



AMY TAUBIN INTERVIEW  
*FRAGMENTS OF PARADISE*  
LIFE STORIES

**Amy Taubin, Film Critic**  
**30 September, 2021**  
**Interviewed by Katie Davison**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 45 minutes and 28 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Amy Taubin  
Film Critic

00:00:07:00

KATIE DAVISON:

So we'll begin with the hardest question of all. Who are you?

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AMY TAUBIN:

I'm Amy Taubin. I'm a film critic and historian whose primary focus is the American avant garde film and independent film. And a bit of, visual art criticism.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So for those of people who don't know who Jonas Mekas was. How would you describe him?

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AMY TAUBIN:

Jonas was a person who lost his country and place of birth. And so he made for himself a country of his own, and he made for himself a home in that country. And that was the the avant garde film. He generated a movement or a movement of artists. Filmmakers coalesced around Jonas as a person and Jonas's idea of culture. And I guess one of the most famous things that Jonas ever said was, it was in answer to a question, what is the counterculture? And Jonas said, we are not the counterculture, we are the culture. He was a great critic, but mostly he proselytize, for a way of making film and a way of thinking about film in relation to history and art. And he was also a filmmaker. I think that Jonas was really a pragmatist. And I think he saw that there was work. That needed, a home base, you know, it needed, it needed a spokesperson, which was Jonas, but it needed a way to make itself seen all the institutions, all the infrastructure for an avant garde film movement in the United States. Were called into being by Jonas. There was the filmmakers cooperative where anyone could put up film, deposit it, and it would be distributed if people asked for it. And so how would people know to ask for it? Well, Jonas wrote a column in the Village Voice, where he wrote that avant garde films. But he also programed them in a theater in New York. So there was the filmmaker Cinematheque, and the Filmmakers Cinematheque wandered around, from theater to theater, wherever Jonas could get a space for to screen for free or for only the money that would come in at the door. And then, after about ten years of doing this, he found a way to make a collection of what was called the Essential Cinema and A place for It to live, which was Anthology Film Archives, which was a mixed blessing. It was really



counter to what Jonas believed doing. Did not believe in canons. And he was really open to new visions and new ideas and new ways of seeing and, and the idea of picking the 100 greatest or whatever, that was not really compatible. But it happened and it still exists. And. Might go forward in a way that's more in keeping with with what Turnus originally wanted.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I wonder if you can define for me the avant garde.

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AMY TAUBIN:

You know, the avant garde is a term that comes from the comes from the military. Yeah. It was the soldiers that was sent out in front of the offices. The first guard, who were cannon fodder. They all died. They were there actually, to protect the generals in the. And they got mowed down. So the avant garde goes out in front of the mainstream, and often does not succeed in the way the mainstream succeeds in having any kind of notoriety or commercial success. It's very old fashioned term, and there's never been a good term for the kinds of films, that Jonas championed and that he made avant garde film. The other terms are underground film or the other cinema. And mostly the terms are relative, because if you have underground film, there must be an overground film. And if you have, an other cinema, then there must be a mainstream cinema. They're not none of them good terms. And of course, the avant garde is funny because nothing is ever ahead of its time. Everything is in its time. So those films were a particular part of their time, and still are. And there have been all kinds of ways that people talk about what they



should be or could be. So for a while, avant garde was non-narrative film, non literary film. But none of that was true. They're narrative avant garde films or literary avant garde films. I think one characteristic usually is because they're not going to generate a huge amount of income. They're made by, in general, individual artists who are very resourceful about materials and treat their materials the way, painters would. Poets would be working with basic materials. So for a long time that was 16 millimeter film, basically was the medium in which Jonas worked and most avant garde filmmakers worked. And then gradually there was a changeover to digital, which began in the late 80s, to. To where we are today, where a lot of people work digitally, but some people still work in terms of 16 millimeter. Materials are very important. The one term that Jonas, I think never used was experimental film, which is the term that, for better or worse, I use most often. Even though, all films experimental, all art is experimental. You know, there wouldn't be, 20 writers coming in on Hollywood films if they knew what they were doing and weren't, you know, in some sense experimenting on every film. So the idea that this particular film is an experiment and Lawrence of Arabia isn't that crazy. Jonas would have said that the avant garde is more like poetry. And Hollywood film is more like prose. But the avant garde film is poised, I think, with, certain kinds of films that don't do the one thing that Hollywood films do, which is give you an entertainment for an evening in a theater. Now, not so much in theaters, but two hours of a story with a beginning, middle and end. That's not what avant garde films do. And one of the really. Central things for film makers who allied themselves with experimental film is how? How do you determine how long the thing is? When does a film resolve itself in time as a structure? There are avant garde films that are six hours long. They're avant garde films that are 10s long. And part of how you shape time



is really central to that notion of avant garde film, and how strong the shape is that you make determines whether you've made a successful work of art or not. You know, in that way it's closer to music, than to certainly it's closer to music than to still photography or painting or sculpture. It's a time based medium, and that's where in quotes the experiment was.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So when did you first become aware of Jonas Mekas?

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AMY TAUBIN:

I was a teenager, and I guess I was reading The Village Voice in college. And Jonas's movie journal was something I read. And I also went with my, husband to be and now ex-husband, Richard Foreman. We began going to cinema 16 when we were both in college. And mixed in with narrative films and science films and pornography and, anthropological film. Were these other films? And that's when I first saw Stan package in my. Darren and I thought they were ridiculous. I was a teenager. I thought, this is the most ridiculous stuff I've ever seen. And then I saw Jonas, who's guns of the trees. And I never wanted to go back to cinema 16 after that, because it was the most depressing thing that I'd ever seen. But for some reason, we kept on following Jonas and what he would write about in The Village Voice. And Richard and I began going to all the screenings at, the various play theaters that Jonas was making, Cinematheque. So the Charles Theater on Avenue B and the City Hall Cinema and all those theaters and then. And really important one on. Near Gramercy Park, the Gramercy Arts, where I saw



Warhol films for the first time. And then Jonas got into trouble with the police. Jonas and Ken Jacobson, slow cop. Then Jacobs, were arrested and and and was dead. And I had gone to these screenings and we were extremely shy and we were also uptown people. And I was an actor, and I was in mainstream theater, up Broadway and on Broadway. But it was gradually becoming clear that the art I cared about was not that. And that was the same thing for Richard. So when I found out that Jonas and the Cinematheque was in trouble, I screwed up my college, and I volunteered, and I went up to him at a screening, and I said, what can I do? And he said, go to the filmmakers, call up and help Leslie Trumbull. And so when I wasn't working, that's what I would do. I'd go to the filmmakers cooperative and help distribute films, basically type labels and make out invoices, mail things. And I did that for years.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Can you tell me about kind of what that was like? That it was his house. And.

