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**THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA**

**1956-1960**

VF-3404

**THE FUNNEL**



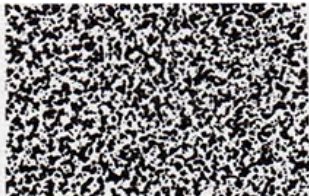


# THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA 1956-1960

## SCHEDULE

- Programme 1: **THE WONDER RING** Stan Brakhage  
**BRIDGES GO ROUND** Shirley Clarke  
**ON THE BOWERY** Lionel Rogosin  
Friday, November 30, 8 p.m. The Funnel
- Programme 2: **N.Y., N.Y.** Francis Thompson  
**BROADWAY BY LIGHT** William Klein  
**SHADOWS** John Cassavetes  
Wednesday, December 5, 8 p.m. The Funnel
- Programme 3: **THE CRY OF JAZZ** Edward Bland  
**THE BRIG** Jonas Mekas  
Friday, December 7, 8 p.m. The Funnel
- Programme 4: **PULL MY DAISY** Robert Frank/Alfred Leslie  
**THE LAST CLEAN SHIRT** Alfred Leslie  
Friday, December 14, 8 p.m. The Funnel

Cover Photo: Louis Armstrong in **Jazz on a Summer's Day** (Bert Stern)



## INTRODUCTION

In his essay for this series Blaine Allan focuses on four years of prolific independent film activity centred in (but not limited to) New York in order to restore critical esteem for a period of realist cinema in North America which has largely been ignored, and to recuperate what he identifies as "a vitally important episode in the evolution of a socially committed, cinematic avant garde".

The essay and programme notes describe the exuberant post-World War II New York environment from which the New American Cinema emerged, and the four screenings, which cover nine years (1955-1964) of film production, evidence the movement's distinctive conjoining of experimental, documentary and narrative film practices.

The importance of the New American Cinema movement lies not only in the films. Although not a homogeneous group, there was a common recognition among the filmmakers that their goals and ideas were in opposition to Hollywood's "official" cinema and thus demanded an engagement on all fronts of film practice. Among other things, they advocated the development of institutions operated on a co-operative basis to aid in the production, exhibition and distribution of independent film, and are largely responsible for the growth of a network of such centres in North America over the past 25 years. Artist run centres such as the Funnel can find their roots in this era. It was a similarly diverse group of film interests in the later sixties that resulted in the formation of the first co-operative institutions for independent film in Toronto.

In the context of the recent history of Toronto arts activity which has seen a more overtly politically engaged work, the "New American Cinema" series is a timely re-examination of a movement which was described in its time as "a more socially committed, more publicly oriented independent cinema" (J. Mekas/Film Culture, 1959).

The "New American Cinema 1956-1960" is the second in the Funnel's Independent Curators Series. Blaine Allan is a filmmaker, -writer, and -teacher who lives in Kingston, Ontario and is currently working in the Film Studies Department at Queen's University. His recently completed doctoral dissertation (from Northwestern University in Illinois) examined relations of the beat generation and independent filmmaking in the late 1950's. His articles and reviews have been published in a number of journals including Film Reader, Cine-tracts and Afterimage (USA).

**Michaëlle McLean**  
**Programming Committee, 1984/85**





## The New American Cinema 1956-1960

The name, "New American Cinema," marks a moment in film history. A movement in the cinematic avant-garde that arose in the 1950s, it paralleled the development of the beat generation as a literary movement and a subculture, and the increased growth of the United States, and New York in particular, in the world art market. The New American Cinema clearly defined a place for filmmaking in the period of cultural agitation that occurred in the United States in the years following World War II.

In a rare moment of common goals and activity, the movement brought together experimental, documentary, and narrative film practices. Moreover, it attempted to establish alternate institutions of filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition to foster independent filmmaking. Yet despite its impact at the time and its influence over both mainstream and avant-garde cinemas, it has suffered neglect compared to other, contemporary developments, such as the new wave in France and similar movements in national cinemas of Europe, or the personalist strain of the avant-garde in North America.

