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# A Calendar of “Eye-Pod Poems”

## Jonas Mekas and the 365 Day Project

### Abstract

*In 2007 (only one year after the launch of YouTube) Lithuanian-American avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas embarked on his first transmedial creation between cinema and the Internet, entitled 365 Day Project. Radicalizing the performative dimension which had characterized his experimental diary films, the then-octogenarian Mekas—one of the seminal figures of the “New American cinema”—challenged himself to create and publish a short film on his website for each day of the year 2007. All the short films (whose running time ranged from one and a half to twenty minutes) were free to be downloaded on the day of their publication, while later they could be bought for an inexpensive price. Footages were both old and new, creating a fragmented temporality (resulting in shifts in years, locations and topics) that brought the immediacy of the diary form into dialogue with memory and history. Mekas called these videos “eye-pod poems,” a wordplay that, on the one hand, indicated the confluence of aesthetic forms (film-poems, almost enacting Alexandre Astruc’s prophecy of the caméra-stylo), while, on the other, showcased an awareness of the plurality of the then-new devices through which they could be viewed. In fact, some of the films were not available to online viewing only, but were also displayed in various exhibitions.*

*Drawing on Henry Jenkins’ theories, this essay analyzes Mekas’ online film project as a creation that exemplifies the collision between old and new artistic media—typical of what Jenkins has called “convergence culture” (2006). Comparing the aesthetic strategies of Mekas’ online project with those of his diary films, the essay also argues that Mekas anticipated the modes of self-narration and self-representation of the social media, albeit with an unquestionably lyrical and artistic quality.*

**Keywords:** *Jonas Mekas, 365 Day Project, transmedia storytelling, diary film, convergence culture*

### 1. The film diary, the diary film and the web diary

At the end of 2006, already in his eighties, Jonas Mekas, the Lithuanian-American filmmaker and poet widely regarded as one of the seminal figures of the New American Cinema, launched his first project designed for the Internet, the *365 Day Project*. The director challenged himself to create and publish a short film on his website for each day of the year

2007. In his own words: “I am challenging myself for one calendar year beginning January 1st, 2007 to make one 3-7 minute video each day. It will be my diary of sort” (quoted in Di Crosta 2011, 176). The footages could be downloaded for free from Mekas’ personal website<sup>1</sup> on the day of their publication, while later they could be bought for a modest price.<sup>2</sup> On screen, this calendar of short films translates into a clickable visual device composed of twelve web pages corresponding to the months of the year, from January to December. Each web page displays a month divided horizontally into weeks. The entry boxes for the short films appear dated and illustrated by a freeze-frame taken from the corresponding film. The viewer is free to leaf through the calendar and flip through the daily box entries forward and backward, independently from the chronology followed by Mekas. The short films range from videos shot the same day of their publication to old archival material and other material from the past. Every video is accompanied by a short description appearing below it. These texts contain the date of publication and the running time of the video, but never a temporal designation of the footages. Still, they provide a concise contextualization which significantly mentions the specific place but not the time of the events filmed.

The *365 Day Project* affirms its radical compatibility with the new media that has characterized the entirety of Jonas Mekas’ cinematic *oeuvre* since the 1960s: the diary film. In this genre “the filmmaker, the lead character, and the narrator coincide” (Naficy 2001, 278). The recourse to new media was new to Mekas, but the diaristic impulse of his art, with its ambition to capture the immediacy of everyday life through first-person narration (oftentimes not just a narrating I, but also a lyrical I), has remained constant over time, undergoing a transmedial passage (from the written diary to the diary film to the web diary) and several technological shifts (from a succession of different Bolexes to the video). In spite of this apparent narratological continuity, Mekas, a one-man orchestra handling his own camera and editing the material by himself, was also particularly aware of the way these technological changes determine a shift in content. As he explained: “[t]he tools already determine the subject. Every new tool, like video or Internet, opens up completely new possibilities of content. And it brings with it something else that did not exist before” (Helmke 2010).

Before moving on to analyze the way the *365 Day Project* represents a culmination of his diaristic practice, I will provide a brief account of the evolution of the strategies by which the filmmaker managed to transpose this autobiographical genre into a different medium.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.jonasmekas.com>. Last visited 12/11/2020.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the entire project is available for free at <http://jonasmekasfilms.com/365>. Last visited 12/11/2020.

