

Experimental Memoria, Part 3:

# Adolfas Mekas

(Sept. 30, 1925 – May 31, 2011)

Wednesday, May 23, 2012

Northwest Film Forum

Co-Presented by The Sprocket Society and Third Eye Cinema  
Seattle, WA

# Experimental Memoria

A special series commemorating the work of three notable experimental and underground filmmakers who left this plane in 2011.

**Experimental** (*Adjective. First known use: 15th century.*)

1. (Of a new invention or product.) Based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized.
2. (Of a work of art or an artistic technique.) Involving a radically new and innovative style.

**Memoria** (*Noun. Latin: "memory".*)

"The treasury of things invented." – *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1 BCE (attributed to Cicero)

One of five canons in classical rhetoric; the discipline of recalling the arguments of a discourse. While partly a means of perpetuating past knowledge, it is more than rote memorization. Rhetoricians viewed memoria as including a deep understanding and command of the material so as to permit improvisation, response to questions, and refutation of opposing arguments. As such, memoria is memory not just preserved but living, integrated, and interacting with the present.

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

**George Kuchar**

*The Devil's Cleavage* (1973)

*Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966)

Wednesday, April 18, 2012

**Robert Breer**

Visions in Motion: A Memorial Retrospective, 1954-2003

16 short films

Wednesday, May 23, 2012

**Adolfas Mekas**

*Hallelujah the Hills* (1963)

Information:

<http://SprocketSociety.org>

<http://www.NWFilmForum.org/live/page/series/2088>

Series curated by Spencer Sundell and Adam Sekuler.

“When I was 10 years old, I was called the Mozart of tap dancing.”

– Adolfas Mekas, cracking wise in *Hallelujah the Villa* (2006)

*Quotes from conversations with Pip Chodorov:*

“Why filmmaking has to be so difficult technically? Only the devil knows. In Lithuania we had a saying: A woman had no problems in her life at all – everything was beautiful. Then she bought herself a pig.” (2003)

“ [After we arrived in New York in 1949] Jonas and I worked in the steel department making convertible beds, and then I was promoted to the mattress department and I made mattresses, and they made me a foreman. I had four German guys under me. I didn’t speak German or English; I don’t know why they made me the foreman. One day they told me something about the next Saturday, they said to skip it. I asked my guys to come in Saturday, you know on Saturday they get paid overtime. So the boss comes in and says, ‘Didn’t I tell you to skip it?’ But I didn’t know what ‘skip it’ meant! The Germans loved me – they got paid overtime! I worked in a cemetery, in Maspeth, Long Island, taking care of the grass, and I got fired because one day it was raining and I had no rain gear, I was walking around soaked like an idiot, and they said get out of here.

“Then I got drafted. Can you imagine? I was in the country less than one year. I did not have residency, I did not speak English, and they drafted me!” I ask, “How did they know you would fight for the country? Are you sure they had the right to draft you?” He says, “I have not looked into it yet. But when I got back it was very good, because I could go to university for free, the television university. I could take out a mortgage and the government will pay my interest. A lot of things I haven’t even used yet. When I die Pola can have a flag placed over my coffin, and six pole-bearers can carry it, and Pola too can have this. We’ve discussed it. I want to be buried in a wooden casket, pine, no brass handles, none of this catholic nonsense, no velvet, I don’t want to be burned, I’m not an Indian, I just want to be put in the ground and let rats and worms do their work, I don’t mind. ...You see, when you are 92 going on 97, you start accepting death in a very interesting way. You begin one by one to cut the threads around you, because you don’t know when you are going, you free yourself from things you may leave undone, you accept without fear.” (2009)

Source: “Adolfas Mekas (1925-2011),” *The Brooklyn Rail*, July-August 2011.

“Next to the two big shots of the New York School, [Shirley] Clarke and [John] Cassavetes, he seemed a poor relative, especially since people got him confused with his brother. *Hallelujah* proved clearly that Adolfas is someone to be reckoned with. He is a master in the field of pure invention, that is to say, in working dangerously – ‘without a net.’ His film, made according to the good old principle – one idea for each shot – has the lovely scent of fresh ingenuity and crafty sweetness. Physical efforts and intellectual gags are boldly put together. The slightest thing moves you and makes you laugh – a badly framed bush, a banana stuck in a pocket, a majorette in the snow. He shows life as defined by [Swiss author and poet Charles-Ferdinand] Ramuz: ‘As with a dance, such pleasure to begin, a piston, a clarinet, such sorrow to be done, the head spins and night has come.’”

- Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du Cinéma*

# This Evening's Program

## It's a Gift (1923)

B&W / silent (with added music soundtrack) / 10 min.

Directed by Hugh Fray. With: Harry "Snub" Pollard, Marie Mosquini, William Gillespie, Wallace Howe, and Mark Jones. Produced by Hal Roach.

According to critic Dwight Macdonald, the preview screening of *Hallelujah the Hills* was preceded by "a recently discovered Mack Sennett short" comedy from the silent era. We were not able to learn the title of that short (which the rather dour Macdonald thought unfunny), nor were we able to secure a Sennett comedy in time for this program. Instead, we present this classic Hal Roach comedy, produced a decade after Keystone's heyday but much in the same spirit. We hope Adolfas would approve.

This is the most famous film starring Snub Pollard, who was born Harold Fraser in 1889 in Melbourne, Australia. As a young man, he joined a well-known vaudeville troupe, Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Co., which featured child and small-stature performers. Like many of its members, he adopted Pollard as a stage name. When the troupe broke up during a 1910 tour of America, "Snub" stayed and soon landed comedy work with the Essanay Studios in Chicago, appearing in films with Charlie Chaplin and others. Hal Roach hired Pollard away in 1915, pairing him with Harold Lloyd for the long run of "Lonesome Luke" comedies. Beginning in 1918, Roach made him a starring character in a series of short comedies that did moderately well until Pollard left the studio in 1924. After his own production company folded in 1926, he worked for the low-rent Weiss Brothers Artclass studio (along with Ben Turpin) until it, too, folded. Pollard made the transition to sound, working steadily but in ever smaller roles and bit parts, often uncredited. Beginning in the 1950s he had a number of small TV roles, particularly in western series. His last film performance was the year he died, as an extra in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

## Hallelujah the Hills – A Romance (1963)

B&W / sound / 82 min. (originally 88 min.)

