, with him considering the moment of shooting more important as it replicates the spontaneity of a written diary. The diary film theorist Laura Rascaroli has taken issue with James' idea that editing and post-production elements are somehow a "betrayal" of the original footage, with her arguing that the "editing and post-production make a diary out of a set of audiovisual notes."⁴² In this section I will consider these aspects of secondary revision as an important component of Mekas finding new meanings in the footage he has collected.

The motivation to edit *Walden* in 1969 was due to the Albright-Knox-Gallery in Buffalo commissioning new works for an arts festival they were organising. Mekas was invited to make a film for this occasion and given ten months to work on it, with the gallery paying for printing expenses plus \$5,000.⁴³ Instead of presenting material he had shot from 1949, he wanted to reflect his most recent activities for the purposes of the festival.⁴⁴ It is significant that there is no in depth focus on Mekas' history of displacement, internment and exile in the film, even though the whole visual approach outlined in the previous section has been connected to these experiences. His commitment to the American avant-garde community means that the film ultimately reflects an exile attempting to find roots in a new country, with James describing the film as one in which Mekas finds a "home in cinema,"⁴⁵ however, there are some significantly different aspects to the way he arranged his diary films from other practitioners.

⁴² Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 129.

⁴³ Brian L Frye "Me, I Just Film My Life: An Interview with Jonas Mekas" *Senses of Cinema* Issue 44 (August 2007), accessed January 29, 2015, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/jonas-mekas-interview/>.

⁴⁴ Joseph Jon Lanthier "Film and Film and Film: An Interview with Jonas Mekas" *Bright Lights Film Journal* Issue 66 (November 2009), accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/66/66mekasiv.php>.

⁴⁵ James, 175.

The majority of diary films were silent, with Andrew Noren, Robert Huot, Howard Guttenplan, Warren Sonbert and Stan Brakhage all rejecting sound in their diary films, a choice that Paul Arthur has connected to the 1960s countercultural aversion to language ordering sensory experience.⁴⁶ These diary filmmakers either privileged in-camera composition, such as Howard Guttenplan, who refrained from editing his films except to eliminate weak moments, or carefully edited their footage in post-production, such as Warren Sonbert.⁴⁷ Sonbert edited his material into intricate rhythmical units and patterns, producing a thirty minute film every two to three years.⁴⁸ In his first three diary films Robert Huot documented his life for one year and included all the material he shot in that time. *One Year (1970)* (1971) is composed of forty-nine, chronologically arranged rolls of film that are predominantly composed of a single take that includes the light flare at the beginning and end of the roll.⁴⁹ In *Rolls (1971)* (1972) only thirteen of the twenty rolls of film Huot shot in 1971 are shown unedited, while the remaining nine are represented by one-second shots that are arranged by an algorithm inspired by a technique used in the pigment industry to match colours.⁵⁰ *Third One Year Movie - 1972* (1973) is ordered according to the number of shots contained in each roll, which means the takes get shorter as the film progresses.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 119.

⁴⁷ P. Adams Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987), 103.

⁴⁸ Paul Arthur, "Dancing on the Precipice: The Films of Warren Sonbert" *Film Comment* 35, no. 2 (March/April, 1999): 57.

⁴⁹ Christian Quendler, "A Series of Dated Traces: Diaries and Film" *Biography* 36, no.2 (Spring 2013): 350.

⁵⁰ Quendler, 350.

⁵¹ Quendler, 351.

Mekas' extensive use of secondary revision was therefore the exception, as he incorporated voiceover, inter-titles, direct sound recordings and music in post-production. The structure of the material is predominantly chronological, but there are sequences that depart from this approach. For example, Reel Two is mainly composed of footage from 1966, but it also includes "Sitney's Wedding" an event that took place on December 19, 1965. The decision to show the wedding of P. Adams Sitney and Marjorie Keller in this reel was motivated by the fact that Adolfas Mekas also got married in 1965, so his wedding appears in Reel One accompanied by the inter-title "A Wedding." Weddings are an important structuring factor of the work, with there being a total of four in the film: "A Wedding" (Reel One), "Sitney's Wedding" (Reel Two), "Peter's Wedding" (Reel Five), and "Wendy's Wedding" (Reel Six). If Mekas had put the two weddings within the same reel it would have unbalanced the film, so he moved "Sitney's Wedding" to Reel Two.

A diary, although digressive and fragmentary, is a narrative form whose entries are clearly segmented into chronological units, but in the 1960s Mekas often referred to his films as "non-narrative," claiming that, "in the narrative there is a protagonist, and the non-narrative forms have only the creator's, the artist's presence or ego."⁵² The majority of critics have challenged this label, with Scott MacDonald calling Mekas' third diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost* "a remarkable narrative film"⁵³ and Jonathan Rosenbaum rejected the description of *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* as a "non-narrative" work in the program notes for the New York Film Festival in 1972.⁵⁴ In his essay Rosenbaum points out that the anti-narrative stance of the avant-garde often meant that narrative works were mislabeled, with him quoting an assertion made by Mekas in his Movie

⁵² Rascaroli, 130.

⁵³ Scott MacDonald, "Lost Lost Lost over *Lost Lost Lost*" *Cinema Journal* 25, no.2 (Winter 1986): 20.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Myths of the New Narrative (And A Few Counter-Suggestions)," in *Independent America: New Film 1978-1988*, ed. David Schwartz (New York: Museum of the Moving Image, 1988), 3-8.

Journal column from 1961, where he connects narrative to “commercial film” and “entertainment” while “art” and “author’s cinema” is connected to non-narrative practices.⁵⁵ The association of narrative with commercial cinema meant that Mekas created this distinction despite being aware that a diary is a narrative form that is clearly structured by chronology.

There is little sense of Mekas’ personal development over this period, with the diaristic structure embracing the repetition of everyday life. Thoreau lived next to Walden Pond for two years, two months and two days, but the book compresses the experience into one year charted by the changing seasons. A similar distortion happens in Mekas’ approach, where the five-year passage of time is marked by the seasons (“In New York Was Still Winter,” “Autumn Came With Wind And Cold,” “Deep Of Winter.”), apart from summer, which is never mentioned in the film. There are inter-titles that sporadically describe dates and times but they never inform the viewer what year it is, but invoking the month (“September”) holidays (“New Year’s Evening In Times Square,” “Chinese New Year,” “Christmas Eve”), day (“Next Day”), time of day (“Next Morning”) and day of the week (“Sunday Morning Snowstorm On Eighth Avenue”). When a flashback occurs (“A Flashback: Seven Years Ago”) we have no idea from what point in time the seven years is being invoked.

Mekas embraces the repetition of un-dramatic events from diaristic structure, also. The inter-title “Winter Scene” appears a number of times. The first images show children by the river, using sleighs and city streets covered in snow. The second time it appears is directly after the previous inter-title, except this time the images show street workers and people walking the streets. It reappears in Reel Six, again showing similar images of New York streets covered in snow despite this footage being separated by years. There are numerous repetitions like this throughout the film. The inter-title “I Thought of

⁵⁵ Rosenbaum, 3.



Fig. 11 *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

Home” appears twice (in Reel One and Reel Six). “A Flashback: Seven Years Ago” also appears twice, in Reel Three and Reel Six, which shows protestors standing vigil in the cold in Times Square. This is a deliberate choice to embrace the mundane, as the avant-garde underwent massive changes, but there is no sense of unease or crisis within the avant-garde community, despite *Walden* starting in 1964, which has been described by J. Hoberman as the year that, “the underground nearly went under.”⁵⁶ This was due to a series of police raids on screenings of Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), which is only alluded to obliquely by P. Adams Sitney holding his hand up to the camera (fig.11) accompanied by the inter-title “Sitney is finger-printed by the police, as director of the Cinema-theque,” with no further explanation why. In the late 1950s and early 1960s a number of avant-garde films engage included sexually explicit material, such as Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Stan Brakhage’s *Flesh of Morning* (1956) and Barbara Rubin’s *Christmas on Earth* (1963) that led to screenings being shut down by the police. as New York was attempting to present a clean image for the 1964 World

⁵⁶ J. Hoberman, “The Underground,” in *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper Row, 1983), 60.

Trade Fair.⁵⁷ Yet the only indication of these complexities within *Walden* is the image of Sitney holding his hand up to the camera.

These types of choices reveal that footage can be re-interpreted and distorted depending on concerns at the time of editing. In his book *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White quotes Roland Barthes essay “The Discourse of History” where he questions the difference between “historical” and “fictional” discourse. Barthes asks, “does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onward, has generally been subject to the sanction of historical “science,” bound to the underlying standard of the “real,” and justified by the principles of “rational” exposition -- does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama.”⁵⁸ Mekas never attempts to make any totalising claims from his chronological approach that would suggest that this is a definitive representation. The fragment is embraced on every level of his filmic construction, from images to inter-titles, to foreground the subjectivity of the filmmaker in both the filming and editing his footage.

Another component of self-inscription in Mekas’ films is the use of inter-titles. These are instrumental to the rhythmic structure of his films, as they offer a respite from the fragmented imagery to allow the viewer a moment of stillness. The text is typewritten in capital letters on white card with there sometimes being noticeable ink smudges on some of the letters, which reinforce the artisanal nature of the film.⁵⁹ There are five main functions that the inter-titles serve: identify people and places, journeys taken, passages

⁵⁷ J. Hoberman *On Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), 37.

⁵⁸ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 35.

⁵⁹ Naficy, 144.

of time, various activities and events.⁶⁰ The people and places we see in *Walden* are usually artistic (“Gregory Markopoulos Shoots Backgrounds For Galaxie,” “Flowers for Marie Menken”), the activities are related to the struggle of maintaining the avant-garde community as a marginal practice (“I Cut My Hair, To Raise Money. Having Teas With Rich Ladies,” “Mailing Film Culture,” “Coop Directors Meet,” “The Village Voice,” “Anthology Cinema Meets”), the trips are to visit other artist friends (“Coming Home From St. Vincent College,” “A Trip To New Jersey,” “Coming Back To New York From Buffalo”), the place is usually Central Park (“Brakhage Crosses Central Park,” “In Central Park,” “One Spring Day In Central Park”) and the events are often culturally significant moments (“Velvet Underground’s First Appearance,” “To Yoko & John, With Love.”)

The inter-titles state what is about to be shown in the images, but the inter-title “Sitney Leaves New Haven, Goes to New York” highlights the tension that can occur between text and image. The footage shows P. Adams Sitney standing outside his old New Haven home. He is then seen walking down the street looking up at the rows of trees that line it, the camera tilting from Sitney’s gaze to the top of the trees, which is then followed by an abrupt cut to the next inter-title. In this example an event is stated on the inter-title, but the proceeding images only have a loose connection to the event described in the text, as the images explore Mekas’ own visual preoccupation with nature, with there being numerous cuts to the base of a tree (foregrounding the theme of finding roots). The people create a narrative focus for the text, but this is not the same as what interests him with his camera, as the images do not show Sitney packing boxes or placing furniture into a van, they show him relating to Mekas’ camera while on a break from the activities of moving house.

The French artist and poet Jean-Jacques Lebel has stated that *Walden*, “is better appreciated by one who knows the characters whose lives are captured here on film, and

⁶⁰ Naficy, 143.

why Jonas filmed them. It helps to have seen the films of Shirley Clarke, Stan Brakhage, Peter Kubelka, Carl Dreyer or Hans Richter and to have met them in “real life”⁶¹ Of course, it is unrealistic for the majority of viewers to have met them, but the subtlety of Mekas’ relationships are revealed through the inter-titles, as they create hierarchies of importance within the film. An individual who is seen but unidentified is different from someone who is both seen and named, as it gives them an emphasis within the flux of imagery. Jerome Hill, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, P. Adams Sitney and Hans Richter all have inter-titles in *Walden* to highlight their status as close friends. There is an informality to the way they are referred to in the text that means viewers often need prior knowledge of the person being filmed, for example “Peter’s Wedding” does not indicate that Peter is the photographer Peter Beard, so the viewer will only be aware of this fact if they recognise him in the footage.

A filmmaker who does not receive an inter-title in *Walden* is Jack Smith, who appears in “An Uptown Party” in Reel Two. Smith and the actor Mario Montez, who appeared in *Flaming Creatures*, are seen in a brief shot of them sitting on the floor together leaning against the wall. Mekas’ camera is at a distance and never gets any closer. Although Mekas championed his work, Smith was frustrated by the way *Flaming Creatures* was used by Mekas to gain notoriety for avant-garde films, which had very little to do with the film he made. Smith complained that Mekas was deliberately causing controversy by showing the film, claiming “It was another way by which he could be made to look like a saint, to be in the position of defending something when he was really kicking it to death.”⁶² Authorities banned screenings of the film, but when Mekas and Ken Jacobs defied the ban it escalated into a legal prosecution against Mekas and Jacobs. These

⁶¹ Jean Jacques Lebel “Jonas Mekas Celebrates what He Sees: The Moebius Strip,” in *The Walden Book*, ed. Pip Chodorov and Christian Lebrat (Paris: Editions Paris Experimental, 2003), 43.

⁶² Jack Smith, “Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art,” *Hatred of Capitalism: A Reader*, ed. Chris Krause and Sylvere Lotringer (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 2001), 243.

legal actions were due to his insistence on bringing the film to audiences, as Mekas was fully aware that a legal battle would draw more attention to avant-garde films⁶³ The complexity of his relationship with Smith is only hinted at by this subtle refusal to prioritise him with the use of an inter-title.

The final element of self-inscription is Mekas' use of sound. Mekas carried around a Nagra tape recorder with him to pick up sounds when he felt like it, but this was not a consistent practice, with there being long stretches of time where he did not record sound at all.⁶⁴ As the images are shot in short fragments of footage it was impossible for Mekas to naturalise sound and image, but the disjuncture reveals that there is no direct access to historical reality, which is in harmony with the assumptions of the visual strategies. The voiceover is not authoritative, but fragmented, the viewpoint of a Lithuanian exile whose accent still bares the trace of that dislocation. He speaks in English, but there is no authority beyond his claim to the images he has filmed of his own life. In the voiceover he acknowledges that some people may be bored or uninterested in what he has filmed and opened up for public scrutiny: "Just watch these images, nothing much happens, the images just go, just images for myself and a few others. One doesn't have to watch."

In Sitney's 1977 essay "Autobiography and Avant-Garde Film" he notes the differences between an autobiography and diary. An autobiography is written many years after the events described, but a diary is composed on a daily basis, usually a few hours after the events have occurred. What this means is that the diarist is unaware what the documented experiences are leading to, creating an open and unstable text. Sitney distinguishes between Mekas' diary films and "autobiographical films" like Stan

⁶³ Juan A Suarez, "Drag, Rubble, and Secret-Flix: Jack Smith's Avant-Garde Against the Lucky Landlord Empire," in *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 182.

⁶⁴ MacDonald, "Interview," 106.

Brakhage's *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-70), Jerome Hill's *Film Portrait* (1972), Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971) and James Broughton's *Testament* (1974), which look back at the lives of their filmmakers from a single temporal vantage point. Sitney does acknowledge, however, a parallel with autobiography in Mekas' practice, as "he allows himself the second, or doubling, movement of verbal commentary," while a diary film without this added layer of reflection would be "a series of discontinuous presents."⁶⁵ Mekas' addition of voiceover creates an intermingling of first-person viewpoints that combines the diarist's naiveté of subsequent events (in filming) and the retrospective knowledge of the autobiographer (in voiceover).

In the voiceover from Reel One Mekas reads a diary extract written by St. John of the Cross in November 1587 where he states, "Speaking distracts one while silence and work recollects and strengthens the spirit. Once a person knows what has been told him for his benefit he no longer needs to hear or speak. Better put into practice silently and carefully in humility. He must not then go in search of new things that serve only to satisfy the appetite outwardly." His work related to sustaining and promoting the avant-garde community is what helps him "strengthen his spirit," as revealed in an inter-title early in Reel One, "I Cut My Hair, to Raise Money. Having Teas with Rich Ladies," but he is not able to speak about his exile at this point, so he instead puts his efforts into gaining money for avant-garde films. At the time of speaking he is still unable to speak about the subject of his exile, even though the visual strategies and motifs betray it in every frame.

In Reel Five we see a German TV crew making a documentary on "underground movies," for which they are following around Adolfas Mekas as he shoots sequences for his film *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963). In the voiceover Mekas emphasises the inaccuracy of the reality of being an experimental filmmaker, as his brother climbs a tree and pretends to be directing his film for the purposes of the TV crew, which Mekas resists in

⁶⁵ Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film," 245.

the voiceover by claiming “That’s how they believe underground movies are being made, having a good time.” In Reel Six Mekas goes to the park and films by himself to get away from the German TV crew. In the voiceover Mekas expresses his dissatisfaction, while the images confirm Mekas’ continued passion for the community. This is because Mekas’ voiceover preserves his immediate response to the images, so it can interact with the immediate response at the time of filming. This tension highlights the temporary nature of his assertions, as nothing in his work can be seen as fixed or definitive. It is an emotional node in a set of reflections that are shaped by his reaction to re-visiting footage from the past. If he had really disliked the avant-garde community he would not have continued to champion it. It is this tension between voiceover and image that I will extend into the next chapter, but what I have established through Mekas’ first diary film is the important difference, and moments where the subject is divided.

Conclusion

In this chapter I acknowledged that Mekas developed the mode of the diary film within the context of the American avant-garde, but that his practice was unusual as many other diarists prioritised the sexual aspects of their lives, while Mekas focused on everyday encounters that took place within his extensive activities promoting and sustaining the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. Although he started filming his life with a visually neutral approach, he realised upon revisiting the footage that the same visual motifs dominated his compositions, such as snow, trees and nature, which made him aware that he was reflecting his memories of his childhood in Lithuania. The formal strategies he developed from this insight reflected the idea that the present is always informed by the past, which means that a direct access to historical reality can never be achieved. These techniques included gestural movements of the camera, single frames, lens flares and superimpositions. The use of superimposition was explored in detail for reflecting the experience of exile, where the subject has to hold two understandings of themselves in the same body. The visual approximation of this idea reflects the inability to see the present in a clear way, as it is always informed by another temporal moment.

In the final section of this chapter I explored the way that Mekas edited his footage in order to centralise or marginalise certain aspects of his life. David E. James viewed the dependence on editing footage for a diary film as a drawback, but following on from Laura Rascaroli's belief that the process of editing was necessary part of the form I argued that Mekas gained new insights into his material. I noted that this practice was unusual for most diary films in this period, as they were mainly silent with very little secondary revision, but Mekas used narrative structure, inter-titles and sound in his films. He organised his footage by chronology, but because the American avant-garde often defined itself as a non-narrative practice to distinguish itself from dominant filmmaking traditions, Mekas mislabeled his approach as non-narrative. The structure mimics very closely the written diary through the embracement of repetition, digression and fragmentation, but the use of inter-titles created hierarchies of importance within the film. A friend who is given an inter-title is prioritized over someone who is not. An example of this is the filmmaker Jack Smith, a key figure in Mekas' concerns at the time, yet he does not receive an inter-title because of their strained relationship. Finally, I considered the sound elements, which acted in tension with the images, to emphasise the gaps between speaking and filming. In the next chapter I will conduct a much more in depth exploration of the sound and image relationship in Mekas' diary practice.

Chapter Three

Trauma Cinema: *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976)

In this chapter I argue that the sound and image relationship in Jonas Mekas' diary films reflect a subjectivity shaped by trauma. The two films I will use to explore this idea are *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), which deal with Mekas' experience of internment, displacement and exile. In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* Mekas not only returns to his homeland after twenty-seven years of forced exile, but also the forced labor camp in Hamburg where he was interned during World War Two. In *Lost, Lost, Lost* we see his life in exile between 1949 and 1963, where he establishes a new identity through the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. The previous chapter showed that Mekas' practice integrates multiple subject positions of filming, voiceover, inter-titles, music and narrative structure, but I will extend the discussion by arguing that the tension between these layers are part of Mekas' attempt to reflect traumatic memory, which is beset with contradictions, uncertainties and inaccuracies. I will divide the chapter into three parts. The first will consider Janet Walker's theory of "trauma cinema" and its applicability to Mekas' practice. The second will analyse the tension between sound and image in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, while the third part will focus on *Lost, Lost, Lost*.

Trauma Cinema

In her book *Trauma Cinema* Janet Walker focuses on documentary films "that deal with a world shattering event or events, whether public or personal,"¹ with her analysis centering on incest and the Holocaust. These events can only be recaptured through the recollection of survivors, foregrounding that memory is integral to our understanding of

¹ Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), 19.

historical reality. As film scholar Pam Cook points out, memory is considered “authentic” in eyewitness testimony, as the presence of the individual at an event, “invests their recollections with an aura that transcends the knowledge that their experience is reconstructed for the purpose of current agendas, and endows it with authority and emotional power.”² Although it is generally understood that memory can be unreliable, in traumatic events the ability to recall events perfectly is incredibly difficult due to the disorientating nature of the experience.

Instead of viewing memory processes as a setback, Walker puts forward the idea of the “traumatic paradox,” where mistakes and gaps in the recollection of someone who has experienced a traumatic event lends legitimacy to what they are saying.³ This idea is adopted from clinical psychiatrist Dori Laub who believed that factual inaccuracies provide credibility to the testimony of someone who has witnessed a traumatic event. The key example Loeb cited is the testimony of a holocaust survivor who mistakenly described seeing four chimneys explode at the Auschwitz concentration camp when in fact only one had been destroyed. While this mistake led some historians to discredit the witness’s account, Loeb believed that the error revealed how the witness’s mind registered the event, which was just as valid as what could be historically verified.⁴ This is why Walker believes that traditional realist modes of cinematic nonfiction representation are not the best way of understanding subjects who have experienced trauma, as it is at odds with their memory processes, which are often marked by inaccuracies, contradictions, repetitions and digressions.⁵

² Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

³ Walker, 4.

⁴ Walker, 5.

⁵ Walker, 125.

An example Walker provides of a traditional approach to documenting traumatic events is The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, who interviewed 50,000 Jewish survivors of the Holocaust to produce over 120,000 hours of footage.⁶ These interviews were recorded in the homes of survivors, who spoke in the language they were most comfortable in. The video camera was stationary and focused on their faces, while they were asked questions by an off-screen interviewer. This visually neutral approach, although incredibly useful in preserving the experiences of such a wide array of people, is at odds with the actual process of memory recall following traumatic events, which is fractured, non-chronological and beset by factual errors, which Walker believes should be imitated formally in order to emphasise that the act of retelling is not necessarily completely historically accurate, but incredibly useful as a record of how people experience events.

Instead of ignoring the complexities of how events are processed by the mind, the documentary films Walker deals with all adopt visual strategies that approximate the mistakes and gaps of recollection, meaning that they are marked by “a non-realist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the films’ narrative and stylistic regimes.”⁷ One of Walker’s key examples is *Daughter Rite*, where filmmaker Michele Citron deconstructs her father’s home movies to locate her own unrepresented past within the footage. As the cameraman her father only focused on happy events from her childhood, so the traumas that existed outside the frame can only be excavated by Citron visually transforming the footage through techniques such as slow motion, repetition and optical step-frame printing. This interrogation is in combination with a first-person voiceover by Citron, who looks for gestures that reveal events that happened outside the frame, specifically the sexual abuse by her grandfather. In one moment she aggressively hugs and kisses her younger sister, with Citron laughing as her sister struggles to get out of her embrace. As an adult revisiting the footage in the voiceover she views this as a

⁶ Walker, 125.

⁷ Walker, 19.

displaced moment of sexual aggression, where the incest of her grandfather is being transferred.⁸ This undercuts the notion that the 8mm footage reflects the past directly and that the truth contained within the frame is self-evident, as meaning can only be excavated by its interrogation and appropriation by Citron.⁹

A more recent example Walker uses to reveal that meaning is not self-evident is *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), which is about a father (Albert Friedman) and his son (Jesse Friedman) being arrested and convicted of child abuse. David Friedman, the son and brother of the two men, possessed over 50 hours of home movie footage that was given to the filmmaker Andrew Jarecki to use in the documentary. There is an even split between the 8mm footage shot by Arnold Friedman when David and Jesse were young boys (25 hours) and the footage David shot after Jesse and Arnold were arrested (25 hours).¹⁰ The film integrates multiple subject positions, from the happy childhood constructed through Arnold Friedman's home-movie footage to the behind-the-scenes footage shot by David. When Jarecki selected and integrated this footage in combination with the interviews with those involved in the case, he does not resolve the contradictions, but foregrounds the processes through which traumatic events from the past can be understood in the present.¹¹ The use of editorial juxtaposition, inter-titles and music allows Jarecki to make inferences about the possible incestuous dynamics to their relationship but the only knowledge that can be gained is distanced by time and memory.¹²

⁸ Walker, 88.