Born in 1922 in the northern Lithuanian village of Biržai (the rural ‘lost paradise’ of his childhood), after the war Mekas left Europe as a displaced person, having been an inmate in a concentration camp in Austria. In 1949, shortly after having moved to New York with his brother Adolfas (who would also become a filmmaker), Jonas Mekas bought his first Bolex and started recording bits and pieces of everyday reality as it happens, without elaboration. At the beginning of the Sixties, he realized that this material was not just a random recording of reality, but contained internal patterns and connections. As Mekas recalls in his lecture on the film *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, he understood that “random thinking was also a mode of reflection” (Mekas 2016, 738) that expressed his own subjective reality: “The footage that I thought was totally disconnected suddenly began to look like a notebook with many uniting threads, even in that unorganized shape” (Mekas 2016, 737). Driven by this intuition, he started editing the material, cutting out the parts that did not work technically or formally or did not capture something that he judged meaningful. It is this editing process that marked the passage between film diary and diary film, a distinction that David E. James has explored extensively, claiming that the former is the act of filming scenes from daily life, which entails a relationship of simultaneity with that reality, while the latter is the subsequent shaping of that material into a poetical and reflective autobiographical text through the editing. This distinction appears more blurred in Mekas’ own writing, where the filmmaker notices that in the raw material of his footages he discovered traces of an unsuspected coherence: “I thought, I was doing something different: I was capturing life, bits of it, as it happens. But I realized very soon that it wasn’t that different at all. When I am filming, I am also reflecting” (Mekas 1972, 738). In this process, self-reflexive memory and subjectivity assume a material dimension that cannot be separated from reality. In a conception that is not devoid of Emersonian echoes, the Self is not conceived as a barrier from reality (Sitney 2008, 83-97). On the contrary, reality results from a tension between subjective and objective elements. As Mekas explains it: “The challenge [...] is to capture that reality, that detail, that very objective physical fragment of reality as closely as possible to how my Self is seeing it” (Mekas 1972, 739). The passage from the film diary to the diary film is not only marked by the intervention of an editing process on the visual material. It also involves the use of intertitles that interact with the images, the soundtrack, and, most importantly, Jonas Mekas’ very distinctive voice-over.<sup>3</sup> Mekas’ voice adds a lyrical quality to the

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<sup>3</sup> As Hamid Naficy pointed out, Mekas’ voice over was usually added several years after the footage (Naficy 2001, 145). Therefore, Mekas’ voice-over is in contrast with the present-tenseness of the footages and transfigures them with a nostalgic and lyrical tone animated by a sense of loss.

footages not just because of the content that he reads to comment on the images—commentary that ranges from rather simple and rarefied phrases to literary quotations—but especially because of the intonation of his expressive and declamatory Lithuanian-accented voice. The result is, as it has often been noted, a concretization of the prophecy of Alexandre Astruc, who in his 1948 essay “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: la Caméra-Stylo” argued that the cinema was gradually becoming an art where “an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel” (2014 [1948], 604). He added, “Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The film-maker / author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen” (2014 [1948], 606).

If in the film shot with the Bolex, the editing played a fundamental role in reshaping the material: by switching to the video Mekas becomes more and more interested in bridging the distance between film diary and diary film. As he explained in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist:

I extract little fragments of reality and I make something different out of them. But I have to say that since I switched to video and especially during the *365 Day Project*, I became interested in how to eliminate that transformation. The challenge is how to record moments of real life and catch the essence of the moment in one unbroken take. No editing. One take, one shot. It sounds easy, but it's not. (2010)

While Mekas' goal is to reach a purer level of immediacy by reducing the transforming presence of the editing, the *365 Day Project* is simultaneously characterized by an intensified abundance of intertextual references and self-reflective strategies. Grasping the lyrical intersection between the filmmaker's subjectivity and fragments of objective reality remains Mekas' primary challenge.

