A Conversation With Jonas Mekas

“If you live in the past, if you can’t escape, then you cannot build a new house, a new future.” Christos Paridis talks with Jonas Mekas about memory, trauma, and the afterlife, about the war years in Lithuania and the 1960’s in New York, and about cinema.

Conversation / Christos Paridis July 19, 2019

Jonas Mekas, who passed away earlier this year, was a legendary filmmaker, poet, cinema critic, and curator. At the age of 96, Mekas was considered an emblematic artist of New York avant-garde scene and the “pope” of non-narrative cinema. As the main editor of Film Culture magazine and a cinema critic for the Village Voice in the 1950s and 1960s, he gave significant substance and theoretical background to a generation of filmmakers, who were struggling to create nonconventional films with a poetic value. Mekas was close to a number of influential people such as Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Bogdanovich, and even Jackie O., to name just a few. He included them in his diary films as personas and images, fragments of everyday encounters and thoughtful comments. In April 2017, he presented his film *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) at the Greek Cinema Archives in Athens during Documenta 14. During this visit we’ve met for a conversation.

Jonas_Mekas.jpg

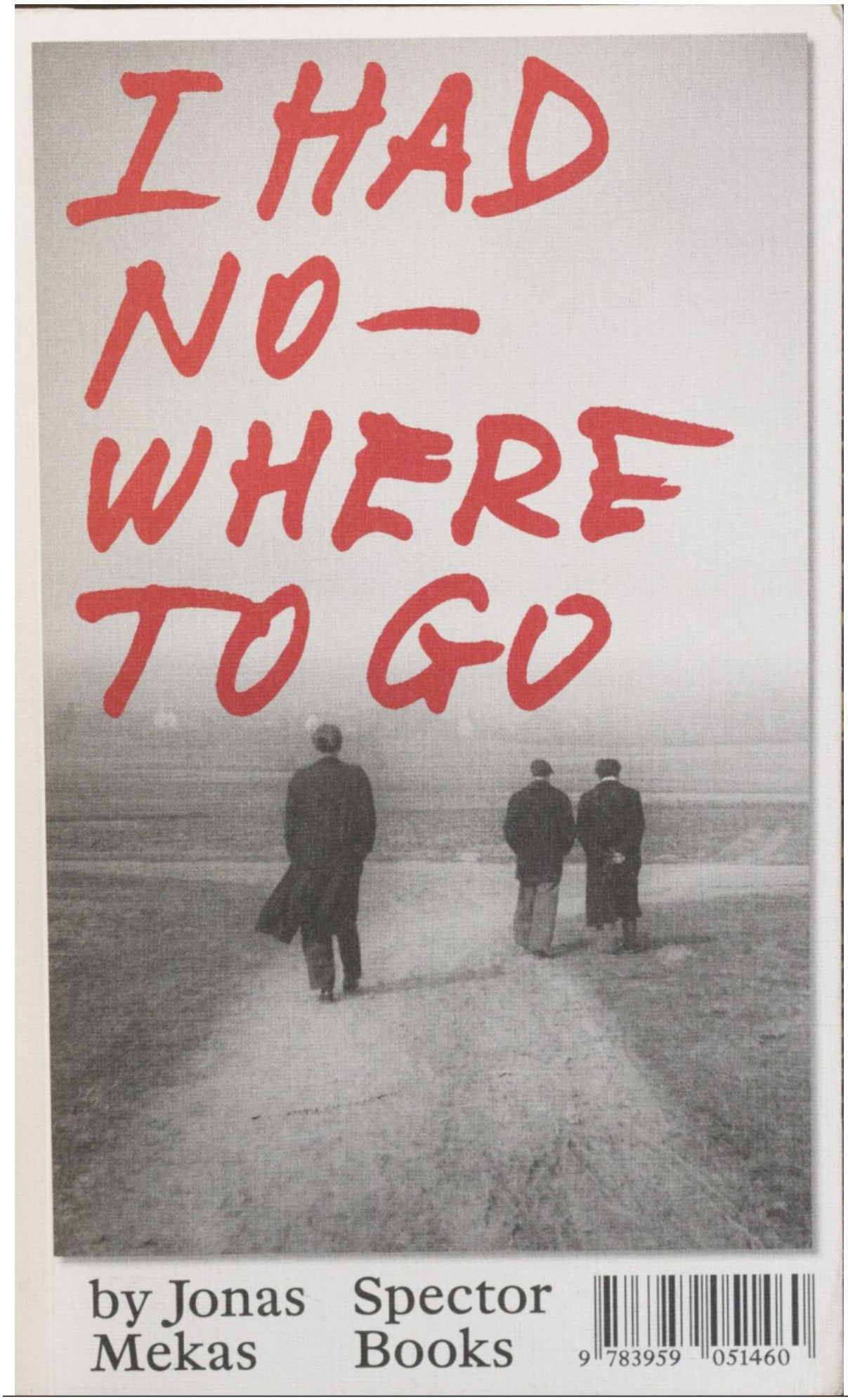


[1]
A portrait of Jonas Mekas, shot at the Fondazione Ragghianti in Lucca in 2008 [2]

C.P: I heard that your book “I Had Nowhere To Go” will be soon republished.