16mm print courtesy of The Film-Makers' Cooperative. (35mm print distributed by New Yorker Films.)

*With:* Peter H. Beard, Sheila Finn, Martin Greenbaum, Peggy Steffans, Jerome Hill, Taylor Mead.

*Also with:* Jerome Raphael, Blanche Dee, Ed Emshwiller, Stoney Emshwiller, Susan Emshwiller, Eve Emshwiller.

Produced by David C. Stone

Written and Directed by Adolfas Mekas

Cinematography: Ed Emshwiller

Edited by Adolfas Mekas & Louis Brigante

Assistant Director: Jonas Mekas

Music: Meyer Kupferman

Set Design: Shizen

Sound: Ray Malon & Philip Burton Jr.

Sound Facilities: Hagens Recording Studios

Costumes & Props: Bathsheba

Spiritual Counsel: H.G.W.

Production Cuisinière: Bessie Milec

Titles: Charles O. Hyman

Opticals: B&O Film Specialists

Still Photography: Jerome Ducrot

Budget: \$65,000. Filmed in South Londonderry, Vermont.

Italian title: *I magnifici idioti* Working title: *Hallelujah the Woods*

World Premiere: Cannes Film Festival, May 1963. US Theatrical Premiere: Dec. 16, 1963.

Award: Silver Sail, Locarno International Film Festival

“It’s my tribute, my hat off, to all the filmmakers that have come before me and who taught me to love movies. I don’t use the word ‘film’, I use the word ‘movies’. This ever-startling thing that never stops surprising us.” – Adolfas Mekas, interviewed on the *Camera Three* program (CBS), 1963

“The time of [Lionel] Rogosin and [Cassavetes’] *Shadows* is past. The new films of the New York school are combining the improvisational style of *Shadows* with a stylized kind of acting.” – Adolfas Mekas, at a press conference at Cannes. (Quoted in *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1963.)

From: Richard Peterson, “*Babo 73, Hold Me While I’m Naked, Hallelujah the Hills,*” in Melinda Ward & Bruce Jenkins (eds.), *The American New Wave 1958-1967* (Walker Art Center & Media Study/Buffalo, 1982), pp. 49-51.

The Surrealists of the 1920s were avid cineastes, and they particularly admired the short comedies of Mack Sennett, Charles Chaplin, and Buster Keaton for their spirit of spontaneity, incongruity, and irreverence. This appreciation went beyond a simple elevation of popular culture in defiance of the standards of “fine art.” To the Surrealists, these comedies fostered a potential liberation from conventions: gags of surprise could bring the irrational into play, and the films’ debunking of authority figures could suggest a critique of the social order.

Some of the Surrealists’ own films appropriated techniques from these comedies without adopting the idea of a comic hero, such as Chaplin’s tramp or Keaton’s stoic, as a mediator of the comic event or as a protagonist with whom an audience could identify. In *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and *L’Age d’Or* (1930), Luis Buñuel eschewed the concept of audience identification and used comic juxtapositions in order to transgress religious and social taboos to the violent extreme that Andre Breton would later term “black humor.”

With the exception of James Broughton and Sidney Peterson, comic sensibilities emerged infrequently in the early years of the American experimental film. Filmmakers from Maya Deren to Stan Brakhage proposed an analogy between film and poetry as a legitimate alternative to the formulaic “prose” of Hollywood cinema. As the filmmaker’s consciousness progressively became the subject of his own work, performance in a traditional sense – that is, concerning an actor who

assumes a concrete role – seemed to be one of the cinema’s outmoded conventions of illusion.

*Hallelujah the Hills* (1963), *Babo 73* (Robert Downey, 1964), and *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (George Kuchar, 1966) are comedies in which the filmmakers recognize and acknowledge multiple traditions: silent comedy, as well as its extensions into sound through the Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields; the Surrealist mobilization of comedy’s anarchistic impulse; Hollywood convention and cliché; and the formal innovations of American abstract film artists. Their makers are film watchers, and their references to these traditions are wholly conscious and playful. Each film is an episodic narrative with concrete characters, although to varying degrees, the performers are called upon to maintain distance from their roles. They don’t conceal the fact that they are acting.

The value of play is both substance and subject in Adolfas Mekas’ *Hallelujah the Hills*. One of the first commercial successes of the Underground cinema, this is an art film that is also a parody of European art films, and as such, it summons another body of work into its canon of cinematic references: the films of the French New Wave, especially those of Alain Resnais, Francois Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard. *Hallelujah the Hills* is an open-ended, demonstrably lyrical story of a love triangle set in rural Vermont. Jack (Peter Beard) and Leo (Martin Greenbaum) both love Vera, who is played by two actresses (Sheila Finn and Peggy Steffans) in order to represent each man’s image of the “ideal woman.” From the very beginning,

Mekas establishes the whimsical nature of this story's telling. Intertitles, like those in silent movies, introduce the characters in posed portraits. We are immediately informed that the grotesque Gideon has already won Vera, and the body of the film traces, in non-linear fashion, the previous seven years of Jack and Leo's courtship. As in Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (which is pointedly satirized in one scene), the dramatic resolution is inconsequential; we're along for the tour.

Athletic Jack visits Vera and her parents every winter; Leo the aesthete surfaces in the summer. The men appear to spend the rest of the year camping, hunting, and playing in the woods. Mekas constructs two levels of comic detail: the individual eccentricities of his characters and his own manipulation of the scenes through sight gags and magical juxtapositions. Jack may pilot both front and rear of a fallen tree that he and Leo are transporting across our line of vision, or he may notice the rectangle that the camera lens has superimposed over his car. Along with cinematographer Ed Emshwiller, Mekas structures the narrative according to the rhythmical spirit of each scene, rather than its dramatic weight.