## 2. “To Petrarca”: literary intermediality

The short film of the first day (*January 1, 2007*) opens with a “dedication” (the word appears in an intertitle) that simultaneously reflects on the archaeology of Mekas' artistic practice and constitutes a declaration of intent. The footage shows Mekas performing in a bar in Williamsburg and singing: “To Petrarca, who walked over the hills of Provence.” Francesco Petrarca acts as one of the most obsessively recurring leitmotifs of the *Project* and Mekas even celebrates the 680th anniversary of the poet's first encounter with Laura (in the video *April 6, 2007*). While the original title alone of Petrarca's *Il canzoniere, De rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (literally: “Fragments of Common Things”) closely resonates with Mekas' sensibility, the main

reference is, as Mekas’ song explicitly mentions, to the structure of the collection, composed by 366 poems. The symbolic appropriation of Petrarca is also linked to the theme of exile and displacement, which is alluded to in the song “The Hills of Provence,” where, in Avignon, the poet met Laura.

Besides this explicit dedication, there is also a hidden but no less important one, in that the image associated to *January 1, 2007* in the entry box shows a still image that is absent from the footage. It displays a typed poem by haiku master Issa Kobayashi (1763-1828) that reads: “New Year’s Day / What Luck ! What Luck ! / A pale blue Sky ! – Issa.” Mekas has repeatedly maintained that haikus represent the model for openness to the unpredictability of his filming style, which characterizes him as a “filmer, not a filmmaker” (Trivelli 2016, 145).

This connection to the present (the here and now) explains Mekas’ definition of the haiku as “the art-form which absolutely comes closest to reality and is also the formal ecstasy of what poetry can achieve” (Helmke 2010). The choice of a specific time and place is never random, but responds to an unpredictable logic of epiphany, where memory often plays a subterranean yet fundamental role:

The only time that I film [...] or record such material is when you really feel right: this is it, I should be filming this. [...] That can happen only when you walk somewhere and you see something and it responds, provokes something in you, it has some memory, and you want to film it, and you film it. (Web of Stories)

In addition, traditional haikus express a grateful acceptance of reality that does away with the need to project further meaning onto it. Still, the reality they depict has a subjective quality insofar as it reflects the attitude, thoughts and the feelings of the poet, which simultaneously accept and transfigure a reality that is most often located in a specific time and place. The resulting tension between being individual and being true to reality rests on the capturing of the right instant. As Mekas puts it: “You have to be able to wait patiently for that moment. I continue to face the most difficult challenge: being really individual while taping real life situations” (Obrist 2010.).

In Mekas’ work, this understanding of Japanese poetry is especially spelt out in the two cycles of visual haikus present in the fifth reel of *Lost, Lost, Lost* entitled “Rabbit Shit Haikus” and “Fool Haikus” (1976). The cycle “Rabbit Shit Haikus” was originally conceived as an autonomous work dating back to 1962. The title refers to Mekas’ tale of “the man who couldn’t live anymore without the knowledge of what’s at the end of the road” (Mekas 1976). When he reached it,

he found a pile, a small pile of rabbit shit at the end of the road, and back home he went, and when people used to ask him, 'Hey, where does the road lead to?' he would answer, 'Nowhere. The road leads nowhere, and there is nothing at the end of the road but a pile of rabbit shit.' So he told them, but nobody believed him. (Mekas 1976)

The whole story captures the idea of an acceptance of reality that does not require the presence of a particular meaning. Significantly, the two visual haiku cycles in *Lost, Lost, Lost* depict the phase of the Mekas brothers' lives in which they started to accept their condition as immigrants in the United States.

In *Wednesday, November 7* there is a close-up of a printed page containing a haiku written by Mekas himself and titled “Imperfect Haiku.” The comment below the video reads: “I cook, I dance, I write haikus,” although the haiku is printed and he is reading it. If, according to James A.W. Heffernan's canonic definition, ekphrasis is the “verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 1993, 3), what is at stake here is the presence of an ekphrasis in reverse, a visual representation of a verbal one. This intersemiotic reversal whereby the image acquires a scriptural dimension and the verbal becomes visual—the written word becomes image—mirrors yet another formal characteristic of haikus, namely the one underscored by Sergei Eisenstein in his pivotal essay *The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram*: “[Haikus] are little more than hieroglyphs transposed into phrases. So much so that half their quality is appraised in calligraphy” (2014, 30).