In 1959, Jonas Mekas, editor of **Film Culture** and columnist for the **Village Voice**, celebrated **Shadows** and **Pull My Daisy**, two recent films, as the harbingers of "a more socially committed, more publicly oriented, independent cinema." Two years later, Elizabeth Sutherland described "New York's New Wave of Movie Makers," which comprised Francis Thompson, Sidney Meyers, Robert Frank, Lionel Rogosin, John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Richard Leacock, and Bert Stern. These names are barely recognized and never adequately assessed in accounts of the avant-garde, although Cassavetes and Leacock have earned great respect as narrative and documentary filmmakers. The task of recuperating them and their films, and restoring the level of critical esteem they deserve is of more than passing historical interest. The New American Cinema remains important not only for the films it produced and the meanings they generated. It also stands as a vital episode in the evolution of a socially committed, cinematic avant-garde.

The New American Cinema grew out of a network of sources that made an active, independent cinema seem possible for the present and for the future. The Hollywood studios had been forced to give up their theatres and were producing fewer and fewer movies. Seeking both authenticity and lower costs, producers moved outside the Southern California soundstages and shot movies on location in New York and elsewhere. Productions imported from France, Japan, Sweden, and other nations established markets for "art films" as alternatives to Hollywood entertainment. Film societies in cities and college towns built audiences for films that otherwise would not have had theatrical release. The dominant cinema at least appeared to be withering and making a place for lower budget, independently produced motion pictures.

The growing popularity of television underscored the apparent decline of Hollywood's dominance. Moreover, television production, which was centred in New York, off-Broadway theatre, the mushrooming of rock'n'roll and jazz as popular music, the notoriety of the beat writers, and the increased awareness of painters and sculptors of the New York School brought public attention and glamour to Manhattan as a centre for culture and working artists. The movies suggested exciting possibilities to people trained in other art forms. Actor John Cassavetes, dancer Shirley Clarke, painter Alfred Leslie, still photographers Robert Frank and Bert Stern all contributed to a cultural cross-fertilization. The sense of vibrant activity and of an artistic community fed into the birth and growth of a parallel cinema.

The New American Cinema describes a realist impulse in the U.S. avant-garde of the post-world War II period. Although allied with other segments of the independent film community, it differed from the personalist and the graphic or abstract films that had evolved over the past decade.

Filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage sought to explore human consciousness by constructing dramas using the principles of dream. The New American Cinema, in contrast, replaced psychological symbolism with an acute examination of detail and routine in contemporary, everyday life. Graphic films such as Francis Thompson's **N.Y., N.Y.**, Hilary Harris's **Highway**, Shirley Clarke's **Bridges Go Round**, and William Klein's **Broadway By Light** abstract solid, static objects into patterns of movement and colour. Their subjects are buildings, freeways, bridges, and street scenes. By depicting urban objects, they aestheticize the everyday. However, to render the city graphically, the filmmakers abandon the human presence in the city, or transform the human being into just another object in the landscape of visual pattern. The New American Cinema saw the city as a place where people live, and specifically as a society where people live in groups.

Opposite: Ben Carruthers in **Shadows** (John Cassavetes)

Films such as **The Little Fugitive** (Morris Engel, 1953), **On the Bowery** (Lionel Rogosin, 1956), **Shadows** (John Cassavetes, 1958), **Pull My Daisy** (Alfred Leslie, Robert Frank, 1959), **Come Back Africa** (Lionel Rogosin, 1960), **The Connection** (Shirley Clarke, 1960), **Hallelujah the Hills** (Adolfas Mekas, 1963), and **The Brig** (Jonas Mekas, 1963) may not be locked into single, closed narrative, but they all tell stories. They take place in modern-day society. The characters—children, destitute alcoholics, young blacks, beat poets, heroin addicts, prisoners—all live on the margins of society. Their stories are not told in sweeping, conclusive narratives, but in collections of incidents. Because the people find themselves on the edges of society, their day-to-day lives becomes problems of survival. The details of daily existence, as a consequence, assume great importance in defining the quality of their lives.