⁹ Walker, 88.

¹⁰ Walker, 117.

¹¹ Walker, xxi.

¹² Walker, 121.

Other scholars have adopted Walker's term to account for shifting documentary practices that prioritise memory processes as an important part of historical understanding. In her study on animated documentaries, Annabelle Honess Roe connects Walker's notion of "disremembering," which involves "conjuring mental images and sounds related to past events but altered in certain respects,"¹³ to Ari Folman's animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). The film follows Folman attempting to reconstruct three days from the 1982 Lebanon War that have been entirely erased from his memory, with the film following him coming to terms with his involvement in the massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut.¹⁴ To counteract the gap in his recollections, Folman shot video interviews with friends and journalists who took part in the war and psychologists that specialise in post-traumatic stress disorder. These interviews were then animated as well as the memories and experiences that the interviewees recount.¹⁵ The acceptance of animation as a documentary practice is in part a wider acknowledgment that there are events that cannot be accessed directly with a camera, with the animation style of the film being "simultaneously realistic and fantastical,"¹⁶ to communicate the significance of memory and dreams in understanding the historical world.

As I argued in Chapter 1, the representation of dreams, memories, hallucinations and fantasies has long been at the centre of avant-garde practice, but the films that Walker believes to be at the forefront of traumatic representation are feminist autobiographical films such as the previously mentioned *Daughter Rite*, *Confessions of a Chameleon* (Lynn Herschmann, 1986), *First Person Plural* (Lynn Herschmann, 1989), *Attic Secrets* (Heidi Bollock, 1998), *Family Gathering* (Lise Yasui, 1988), *History and Memory* (Rea

¹³ Walker, 14.

¹⁴ Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 161.

¹⁵ Honess Roe, 161.

¹⁶ Honess Roe, 162.

Tajari, 1991) and *Tak for Alt* (Laura Bialis, Broderick Fox and Sarah Levy, 1999).¹⁷ The visual strategies of these films reflect the contradictory nature of trauma “by looking to mental processes for inspiration,”¹⁸ but this approach can be found much earlier in the work of American avant-garde filmmakers, whose work is not even referenced by Walker. Other scholars have looked at American avant-garde films for the representation of traumatic representation, most notably E. Ann Kaplan’s analysis of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which “produces a visual correlative to the subjective, emotional and visual experience of trauma.”¹⁹ Although Kaplan acknowledges that the film is non-specific about the trauma being represented, she argues that it reflects the gender struggles after World War Two, when women were expected to return to their traditional roles as wives and mothers after fulfilling jobs previously reserved for men.²⁰

Where Roe has applied Walker’s term to more contemporary documentary practices, I will argue that her ideas are applicable to the diary films of Jonas Mekas, whose films preceded the more widespread adoption of experimental techniques for subjective representation in documentary practice in the 1980s. The trauma that informs Mekas’ approach is his exile from Lithuania, which he was forced to leave in July 1944 to escape arrest by German authorities for publishing articles in an anti-Nazi newspaper. Mekas points out an important emotional difference between forced and voluntary exiles, as although it is still possible for voluntary exiles to miss their home and family, they can ultimately “grow new roots” and “forget all about it,” while as a forced exile Mekas “always wants to go back home and it stays there and it doesn’t disappear.”²¹

¹⁷ Walker, 21.

¹⁸ Walker, 19.

¹⁹ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 125.

²⁰ Kaplan, 125.

²¹ Jonas Mekas, “The Diary Film” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*,

This sets up two subjectivities that act in tension with one another: the self that existed in Lithuania and the self that has been created in exile. Although it is possible for everyone to trace various selves through common events like birthdays, weddings and holidays, the traumatic rupturing of Mekas' subjectivity makes the relationship between the self before and after these events much more problematic.²²

The diary practice outlined in the previous chapter creates a confrontation between two subjects: the one who filmed the images and the one editing them. This approach has been described by Catherine Russell as a “temporal experience through which the film or video-maker confronts himself or herself as tourist, ethnographer, exile or immigrant.”²³ Mekas' filmic construction juxtaposes the ‘I’ that filmed the footage and the ‘I’ that speaks about them in the voiceover, creating a tension between the attitudes expressed at the time of filming and those at the time of speaking. The convergence of these two subject positions within the filmic text does not bring them into harmony, but exposes the gaps to imitate Mekas' fragmented sense of self. Although he wants to reconcile the split, this practice acknowledges that it can never be resolved.

In continuity with Walker's theory of the “traumatic paradox” Mekas' films do not present historical understanding as self-evident, but involve interpretation and interrogation of the footage he has shot. There is no manipulation of the image in post-production, with it remaining preserved as an immediate and intuitive reaction to the events depicted. The process of excavating new meanings and understanding of the footage occurs in the selection, music, voiceover, inter-titles and narrative structure, with the way he records his voiceover being similar to how he uses the camera. He does not

ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 196.

²² Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 3.

²³ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 279.

write anything down or prepare what he is going to say in advance unless he is reading pages from his written diary, so what is heard is an immediate and intuitive reaction to the footage being revisited.²⁴ When Mekas looks at the footage at years remove he is rediscovering, reconstructing and reinterpreting his filmed past, which means that in the voiceover his memory is being reworked through the act of watching the filmed footage. What Michael Renov notes about this approach is that, “the resonances -- and frequent dissonances -- between sound and image consistently challenge the retrieval of untroubled or available historical meaning from documentary images.”²⁵

Mekas’ practice presents multiple layers of self-inscription that do not attempt to create a unitary representation of subjectivity. The moment of filming is a present moment activity that reveals his past through the emphasis on particular details within a scene. The editing is dislocated from the subjectivity being expressed in the images, so we get a disjuncture between filming and editing. The voiceover acts in tension with the images as subsequent experience has redefined his understanding of the past when he re-engages with the images he has filmed. It is not always necessarily clear to Mekas why he filmed certain details in a particular way once he revisits the footage. There is no stable understanding of subjectivity in Mekas’ films as he foregrounds the instability through the tension between voice and image, which connects to Walker’s definition of trauma cinema as it highlights that memory processes are unreliable yet a valid strategy for understanding the historical world

The two films that I will now focus on both deal with loss. The film scholar David E. James points out that although Mekas is reunited with his homeland and family in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* if he had decided to remain there it would

²⁴ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 145.

²⁵ Michael Renov, “Lost, Lost, Lost: Mekas as Essayist,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 224.

entail the loss of his life in New York, “a double-bind in whose terrors all exiles live,”²⁶ while *Lost, Lost, Lost* contains a “double loss, that of Lithuania and that of the early years in New York”²⁷ Mekas acknowledges the gaps in memory that cannot be filled or accessed by the camera with cuts to black screen, hesitant voiceovers and inter-titles that inform “I Am Trying to Remember.” At the same time he does not dismiss that there is no truth of how he is attempting to reconnect to the past through these memory processes, but a clear understanding cannot be gained. The distance between editing and shooting is incredibly important to the meaning of the work, as it reveals how Mekas relates to and reinterprets it, with the past retranslated and reworked by later knowledge and experience.²⁸

Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania

In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* Mekas documents the return to his homeland of Lithuania for the first time in twenty-seven years, where he is reunited with his uncle, mother, brothers and sisters. His return was made possible after his film *The Brig* (1964) was favorably reviewed by the editor of *Pravda*, who had seen it on a trip to New York. It was subsequently invited to the Moscow Film Festival, where it was praised for being an “anti-capitalist” film. By being so well received in Russia, Mekas believed that the Lithuanian authorities would grant him a visa, which they did. The authorities also offered to provide him with a camera crew to film his visit, but Mekas declined, telling them that he would be filming everything alone with his Bolex camera. They allowed him to do this, but an official film crew from the Lithuanian government filmed Mekas

²⁶ David E. James, “Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in *Walden*,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 167.

²⁷ James, 167.

²⁸ King, 4.

using much more expensive cameras that were shooting everything on Cinemascope, but Mekas does not acknowledge the presence of this other crew within the film itself.²⁹

The film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum believes *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* to be “the one film that makes all the others legible,”³⁰ as it directly recounts Mekas’ experience of internment, displacement and exile, something that is only dealt with obliquely in his first diary film *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)*. The film is divided into three parts, with a different “home” represented in each section. The first involves his home in exile in Brooklyn, the second his childhood home of Semeniškiai, and the third Hamburg, where Jonas and Adolfas spent a year inside a forced labor camp during World War Two. In the three parts there are varying distances between the time of filming and editing. The footage in the first part was mainly shot in the early 1950s, so there is a gap of twenty years between shooting and editing, but in the rest of the film the gap between filming and reflection was only a few months. This is due to the fact that in order to complete the film Mekas was given money by Norddeutscher Television, who paid for editing and film stock in exchange for the German television rights to the film. Mekas forgot about this arrangement, and was contacted by them in December 1971 informing him that they planned to screen the completed film on January 20, 1972. This time constraint shaped the final work, as Mekas thought about the form and structure of the film for a few days then edited the material in only one day.³¹

²⁹ Scott MacDonald, “Interview with Jonas Mekas,” *October* 29, no.1 (Summer 1984), 111.

³⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Jonas Mekas,” in *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver, Colorado: Arden Press, 1983), 113.

³¹ Mekas, 194.

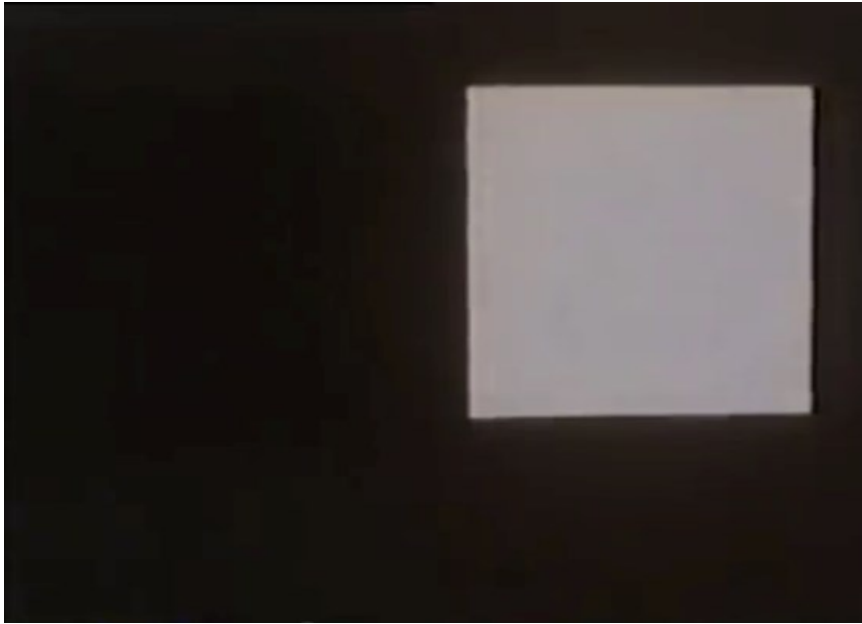


Fig. 12 *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (Jonas Mekas, 1972).

The opening section is twelve minutes long, the shortest of the three parts. The footage is in both colour and black and white, depicting Mekas' immigrant experience in New York in the early 1950s, some of which would later appear in *Lost, Lost, Lost*. The opening shot is of a white square to the right of the frame, an image that recurs throughout Part One and Part Three (fig. 12). Mekas shot this image in 1950 when he had the idea of trying to divide all of his films like chapters in a book, but its appearance resembles the sprocket on a roll of film or a cinema screen awaiting images to be projected onto it.³² The frequency of its inclusion in these two parts of the film emphasise the limitations of the images as an accurate depiction of his experiences, as what he has filmed represents only a small fragment of his life, yet he does not reject the usefulness of the footage in helping him reconnect to his past and the emotions connected to it.

³² Mekas, 196.

In the voiceover recorded in 1971 looking at images shot in the 1950s Mekas states that the images, which depict a walk in the Catskills around 1957 and 1958, represents the moment he felt at home and “not completely alone in America.” Although the voiceover defines it as a moment of stability, the images are consistent with the motifs that permeate his work of nature, trees, snow and children that reconnect him back to his childhood in Lithuania, demonstrating that his sense of home is still defined by his past. It then cuts back to 1950 to show us the street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn where the brothers lived upon their arrival, which was mainly populated by other Lithuania immigrants. The rituals of the other displaced Lithuanians that he filmed from that time create a counterpoint for the rituals depicted in Part Two when he returns to Lithuania. In this section we see immigrants dancing in a circle on a boat, but when we see the image again, accompanied by the same piece of music, Mekas is now part of the circle with his other family members, confirming the reconnection with his homeland. What emphasizes his continued dislocation is the voiceover, which is spoken by Mekas in heavily accented English. As the film scholar Hamid Naficy has pointed out, voice tracks the disintegration of homeland as, “One of the greatest deprivations of exile is the gradual deterioration and potential loss of one’s original language.”³³ English is the language Mekas had to learn in exile, which therefore inscribes the loss of his homeland and native language into every moment of the film.³⁴

Part Two documents Mekas’ return to his homeland, but the footage is only about half of what he shot. Instead of punctuating the images with the white square that he uses in Part One and Three he uses numbered fragments, which are introduced by the inter-title “100 Glimpses of Lithuania August 1971.”³⁵ This inter-title suggests that there will be 100 numbered fragments, but there are only 91 numbered sections, a mistake that is

³³ Naficy, 24.

³⁴ Jan Christopher Horak, “Regarding Mekas: Avant-Garde Film and Audience Subjectivity” *Millennium Film Journal* 53 (Fall 2010-Winter 2011), 61.

³⁵ Mekas, 194.

consistent with Mekas' representation of the distorting effects of memory.³⁶ He intended to document the return to his homeland with the same density of visual techniques seen in *Walden*, but the subject matter and technical limitations necessitated a different approach. Mekas brought with him a brand new Bolex, but unbeknownst to him it had a defect that caused it to change frame rates. For instance, he would set the camera to twenty-four frames per second, but the camera would suddenly shift to thirty-two frames per second unexpectedly. As a way to gain control over his equipment he decided to embrace this irregularity as a stylistic device, as he noticed that the frame rate would change when he shot in short takes, so he accentuated this mistake and often did not check his lens opening before taking a shot.³⁷

The main visual strategy of this segment is overexposed footage, as Mekas' aim was to, "reveal reality in, literally, a different light."³⁸ The brightness gives his depiction of Lithuania a dreamlike quality, suggesting that his exile has made it impossible for him to look at his home country in the same way again. The distortion of the images reveals that the return to Lithuania does not resolve the issue of exile, but complicates it further, as it does not heal the wound, but re-complicates the absence from his homeland that makes it impossible to view in the same way. It is significant that the device of superimposition is not used at all in the "100 Glimpses," as in the previous chapter I argued that this device of bringing two temporal moments into a single frame is a visual metaphor for exile, as Mekas holds two understandings of himself together in the same body: a Lithuanian and an exile. The return to his homeland involves him looking for the source of the images that he could only approximate in New York, which created a doubling effect.

³⁶ MacDonald "Interview," 113.

³⁷ Mekas, 195.

³⁸ Mekas, 194.



Fig. 13 *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (Jonas Mekas, 1972)

The one aspect he does attempt to document as coherently as possible is his mother, as the camera movements are more restrained and the shot durations are slightly longer. Mekas does not start his voiceover until fragment 7 “Mamma (Born 1887)” (fig. 13) when he states, “and there was Mamma and she was waiting. She was waiting for 25 years.” The decision to begin the voiceover only once she appears onscreen suggests that he has not properly returned home until he has been reconnected with his mother. There is an error in his statement, however, as it had been twenty-seven years, not twenty-five since he had last seen her, another example of memory being distorted by the passage of time. She possesses the rituals, habits and beliefs of someone who has never been forced to leave the country, with there being a strong emphasis on her work ethic, with inter-titles including “Mamma’s Work Never Ends,” “Mamma Prepares Ruta (Rue) Seeds” “Mamma Makes Fire” and “Mamma Bakes Potato Pancakes.” Mekas also looks for other elements that have remained the same in his absence, such as the house he grew up in, his brothers Kostas (“29”), Povilas (“34”) and sister Alzbune (“35”). There is even an inter-title that announces “Our Old Toilet is Still There,” which emphasises that every

little detail is focused upon as a sign of stability, meaning that his return to Lithuania does not involve him confronting the country in 1971, but searching for the home he was forced to leave in 1944.

Mekas acknowledges that he is not interested in the present day reality of Lithuania in the voiceover for fragment “33,” where he claims, “Of course you would like to know something about the social realities. How is life going there in the Soviet Lithuania? But what do I know about it? I’m a displaced person on my way home. In search of my home. Retracing bits of past. Looking for some recognisable traces of my past.” The images that accompany this reflection are his family members being measured, with all the men stand in a line and a stick is placed above their heads. The women conduct the same ritual also, but when Mekas utters the phrase “recognisable traces of my past” we see the ink lines measuring the height of the various people with their name written next to it. This is a moment of disjuncture between the voiceover and the images, as although the ritual is familiar from his childhood, the height of his family members have changed. This sets up a tension that runs throughout the rest of the segment of Mekas searching for elements that are familiar to him, but re-engaging with them in the present day confirms the passage of time and that life will never be the same.

As he wants to document the Lithuania he knew before he was forced to leave it he largely ignores the modernisation of the country. Mekas does briefly acknowledge the industrialisation of farming practices in “31,” where he meets an old school friend who is also called Jonas and who operates a combine harvester on the collective farm. The Jonas who was forced to flee the country in 1944 is not interested in these present day practices, as in “67” we see him using a scythe to cut the grass in the field behind his house, an outdated piece of technology that was replaced due to industrialisation. This was how the grass was cut when Mekas was still in the country, which means it is another example of Mekas return to the rituals of his homeland before he was forced to leave it. In “70” his brother Kostas brings out a wooden plough -- another outdated piece of technology -- and tells Mekas to pull it around the field. In the voiceover Mekas says

that his brother told him to pull the plough so that he could show the Americans “how miserably we lived,” which he finds funny. In the images Kostas pretends to whip Mekas like a horse, but this performance highlights that past rituals no longer have the same meaning when they are performed in the present day, as it is now considered a joke, but when Mekas was a child the plough was an essential component to the survival of the farm.

There is an extensive amount of direct sound in the film that preserves the speaking and singing voices of his family that was recorded by the wife of Adolfas Mekas, Pola Chapelle. There are numerous Lithuanian songs heard throughout, from Mekas’ brother Kostas singing about farming, to his family standing in a circle outside their mother’s home to sing as she watches on from the doorstep in “38.” There is also much more use of direct sound to capture his mother’s speaking voice than for any other person in the film. In “18” we hear her playing with her pet cat. In “22” we hear her speaking in Lithuanian, which Mekas translates in voiceover, telling us that she is complaining that her memory is fading and that she cannot find any spoons: “She has ten and she can’t find a single one this morning. The thing about old age is that you can’t find your spoons when you are that old.” This foregrounds the unreliability of memory in old age, as although the film emphasises that Mekas’ traumatic experience of exile creates a distorted memory of the country he was forced to leave, memory is still a problem for someone who was never forced to leave it.

In “52” we hear his mother speaking in Lithuanian in conjunction with images of washing her face and in “53” we see her eating breakfast with the rest of the family as Mekas explain what she had said in the previous fragment, informing us that she was talking about how the police waited outside the house by hiding in the bushes in case Mekas and his brother decided to return. They knew they were there because they could hear the dogs barking. This memory suddenly impinges unexpectedly later in the film in “84,” where we see his mother making potato cakes. The gentle piano music on the soundtrack gives a sense of calm, but then Mekas’ voiceover interjects, stopping the

music abruptly to state that “Yes, they were waiting for you every night for more than a year behind the bathhouse. The dogs used to bark every night, she said,” the piece of music resumes and the images of his mother frying the potato cakes on a fire stove outside the house continue on. This is an example of formal techniques imitating trauma by reflecting the intrusive way an unwanted memory re-enters consciousness unexpectedly

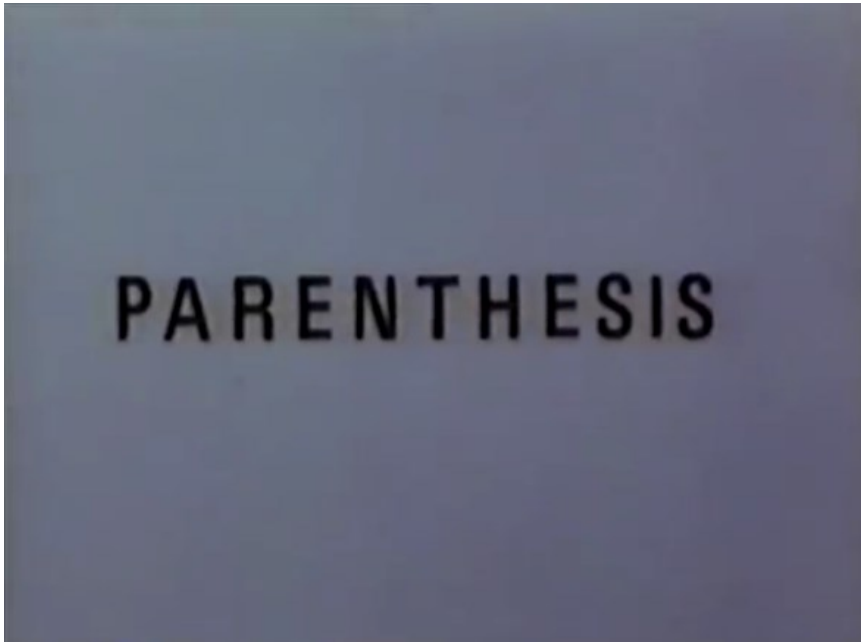


Fig. 14 *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (Jonas Mekas, 1972)

If the voiceover emphasises certain information, the inter-titles often sideline traumatic events. This is demonstrated between fragment “54” -- “Parenthesis” -- (fig.14) and fragment “56” -- “Parenthesis Closed.” Mekas’ voiceover describes his escape from Lithuania, explaining that he had been editing an underground anti-Nazi newspaper when the German Army entered the country. He hid his typewriter under a pile of wood outside the house, but one night it was stolen, so he had to flee immediately as it could be traced back to him. The images that accompany this description are of fields and a lake, idyllic images that act in tension with the verbal descriptions of political persecution, but suggest an undercurrent of violence through images of reeds being

blown violently in the wind and waves hitting the shore. When Mekas utters the phrase “false papers were made for us to go to the University of Vienna” the screen cuts to black and remains so for thirty-seconds until the inter-title “Parenthesis Closed” appears. He does not connect any images to his description of how the German authorities re-directed the train they were on to Hamburg and imprisoned them in a forced labor camp. The use of a black screen acknowledges the rupture in his life, as there are no images to be found in Lithuania that he can associate with the trauma he suffered. The black screen also points to the limitations of visual representation and acknowledges that he can only access that time through verbal recollection.



Fig. 15 *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (Jonas Mekas, 1972)

In “72” we see images of a visit to his old school house (fig.15), which in the voiceover he claims reminds him of walking through the snow to get there as a child. The physical sensations he describes of “our noses frozen. Our faces burning in cold wind and snow,” again act in tension with the bright summer light of the images. Mekas is also seen having a race with his brother in the school field just as they would do as children, but as adults the passage of time is marked. The happy images are undercut by the musings in

the voiceover, which progressively become darker and more sinister as it continues on to “74”: “Where are you now my old childhood friends? How many of you are alive? Where are you scattered through the graveyards, through the torture rooms, through the prisons, through the labour camps of the western civilisation.” In conjunction with this voiceover it shows images of daily life on the farm of people feeding and milking the cows. The abrupt shift from the “beautiful days” of walking to school through winter fields to the “graveyards, torture rooms, prisons, and labor camps” are not far apart in his memory, no matter how hard he tries to focus on the beauty of nature, it still brings him back to the traumas he suffered both within the country and by being forced to leave it.