A close-up on a page that does not allow us to read the entire page, but only a part of it at a time, is also present in *Tuesday January 2*. Mekas is in the cloister of Saint-Louis in Avignon (again, the city where Petrarca met Laura) and reads out loud a passage from *The Knowing Heart* (in Hebrew: *Da'at Tevunot*), a treatise by the Italian mystic and kabbalist Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746). Luzzatto's book represents an attempt to overcome the apparently binary opposition between philosophical rationality and mysticism by putting them into dialogue. Similarly, in *Day 2* Mekas attempts to transcend the duality between image and word. The first part of the video is set indoors, in the cloister's library, with a very tight close-up on a particular passage of the book: “For we have to understand that every variety of goodness can be understood entirely as a quality of goodness in itself.” Afterwards, Mekas is in the courtyard of the cloister and his camera focuses on a tree in the middle of it, while he repeats the same passage as if it were a mantra, where the emphasis is placed not on the meaning but on its rhythmic quality, underscored by Mekas' emotionally charged voice. Again, while the camera imitates haiku writing (lingering on the tree), the word becomes iconic and the spectator is put in the active condition of becoming a reader.

A similar epiphanic moment involving an out-loud reading of a written text occurs in *May 22, 2007* where, while at the Turin Book Fair, Mekas—pointing the camera towards himself—claims to have discovered the reason that prompted him to start writing diaries in his childhood: reading the diaristic novel *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis. It is arguably one of the most emotional moments of the entire project, the importance of which is underscored by the director’s voice, now broken with emotion (indicating the temporal closeness between the discovery and the filming). The video then shows a conversation between Mekas and his fellow experimental filmmaker (as well as scholar of American literature) Massimo Bacigalupo, where the latter reads a passage from *Cuore* in the original Italian version.

In addition to these intertextual references, Mekas exploits the format of the calendar to commemorate the birthdays of some of his literary heroes, such as Jack Kerouac (*March 12*), Charles Baudelaire (*April 9*), and Antonin Artaud (*September 4*).

### 3. Intermediality and remediation

As Irina Rajewski points out, intermedial references imply “a crossing of media borders, and thus a medial difference” (2005, 55). What the medial difference reveals is not just a similarity, but also a gap between the specific aspects of the media that emerges exactly when one medium adopts the strategies of another. “A given media product cannot *use* or genuinely *reproduce* elements or structures of a different medial system through its own media-specific means; it can only *evoke* or *imitate* them” (Rajewski 2005, 55, emphasis in the original). The intermedial gap can be filled in by deploying strategies that act according to an “as if” logic: a writer writes *as if* she could use the tools and techniques of a filmic system (zoom, fade-ins and -outs, and so on). In Mekas’ case, cinematic tools are used to evoke and imitate the structures of quintessentially literary genres (the diary, the haiku, among many others).<sup>4</sup> Intermediality is therefore a concept that certainly applies to Mekas’ whole cinematic body of work, including, as we have seen, the content of the videos of the *365 Day Project*. Nevertheless, the intermediality in the *Project* not only encompasses the relationship between the literary and the visual, but also engages with music. Emblematic in this respect is *Day 12 January 12, 2007*, one of the short films that

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<sup>4</sup> The spectrum of literary structures channeled by Mekas into his cinema is rather wide. For example, it is worth mentioning his filmic correspondence with the Spanish filmmaker José Luis Guerin, contained in the collective film *Correspondencia(s)* (2011), which also contains other video-correspondences between contemporary filmmakers: Isaki Lacuesta / Naomi Kawase, Albert Serra / Lisandro Alonso, Jaime Rosales / Wang Bing and Fernando Eimbcke / So Yong Kim. As Anita Trivelli points out, Mekas is “simultaneously protagonist and source of inspiration” (2016, 157) of the project.

showcase a simultaneity between the day of the shooting and the day of the publication (and almost a blurring between the borders of film diary and diary film). The comment below the video reads: “I do not feel / like doing anything / today. I want to / listen to music.” The video, accompanied by the intradiegetic music of Bach, shows a close-up of Mekas’ face, breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the audience: “My dear viewers, I don’t know what to do today, there are days when one does not want to do anything, only listening to music, [...] only to be happy.” Similarly, in *November 7, 2007*, the video containing the poem “Imperfect Haiku,” Mekas shows himself listening to Nirvana’s song *Lithium*.