In most cases, the films were shot on location in and around New York City with non-professional actors or journeyman performers. The appearance of New York locations and the use of unknown talent or public figures not known for acting provided reasons for reading a documentary element into these fictional films. Such concentration on detail, and on the lives of the marginal, subordinate groups in U.S. society, and the impression of documentary truth mark the New American cinemas as a realist movement.

The films gained significant power, sometimes shock value, from their thematic adventurousness. Lionel Rogosin's **On the Bowery**, shot on Skid Row, stands as an exposé of the "other America" that Michael Harrington named in his 1962 book about poverty in a United States caught up in a self-image of uniform affluence. John Cassavetes's **Shadows** is built on the racial tensions of everyday life in the city, not on the special case of conflict in a "safer" location for a story with a racial theme, such as the U.S. south. **Jazz on a Summer's Day** is an attractive and vivid concert documentary, but it also puts jazz, a predominantly black cultural form, at the forefront. **Pull My Daisy**, as an inside look at the beat generation, also encompasses many of the values and tensions of the subculture, particularly regarding normality and family life, and what Barbara Ehrenreich has recently described as the lure of irresponsibility to the American male and his "flight from commitment."

Just as importantly, the New American Cinema demonstrated a liberating disregard for the rules that standardized most of the films audiences saw in theatres in the 1950s. The image quality ranged from the gritty grain of **Shadows** to the saturated colour of **Jazz on a Summer's Day**. Cited for their use of handheld camerawork, the filmmakers more often kept their cameras on tripods, but directed performances and camera with little regard for restraint or conventions. Editing styles flouted conventions of continuity.

The keys were improvisation and spontaneity. "Improvisation" does not mean random action, but the creation of situations or limitations within which participants may work freely. "Spontaneity" refers to the impulse that gives rise to action, not to the quality of action itself. Each filmmaker employed improvisation and spontaneity in a different way. Rogosin cast his main characters from people he met on the Bowery, and encouraged them to devise their own dialogue. Cassavetes had started his film because of a successful improvisation in an acting class that he conducted. While shooting **Shadows**, he allowed his actors to determine their own actions within the limits of the shot. For **Pull My Daisy**, Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie often shot scenes three times from the same angle. They permitted their actors, mostly non-professionals, to alter their performances from take to take, and gave themselves a number of options in the editing room. When shooting the Newport Jazz Festival concerts, director Bert Stern and editor Aram Avakian maintained careful control. However, the improvisations in the performances inflect **Jazz on a Summer's Day**'s freely associative editing style. In fact, the idea of improvisation and truth in filmic representation becomes an issue and a device in Jack Gelber's play, **The Connection** and in the movie Shirley Clarke made of the production, in which a documentary filmmaker attempts to get authentic "performances" out of a group of junkies.

The filmmakers sought to create a cinema that would represent their world with truth and contemporaneity. The issue at stake was not solely the personal vision of the filmmaker, but also the world in which the artist lived and worked. Engaged with the surrounding world, he or she had to consider and question the ways the rules of that world determined how it was to be seen. By questioning those rules, the filmmaker and his or her contemporaries found themselves outsiders.

In September 1960, a meeting of the New American Cinema Group convened. The participants included filmmakers, future filmmakers, producers, financiers, and a theatre owner. This gathering represented a momentary consolidation of a significant part of the independent film scene in New York at the start of the decade. A first statement, published in **Film Culture**, opposes an "official cinema" which is "morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring." Furthermore, the statement advocates measures to facilitate filmmaking outside established guidelines and organizations. It condemns censorship and favours the free passage of films across international boundaries. It cites limited partnerships as a model for financing film production, condemns current distribution and exhibition policies, and proposes a cooperative distribution system. It demonstrates the filmmakers' desire to cooperate with craft unions. The group's statement claims, "In joining together, we want to make it clear that there is one basic difference between our group and organizations such as United Artists. We are not joining together to make money. We are joining together to make films." The rhetoric makes evident the group's antagonism to the Hollywood commercial filmmaker and to the studios' profit motive. The group action consolidated the interests of various types of independent filmmakers and attempted to alleviate some of the pressures of film production. In other words, the New American Cinema Group's goal was neither "joining together to make money" nor "joining together to make films." It was joining together to make institutions so its constituents could continue to make films.

