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Bridging the Absence

Jonas Mekas's Hybrid Cinema

Abstract

In this essay I will focus on Jonas Mekas's 'diary films' such as Walden (1969), Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (1972), and Lost Lost Lost (1975), interpreting them as a trilogy that constitutes one of the most seminal expressions of Laura Marks's theoretical notion of "hybrid cinema" or "experimental diasporan cinema" (1994). As Marks argues, experimental diasporan films are characterized by an autobiographical attitude that "mediates a mixture of documentary, fiction, and experimental genres" in an aesthetic effort to create a formal correlative of the liminal and multicultural identities of diasporic auteurs (1994, 245). Moreover, they often incorporate intermedial strategies.

This notion applies to Mekas's films, which have been variously defined as diary films, documentaries, essay films, film-poems, home-movies (although the home represented is often a lost Heimat), and through the generic label of 'avant-garde.' His films are animated by a sense of identity (and of the film itself) as an unfinished process, which is exemplified by Mekas's gestural and erratic camera. This process is put into dialogue with a sense of perpetual nostalgia that both reflects and repairs the discontinuity of the self, binding past and present. The resulting tension is further visible in the gap between Mekas as a (self-proclaimed) 'filmer'—simultaneously filming and experiencing reality—and as a filmmaker—selecting the material, editing, and commenting it through his voice-over and the use of intertitles. Through the contemplation and enactment of this gap, Mekas's intimate experience of loss and exile becomes a collective narrative shared with the spectators.

Keywords: *Jonas Mekas, hybrid cinema, migration, intermediality*

In the last thirty years film scholarship has shown a growing interest in the attempt to define the specificities of the cinema produced by diasporic, exilic, and displaced filmmakers. The resulting corpus of theories and approaches is unsurprisingly broad. The terminology produced thus far includes: "cinema of displacement" (Ghosh and Sarkar 1995), "intercultural cinema" (Marks 2000), "accented" and "interstitial cinema" (Naficy 2001), and "cinema of transvergence" (Higbee 2007). These terms often refer to different things: diasporic and intercultural *auteurs* (regardless of whether they describe a diasporic experience or not), the portrayal of displaced

and culturally hybrid characters (also when it is not carried out by diasporic filmmakers), as well as the aesthetic modes of representation and the material conditions that make films possible. In particular, it is not always clear whether these definitory attempts refer to the authorial voice or to the topic of the films. For instance, in their 1995 article Ghosh and Sarkar identified some “spatial tropes” typical of what they termed “cinema of displacement,” but their case studies included films which, despite portraying zones of contact and hybridity, were not directed by immigrant or transnational filmmakers, as the inclusion of Nikita Mikhalkov’s 1989 *Urga* demonstrates. A more precise correlation between the filmmakers’ biographies, their aesthetic strategies, and their subject matter is spelt out in the notion of “accented cinema,” put forward by the Iranian American scholar Hamid Naficy in his successful *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001). Naficy’s book represents one of the most exhaustive accounts of the field of exilic /diasporic cinema in terms of both the number of formal features analyzed and of the wide range of films included. His study looks at the films that exilic, diasporic, and post-colonial/ethnic filmmakers have made in the West since the 1960s. Naficy chooses the notion of “accent” to address the supposed artisanality (and genuine imperfection) of the modes of production that stem from the conditions of displacement and deterritorialization. As he maintains, “accented” films are “interstitial because they are created astride, and in the interstices of, social formation and cinematic practices” (Naficy 2001, 4-5). The ‘accented style’ refers to the similarities of aesthetic traits, narrative techniques, and themes that characterize diasporic cinema without defining a proper genre insofar as the commonalities “cut across gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, as well as across boundaries of national cinemas, genres and authorship” (Naficy 2001, 39).

