In an interview with Swiss curator and art critic Hans-Ulrich Obrist, independent filmmaker Jonas Mekas describes the path that took him from Lithuania to becoming the ‘godfather’ of American avant-garde cinema. Mekas discusses his time in forced labour and displaced persons camps, describes his assimilation into postwar New York, and shares his insights on how film has been influenced by changes in technology. A selection of images from Mekas can be found in Portfolio.

Tell me about your early life.
I remember my beginnings very well. I think that I must have been around six years old. I was sitting on my father’s bed. Suddenly I felt like singing about the story of his day. It was a very faithful recitation of what he had done on that day. My mother and father listened to me and I can still remember their amazement. I was entranced. They were my first audience. Since then, I have been trying to achieve that same intensity and closeness to everyday reality that I managed in my recitation that day. When I film today, I unconsciously want to achieve some sense of adventure and excitement as I did then. It was then that I think I reached the peak of my poetic life. Ever since, I have only tried to recreate it.

What effect did New York have on you when you moved there after the war?
During Soviet and German occupation and the five years in displaced persons camps, I was in the ruins of what once was Germany, we were starved for culture and what we had missed during our younger years. When we landed in New York, we felt like we were dropped off in Paradise; the city was full of cinemas, actors and jazz. The excitement was overwhelming. As Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Maya Deren and Sidney Peterson in those days were called experimental. Then there was the Beat Generation, Abstract Expressionism, Tenth Street, and eventually, Happening Theatre. It was incredibly rich and exciting and we absorbed it like dry sponges. We came to New York disappointed with humanity but discovered and got infected by a fresh energy and enthusiasm for cinema. I switched to film. I have no idea why, but I have to film it. So I film it. It took a decade to begin to see that it looked like the equivalent of a written diary. Only at that point did I become more conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema.

What made you decide to film every day?
It all happened gradually. I was too busy for a time-consuming process of filmmaking. But I had a craving. So I kept filming. I was a camera junkie. It took a decade to begin to see that it looked like the equivalent of a written diary. Only at that point did I become more conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema.

Finally, how important is the element of opposition to society in your work?
When you look at avant-garde artists of the past, you find a certain kind of schizophrenia. The manifestos are angry and full of oppositional stances, but the works are positive and exciting, a jump forward from their contemporaries. Form, content, and technique move ahead. The oppositional stance is needed only psychologically; it is like an excuse to make a drastic change in their practices. The avant-garde film was not opposed to Hollywood film; we were simply different animals. Same in the arts. Man cannot live by melodrama alone. And also, man cannot live by steak alone; occasionally we need some salad. Put some manure on the roots so the tree grows better. I learned that from my father.