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AMY TAUBIN:

You know, when I started working at the co-op, it was at, 414 Park Avenue South, on the second floor. And in the front were desks, two of them, I believe in telephones. And there was the film that was kept there that was circulating, was on shelves, and Jones lived on and off in the back. And there were also projectors. And in the evening, Jones would show films at the co-op for other filmmakers. And he also for, people he thought might donate money to support filmmakers and support the co-op. And so it was at those



screenings that I met Barbara Rubin and Harry Smith, and Jack Smith, and Warhol, who I had when I first saw the Warhol films. I had no idea who made them, and I didn't really, you know, I didn't put a face with the films till slightly later. You know, Warhol was a great sponge, and he certainly came to the Cinematheque when his films, the kiss series, was on programs with other films. I remember. He went to the first screening of, Michael Snow's New York indie rock and roll. And actually liked it and told Michael he liked it. But of course he liked everything. And he came to the co-op at night, to see whatever Jonas was showing there. And Jonas showed anything that he picked up off the shelves. Yeah. Jonas was the oddest person to be at the center of so many different stories of New York society and was, you know, highly regarded and taken quite seriously, in Park Avenue, living rooms, where in in the homes of great art collectors. I've never understood it, you know? I think the most contentious place for donors was with other filmmakers, other filmmakers of the avant garde, because they all wanted something from him, and it was extremely difficult. You had a movement that was small and virtually penniless. Most people who made avant garde films, you know, they didn't have any money from them, and they were in a period of time where maybe they could get by for a while and not have a job, or have the kind of job where you worked one night a week or, like really much and remained in working for Newsweek at night, on the teletype machine. And so everyone wanted to be mentored and Jonas's column and everyone was angry with Jonas if he didn't mention them. That was the place that was probably most difficult for him. The avant garde film movement was very, very, very small in the beginning and then grew slightly bigger through the 60s. But you could fit all the artists who were poets and musicians and avant garde filmmakers and painters who did not yet have galleries. If there were



200 altogether, that was a lot. So when people socialize, those same 200 people came together, and Jonas was a gravitational force among all those people.

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KATIE DAVISON:

In the beginning, as we're researching this, like getting through all the institutions and why they matters. You know, it kind of takes a little bit of getting your head around, but very basically, it seems like creating places to see these works became really important. Maybe now people, because content is so readily available. Wouldn't understand why why creating space to screen films and then writing about them was so important.

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AMY TAUBIN:

Jonas was not the first person to realize that, avant garde film needed to be written about, and there needed to be places to show it. I mean, theaters that showed Hollywood movies were not going to show avant garde film, in the 50s. So in New York there was this kind of big institution, solid institution, which was cinema 16 and cinema 16 showed all kinds of films, including occasionally European narrative films, but mostly films that would not be shown in commercial theaters. And they were a subscription series. And, cinema 16, had two venues. One was, a high school called Fashion Arts and Technology and the other Fashion Trades High School, which also held meetings of the Communist Party. And then there was a theater on a real theater on 34th Street that showed cinema 16 on Sunday mornings. Like, instead of going to church, you went to cinema 16. And those were kind of





rituals. But my a Daryn who had made her first film, mixtures of the afternoon. In 1943, was the person who realized that she had to have a place to show it. And so she began showing, both in art galleries and at the Provincetown Playhouse on McDougall Street, which was a theater. And, and it was in relation to those early screenings that Jonas began his Movie Journal column. And at that point, the New American Cinema group had come into being, and Jonas had written its proclamation that asked for movies *The Color of Blood*. And he realized that, people had to know about these films, and there had to be a place to show them. And that's why the cinema was so important, and they never could stay very long in one place. So if they started at the Charles Theater and then, for a while, the City Hall Cinema and the Gramercy Arts and the Bleecker Street Cinema at midnight and the Carnegie Hall cinema uptown when it came into being also at midnight, and then the Elgin Theater much later. And those were midnight or then there became festivals and they would take a little ads in the *Village Voice*. I mean, the *Village Voice* was really central to, getting this movement written about and known. And of course, Jonas didn't respect or think twice about conflict of interest, and that's why he didn't think of himself as a critic or really as a journalist. He simply wrote a diary that was printed in *The Village Voice*, and it was called *Movie Journals*. And he essentially wrote about the films that his friends were making that he was showing at the Cinematheque. And the reason the boys regarded this not as a conflict of interest for many years is that no one made any money, and they all were aware that Jonas wanted to become famous or rich. He would write about Hollywood films as he started out doing, and that, you know, you can only talk about conflict of interest when there's money or power involved, and there wasn't money or power involved. And that's how Jonas justified this bargain to himself.



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KATIE DAVISON:

Would you describe Jonas as criticism, style, as the part of the diary form?