Another link between the filmmakers’ biographies, their aesthetic modes, and their subject matter is present in the approach proposed by Laura Marks. She initially chose the use of the term ‘hybrid cinema’ to define the relatively narrow genre of “experimental diasporan films” (Marks 1994, 245), while later switched to the more comprehensive (although, as she underscores, “rather mild” [Marks 2000, 6]) definition of “intercultural cinema.”¹ Her analysis of hybridity in experimental diasporan cinema, inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s theorization of the “time-image” (1985) as well as by Naficy and Trinh T. Minh Ha, concerns simultaneously the biographical dislocation of the filmmakers as well as the aesthetic form of their films. As she explains: “Theories of hybrid cinema argue that a hybrid form, in which autobiography mediates a mixture of documentary, fiction, and experimental genres, characterizes the film production

¹ As Marks explains: “‘Intercultural’ means that a work is not the property of any single culture, but mediates in at least two directions” (2000, 6).

of people in transition and cultures in the process of creating identities” (Marks 1994, 245). This concept of ‘hybridity’ describes the different forms of inbetweenness that characterize diasporic films, but also identifies the existence of intermedial practices. Hybrid cinema “implies a hybrid form, mixing documentary, fiction, personal, and experimental genres, *as well as different media*” (Marks 2000, 8, my emphasis), while intermediality involves the crossing of the borders between different media and art forms.

The nexus between intercultural and intermedial hybridity, which is especially ubiquitous in the “experimental diasporan cinema” (1994) analyzed by Marks, is also mentioned by Naficy (2001), although he does not seem to consider it as one of the salient features of accented style. Naficy writes that “[i]ncreasingly, accented films are using the film’s frame as a writing tablet on which appear multiple texts in original languages and in translation in the form of titles, subtitles, intertitles, or blocks of text” (2001, 25). According to him the goal of these formal experimentations is only to de-emphasize “visuality while highlighting the textuality and translational issues of intercultural art” (2001, 25). Naficy locates this medial hybridization in the context of the decentralization of the Western cultural emphasis on visuality. This conception is in keeping with Martin Jay’s influential definition of the visual regime of Cartesian perspectivalism as the “hegemonic scopic regime of the modern era” (Jay 1993, 113). It also resonates with Marks’s concept of “haptic visuality” (2000), which refers to the idea that the memories of people who move between different cultures are often encoded beyond the limits of sight and sound, in more embodied senses that defy representation, such as touch and smell. That is why image and sound in diasporan cinema are often deployed in a way that makes them evoke other senses. A similar process is at stake with the recourse to intermediality, where every medium is pushed towards its limits, made to replicate the illusion of another medium’s structure and practices, and, as we will see later on, forced by this very procedure to explain itself and to reveal an intermedial gap.

In this article I will discuss intermediality as one of the most salient features of the “experimental diasporan cinema” theorized by Marks. The proliferation of intermedial strategies in diasporan cinema is not just part of an aesthetic trend, but stems from a set of theoretical implications that make medial hybridization the most effective tool to provide a material representation of a displaced subjectivity. I will analyze some of the hybrid formal strategies channeled in what can be arguably considered as the “*Ur-text*” (Krstic, 56) of experimental diasporan cinema, namely the trilogy of ‘diary films’ composed by *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* (also known as *Walden*) (1968), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1971),

and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), created by Lithuanian-American expatriate poet and avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas.