The participants' desire to remain independent overruled their group impulse. The Film-Makers' Cooperative, which Jonas Mekas founded in 1962, remains as a mark of the filmmakers' wish to establish a distribution outlet. However, the cooperative served the needs of the experimentalists more than those of the feature filmmakers who tried to crack through the dominant cinema.

The broad cultural perspective in which the New American Cinema was formed prepared the way for the rise of the film underground of the 1960s. Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Ken Jacobs, for example, adopted the principles of spontaneity and improvisation that their predecessors had used. However, they replaced the social commitment and realism of the New American Cinema with detached irony. Instead of taking their cameras to the streets with an interest in the world and society around them, the underground filmmakers created their own clandestine communities and turned their gaze inward.

The New American Cinema, through its engagement on all fronts of filmmaking practice, provided much of the impetus that has carried the avant-garde through the past twenty-five years. This concentration of cinematic activity formed part of a wide-ranging movement. Like many such movements, its promise was never fully realized, but its potential must not remain underestimated.


## **Blaine Allan**



Richard Bellamy in **Pull My Daisy** (Alfred Leslie/Robert Frank)



# PROGRAMME NOTES



## Programme One

### THE WONDER RING

Filmmaker: Stan Brakhage  
U.S.A., 1955  
4 minutes

### BRIDGES GO ROUND

Filmmaker: Shirley Clarke  
Music: Louis and Bebe Barron; Teo Macero  
U.S.A., 1958  
8 minutes

### ON THE BOWERY

Producer, Director: Lionel Rogosin  
Writer: Mark Sufrin  
Cinematographer: Richard Bagley  
Technical staff: Newton Avrutis, Darwin Deen, Lucy Sabsay, Greg Zilboorg, Jr.,  
Martin Garcia  
Editor: Carl Lerner  
Music: Charles Mills  
Conductor: Harold Gomberg  
With: Ray Salyer, Gorman Hendricks, Frank Matthews  
U.S.A., 1956  
65 minutes

The city provided filmmakers of the 1950s with an imagery that connoted the modern. They used the mass of buildings and other physical structures, the speed of freeway or other modern transportation to convey impressions of life in the growing cities. The typical "artistic" film of this type used a jazz-influenced score to suggest the pulse and drive of urban life. The music, synchronized with images that often visually distorted or abstracted real objects, determined the visual rhythm. In contrast, Stan Brakhage's film, **The Wonder Ring**, which offers impressions of motion as viewed from an elevated train, is silent and gains its rhythm from its visuals. Brakhage, who shot the film for Joseph Cornell after learning that the El line was to be demolished, establishes a meditative tone with the film's meditative pace and rich colours, and its regular motion. Shirley Clarke's film, **Bridges Go Round** is another example of the abstraction of architecture. City bridges have an important place in the imagery of art and literature in the United States. Clarke uses optical effects and complex camera movement to choreograph the bridges, objects which are large and still, in fluid motion. More than observing patterns in the object, she causes the objects to move in patterns.

The imagery suggests the modern but the filmmakers' formal treatment of urban objects removes them from the context of human experience. Lionel Rogosin shot **On the Bowery** in the shadow of the Third Avenue El, and the image of the elevated train tracks, looming over the city street, appears at the start and end of the film. The tracks, which direct the protagonist, Ray, to the Bowery represent a man-made enclosure. Over some seventy-five years, the Bowery changed from a fashionable residential area to a strip of flophouses and juke joints, and the home of indigents and alcoholics. "On the Bowery" describes a physical state and an existential state.