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AMY TAUBIN:

I think Jonas said he wrote diaries. He wrote journals. He wrote journals that were printed or handwritten and then printed. And he made films that were also journals. And I'm not sure at what point. Probably not until he had made a lot of work. Did he understand that, that the form they were taking was, the form of a journal? The first great Jonas Mekas film. *Walden Diaries, notes and Sketches* is that it is a diary of a person who moved through all stratas of New York society. And I always say to people, if you want to see what New York was like in the 60s, the first thing you do is look at Jonas's diaries, notes and sketches. I mean, there are things you won't see, but you'll see Mayor Lindsay taking a walk, through the wooded park in New York. You'll see, people again in, Park Avenue, living rooms, and you'll see artists at work and you'll see daily life on the streets. You will really see what New York was like in the 60s. I don't think that I ever saw Jonas until very late in his life. Without a camera. I mean, no, he was not carrying a camera when he was inside. The filmmakers go up or later inside the anthology, but it was near the hand. But in the street, Jonas always had a camera in his backpack or over the shoulder bag. And it was a series of 16 millimeter Bolex cameras. First wind up cameras, and then I think the last camera he had was battery operated. It is. And then in the ATC, exchange them for video cameras beginning with the worst. Hi Ed, I think we saw what he started with. Yeah. Jonas carried his camera everywhere, and so



did a lot of people who then identified themselves as avant garde filmmakers. So that Warren Sandberg, who was a diary filmmaker, carried his camera everywhere. And so I believed it. Andrew Norton carried its camera everywhere. On the other hand, the avant garde filmmakers who were not diaries, like Michael Snow did not carry their cameras everywhere. It's odd. I think I remember seeing I do remember seeing notes from the circus. And that would be a big chunk of world. And, and I saw, the award ceremony to Andy Warhol, the film culture award ceremony, which I'm not sure is involved in in its entirety. I don't think it is, but the one I do remember because it's in there and it because it is in the style of much of world and was notes from the circus. Actually, I was an actress when, Adolphus was making The Hill, and I think I submitted my photo to the casting. And later, Adolphus sent that photo back to me and said, well, it wasn't right for what we were doing. So I liked Hallelujah the Hills enormously. But even before that. You know, I truly do not remember. What film it is of Joan is that I reconsidered my really negative feelings about. Guardians of the trees. And it probably was something extremely small, and I don't remember what it was, but Jonas was very clear about the problem he had making guns. The trees, which was. It was a narrative film that required continuity. And he didn't have the money to shoot continuity, and he didn't have the money to shoot with actors who weren't experienced. And it was at that point that he had to invent a different way of making films when he understood that, oh, I know what I saw. I saw the brig. And I thought that was great. The brig is really a collaborative film because it's a document of a living theater production, and I think it's a collaborative film between Jonas and Adolphus, because it was fantastic. If you look at, some of the diary films that use the very earliest footage he shot in New York, which is really like black and white, images of daily life, almost like



ethnographic filmmaking of, people in the Lithuanian community, immigrants who had just come over, who lived in his neighborhood, their daily life, that looks like really good black and white documentary shooting in 16 millimeter. And. I think later, Jonas realized what he could throw away. And part of that is the influence of Stan Brackett. And for Brakhage, it was an intellectual thing. That he threw all the rules away, including the rule about focus and exposure and the kind of film used indoors or outdoors. And while I was in and out of focus image equivalent to an in-focus image. And I think some of that rubbed off on Jonas. And basically he shot more and more from the hip without putting the camera to his eye, you know? But, when he was editing, at first, he was quite careful about the images he used. My favorite film of Jonas is the film of, outtakes from *The Life of a Happy Man*, and that probably has the most out of focus shooting for any film of Jonas's. You know, *The Brick* showed in Venice at the Venice Film Festival and won a prize. And they were so crazy it won a prize. They thought it was the documentary of a real brick, as opposed to the documentary of a theater production. It was, I think, quite confusing, but it did win a prize and it did put Jonas on the map. Yeah, but more as still at that time as some kind of curator then as, a filmmaker in his own right. I don't think people saw Jonas as a filmmaker in his own right until diaries, notes and sketches *Walden*.

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KATIE DAVISON:

In that period, I wonder, was there more inclusivity and in the avant garde community? I mean, you see more women filmmakers, it seems, and and more people of color. Or is that a misperception?



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AMY TAUBIN:

There was certainly women filmmakers and. Jonas really encouraged women filmmakers. And one of the horrible thing about, the anthology is the number of women who, Jonas would have had in there. But the other people who decided this didn't, and that was Barbara Rubins Christmas on Earth, which then Jonas gave a special place in the anthology, too, because it is, if not the greatest film of that period, one of the greatest films, and also Shirley Clarke's films, which were such groundbreaking major work, and that they were not included was just horrible. It was it was really painful. But I a good film, like every part of the art world, in the late 50s through the 60s, was dominated by white men. And it also. Was, if you look at the history of queer film and you look at the history of avant garde film, they are twined around each other. From the 40s onward. And so in relation to gender, much more inclusive and progressive. And that was a big deal for Jonas, who was who began, as writing in the Village Voice, some very homophobic pieces. And then at a certain point, he looked at Jack Smith's work and he realized that Jack was making great film and great art. And something changed profoundly in Jonas. And he would always say, you know, he grew up on a farm. And, he was really conservative in that way. But he really turned around, and it was Barbara. Really. Rubin and and Jack there turned Jonas around, and then. Andy. Yeah. I don't mean in his life. He lived his life as a heterosexual man, but in terms of the work he cared about, that was an entirely different thing.

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KATIE DAVISON:



Do you remember the rioting around The Flaming Creatures, during that period, and why that battle was so important?

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AMY TAUBIN:

You know, when people think of the 60s, they think of 60s as just this counter culture, anything goes, nudity, sex on the street, all of that. The censorship at the beginning of the 60s was really terrible. It wasn't only to do with film, there was the Lenny Bruce case. Where this absolutely great comedian performer, this brilliant man was really quite destroyed by the police, by getting arrested, by censorship. And the two films that played together, Jean Genet's only film, and The Flaming Creatures, which Jonas showed as a double bill. And he had smuggled the Genet film into the country, and decided that it was somehow paired with The Flaming Creatures, and I don't think anyone was prepared to see the cops show up and close things down. I don't think that occurred to people beforehand. But as soon as that happened, when was that... 63, going forward it was really quite a mess.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So, right around that period, I think 63, 64, Jonas shoots Empire for Andy, do you know how that comes about?