In few other filmmakers' works the boundaries between life and art are as permeable as they are in Mekas's. Therefore, before moving on to analyze his aesthetic strategies, it will be necessary to point out some biographical facts. Born in 1922 in a rural village of Northern Lithuania, Semeniškiai, in his early twenties Jonas Mekas, together with his brother Adolfas, fled from their war-torn hometown but were eventually imprisoned in a labor camp outside Hamburg for eight months. They managed to escape, hiding in a farm near the German-Danish border for two months until the end of the war. Then they lived in several displaced persons' camps² for almost four years. This was the time when Mekas's interest for cinema started to bloom, triggered by the screenings of Hollywood movies that the US army arranged for the displaced persons (DPs). After studying philosophy at the university of Mainz, where he edited a literary journal and started publishing his poems, in 1949 he managed to emigrate to New York together with his brother Adolfas. Few months after the brothers' arrival in Brooklyn, Jonas Mekas bought his first Bolex and started recording bits and pieces of everyday reality randomly. During the 1950s Mekas founded and became editor-in-chief of the *Film Culture* magazine and started an influential column in the *Village Voice* called "Movie Journal." At the beginning of the 1960s, he realized that the material he had occasionally shot whenever he had some free time was not just a random recording of reality, but contained internal patterns and connections. In Mekas's own words: "The footage that I thought was totally disconnected suddenly began to look like a notebook with many uniting threads, even in that unorganized shape" (1972, 737). Driven by this idea, Mekas started editing the material, cutting out the parts that did not work technically or formally or did not capture something that he judged meaningful. Mekas's intuition did not come out of thin air, as the diary film as a genre had already been invented and performed by another experimental filmmaker based in New York, Marie Menken (1909-1970), who was, by a curious connection, a daughter of Lithuanian immigrants. The January 4th, 1962 entry of Jonas Mekas's column "The Movie Journal" is devoted to Marie Menken and titled "Praise to Marie Menken, the film-poet." In the entry Mekas describes Menken's cinema as "a film poetry free of obvious symbolism and artistic or literary influences, a poetry where the filmic syntax achieves a spontaneous fluidity and where the

² 'Displaced Person' is a term that refers to the refugees (both Jewish and non-Jewish) uprooted by the devastation of World War II, a large proportion of whom wound up in the Displaced Persons camps, spread in Germany, Austria, and Italy. These facilities were administered by Allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

images are truly like words that appear and disappear and repeat themselves as they create clusters and blotches of visual meanings, impressions” (Mekas 1972, 52). It is a description that, living aside the literary influence—which plays an important role in Mekas’s film—can be easily applied to Mekas’s diary films.

The editing process marked the passage from film diary to diary film, a distinction that David E. James (1992) 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. In the process, a pivotal role is played by the intertitles and by Mekas’s recorded voice-over. Mekas’s voice adds an undeniable lyrical quality to the filmed material because of the emotionally charged intonation of his strongly accented voice. While in the footages the filmmaker’s own inscription in the filmed material displays a relationship of simultaneity with the recorded reality, his voice-over and the intertitles, added afterwards and sometimes after a time lag of more than twenty years (as in the case of *Lost, Lost, Lost*), interact with the material by often relying on the past tense.

Although the term ‘diary film’ is almost a given when it comes to labelling Mekas’s works, since it was often used by the auteur himself in various interviews, critics’ attempts to apply other definitions to his very personal avantgarde films are numerous. While Mekas’s artistic use of a home-movie aesthetics is generally acknowledged, some critics have characterized his films as “film-essays” (Renov 1992; Krstic 2019), therefore as documentaries, others as “epistolary films” or, more specifically, “letter-films” (Naficy 2001, 103). The equally recurrent label “film-poems” was the term historically applied to the avant-garde films that emerged in the 1940s (directed by Maya Deren, Sydney Peterson, James Broughton, and others) and the 1950s (Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and Gregory Markopoulos). It may come as a surprise that one of the harshest critics of the practice of film poems had initially been Jonas Mekas himself who, as a chief-editor and columnist of the magazine *Film Culture*, in a 1955 article titled “The Experimental Film in America” attacked “the adolescent character of American film-poems” (Sitney 2000, 21), as well as their supposed self-absorption and rejection of reality. Mekas would later describe the article as a “St. Augustine-before-the-conversion piece” (Sitney 2000, 26), since he had soon turned into one of the most influential advocates of film-poems in the same columns, before becoming also one of its most renowned practitioners.