Part Three opens with an inter-title announcing “Parenthesis,” as in this section Mekas confronts the traumatic experience recounted in fragments “54” to “56” of the “100 Glimpses” from Part Two. Unlike the previous parenthesis, Mekas does not resort to a black screen, but instead confronts the spaces described in the voiceover of being interned in a forced labour camp. The first image shows Adolfas lying in the grass, which Mekas informs us in the voiceover is the spot where his bed used to be situated in the Nazi camp. This re-enactment of trauma highlights the passage of time, but it is noteworthy that the person conducting the action is Adolfas, not Jonas. The fact that Mekas was unable to conduct the gesture suggests his difficulty with the situation, which is confirmed in the voiceover where he states that people in Hamburg had forgotten that a forced labour camp used to be situated there and “only the grass remembers.” The importance of nature in his films is clarified as a repository of memory that transcends human history, as the grass is still there, but human civilisation has thankfully moved on.

The difference between Jonas and Adolfas’ reaction to the confrontation with these traumatic spaces is seen in Adolfas’ *Going Home* (1972), which often presents moments that can also be seen in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* but from a different

point of view.³⁹ In the voiceover for *Going Home* Adolfas reads extracts from his diaries as a child in Semeniskiai and the ones he wrote in the German forced labour camp. These entries highlight the gap between the person represented in the images and the one speaking in the voiceover that is similar to *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, but as Philippe Dijon de Monteton points out, Adolfas is more extroverted than Jonas in the images, as he walks up to the foreman and cheerfully talks to him as he is shown the machine he used to work on. In contrast, Jonas remains at a distance from the foreman and only recalls in the voiceover that, “this is the bench where I was beaten up for working too slow and talking back.” Mekas is unable to be as comfortable in the situation as his brother, which is why he remains behind his camera inside the factory, waiting for the deferment of editing the footage to register his thoughts.

The brothers then leave Hamburg and travel to Vienna, completing the trip they had planned in 1944 from Lithuania but were unable to achieve due to their internment. Introduced by the inter-title “Vienna, August 1971” they meet up with the friends they have made in the artistic community of New York, including Ken and Flo Jacobs, Peter Kubelka, Hermann Nitsch and Annette Michelson. In the voiceover Mekas praises each of them for their virtues: Michelson for making culture her life, Nitsch for having the courage to follow his vision and Jacobs for the purity of his childlike view, but he admits to feeling envious of Kubelka because of his “peace, his serenity, his being just in himself with things around him, with things he has always been with. At home, in place, in time, in mind, in culture.” This is something Mekas will never have. The final shot of the film of a burning fruit market, which Kubelka tells Mekas is the most beautiful one in Vienna but that it is being burnt down in order to be replaced by a new one. The final words of the film, “They want a modern market now” affirms how easily history can be eradicated, only to exist in the memory of those who can remember.

³⁹ Philippe Dijon de Monteton “A Foolish Genius: The Life and Work of Adolfas Mekas” *Experimental Conversations* 8 (Winter 2011), accessed February 8, 2015, <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/article/a-foolish-genius-the-life-and-work-of-adolfas-mekas/>.

In my analysis of *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* I have shown that historical understanding is not self-evident in either the images or the soundtrack. The visual strategies acknowledge the impossibility of Mekas viewing his homeland without the distorting effect of memory, as overexposed footage, black screens, fragmented inter-titles and white squares constantly imitate the unreliability of mental processes, which is at the foundation of Walker's understanding of trauma cinema. The sound elements are similarly disjunctive, preventing a clean suture between voice and image, with Mekas' practice bringing two moments of subjective expression into confrontation. The voiceover is similarly informed by memory processes, as although it can be simply descriptive at times, at others it leads to digressions and further reflections stimulated by the act of revisiting the filmed footage, such as the visit to his old school house or the discovery that the police remained outside his family's home long after he had left. In these moments the music is abruptly cut, with a momentary silence before he starts to speak, which does not attempt to imply a smooth or harmonious relationship with the images, but creates an intrusive and awkward relationship that imitates the way an unwanted memory can enter consciousness at an unexpected moment.

Lost, Lost, Lost

In this section I will now move on to consider the connection *Lost, Lost, Lost* has to Walker's notion of trauma cinema. The film is mainly composed of black and white footage, with only a few moments in colour that Mekas shot between 1949 and 1963, the period in which he arrived in New York and had to integrate into a new country, language and culture. This footage is arranged into six chronologically ordered reels that he edited in 1975, which sets up a parallel with *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, as in that film Mekas returned to his homeland after a twenty-seven year absence, but in *Lost, Lost, Lost* he returns to his footage after twenty-six years away. The similarly large temporal gap between experience and its examination again foregrounds the importance of memory in historical understanding, as Mekas brings two subjectivities into contact: the Mekas who filmed the images and the Mekas speaking about them in the voiceover.

The large gap between editing and shooting can be partly attributed to Mekas' unwillingness to confront an emotionally difficult period of his life, but like all of his work the pressures of funding, deadlines and contracts are also a factor, as the film was only able to be completed thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.⁴⁰ Its applicability to Walker's notion of trauma cinema is that the meaning of the footage is not self-evident, as it is only in the later stages of the film that Mekas starts to develop the distinctive single frame technique that I have described in *Walden* and *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. The majority of *Lost, Lost, Lost* is shot in a visually neutral style that emulate what Mekas thought was the style that all professional filmmakers had to employ of steady shot compositions. The images show him grappling with various cinematic modes, from home movies to documentary and finally avant-garde practice. Mekas' avant-garde approach allowed his subjectivity to be inscribed into the images, but the obfuscation of his subjectivity in his earlier documentary style means that the footage does not present his feelings as an exile. The pain of being unable to return to his homeland is not seen in the footage, so in the voiceover Mekas has to excavate feelings and experiences that are not contained within the images.

The disjuncture between what we see and what we are told is a central tension of the film. The opening image is the first footage Mekas shot using a 16mm Bolex camera, introduced by the inter-title "A Week After We Landed in America (B'klyn") We Borrowed Money & Bought Our First Bolex," In the footage Mekas and his brother Adolfas are seen happily performing in front of the camera, Adolfas throwing his hands in the air and Jonas inquisitively walking up to the camera lens. Their sense of excitement at purchasing the camera is immediately undercut in the voiceover, where Mekas chants a refrain that will be heard throughout the film: "Oh sing, Ulysses/Sing your travels/Tell where you have been/Tell what you have seen/And tell the story of a man/Who never wanted to leave his home/Who was happy/And lived among the people

⁴⁰ MacDonald "Interview," 97.

he knew/And spoke their language/Sing how then he was thrown out into the world." The voiceover speaks of loss, but the images show the happiness of Mekas and his brother experimenting with their new camera, which immediately sets up the tension between what is articulated in the images and what is stated in the voiceover as being two different things.

The way Mekas speaks in the voiceover is incredibly idiosyncratic and acts in rhythmic tension with the images. The film critic Alan Williams notes Mekas' rich use of voice in *Lost, Lost, Lost* where the sound of him setting up his microphone and the ambient noise of the room he is recording in can be heard, making it difficult to hear exactly what he is saying at times. The proximity of the microphone to his mouth is what also contributes to this muffling effect, but even without understanding every word, there is a musicality to the way Mekas pauses at unexpected moments or gives an intonation of emotion, so that "an entire scale of feelings is evoked through the combination of delay (pauses) and absolute presence (close miking, ambient noise)"⁴¹ He does not strive for "professional" standards, so the inclusion of "mistakes" like the sound of his microphone being set up is similar to how he incorporates awkward camera movements or out-of-focus shots in his avant-garde practice, which affirms his integration into the avant-garde, even if the images he is revisiting do not stylistically conform to the values he now holds at the time of speaking.

After the initial experimentation of getting his Bolex for the first time the style suddenly retreats into steady shot compositions. As an immigrant it is unsurprising that he first accepted the dominant traditions of the culture he was entering, as absorbing mainstream values is a common occurrence in immigrant narratives.⁴² In the first two reels Mekas documents Lithuanian weddings ("A Lithuanian Wedding in Brooklyn"), dances ("Two

⁴¹ Alan Williams, "Diaries, Notes and Sketches: Volume 1 ("Lost, Lost, Lost")," *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Autumn, 1976): 61.

⁴² Efren Cuevas, "The Immigrant Experience in Jonas Mekas's Diary Films: A Chronotopic Analysis of *Lost, Lost, Lost*," *Biography* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 63.

Dances), baptisms (“Baptism of Paulius Landsbergis”), picnics (“A Picnic”), shops (“Ginkus’ Candy Store on Grand St”). Reel Two has a much more political emphasis than the first, documenting protests (“On Liberty Ave DP’s Picket Lithuanian Communist Newspaper”), committees (“Committee For an Independent Lithuania Meets in NY”) and political speeches (“Zadeikis Ambassador of Independent Lithuania in Washington.”) In this period he considered his role as being that of a traditional documentarian, preserving the lives of other immigrants like himself by shooting in a simple manner to “capture the situations very directly.”⁴³

The problem with this visually neutral approach is that many of the emotions from this time are not reflected at all. The act of revisiting the footage results in him using the voiceover to express his frustration at being unable to capture the enormity of his feelings. In “Was There a War?” in Reel One the images show children eating at a dinner table, but in the voiceover Mekas asserts that, “you will never know what they think. You will never know what a displaced person thinks in the evening and in New York.” The focus on an everyday routine like meal time captures the outward normality of the Lithuanian exiles that makes them indistinguishable from anybody else, but revisiting this images at years remove allows Mekas to challenge this depiction to highlight the tumultuous emotions that exist beneath the outward appearance of contentment. In this voiceover Mekas is informing the viewer that he can never fully capture the wealth of his feelings from that time within the space of the film, but he also draws attention to the fact that for viewers who have not gone through the experience of exile they can never fully understand it.

On some occasions the images take Mekas back to his thoughts at the time of shooting. This is revealed in the segment “At City Hall People Gathered to Protest Air Test Raids” which shows demonstrators being arrested by the police, but in the voiceover Mekas states, “Here I came to this point, to this place. The winds have brought me here and I see you, and I record you. I don’t know if I ever understood you. If I ever understood

⁴³ MacDonald “Interview,” 85.

what you stood for, what you went through. But I was there. I was just a passerby from somewhere else, from completely somewhere else, seeing it all with my camera. I recorded it, I recorded it all. I don't know why." The reflection at years remove does not give a deeper understanding of the event, as all the images can confirm is that he was there recording with his camera, as he can no longer recapture the emotions and intentions at the time of shooting.

To reinforce the incomplete depiction of this time Mekas includes numerous close-up shots of pages taken from his written diary, which also allows him to represent aspects of his life that he was unable to capture with his camera.⁴⁴ The subject of the written diaries are much more melancholic than the images, but the pages are only seen for a short amount of time, with Scott MacDonald noting his experience of only being able to read disjointed sentences on a page that appears in Reel One: "heavy steel," "in my hand," "if I am really," "chestnuts," "Broadway," "cheap joints," "nightmare," "The morning," "I woke up," "tried to sleep," "around in my," "exhausted," "middle of the," "he jumps up," "He tosses," "the lights," "darkness looms," (fig.16) "tries to sleep."⁴⁵ The ability to only read fragmented phrases rather than complete sentences is similar to the white square in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, which acts as a reminder of the gaps in cinematic representation, as the written diary entries show that there are experiences he was unable to capture with his camera, but the fragmented presentation refuses to give them any more authority than the images.

⁴⁴ MacDonald, "Interview," 87.

⁴⁵ MacDonald, "*Lost Lost Lost*," 24.

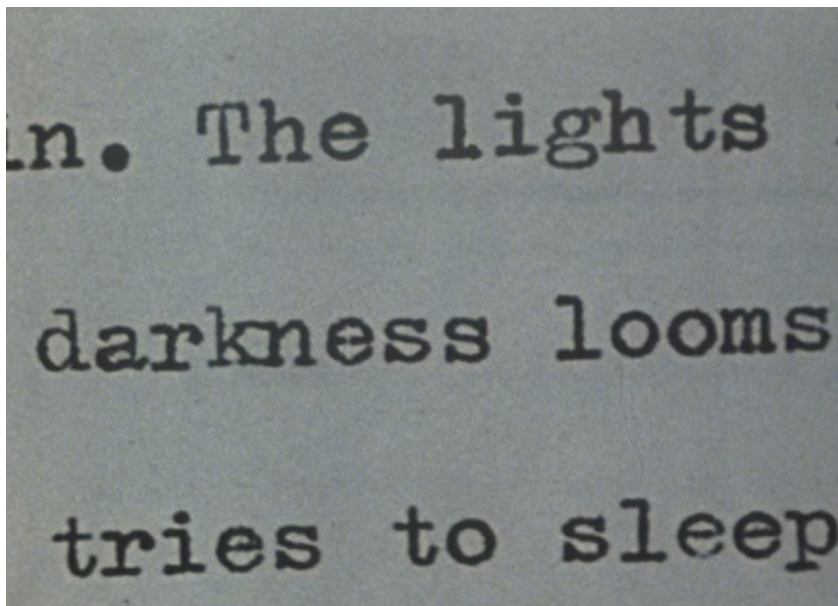


Fig. 16 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)

The inter-titles often attest to the difficulty Mekas is having remembering past events, such as “I Am Trying to Remember” (fig.17), which acknowledges the fallibility of memory in accessing past events. The moments he does remember of self-doubt and loneliness are often not captured directly in the images, so the underlying emotions have to be expressed through the combination of images, inter-titles and voiceover. For example, when the inter-title “I Walked My Heart Crying From Loneliness” appears, there are no images showing Mekas upset, only the image of an empty street. Mekas has to use the space to reflect his internal state of isolation in combination with the inter-title. In the voiceover for “The Long Winter” Mekas claims, “Those were long lonely evenings, long lonely nights. With a lot of walking. Walking through the night of Manhattan. I don’t think I have ever been as lonely.” It is only intimated that the loneliness Mekas is experiencing is connected to sexual longing, as during the voiceover Mekas cuts to images of a sex shop on Broadway that has a billboard outside that reads “Female Sex” (fig.18)

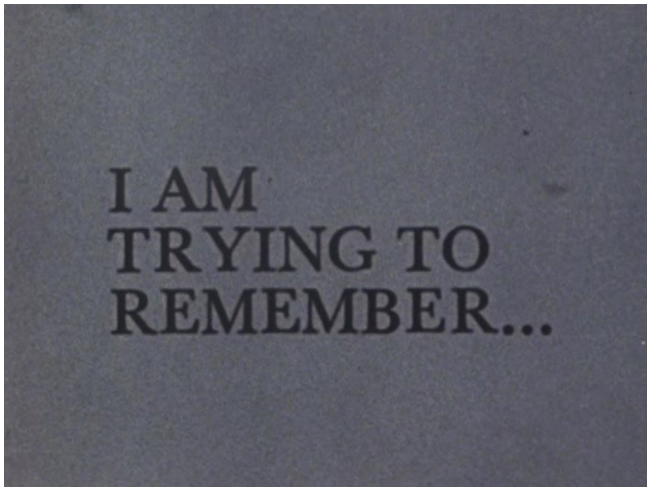


Fig. 17 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)



Fig.18 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)

The tension between writing and speaking is revealed when Mekas reads an extract from a diary entry written on October 3, 1950, in conjunction with images of his brother Adolfas working at a typewriter: "I have been trying to write, with a pencil, but my fingers do not really grasp the pencil properly, not like they used to grasp it years ago. From working in the factory, my fingers became stiff. They don't bend. Anyway, I cannot hold the pencil, so I got a typewriter and I began to type, with one finger." This diary extract reveals Mekas' attitudes at the time of writing, when he was working in a

tiring factory job to support himself financially.⁴⁶ The act of reading it in 1975 gives it a different inflection of meaning, as the manner in which the words are spoken give it a new emotional resonance, as Mekas reads the words in halting sentences, underlining a sense of melancholy rather than the frustration expressed at the moment of composition. This is because Mekas is no longer the same person who wrote that sentence, but the loneliness and hardships of that period are brought back to him in the moment of reading.

In the voiceover Mekas frequently mixes the third and first-person to further underline the temporal disjuncture. In “A Walk in Central Park,” Mekas refers to himself in the third person, stating that, “There is very little known of this period of our protagonists life. It’s known he was very shy and very lonely during this period. He used to take long, long walks. He felt very close to the park, to the streets, to the city.” Looking at those images at years remove, Mekas no longer wants to identify himself with the isolated and lonely individual behind the camera, so he uses the third person to emphasise that the person recording the voiceover in the present is different from the one filming the images. The use of third-person narration can also be found in Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* (1990), which is spoken by a young girl who recounts moments from the life of a woman she only ever refers to as “the girl” “she” and “the woman.” Friedrich has said that some viewers “weren’t even aware it was autobiographical, which I like,”⁴⁷ but in Mekas’ practice there is no mistaking that he is referring to his past self, but it highlights the difficulty in reconciling multiple subject positions to create a coherent sense of self.

At the end of Reel Two Mekas announces his decision to move from Brooklyn to Manhattan. In the voiceover he reveals his shifting attitude to Lithuania in conjunction with images of a picnic attended by Lithuanian exiles: “I began to feel that if anything

⁴⁶ Tijuana Mamula, *Cinema and Language Loss: Displacement, Visuality and the Filmic Image* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

⁴⁷ Scott MacDonald, “Su Friedrich,” in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992), 309.

can be done for Lithuania it can be done only by the people who live there. The only way I can be useful to Lithuania is by building myself from scratch, from the beginning, and then giving myself back to it, back to Lithuania.” The song Kiss of Fire starts to play and continues into the final segment “New Years Eve, 1953,” which depicts people drinking and dancing at a New Years Eve party. At the culmination of the song Mekas abruptly cuts to a black screen. It is silent for a few seconds until Mekas’ voice emerges: “This was our last time together. I felt I was falling into one thousand pieces. The next day I left Brooklyn and moved to Manhattan.” The decision to cut to black in this moment jars with the happiness of the people in the images, but it also mirrors the use of this device in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. What connects these two moments is Mekas moving to a new place, but the last journey ended with him in a Nazi forced labour camp. In this case Mekas makes it safely to Manhattan, but the decision to move evokes the trauma of his previous journey, which is why the black screen returns.

The move to Manhattan signifies a move towards the artistic community and away from the other Lithuanian immigrants. In Reel Three there is much more artistic activity depicted, such as Mekas shooting *Guns of the Trees* (“Charles Levine Footage of the Guns of the Trees Shooting”) (fig. 19), producing Film Culture (“Film Culture is Rolling on Lafayette St”) going to the New Yorker cinema (“At the New Yorker Theatre”) and going to a play at the Living Theatre (“At the Living Theatre,”) with the reel ending with the shooting of Robert Frank’s *Sin of Jesus* (“Robert Frank Shoots the Sin of Jesus.”) Mekas had not yet discovered the form of the diary film, but his first attempt at an “experimental” film is seen in “An Unfinished Film,” which was to be entitled *A Silent Journey*. The fragment we see that was intended for that film involves a woman (played by Lily Bennett) dreaming of a car crash.⁴⁸ The focus on a traumatising event combined with her decision to go to the park to be near nature parallel the concerns of Mekas’

⁴⁸ Other footage intended for this abandoned project is seen in “Early Images,” which shows Adolfas Mekas dressed as a soldier, a family reading a newspaper, people on a skating rink, and a tree in Central Park. The footage in “Adolfas Circa 1952,” which shows Mekas’ brother in front of a merry-go-round was also intended for *A Silent Journey*.

diary films, so this is an example of how the boundary between documentary and fiction can be blurred, as Mekas is attempting to find an appropriate method of self-expression before he was willing to acknowledge that the documentation of his own life was a valid filmmaking approach. The repeated phrase “She sees it all” rhymes with Mekas’ repetition of the phrase “I was there, I recorded it all” throughout the film.



Fig. 19 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)

Mekas was also shooting a number of documentary projects in this period, with the title *Lost, Lost, Lost* deriving from the first script Mekas wrote in collaboration with his brother called *Lost, Lost, Lost, Lost*, which was about Lithuanian Displaced Persons in America. Although this film was never completed, Mekas adopted the title for this later work, using the word “Lost” three times instead of four and incorporating some of the footage he had shot for it.⁴⁹ The repetition of the word may at first seem to be emphatically stating Mekas’ disorientation, but like many elements in the film it has a double meaning. The removal of the fourth “Lost” from his original film’s title is an acknowledgment that by the time he edited the footage he had found a poetic mode in cinema, something he could not embrace at the time of filming. This is confirmed in

⁴⁹ MacDonald “Interview,” 84.

“Rabbit Shit Haikus,” a sequence of 56 filmic haikus that each last only a few seconds that appears in Reel Five. These were filmed during the production of Adolfas Mekas’ directorial debut *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963), which is revealed in the first few haikus where preparations for filming are seen. The focus of each haiku involves nature -- trees, snow, frost, sunlight, grass -- but within this Mekas explores a range of expressive in-camera techniques such as camera speeds, light values, focus, and camera movement.⁵⁰ The reference to Haiku reinforces the importance of poetry on his practice that I argued in Chapter 2, but it also clarifies the significance of the repetition of the word “Lost” three times in the title, as in Japanese Haiku contains seventeen syllables in three phrases (5-7-5) or three lines in English. The form uses these limitations to create a heightened moment of awareness using simple imagery often taken from nature, which parallels Mekas’ own fragmented style and emphasis on nature in his avant-garde practice.⁵¹

The full embracement of avant-garde techniques is stressed in the closing moments of Reel Six, where Mekas alternates between colour footage he shot of a visit to Stony Brook beach and footage shot by friend and filmmaker Ken Jacobs. These are clearly demarcated by inter-titles “a. Ken’s Footage” and “b. Jonas’ Footage.” In Jacobs’ footage he shows women on the beach, close-ups of pebbles on the shore, but there is a moment where he films Mekas filming a white horse in a field. This is filmed from a distance in a steady composition, showing the “objective” recording of Mekas’ experience. When it cuts to “b. Jonas’ Footage” we see the “subjective” footage Mekas filmed of the horse. Jacobs’ footage has a solemn organ music playing on the

⁵⁰ MacDonald “Lost Lost Lost,” 28.

⁵¹ In his essay “Poetry and Film: Avant-Garde Cinema as Publication” Scott MacDonald argues that avant-garde filmmakers from the late 1960s and early 1970s were reluctant to accept the label of “poetry” due to them no longer wanting to connect their films with literature, believing this association to be just a way of legitimizing their practice with an already established art form. This is in contrast to the generation of filmmakers that preceded them in the 1950s -- a group that included Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos -- who readily embraced and helped construct this connection. The only other filmmakers MacDonald sees as continuing to embrace the label of poetry are James Broughton and Jonas Mekas, who both wrote poetry alongside their filmmaking activities.

soundtrack, while Mekas' footage is accompanied by an upbeat jazz composition, which corresponds to the sense of freedom he now has with the camera, that allows him to react emotionally and without self-consciousness. In the closing narration Mekas states: "I have memories of this place, I have been here before. I have a memory of this place. I have really been here before. I have seen this water before, here. I have walked upon this beach, these pebbles." This is a moment of recognition between the Mekas filming the footage and the one speaking about them in the voiceover, highlighting the ability for memory to unify past and presents selves.

Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter I outlined Janet Walker's notion of trauma cinema by providing key examples from her study such as *Daughter Rite* and *Capturing the Friedmans*, which embraces the inaccuracies of memory as a valid representational strategy for historical understanding of past events. Walker's theory has been expanded by other documentary theorists, such as Annabelle Honess Roe using it within the context of her study on animated documentaries, particularly *Waltz With Bashir*. The key limitation I noted in Walker's study, however, was her ignoring the American avant-garde as a key source for traumatic representation using non-realist modes of representation. There are other theorists within trauma studies who have focused on the avant-garde, such as E. Ann Kaplan arguing that *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a key example of traumatic representation, but I argued that Walker's term could productively be applied to the work of Jonas Mekas, who she does not mention in her study.

In the second section of this chapter I extended my argument by discerning the ideas Walker outlined in her study within *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. The film is divided into three parts that foreground the variety of gaps between experience, representation and its examination. The formal techniques imitate the fragmentary nature of memory. In Part One and Three a white square motif is used to emphasise gaps between footage, while in Part Two 100 numbered fragments are presented to highlight that only a partial and incomplete perspective is being presented. Mekas also includes

numerous inaccuracies, such as stating that there will be 100 fragments, but only 91 are presented. The voiceover also includes errors such as Mekas stating that he had not been to Lithuania in 25 years when it had been 27. The images of Lithuania are overexposed to foreground the distorting effects of memory, which makes it impossible for him to view the country objectively. Instead of attempting to understand the country in 1971, Mekas looks for traces of his life before he was forced to leave it in 1944, such as re-enacting pre-industrial farming techniques. By trying to recapture the past in the present, however, he ultimately confirms the passage of time. Other traumatic techniques he uses includes cutting to a black screen, sidelining particular events with inter-titles that read “Parenthesis” and cutting out the music on the soundtrack abruptly to recount a traumatic memory.