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AMY TAUBIN:

I was no longer going the factory when Empire came around. But I certainly was close to Jonas. And the story I've always heard. Andy. Andy was, a person



who liked to have people suggest ideas to him. Andy was a sponge, you know? So Naomi Levine, the avant garde filmmaker, believe that Andy painted the flower painting paintings because Naomi said pink flowers and someone else said paint money. And Jones looked at the Empire State Building one day and thought that was an image for Andy, and I guess he told Andy about it, I don't know, but he certainly shot it for Andy. Shot it with his own camera. And a journalist lent cameras. He lent a camera to Jack Smith for Flaming Creatures. He lent a camera to Barbara Rubin for her film. He lent a camera, a 60 millimeter camera to Andy for the early films. Then Andy got his own slate. So he shot Empire for Andy. Yeah. Jonah's certainly. Gave Andy the idea of making films. He gave him the I mean, Andy was a movie lover. Andy wrote to Shirley Temple when he was a boy. Andy modeled his voice in his behavior on Shirley Temple. You look at Andy with his arms wrapped around him and his voice, and you realize that Shirley Temple on the Good Ship lollipop. And. Oh. And so. And Andy was also interested in Jack Smith and in drag performances, what it was then called drag cabaret. And the early superstars, like, Mario Montez, came from Jack Smith's circle. And so Jack was really influential on Andy, and Jack was someone who Jones wrote of that, and Jack was someone whose films were shown at the Cinematheque. And so when Andy thought maybe this would be a good idea, maybe I'd like to do this. Make them. I could make a movie. He saw the world that Jonas had created, which was the filmmakers call up that maybe he could distribute these films and the Gramercy Arts Theater that could show them. And a place in the Village Voice where they would be written about. I think that Warhol really realized that there was a structure that he could perhaps become a film maker within. Now, what was crazy about this? It was so profoundly crazy. Warhol believed that the films he was making at the factory would take him



to Hollywood. And of course, you know, you had to know if you knew anything about the industry, that the industry would never care about this. And actually they would be repelled by this. And at the same time, Warhol was making trouble for himself in the visual art world because, you know, his dealers had to keep quiet that he was making these semi pornographic or actually pornographic films down in his factory. They did not want to know about this, but Jonas did. I mean, Jonas thought these films were the most valuable thing. And for a period of time, they were the most important thing that Warhol was doing. You know, after the Death and Disaster series, Warhol pretty much put away painting in favor of making a film every single day in the factory. The only reason he could do that was he sold paintings. Otherwise, you wouldn't have had the money would have been a spoiler as any other avant garde filmmaker.

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AMY TAUBIN:

Were you also following what was happening with Fluxus and George Maciunas at the time?

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AMY TAUBIN:

I met George Maciunas just through Jonas. Richard and I met George. And I met. Visual artists through George. They were artists and sound artists who were involved with Fluxus. And the one thing about Jonas' Guns of the Trees, besides my not liking it, that connected me to it, and to a part of the art world, was that one of its stars, Frances Stillman, we had been at Sarah Lawrence together. And Frances was two years ahead of me. But for a year we had lived





in this same Off-Campus house, Morris House, where, the most brilliant and furthest out young women lived, and Francis, who was already involved. With a group of people who would live at, 56 Ludlow Street, and that would be Jack and Tony Conrad and John Cale and later Lou Reed and Angus McAleese, who became, Frances's boyfriend for a time. Connected somehow to Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Orlovsky and Gregory Corso. And they used to come up and visit us at Morris House once a week, and we would feed them whatever was in our refrigerator, basically peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and they would bring us pot to smoke. And so that was my first connection. But I have no memory of Jonas coming up to Sarah Lawrence or to Morris House, although I imagine he did. So it was a very, very small world.

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KATIE DAVISON: I mean, it just sounds so. I mean, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with the icons of our day.

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AMY TAUBIN:

Well, I was a very upper middle class young woman, and although I was already primarily interested in French surrealist film, and in, you know, Russian constructivism, and the avant garde arts of the early 20th century. I really wasn't prepared for the beat generation. Basically, these grubby guys would come around and eat or peanut butter and jelly. I was not prepared for that. And I never was that interested in Allen Ginsberg or, those early poets. Personally, I was interested in was Robert Frank. And so Robert Frank was. A fairly isolated character, although he was part of the first New Cinema group, and certainly a person on that proclamation. And I was quite shy, and I don't



think I ever said a word to Robert until so much later. I didn't say a word to Jonas, you know, until 1963.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I can't remember when Pull My Daisy was. Jonas has this great footage, so I guess he was on the set of it. Was he being influenced by what Robert Frank was doing? Did you have a sense of that?

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AMY TAUBIN:

There weren't so many films going on in 59 and 60. Jonas. I mean very, very fast mover. He came to the U.S., thought that he would write Hollywood scripts, made these kind of documentaries that look like documentaries of, you know, people in his neighborhood and saw and somehow met my adherent. And I think it was Maya who really impressed Jones. And then quickly Mark hopeless. And there were people working on the West Coast. Would, you know, there was not that much geographical crossing of the country. So I'm not quite sure what he knew of those people like Sidney Peterson and people on the West Coast. But, My, I would say was the crucial person for Jonas to draw him into what this tiny, tiny group of film makers would doing. And then he was a great champion of Robert Frank's films of, Pull My Daisy and then, the one with the angel in it, and. And then, of course, Stan. And perhaps visually, Stan Brackett more than anyone else, because Maya Deren was still making films with great cinematographers shooting for her and began shooting in 35 and then 16. And that was still a kind of way that journalists saw a film, really, I think until he saw. And and the same is



true for Paul My Daisy, which was shot in 35. And, well, that was a great camera man. And, and then there was two people who blew that open. One was Brackett, the other was the person I haven't mentioned yet is Ken Jacobs. And Jonas saw these tiny films that Ken was making these incredibly fragile films at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s, like *The Death of Pete Down* and *Little Steps of Happiness*, with Jack Smith as a star. And those were really, really important to him. And he got to Jack and who Jack was and, his beginning to understand about gender, and to understand transgression. Because, after all, what Jones was interested in in all of these films was transgression. But he was hesitant about people who would show themselves as sexually transgressive. But it took, I think, Ken Jacobs work with Jack for Jonas to be able to open in that way. And Ken's Ken is probably the greatest cameraman of the of uncle Art, which is why I've always thought it's terrible that Ken gave up really shooting original footage, but working with footage that was already there, either his own or others. Ten had the greatest eye. Unbelievably great films. World was born here. Maya was born in the Soviet Union. Jonas was born in Lithuania. But most people in the avant garde like bracket were at least second or third generation. And then, of course, the person who funded anthology, Jerome Hill came from one of the blue blood American families, a family that founded railroads and was immensely wealthy. But Jerome Hill was interested in avant garde film and in being a film maker himself. And he was profoundly different from anyone else. But he really cared about this work, and he really cared about Jonas's vision of making a permanent home for it. An anthology could not have come into being without Jerome and, who supported a great many filmmakers during his lifetime. So what, if any, influence or connection did Jonas have to the French New Wave? None. Or let me put it this way. Morris Angle made Little