What the majority of the labels applied to Mekas’s cinema have in common is a hyphen that links their cinematic nature to a literary practice, stressing its metamorphic character. It is meaningful that two of the practices addressed by the labels (the diaristic and the epistolary),

belong to the realm of non-professional writing. Also, both letters and diary-entries are heterogeneous and fragmented parts of a whole that is not articulated according to a pattern of aesthetic organicity. As David E. James points out, in diaristic practices the process is more important than the product: “Just as much as a written one, a diary made in film privileges the author, the process and moment of composition, and the inorganic assembly of disarticulate, heterogenous parts rather than any aesthetic whole” (1992, 147).

Moreover, diaries and letters have in common with the essayistic practice the presence of the author’s self-inscription in the text, as well as an approach that is both inward- and outward-focused, both reflective and descriptive. As Michael Renov (1992) writes in his analysis of *Lost, Lost, Lost*, Mekas’s cinema enacts the essayistic practice in the way it was conceived by Michel de Montaigne. His cinema follows what French literary critic Gerard Defaux defined as the “twofold project” (quoted in Renov 1992, 216) of Montaigne’s *Essays*: the “unyielding attentiveness both to the measure of sight and to the measure of things” (Renov 1992, 219). Nonetheless, Mekas’s own description of his project designates this dialectic not as an issue relegated to the essayistic category, but as the main problem of art in general: “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. Of course, what I faced was the old problem of all artists: to merge Reality and Self, to come up with *the third thing*” (Mekas 2016, 739, my emphasis).

Coming up with the ‘third thing’ is also what animates Mekas’s recourse to intermediality. As Irina Rajewski explains, intermediality is a form of intertextuality that implies “a crossing of media borders, and thus a medial difference” (2005, 55). Intermediality reveals the specificity of any one medium at the very moment in which such a medium adopts the strategies of another, revealing the gap that separates them. As Rajewski points out, “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” (2005, 55, emphasis in the original). According to the critic, the imitation of the other medium’s practices is enacted following an “as if” logic. When this “as if” logic is performed by a literary medium that imitates visual arts, an analysis concerning this phenomenon is fitting to be part of the millenary (yet still timely) debate concerning *ekphrasis*. In this respect I will consider Heffernan’s characterization of this practice as “the verbal representation of a visual representation” (1993, 3), as well as Klaus Clüver’s broader definition of the same as “the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (1997, 26).

In Mekas's diary films what occurs is an ekphrastic process in reverse, whereby the 'inherently collective' medium of cinema evokes and imitates quintessentially private structures of the written text following an "as if" logic that is analogous to the one pointed out by Rajewski. Mekas's strategy is therefore a concretization of Alexandre Astruc's concept of *caméra-stylo*, which is apt to describe a reversal of *ekphrasis*. In his 1948 essay "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: la *Caméra-Stylo*," Astruc argued that 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, 604). He added, "Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen" (Astruc 2014, 606). What is at stake with Astruc's essay is therefore also a reflection on the notion of authorship in the cinematic practice.

The attempt to fill the intermedial gap through the evocation and imitation of the literary medium in Mekas's hands becomes a formal correlative of the attempt to repair the most conspicuous loss that dominates (and animates) his cinema: that of the irretrievable rural Lithuania of his childhood. Just as Mekas's constantly voyaging 'gestural camera,' deprived of the tripod, imitates the pen, by way of analogy the Manhattan portrayed in *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* constantly evokes and imitates the lost paradise of his childhood, Semeniškiai. Mekas's celebration of the present moment is complicated by the fact that his acceptance of the here and now, inherent in the simultaneous registration of reality on which his camera depends, is persistently mediated by the projection, through the editing process, of the past into the present, as well as of the rural landscape onto the quintessentially urban environment of New York City. The disjunctive interplay between images, intertitles, and the sound apparatus (music, background noises, voice over) plays a key-role in transfiguring the frenetic metropolitan environment into Mekas's own premodern interiorized landscape.