In the third section I turned my attention to *Lost, Lost, Lost*. The applicability of Walker’s notion of trauma cinema to this film is enacted through the central tension between voice and image, as the footage does not reflect the pain of exile, so Mekas has to excavate those experiences through the voiceover. The images show people smiling at weddings and picnics, but in the voiceover Mekas speaks about his isolation and lack of resources. The formal techniques that imitate memory processes are similar to *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, such as cutting to a black screen when he recounts moving from Brooklyn to Manhattan, using inter-titles that raise questions rather than provide clear answers (“Was There A War?” and “I Am Trying to Remember”), and the use of recurring close-up shots of his written diaries that expose the limitation of cinematic representation. The voiceover also mixes the third and first person to foreground that the film is a textual reconstruction of past events, but also conveys the feeling of dislocation from his previous self. In the next chapter I will look Mekas’ video practice, which significantly eliminates the disjunctive sound and image relationship that I have discerned in his films.

Chapter Four

The Diary Videos of Jonas Mekas

In this chapter I will explore how Jonas Mekas represents his subjectivity using video. Mekas has shot exclusively on various video formats since 1989, but this remains a largely unexamined area of his work, which this chapter will rectify. The representational strategies he employs are completely different from his films, with there being three major differences from his filmic self-representation that I identify. First, he eliminates any concern with using visual strategies that reflect conscious states. Second, he adopts synchronous sound, which removes the disjunctive sound and image relationship from his films. Third, he frequently talks directly into his camera or from behind it, which collapses the act of speaking and recording into the same temporal moment. In order to explore these new techniques I will divide my analysis into three parts. The first will explore other examples of the video diary and its theorisation. The second will explore Mekas' visual approach to subjective representation in video. The third will then focus on the sound and image relationship in Mekas' video practice and how it instigates a new relationship to memory.

The Video Diary

The term "video diary" is used by the majority of documentary scholars including Michael Renov,¹ Alisa Lebow,² Keith Beattie³ and Laura Rascaroli⁴ but no explicit reason is given as to why it is preferred over the term "diary video." In this section I will

¹ Michael Renov, "Filling Up the Hole in the Real: Death and Mourning in Contemporary Documentary Film and Video," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 121.

² Alisa Lebow, *First-Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xi

³ Keith Beattie, *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television* (London: Palgrave, 2004), 117.

⁴ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 132.

provide an overview of the mode by looking at a variety of examples in both marginal and mainstream practices. In the 1940s avant-garde filmmakers appropriated 16mm cameras aimed at non-professionals in order to make personal films, but in the 1980s the emergence of domesticated video technology facilitated a new generation of practitioners. In 1965 Sony released the first portable video recorder called the Portapak, a device where the camera and sound, although portable, consisted of two different pieces of equipment. In 1971 the functions of the apparatus were expanded to include playback, rewind and fast-forward, eventually leading to the development of the consumer camcorder, released in 1983, where image and sound were combined into one device.⁵ The technology has developed significantly since this early incarnation, but the three main characteristics that have been identified by video theorist Yvonne Spielmann is that it is an electronic medium whose signals are generated inside a camera that produces images that can be manipulated in post-production.⁶ The rise of first-person filmmaking practices in the 1980s has been attributed to video's cheapness, ease-of-use and accessibility, which meant that the level of technical knowledge required to use it was greatly reduced.⁷

The media theorist Patricia Aufderheide acknowledges that diaries, memoirs, home movies, therapeutic records and travelogues had been around for decades, but that it "wasn't until the mid-1980s that the personal essay film became accessible beyond the reaches of film schools and art houses, and began to take a place in the programming

⁵ Sylvia Martin, *Video Art* (London: Taschen, 2006), 10.

⁶ Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 1.

⁷ The diary videos shot by Sadie Benning while she was still a teenager using a Fisher Price PXL-2000 video camera -- *A New Year* (1989), *Living Inside* (1989), *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990) and *Jollies* (1990) – is an example of accessible video technology being appropriated by a wider spectrum of people. The camera was marketed as a children's toy and introduced in 1987, with it creating a high contrast, hazy, black and white image. Other artists who used the camera include Michael Almereyda in sections of his feature film *Nadja* (1994) and Peggy Ahwesh in *Strange Weather* (1993).

diet of television.”⁸ What this highlights is that it was not just the means of production that had changed, but also a cultural shift in the institutional frameworks willing to distribute first-person videos, with television historically being resistant to autobiographical practices.⁹ In the United States the channel PBS screened the series *POV*, which showcased works such as *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993), a video diary by Mark Massi and Tom Joslin that deals with the final months of their life after both being diagnosed with AIDS.¹⁰ In the United Kingdom the BBC programmes *Video Diaries* (1991-1993) and *Video Nation* (1994-1999) allowed individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds to talk about their life within the space of their own home using a small video camera given to them by the programme makers. Although the diarists worked in collaboration with a producer, they were still the subject, director, camera operator, sound recorder and editor of their work.¹¹

The dominant technique of many video diaries is a frontal composition of the diarist talking directly into a stationary camera with synchronous sound. This approach is not unique to video, as documentary theorist Keith Beattie has connected it to Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1986), where McElwee sits alone late at night to talk into the lens of his stationary film camera.¹² A much earlier precedent, however, can be found in Jim McBride’s mock-diary *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967), which parodied the approach before it even existed, as it depicts the protagonist David Holzman talking into the camera about his life within the space of his editing room. This approach of directing the camera at the filmmaker can also be seen in video artworks from the 1970s, such as

⁸ Jack C. Ellis and Betsy L. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 262.

⁹ Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First-Person Media and Factual Television* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 110.

¹⁰ Beattie, 118.

¹¹ Richard Keighron, “Video Diaries: What’s Up Doc?” *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 10 (1993), 24.

¹² Beattie, 124.

Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), in which Acconci records himself pointing at his own image on a video monitor for the whole duration of the tape, which led art critic Rosalind Krauss to equate the entire medium with narcissism.¹³ The decision of many video diary practitioners to turn the camera on themselves, however, is often not due to narcissism, but marginalised subjects seeking self-representation.¹⁴

As the video camera allows people to record private thoughts without specialist training, Renov has argued that the medium is suited to the confessional mode, as the elimination of a camera crew facilitates deeper self-interrogation.¹⁵ The irony that Beattie has pointed out in video diaries made for television is that the collaboration with producers negates the values of autonomous subjective expression that is often attributed to the medium because of its ease-of-use. Beattie quotes a comment made by a producer of *Video Diaries* Jeremy Gibson, who admits to shaping the viewpoints of participants in post-production in an attempt to make them seem more sympathetic, as he claims that their ego, attitude and approach “can come across from the rushes in a very off-putting way that an outsider wouldn't like. It's our job to identify that and try and turn the diarist to take a less egocentric approach.”¹⁶ The decision of what is “off-putting” is determined by the producers, but their role is not foregrounded within the finished product, as all the audience sees is the diarist speaking alone to the camera in their home, which makes it seem that an unmediated representation of their viewpoint is being presented, when in fact it is not.¹⁷

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, “Video and Narcissism” *October* 1, no.1 (Spring 1976): 50-64.

¹⁴ Video diaries are often by people from marginalised groups, such as gays and lesbians (Sadie Benning, George Kuchar), women (Lynn Hersmann) and ethnic minorities (Marlon Riggs).

¹⁵ Michael Renov, “Video Confessions,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practice*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 83.

¹⁶ Beattie, 120.

¹⁷ An earlier example of a collaborative video diary practice is Wendy Clarke's *The Love Tapes* (1977), where individuals of various ages and backgrounds were given the opportunity to talk

The illusion of autonomous subjective expression in video diaries led to them becoming an important component of many competitive reality shows that embed to-camera monologues within their narrative structure to suggest that a “real” self is being presented. It is an integral part of *Big Brother*, where contestants enter a “diary room” and speak directly into a stationary camera to recount their experience of the day’s events and their views on other contestants. They are prompted by an unseen speaker, but mainly speak in a monologue to talk directly to the audience watching at home, which sets up a sense of intimacy and honesty.¹⁸ In their book on reality television Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn claim that the extensive use of video diaries in reality show formats reflects a cultural climate in which uninhibited emotional reactions are viewed as an authentic form of communication, but that what is often forgotten is that the ability for someone to speak in this way is mediated by the subject’s cultural and linguistic background, which means that the presumed truth-value of this approach is a culturally constructed assumption.¹⁹

The medium has also introduced a new understanding of audio-visual realism, as the presumption that anyone can use a video camera means that amateur stylistic techniques are often viewed as truthful. These techniques include low resolution images, off-centre framing, bad lighting, distorted sound, in-camera cutting and the voice of the person behind the camera being heard making comments on the event unfolding in front of them.²⁰ The irony of this assumption is that the more difficult it is to discern what is

for three minutes on the subject of love. Clarke set up a booth in a public space that contained a chair, a video camera and a monitor. When the individual was alone inside the booth they could choose a backdrop and musical accompaniment before turning on the camera. Clarke acted as a facilitator for individuals who would not normally have the opportunity to be represented, but she did not attempt to re-define the viewpoints of her participants in post-production.

¹⁸ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 72.

¹⁹ Biressi and Nunn, 72.

²⁰ Beattie, 121.

happening in the images, the more likely it is that viewers will believe the veracity of the events depicted. The photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank explored these assumptions in his video *C'est Vrai (One Hour)* (1990), which follows Frank and the actor Kevin O'Connor around lower Manhattan in a single-take between 3:45 and 4:45pm on July 26, 1990.²¹ It seems to capture spontaneous encounters, but it was actually scripted by Frank and Michael Rovier, with the exception of a conversation heard in a diner that was written by Mika Moses and an improvised conversation with Peter Orlovsky.²² The published script also reveals that 27 actors and 6 crew members were employed, which shows that style can be exploited to give staged events the feeling of spontaneity even though there is nothing inherently truthful about the style beyond its culturally constructed assumptions.²³

The different style and approach of many videos from film practices can be seen in Robert Gibson's *Video Fool For Love* (1995), which depicts the filmmaker's romantic and sexual encounters over a number of years, including scenes of him walking around his apartment looking for a condom before sex, proposing marriage while naked in the bath and going to the hospital to have a vasectomy reversed.²⁴ In his analysis of the video, media theorist Jon Dovey notes how it possesses a different "grammar" to film.²⁵

²¹ Another example of the truth-value of video being deconstructed is *Onourown* (1990). The mock-diary video follows two protagonists that are fictionalized versions of the directors Joe Gibbons and Tony Oursler, who have been discharged from a psychiatric hospital. To help them integrate back into society, their therapist suggests that they keep a video diary. It was shot on consumer-grade equipment to tell a fictional story that aimed to challenge the sense of authenticity that was associated with video, highlighting that there is no inherent truth to the techniques associated with the medium.

²² Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Metaphysical [On Robert Frank's *C'est Vrai /One Hour*]," December 2003, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2003/09/metaphysical-cest-vraione-hour/>.

²³ Robert Frank, *C'est Vrai (One Hour)* (Gottingen: Steidl the Masters, 2007).

²⁴ Dovey, 70.

²⁵ Dovey, 71.

The video camera was a daily component of Gibson's life since 1983, but because the format was so cheap to shoot on the moment of recording is often "thrown away," as unlike in film, there is no concern with wasting expensive film stock. The camera's ease-of-use means that it is casually passed between Gibson, his lovers, and people to whom the viewer is never introduced, which creates a fluidity of subject positions within the video. There is also a wider array of compositions used, as in film the camera is usually placed on the filmmaker's shoulder, but as the video camera is so light it allows for a variety of shooting positions from the waist, chest, at arm's length or resting on a table.²⁶

The differences between the two mediums can also be seen in Dieter Roth's Super-8 film *A Diary* (1982) and video installation *Solo Scenes* (1998). *A Diary* was shot using 14,800 feet of film between January and June 1982 to capture events such as driving, eating and working with a handheld camera, while *Solo Scenes* was shot on video between 1997 and 1998, the last year of Roth's life.²⁷ Unlike his Super-8 film, none of the videos take place outside, with them all occupying his home and studios in Iceland, Switzerland and Germany.²⁸ In the 128 tapes we see him at work, going to the toilet, showering, eating, reading in bed, writing at his desk, making phone calls and pacing around his studio with little regard for the presence of the camera, which he left running as he went about his activities, with the majority of shots showing him either alone within the frame or completely absent from it. The ability to choose the framing and then leave the video camera to record unattended means that it does not disrupt the flow of Roth's daily activities, while in his films the requirement of an operator at all times means that the experience and its representation must take place simultaneously, which divides Roth's focus between conducting the action and composing it for his camera.

²⁶ Dovey, 71.

²⁷ Sarah Lowndes, "Hole Punch: The Late Autobiographical Works of Dieter Roth" *Dieter Roth Diaries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 47.

²⁸ Lowndes, 48.

The type of secondary revision that can be applied to video footage is also different to film. Lynn Hershmann's *Electronic Diary* (1988) is divided into three parts that each deal with a different traumatic event that shaped her subjectivity. In part one, *Confessions of a Chameleon* she describes being abused as a child, getting married at fifteen and becoming a call girl to support her daughter when her husband walked out on them. She talks directly into the camera, but to imitate her embodied experience of fragmented subjectivity, she multiplies the image of herself in post-production.²⁹ In *Binge* she talks directly into her camera about gaining forty-five pounds after her husband left. This footage was recorded over several months, but in post-production Hershmann again manipulated the footage to reflect the themes of her monologue.³⁰ For example, when she talks about avoiding looking into mirrors, Hershmann splits the image into two symmetrical halves. At one point she mentions physical distortion and reflects that idea visually by compressing the image of her face into a thin column.³¹ The formal strategies used to reflect internal states are very different from the diary films of the 1960s and 1970s, as video images can be manipulated much more easily, particularly Digital Video (DV), which records a series of zeros and ones in a pattern of relationships defined by mathematical algorithms that is then stored as digital information that can be manipulated without degradation to the image quality.³²

What has been highlighted so far is that video diaries have technologically deterministic elements but that the strategies are negotiated within a specific cultural context. When

²⁹ David E. James, "Lynn Hershmann: The Subject of Autobiography," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practice*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 126.

³⁰ Christine Tamblyn, "Qualifying the Quotidian: Artist's Video and the Production of Social Space," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practice* ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 20.

³¹ Tamblyn, 21.

³² Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 6.

documentary theorist Laura Rascaroli attempted to extend the theoretical discussion of the diary film, however, she used a video diary and did not take into account issues of medium specificity. The key example Rascaroli uses is Aleksander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices -From the Diaries of War* (1995), which focuses on the lives of border guards along the Tadjik and Afghani frontier.³³ It was shot on Betacam SP video cameras over a period of six months in 1995, employing long takes, prolonged close-ups, a washed out grey image achieved in post-production and a soundtrack that mixes natural sounds and music by Toru Takemitsu. In the voiceover Sokurov muses on subjects ranging from composers to the soldiers patrolling the border, creating a similar dispersion of subjectivity that David E. James identified in the diary film between filming (composition, framing, sound) and editing (voiceover, digital alteration of image, music).³⁴ The split between filmmaker (Sokurov) and subject (soldiers) is also in place, which means that Rascaroli believes it to be a "diary film" in continuity with James' distinction.³⁵

By continuing to refer to it as a "diary film" rather than a "diary video" Rascaroli ignores the ways in which the approach is tied to the technological possibilities of the video camera. *Spiritual Voices – From the Diaries of War* is comprised of five episodes of varying length, with episode one composed entirely of a thirty-eight minute static shot of a snowy Russian landscape, a choice that would not be possible in film. Invisible editing could connect disparate shots into one continuous take, but this is in continuity with Sokurov's concern with extended takes that would culminate in his fiction film *Russian Ark* (2002), which adopts many of the same techniques from his documentaries: it is shot on location, employs one long take, and contains a first-person narration that

³³ Rascaroli, 132.

³⁴ David E. James, "Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in *Walden*," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 168.

³⁵ Rascaroli, 135.

makes the events depicted a memory rather than an immediate experience.³⁶ *Russian Ark*, like *Spiritual Voices*, was made possible because the technology existed for Sokurov to record for that length of time, with it being comprised of a single 90 minute take through the Winter Palace of the Russian State Hermitage Museum using a Sony HDW-F900. To record for that length of time on high definition meant that the footage was transferred to a hard disk carried behind the cinematographer as he travelled between the 33 rooms of the museum. The technological means had to exist for his cultural shaped concerns to be expressed.

Where Rascaroli avoids medium specificity, Catherine Russell believes that video's capability to record for extended periods is a drawback to subjective representation. Her key example is George Kuchar's *Weather Diaries*, a series of forty-five videos he shot between 1986 and 1990 that document the storms in Tornado Alley, Oklahoma.³⁷ The storms are documented from inside various motel rooms, but the videos also show him waiting around, visiting fast-food restaurants, discount stores, strip malls and voyeuristically recording the people outside his motel room window. There is no element of secondary revision as Kuchar conducts all the editing in-camera, but sometimes he rewinds the tape to record over random moments to avoid a simple chronological sequence of events.³⁸ He always shoots with synchronous sound and offers ongoing commentary on what he is seeing, often talking to people in front of the camera and includes ambient noise on the soundtrack.³⁹ Russell views this emphasis on the immediate moment and the constant act of recording as a drawback to the complex representation of Kuchar's subjectivity, as he "inhabits a world of images" where there

³⁶ Jeremy Hicks, "Sokurov's Documentaries," in *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, ed. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2011), 25.

³⁷ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 313.

³⁸ Tamblyn, 20.

³⁹ Russell, 287.

is no clear demarcation between life and its representation. A counter-example Russell uses is Mekas' film practice, which "transcends the loss of experience by transforming the experienced world into images,"⁴⁰ however, Mekas' video practice is very similar to Kuchar's.

Mekas' Video Practice

Russell viewed the lack of secondary revision in video practice as a limitation, but this dismissal is similar to literary theorist Elizabeth Bruss complaining that film is inferior to language because it creates a different textual construction of the self.⁴¹ In this section I will argue that, although aspects of secondary revision are reduced in Mekas' video practice, it does not necessarily mean that a less complex representation of subjectivity is being presented. As the discussion on diary videos *Spiritual Voices – From the Diaries of War*, *Video Fool for Love* and *Electronic Diaries* has shown, there is still an extensive use of secondary revision in many videos, but instead of focusing on secondary revision Mekas has embraced the durational capabilities of the medium to record for much longer periods of time. In the previous chapters on Mekas' filmic self-representation the tension between layers of self-inscription have been central to my analysis, but in video a wider range of experiences are documented, which unlike Russell I do not view as a limitation. It must be acknowledged that the decision to adopt video was not a purely artistic choice, but due to the rising expense of printing costs that meant he was economically incapable of continuing to shoot on film. Mekas was instrumental in preserving video works at Anthology Film Archives, first setting up a video program in 1974, so he was acutely aware of the problems of the formats long-term archival stability and lesser image quality in comparison to film, but the negotiation

⁴⁰ Russell, 291.

⁴¹ Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 296-320.

with the medium has resulted in a different direction to his practice of documenting everyday life.⁴²

When Mekas started to film his life he was a non-professional attempting to meet the standards of dominant filmmaking traditions, but in video he was an established artist with over forty years of experience in self-representation. Unlike the 16mm Bolex camera he bought in 1949 by borrowing money, Mekas was given his first video camera in 1987 by the electronics company Sony for free, facilitated by Kiki Miyake, who was a friend of the filmmaker Shirley Clarke. The camera was given to him on the condition that he provide the company with footage that they could use for promotional purposes, which is seen in *I Get My First Sony* (2013). This short video is shot inside Mekas' Manhattan apartment, which he attempts to use in the same way he used his Bolex.⁴³ He records in short bursts of images, showing us disconnected fragments of people, objects and pets in his apartment. The first image is of Mekas' reflection in a small mirror (fig.20), we then see his wife Hollis Melton, his young son Sebastian, their pet cat (fig.21), a radio, a flower (fig.22) and the view from outside their window.

⁴² Bob Harris, "Video at Anthology" *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 286.

⁴³ Jonas Mekas, "I Get My First Sony," December 4, 2013, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://jonasmekas.com/diary/?p=1645>.



Fig. 20 *I Get My First Sony* (Jonas Mekas, 2013)



Fig. 21 *I Get My First Sony* (Jonas Mekas, 2013)



Fig. 22 *I Get My First Sony* (Jonas Mekas, 2013)

These are only approximations of his film style as the world is documented differently in each medium. Each shot only lasts a few seconds, which is achieved by stopping the camera and starting it again from a new angle. In film light enters the camera lens and hits the emulsion on the film stock, which activates silver halide crystals that leave an imprint of the pro-filmic event on individual frames.⁴⁴ Mekas used this process for expressive purposes, pointing his camera into sunlight to create lens flares, rewinding and re-exposing the negative in-camera to create superimpositions and shooting only a few frames from various encounters to create unexpected juxtapositions. When Mekas used Analogue Video (AV) the process was completely different, as light enters the lens and hits a sensor that captures a representation of the pro-filmic event, which then transmits a signal composed of varying waveforms onto magnetic tape, so with video there are no “frames” to be manipulated.⁴⁵

Unlike his Bolex, the video camera had synchronous sound recording capabilities, so Mekas can be heard talking from behind the camera. When he records his wife he can be heard asking her if she can see the red light flashing on top of his camera. When he records a close-up of a flower he recites the line “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” from Gertrude Stein’s 1913 poem *Sacred Emily*. The closing shot of the video is the view outside Mekas’ window and he says, “the roofs of New York,” which reinforces what the images already show us. Mekas experimented with imitating the lack of direct sound from his Bolex by disconnecting the sound on his video camera, but he decided that it was easier to record sound and omit it later if he wanted to.⁴⁶ In his subsequent videos Mekas’ presence is constantly marked from behind the camera by the sounds of breathing, footsteps and talking, even though he is not seen, which supports Dovey’s claim that, “the contemporary video document is nothing *but* an inscription of presence

⁴⁴ Willis, 5.

⁴⁵ Willis, 5.

⁴⁶ David Jenkins, “Interview: Jonas Mekas,” *Little White Lies* (January 7, 2013), accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/features/interviews/jonas-mekas-22867>.

within the text.”⁴⁷ The omnipresent use of sound in his videos has impacted his approach, as it does not necessitate a major concern with marking his subjectivity visually.

The relationship with his 16mm Bolex was a mixture of economic, technical and cultural factors. As a marginal subject he could only afford equipment that was aimed at non-professionals. The camera had no direct sound recording capability and the wind up mechanism meant that only 30 seconds of continuous filming could take place before it needed to be rewound. The way that he used it within these limits, however, was more cultural than technical, as he at first emulated the style of professional filmmaking, but then rejected these standards when he became part of the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. The inverse occurred in video, where he attempted to emulate his former artistic practice in *I Get My First Sony* but then rejected this for a style much closer to home video, as in the same month he recorded *I Get My First Sony* he also shot *October 1987 -- Allen Ginsberg* (2013), which documents a visit by Allen Ginsberg to Mekas’ apartment, which is recorded in long takes in low light, with the two men passing the camera between them and casually talking about the technology.⁴⁸ There is no concern with visually transforming the interaction by stopping the camera and imitating the fragmented style of his Bolex, meaning that sound has taken precedence over the visuals.

In his study on home video James M. Moran notes that the home video aesthetic “subordinates formal experimentation to the referential documentation of everyday life,”⁴⁹ but one of the key criticisms of Moran’s book is his reluctance to engage with

⁴⁷ Dovey, 56.

⁴⁸ Jonas Mekas, “Allen Ginsberg -- October 1987,” *Diary* October 15, 2013 (2.40pm), accessed March 24, 2015, <http://jonasmekas.com/diary/?p=1622>.