J.M: A new edition in English just came out from Spector Books. This book is a diary that begins in 1944, when I left Lithuania. It covers the few years that I spent in Germany, first in a forced labor camp during the last year of World War II, and then, for 4-5 years in displaced persons camps, before the United Nations Organization took me to New York. This diary ends in 1953, when I was already in New York for about 3 years. These years determined a transition in my opinions about everything. They were the universities of my life, so to speak.

MG_2237_1024x1024@2x1.jpg **[3]**


I HAD NO-WHERE TO GO
by Jonas Mekas
Spector Books
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[4]Cover of

Jonas Mekas's "I Had Nowhere to Go" (Spector Books, 2017)

C.P: Would you say that those years were years of despair?

J.M: I grew up on a farm in a village in Lithuania. Lithuania was never really peaceful, even when I was in primary school. Soviets occupied Lithuania. Then, the Germans pushed them out, and we were under German occupation. I didn't have a normal teenage period. Documenta 14 in Kassel includes "Images Out of Darkness" - a series of photographs I took during those years, while I was in displaced persons camps in Wiesbaden and Kassel.

C.P: How was Kassel in those years after the war?

J.M: There was no city. Some areas survived, but I would say that 80% of the city was gone. It was plain nothing.

C.P: What did you gain from that desperate period?

J.M: Man has the desire for normal life, but between the years of disasters, wars, and conflicts, there are only brief intervals of normal life. In some areas of the world, after the end of the Second World War, there was some peace and normal life, but that did not happen everywhere. Excluding Europe, which was going through a peaceful period, there was a revolution in China, and people were suffering in the Soviet Union.

However, as I mentioned before, those were my "university" years. I learned a lot, I had time to read, study and also understand what humanity is all about: nationalism, ideologies, political ideas, conflicts. People persist in their ideas and beliefs and do not want to cooperate. In the past it happened on some continents or parts of some continents. Now, nationalism is a global phenomenon.

IOD-1 small.jpg **[5]**



[6]Jonas Mekas, Kassel/Mattenberg, Myself Overlooking the D.P. Camp, 1948, from: "Images Out of Darkness"
Courtesy of The Estate of Jonas Mekas

IOD-3 small.jpg **[7]**



[8]Jonas Mekas, Kassel Railroad Station, Waiting to be Transported to Another Camp, 1948, from: "Images Out of Darkness"
Courtesy of The Estate of Jonas Mekas

C.P: Leaving Europe, you left behind a lifetime. How did you deal with it emotionally?

J.M: It is like a child attached to his mother. Either a good mother or a bad mother, there is always a connection, an attachment. Good or bad has nothing to do with it. Similarly I had an attachment to Lithuania, to the air and to the landscape, to everything around you. It is not just the people and culture and songs and dances and language. It is everything, all these memories call you back like voices from the past.

C.P: Did these memories haunt you?

J.M: It takes time to escape from the past, but as you move forward you build your life from the beginning. If you live in the past, if you can’t escape, then you cannot build a new house, a new future. Many get stuck in the past. That’s why we have what we have today in the world – stuck in the memories. People don’t forget what others had done, the clans and the countries. There were wars and disagreements and they cannot forget them. Instead they keep fighting. One has to move forward, forget and forgive and move on. That’s what I am doing.

C.P: Still, you havn't seen your mother for 26 years.

J.M: I couldn’t even write letters to her. But time passes and you forget. You get involved in your life

and you don’t think everyday about your past. You have a new life, with new problems and new challenges, and you move forward.

C.P: In your film *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, it seems that the seeking of “home” is constantly coming back.

J.M: When you stop and think about it, it happens. One needs stability, to feel that “I belong here,” without this meaning that he must be constantly tormented by this thought. We need roots and friends, or we become... I don’t know, if we don’t do anything about it we end up in asylums.

Reminiscences-1 small.jpg **[9]**



[10]Still from Joans Mekas's "Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania" (1972)
Courtesy of The Estate of Jonas Mekas

Reminiscences-3 small.jpg **[11]**


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[12]Still from Joans Mekas's Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (1972)
Courtesy of The Estate of Jonas Mekas

C.P: It reminds me of the famous poem *Ithaka*, by Constantine Cavafy, where the poet is making a metaphor of Ulysses's trip back to his island and what our goal should be in life…

J.M: Yes, because in a sense your real home has a soul. Your life on this planet is temporary. There is another life, there are other dimensions, your home is somewhere else. So, one has to move forward unless he is so absorbed in himself or in his land or in his village that he resembles a mushroom or a potato with no other interests.

C.P: Are you interested in mysticism? Do you believe in the possibility of an afterlife?

J.M: It is not only a possibility, for me it is certain. When you are 95 you have a wide perspective of what it means to live on this planet and be part of humanity, what life is all about, where you come from, where you are, and where you are going to.

C.P: Most of your family is gone. Do you mean that you believe you will meet them again somewhere?