Rogosin and writer Mark Sufrin immersed themselves in the milieu of the Bowery before starting production. The film's script outlined a structure for the film, but not dialogue. They constructed a model fiction and selected their principal actors, Ray Salyer and Gorman Hendricks, from among the people they met. Rogosin has written that Hendricks's personality "was symbolic, not 'typical' of men in the Bowery." More than characters, the people in the film represent ideas and illustrate the conditions of the Bowery.



Rogosin and his small crew had to infiltrate the area to capture the private quality of the district. They often shot exteriors from a car window. For crowded bar sequences, they wrapped their thirty-five millimetre camera in a bundle and dressed in ragged clothing in order to shoot undetected by bar owners and patrons. Such practices demonstrate an ambivalence between the filmmaker and his subject. At the same time the filmmakers penetrated the area, they also maintained a distance from its people. This distance is evident in the film's visual style. The telephoto lens permits the filmmakers to get visually close to the subject while remaining physically distant.

**On the Bowery** employs the simple story of Ray, a young man who quickly falls into drunkenness and poverty, and Gorman, the older man who did the same sometime in the past, and who shows Ray a way of saving himself. The narrative structures an observational analysis of life in marginal cultural group. The three films in the program offer contrasting views of the urban landscape in the 1950s, and of the lives of people in the city. The short films paint lyrical scenes, while Rogosin's feature offers a bleak narrative and a case history that opened up the barren world of the Bowery to a viewing public.



**On the Bowery** (Lionel Rogosin)

## Programme Two

### **N.Y., N.Y.**

Filmmaker: Francis Thompson  
Music: Gene Forrell  
U.S.A., 1957  
16 minutes

### **BROADWAY BY LIGHT**

Director, Cinematographer: William Klein  
Music: Maurice Le Roux  
Technical Advisor: Alain Resnais  
U.S.A./France, 1957  
11 minutes

### **SHADOWS**

Director: John Cassevetes  
Producer: Maurice McEndree  
Associate Producer: Seymour Cassel  
Cinematographer: Erich Kollmar  
Editor: Maurice McEndree  
Supervising Film Editor: Len Appelson  
Sound: Jay Crecco  
Saxophone solos: Shafi Hadi  
Music: Charles Mingus  
With: Ben Carruthers, Lelia Goldoni, Hugh Hurd, Anthony Ray, Rupert Crosse, David Pokitillow, Tom Allen, Dennis Sallas, Davey Jones.  
U.S.A., 1959  
82 minutes

In **N.Y., N.Y.**, Francis Thompson uses distorting lenses to construct a modern form of beauty derived from urban architecture and the motion of people in the city. William Klein, then principally a still photographer, uses the limiting lines of the film frame to select images from Broadway's nighttime illuminations. Both films extend from the cinematic tradition of the "city symphony," presenting, respectively, a day and a night in the life of the city.

**Shadows**, John Cassavetes's first film, started as an acting improvisation. Accounts of the film's production stress that it was meant as an actors' exercise, and not for a general audience. Interviewed on Jean Shepherd's late-night radio show, Cassavetes mentioned that he and the actors would like to put the exercise on film, if they could find the money. Within several days, listeners had donated about two thousand dollars to the production. The company produced the film over almost three years. Cassavetes showed a first version of the film, and then withdrew **Shadows** to shoot additional sequences and recut the film to give the episodic film a stronger narrative continuity.

The original improvisation concerned a young black woman who passes for white. Her white boyfriend abandons her when he meets her brother and learns of her racial background. The transition into a full-length film introduced another character, a younger brother.