*Hallelujah the Hills* is a film about the romantic fantasies of men. Vera exists primarily in terms of Jack's and Leo's imaginations, and our own perspective on these young men in suffused with their self-images. Mekas portrays the male/male and male/female relationships in different ways. The courtship scenes are often staged and edited with spatial and temporal discontinuities that convey each man's ultimate inability to "connect" with Vera. During Jack and Vera's winter walk, as the camera fragments their trajectory by tracking repeatedly past them, the film launches – as though it were Jack's wish fulfillment – into the ice-flow scene from *Way Down East* (1920), directed by D.W. Griffith, the cinema's great "connector" of both narrative space and idealized lovers. In contrast to the elliptical quality of Vera's scenes, the relationship between Jack and Leo is depicted in a simpler manner. The camera often observes

them passively, affording them the time and space in which to improvise their games.

In *Hallelujah the Hills*, play is the most successful means of communication. However, Jack and Leo's playful existence has a grave irony. While Mekas celebrates the spirit of their unconventional behavior, he also exposes its underside. In the opening scene of the film, a camera iris (suggesting a spuglass as much as silent film convention) opens on the unidentified pair toting guns and directing their jeep through the woods. Charades of the hunt and military maneuvers abound in their relationship during the off-seasons, when they are not "stalking" Vera or competing as rivals for her love. Jack echoes both motifs in two distinct scenes in which he feigns death: first as a fallen animal in its spastic death throes, and then as the casualty of an imaginary aerial attack on a military graveyard.

Like children, they immerse themselves in fantasy to the extent that they are blind to the implications of their games. In an existence of total pretense, their freedom is illusory. Just as they never can complete their profession of love for Vera, they will never be complete themselves. Their displacement at the end of the film by another pair of child-men is justified thematically by their ultimate inadequacy.

The two convicts who complete the film with its final shot (in both senses of the word) provide a perfect closure to the interrelated themes of game-playing and death. Played by Taylor Mead and Jerome Hill, they are visually reminiscent of the infantile convicts that Laurel and Hardy portrayed in the silent film *Liberty* (1929). Like Laurel and Hardy, they appear to be convicts by virtue of their striped uniforms (which may well be pajamas, since we encounter them sleeping by the side of the road). With puny weights chained to their ankles, these grotesque versions of dueling Jack and Leo bicker over a pair of dueling pistols before playing the final game. "Let's do it," says Hill. "I can't count," replies Mead, who turns conspiringly to the camera and adds, "I'll shoot first."

Boys will be boys.

# Adolfas Mekas

Adolfas Mekas was born on Sept. 30, 1925 in Semeniskiai (sem-uh-NEESH-kee), a quiet farming village in Lithuania. (In later years Mekas claimed he was 10 years older, a joke that stemmed from his Dadaistic delight in inventing facts and general intellectual pranksterism.)

Along with his older brother, Jonas, Mekas followed more intellectual pursuits when not tending to cows, including writing, theater, and publishing. During World War II, under first Soviet and then Nazi occupation, the brothers secretly wrote and published political pamphlets and an underground newspaper, ultimately becoming quite involved with the Lithuanian resistance. In 1944, when sources told them their arrest was imminent, they tried to flee to Vienna, hoping to bluff their way through by claiming they were travelling to attend college there. The gambit failed, and they were arrested by the Germans and sent to a forced labor camp in Elmshorn, outside Hamburg. Later they managed to escape, hoping to reach Denmark. Unable to cross the border, they managed to find refuge with a sympathetic farmer near Flensburg, where they hid for the remainder of the war.

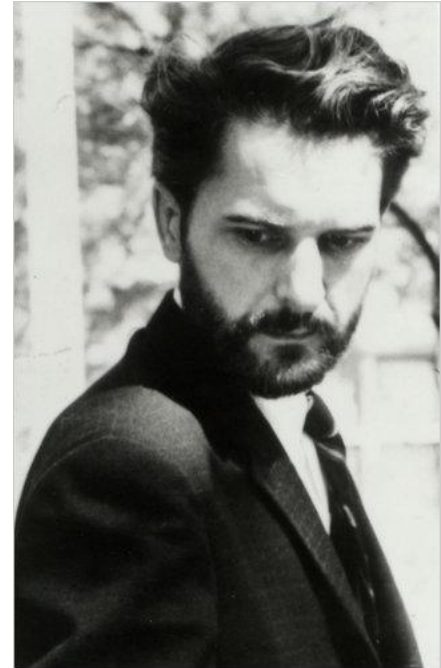
Following the war, they spent four years in various Displaced Persons camps in the French-occupied zone of Germany. During this period they managed to remain active by writing and publishing poetry, short stories, and camp newsletters, and attending university classes in literature and theater arts in Mainz. This was also when they discovered cinema, attending numerous screenings of international films, an experience that would transform their lives. As he recalled later, “And there it was, everything just opened up. When you saw *Beauty and the Beast* [Jean Cocteau, 1946], this is the language of the future. And I think the early post-war cinema really captivated us and seduced us into cinema.”

In October 1949, the UN International Refugee Organization sent the brothers to the US. Although they were to go to Chicago, upon arrival in New York City they decided to stay there instead, drawn by the energy and intellectual ferment they found even during their first couple days there (which included attending screenings of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and 1928's *The Fall of the House of Usher*). Broke and unable to speak English, they managed to locate a Lithuanian contact who helped them get started.

In 1950, Adolfas was drafted into the US Army, despite not yet having residency and a dismal command of English. Sent back to Europe, it stirred painful memories. According to a 1972 account by Jonas, Adolfas “started eating leaves from the trees and they thought he was crazy. So they shipped him back to the States.”