J.M: This is another discussion. You have to read Sufi writings or the writings of Jacob Belme that sought to understand what life is all about. Human life includes many stages, one after the other. You have to prepare in the best possible way for the next stage of your life. This is as real as anything. My knowledge and my work for my next stage as a human being is as real as anything else.

C.P: You have been keeping a series of very interesting diaries, both written and filmed.

J.M: Now I mostly create new diaries with my digital video camera, which I always carry with me. I make notes of some events of the day, mostly describing my thoughts and my feelings.

C.P: You have said that during 2007 you kept an everyday video diary.

J.M: That is correct. I challenged myself to make one short video everyday and put it in my website. I didn't miss one day.

Jonas Mekas – Always Beginning | TateShots **[13]**

Video of Jonas Mekas – Always Beginning | TateShots
TateShots .يوناس ميكاس – دائمًا أبدأ

C.P: But you've kept a diary since you were very young.

Y.M: From the age of 6.

C.P: Wasn't it an overexposure of your private life?

Y.M: No, no, I did not show my private life. A camera can record only what is in front of it. I am not like Anaïs Nin or Henry Miller. I am not interested in that. I am more like an anthropologist that

records essential delightful moments of my contemporaries. I am part of it.

C.P: You make a distinction between the filmmaker and the filmer.

J.M: In my case I like to film. A filmmaker usually knows what kind of film he wants to create. He writes a script, gets others to cooperate with him, to turn the script into a film. But I don't have films I only have footage.

C.P: Your Lithuanian film is reminiscent of the human memory: short images, little editing, blurry images. That's life as a memory.

J.M: I happen to agree with that. That's what it is.

C.P: Why did you decide to create a non-narrative film back in your youth?

J.M: In a sense there is a narrative, but not necessarily the one that we are used to today. The modern narrative is not similar to that of the 19th century, which is the kind of narrative that you can find in my films. The plot is minimal, in many cases it doesn't exist, it is composed of descriptions of lives of some protagonists, like those you can usually find in modern literature. If you string them together there are moments of people's lives because people are born, they die, and life goes on and on like a saga. That covers a long period of life. It has been done by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgard, who is quite popular, for example. He wrote 5-6 volumes that go on and on...

C.P: Proust also did that.

J.M: Yes, something like Proust. He progresses, but there is no real plot.

C.P: Do you remember the case of the legendary filmmaker of Greek descent, Gregory Markopoulos? (He was the first to develop a film form that is similar to video art.)

J.M: We are very different in interests. He was very different from any other filmmaker that I know. He was interested in mythology and was very devoted to his Greek identity.

C.P: He was related to the Anthology Film Archives though.

J.M: He was very much related, but later, when he disagreed with some filmmakers, he left the US and went to live in Switzerland. But he had many friends among the filmmakers. He is still part of the group of that period. But you take any of the important filmmakers of that period, everyone came with his/her world. Thematically and technically. Don't confuse Stan Brakhage with Markopoulos. Brakhage had his own cinema language, his own content, or Kenneth Anger, or Maya Deren. Each one is so different. Or Andy Warhol. Very different personalities. Different content.

C.P: Would you say that Andy Warhol became a filmmaker because of your positive reaction?

J.M: Andy studied filmmaking in my loft, in my room. That was his film school. He met some of his superstars in my loft. And then he began making films. He started seeing films by various filmmakers in my place. My place was the office of The Filmmakers' Cooperative, you see. The filmmakers used to come there every evening, look at the shorter films and meet other filmmakers. Andy Warhol joined in 1962.

1179566_war_mek.jpg **[14]**



[15]Joans Mekas and Andy Warhol
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C.P: Did you totally reject American cinema?

J.M: No, no! To read poetry doesn’t mean you don’t like prose. You can read Emily Dickinson and Melville.

C.P: I mean Hollywood movies.

J.M: No, everybody liked it. I edited Film Culture magazine and I wrote not only about avant-garde. There was a lot about mainstream cinema, the so-called narrative cinema of Hollywood.

C.P: Do you miss New York of those years?

J.M: No, I remember and I respect the past, I see what it contributed to me, but I live in the present moment. I’m interested in what’s needed to be done now, what my friends are doing, what I want to do NOW. I don’t have much time for the past.

C.P: Is New York still exciting?

J.M: It is not intense as it used to be. Intensity comes in waves, like movements in culture. Civilization is not moving forward, it moves in convulsions. We are obsessed today with the digital possibilities and with computers. You can compare it with the beginning of the 20th century, when cinema started, airplanes appeared in the world, communication changed, telephones appeared. The

huge changes in technology that affected everything. The same is happening now. You can create a video and three minutes later send it to a friend in Buenos Aires or Tokyo. We didn't have that in the 1960s

C.P: Is there space left in you for dreaming?

J.M: I dream and I have a book about my dreams. For one year I kept notes of my dreams. My "night life" is very different from my days. Dreams come from somewhere else.

C.P: Are they optimistic?

J.M: In that sense I am an optimist. I believe in the human spirit. Nothing on this planet lasts and the human spirit moves forward, inspired by angels.

A previous version of this interview was published in Greek in lifo.gr in April 2017

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