The characters form part of a circle of young artists, intellectuals, and entertainers. Hugh, a singer, has to work as a host in a strip club to get work. Ben, a trumpet player, wanders around Manhattan with his friends Tom and Dennis, looking for women. Lelia spends most of her time with David and his literary friends, before she meets Tony. Compared to his brother and sister, Hugh has the darkest skin, and accepts his racial background. Embodying parental authority, he is the only character in the film to voice the fact that the conflict is "a problem of the races." Ben is the least directed of the three. His internal racial tensions remain under his cool and callow surface, and unresolved at the film's conclusion. Unlike her brothers, Lelia must choose between being black and acting the part of a white intellectual. Her conflict also entails her emotional and sexual growth, and her relations to her family. Moreover, her dilemmas arise from the demands of the men who surround her. Her part in the film charts a passage toward discovery and acceptance of her marginal status. In these terms, we can see that the film sets how one acts in opposition to what one is, and that the realm of the bohemian intellectual is a stage to be passed through on the way to maturity.

**Shadows** is distinctive for constructing racism as a part of its characters' daily lives. Tony's seduction and rejection of Lelia is an extraordinary and painful event for her character. However, the narrative weight of that event is counterbalanced by the understatement of racism in Ben and by the pervasiveness of compromise for Hugh.

Unlike **On the Bowery**, **Shadows** does not dwell on the physical makeup of the community as a geographical area. Instead, it stresses the interaction of the people who comprise the subculture. Cassavetes and his actors draw the complexities and tensions of a social issue through the characters' emotional growth.



Leila Goldoni, Hugh Hurd, Ben Carruthers  
in **Shadows** (John Cassavetes)

## Programme Three

### THE CRY OF JAZZ

Filmmaker: Edward Bland  
U.S.A., 1958  
35 minutes.

### THE BRIG

Filmmaker: Jonas Mekas  
Writer: Kenneth H. Brown  
Staging: Judith Malina, Julian Beck, at the Living Theatre  
Producer: David C. Stone  
Cinematography: Jonas Mekas  
Editor: Adolfas Mekas

With: Warren Finnerty, Jim Anderson, Henry Howard, Tom Lillard, James Tiroff, Stephen Ben Israel, Gene Lipton, Rufus Collins, Michael Elias, William Shari, Viktor Allen, George Bartenieff, Gene Gordon, Mark Duffy, Henry Proach, Carl Einhorn, Luke Theodore.  
U.S.A., 1964  
68 minutes.

**The Cry of Jazz** is a documentary by a black filmmaker. I have not been able to see it before assembling this series.

Writing in 1960, Edward Bland called his production a "thesis film," and explained, "This holding action called jazz was a conflict with the endless daily humiliation of American life which bequeathes the Negro a futureless future. Thru jazz one can become aware of the Negro's image of himself.

"It is an image of a man peculiarly sensitive to the vivid present. Denied a future and a past, the present moment must be the accent of time in which the Negro invests his passion. The joyous celebration of the present is the Negro's answer to America's ceaseless attempts to obliterate him. Jazz is a musical expression of the Negro's eternal re-creation in the eternal present . . . .

"And although jazz was originally the exorcism of a hopeless and timeless demon, in the past 10 years or so it has become a cult of romantic and futuristic pretensions. No one could be further from the spirit of jazz than the typical member of this romantic futuristic cult: the Hipster who seems to be invading and disturbing the present but shaky sanctum of American conformity.

"What, then, is the future of jazz? None. Jazz is dead."

One of the principal parallels to the New American Cinema was the growth of off-Broadway theatre. Appropriately, two of the most potent films that the movement produced originated on the stage of the Living Theatre. Julian Beck and Judith Malina presented **The Connection** in July 1959 to open their new theatre in Greenwich Village. **The Brig** closed the same venue four years later.

Jack Gelber's and Kenneth Brown's plays both employ accuracy and detail in the support of dramatic realism. Shirley Clarke directed a film of **The Connection** in 1960 (it was recently shown in Toronto as part of the Forbidden Films series), and Jonas Mekas filmed a performance of **The Brig** in 1963, the day after the production closed. Both films modify and amplify the realism of the theatrical productions. Clarke replaced the characters of the theatre producer and playwright who, within the fiction, are responsible for **The Connection**, with a direct cinema crew who try to make a film with a group of junkies. For **The Brig**, Mekas became such a crew.