⁴⁹ James M. Moran, *There’s No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xix.

any specific examples of home video practice, preferring instead to focus on semi-professional “event videography” and the use of home-video footage in mainstream movies and television shows.⁵⁰ However, Moran’s description does correlate with Mekas’ video practice, but his adoption of this stylistic approach is part of his avant-garde values of challenging reigning aesthetic strategies and foregrounding the means of representation.⁵¹ Like his film practice, Mekas’ everyday documentation is not an amateur or home video practice, as he is shooting with the intention of releasing it for public exhibition. Also, the aesthetic strategies he employs are carefully nurtured, so the “mistakes” of bad sound, lighting and off-centre framing are the result of Mekas achieving a desired aesthetic aim. The key representational strategy he has maintained from his film practice is the handheld camera. This is demonstrated in *Lithuania and the Collapse of the USSR* (2008), which is composed entirely of footage Mekas shot of the American television news coverage of Lithuania’s struggle for independence between 1989 and 1992. There is not a single composition achieved using a tripod, despite the focus being the stationary object of a television set and throughout its nearly five-hour running time every shot is handheld, as Mekas watches the coverage from his living room. The physical connection between Mekas’ hand and the camera is still of great importance, in connecting to Mekas’ subjectivity as it is a conscious decision to embrace techniques that reject culturally accepted notions of what constitutes a professional film.

Where before he would use a great deal of voiceover and inter-titles, Mekas allows the immediacy of the moment to take precedence over any retrospective mediation of that footage. What is significant about this approach is that it places greater emphasis on how the footage is edited and selected in post-production, as he was recording so much it would be impossible for him to present all of it. In *Lithuania and the Collapse of the USSR* he records the news coverage without interjecting any contradictions through

⁵⁰ David Buckingham, Rebekah Willett and Maria Pini, *Home Truths?: Video Production and Domestic Life* (Detroit: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 20.

⁵¹ Moran, 72.

either voice or text, simply recording the images that news networks like Fox and CNN decided to show. This approach is unusual for Mekas as it accepts mainstream media coverage of the events, without any retrospective complication, but it cannot be said that Mekas is totally uncritical of the footage he records, as through his editing he creates humour in the disjuncture between the severity of the issues in the news programmes and the ridiculousness of the advertisements that punctuate them. His manipulation is purely through editing, as every news item not related to Lithuania is eliminated from across all the different news networks. By not spending much time criticising the mainstream media's practices within the video, Mekas is acknowledging that he has no other way of connecting with his homeland, which ultimately emphasises his dislocation.

The lengths of his shots have dramatically increased in video. Mekas' filmic concern with condensing events through his single frame approach was in part formed by his limited funds to afford film stock and printing costs. Taubin remembers attending Mekas' forty-fifth birthday in 1967 and his anger upon discovering that \$45 had been spent on ice for the party, as the money could have bought three rolls of 16mm film.⁵² It would require a great deal of economic resources to casually film random events, which is why Mekas frequently returned to Haiku poetry as a source of inspiration in his filmmaking practice, as it involved the distillation of an event. The low cost and extended running time of video increased the range and volume of events that could be recorded.⁵³ Mekas' use of long takes in his videos originates from a concern to, "record moments of real life and catch the essence of the moment in one unbroken take. No editing. One take, one shot."⁵⁴ The movement from attempting to find the essence in a single frame (film) to a single take (video) is still a distillation of a moment.

⁵² Amy Taubin, "Film as Life: Jonas Mekas" *Sight and Sound* 23, no.1 (January 2013): 42.

⁵³ Moran, 41.

⁵⁴ Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Brief Glimpses of Beauty: An Interview with Jonas Mekas," *C Magazine* 10 (29 January 2010): 14.

In home movies significant events are prioritised with an emphasis on people smiling for the camera, but in home videos secondary events are often captured, such as moments of boredom or anger as the subject can forget that the camera is continuing to record them.⁵⁵ This is evident in Mekas' video practice where seemingly inconsequential moments are included. In the first video Mekas sends to Jose Luis Guerin in *Correspondences – Jonas Mekas and Jose Luis Guerin* (2011) it is snowing and he walks from a restaurant into an awaiting taxi. He records the view outside of his window that is covered in ice, water and condensation, which abstracts the passing street lamps, cars and neon signs. We then see him enter the elevator in his building, the camera passed to his son Sebastian to show us the snow covering his jacket and hat. He leaves the elevator and enters his apartment to greet his cat, which then ends the sequence. The affordability of video resulted in more material being shot that has resulted in a wider set of experiences being represented in his videos than in his films. Mekas started to record for long stretches of time due to the slowness of his video camera. With his Bolex, he would see a moment that interested him, press a button and start recording immediately. In video Mekas would see an event that interested him, take out his camera, and then have to wait until the power came on before he could begin recording. Although this only represents a gap of a few seconds, it was crucial for Mekas to capture the exact image or moment that stimulated him to pick up his camera, with him feeling that video only gave him "the post-event,"⁵⁶ as it would miss out the precise moment he became interested in recording. To counter this he experimented with allowing the camera to run for long stretches of time, so that when something interesting happened, he knew he would have it documented.

In his early videos Mekas tested the limits of the technology by shooting one uninterrupted sixty-minute take, which was the standard length of videotape at that time.

⁵⁵ Moran, 42.

⁵⁶ Juliet Helmke, "In Conversation With Jonas Mekas" *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2010), accessed February 14, 2015, <http://brooklynrail.org/2010/11/art/in-conversation-with-jonas-mekas>.

The first handheld long-take video Mekas shot was *Mob of Angels: A Baptism* (1990), which was commissioned by French television for a project called One Take Videos.⁵⁷ Mekas never submitted it for broadcast because he was unhappy with what he shot, but he now considers it part of his body of work.⁵⁸ The video is one uninterrupted sixty-minute take of a child being baptised by a member of his wife Hollis Melton's all female drumming group The Mob of Angels, who played frame drums in the ancient Mediterranean tradition of sacramental rhythms.⁵⁹ It starts with Mekas outside the venue, walking in to record the baptism, then ending with him walking back out onto the street. He is responding to the rhythms of the event, so his movements are determined by the rhythms of the immediate moment rather than imposing camera movements that act in rhythmic tension with what is being recorded. The scope of experiences has been expanded in his videos, but it has also resulted in him abandoning his written diary as he began filming so much of my daily life that he felt no need to write about it.⁶⁰

Another example of the detail with which experiences are documented by Mekas in video is *Allen's Last Three Days on Earth as a Spirit* (1997), which documents Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Wake ceremony that took place at Ginsberg's apartment after his death in April 1997. The video starts on April 5, the day after Ginsberg's death and follows the rituals of the monks who sit on the floor and chant. Mekas surveys the room with his camera and dwells upon images for long periods of time rather than relegating them to an impressionistic memory. He talks to friends and family to capture their memories, anecdotes and stories. In a long sequence Ginsberg's body is prepared before

⁵⁷ The final project comprised 14 filmmakers including Robert Frank, Stephen Dwoskin and Robert Kramer. The producer of the series was Philippe Grandrieux, now known as a filmmaker in his own right.

⁵⁸ Jonas Mekas, "Mob of Angels: A Baptism (1990)," in *Jonas Mekas: Films, Videos, Installations (1962-2012)*, ed. Pip Chodorov (Paris: Paris Experimental, 2012), 115.

⁵⁹ Mekas, "Mob of Angels," 115.

⁶⁰ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Shoot, Shoot, Shoot: Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2008," in *Jonas Mekas*, ed. Barbara Engelbach et al (London: Koenig Books, 2008), 176.

being taken to the mortuary. It starts with someone saying that, “I think everyone should leave while they take care of the body,” but Mekas and a few others are allowed to stay. Mekas documents the methodical preparation of Ginsberg’s body as it is placed inside a body bag and moved from his bed onto a gurney. Friends stand around praying and chanting methodically under their breath, while Mekas stands in the far corner of the room and does not move from that spot. The zoom is used a number of times to get a close-up of Ginsberg’s face, but there are no cuts. The way the zoom is employed to focusing on a central detail. When Ginsberg’s body has been taken out of the apartment Mekas records the curtains gently moving in the breeze where his body was situated a few moments previously. This whole sequence lasts ten minutes without a single cut and Mekas only cuts when he walks out of the building onto the street to see the car containing Ginsberg’s body drive away.⁶¹

Another example of how the ability to record for much longer periods expands the type of material Mekas shoots and includes in his work can be seen in *Letter From Greenpoint* (2004) in which Bob Dylan’s “Like A Rolling Stone” appears on the radio and Mekas sings along to it joyously. The camera is placed on a stable surface and records Mekas and his assistant Northover sitting at the table playing the harmonica along with the music. There is no connection between Mekas’ emotions and the movement of the camera, until he decides to pick it up and move the composition from a wide shot into a close-up of Northover playing the harmonica. The emotion of the present moment is communicated by singing rather than visually, but the scene shifts

⁶¹ Allen Ginsberg was an important presence in Mekas’ life and work. He read extracts from his poetry on the soundtrack of Mekas’ first and only narrative feature *Guns of the Trees* (1962). The influence of Beat poetry has a strong mark on Mekas’ film practice, as they are both concerned with documenting first-person perspectives using techniques that discarded rhyming conventions to encourage a much more spontaneous approach to the documentation of events that foregrounded the individuality of the writer. In the voiceover for “A Visit to the Asylum” in *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) Mekas adopts the famous line from Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* (1956) to help understand his position in the avant-garde community: “No, those were not the best minds of my generation there behind the windows. No, I don’t know where the best minds of my generation are.”

when Northover sings the line “how does it feel?” and Mekas turns the camera into a close-up on himself and responds “nobody asked me and I don’t know how I would answer.” Mekas becomes concerned with registering his own exhaustion in his eyes as the younger Northover continues to energetically sing and play along to the music. The sense of exhaustion that Mekas conveys is not present in his films, which only register the joyousness of singing, but by recording for a much longer period of time with video the moment changes into a meditation on old age.

The levels of collaboration have increased in his video work. *Laboratorium Anthology* (1999) was largely shot by Auguste Varkalis, while *Notes on an American Film Director at Work: Martin Scorsese* (2005) is comprised of footage shot by Mekas and his son Sebastian on the set of Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed* (2006), with the 15 hours of footage they collected being edited by his assistant and friend Benn Northover, as Mekas was busy with other projects at the time.⁶² In *Sleepless Nights Stories* Mekas happily passes his camera to Northover and Sebastian as he talks with Patti Smith at an art gallery opening as photographers congregate around them, or to dance with Yoko Ono at a party. He embraces the fact that the video camera is small, lightweight, works well in low light, has a built in microphone for direct sound recording and can shoot for much longer than a roll of film.⁶³ In this section I have shown that a broader range of events are depicted in Mekas’ videos, but in the next part I will explore how memory is encased in the present moment of recording, which means that the present is always mediated by memory.

Synchronous Sound

The use of direct sound was an integral part of Mekas’ film practice albeit not in harmony with the image. In *Self Portrait* (1980), Mekas’ first video work, there are a

⁶² Jonas Mekas, “Notes on An American Film Director at Work: Martin Scorsese (2005),” in *Jonas Mekas: Films, Videos, Installations (1962-2012)* (Paris: Paris Experimental, 2012), 195.

⁶³ Renov, “Video Confessions,” 84.

number of parallels with the first footage he shot using his Bolex, which is seen in the opening shot of *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) introduced by the inter-title “A Week After We Landed in America (B’klyn) We Borrowed Money & Bought Our First Bolex.” The camera is on a tripod and we see Mekas and his brother standing in their sparsely furnished Brooklyn apartment (fig.23). They constantly move around in front of the camera, with Adolfas smiling and throwing his arms into the air, while Jonas is slightly more reserved in his body language, inquisitively walking up to the camera to look closely into its lens, but their gestures derived from their awareness that they were silent movie actors whose emotions needed to be registered through their body movements rather than speech. The way he behaves in front of a camera with sound is completely different, as in *Self Portrait* the camera is also placed on a tripod, but the use of direct sound means that Mekas stands calmly in front of the camera and talks directly into the lens (fig.24). He is in a public space rather than a private one, standing in front of his friend Sally Dixon’s house holding a can of beer, which creates a sense of formality that is not present in any of his films. The main focus of Mekas’ monologue in *Self Portrait* is his self-consciousness with video, as it was shot ten years before he fully embraced the technology. In the opening he foregrounds the length he will talk by holding up a watch to the camera to reveal that the time is 1:45pm and stating that he will stop speaking at 2:05pm. He refers to his unfamiliarity with video, at one point stating, “I’m being taped, I’m not being filmed. I don’t make tapes myself. I’m not in video. It makes no difference. These are moving images. They are a tool to record reality.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Mekas has subsequently thought more deeply about the differences between the two mediums. In 2001, he gave a lecture at Cooper Union called “The Absolute and Beautiful Interrelationship Between Technology, Content and Form of Cinema,” where he argued that when an artist changes their technology, the content of their work changes also. One of the examples he gives in the lecture is filming a leaf. If he filmed it using an 8 mm camera the image would be composed of four grains, but if he used a 16 mm camera the image would be composed of hundreds of grains. The difference between the two images would be considerable, as the former would be impressionistic, while the latter would be naturalistic because of the amount of detail in the image. Technology opens up new possibilities of expression, but it does not determine how the individual uses it.

The camera is operated by his friend Robert Schoenbaum, who never appears in front of the camera, but who explores its possibilities by tilting, panning and zooming in to various parts of Mekas' body, which sets up another parallel with *Lost, Lost, Lost* as Mekas' engagement with a new technology is a shared experience rather than an individual one.⁶⁵ He introduces himself, which never happens in his films: "My name is Jonas. That is the first name. My last name is spelt M-E-K-A-S. Some people pronounce it Me-kas. Some pronounce it Mek-as. Where I come from originally, that is Lithuania, they pronounce it Ma-kas [...] Most of the time my name is pronounced Me-kas, that is more the English pronunciation." The halting rhythmic structure is familiar from Mekas' voiceovers and his exilic status is still pronounced in his heavily accented English. The fluidity of his subjectivity is foregrounded through the different pronunciation of his name, the split between Lithuanian and English pronunciations means that he is both Jonas Me-kas and Ma-kas.



Fig. 23 *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, 1976)

⁶⁵ Jonas Mekas, "Self Portrait (1980)," in *Jonas Mekas: Films, Videos, Installations (1962-2012)* (Paris: Paris Experimental, 2012), 104.



Fig. 24 *Self Portrait* (Jonas Mekas, 1980)

In his single-take video *A Walk* (1990) he explores the relationship between memory and space through the synchronous sound capabilities of the camera. Mekas uses direct sound to narrate his thoughts as he walks through his neighborhood, highlighting how memory defines his relationship to space. The video was shot on December 15, 1990, and contains no cuts as he walks from 80 Wooster Street to the Williamsburg Bridge, a journey that takes him exactly fifty-eight minutes. The vibrancy of his soundtrack has now usurped that of his camerawork, with the natural rhythms of the environment he inhabits being prioritized such as the bustle of people walking the streets or the collective murmur of groups talking as they exit restaurants and shops. As he walks past the trees on 80 Wooster Street he tells a story of how George Maciunas planted them along the street, which angered the local authorities, and yet they remain. He muses on the nature of being a displaced person, but acknowledges “I recognise a lot now,” later exploring this notion further by claiming, “I walked these streets in 1950 and didn’t know a soul. It was just emptiness. But now I’m walking the streets and I recognise them. I have been here many times before. There is something in these miserable streets that speak to me. It is part of me, and I am part of it. We are inseparable.” Although the

visual style does not systematically imitate conscious states, when it begins to rain Mekas has to constantly wipe the camera lens to get rid of water and condensation. There are passages in the video where he tries to eliminate the condensation but fails, so the images are obscured by a white haze. This corresponds thematically to the unreliable nature of memory that Mekas articulated in his film work through impressionistic fragments.

Mekas' decision to embrace synchronous sound redefines the diaristic subject, as there is no longer a split between the "I" that is recording and the "I" that is speaking about the images in voiceover at years remove. In his films Mekas would look at images he had shot many years previously to record a voiceover, but in *A Walk* he is able to narrate his feelings as he interacts with the space. There is a new relationship to memory, as instead of using images to activate memory, he is using the physical environment to reveal the multiple layers of memory and history that exists around him. The reason he walks to the Williamsburg Bridge is that it enacts a journey to "where my New York life began." At the end of *A Walk* he records the Brooklyn skyline from the Williamsburg Bridge and mutters, "Never again. Never again, Brooklyn." In this moment he is referring to his first New York home in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a period that was marked by extreme poverty and isolation, but in 2004 he was forced to move to Greenpoint, Brooklyn as it became too expensive for him to continue living in his Manhattan apartment.

This displacement from Manhattan to Brooklyn is documented in *Letter from Greenpoint*. The video is only eighty-minutes long, and divided into two parts. Part One lasts twenty minutes and is devoted to Mekas' preparation to move out of his apartment, while the remaining sixty minutes show his integration into Greenpoint. A prolonged eight-minute scene in Part One involves Mekas recording his empty apartment before he moves out, a space seen hundreds of times in his films. He narrates his feelings about leaving from behind the camera as he is confronted with the empty space. He has returned there to retrieve some boxes from the basement of his building. He moved into the apartment in 1974, the year that he married Hollis Melton, with their daughter Oona

born on November 3 of that year. When he looks around the room he has lived in for thirty years he goes through a variety of emotions. When he acknowledges that the space is “totally empty” he clears his throat and awkwardly laughs, but the phrase “empty space” is compulsively repeated by Mekas. These repetitions, hesitations, and awkward clearings of his throat reveals his immediate reaction, which is fragmentary because it is an emotionally difficult, which his previous style registered visually but that is emphasized by sound in video. As none of his personal belongings can be found in the space anymore, he states:

Memories are on one plane and this space is on another plane. There must be a lot of little atoms of myself, Hollis, Sebastian, Oona, attached to it somewhere, floating in the air. That are just atoms, totally invisible, totally somewhere else. Somewhere else. Empty spaces. Empty spaces. Ho ho ho. Here I am. This empty space. Ha. Impregnated with thirty years of life. Every wall, floor, ceiling. Space itself that is full of me, full of Oona, full of Sebastian, Holly. Ho ho. Ho ho ho. Ha. This space. You’re still here. But slowly, slowly everything will be changed by new and different atoms are coming into the space.

The same “Ho Ho Ho” acts as a crescendo to the end of Mekas’ film *As I Was Moving Ahead I Occasionally Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), but in that film we see the life he lived in the apartment with his family. We see his wife and two young children as they grow older, but the aural counterpoint in *Letter From Greenpoint* of shouting “ho, ho, ho” into the empty space highlights the disjuncture. The stylistic approach with his video camera is to preserve as many details of the empty space as possible, but the length of his shot is shaped by how long he wants to talk about the subject from behind the camera rather than a particular image he wants to capture. The relation to the environment he is occupying at the time of recording defines his shot length and composition.

Another aspect of direct sound is that there are more musical performances in his videos. In *Laboritorium Anthology* he is able to document a number of musical performances, including Philip Glass and Patti Smith. When Smith recalls Mekas struggling to raise

money while still living in the Chelsea Hotel 30 years previously, she mentions “what a sorry figure” Mekas was in that time and it abruptly cuts to the construction of the new site for Anthology where Mekas can be heard from behind the camera stating that it is two days before the opening. We see the flowers he looks at on his way to work, the people who work at Anthology and then it suddenly cuts back to Smith a few minutes later singing a Hank Williams song “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” as she and Harry Smith would sing that together. Unlike the speech she gave earlier which is abruptly curtailed, her singing is allowed to play out for much longer. The importance of music and singing is everywhere to be found in the video, from Mekas playing the trumpet, to Nam June Paik’s performance art, which involves him hitting the keys on the piano with a stick before repeatedly pushing it over and having it picked up again by a team of assistants.

In the second part of *Allen’s Last Three Days on Earth as a Spirit* introduced by the inter-title “April 6, 1997” Mekas reads an extract from a twenty minute phone conversation he had with Ginsberg on April 2, 1997. He points his camera at a fully blossomed tree swaying in the wind, an image that also opens the video. This is an example of time frames co-existing. Mekas is reading the passage once Ginsberg has passed away, it was written after he had died, so it imbues the significance of the interaction with the subsequent knowledge that it would be their last conversation. Mekas describes how weak his voice sounded on the phone as he informs Mekas that the doctors have told him that he only has three months to live due to liver cancer. He claims that he is in a good mood as he had accepted death. He was writing a lot of poetry for a book which could be called “Poems from the Bed. Thinking About Death” Ginsberg wanted Mekas to visit him and he promised to visit him next week in his new apartment. Mekas recalls it wasn’t a sad conversation, as “I just couldn’t feel sad hearing his voice so relaxed.”

In *Notes on Utopia* (2005) he delivers four monologues into his camera to foreground that his views are contingent on time and place. The video is composed of four

improvised monologues on the theme of utopia divided into four “notes” of varying length: “Note One” (15 minutes), “Note Two” (23 minutes), “Note Three” (9 minutes), and “Note Four” (8 minutes). These were recorded over two years, as the first two notes were shot and screened at the Venice Biennale in 2003, while the final two were recorded in May 2004. The video is a collage of ideas rather than the progressive development of one idea that moves toward a firm conclusion. The decreasing running times of the final two segments indicates that there is not an ever expanding accumulation of thought, but a growing reluctance to think about the subject. In the final “note” Mekas states: “Bad things are happening. I don’t care about the bad things happening around me, because I am somewhere else. I don’t want to have anything to do with what is happening around me.” Mekas sings this sentence, while in the background music is being played loudly. There is no firm stance developed through the monologues, simply the multiple directions of his thoughts. What has been said does not mean his thoughts have been fixed as, like everything in his work, it is open to re-interpretation.

Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter I noted that the diary form has shifted from solely an avant-garde practice into mainstream television, particularly within reality show formats. The video diary is still used by artists from marginalised subject seeking self-representation, such as Sadie Benning, Lynn Hershmann and George Kuchar, but unlike the diary films of the 1960s, which were silent, handheld and formally innovative, the dominant compositional technique of the video diary is a stationary camera that the subject speaks directly into with synchronous sound. As noted by Jon Dovey, the shooting techniques are completely different from film, with him using the example of *Video Fool For Love*, in which the video-maker records for a much longer period of time and passes the camera between people without any technical knowledge to create a greater fluidity of subject positions. The ability for people to operate the technology themselves created a new assumption about audio-visual realism, as amateur techniques are viewed as authentic, such as out-of-focus shots, awkward camera movements and

bad lighting. I then challenged Laura Rascaroli's failure to account for medium specificity in the theorisation of diary videos and critiqued Catherine Russell's assumption that the ability to record for longer periods of time was a drawback to subjective representation, as I argued that it has resulted in a wider variety of experiences being documented.

In the second part of this chapter I showed that Mekas takes a completely different approach to subjective representation. Although the levels of secondary revision have been removed from his practice, such as voiceover, inter-titles and music the ability to record for much longer periods has resulted in an expansion of the type of events he documents. The visual strategies he employs in video are completely different. Using James M. Moran's research on home videos, I showed that Mekas' practice adopts stylistic techniques from amateur practices, just as he did in his film practice. The use of long takes do not attempt to imitate memory processes like in his film, but it has resulted in a greater scope of experiences being represented than in his films. He allows the camera to keep recording for longer than expected to allow the shifts in emotion to be registered, such as in *Letter From Greenpoint* when his joy at singing along to a Bob Dylan song on the radio continues to register his exhaustion or in *Allen's Last Three Days on Earth as a Spirit* Mekas documents the coroner preparing Allen Ginsberg's dead body to be taken away for cremation in extreme detail.

In the third section I argued that the adoption of synchronous sound redefined the diaristic subject in his practice. In his films there is a temporal disjuncture between sound and image, but in his videos the act of filming and speaking are collapsed into the same temporal moment. In his films the confrontation between voice and image created a confrontation between two subject positions that never unify, but in his videos the relationship with physical environments such as streets, apartments and friends instigates a new relationship with memory, as instead of looking at filmed footage like in his films, the space acts as a new stimulus for memory. This can be seen in *A Walk*, which involves Mekas recording a journey from his apartment to the Williamsburg Bridge that

simultaneously documents the space and the memories they provoke in Mekas. The same occurs in *Letter From Greenpoint*, where Mekas documents his reaction to the empty space of the apartment he lived in for 30 years before being forced to leave it due to rising rent prices. In his films the recorded images were the stimulus for Mekas' memory, but in video the immediate space acts as the provocation to speak. In this chapter I have primarily focused on the moment of shooting, but Mekas' secondary revision of his video work, including the selection and arrangement of the footage within a narrative structure, will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

The Online Diary: *365 Day Project* (2007)

In this chapter I will explore how the Internet has affected Jonas Mekas' approach to self-representation by engaging with his ambitious *365 Day Project* (2007), which involved him releasing one short video for every day of the year on his website. The chapter will be divided into three parts. The first will explore the online diary and how digital and online platforms have created new methods of production, distribution and engagement with first-person footage. The second part will be an in-depth analysis of the *365 Day Project*, focusing on how Mekas' personal archive of footage is re-defined and re-shaped within the structure of the project, highlighting that audio-visual records of the historical world are always open to redefinition. The third will explore the database documentary, focusing particularly on how the viewer has a greater role in forging personal connections between Mekas' footage.

