

# THE MEKAS QUESTION: My Being or My Life?

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(in a suburban Philadelphia newspaper which has not existed since the 1960s)

Jonas Mekas, an aspiring new filmmaker from New York, has made an important movie, *Guns of the Trees*. This film recently had its Pennsylvania premiere showing at the Wayne Avenue Playhouse in Germantown. Mr. Mekas's picture, low-budgeted at \$25,000, is one of a group of experimental films that are coming to be known as 'off-Broadway cinema'.

*Guns of the Trees* is a picture quite different from what we are accustomed to seeing in movie theatres. In a sense, it is a revolt against Hollywood's sugar-coated spectacles. But in a bigger way, *Guns of the Trees* is an attempt at real self-expression by a group deeply concerned, in their own way, with mankind's reaction to today's world of pistons and pulleys and push-button warfare.

The *Guns* makers were not adept at film production, but they used the motion picture camera as best they could to say what they felt they had to say. *Guns of the Trees* was not a technical work of great quality. There were too many sloppy camera pans, too frequently uncontrolled camera movement in general. Mr. Mekas told me, during a conversation prior to a showing of his film, that he and his brother did most of the camera work. This saved money for the privately-financed picture.

*Guns of the Trees* could theoretically have approached Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* in general impact. Seeing the picture was like walking into a confused mind and seeing all the doubts and uncertainties inherent in mankind parading across the cinema screen. The movie faced the audience directly with the problem of why we are living. No one can readily answer this question simply enough to satisfy anyone but himself. So the film was an outburst of bewilderment.

No studios were used for shooting *Guns*. The actors (including Mr. Mekas and Ben Carruthers) were not paid salaries. The picture took 12 months to make with an expense of about \$100 a day when shooting to feed the people working on the picture. Mr. Mekas still owes some of the cost of the raw film stock and developing processes. But Mr. Mekas may well make a profit on his movie. It was written up in a recent *Playboy* magazine by Arthur Knight, *Saturday Review* critic. And the film has a controversial appeal.

*Guns of the Trees*, in an artistic sense, was successful (as far as its technical limitations let it be). The message generally did come across. Some

helpful lines of Ginsberg's poetry added meaning to the picture. Perhaps the key sentence to the whole movie was asked by a young girl in a moment of perplexity: 'My being or my life?' What was she living for, and what was important for her? Should she dedicate herself to a cause, or are causes useless? Should she live for today, or should she have thought for tomorrow? Should she strive for life independent of convention or should she think merely of her own being and conform to standards that don't suit her? These are the questions one heard from *Guns of the Trees*. And these are the questions one must either disregard or seek honestly for the answers himself.

*Guns of the Trees* was not released through any distributor. Its showings are the result of a bold new organisation known as the New American Cinema Group or NACIG. This Group now embraces approximately 75 motion picture theatres throughout the United States. These art theatres have agreed among themselves to show new, experimental, or avant-garde movies which are made in connection with the Group. *Guns of the Trees* was one, and there are now eight more such pictures being made in New York City.

The NACIG is an admirable project that deserves support and encouragement from everyone interested in America's cinematic future. For men like Jonas Mekas and Barney Sackett (owner of Wayne Ave. Playhouse) and the other connected with the Group are actually pioneering in the formation of a new and hopefully better future for American movies as an art forum.