In their inner intermedial dimension, the calendarized short films do not particularly differ from Mekas’ diary films, especially from the ones released after his passage to the video in the early 1990s. The presence, in the *Project*, of archival material filmed with the Bolex (for example, *Day 6, January 6, 2007*, where Mekas is in the castle of Marquis De Sade, again in Provence, 1966) allows us to compare the different strategies imposed by the technological shifts, as well as the analogies. Furthermore, they provide the sense of a fragmented temporality, where web-diary seems to register what Mekas is doing on an exact day (which is the case of *12 January*), but also what he is remembering, the connections of thought and memory that occurred on that day. While in terms of content there is an almost total continuity with the intermedial modes that have always been present in Mekas’ diary films, it is their relationship with the formal aspects of the rest of the platform (the calendar, the short comments below) that constitutes a novelty and as such requires to be analyzed with more specific theoretical approaches concerning the new media.

In 2007 social media like Twitter and Facebook and streaming platforms like YouTube were only recently founded. It is difficult not to consider Mekas’ project as an artistic anticipation of these current communication platforms combining narration and self-representation (especially YouTube *vlogs* and Twitter, as is evident from the comments below the videos of the *Project*). Mekas was particularly aware of the devices that would host and distribute his project. He called the short videos of the *365 Day Project* “eye-pod poems,” using wordplay (the conflation between the homophone “I” and “eye”) very much in line with his poetics. This definition also indicates the perfect technology for experiencing a project that can be viewed via a variety of communication platforms. The choice of the iPod in Mekas’ definition demonstrates an impressive awareness of technology-driven changes that at the time were yet to be born.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in his influential essay *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, media

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<sup>5</sup> The video iPod was launched in 2005.



theorist Henry Jenkins maintained that the iPod was the most emblematic device of “media convergence,” a term designating “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of migratory audiences who will go almost everywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment they want” (2006, 2). The iPod is also often used to indicate the merging of previously distinct media into one, and in 2007 it was the most advanced device through which media convergence could be achieved. As Jenkins also points out:

The video iPod seems emblematic of the new convergence culture—not because everyone believes the small screen of the iPod is the ideal vehicle for watching broadcast content, but because the ability to download reruns on demand represents a major shift in the relationship between consumers and media content. (2006, 253)

In the *365 Day Project* the convergence is also characterized by the work’s proneness to be channeled into different platforms, as evidenced by the fact that it was exhibited in various galleries.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, the immediacy and the intimacy that were already at the core of Mekas’ cinema become even more radical when channeled into a device that allows for an unmediated publication of the contents as well as for a more active and horizontal cooperation on the part of the viewer. This is underscored by the several occasions in which Mekas breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly. This very aspect characterizes the *365 Day Project* as an exemplary artistic expression of the phenomenon of remediation. As Jay David Bolter points out (1999), remediation is a process that characterizes all current media, which simultaneously pay homage to and rival earlier media by “appropriating and refashioning the representational practices of these older forms” (2005, 14), a process, as we have seen, that characterizes Mekas’ whole cinematic work. Another salient trait of the process of remediation that the *365 Day Project* displays is the double logic through which an effect of immediacy (in this case, direct communication between the auteur and the viewer) depends on hypermediacy (the multiplicity of devices through which it is possible to access the artwork and their portability). In this respect, it is worth noting that towards the conclusion of the *Project (December 30)*, Mekas announces his next one, the *1001 Nights Project*, which unfortunately never saw the light of day. This time he invites the viewers to send him their own footages concerning nocturnal autobiographical moments. The shift would have been from the filmed diary to a collective

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, at agnès b.'s Galerie du Jour in Paris in 2009 and at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe.

palimpsest where the role of the viewers would have become radically more cooperative. Still, the connection with the past—underscored by the title—and the openness to the present and the future would have remained unaltered.

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