The Online Diary

Online practices predominantly involve issues of self-representation, with Anna Poletti and Julie Rak asserting that “acquiring and maintaining online identities make up the core activities of many users.”¹ Most diarists uploading footage online would probably be surprised to learn that their practice has its roots in the avant-garde, but online platforms have realised many of the key aims of the New American Cinema group, particularly the presentation of individual works without the need of institutional interference. When the Film-Makers Co-operative was set up in 1962, one of its founding aims was to distribute any film submitted to it without passing judgment on its quality, but the presentation of first-person footage on the Internet has altered

¹ Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, “Introduction: Digital Dialogues,” in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 3.

assumptions about the diary form.² The first text-based diary to be published online was posted on January 3, 1995, but since then written diaries have proliferated as Internet connection speeds increased and personal computers became more affordable. In the late-1990s the introduction of user-friendly Web-authoring software such as *Blogger* and *Live Journal* made it easier for ordinary people to write and post entries about their life and day-to-day feelings, but also choose formats, archive their posts and decide if they would like to make them public or private.³ What is significantly different about diaries posted online is that they invite a level of interactivity that was usually not associated with the form.

This has only intensified with social networking sites. On Twitter, brief instalments of life narratives are updated regularly within the space of 140 characters. There is a high level of engagement with other users through commenting, re-tweeting, forwarding or tagging, a practice that has been labelled by Laurie McNeill as “auto/tweetographies.” McNeill also notes that the “real time” aspect of Twitter encourages an almost constant presence by the user, a requirement that has been facilitated by mobile devices.⁴ The problem with many social networking platforms such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter is that they allow the construction of a subject that exists in a constant present without any clear sense of its history. Amy J. Elias has noted that posts can be erased, updated or revised without any textual acknowledgment of these transformations, which

² Jonas Mekas, “Independent for Independents,” in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2005), 36.

³ Madeline Sorapure, “Screening Moments, Scrolling Lives: Diary Writing on the Web,” *Biography* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 2.

⁴ Laurie McNeill, “Life Bytes: Six Word Memoir and the Exigencies of Auto/tweetographies,” in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 149.

leads to a presentation of the self that is “fully constituted in the present. Presentation, not retrospection, is the activity promoted by these forms.”⁵

In terms of filmed diaries, digital platforms have made it easier for users to record and upload material online.⁶ YouTube, which was founded in February 2005, is a name synonymous with online video, with it containing a variety of recorded material, from traditional media to user-generated content.⁷ The phenomenon of “video blogging” or “vlogging” was facilitated by the platform, but also the availability of digital cameras and video editing software that meant that individuals could shoot and upload footage on the same day. In vlogs the individual speaks directly into a stationary camera that is usually situated in their home, which viewers can then discuss in the comments section beneath the video. In their study of YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green have noted the “conversational character” of vlogs as they “remind us of the residual character of interpersonal face-to-face communication.”⁸ An example of this practice was vlogger Peter Oakley, who started uploading video diaries onto YouTube in August 2006 under the username “geriatric1927.” He was seventy-nine-years-old when he started and in each video he sits in his living room wearing headphones and talking directly into his camera about his life and career, which he divided into weekly episodes each entitled *Telling It All*.⁹

⁵ Amy J Elias, “Virtual Autobiography: Autobiographies, Interfaces and Avatars,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 514.

⁶ Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose, “‘This Great Mapping of Ourselves’: New Documentary Forms Online,” in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 366.

⁷ Rick Prelinger, “The Appearance of Archives,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickers and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: The National Library of Sweden, 2009), 269.

⁸ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 54.

⁹ Danny Birchall, “Online Documentary,” in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices*, ed. Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (London: Open University Press, 2008), 282.

The ability for ordinary people to upload vlogs online has resulted in the assumption that it is a truthful form of expression, but filmmakers have imitated this style and approach to reveal that there is no inherently truthful style. The most famous example of this is “lonelygirl15,” a vlog that purported to be the diary of a 15-year-old girl called Bree, who talked in her bedroom on topics such as friends, family, anxieties and her parent’s involvement in a religious cult.¹⁰ This was revealed to be a staged performance after four months in September 2006, with it being scripted and created by the filmmakers Ramesh Flinders and Miles Beckett. The actress Jessica Rose played Bree, while the emails and comments purporting to have been written by Bree were by Amanda Solomon Goodfried, who was a supporting actor in the videos.¹¹ This violated the autobiographical pact in the same way that Jim McBride’s *David Holzman’s Diary* (1968) had done nearly 40 years before.¹²

The compositional strategies of vlogs are very similar to many of the video diaries that emerged in the 1980s, but the main difference between the video diaries mentioned in the previous chapter by Lynn Hershmann, Sadie Benning, George Kuchar and Jonas Mekas is that online diarists can now immediately upload the footage themselves. Digital media is a numerical representation of 0-1 digital codes that can be stored, distributed, manipulated, transferred and copied with great ease.¹³ The instantaneous possibility for distributing first-person footage often eliminates the element of retrospection that marked the diary film and video¹⁴ For example, platforms such as

¹⁰ Birchall, 282.

¹¹ Jill Walker Rettberg, *Bloggging* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 132.

¹² Elias, 519.

¹³ Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011), 15.

¹⁴ Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seir, “Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickers and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: The National Library of Sweden, 2009), 193.

“Ustream”¹⁵ and “Livestream”¹⁶ (both founded in 2007) allow users to broadcast webcam diaries live on the Internet. This means that David E. James’s theorisation of the diary film being marked by the tension between private (film diary) and public footage (diary film), cannot be applied to new diaristic practices, as new production methods are dismantling these boundaries.¹⁷

The problem with personal blogs, photo-sharing sites, social media and YouTube channels is their ephemerality, as posts can get deleted or lost in the deluge of subsequent entries, but a personal website allows the user to curate their work more closely. Jonas Mekas launched his personal website – www.jonasmekas.com -- in November 2006 and the first project he released on this new platform was *First Forty* (2006), which was designed as a way to introduce his work to a new audience.¹⁸ The project presents forty short videos that are each contained in a square, which the user clicks on and is taken to a page with the video. The majority of the material is from previously released works, for example, the film portrait of the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer that originally appeared into *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1969) is presented in *First Forty* as a stand-alone fragment. There is also significant reworking of material, such as *Award Presentation to Andy Warhol* (1964), which was originally released as a silent work, but in this version includes a voiceover track recorded by Mekas. The majority of the forty short films were shot on film rather than video and show famous people including Elvis, John Lennon, Yoko One, Allen Ginsberg, Salvador Dali and Patti Smith. The fragments are non-chronological and showed the new structural possibilities for presenting footage he had shot.

¹⁵ Ustream, accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.ustream.tv/>.

¹⁶ Livestream, accessed January 20, 2015, <https://new.livestream.com/>.

¹⁷ David E. James, “Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in *Walden*,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 145-179.

¹⁸ Jonas Mekas, “First Forty (2006),” accessed January 23, 2015, <http://jonasmekas.com/40/>.

The critique of many online diaries I have outlined so far is that immediacy is prioritised and that the layers of subjective revision are obscured, but Mekas' differing approach can partly be attributed to his age. The writer Marc Prensky has referred to people who have grown up with technologies such as the Internet, computers, email, videogames, digital music players, video cameras and mobile phones as Digital Natives as they "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors."¹⁹ Those who have not grown up with these technologies since birth are referred to as Digital Immigrants, as they approach these technologies from a position of unfamiliarity. The characteristics of a Digital Native include processing information quickly, preferring images over text, multitasking, randomly accessing material and thriving on "instant gratification and rewards, while a Digital Immigrant possesses a longer attention span, a preference for texts over images and use cause and effect thinking."²⁰ The oversimplification in the generational divides aside, Mekas' approach to self-representation resists the instant gratification aspect of online practices, as he brings with him nearly sixty years experience of self-representation. In the following section I will look at the next diary Mekas released on his website entitled *365 Day Project*.

365 Day Project

In January 2007 Mekas began to release one video for every day of the year on his website, an idea that was inspired by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch, who wrote one love poem for every day of the year for a woman named Laura.²¹ A new video was uploaded each day into a calendar grid (fig.25), so visitors could follow the piecemeal process by which the project was being put together. The user would click on the date that interested them and they would be taken to a page that had a still image

¹⁹ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants" *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October, 2001), 1.

²⁰ Prensky, 2.

²¹ The collection was originally titled *Rime sparse* ("Scattered Rhymes"), but was later renamed *Il Canzoniere* ("Song Book"). The poems were written over a period of forty years for a woman Petrarch saw from a distance but never actually met.

from the video and a short piece of text below describing what was contained in it and a link to download it (fig.26). The videos varied in length from 1 minute 32 seconds (August 2) to 20 minutes (December 24) and could be downloaded as an MP4 file to be viewed on computers or iPods. The videos were free to watch on the day of their release, but after that date each one cost \$1.99 to download.²² Although it is now widely referred to as the *365 Day Project*, during its initial release it was called *365 Films by Jonas Mekas*. The majority of the footage was shot on either analogue or digital video and was distributed and downloaded as digital files, which is why Mekas eliminated the reference to “film” in the new title.

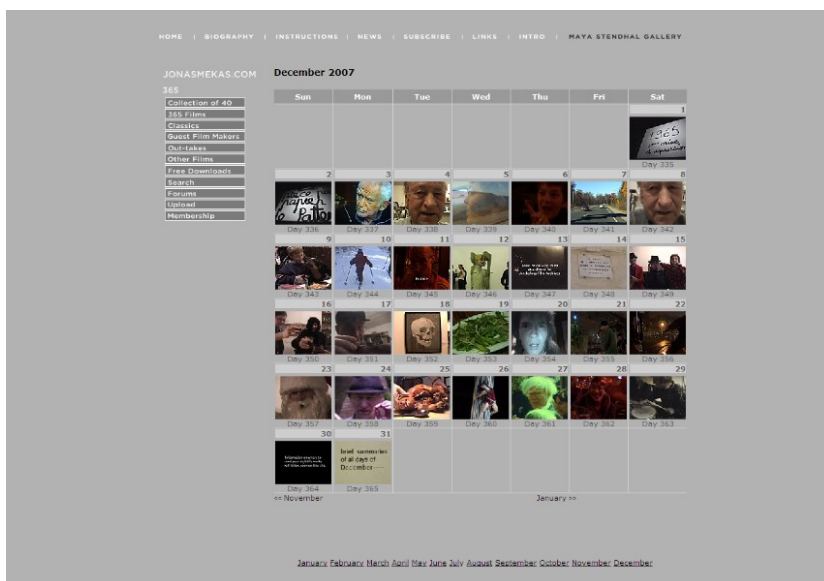


Fig. 25 *365 Day Project* (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

²² This strategy proposed a way for filmmakers to make money from their work outside conventional exhibition venues such as film festivals, galleries, museums, and universities. Although websites like UbuWeb (ubu.com) present a wide spectrum of avant-garde and experimental films for free to facilitate access to often obscure works, they are also worrying for filmmakers wanting to maintain a living through their practice.

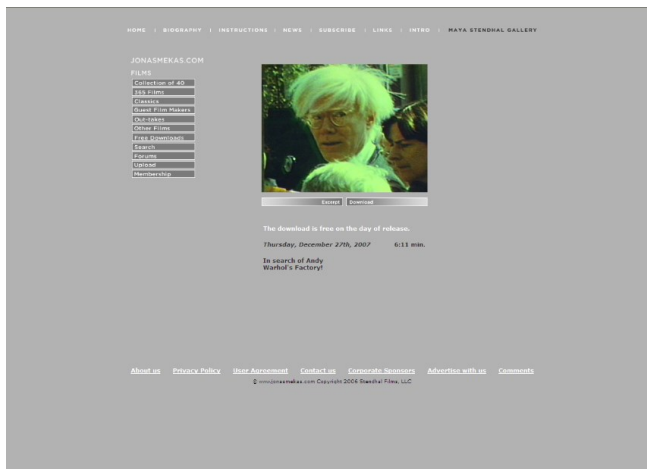


Fig. 26 *365 Day Project* (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

The videos are designated by their date, but just as a diarist can write about any event from their life on any particular day, the footage Mekas presented came from various times in his life, resulting in dramatic shifts in year, location and subject. The earliest footage is of the preacher Billy Graham that Mekas shot in 1955 (July 10)²³ and the most recent was shot during the project in 2007, which represents a period of fifty years, the longest time-span of any of his work.²⁴ The videos present social events like parties, meals, concerts (Sonic Youth, Madonna, Patti Smith, Lou Reed), film presentations at Anthology Film Archives (Louis Malle, Norman Mailer, Ben Vautier), or trips abroad (Japan, France, Finland). In some of the videos Mekas is simply alone exploring the environment with his camera and in others delivering monologues into it on subjects ranging from poetry to Paris Hilton.²⁵ Each video starts with a title card with Mekas'

²³ Jonas Mekas "July 10, 2007" *365 Day Project* (2007), accessed January 20, 2015, <http://jonasmekasfilms.com/365/day.php?month=7&day=10>.

²⁴ In the video for July 10 Mekas records the footage of Billy Graham on his digital camera directly off the screen at his editing desk, talking from behind the camera as he watches the silently shot footage, stating that he filmed it as an exercise in "film journalism," which confirms the discussion in Chapter 2 on the diary film that for the duration of the 1950s Mekas was attempting to emulate professional standards in his shooting style.

²⁵ Tom Smith, "Moment by Moment by Moment: Reflections on Jonas Mekas' 365 Films," *Vertigo* 4, no. 1 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 17.

website written on it, followed by the date of that video (fig.27) and ending with the same sketch of flowers on a branch (fig.28).

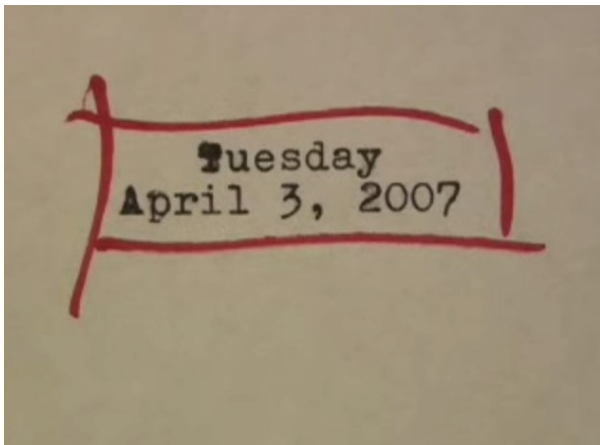


Fig. 27 *365 Day Project* (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

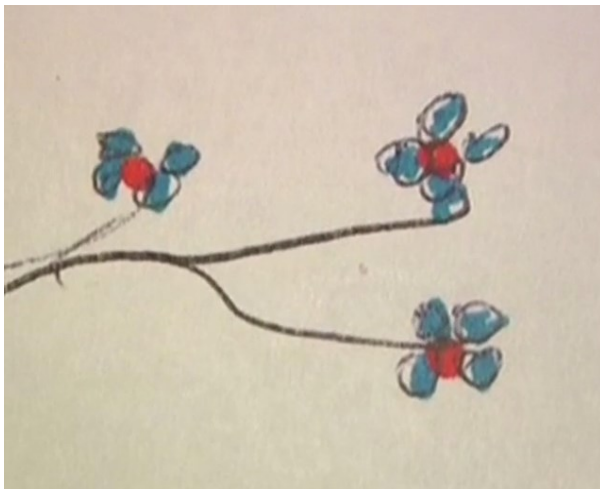


Fig. 28 *365 Day Project* (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

Laura Rascaroli has referred to the project as a “refined vlog,” which “through its calendar structure and graphics, makes the temporal dimension of diary-making fully tangible.”²⁶ The use of specific dates for each video brings Mekas’ diary practice closer to the written diary, which is defined by Philippe Lejeune as a “series of dated traces”

²⁶ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), 124.

that, “attempt to capture the movement of time rather than freeze it around a source event.” In his films Mekas would adhere to a chronological structure to mimic the naivety of a diarist posting entries without any retrospective knowledge, but then adopt elements of autobiography by speaking from a position of retrospective knowledge in the voiceover, inter-titles and music.²⁷ In the *365 Day Project* Mekas imitated the process and structure of a written diary much more closely, posting new entries without any certainty of what would happen the next day, which exposed the incoherence to his subjectivity as it changed over time. The structure of this project was also similar to a written diary as there was no central conflict to the material and the only closure was the temporal decision to end the project on December 31, 2007.

In the previous chapter Mekas’ adoption of the video camera to record his daily life responded to his needs of having a lightweight piece of equipment that he could easily carry around with him to produce good image quality, direct sound and a cheaper alternative to film, but the representational strategies he developed through the technology created concerns that extended into his decisions in post-production. Mekas now estimates to have around 2,000 hours worth of video footage in his possession. An example that highlights the difference between how much footage he would film in comparison to how much he would shoot on video is revealed in a conversation with the filmmaker Harmony Korine, where Mekas recalls visiting him at his apartment and recording “five or six hours worth of material.” This is in contrast to the scale of possible recording lengths he outlined in film of either ten frames, ten seconds or ten minutes per day.²⁸

In video the editing process involves cutting out footage from the encounter to get to the moment that interests him. The development of non-linear editing equipment means that

²⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 179.

²⁸ Jonas Mekas, “*Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches) (1969)*,” in *Jonas Mekas: Films, Videos and Installations (1962-2012)*, ed. Pip Chodorov (Paris: Paris Experimental, 2012), 87

it is easier to traverse footage, as videotape was similar to film in that it had to be physically rewound or fast-forwarded, but the introduction of DV meant that images could be randomly accessed on digital hard disks. The Avid Media Composer is widely used in commercial filmmaking, while consumer level programs such as Final Cut Pro are available to anyone who can afford it.²⁹ There is a tension between the meaning of the raw footage and how it is structured for public exhibition, but the mixture of old and new material in *365 Day Project* shows that retrospection is still an important value in his work, as the meaning of the images is not locked in the moment of recording, but developed through how they are employed within the structure of the project.

There are numerous examples of footage from other videos being re-edited and re-contextualised within the project to bring out new meanings in the material. There is footage that first appeared in the project that then became longer works, such as the TV news coverage of Lithuania gaining independence (February 16), which then became part of *Lithuania and the Collapse of the USSR* (2008) or his behind-the-scenes footage on the set of Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) seen on February 17, which was originally part of his video *Notes on an American Film Director at Work: Martin Scorsese* (2005). The video for December 27 uses six minutes from the sixty-four minute video *A Few Notes on the Factory* (1999) that was made for the Guggenheim Museum's traveling exhibition "Andy Warhol's Factory Years."³⁰ The video for January was originally used in part of his film *Notes for Jerome* (1978), which places an emphasis on Jerome Hill, but by excising it from this context into the *365 Day Project* loses this emphasis.

²⁹ Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York and London: Continuum, 2008), 258.

³⁰ Jonas Mekas, "A Few Notes on the Factory (1999)," in *Jonas Mekas: Films, Videos, Installations (1962-2012)*, ed. Pip Chodorov (Paris: Paris Experimental, 2012), 149.

Mekas' personal archive of recorded moments is shown to be up for redefinition depending on the context it is used in. The poststructuralist writers Michel Foucault³¹ and Jacques Derrida³² viewed archives, which were once considered an objective storehouse of materials and records, as creating knowledge of the past through their construction and maintenance.³³ An archive is therefore never "objective" but a personal archive is different to one collected by official organisations, where personal opinions are often suppressed. Kenneth Foote, a noted archivist, believes that material should not be collected too quickly, particularly in cases of highly emotional events, as in archives the question of what can be considered significant is always raised but cannot be answered immediately. He therefore believes that there needs to be an element of retrospection to answer that question more clearly.³⁴ This is what Mekas' filmmaking practice is predicated on, that new meanings and understanding can be gained from what he has shot when he revisits it at years remove.

The stimulus for re-editing footage for the project varied. On the birthday of a particular friend he would dedicate that day's video to them, with dedicatees including Yoko Ono (February 18) and Gregory Corso (March 26).³⁵ For Ono's video Mekas records her receiving a giant cake at an event. The video was recorded in low light, so it has a green tinge and the sound has been cut out. Mekas records her from a distance in a vast crowd of people as she blows out the candles of the cake. It then cuts to Mekas and Ono

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Row, 1976).

³² Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," trans. Eric Prenowitz *Diacritics* 25 no.2 (1995): 9-63.

³³ Miller, 125.

³⁴ Courtney Rivard, "Archiving Disaster and National Identity in the Digital Realm: The September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank," in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 135.

³⁵ Smith, 17.

dancing together, meaning he must have given his camera to someone else to record.³⁶ Unlike Ono's dedication, Corso had died in 2001, but the video was recorded on September 22, 2000 and shows him in bed, obviously in a weakened state as he looks through books of his poetry. Mekas sits down next to Corso and tells him how he saved his life by preventing him from going to Times Square late one night. A book of Corso's poetry fell off the bookshelf as he was about to walk out the door and Mekas recalls how he stayed at home to read instead of going out. These two videos are examples of how the temporal disjuncture between recording and releasing the footage creates new insights depending on when it is returned to, as knowledge of Corso's death inflects the meaning of the footage differently to the video of Ono who is still alive.

The release of old footage within the *365 Day Project* is sometimes stimulated by the death of a friend. The novelist Norman Mailer died during the project on November 10, someone Mekas had already released footage of on July 10, which showed him introducing a screening of *Wild 90* (1968) at Anthology Film Archives. A few weeks after Mailer's death, on December 3, Mekas released further footage that contained interviews with Mailer and an excerpt from the infamous fight scene between Mailer and Rip Torn at the end of *Maidstone* (1970). It is unclear whether Mekas had already planned to release this material as part of the project, but if not, then it represents the quickest time-span in which Mekas edited footage together for its memorial purpose. This does not prioritise immediacy above reflection as the footage was shot in the 1990s and only released in 2007, but Mekas was able to distribute it quickly and allow the final shape of the project to be defined by an occurrence that happened during its making.³⁷ There is no need for Mekas to record a voiceover acknowledging the passage of time, as the temporal element is already pronounced within the diary structure of the project.

³⁶ Jonas Mekas "February 18, 2007" *365 Day Project* (2007), accessed January 24, 2015, <http://jonasmekasfilms.com/365/day.php?day=18&month=2>.

³⁷ Smith, 19.

The power of the voiceover shaping the meaning of the images in his film work is demonstrated in *Zefiro Torna or Scenes From the Life of George Maciunas* (1992) where footage from a dumpling party at 80 Wooster Street is used that depicts George Maciunas serving food, Andy Warhol staring into space, John Lennon taking photographs and Mekas eating dumplings. The footage presents the joyous occasion of friends getting together and enjoying one another's company, but in the voiceover Mekas reads extracts from his diary about Maciunas' declining health due to cancer. The two diary extracts he reads are from February 20, 1978, and March 1, 1978. In the first extract Maciunas tells Mekas' wife Hollis Melton that he can "sleep, but not really sleep" due to the pain he is in, while in the second Maciunas asks "I wonder what I will be in my next life?" as he waits to catch a train with Mekas. The use of voiceover renegotiates the tone of the film from a joyful to an elegiac meditation of the transience of life.

The videos that involve Mekas returning to locations to track their changes over time are confirmations of the passage of time. Examples include a visit to the train station where the Lumière's filmed *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (February 27); visiting the site of Joseph Cornell's old house (May 3); and exploring the various locations where Warhol's Factory used to be situated (December 27). The site of the first Factory is now an underground car park, and the other two locations on Union Square are now restaurants, with Mekas also pointing out the place where he filmed Warhol for the last time before his death. These are particularly poignant because they act as confirmations of the change that all Mekas' work implicitly anticipates through the emphasis on capturing the present moment.