Overwhelmed with the actuality of the Living Theatre production, which he attended on closing night, Mekas walked out of the auditorium before the play ended because he wanted to film it, to see it with his camera instead of his eyes. The next night, he and the cast sneaked into the building, which had been closed down by its owner. They restored the sets, used the stage lighting, and Mekas shot the performance in twelve ten-minute takes, recording the sound directly on the film and on a separate tape recorder for safety. A week later, at the urging of Malina and Beck, Mekas picked up some sections that he had missed the first night. Afterwards, he gave the footage and the tape to his brother to edit, directing him, "treat it with disrespect and cruelty; cut out whatever isn't worth looking at; forget there ever was a play — we both hate plays anyway; do unto me what I did unto Brown and the Becks."

**The Brig** is based on Kenneth Brown's experience as a Marine in incarceration in Japan. The Living Theatre's production turned Brown's individual experience into a collective experience for its audiences. In the brig, a hermetic world, all human actions are magnified and denaturalized in order to pound discipline into the inmates' beings. The prisoners must speak in loud and emotionless voices, and their guards respond similarly, with an apparently unending tirade of commands. The prisoners cannot sit. They cannot walk at a normal pace; they must move from place to place at double time. The narrow and turning passages transform the brig into a maze. The prisoners must stop at each doorway and request permission to cross a white line on the floor. The production sets up a structure so oppressive and confined and dedicated to the rupture of human will that the only recourse is rebellion. "The Immovable Structure is the villain," writes Judith Malina. "Whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a government or The World As It Is."

As a record of a theatrical performance, **The Brig** stands as a documentary. However, Jonas Mekas has written that he "wanted to undermine some of the myths and mystifications of *cinéma vérité*." Mekas does more than just record the performance; he inserts himself into it. His extraordinarily mobile camera, which recorded the action as he saw and experienced it, embodies the values of improvisation that remain at the heart of the New American Cinema. The fact that he deploys a technique that liberates form to evoke suppression should be no surprise. If we compare **The Brig** to the other films of the movement — **Shadows**, **On the Bowery**, **Come Back Africa**, **Pull My Daisy** — we can see that they all concern the cultural restrictions and pressures of their time, and use the cinematic form as a type of cultural agitation.

In a period of self-examination, **The Brig** details a structure of authority. The military prison serves as a symbol for more general and pervasive forms of authority and power, something that becomes apparent in the stylized staging of the play. However, the production's realist style underscores the play's condemnation of the military's own violence. The scrutiny must have been scathing in a moment that the United States at least believed to be peacetime, although the lessons of Vietnam would prove popular belief wrong.

Moving through the corridors, between the bars of the set, Mekas has to make his way around the action of the play, and retains a distance from the action in his role as observer and reporter. More accurately, however, his camera becomes a participant in the action. The spectators, presumably in the safety of the audience but already surrounded by the constant and insistent din of the prisoners and guards, find themselves visually drawn into the confinement of the brig, and provoked to response analogous to that of the prisoners.

## Programme Four

### PULL MY DAISY

Adaptation, Photography, Direction: Alfred Leslie, Robert Frank

Narration: Jack Kerouac

Editors: Leon Prochnik, Alfred Leslie, Robert Frank

Music: David Amram

Song: "The Crazy Daisy," lyrics by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, sung by Anita Ellis

With: Beltiane (Delphine Seyrig) (the Wife), Denise Parker (the Woman), Pablo Frank (Pablo), Allen Ginsberg (Allen), Gregory Corso (Gregory), Larry Rivers (Milo), Peter Orlovsky (Peter), Mooney Peebles (Richard Bellamy) (the Bishop), Alice Neel (the Bishop's Mother), Sally Gross (the Bishop's Sister), David Amram (Mezz McGilliduddy)