For several years they juggled a series of menial jobs with ongoing intellectual and creative pursuits, including a friendship with Hans Richter, who taught film at a college in the city. They borrowed money to buy a cheap Bolex 16mm movie camera and began experimenting with making films. They also wrote scripts which they tried submitting to Hollywood studios and even directly to director Robert Flaherty, all of which came to naught.

In 1955, they co-founded *Film Comment*, one of the most important post-war film journals championing the then-presumptuous notion that cinema was a serious form of art, well before the study of film was deemed respectable by the academic world. As co-editors, and with contributors like Andrew



*Adolfas Mekas in 1962, the year he made his first feature, Hallelujah the Hills.*

Sarris, Stan Brakhage, Richard Leacock, Rudolf Arnheim, Arlene Croce, Peter Bogdanovich and later P. Adams Sitney, the magazine quickly evolved into a strong advocate for avant-garde and independent cinema.

1959 saw early stirrings of a whole new style and approach to filmmaking, particularly with the release of John Cassavetes' *Shadows* and Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy*, which stood in stark contrast to the increasingly ossified and outdated Hollywood aesthetic. In the summer of 1960, Jonas published an article in *Film Culture* titled "Cinema of the New Generation," which first proclaimed a new movement he christened New American Cinema.

In September that year, they brought together a group of 23 filmmakers and formed the New American Cinema Group, a "self-help organization" that formed committees to explore the financing, promotion, and distribution of their films. The latter in particular was very difficult, as the market for "art films" was controlled by a handful of distributors with limited tastes who also dictated onerous terms. The group quickly came to the realization that something entirely new needed to be done.

It all came to a head in 1961 when Cinema 16, a New York film society that was the most respected and daring art film distributor, rejected Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night*. In January 1962, the Film-makers' Cooperative was formed by the Mekases and a group of filmmakers including Stan Vanderbeek, Robert Breer, Robert Downey Sr., Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, and others. FMC provided (and still provides) non-exclusive distribution, taking only a tiny percentage to cover basic administrative costs. This was a radically new idea at the time and it quickly took root, inspiring the creation of other artist-controlled film cooperatives in California, London, Australia, and across continental Europe.

This network provided the foundation of the entire underground film movement of the 1960s and '70s, fueling a thriving (if sometimes fly-by-night) proliferation of alternative venues and providing a platform for an ever-more daring range of films and filmmakers – all of which furthered a redefinition of cinema art that ultimately even transformed Hollywood. Even more than *Film Culture*, FMC was perhaps the single most important creation of the brothers' lives.

Meanwhile, Adolfas began making his own films, beginning with *Hallelujah the Hills*, which was warmly received by audiences and (most) critics, and proved to be the first hit of the New American Cinema movement. In its first year of distribution, the film played at 27 international film festivals, all by invitation. The following year, Jonas and Adolfas collaborated on *The Brig*, a quasi-*verité* document of the play by The Living Theater which achieved widespread recognition and acclaim. *The Double-Barrelled Detective Story* followed in 1965, but the sponsor refused to release the film, causing considerable harm to Adolfas' filmmaking career.

Throughout all of these years, the Mekas brothers were truly inseparable. As Adolfas told an interviewer in 2007, "We lived together until two days before I got married. ...We did everything together, we went to the same places together. And there were a few times when we were in love with the same girl. (Laughs)"

In 1965, Mekas married the love of his life, the singer and artist Pola Chapelle. She later told the *New York Times* that she was drawn to him by his robust and unpredictable sense of humor, recalling that on their first date, he threw his hat out the window of a taxi cab. Another time, after a film opening at the Museum of Modern Art, he rolled up the red carpet, put it under his arm and walked away with it. (He returned it later.)

But it became increasingly difficult for Adolfas to make films, who later recalled that "the monies dried up for independent productions. At the end of the '60s, beginning of the '70s the monies dried up. I pushed for about seven or eight years, pushed my scripts, my feature-length scripts, pushed various sources, agents, lawyers, and some of my scripts, especially two of them, were sitting with Warner Brothers for five years, and they died. And the cost of making feature films was getting out of hand by that time. And my interest was in feature film."

A lucky break came in 1971, when P. Adams Sitney tipped him about an opportunity to teach at Bard College's brand new (and still probationary) Film Department. (Contrary to some sources, Adolfas



was not a co-founder.) “I said ‘I’ll be there for a semester,’” he recalled later, “and then I stayed there for 32 years.” It was touch and go for several years, however, as the department was nearly dissolved several times. Finally, in 1975 it achieved official departmental status, and Adolfas was named its director, a position he served until 1994. From 1983 to 1989, he was also the director of Bard’s Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts. Mekas continued to teach at Bard until he retired in 2004.

His final project, left uncompleted, was *Brucia Bruno Brucia (Burn Bruno Burn)*, a film collaboration with David Avallone about Giordano Bruno, an Italian philosopher who was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1600, whom Mekas described as “the first Beatnik.”

Adolfas Mekas died of heart failure on May 31, 2011 in Poughkeepsie, NY.

## Memories of Adolfas

*Upon his passing, The Brooklyn Rail asked Mekas’s fellow filmmakers, colleagues, students, and friends to share their thoughts and reminiscences about his life and work. The following are excerpted from the July-August, 2011 issue, archived online at <http://brooklynrail.org/2011/07/film/adolfas-mekas-1925-2011>*

Adolfas Mekas was an adopted son of Mark Twain. He even brought to cinema a Twain story, *The Double Barrelled Detective Story*. The misguided refusal of the sponsor to release the film in 1965 did considerable harm to the filmmaker’s career. But it led by the circuitous pathways of destiny to his remarkable work as a teacher. He took a job at Bard College to hold himself over for a year or two and stayed on for some four decades. What he came to call “The People’s Film Department” was his theater of hijinks; for he surprised even himself with his enormous didactic gifts, his startling administrative skill, and his unceasing fount of comic invention. His own fractured education and his nearly total disregard for academic decorum made him the ideal professor. Nowhere in the archives of film is there an invented character who could come near the brilliant, lovable, outrageous mischief that consistently turned his classrooms into arenas of magic. He taught generations how to see and act.