Fugitive, and he made it with a camera that was specially designed for him to handhold on the beaches of Coney Island. And that film went to the Venice Film Festival, and that film made New Wave filmmakers realize that they could also commission a camera like this, and they could shoot in the streets, and. So I would say that Morris Angle, who was part of that first new American cinema group, had this enormous influence on the French New Wave. But the French New Wave, not on the early part of the avant garde and not really on journalists who by the time the new wave got started, was already on to something that did not involve feature films, something that was not feature films with actors and narrative. Now, that said, you know, journalists loved all kinds of films. He loved Rossellini. And he loved Rossellini's films. He probably did not love Godard's films. Not true for his films. He loved drier films. Those and those films are in the anthology Permanent collection. Those were films that were very, very important to him. But I think that journalists thought that the American avant garde had already gone several steps past the breakdown of narrative that Goodall was involved in. You know, was not particularly interesting. What was and was, was also part of this early period was, verité documentary, and the work of, Ricky Leacock, and the men Maysles, and Da Pennebaker. Those were part again of the new Nu Cinema group. And I think that the handheld work, particularly Leacock, was as important to Jonas's development as a filmmaker, as, Brakhage that notion of handholding and cutting on movement, that, that is clearly influential on Brakhage, too, although Brakhage never would have said that.

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KATIE DAVISON:



Can you describe or define for us what the New American Cinema group was?

00:57:08:00

AMY TAUBIN:

It was essentially Jonas, throughout his lifetime, had this idea that it would be hard to raise money for individual films, but if you could have a group of filmmakers, a film movement, it might be easier to fund them. And so the New American Cinema Group was exactly that. It was a bunch of filmmakers who came together, who had an idea of making films as pretty much independent, individual artists outside of the system of, Hollywood or even public television and, you know, could present themselves. I mean, there was that famous line that we want to make films, *The Color of Blood*. There was this notion of and there were all kinds of films. There were narrative films there. There were avant garde films that were, documentary films. Makers were involved. There was Louis Allen, who was a really important Hollywood producer and Broadway producer and, actually director of films, who was extremely interested in this kind of work. And he was part of the New American Cinema group. So it was really, heterogeneous, but it was primarily there to. Interest people who might want to lend financial support and to say, this is a movement that's bigger than any one film. You know, like Stan Brackett, you might like Ricky Leacock, you might like Robert Frank. You know, I don't think the idea for the co-op grew out of the New American Cinema Group, although the idea of collectivity is behind both of them. I think the New American Cinema group had pretty much gone nowhere. By the time there was simply the need to be thoughtful, to be able to show their work. And, you know, the history that filmmakers go up is so strange, because this was also a moment where, American art, abstract art was being used for



propaganda purposes all over the world. And it's very interesting. When I went to work for the co-op, huge amounts of rental were coming primarily in Europe by. You know, the United States Agency for Art abroad, whatever those letters stood for. I mean, they were essentially the CIA. And this was showing that America was free to make art that was abstract. It was very, very, very curious. The promotion of abstract art by the government and to see that, avant garde art was also. Avant garde film was also included there. I don't think they showed Warhol films or Jackie Smith films, but I think as I remember, they went to lower bracket films. And the other places that rented from the co-op in the early days. Were, advertising agencies that were advertising agencies, big major advertising agencies, because that industry was located in New York. They'd come in every week and say, what's new? And so Bruce Conner, Bruce Bailey. Kenneth Anger, those films were looked at, Edmund Miller every week by the advertising agencies, seeing what tricks they could drive, what visual tricks could they drive from them? And then there were colleges and, you know, the co-op, really, what the co-op did was to make a network of college cinemas, who began to rent, along with new wave films, French New Wave and along with mainstream American films, avant garde films as well.

01:02:28:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Do you think that, the AMA card had an effect on, like the changing forms of techniques used in more mainstream media as we're going from the 60s into the 70s?

01:02:40:00



AMY TAUBIN:

I mean, in the same way as we look at *Breathless* now and it just looks totally normal. And I tried to tell students why this kind of jump cut Jonas could speak with enormous conviction. I mean, I, I should say that I probably would not be a writer without journals. Kind of. Showing me in the movie journal that this was possible, that it was possible to, write about work. In a way that was both rigorous and personal. And that. If you were going to write about work where that question of what matters to me? Is the first question you ask when you pick up a camera. Well, there had to be a way to write so that what matters to me is always there. When you sit down at the keyboard and what matters to me changes, you know, over a lifetime, over a week. You're not writing about yourself, but you are writing about an interaction between yourself and a particular work or group of works. And I think Jonas, for me, was a model of how to do that, other ways that he should have been the model. He, was not so influential because terms really didn't care about anything being perfect, either a sentence or an image in a film. He thought that that was a waste of time. And it could be good enough, but to to have conviction without being first over endlessly. And I've us endlessly. It's interesting because some people have persuaded me to put together a collection of writing, and I see that I had started writing some stuff, which is how journalists could recommend me even before he recommended me. But he recommended me for my first newspaper job. He had left the *Village Voice*. And he left the *Village Voice* for the first time. An editor there took a pen to his copy. The voice was changing and Jonas was getting edited, and he just walked out. And then Jill Johnson walked out after him. And that was a great loss. And he went to the *Soho News*. And then he simply didn't have time to keep up with the cutting edge. And so one day he said to me, you know, you



see a lot of films you can write. I'm going to tell them you should write about avant garde film at the Soho News. So that was my first regular professional writing job. Yeah.