The process of editing his video footage brings out new meanings through selection, which can be seen by comparing two versions of the same event. On September 11 of the *365 Day Project* Mekas presents some of the footage he shot on September 11, 2001, from the roof of his Manhattan apartment. The length of the video is five minutes and three seconds, but he shot forty minutes of material on the day of the attack. This was

revealed when Mekas released the entirety of his footage unedited on his website in 2011 under the title *My 9/11 Footage*.³⁸ This can be confirmed as an unedited version as cuts mainly occur during transitional moments like when he is walking down the stairs of his apartment building or when he is taking the lift up to the roof, which means he is simply stopping the camera. The unedited version starts with both towers burning, but still standing, but Mekas is present when the first tower collapses. He makes a very few comments from behind the camera, but upon watching the first tower collapse he can be heard quietly stating “I hope they managed to get some people.” He returns to his apartment to watch the television news coverage for a while, but then returns to the roof to document the fallen second tower. He stays for only a few minutes to document the space once occupied by the World Trade Centre and then goes back to his apartment again. The rest of the footage shows Mekas out on the street documenting the destruction from different vantage points, each time starting with a close-up of his watch -- 12:45, 1:45, 2:25 -- then tilting up to the rising smoke.

The version shown as part of his *365 Day Project* does not show the collapse of the towers. Instead Mekas shows three perspectives on the destruction: from the roof, the street and on a television screen. It is significant that he does not show the collapse of the towers in this representation of events. The mediation of the experience is emphasised by Mekas even though he could have simply stayed on the roof of his apartment, but he significantly decides to go back to his apartment to film the coverage of the event on news channels. He places his camera close up to the television screen to create distortion or flickering of the image, a deliberate choice that corresponds to his inability to view the traumatic event clearly. The only time Mekas’ voice is heard is when he states the name of the street he is on.³⁹ Mekas does not interrogate the footage through the tension between image and sound, which was central to his film practice.

³⁸ Jonas Mekas, “My 9/11 Footage,” *Diary* (blog), September 10, 2011 (5:48pm), accessed January 21, 2015, <http://jonasmekas.com/diary/?p=1301>.

³⁹ Jonas Mekas, “September 11, 2007” *365 Films*, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://jonasmekasfilms.com/365/day.php?month=9&day=11>.

When the viewer downloaded and watched the video on September 11, a comparison point was made between the present moment of viewing and recording. Mekas does not attempt to verbalise his reaction to the events, but the selection and arrangement of material highlights elements that can be sidelined or centralised.⁴⁰

There were some elements of the *365 Day Project* that embraced the instantaneous potential of the Internet in short videos that were shot during the project in the style of vloggers. In some of the videos Mekas simply talks into his camera in order to react to current events, such as a tabloid story stating that the singer Britney Spears had shaved her head. In the video for February 21 Mekas reacts to the story while he is having breakfast with his assistant Benn Northover. It starts with a close up of an image of Spears in the newspaper with her head shaved, suggesting that Mekas was eating his breakfast, encountered the article and then picked up his camera to record his reaction to it. He then turns the camera on himself and starts to muse on the subject, claiming that nervous breakdowns are necessary for artists. A similar process happens in his reaction to a tabloid article on Paris Hilton in the June 17 video, which make fun of her claims that she is not the same person she used to be. Mekas reacts against the negative attitude towards the idea of becoming a different person. These statements on ephemeral newspaper articles reveal deeply rooted attitudes that have been present in all his filmmaking practices, demonstrating that the present moment is interlinked with the past.

⁴⁰ The first time Mekas edited his 9/11 footage was for his six-minute video *Ein Marchen aus Alten Zeiten* (2001), which uses the title of a poem by Heinrich Heine to distance the trauma of the event by framing it within a fairy tale as it was too close to the event for Mekas to comprehend the death of 2,500 people occurring in front of him. The second time was for *The Destruction Quartet* (2006), an installation that presented four moments of destruction on four different monitors. In the first monitor Nam June Paik is seen destroying a piano in 1997, in the second the Berlin Wall is seen being demolished in 1990, in the third Mekas records Danius Kesminas's fire sculpture, (New York) Consequence in New York in 1991, while in the fourth monitor Mekas presented his September 11, 2001, footage. These further examples back up my claim that the images do not have any stable meaning, but are dependent on how they are edited and juxtaposed.

The instantaneous distribution capabilities also allow him to foreground the collaborative nature of the project. There are a number of videos where Mekas and his team celebrate the successful release of the videos. The project was made possible by a small team who worked with him throughout the year, mainly his assistant Benn and his son Sebastian, but also the artist and curator Elle Burchill. Mekas has admitted that he has very little technological understanding, with him not even being sure how to download one of the videos himself. Mekas never attempted to hide the level of their involvement as there are a number of videos where the team celebrate various stages in the completion of the project, with there not being a single day that they failed to upload a video. On the videos for the last day of each month Mekas, Sebastian, Burchill and Northover enjoy the success of the past month's videos being produced and put up within the tight deadline of twenty-four hours. On January 31, we see them eating, drinking and dancing together. A similar video was released on February 28 of them dancing and running around Mekas' apartment in celebration.

Mekas' work has always involved filming others to reflect the self, but this project increased the levels of collaboration. A number of the videos were not shot by Mekas and referred to as "video postcards," which is not unprecedented in his work. He frequently gave his camera to friends, such as the footage shot by Jane Brakhage in "A Trip to Stan's" seen in *Walden* or "The Shooting of Guns of the Trees" in *Lost, Lost, Lost* shot by Charles Levine. The video postcards were sent to Mekas by close friends and family: Benn Northover (February 12 and September 7), Sebastian Mekas (March 22) Elle Burchill (July 15 and August 29), Virginie Marchand (August 6), Pola Chappelle (October 13, 14 and 15) and Dominique Dubosc (November 9). In Pola Chappelle's contribution she returns to Lithuania with her husband Adolfas Mekas. In the first video they see Mekas' brother Kostas (seen prominently in Mekas' *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*), they talk, eat and drink together. In the video for October 14 they are seen attempting to use a Segway on a street in Vilnius at night. The third and final video is of them showing glimpses of Vilnius from the perspective of a moving car.

These are just extensions of the idea that Mekas could hand his camera over to a friend, but with digital technology that can be extended across the globe.

In the final video, Mekas announced a project that never came to fruition, but that would have represented an interesting new direction in his work. In the video for December 30, 2007, Mekas announced a project called “One Thousand and One Nights,” which would involve viewers from around the world submitting videos between two and eight minutes about their “night life,” to be shown on his website, with Mekas asking people to send in their videos “via computer, internet, mini-cassette, DVD, film, telephone, any way you can, whatever means you have available.” This would have extended the participatory aspect of the *365 Day Project*, which contained video postcards from close friends and family, and a multitude of first person perspectives that would have aligned it with projects such as *Life in a Day* (Kevin MacDonald, 2011), in which people from around the world were invited to record their life on July 24, 2010, and upload it onto YouTube to create a user-generated documentary portraying a single day.⁴¹

Mekas planned to start releasing these submissions on his website in July 2008, but this never happened. Instead the idea mutated into his video *Sleepless Nights Stories* (2011), which integrates footage Mekas shot of people including Bjork, Marina Abramovic, Harmony Korine and Louis Garrel recounting stories from their life. The failure of this internet project was due to a disagreement with the Maya Stendhal Gallery, who owned and set up Mekas’ website in 2006, a relationship that ended abruptly in 2009 with an announcement on Mekas’ video and DVD distributor’s website:

Jonas Mekas informs us that, as of July 2009, he is no longer associated with, or represented by the Maya Stendhal Gallery. Although that gallery is still making his work accessible via the jonasmekas.com and jonasmekas.net websites, these sites are still controlled by the Stendhal Gallery, and are there against his will and wishes. Therefore he calls for a boycott against the

⁴¹ Dovey and Rose, 371.

Stendhal Gallery.⁴²

It was later revealed that Mekas and designer Paula Scheer were suing the Maya Stendhal Gallery for selling a number of their works without their knowledge. Mekas issued court papers alleging that Harry Stendhal had sold their work without consent to pay off gambling debts of \$90,000.⁴³ This situation forced Mekas to change his website from jonasmekas.com to jonasmekasfilms.com, but he later regained his original domain name. This experience represents a technological displacement that highlights the instability of the online world, where it is often taken for granted that personal image, text or video data will not be lost. Mekas managed to get his materials back, but it was another instance of the technology replicating his experience of exile.

Database Documentary

Up until this point I have argued that the Internet has altered diary practices, most notably through the temporal collapse between recording and distribution, but that Mekas' approach in the *365 Day Project* combines immediacy and retrospection through a mixture of footage shot and uploaded during the project and older material from his personal archive of footage. In this section I will extend my discussion by considering the *365 Day Project* as an example of the database documentary, but first I will look at some other examples of the form. A database documentary uses online platforms to present material that can form the basis of a conventional documentary production, such as text, photographs and video recordings, but provide access to that material in a way not shaped by traditional structures.⁴⁴ The new media theorist Lev Manovich describes a

⁴² Pip Chodorov, "Jonas Mekas: Free Downloads" *Re:voir* (January 2010), accessed January 13, 2015, <http://revoirvideo.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/jonas-mekas-free-downloads.html>.

⁴³ Jeanne Macintosh, "Stendhal is Rogue's Gallery: Suit" *New York Post* (July 13, 2010), accessed January 13, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2010/07/13/stendhal-is-rogues-gallery-suit/>.

⁴⁴ Hart Cohen, "Database Documentary: From Authorship to Authoring in Remediated/Remixed Documentary" *Culture Unbound* Vol. 4 (2012), 328.

database as “a structured collection of data,”⁴⁵ which means that the majority of online practices involve databases, from hyperlinks, web pages, search engines and online shopping, but its impact upon the documentary form is that the viewer has greater participation in the process of making meaning.⁴⁶ A database gives greater control to the viewer in exploring documentary footage, as they are able to create meaning and narrative connections for themselves. This type of practice reduces the role of the filmmaker in the process of knowledge production, which has led documentary scholar Craig Hight to claim that it offers the potential for an “extensive and permanent transformation of fundamental aspects of documentary culture.”⁴⁷

In a database documentary the user can perform various operations such as view, navigate and search, which documentary theorist Dale Hudson has noted, “loosens assumptions about documentary from fixed modes (expository, observational, personal) and towards open modes (collaborative, reflexive, interactive).”⁴⁸ This approach was not created by the Internet, as there are precursors to these types of online practices.⁴⁹ An example of this is Chris Marker’s CD-Rom *Immemory* (1997), which assembles postcards, photographs, film stills, clips, quotes, musical passages and text into eight different zones: Travel, Museum, Memory, X-Plugs, Poetry, War, Photography and Cinema.⁵⁰ The user navigates their way through this material with a cursor that evokes the shape of a cross-hair on a gun, which when moved across the screen results in it changing colour to suggest that a new tangent can be pursued, creating a non-linear

⁴⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2001), 218.

⁴⁶ Miller, 21.

⁴⁷ Craig Hight, “The Field of Digital Documentary: A Challenge to Documentary Theorists” *Studies in Documentary Film* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2008), 3.

⁴⁸ Dale Hudson, “Undisclosed Recipients: Database Documentaries and the Internet” *Studies in Documentary Film* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2008), 89.

⁴⁹ Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form” *Millennium Film Journal* 34 (Fall 1999), 219.

⁵⁰ Kent Jones, “Time Immemorial” *Film Comment* 39, no. 4 (July-August, 2003): 46.

experience in which the user navigates the material for themselves. The fluid organisation draws attention to the fact that when images are re-contextualised, new associations are created, highlighting that the structure gives meaning as much as the images themselves.⁵¹

An initiative that has produced numerous database documentaries is *The Labyrinth Project* at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, which has been under the direction of Marsha Kinder since 1997. The project has received contributions from artists, historians and ordinary people telling their own life stories in innovative combinations of images, sounds and texts.⁵² For example, in 2002 *The Labyrinth Project* worked in collaboration with Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács to create *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River* (2002) a large-scale installation with forty hours of amateur footage shot by Captain Nandor Andrasovits, who in 1939 transported Jewish families fleeing Adolf Hitler along the Danube to the Black Sea where they boarded a ship to Palestine. A central component of the installation was the use of touch screen monitors that allowed people to interact with the footage and a website where visitors could add their own stories. This approach was designed to raise questions of agency and authorship, as meanings were fluid due to the variety of combinations that were possible.⁵³

The Korsakow System was invented by the media-artist Florian Thalhofer as an open-source application for the creation of database documentaries.⁵⁴ The user downloads the

⁵¹ Marsha Kinder, "The Conceptual Power of On-Line Video: Five Easy Pieces" *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube* ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: INC, 2008), 59.

⁵² Kinder, 60.

⁵³ Kinder, 61.

⁵⁴ Matt Soar, "Making (with) the Korsakow System: Database Documentaries as Articulation and Assemblage," in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses* ed. Craig Hight, Kate Nash and Catherine Summerhayes (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 154.

application onto their hard drive, which means they do not have to view it online. The creator of the database documentary can then decide on what footage they want to include and how the scenes relate to another one, but the user can create new paths between the footage. An example of this is Adrian Miles' *Fragments of a Vog*,⁵⁵ where a short video occupies the centre of the screen with a poetic phrase underneath it and a selection of other videos in a series of smaller screens. By clicking on a new video it then occupies the main screen and creates a set of new videos in the smaller screens beneath it. The content in Miles' project is a selection of scenes that suggest "slices of life" including outdoor scenes, family and friends.

Another example of personal life narratives being used in a database documentary is *Who Is...?* (2005), in which Magnus Bårtås collected biographical material on five artists of different nationalities and organised it into separate items so the user could dwell on each piece of information separately.⁵⁶ On the homepage the user sees still images of the five artists alongside their name. When you click on one of the names you are taken to their individual page where you can choose from four different categories: factual, formal, unexpected and experienced. These labels provide short clips and still images of the subject in everyday activities accompanied by a child's voice who makes random comments about the artist's life, such as "He says he sometimes sits by himself and laughs" or "He has a dark blue Mercedes that he drives at death-defying speeds."⁵⁷ This approach highlights that only a partial or incomplete understanding can be gained from the subjects we are trying to understand.

⁵⁵ Adrian Miles, *Fragments of a Vog* (2009), date accessed January 12, 2015, <http://vogmae.net.au/fragments/>.

⁵⁶ Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (New York and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 155.

⁵⁷ Spence and Navarro, 156.

Mekas' *365 Day Project* can be viewed as a database documentary as it allowed users to download the videos and watch them on iPods, a device that was released in 2001, but by 2006 was estimated to account for 76% of global sales of portable media players (PMP) and in April 2007 Apple announced over 100 million items had been sold, making it the dominant means of watching portable video.⁵⁸ It is now referred to as the "iPod classic" to distinguish it from the more recent touchscreen and Wi-Fi enabled "iPod Touch," but during the *365 Day Project* users could keep video files and watch them anywhere they wanted.⁵⁹ They also had the option to pause, rewind or fast-forward each video, which Mekas viewed as the reality of how people were starting to watch moving images, stating that, "the iPod screen is dominant among the younger generation. The shift from communal to private viewing is here and it won't go away."⁶⁰ The new media theorist Henry Jenkins viewed the iPod as "emblematic of the new convergence culture"⁶¹ as it collapsed previous distinction between media and changed the relationship between producers and consumers by allowing users to download and rearrange digital files on their own devices.

According to Mekas the videos were downloaded over hundreds of thousands of viewers around the world, mainly on the day of release. There was no expectation that the viewer would watch the work in its entirety -- from January 1 to December 31 -- as the collective running time of all 365 videos is 38 hours.⁶² The project is now free to watch

⁵⁸ Jamie Sexton, "Case Study: The iPod," in *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, ed. Glen Creeber and Royston Martin (McGraw Hill: Open University Press, 2009), 102.

⁵⁹ Matt Hills, "Participatory Culture: Mobility, Interactivity and Identity," in *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, ed. Glen Creeber and Royston Martin (McGraw Hill: Open University Press, 2009), 112.

⁶⁰ Obrist, 15.

⁶¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 253.

⁶² Stefan Grisseemann, "I'm an Outsider. I'm a Monk. I'm Somewhere Else: Interview with Jonas Mekas. *Rouge* 12 (October 2008), accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.rouge.com.au/12/mekas.html>.

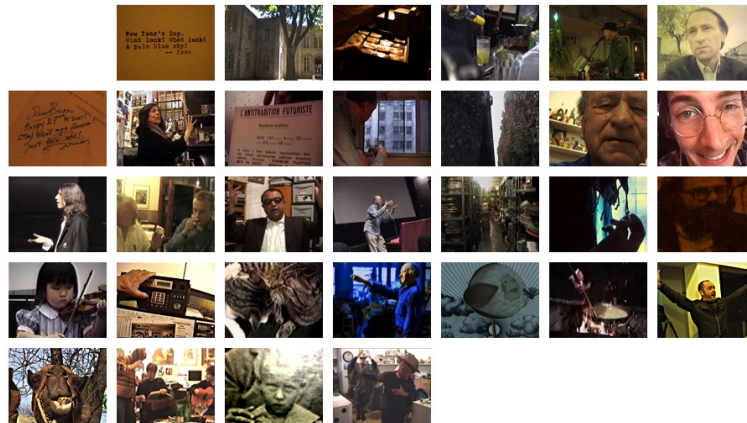


Fig.29 *365 Day Project* (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

on Mekas' website in its entirety, so the viewer can choose to watch particular videos without the requirement of downloading it. The videos can be watched in a variety of combinations, bringing various fragments from Mekas' life into juxtaposition for the user to find meanings and associations between them. The choice of what to watch is often determined by the tiny thumbnail image that represents that day's video (fig.29). These play a large role in what draws the attention of particular viewers. For example, celebrities play a large role, so the videos with Susan Sontag in conversation with the filmmaker Bela Tarr (January 8), Patti Smith reading an Allen Ginsberg poem (January 14), the artist Douglas Gordon (January 27), or close-up image of a photograph of Allen Ginsberg (January 20), will draw the attention of viewers who are interested in those people. It is also possible to discern whether it is a video or a film that is being presented that day, with the video from January 6 obviously a work shot on film due to the image quality, while the proximity of the camera to Mekas' face in the video for January 12 means the viewer can deduce it is a vlog post. The more ambiguous images a hand upon a radio (January 22), a child playing the violin (January 21), a close-up of a cymbal on a drum set (January 26) may fail to grab the viewer's attention as immediately as the other images.

The user has a non-linear interaction with a wealth of material by browsing, linking and sharing it with others. They can download, replay, fast-forward or pause at any given moment, creating a spectatorial shift from temporal to spatial positioning.⁶³ Mekas does not believe that this approach is a drawback, as on the release of *Walden* in 1969 he encouraged viewers to have a relaxed relationship with the images, stating that: “The film being what it is, i.e. a series of personal notes on events, people (friends) and Nature (Seasons) – the author won’t mind (he is almost encouraging it) if the viewer will choose to watch only certain parts of the work (*film*), according to the time available to him.”²⁷ Of course, walking in and out of a cinema is not a common practice, which is why the video artist Nam June Paik asserted in the early 1990s that Mekas’ work was well suited to the videodisc “because of its vast and convenient retrieval mode.”⁶⁴ Mekas developed the idea of the viewer only watching parts of his footage in an installation work entitled *Dedication to Fernand Léger* (2003), in which Mekas assembled twenty-four-hours of video footage shot between 1987 and 1995 and screened it on twelve monitors. Each monitor contained two hours of footage, all running simultaneously, creating a cacophony of sound from the disparate time frames colliding together in one space. This idea derived from a 1933 essay by Léger, where he imagined making a 24-hour film about a family that showed their daily activities and interactions.⁶⁵ 24-hours of video footage eradicates the possibility for the viewer to see the work in its entirety, with the multiplicity of monitors also meaning that there is not a fixed way of viewing it. The online platform of the *365 Day Project* merely realised ideas on spectatorial relationships he had encouraged in his earlier work

⁶³ Janet Marles, “Database Narratives, Possibility Spaces: Shape Shifting and Interactivity in Digital Documentary” *Digimag Journal* 73 (November 2012), 78.

⁶⁴ Nam-June Paik, “Who Is Afraid of Jonas Mekas?” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 284.

⁶⁵ Jonas Mekas, “Artist’s Statement: Dedicated to Fernand Léger,” *Maya Stendhal Gallery*, accessed January 24, 2015, http://www.mayastendhalgallery.com/mekas_dedication_leger.html.

The problem that some scholars have voiced about the database documentary is that it is more difficult to make coherent arguments about the historical world, asking how innovative narrative structures online can be utilised and yet still make a factual story comprehensible to the audience.⁶⁶ The emphasis on the role of the user making meaning raises questions of agency and authorship.⁶⁷ In his essay on database documentaries Stuart Dinmore states “the ability to form an argument is potentially ruptured when the power to edit or juxtapose is – depending on the abilities and structure of the individual project – in the hands of the audience.”⁶⁸ The database does allow Mekas to make an argument through this structure as it this reflects the same problems of creating meaning out of his footage that marks all of his work. As he accumulated more footage he found it increasingly difficult to structure his material in a satisfying way. In Mekas’ longest film *As I Was Moving Ahead I Occasionally Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* the arrangement of the footage in the first chapter is determined by chance, as Mekas had so much footage in his possession that he felt it was the only way he could begin.⁶⁹ He comments on how he arranged the footage in the voiceover, stating, “When I began now to put all these rolls of films together, to string them together, the first idea was to keep them chronological. But then I gave up and I just began splicing them together by chance, the way I found them on the shelf, because I really don’t know where any piece of my life really belongs.”⁷⁰ The use of an online database allows him to undermine the perceived textual coherence of narrative structures by embracing the multiple possibilities of finding meaning within his first person footage.

⁶⁶ Marles, 78.

⁶⁷ Kinder, 60-1.

⁶⁸ Dinmore, 126.

⁶⁹ P. Adams Sitney *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 374.

⁷⁰ Sitney, 375.

The terms applied to the representation of subjectivity in the digital age have a great deal of overlap with the terms applied to Mekas' representation of subjectivity in his films. Larry Friedlander has asserted that, "in the digital realm authorship is dispersed, collaborative and unstable,"⁷¹ which parallels Michael Renov's understanding of "new autobiography" in film and video being based on the, "construction of subjectivity as a site of instability -- flux, drift, perpetual revision -- rather than coherence."⁷² The navigation of online databases can be compared to Roland Barthes' idea of the "writerly text." In writing the sequence of events are determined by the author, which the reader has to follow. This means that the author has the power to present an authoritative linear representation of reality.⁷³ This is an example of a "readerly text," which prioritises authorship and linearity. Barthes much prefers the "writerly text," where the authority of the author is undermined, which he put forward more forthrightly in his essay "The Death of the Author." In writerly texts the reader can create meaning within the text, which means that they are "no longer a consumer, but producer of the text."⁷⁴ This gives too much power to the reader, as it is ultimately a negotiation between them.

An example of the viewer having power in the *365 Day Project* is the prioritising of footage they believe is important. For example, a key event from Mekas' life is contained within the project of receiving his Lithuanian passport back, but it is just one of 365 fragments, which results in the obfuscation of the event, as it does not have any hierarchical importance over any other days in the project. In the video for November 15 Mekas returns to Lithuania to receive his Lithuanian citizenship. In the text beneath the video Mekas states, "i [sic] receive back my Lithuanian citizenship -- very serious

⁷¹ Larry Friedlander, "Narrative Strategies in the Digital Age: Authorship and Authority," in *Digital Storytelling, Mediated Stories: Self-Representations in New Media* Ed Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 179.

⁷² Michael Renov, "The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 110.

⁷³ Miller, 18.

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4-5.

business.” The event is not treated with any sense of importance whatsoever. There is no explanatory monologue by Mekas explaining to the viewer his personal history. The duration of the video is only 6 minutes 24 seconds. There is very little reflection after the ceremony. He goes out with friends to drink wine. The conversation mainly concerns an observation by someone who had re-watched Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) two days previously, where he notes that the scene where the actor Keir Dullea accidentally knocks a glass from his table and looks up, is a reference to an exact shot in Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

The lack of hierarchical importance that Mekas gives the video for November 15 in which he regains his Lithuanian citizenship is reflected in the content of the video itself, which is more focused on the loss of the 1960s avant-garde community than the sense of elation at regaining a sense of stability to his identity. The Lithuanian passport ultimately does not give him stability or coherence to his subjectivity. It is a gesture of the state that instigated his exile that does not resolve the emotional issues of fragmented subjectivity that he has been dealing with ever since he left, but as someone who is familiar with Mekas’ work I can contextualise it within his personal history and give it prominence for other viewers. In his film *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) the problems of return, exile and redefinition are highlighted, but in the *365 Day Project* this theme is just one of many, as at years remove there are a wealth of issues informing his subjectivity.