— P. Adams Sitney

Adolfas always had a flare for the dramatic. While improvising the role of an ill-tempered father (*Certain Women*) he did a variation where he ripped his shirt off, popping all the buttons, and stomped out. He just hated it when things felt predictable. His office window at Bard overlooked our lovely Preston Theater, which he originally designed. He often sat up there with the lights out and red velvet curtain pulled back, watching films from his private sanctum, sometimes sharing his booze with a guest. For one faculty show, Adolfas made a video in which he leafs through his expurgated FBI file detailing his glories, follies, and various regrets — John Williams stole his theme music (*Hallelujah the Hills*), Roman Polanski beat him out for the cover of *Time* (*Knife in the Water*). It builds to a fantastic, cathartic ending. Addressing the audience, Adolfas shouts “I have lived through it all!” He raises his arm, pointing over our heads shouting, “If you want to see the living proof turn around right now!” Obediently, everyone turned and there sat Adolfas in his window with his glass raised. A sublime performance — just for him and us and that little theater.

— Peggy Ahwesh

I came east to Bard College to study film in the fall of 1982, and Adolfo was so unlike anyone I'd ever come across in Beloit, WI, that it took me years to figure out how to place him, how to speak to him, how to learn from him. He was all heart: he spoke with immediacy and astringency; there was no bullshit, no sugar coating, no intellectual meandering; just a shoot from the hip reaction. I remember editing my very first film on the second floor of the film center while a hapless senior faced a board of professors responding to his film. The 16mm projector turned on and chugged for several minutes, then Adolfo's voice rang out in its Eastern European staccato: "Shit, shit, shit: this film is shit." I cringed upstairs, but after a few minutes Adolfo had softened, and murmured encouraging words to the student. I learned to trust Adolfo because he had no investment in anything other than the joy of making work: his puckish, anti-institutional spirit was paramount, and passing trends held no sway with him. There was no fooling Adolfo, he could feel the heart in a film, and he responded viscerally with unvarnished enthusiasm or vitriol. Near the end of my time at Bard he told me about a former student who'd sent a 16mm film with fishhooks taped to it to the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and when they dutifully tried to prescreen the print it ripped the gate out of their projector. "Brilliant," he said, "pure Dada." Adolfo only cared about the act of creation: nothing else was sacred to him, not the avant-garde, political pieties, or any traditions or institutions. I loved the eternal twinkle in his eye, and the way he encouraged filmmaking as a way of life, not an accumulation of works.

— Mark Street

A Memory of Adolfo at Bard. It's hard to believe that there was a period at Bard College several decades ago when we had time to play softball two days a week each spring. It was an occasion for students and faculty to get together outside of class and run around together and have fun. It's important to understand that Bard was not a sports-oriented college, and the whole enterprise of sports was at best a novelty. It's also important to understand that Adolfo had no idea how to play softball. The film department's team was called Saint Tula, who was the adopted patron saint of our department, which was based on a photograph some student had taken on a trip to Italy in the '70s of an Italian saint with what looked like a film reel behind her head. The team was uneven, but colorful and scrappy, consisting of men and women who were — like Adolfo — competitive and crazy. There was another team called E Coli that consisted of a group of gnarly guys with a lot of body hair who wore dresses and no underwear. They were so ugly that nobody wanted to play them.

Despite his uncertainty of the nuances of the game, Adolfo was our coach, cheerleader, and "secret weapon." He was always the gentleman, dressed in jacket and tie and looking like someone's uncle — but he was very deceptive. Essentially he would stand quietly behind the backstop and wait for the first pitch to be thrown and then start yelling like a maniac. It was an avalanche of polyglot invective, from his Lithuanian accented "swing batter" to a litany of nerve-rattling phrases and expressions in Swedish, German, and Italian that were utterly incomprehensible. The other teams absolutely hated him and on several occasions threatened him with bodily harm. I can still hear him yelling "Swing batter," followed by a swoosh and angry muttering. The angrier the opposing players would become the happier Adolfo would be. I never remember seeing him so giddy and delighted with himself. We won the intramural championship one year. There's a photograph of our winning team in the college gym with all of us standing around Adolfo, who was holding the Saint Tula banner. It's a memory I cherish.

— Peter Hutton

Adolfo Mekas may have done much through example to reinvigorate Hollywood filmmaking, encouraging more personal and less inhibited expression, but was he really an avant-garde filmmaker as described in his *New York Times* obituary? I saw him as an intellectual import, making New Wave films in the USA. Jonas leaned to Beat, Adolfo — dapper to the end — to Hipster. He was like Cassavetes,

whom I met once in the very early '60s and couldn't take my eyes off his polished Italian shoes — which is to say he was the picture of ambition circumventing corporate structures. Underground Film was an expression of anomie; USA was a non-existent bluff and so were its rewards. Hipsters saw the vacuity but wanted to lay claim to the rewards.

It was a long time before I registered with Adolfas, who I felt endured me as one of his brother's zany enthusiasms. Flo's attachment to me may have begun my credibility, as she was clearly one of the rewards. Pola spoke up for me and together they watched *Capitalism: Child Labor* and other works. Genuinely friendly, his manner still conveyed he was someone engaged much more with the realities and I suppose he was — with scripts and budgets and people and locations, with being a film director. Tellingly, though, his tenure at Bard had favored genuine film-artists — it was no springboard into the industry. A complex fellow was Adolfas, kept erect by his fine clothes so as not to become a puddle of feelings.