01:06:16:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I want to go back to that. The students and trying to understand breathless from this perspective. I mean, it's also been an issue that I've been having as we look at some even like Robert Moon and it looks like a music video, or I wonder if you could just tell me a little about how the avant garde influenced the mainstream.

01:06:36:00

AMY TAUBIN:

There's a famous story that probably had been told dozens of times. And it's a story about Martin Scorsese, who very late, like in the late 60s, early 70s, was friendly with an avant garde filmmaker named Vernon Zimmerman, who ended up in Hollywood doing it. I'm not sure what, but he made a couple of films that were shown as part of, you know, films at the Cinematheque, and Vernon took a lot of the avant garde films over to Marty's, and one of them was Kenneth Anger's Scorpio Rising. And it was there that he realized, oh, you could have preexisting pop songs play in their entirety through a scene of a film, not just a song that's written for the hero and the heroine to row a boat. Central Park lit. But existing songs that the film could be set to, and that came from seeing Scorpio Rising. And so I think of Scorpio Rising as the first set of music videos, or very early set. But so in a strange way, is Rose Holbert, because Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith found that record of Sounds of Spain, that





when Rose Hobart is shown properly, it's the particular track that's played with over and over again. And so that idea of how sound and image could combine was an image that came from a certain part of the avant garde, and that ended up being music videos, you know, and before that, 30s and 60s commercial spots. How do you put sound and image together in a situation that's not necessarily narrative, where the music is not supporting a story, but it's doing something else? Jonas's soundtracks are the most amazing in the diaries and all the films after that soundtracks. Because although he would often carry a tape recorder, he didn't record sync sound till much later when he began making digital, making video work. And so those soundtracks were composed as he was editing, picture. He would just keep a radio, in the editing room, and he would record music off the radio. He would have a microphone that he recorded his own commentary as he edit it in those tracks of. Really? They would. They are what make the time structure of the diary films so complicated. Because the shooting happened immediately in that moment, but the soundtrack doesn't. And, in that way, it's very different than cinema verité. You could say the shooting is verité like, but the sound has nothing to do with verité.

01:10:34:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I wonder if we could talk about Genesis films. You said that you you talked about optics, like as a happy man, but what do you think are his most important film works?

01:10:43:00

AMY TAUBIN:



Outtakes from love a Happy Man is my favorite, and partly because it seems the most handmade, and also because Elbow Schell, who began working with Jonas very late in his movie making, is a really wonderful editor, and it was a combination in that film of LS I and Jonas is I that I particularly enjoy, but I think. The the you know the groundbreaking work is world in got diaries, notes, books and sketches. But I am particularly moved by lost, lost, lost, which I believe is the film that comes after it. Really by that early series of films made with footage from the 60s. And then there's completely different work. There's that four screen, Lithuania, TV footage installation, when the Soviets fell in, let in Lithuania. And that, I think, is really brilliant. There's some of Jonas's portraits. While you know the filmmaking, the digital, the video filmmaking is excruciatingly awful. That portrait. Of George Tunis, the portrait of, Raymond Abraham. As portraiture. I think they are extraordinary. And I think that someplace that Warhol and Jonas come together or around their interest in portraiture. While Jonas never made anything like the Warhol screen test, all of Warhol's filmmaking is portraiture. Some of Jonas's filmmaking is portraiture. But those later digital or video portraits, while I might not find them esthetically pleasing, they are so brilliant in terms of portraiture. Yeah. Jonas worked more than any person I've ever known. He worked nonstop, I think probably until the last five years of his life. He probably got by on 3 or 4 hours of sleep. I once wrote a piece about him, for the New York Times, actually, where he described his day. I think the piece was maybe at the beginning of the 90s. You know, and it was still I go to the anthology in the morning and I read the mail and I make my phone calls, and then I have lunch. And then I go home and I take care of. I forget what was the international correspondence. And I have time with my family, and then I watch religiously. Sports on TV. Tennis and basketball. But particularly tennis



and running. And then when it's quiet, I go into the editing room after midnight, and I stay in there as long as I can stay awake, usually for hours. I mean, it was fantastic how much he worked. And so there was this thing about journalists of always having projects and going forward. But, you know, I think Jonas was the most traumatized person I've ever had contact with. I mean, anyone who knew him should have known how deep the traumas of his early life were in him. And. The degree to which he refused to give into them. And the degree to which he kept that invisible. And allowed it to come out in the films only in the form of melancholy. Not in the form of the extremity of loss and anger that I just saw. In every gesture and every facial movement, you know. I mean, you know how clowns are the most angry and the most tragic figures. Jonas worked very hard at being a clown. For other people. Well, I think maybe that's why I like diaries, notebooks, and sketches so much that there is a sense of reconciliation in diaries, notebooks and sketches that. He's. You know, Jonas would say that. I think he says it in that film that everyone talks about his films in terms of loss. And indeed, he made a film called lost, lost, lost. But. In that film. He wasn't trying to remember or looking for the images that were in memory and may be lost in memory. The images on the screen were there for themselves. They were what existed. And that sense of them existing is very strong in that film. Well, for us it's about saving money on film. For Brakhage, to this idea of shooting two and three frames was about, I mean, you know, kids these days can imagine how expensive it was to shoot three minutes, two and, you know, three quarter minutes to film and process it. It was fantastic. It was the cost of your rent for a New York City apartment. Did you could rent for \$30 or \$40. And that was the cost of a, you know, three minutes of film with processing. And so the idea of superimposing on one strip or shooting only three frames at a time, it was



economic. And then it was about. Radical time as opposed to real time. You know, and the what Warhol introduced was slowed down time. Slower than real time. And what everyone else was doing was much, much faster than real time. Yeah.

01:18:51:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I wonder if you could define for me what time the diary form was, according to Jonas, in his films, but also if he was the pioneer of it. Like when I see the first one.