The use of search engines allows other users to reorganise the diary entries by theme or keyword, eliminating the chronological structure to find a particular video.⁷⁵ This means that users no longer have to watch the project in chronological order, presenting a choice between linear and non-linear engagement. There are guiding factors such as search engines, meta tags and databases, but the online viewing experience is highly fragmented and the problem arises of how the viewer can navigate through such a

⁷⁵ Sorapure, 4.

wealth of material.⁷⁶ Watching the entirety of the videos in chronological order will give one understanding of the material, but it is not necessarily the correct one. Although the user has greater input in the selection and juxtaposition, they do not have complete freedom, as they are still limited to the structure imposed by Mekas. It is not open-ended, as the decision to create a work of 365 videos makes it a self-enclosed project. The personal webpage also distinguishes him from those people uploading personal material onto YouTube. If he were to release his videos on YouTube he would have much less control over the structure, meaning and association between the videos, as the algorithm associates not only videos by the uploader, but videos that YouTube believe are similar to the type of video you are watching, which disperses the focus on associations between Mekas' footage that the diary structure he has chosen on his website enforces.

The meaning from the material he has shot derives from its selection and arrangement. There is a tension between the meaning of the raw footage and the process of interpreting it by structuring, juxtaposing and restructuring it for public exhibition. This is the same problem that Mekas worked through in film, but the possibilities of structuring material online offers new avenues for engagement. Although users could watch Mekas' videos whenever they wanted, they were still limited by what Mekas selected to include in the project.

Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter I looked at various examples of online diary practices. I noted that the Internet has transformed written and filmed diaries, as it allows a much greater level of participation. On social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, users can upload brief instalments of life narratives, but in a way that prioritises the immediacy of the present moment without any element of secondary revision or retrospection. It is also possible to obscure the layers of subjective reworking of posts on these platforms, which constructs a subject that exists in a constant present. In terms of

⁷⁶ Dovey and Rose, 367.

video diaries I noted the prevalence of video blogging or “vlogging,” which shares many representational strategies with video diaries from the 1980s of the subject talking directly into a camera within the space of their own home, but the instantaneous distribution of that material on platforms such as YouTube has closed the temporal gap between creation and exhibition. Vlogs also allow a greater level of interactivity, as users can make comments beneath the videos and make suggestions about what the vlogger could talk about in the future. An example of this practice was Peter Oakley, who started uploading video diaries onto YouTube in August 2006 under the username “geriatric1927,” sitting in his living room wearing headphones while talking into the camera about his life. The truthful assumptions of this style and approach was deconstructed in the performance “lonelygirl15,” a vlog that purported to be the diary of a 15-year-old girl called Bree, but which was revealed to be a staged performance after four months.

In the next section I considered Mekas’ online diary *365 Day Project*, which involved him releasing one short video for every day of the year. I built upon the discussion of the previous section to note that Mekas refused the instant gratification of many online diaries by mixing footage shot during the project in 2007 and much older footage from his archive of over 2,000 hours of video footage. The footage that was taken from other videos and re-contextualised within the project revealed that there is no inherent meaning to Mekas’ material, but is developed through editing and selection. A clear example I provided was the footage he shot on September 11, 2001. He shot 40 minutes on the day of the attacks, but in the 6 minute version presented on September 11, 2007 he did not to show the most traumatic material he shot of the first tower collapsing, instead emphasising the trauma of the event through the television news coverage and street scenes in the aftermath of the attack. The videos in which Mekas embraced the instantaneous possibilities of the Internet usually involved him reacting to tabloid news stories that acted as springboards for philosophical reflections or celebrations about the success of the project so far. I therefore argued that retrospection and temporal delays are still important to Mekas’ practice.

In the final part of this chapter I considered the *365 Day Project* as an example of the database documentary. I outlined the breadth of database documentaries, from Chris Marker's CD-Rom *Immemory* (1997) to Adrian Miles' *Fragments of Vog* (2009), as opening up questions of agency and authorship. The viewer has a greater role in the process of making meaning by navigating through a wealth of footage in a non-linear fashion. This has led some documentary scholars to be concerned about the direction of documentary practice, as it is difficult to make an argument about the historical world if there is no core way of comprehending the material. Mekas' use of the database structure retains key ideas from his previous work that the historical world can only be grasped by the individual through fragmentation and incompleteness, an idea that is perfectly encapsulated by a database. The viewer does not have complete control in making meaning, as they are limited to the videos Mekas has chosen to present, but they can prioritise certain videos by disrupting the chronological structure and browsing the entries at random. The representation of subjectivity in Mekas' practice is maintained as fluid and unstable, but foregrounded through a more interactive relationship with the viewer.

Conclusion

“I Am Somewhere Else”

In this thesis I have shown that Jonas Mekas' diary practice has provided a useful example of an individual negotiating with technology across various historical moments. In Chapter 1 I contributed to the renegotiation of documentary history by using Mekas as a key example of the interaction between avant-garde and documentary practice. Although Bill Nichols' modes of representation have been extremely useful in mapping out the broad historical shifts that have taken place in documentary, a more intricate and complex understanding is starting to be built up, in which Mekas proves to be an extremely useful case study. When Mekas adopted an avant-garde approach in the early-1960s it was in opposition to the dominant understanding of documentary as outlined by John Grierson, however, he did not repudiate an engagement with social reality in his decision to document his personal life with a multitude of techniques that foregrounded his presence behind the camera.

In Chapter 2 I acknowledged that Mekas developed the mode of the diary film within the context of the American avant-garde, but while many other diarists prioritised the sexual aspects of their life, Mekas focused on everyday encounters that took place within his extensive activities with the New York avant-garde filmmaking community. Although he started filming his life with a visually neutral approach, he realised upon revisiting the footage that the same visual motifs dominated his compositions, such as snow, trees and nature, which made him aware that he was reflecting his memories of his childhood in Lithuania. The formal strategies he developed from this insight reflected the idea that the present is always informed by the past, which means that there is no direct access to historical reality as it is always mediated by memory. The techniques he used to represent this idea were gestural movements of the camera, single frames, lens flares and superimpositions. The use of superimposition was explored in detail for reflecting the experience of exile, where the subject has to hold two understandings of themselves in the same body. The visual approximation of this idea reflects the inability to see the present in a clear way, as it is always informed by another temporal moment.

David E. James viewed the dependence on editing footage for a diary film as a drawback, but following on from Laura Rascaroli's belief that the process of editing was a necessary part of the form I argued that Mekas gained new insights into his material. I noted that this practice was unusual for most diary films in this period, as they were mainly silent with very little secondary revision, but Mekas used narrative structure, inter-titles and sound in his films. He organised his footage by chronology, but because the American avant-garde often defined itself as a non-narrative practice to distinguish itself from dominant filmmaking traditions, Mekas mislabeled his approach as non-narrative. The structure mimics very closely the written diary through the embracement of repetition, digression and fragmentation, but the use of inter-titles created hierarchies of importance within the film. A friend who is given an inter-title is prioritized over someone who is not. An example of this is the filmmaker Jack Smith, a key figure in Mekas' concerns at the time, yet he does not receive an inter-title because of their strained relationship. This showed how Mekas could centralise or marginalise certain aspects of his life through secondary revision. Finally, I considered the sound elements, which acted in tension with the images to emphasise the gap between speaking and filming, creating a clash between two subjective positions that do not unify.

In Chapter 3 I conducted a much more in depth exploration of the sound and image relationship in Mekas' diary practice. The term "trauma cinema" adopted from Janet Walker pointed toward an early precedent of the practices she describes of female autobiographical filmmakers in the work of Jonas Mekas, a filmmaker she does not mention, but whose films are productive to her argument. In the first part of this chapter I outlined Janet Walker's notion of trauma cinema by providing key examples from her study such as *Daughter Rite* and *Capturing the Friedmans*, which embrace the inaccuracies of memory as a valid representational strategy for historical understanding of past events. Walker's theory has been expanded by other documentary theorists, such as Annabelle Honess Roe using it within the context of her study on animated documentaries, particularly *Waltz With Bashir*. The key limitation I noted in Walker's study, however, was her ignoring the American avant-

garde as a key source for traumatic representation using non-realist modes of representation. There are other theorists within trauma studies who have focused on the avant-garde, such as E. Ann Kaplan arguing that *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a key example of traumatic representation, but I argued that Walker's term could productively be applied to the work of Jonas Mekas.

In the second section of this chapter I extended my argument by discerning the ideas Walker outlined in her study within *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. The film is divided into three parts that foreground the variety of gaps between experience, representation and its examination. The formal techniques imitate the fragmentary nature of memory. In Part One and Three a white square motif is used to emphasise gaps between footage, while in Part Two 100 numbered fragments are presented to highlight that only a partial and incomplete perspective is being presented. Mekas also includes numerous inaccuracies, such as stating that there will be 100 fragments, but only 91 are presented. The voiceover also includes errors such as Mekas stating that he had not been to Lithuania in 25 years when it had been 27. The images of Lithuania are overexposed to foreground the distorting effects of memory, which makes it impossible for him to view the country objectively. Instead of attempting to understand the country in 1971, Mekas looks for traces of his life before he was forced to leave it in 1944, such as re-enacting pre-industrial farming techniques. By trying to recapture the past in the present, however, he ultimately confirms the passage of time. Other techniques he uses to reflect on traumatic events include cutting to a black screen, sidelining particular events with inter-titles that read "Parenthesis" and cutting out the music on the soundtrack abruptly to recount a traumatic memory.

In the third section I turned my attention to *Lost, Lost, Lost*. The applicability of Walker's notion of trauma cinema to this film is enacted through the central tension between voice and image, as the footage does not reflect the pain of exile, so Mekas has to excavate those experiences through the voiceover. The images show people smiling at weddings and picnics, but in the voiceover Mekas speaks about his isolation and lack of resources. The formal techniques that imitate memory processes

are similar to *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, such as cutting to a black screen when he recounts moving from Brooklyn to Manhattan, using inter-titles that raise questions rather than provide clear answers (“Was There A War?” and “I Am Trying to Remember”), and the use of recurring close-up shots of his written diaries that expose the limitation of cinematic representation. The voiceover also mixes the third and first person to foreground that the film is a textual reconstruction of past events, but also conveys the feeling of dislocation from his previous self.

In Chapter 4 In the field of diary video theorisation I have contributed a building block to understanding the ways the video has allowed for the creation of new methods of subjective expression. The diary form has shifted from solely an avant-garde practice into mainstream television, particularly within reality show formats. The video diary is still used by artists from marginalised subject positions seeking self-representation, such as Sadie Benning, Lynn Herschmann and George Kuchar. Unlike the diary films of the 1960s, which were silent, handheld and formally innovative, the dominant compositional technique of the video diary is a stationary camera that the subject speaks directly into with synchronous sound. The shooting techniques are completely different from film as it is possible to record for a much longer period of time and because it is so lightweight it can easily be passed between people without any technical knowledge creating a greater fluidity of subject positions. The ability for people to operate the technology themselves created a new assumption about audio-visual realism, as amateur techniques are viewed as authentic, such as out-of-focus shots, awkward camera movements and bad lighting.

Mekas takes a completely different approach to subjective representation in video. This remains an area of his filmography that has been largely ignored by scholars and critics and this chapter addresses this gap. Although the levels of secondary revision have been removed from his practice, such as voiceover, inter-titles and music, the immediacy of his reaction at the moment of recording has preserved from his films, but the visual strategies he employs in video are completely different. Using James M. Moran’s research on home videos, I showed that Mekas’ practice adopts stylistic techniques from amateur practices, just as he did in his film practice.

The use of long takes does not attempt to imitate memory processes like in his film, but it has resulted in a greater scope of experiences being represented. He allows the camera to keep recording for longer than expected to allow the shifts in emotion to be registered, such as in *Letter From Greenpoint* when his joy at singing along to a Bob Dylan song on the radio continues to register his exhaustion or in *Allen's Last Three Days on Earth as a Spirit* Mekas documents the coroner preparing Allen Ginsberg's dead body to be taken away for cremation in extreme detail.

The adoption of synchronous sound redefined the diaristic subject in his practice. In his films there is a temporal disjuncture between sound and image, but in his videos the act of filming and speaking are collapsed into the same temporal moment. In his films the confrontation between voice and image created a confrontation between two subjective positions that never unify, but in his videos the relationship with physical environments such as streets, apartments and friends creates a temporal disjuncture between memory and history, instigating a new relationship with memory. This can be seen in *A Walk*, which involves Mekas recording a journey from his apartment to the Williamsburg Bridge that simultaneously documents the space and the memories they provoke in Mekas. The same occurs in *Letter From Greenpoint*, where Mekas documents his reaction to the empty space of the apartment he lived in for 30 years before being forced to leave it due to rising rent prices. In his films the recorded images were the stimulus for Mekas' memory, but in video the immediate space acts as the provocation to speak. The synchronous sound capabilities of the video camera has also resulted in a greater emphasis on musical performances and the ability to use it to register his thoughts by speaking directly into the lens.

In Chapter 5 I argued that the Internet has transformed written and filmed diaries, as it allows a much greater level of participation. On social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, users can upload brief instalments of life narratives, but in a way that prioritises the immediacy of the present moment without any element of secondary revision or retrospection. It is also possible to obscure the layers of subjective reworking of posts on these platforms, which constructs a subject that

exists in a constant present. In terms of video diaries I noted the prevalence of video blogging or “vlogging,” which shares many representational strategies with video diaries from the 1980s of the subject talking directly into a camera within the space of their own home, but the instantaneous distribution of that material on platforms such as YouTube has closed the temporal gap between creation and exhibition. Vlogs also allow a greater level of interactivity, as users can make comments beneath the videos and make suggestions about what the vlogger could talk about in the future. An example of this practice was Peter Oakley, who started uploading video diaries onto YouTube in August 2006 under the username “geriatric1927,” sitting in his living room wearing headphones while talking into the camera about his life. The truthful assumptions of this style and approach were deconstructed in the performance “lonelygirl15,” a vlog that purported to be the diary of a 15-year-old girl called Bree, but which was revealed to be a staged performance after four months.

I then looked in depth at Mekas’ online diary *365 Day Project*, which involved him releasing one short video for every day of the year. It was an idea that was inspired by the 14th century Italian poet Petrarch, who wrote one love poem for every day of the year for a woman called Laura. (A source of inspiration that indicates Mekas still maintains a strong connection with literature in his work, a connection first enforced with his first feature length diary film *Walden: Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*.) This project came closest to a written diary because it was constructed as it goes along, while his films were edited from footage he had already accumulated as Mekas mixed footage shot during the project in 2007 and much older material from his archive of over 2,000 hours of video footage. The footage that was often taken from other videos and re-contextualised within the project revealed that there is no inherent meaning to Mekas’ material, but is developed through editing and selection. A clear example I provided was the footage he shot on September 11, 2001. He shot 40 minutes on the day of the attacks, but in the 6 minute version presented on September 11, 2007 he did not to show the most traumatic material he shot of the first tower collapsing, instead emphasising the distress of the event through the television news coverage and street scenes in the aftermath of the attack. The videos

in which Mekas embraced the instantaneous possibilities of the Internet usually involved him reacting to tabloid news stories that acted as springboards for philosophical reflections or celebrations about the success of the project so far. I therefore argued that retrospection and temporal delays are still important to Mekas' practice.

I then considered Mekas' *.365 Day Project* as an example of the database documentary. I outlined the breadth of database documentaries, from Chris Marker's CD-Rom *Immemory* (1997) to Adrian Miles' *Fragments of Vog* (2009), and argued that they open up questions of agency and authorship, as the viewer has a greater role in the process of making meaning by navigating through a wealth of footage in a non-linear fashion. This has led some documentary scholars to be concerned about the direction of documentary practice, as it is difficult to make an argument about the historical world if there is no core way of comprehending the material. Mekas' use of the database structure retains key ideas from his previous work that the historical world can only be grasped by the individual through fragmentation and incompleteness, an idea that is perfectly encapsulated by a database. The viewer does not have complete control in making meaning, as they are limited to the videos Mekas has chosen to present, but they can prioritise certain videos by disrupting the chronological structure and browsing the entries at random. The representation of subjectivity in Mekas' practice is maintained as fluid and unstable, but foregrounded through a more interactive relationship with the viewer.

What I have ultimately shown in my research is that fragmented representations of subjectivity across a variety of media have value in helping us to engage with and understand the historical world. In one of the "video letters" Jonas Mekas sends to filmmaker José Luis Guerín in *Correspondences: Jonas Mekas - José Luis Guerín* (2011) he records himself editing footage for his film *Outtakes From the Life of a Happy Man* (2012). On his editing desk we see various times, places and activities -- a woman roller skating in Central Park, snow covered New York streets, Ken Jacobs in London, Peter Kubelka cooking -- until footage of Mekas appears and we hear him exclaim from behind the camera, "And there is the filmmaker himself. But that was

long ago, now I am somewhere else.” This phrase acknowledges the distance between the filmed images and the present moment of viewing (which is also another moment of recording), creating a self that is split between past and present, photographed and observed. In his films the “I” that is “somewhere else” is predicated on a temporal disjuncture between sound and image, but in video the act of filming and speaking are collapsed into the same moment, however his present is always shaped by his past. Regardless of medium, the “I” is always destined to be “somewhere else” in Mekas’ work, fractured by the act of representation, but never masked, the split always being an important to the process of self-understanding.

In the released version of *Outtakes From the Life of a Happy Man* Mekas takes the same approach of ordering his silently shot 16mm footage with inter-titles, music, direct sound and a voiceover recorded at years remove, but unlike his other diary films Mekas intercuts digitally shot footage of himself editing the material, showing us intense close-ups of his hands cutting the negative. The notion of outtakes foregrounds an exhaustion of the material he has in his possession, meaning that he has to go back and reevaluate the footage he once considered unsuitable for his finished work. In the voiceover Mekas states that: “These are not memories. My memories are my memories. This is all real. Every image, every detail is real. It’s not a memory. It has nothing to do with memory. They are gone. The images are here and they are real.” This moment attests to the fluidity of his subjectivity, as at the age of 92 he can look at the footage from his life and decide it is all real, but this is just one moment in time. It is entirely likely that the footage will mean something completely different and unexpected in the future.

Filmography

- A New Year* (Sadie Benning, 1989)
- A Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1929)
- A Walk* (Jonas Mekas, 1990)
- A Diary* (Dieter Roth, 1982)
- Aberration of Starlight* (Andrew Noren, 2008)
- Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse, Part One: Huge Pupils, The* (Andrew Noren, 1968)
- Allen's Last Three Days on Earth as a Spirit* (Jonas Mekas, 1997)
- Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (Marie Menken, 1961)
- As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (Jonas Mekas, 2000)
- Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1926)
- Body Beautiful, The* (Ngozi Onwurah, 1991)
- Bontoc Eulogy* (Marlon Fuentes, 1995)
- Brandy in the Wilderness* (Stanton Kaye, 1971)
- Brig, The* (Jonas Mekas, 1964)
- Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003)
- Centers* (Vito Acconci, 1971)
- C'est Vrai (One Hour)* (Robert Frank, 1990)
- Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961)
- Confessions of a Chameleon* (Lynn Herschmann, 1986)
- Correspondences – Jonas Mekas and Jose Luis Guerin* (Jonas Mekas and Jose Luis Guerin, 2011)
- Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979)
- David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967)
- Death and the Singing Telegram* (Mark Rance, 1983)
- Diaries* (Ed Pincus, 1981)
- Diary of a Chambermaid* (Jean Renoir, 1946)
- Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1951)

Diary of a Lost Girl (G.W Pabst, 1929)
Don't Look Back (D.A Pennebaker, 1967)
Electronic Diary (Lynn Hershmann, 1988)
European Diary '71 (Howard Guttenplan, 1971)
Family Gathering (Lise Yasui, 1988)
Family Portrait Sitzings (Alfred Guzzetti, 1975)
Fahrenheit 9/11 (Michael Moore, 2004)
Film Portrait (Jerome Hill, 1972)
First Forty (Jonas Mekas, 2006)
First Person Plural (Lynn Hershmann, 1989)
Flaming Creatures (Jack Smith, 1963)
Flesh of Morning (Stan Brakhage, 1957)
Free to Go (Andrew Noren, 2003)
Fuses (Carolee Schneemann, 1964-7)
Gimme Shelter (Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970)
Gleaners and I, The (Agnes Varda, 2000)
Glimpse of the Garden (Marie Menken, 1957)
Go! Go! Go! (Marie Menken, 1963)
Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner, The (Werner Herzog, 1973)
Guns of the Trees (Jonas Mekas, 1962)
He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of his Life (Jonas Mekas, 1985)
History and Memory (Rea Tajari, 1991)
I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like (Bill Viola, 1986)
I Get My First Sony (Jonas Mekas, 2013)
If Every Girl Had a Diary (Sadie Benning, 1990)
Jane (D.A Pennebaker, 1962)
Jollies (Sadie Benning, 1990)
Laboratorium Anthology (Jonas Mekas, 1999)
Lady in the Lake (Robert Montgomery, 1947)
Land of Silence and Darkness (Werner Herzog, 1971)

Land Without Bread (Luis Bunuel, 1932)
Lessons of Darkness (Werner Herzog, 1992)
Letter From Greenpoint (Jonas Mekas, 2004)
Leviathan (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012)
Lithuania and the Collapse of the USSR (Jonas Mekas, 2008)
Living Inside (Sadie Benning, 1989)
Little Dieter Needs to Fly (Werner Herzog, 1997)
London (Patrick Keiller, 1994)
Lost, Lost, Lost (Jonas Mekas, 1976)
Love Tapes, The (Wendy Clarke, 1977)
Man with a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, 1929)
Me and Rubyfruit (Sadie Benning, 1989)
Meshes of the Afternoon (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, 1943)
Moana (Robert Flaherty, 1926)
Mob of Angels: A Baptism (Jonas Mekas, 1990)
Nadja (Michael Almereyda, 1994)
Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty, 1922)
New York Miseries, The (Andrew Noren, 1966)
News From Home (Chantal Akerman, 1977)
(nostalgia) (Hollis Frampton, 1971)
Notes on an American Film Director at Work: Martin Scorsese (Jonas Mekas, 2005)
Notes on Utopia (Jonas Mekas, 2004)
October 1987 -- Allen Ginsberg (Jonas Mekas, 2013)
One Year (1970) (Robert Huot, 1971)
Onourown (Joe Gibbons and Tony Oursler, 1990)
Plow that Broke the Plains, The (Pare Lorentz, 1936)
Primary (Robert Drew, 1960)
Rain (Joris Ivens, 1929)
Reassemblage (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982)
Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (Jonas Mekas, 1972)

Reminiszenzen Aus Deutschland (Jonas Mekas, 2012)
Rien que les heures (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926)
Robinson in Space (Patrick Keiller, 1997)
Roger and Me (Michael Moore, 1989)
Rolls (1971) (Robert Huot, 1972)
Russian Ark (Aleksander Sokurov, 2002)
Scenes From Under Childhood (Stan Brakhage, 1967-70)
Scorpio Rising (Kenneth Anger, 1963)
Self Portrait (Jonas Mekas, 1980)
Shadows (John Cassavetes, 1958)
Sherman's March (Ross McElwee, 1986)
Silverlake Life: The View From Here (Mark Massi and Tom Joslin, 1993)
Sink or Swim (Su Friedrich, 1990)
Sleepless Nights Stories (Jonas Mekas, 2011)
Solo Scenes (Dieter Roth, 1998)
Spiritual Voices – From the Diaries of War (Aleksander Sokurov, 1995)
Strange Weather (Peggy Ahwesh, 1993)
Sweetgrass (Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009)
Tak for Alt (Laura Bialis, Broderick Fox and Sarah Levy, 1999)
Tarnation (Jonathan Caouette, 2004)
Testament (James Broughton, 1974)
Thin Blue Line, The (Errol Morris, 1988)
Third One Year Movie - 1972 (Robert, Huot, 1973)
Time Being (Andrew Noren, 2001)
Time Indefinite (Ross McElwee, 1993)
Tongues Untied (Marlon Riggs, 1988)
Video Diaries (Various, 1991-1993)
Video Fool For Love (Robert Gibson, 1995)
Video Nation (Various, 1994-1999)
Visual Variations on Noguchi (Marie Menken, 1945)

Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches) (Jonas Mekas, 1969)

Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, 2008)

Weather Diaries (George Kuchar, 1986-1990)

Wedlock House: An Intercourse (Stan Brakhage, 1959)

White Diamond, The (Werner Herzog, 2002)

Why We Fight (Frank Capra, 1942)

Window Water Baby Moving (Stan Brakhage, 1959)

365 Day Project (Jonas Mekas, 2007)

35 Up (Michael Apted, 1991)

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