— Ken Jacobs

What was striking about Adolfas was the interconnectedness between art and life. *Hallelujah the Hills* made more sense to me when I had met the filmmaker in person. The wit and ebullience, with everyone kept well lubricated with his homemade Limoncello, seemed to all come together in the merging of innocently absurdist art and the drollery of life. There was a certain generosity of spirit around him: this can be seen in the egalitarian-minded christening of “The People's Film Department” at Bard (listed more soberly on the Bard College website as the Department of Film and Electronic Arts).

With obvious relish he asked if I knew about the bunny suit. Pola cringed at its mention. Adolfas explained that when the spring semester was coming to an end, and the lull between finals and graduation had fallen upon the Bard College campus, he would pull out his furry rabbit costume and stroll around the campus dressed as a giant bunny. Department Chairs, Deans, the College President, and other esteemed members of the academe would suddenly pretend they didn't know him, quickly darting away at the approach of the furry apparition. Who is there to carry the torch of such madcap drollery in today's academe?

The occasion of our meeting came after I had sent Adolfas a manuscript, “The Sayings of St. Tula,” (St. Tula being the Patron Saint of the People's Film Department at Bard) which he assumed at first was a prank being played on him by one of the other faculty at Bard. His basis for his thinking it was a prank was that “Schlemowitz” was clearly a made-up name.

— Joel Schlemowitz

Adolfas Mekas was a colleague of mine for 25 years at Bard College. For most of that time he was chair of the film program, and more than to anyone else, the credit for building it belonged to him. Such was his love of life, film, and teaching, it was impossible not to have a deep affection for him. He left behind several legacies to the American film community. In 1955, along with his brother Jonas, he co-founded *Film Culture*, a journal that played a key role within the US in shaping critical assessments of cinema as a serious art form well before the study of film was deemed respectable by the academy. In addition, Mekas was a charismatic and generous teacher who had a profound effect on his many students, not a small number of whom have led notable careers in the film world. Possibly the most important legacy, however, are Mekas's films, one of which stands out above the others: *Hallelujah the Hills*, a hilarious and stylistically original comedy that combines anarchic visual gags with a melancholic undertone. Everyone who loves film should see it; in it they will find the enduring spirit of this unforgettable man.

— John Pruitt

# The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group

September 30, 1962 – announcing the formation of the Film-Makers' Distribution Center

In the course of the past three years we have been witnessing the spontaneous growth of a new generation of film makers — the Free Cinema in England, the Nouvelle Vague in France, the young movements in Poland, Italy, and Russia, and, in this country, the work of Lionel Rogosin, John Cassavetes, Alfred Leslie, Robert Frank, Edward Bland, Bert Stern and the Sanders brothers.

The official cinema all over the world is running out of breath. It is morally corrupt, esthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring. Even the seemingly worthwhile films, those that lay claim to high moral and esthetic standards and have been accepted as such by critics and the public alike, reveal the decay of the Product Film. The very slickness of their execution has become a perversion covering the falsity of their themes, their lack of sensibility, their lack of style.

If the New American Cinema has until now been an unconscious and sporadic manifestation, we feel the time has come to join together. There are many of us — the movement is reaching significant proportions — and we know what needs to be destroyed and what we stand for.

As in the other arts in America today — painting, poetry, sculpture, theatre, where fresh winds have been blowing for the last few years — our rebellion against the old, official, corrupt and pretentious is primarily an ethical one. We are concerned with Man. We are concerned with what is happening to Man. We are not an esthetic school that constricts the filmmaker within a set of dead principles. We feel we cannot trust any classical principles either in art or life.

1. We believe that cinema is indivisibly a personal expression. We therefore reject the interference of producers, distributors and investors until our work is ready to be projected on the screen.

2. We reject censorship. We never signed any censorship laws. Neither do we accept such relics as film licensing. No book, play or poem —

no piece of music needs a license from anybody. We will take legal action against licensing and censorship of films, including that of the U.S. Customs Bureau. Films have the right to travel from country to country free of censors and the bureaucrats' scissors. United States should take the lead in initiating the program of free passage of films from country to country.

Who are the censors? Who chooses them and what are their qualifications? What's the legal basis for censorship? These are the questions which need answers.

3. We are seeking new forms of financing, working towards a reorganization of film investing methods, setting up the basis for a free film industry. A number of discriminating investors have already placed money in *Shadows* [John Cassavetes, 1959], *Pull My Daisy* [Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1959], *The Sin of Jesus* [Robert Frank, 1961], *Don Peyote* [Harold "Doc" Humes, ca. 1961-62], *The Connection* [Shirley Clarke, 1961], *Guns of the Trees* [Jonas Mekas, 1962]. These investments have been made on a limited partnership basis as has been customary in the financing of Broadway plays. A number of theatrical investors have entered the field of low budget film production on the East Coast.

4. The New American Cinema is abolishing the Budget Myth, proving that good, internationally marketable films can be made on a budget of \$25,000 to \$200,000. *Shadows*, *Pull My Daisy*, *The Little Fugitive* [Ray Ashley, Morris Engel, and Ruth Orkin, 1953] prove it. Our realistic budgets give us freedom from stars, studios, and producers. The film maker is his own producer, and paradoxically, low budget films give a higher return margin than big budget films.

The low budget is not a purely commercial consideration. It goes with our ethical and esthetic beliefs, directly connected with the things we want to say, and the way we want to say them.

5. We'll take a stand against the present distribution-exhibition policies. There is something decidedly wrong with the whole

system of film exhibition; it is time to blow the whole thing up. It's not the audience that prevents films like *Shadows* or *Come Back, Africa* [Lionel Rogosin, 1959] from being seen but the distributors and theatre owners. It is a sad fact that our films first have to open in London, Paris or Tokyo before they can reach our own theatres.

6. We plan to establish our own cooperative distribution center. This task has been entrusted to Emile de Antonio, our charter member. The New York Theatre, The Bleecker St. Cinema, Art Overbrook Theatre (Philadelphia) are the first movie houses to join us by pledging to exhibit our films. Together with the cooperative distribution center, we will start a publicity campaign preparing the climate for the New Cinema in other cities. The American Federation of Film Societies will be of great assistance in this work.