Unlike Thoreau, Mekas finds his own personal Walden pond—to which the alternative title of *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* refers³—inside and not outside the city. He achieves this transfiguration by focusing on the city's naturalistic refuges (most notably Central Park), on the intact possibility of belonging to a community (the Filmmakers' Cooperative that Mekas himself founded), and by visiting artists who live outside the city (a long section that illustrates the Lithuanian filmmaker's visit to Stan Brakhage and his family in Colorado.) As the filmmaker

³ As James summarizes, "relations between Mekas's *Walden* and its eponymous ancestor are [...] multiple and complex, but subtending them all is their common affirmation of the priority of autobiography" (1992, 148).

explained in an interview conducted by Scott MacDonald: “To me Walden exists throughout the city. You can reduce the city to your own very small world which others may never see. [...] *Walden* is made up of bits of memories of what I wanted to see. I eliminated what I didn’t want to see” (MacDonald 1984, 105). An eloquent example of this transformative process is the subway noise that opens *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, accompanied by images of Central Park covered with snow (which are a leitmotif of the film), as well as by two separate intertitles reading: “In New York was still winter / But the wind was full of spring.” Through the interplay between the images and the intertitles, the noise of the subway train (which we do not see) is immediately colored with ambiguity, becoming undistinguishable from the sound of the wind. The use of the montage as a way not only to bridge, but also to underscore gaps and absences is exemplified by Mekas’s frequent recourse to an editing technique called “single frame,” which, as Scott Nygren writes, through a rapid burst of temporally separated frames “incorporates visible absence in the form of the space between the frames into the recording process” (1992, 246). The absence and the gap between the frames are addressed by Mekas’s voice over in another moment of *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches*, where he seems to spell out a theoretical manifesto for his cinematic project: “That’s what cinema is, single frames. Frames. Cinema is between the frames. Cinema is... Light. Movement. Sun. Light. Heart beating. Breathing. Light. Frames” (Mekas 1968). While he outlines his idea of cinema as predicated on absences and gaps, the sound apparatus reproduces the noise of a typewriter. This results in a peculiar intermedial gesture whereby the writerly (and in this case explicitly essayistic) nature of Mekas’s *caméra-stylo* is evoked by a representational system that is usually inaccessible to the written word, the auditory form.

It is not coincidental that the use of the single frame technique also characterizes the second of the three parts that compose *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, entitled “100 glimpses of Lithuania,” where the word ‘glimpses’ well describes the visual effect of this technique. The section illustrates the Mekas brothers’ return to Semeniškiai after twenty-two years of absence, in August 1971. There they reunite with their mother, their uncle, a Protestant pastor, and with other relatives. Omissions play a crucial role in this section, to such an extent that in *Reminiscences* there is a total lack of moments where the Mekas brothers confront the inevitable modernization that has occurred in Lithuania since 1949. The only changes portrayed concern people’s aging, like Mekas’s mother’s and uncle’s, both born at the end of the 19th century. As for the rest, the “100 glimpses” are a series of visual idyls set in a pre-industrialized, uncontaminated rural Eden conveying the idea of the preserved integrity of the landscape of Mekas’s childhood. Again, he eliminates what he does not want to see, but it is through this

omission that he finds a representation of the irretrievability of the Lithuania of his childhood, as well as of the impossibility of successfully achieving a *nostos*. The “measure of sight” applied by Mekas onto reality can only lead to an imitation and evocation of the impossible footage that, as David E. James acutely points out, constitutes the “absent center of the entire project” (1992, 168). The result is both documentary and dreamlike. As Anita Trivelli points out, through the single frame technique the visual fragment becomes “the detonator of an oneiric memory,” which nonetheless exhibits “epiphanic glimpses of concreteness” (Trivelli 2016, 151, my translation). What the “100 glimpses” stage is both Mekas’s dream of regaining the lost paradise of his pre-war hometown and the coming to terms with its impossibility.