01:19:03:00

AMY TAUBIN:

I'm not sure that Jones was the pioneer of the diary film. So many avant garde filmmakers in the early 60s were carrying around their cameras and shooting their friends and their girlfriends and their boyfriends and getting up in the morning and, going to sleep at night. And, they would make warrants on what was making diaries. Andrew Norton was making diaries. And you could argue that, certainly. Absolutely. Ken Jacobs was making diaries because Jones hadn't decided what he would do with all this footage that he was shooting all along. I'm not so sure that he conceived of them being put together as a diary. He certainly, you know, since childhood, had been writing in a diary every day. And and so when he picked up a camera, he began to do the same thing with it. But how? That would be a form that could be printed in a book or shown on a screen protector on a screen? I'm not sure he thought of until there were other diary filmmakers out there, because. So much of avant garde film involves is a one person show. And it's one person looking. I mean, you



can make the argument that bracket just films are all diaries. What else are they? They are, in part, diaries of his life, but they're also diaries of his discovery of what to do with the camera. The thing that Jonas did was to complicate complicated by his use of sound and by making these two time zones the the film, the film image, which exists in the past, by the time that he is constructing the sound for it. And they always exist in two different cine time zones, even though when you see and hear them in a theater or wherever. Both the image and sound of the past. But I do think it was Jonas who complicated. But after all. Meshes of the afternoon is not a diary film. But Alexandra Hammond's Private Life of a Cat is a diary film. It's a diary of the cats, male and female, that he and Maya had, who had kittens and the kittens growing up. It is a diary of them watching their cats raise their kittens. What else would it be? And it's called The Private Life of a cat. For the most part. Documentaries separate the maker from the maker separates themselves from what they're shooting. A diary is a one person job, you know? This is my life. This is my camera. This is my eye. And so the Jonas's portrait films aren't really diary films. They have a specific subject. And some of the footage John is shot is part of his ongoing diary. I saw George Tunis on this day and you see it in other films, but when George becomes the subject, it is not Jones's diary George anymore. And it may be more a question of which way does it pull? Because I'm sure you could make an argument. It's only Jonas is footage of George. It's the part of Jones's diary that he kept of George. But I don't see it as a diary film.

01:24:17:00

KATIE DAVISON:



Is the 60s the end of the 60s? Like 64 to 70? Is that sort of the height of this period of of our guard underground film?

01:24:27:00

AMY TAUBIN:

The late 50s to about 1970 was about a certain kind of idea of avant garde or experimental film. And after that it became much more fragmented, and some people would go on making work that followed from what they did during that period, like, Nick Dorsey, Jerry Hyland is still making work. That is a continuation of what they did in that period. It's different, but it still is a continuation. I think that history has to yet talk about, what Ken Jacobs has done. I mean, this is just an enormous body of work that continues and changes when he goes digital. And it is beyond shifting technology. It's about a shifting esthetic and a shifting relationship to the world and to the history of film itself for me. Ken is as much a historian in his films, a historian of New York, a historian of the history of film, much more than a diarist. And in an odd way. I think that's the great development, and it's a development that Jonas was part of. To see film as the bearer of history. And, you know, we we always said quite glibly, in the 60s, the moving image is now the place in which history is written, rather than in books. I'm not sure whether I feel like that or any more, I probably do. But the filmmakers who have been able to continue have that very strong relationship to history. And certainly Jonas had a strong relationship to history.

01:27:00:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I read something about you reflecting on organizing Jonas' 45th birthday.



01:27:07:00

AMY TAUBIN:

Barbara Rubin and I were very close friends at that point. I believe it was Jonas 45th birthday, and we decided something special had to be done. Jonas, you know, had one corduroy jacket that he wore to death. It was falling in rags. Most of what Jonas wore was falling in rags, and seldom went to the laundry or the dry cleaners. And so Barbara and I decided that we wanted to dress Jonas for his 45th birthday. And we also wanted to make a great party. So we took Jonas to stores where basically, I had charge accounts, which was generous for men's wear and Saks Fifth Avenue. And Barbara wanted Jonas to look like a Beatle because she was in love with the Beatles. And so we got Jonas, this wonderful suit. And as I remember, some wonderful shirts. And I don't think Jonas, if ever wore them again. Or maybe ever. Maybe he wore one piece of this to his birthday, I don't know. And we were organizing a party, and Barbara and I and, various friends of Barbara, Rosebud and, women, friends of ours were in charge of making the cake. And we had invited 200 people. And so we needed an enormous cake. And so everyone was assigned, you know, Betty Crocker cake mix in your, oven. And everyone had to come out with either a round shape or a square shape and bring them together. And it was Barbara's idea to make the cake in the shape of a Jonas and to ice it, you know, with Jonas's face. And. So it was a figure of Jonas. It was also Barbara's idea that we she would we collected money from people to make this party, and everyone had to contribute something. And we bought a lot of. I don't know why we needed ice because we had wine and beer, but Barbara wanted to ice, and so she ordered, like, \$45 worth of ice. And Jonas came to this party, and the first thing that he encountered was the guy delivering ice



and realizing that it was 45, \$50 of ice, and he was so angry that we had taken money from poor filmmakers who needed it for their work to make a party for him, and then that we were spending it on ice. He was really angry at us, but he continued cooperating a little bit because, you know, all the people in his life were there at that point. And it was in the cinematic on 41st Street in the basement of the war listed building. So it ran through from 41st Street. 42nd Street. It was the most interesting home the Cinematheque ever had because it was on 42nd Street. And then we gave Jonas the knife. And it was that at that point that I realized, although no one else seemed to realize, that we had made a totem figure of Jonas, and now we were asking him to kill the totem. I mean, basically, we were asking him, and Jonas realized in a flash, and he made a joke of it, like, do I cut off my hand or do I cut off my foot first? What can I live without? And he did one of his kind of comedy routines, going around the figure with a knife and, you know, showing what it would be like without a foot or a hand. But that we did not realize, Barbara and I what we would doing until it was too late. And it was there, and Jonas was there, and we saw what it meant to have made him into a totem during his lifetime. Was really. I don't think so, because Jonas was really engaged. Barbara probably shot. But most of Barbara's footage from that period is lost. And there might have been other people there with cameras. I mean, maybe Warren was there with the camera. I never saw it in anyone else's film.