7. It's about time the East Coast had its own film festival, one that would serve as a meeting place for the New Cinema from all over the world. The purely commercial distributors will never do justice to cinema. The best of the Italian, Polish, Japanese, and a great part of the modern French cinema is completely unknown in this country. Such a festival will bring these films to the attention of exhibitors and the public.

8. While we fully understand the purposes and interests of Unions, we find it unjust that demands made on the independent work, budgeted at \$25,000 (most of which is

deferred), are the same as those made on a \$1,000,000 movie. We shall meet with the unions to work out more reasonable methods, similar to those existing off-Broadway — a system based on the size and nature of the production.

9. We pledge to put aside a certain percentage of our film profits so as to build up a fund that would be used to help our members finish films or stand as a guarantor for the laboratories.

In joining together, we want to make it clear that there is one basic difference between our group and organizations such as United Artists. We are not joining together to make money. We are joining together to make films. We are joining together to build the New American Cinema. And we are going to do it together with the rest of America, together with the rest of our generation. Common beliefs, common knowledge, common anger and impatience binds us together — and it also binds us together with the New Cinema movements of the rest of the world. Our colleagues in France, Italy, Russia, Poland or England can depend on our determination. As they, we have had enough of the Big Lie in life and the arts. As they, we are not only for the new cinema: we are also for the New Man. As they, we are for art, but not at the expense of life. We don't want false, polished, slick films — we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films — we want them the color of blood.



## Other Films by Adolfas Mekas

### *A Silent Journey* (ca. 1953)

Co-directed with Jonas Mekas. Never completed, it was intended to be what Jonas has described as “our first ‘poetic’ film.” Some footage shot for it appears in Jonas’ *Lost Lost Lost* (1975).

### *The Brig* (1964)

Co-directed with Jonas Mekas. Award-winning film of the harrowing production by The Living Theater, depicting daily life and abuse in a Marine brig.

### *Skyscraper* (1965) b/w, 3 min.

A parody of Italian movies, made for use in the Broadway musical of the same title. Written by Peter Stone, with Pola Chapelle, Paul Sorvino, Julie Harris, and Charles Nelson Reilly.

### *The Double-Barrelled Detective Story* (1965) b/w, 90 min.

A black comedy adapted from a short story by Mark Twain. With Jeff Siggins, Greta Thyssen, Hurd Hatfield, and Jerome Raphael as Sherlock Holmes.

### *An Interview With The Ambassador From Lapland* (1967) color, 3 min.

A Swiftian “Vietnam comedy,” produced by Pola Chapelle and filmed by Jonas Mekas.

### *Windflowers* (aka, *The Story of a Draft Dodger*) (1968) b/w, 75 min.

Follows a draft dodger over six years, charting his disenchantment with the Establishment and his gradual radicalization. With Pola Chapelle, John Kramer, and Tina Stoumen. Music: Adolfas Mekas.

### *Compañeras y compañeros* (*Companeras and Companeros*) (1970)

Co-directed with David C. Stone and Barbara Stone. A documentary shot in Cuba that seeks to illustrate the continuing vitality of the Cuban revolution through a series of interviews with the youth of Cuba – young activist workers, peasants, students, etc. Produced for the Cuban film organization, El Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC).

### *Going Home* (1971) b/w, 60 min.

In 1971, after a twenty-seven year absence, Adolfas and Jonas returned to their birthplace in Lithuania. Jonas made his own film about the trip, *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972, 82 min.). Adolfas’ wife Pola Chapelle, who accompanied them, did as well: *Journey to Lithuania* (1971, 90 min.).

## Films as Editor

*Goldstein* (Philip Kaufman & Benjamin Manaster, 1964)

*The Love Merchant* (Joseph Sarno, 1966) – credited as “George Binkey”

*Step Out of Your Mind* (Joseph Sarno, 1966) – credited as “George Binkey”

*A Weekend with Strangers* (Allen Savage, 1971) – credited as “George Binkey”

## Appearances as an Actor

*Guns of the Trees* (Jonas Mekas, 1961)

*Windflowers* (Adolfas Mekas, 1968)

*The Genius* (Joe Gibbons & Emily Breer, 1993) – with Tony Conrad & Karen Finley

*Certain Women* (Bobby Abate & Peggy Ahwesh, 2005)

## As a Documentary Subject

*Hallelujah the Villa* (David Avallone, 2006) video, color, 28 min.

A spirited interview with Adolfas Mekas. Included on the Re:Voir DVD release of *Hallelujah the Hills*. It can also be found online at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeCRP\\_Hj7DA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeCRP_Hj7DA)

# Sources and Suggested Reading

Unfortunately, Adolfas apparently left almost no published trace as a writer or film theorist: after an extensive search, we could find no such writings or even bibliographic references.

Official web site – <http://www.adolfasmekas.com/>

Adolfas Mekas, *George the Man* – An unfinished “fictional autobiography” of his alter ego George Binkey, a pseudonym he used for editing credits on several sexploitation films he worked on to make ends meet in the 1960s and early 1970s (see above).

Adolfas Mekas, unproduced screenplays – “Instead of making a film, we decided to write it. There will be a series of scripts-ready-for-production, scripts that will never be produced. By reading these scripts you can be your own producer, cinematographer, casting director, and the film director himself – all in one.” Published by Hallelujah Editions, online at <http://www.hallelujaheditions.com/>

- *The Father, the Son, and a Holy Cow* (2005)
- *When the Turtles Collapse* (with Pola Chappelle) (2005)
- *Nailing the Coffin* (with Jonathan Shipman) (2005)

Philippe Dijon de Monteton, “A Foolish Genius: The Life and Work Of Adolfas Mekas,” *Experimental Conversations* (Cork Film Centre), Issue 8 (Winter, 2011) – By far the most extensive biography and survey of works on Adolfas. Indeed: it is the *only* one we could locate after extensive research. Online at <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/articles/069/a-foolish-genius-the-life-and-work-of-adolfas-mek/>

Dante A. Ciampaglia, “From the Archives: Adolfas Mekas Interview” (2007) <http://danteaciampaglia.com/2011/06/03/from-the-archives-adolfas-mekas-interview/> – Transcript of an interview for the author’s thesis project.