An analogous impossibility is at stake with the intermedial encounter between cinema and literary practices. As W. J. T. Mitchell remarks in his discussion of *ekphrasis*, “[w]ords can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their ‘objects’” since “[a] verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can” (Mitchell 1995, 152). Accordingly, in the reverse *ekphrasis* of the *caméra-stylo* moving images cannot completely replicate the potentiality of the written word. Mekas shows his awareness of this intermedial gap through the frequent presence in his oeuvre of close-ups of printed or written pages, like the pages of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* in *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches* or the pages of his own diaries written in the 1950s in *Lost, Lost, Lost*. They are close-ups scans of incomplete textual passages which, in the very enactment of a conflation between the screen and the page, frustrate the viewer/reader’s possibility to really read the screen, revealing the inevitable incompleteness of such an attempt—although this was truer in the 1970s, when these films were conceived only for a projection in a theater, than it is now, when the viewer is given the possibility to stop the running of the film at her will.

Another meaningful conflation between words and images is present in the segment titled “Rabbit Shit Haikus,” contained in *Lost, Lost, Lost*. The segment was originally conceived as an autonomous short film shot by Mekas in 1962 during the breaks of the filming of his brother Adolfas’s feature film *Hallelujah to the Hills*. This section plays an important role in the thematic economy of Mekas’s monumental 1976 diary film. It is used to narrate the period in which the Mekas brothers started to come to terms with their exilic condition and accept their life in America. Mekas chooses the *haiku* in that this Japanese poetic genre represents the ultimate expression of a contact with the here and now, the celebration of the present moment. The visual *haikus* consist in an interlude of vignettes separated by intertitles showing numbers instead of words, and portraying Mekas walking through a landscape covered with snow. The

filmmaker's voice-over tells the story of "the man who couldn't live anymore without the knowledge of what's at the end of the road" (Mekas 1976). When the man 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 story captures the idea of an acceptance of reality that does not require the presence of a particular meaning. At the same time, through this story Mekas reflects on the impossibility to reach the projected end of his own road: the retrieval of his childhood's *Heimat*. It is therefore meaningful that, also in this case, the snow-clad surroundings act as a surrogate of the landscape of the filmmaker's lost Lithuania. Moreover, the intermedial nature of the section, declared by the title that identifies the vignettes as *haikus*, reveals a subtle complexity. Mekas reaches the essence of the *haiku* genre—a connection with the place and the moment of the present—without actually trying to translate the literary genre into an audiovisual surrogate. The intertitles do not evoke *haikus*, as they are made up of numbers, nor does Mekas's voice-over. Besides telling the rabbit-shit parable twice, Mekas as a narrator uses the rhetorical device of repetition, rather uncommon in the *haiku* tradition, repeating three times a series of words: "the house, the house, the house," "the childhood, the childhood, the childhood," "the evening, the evening, the evening," and so on. This repetition may be read as a reference to a circularity that substitutes the linear concept of the question concerning the "end of the road." It follows the logic of the mantra, which is, historically, a device to return the focus to the present moment. Anyway, what the "Rabbit Shit Haikus" reveal is that the film form lacks the structures that can make *haikus* possible. Therefore, it can evoke the essence of the *haiku* practice only by means of creating a completely different audiovisual experience.

To conclude, we have seen how the intermedial gap in Mekas's cinema becomes the formal correlative of the tension towards impossibility that animates his art. The impossibility for a medium to fully reproduce the structures of a different one mirrors the impossibility for Mekas to compensate his loss, by making New York become Semeniškiai. In both cases, the result is a constant vital tension that produces a complex and rich 'third thing' that is prone to be continually renewed and renegotiated. This dialectic involves different languages (both spoken and intersemiotic), the present and the past, America and Lithuania, as well as subjectivity and reality, giving shape to a unique oeuvre that provides the migrant experience with one of its most monumental artistic expressions to date.

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