01:32:12:00

KATIE DAVISON:

You're on the board of, anthology, and I just want to hear from you. Why do you think it's important? And is it still important?





01:32:20:00

AMY TAUBIN:

Oh my God. I mean, just wanting to make a permanent home for upland colored film. And that was Anthology Film Archives. And until the last year of his life, I think Jones thought he would live forever. And he was the force behind anthology. He could convince people that this was a great and important cause, and I'm not sure that anyone after him can do that so often I feel disheartened. I also. Differ. From some of the people on the board. If this were a world in which money for the avant garde was unlimited. I would say having a beautiful building in New York is really important. And having theaters where people can go any night of the week and look at this work is really important. But in part because money is limited. And also we've seen with Covid is done. I think it's much more important to preserve the films of the avant garde and preserve them in a way so that they can be distributed online or in theaters. And right now, they can't at all the rights problems. There are certain problems, Lee, that they haven't been digitized for a long time. I was against digitizing film because the materials that things were made of are really important. And digitizing, say, the Warhol films, was done at such a terrible level. But this has gotten a lot better. Todd Haynes has in his film *The Velvet Underground*, he's used a bunch of screen tests, and in that film, which was carefully produced online, the Warhol silent films have never looked better. So this now becomes possible. And of course, Jonas was the first person actually to take his films, make terrible VHS copies of them, and put them in Kim's video so that anyone could see them. And the VHS copies were terrible, and he thought it was more important for them to be seen than that, they'd be seen perfectly, or even in the best possible way. So while I think the preservation of this work and the preservation in some form so that



anybody could decide, oh, I want to see Flaming Creatures. Oh, I want to see diaries, notebooks and sketches. And you could go online and see it. That seems to me to be far more important than, you know, having a building that's a center of avant garde film. But I must say that I think I'm a minority with that viewpoint.

01:35:57:00

KATIE DAVISON:

When was the last time that you spoke to him?

01:36:01:00

AMY TAUBIN:

I visited him. I don't know if it was five weeks or three months before he died. And I went to his apartment and we sat around and, you know, he was working like Jonas. And he was reading a lot. And he often at that point was sending me emails about things that books that he was reading. I wish I could remember when the last time was I went to that apartment. I know that for a couple of weeks, both Ken and Jacobs and I were calling because we want to see him. Jonas would say, you know, not till I'm a little stronger. And then at a certain point, he realized that he wasn't going to get stronger. And then he died. But when I saw him for the last time, he was still. He wasn't strong physically, but he was in full possession of being of his mind. And on the one hand, it seems that we're in a situation today where a lot of things that John spoke for are becoming more, possible because of the technology, the capacity to make, films at any time through your phone. But at the same time, I think, there's a kind of retreat from some of the sensibilities of the author, the interrogation of self, critical passages. Where does that leave us? Where,



in some sense, a lot of what that room home for has become possible, but it's not being realized. I never had conversations with Jonas that were. About where we're going. In terms of. The wider world. You know, that idea that has been quoted so often of Francis Ford Coppola that somewhere in the Midwest, there's a little girl with her family's video camera, and she's making a movie, and it will be the she will become the great filmmaker. It will be a great movie, I don't know. I don't think. Or at least it was not part of my conversation with Jonas that he had ideas like that. Bout two years before you. Oh, it was when Trump was elected. And I remember standing in anthology with Jonas, and I was very upset, and, and Jonas, you know, was close to a lot of people who were political in the 60s, for example, David and Barbara Stone. And, you know, he showed work by New York Newsreel. At the Cinematheque, there was a lot of crossing over of people who were specifically involved in politics. And at that point, he said, you know. I would never. Tell you, encourage you to waste your time with this because these kinds of things come and they go. And people with power change and the world does not change. In that way, the world at large does not change in that way. It will always be that way. And so the only thing to do is to try to carve out a space where you are not controlled by that. Your anger is not controlled by that. What you do is not controlled by that. And so I think that Jonas always thought of the possibility. Yeah, certainly that the next young person would come along and make something that's great. But I don't think he expected in 1958 that there were many people doing that, or even understood with the people who were doing that were doing. And I don't think he thought that in, you know, 2018 that there were going to be, you know. The technology was there and phones were great, and it was great that people could pick up their phones and make things. But I don't think he



thought in the negative way that I think like it's too easy and there are too many images. And now images, you know, are rapidly making us nauseated because there are so many. I don't think he ever thought like that. I want to.

01:42:01:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Ask one final question about, you know, his legacy. When he died, everybody was calling him the godfather of American cinema, which feels a little bit simplistic, you know, considering all he was. And I just I wonder how, you know, like, how can we understand him in total, you know, for for today's audiences.

01:42:22:00

AMY TAUBIN:

I think, I would hope that people understand that Jonas made great films. He was not alone in that. But he should be counted among the great filmmakers. But that he built a movement and that that movement lasted for some 70 years. It may not go much further, but that's an extraordinary thing. And that Jones could say when someone asked him about what is the counterculture up to, Jones could say to them, I'm not part of the counterculture. We are the culture that he could think and make people feel that this was what was important in American art for several decades. That and that actually, people didn't need a fortune to make a film and that, and that art is personal. And of course, you know, look, people shoot on their phones is personal, but what is personal to someone has to be ever larger for what they shoot on their phones to be interesting. And I think that's what Jonas stood for.



01:44:02:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Was Jonas your friend?

01:44:05:00

AMY TAUBIN:

I certainly wanted Jonas to be my friend. You know, we have all kinds of friends. I don't know that Jonas ever thought of me as a friend. I have no idea. I would see a great deal of him, and then I wouldn't see any of him. In the 60s, when he was really poor and I was married to Richard, we used to have him over to dinner once a week to make sure that he was fed, and he was terrible to feed. I used to make, what a question. Potato soup. And it was, because it was watercress and potatoes. If it was green and he would not eat it, he said potato soup has to be white. And so I would, you know, go all over trying to figure out what I can feed Jonas, who basically lived on hotdogs and crackers. You know, most of the time I never would have ever asked Jonas a personal question, you know, about his life, which is what you generally ask friends. I never would have dared to.

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