Andrew Lampert (?), “Adolfas Mekas,” Cosmic Baseball Association web site, <http://www.cosmicbaseball.com/amekas05.html> – Covers his early years at Bard, including struggles to retain the film department and related campus politics.

*L’Avant-Scène Cinéma* no. 64 (October, 1966) – This issue of the Paris film journal was largely devoted to *Hallelujah the Hills*. It included a translation of the script, clippings of press reviews, a Mekas filmography, and related information.

Jonas Mekas, *I Had Nowhere to Go* (Black Thistle Press, 1991) – Diaries covering the end of WWII, the DP camps, and subsequent migration to the US. During the entire period, Jonas and Adolfas were inseparable.

Jonas Mekas, Oral History, *Web of Stories* (web site) <http://www.webofstories.com/play/11082> – An exhaustive videotaped oral history, broken into 135 digestible short clips ranging from 2 to 7 minutes, each with a basic subject title and a full transcript. Jonas’ account is not strictly chronological, so it pays to page through the listings provided.

## The New American Cinema Movement and Related

Jonas Mekas, “A Call for a New Generation of Film Makers” and John Cassavetes, “What’s Wrong with Hollywood,” *Film Culture*, no. 19 (ca. Spring 1959) – Mekas’ editorial, announcing the first Independent Film Award (to Cassavetes, for *Shadows*), throws down the gauntlet and sets the stage for the proclamation of the New American Cinema movement in the coming months.

Jonas Mekas, “Editorial Note,” *Film Culture*, no 20 (Fall 1959) – Written as some of the key early works of the French New Wave were finally arriving in the US and clearly changing his thinking, a growing contempt for mainstream cinema oozes from the pages.



Jonas Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation," *Film Culture*, no. 21 (Summer 1960), pp. 1-20 – Of singular importance, it is in this article that Mekas first declares "the New American Cinema," describing what he sees as its roots, origins, aesthetic, and mission. Essential reading.

P. Sitney Adams (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* (Praeger Publishers, 1970; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Cooper Square Publishers, 2000) – Anthology of articles from the journal *Film Culture*, co-founded and co-edited by Jonas and Adolfas Mekas (among others), one of the most important and influential film journals of the time which not only brought a new seriousness to film criticism and theory, but also directly fostered the independent filmmaking revolution that transformed cinema. Essential reading.

Gregory Battcock (ed.), *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (Dutton, 1967) – A classic small-format paperback that gathers essential documents and criticism surrounding the emerging New American Cinema movement.

Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (Macmillan, 1972) – Excerpts from Jonas' long-running and highly influential film column for the *Village Voice* in which he covered, analyzed, and advocated for the then-emergent underground/independent cinema movement(s).

Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is: The International Free Cinema* (Overlook Press, 1975; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1985) – An essential history of independent and underground cinema up through the early 1970s.

Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (E.P. Dutton, 1967) – This classic book provides a fine, approachable overview written as it was all hitting a peak.

Harris Dienstfrey, "The New American Cinema," *Commentary*, June 1962 (vol. 33, no. 6), pp. 495-504 – One of the earliest articles in the mainstream press to take up and examine the Mekas-christened New American Cinema movement; also quite lengthy, thoughtful and sympathetic for the time. A recommended snapshot of the ferment leading up to the release of *Hallelujah the Hills*.

"Art of Light & Lunacy: The New Underground Films," *Time*, Feb. 17, 1967, pp. – A rather breezy but surprisingly cogent, informed, and sympathetic overview in one of the steadfast gate-keeper periodicals of the Mainstream covers the diverse ascendant voices and talents of the time. Sadly, it's impossible to imagine such a piece appearing in this magazine today.

## Home Video

*Hallelujah the Hills* (Re:Voir, 2010?) PAL DVD (all regions), with booklet – The full feature, plus an excerpt from a 1963 episode of *Camera Three* featuring Mekas, Amos Vogel, and other honorees at the first New York Film Festival that year; and a 28 minute 2006 interview, *Hallelujah the Villa*, in which Mekas reflects on his career, mixing fact, fiction, and leavened with his infectious humor. The booklet includes an essay by Frédérique Devaux, in both French and English. Available via <http://revoirvideo.blogspot.com/2008/11/paratre.html>

## Early Writings by Adolfas and Jonas Mekas

Following the end of World War II, the brothers spent four years in Displaced Persons camps. During this period, they continued to write and (somehow) publish poetry, fairy tales and short stories, including these collections:

- *Trys broliai ir kitos pasakos* (Three Brothers, and Other Tales) – Wiesbaden, 1946
- *Knyga apie karalius ir žmones* (A Book of Kings and People) – Tübingene: Patria 1947
- *Iš pasakų krašto : rinktinės įvairių tautų pasakos* (From the Fairland: A Collection of Tales of Different Nations), with Vytautas Adamkevičius – Kassel: Giedra, 1947
- *Proza*, with Algirdas Landsbergis and Leonas Letas – Kassel: ca. 1947 (dated 1900 as a joke). A follow-up volume, *Antroji proza*, was published in New York in 1951.



**EXPERIMENTAL MEMORIA III**



# *Hallelujah the Hills*

a 1963 underground comedy by Adolfas Mekas



“A dizzy time capsule of proto-revolutionary anarchy.” - *The Village Voice*

“A slapstick poem, an intellectual hellzapoppin, a gloriously fresh experiment and experience in the cinema of the absurd.” - *Time magazine*

“Hilariously funny and ravishingly lyrical.” - *The Guardian*

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