U.S.A., 1959

29 minutes

### THE LAST CLEAN SHIRT

Filmmaker: Alfred Leslie

U.S.A., 1964

30 minutes

Even within the New American Cinema, **Pull My Daisy** stood apart. Because of the people involved in the production, the film cannot be separated from the beat generation, the subculture that enveloped the cinematic avant-garde of the 1950s. Moreover, it is an anarchic comedy, slippery in both thematic and narrative terms. A recent assessment by J. Hoberman describes it as "a series of antic doings in a Bowery loft." Yet it is clearly more significant than this brief note suggests. Unlike films such as **On the Bowery** or **Shadows**, it does not draw from suppressed social problems as a pretext for its drama. It is less self-consciously serious in tone. In fact, the filmmakers advertised it as an "entertainment." Like **Jazz on a Summer's Day**, it deals with the importance of culture itself in society. **Pull My Daisy** preserves traces of the beat artists and the poetry that they introduced and made popular. The film embodies the significant contributions that the poets and artists and musicians made to reconstruct and foster culture in the United States during the doldrums of the 1950s. With the framework of a comic conflict between a group of bohemians and representatives of an orthodoxy — a bishop and his family — **Pull My Daisy** outlines a fable of the struggle of contemporary artists against a status quo. It concerns the agitational aspect of artistic activity, something that Jack Kerouac crystallizes in his narration when he refers to "All these poets. Struggling to be poets."

The daily life that the film represents is the daily life of artists. The film does not depict the totality of 1950s bohemian life. It was not meant to. It does acknowledge the impact of artistic change on United States culture in its time. It concerns the intimate connections between daily life and the processes of art. Furthermore, in its story and its cinematic practice, it asserts that renewed artistic culture altered our conceptions of realism.

If we reduce the film to its barest narrative skeleton, we can see that thematically it asserts the values of spontaneity. In a schematic system of oppositions, the film matches formality with casualness, stasis with activity, and sobriety with, in one sense, intoxication, and in another, frivolity. The married couple, Milo and the Wife, hold positions between the two poles. She is an artist, but remains socially self-conscious; he is "the railroad poet," but he holds a job and wears his uniform throughout the film. Generally, the Wife conflicts with Milo and represents aspirations to respectability that he and his rambunctious poet friends foil with their drunken nonsense. In some ways, the film blames the Wife for the conflict. Through her, the house itself comes to represent confinement to the poets who must, in the end, escape out the door. The film's conclusion at least suggests the pain that the abandonment causes the Wife. However, it really endorses a liberating potential in the lure of irresponsibility to the childlike poets.

One of the reasons that the film has resisted concentrated analysis and drifted from critical attention is the level of anarchic, zany comedy. This humour is certainly linked to the clownish characters of the poets and the resistance to commitment in the face of a United States that posed family life and responsibility as inescapable normality in the 1950s. The comic element is a basic part of the film's notion of realism, a realism that seeks to represent, not symbolize, and specifically seeks to represent the pleasures of spontaneous creativity.

After **Pull My Daisy**, Robert Frank directed another independently produced narrative film, **The Sin of Jesus**, and Alfred Leslie retired from filmmaking for several years to concentrate exclusively on painting. He produced **The Last Clean Shirt** in the significantly different context of the film underground that had been developed and popularized by Andy Warhol. Shown at both the New York and London film festivals, the picture elicited negative reactions from its audiences. Philip French reported, "For the half-hour that the movie ran the complacent mood of the audience was shattered — they booed, groaned, stamped their feet, and finally resorted to the slow hand-clap." Leslie had fixed his camera in the back seat of an automobile, looking forward as a black man drives through the streets of New York while listening to a white woman talk to him in an invented foreign language. The film repeats twice more, once with subtitles translating the "foreign" language, and once with subtitles communicating the man's thoughts. French notes that the film has a finely honed sense of parody that links it with the humour of **Pull My Daisy**. However, the repetition of the sequences and the use of subtitles to determine response lead French to conclude that "one could use it as the basis for an inquiry into the fundamental problems that underlie most discussions of the nature of the movie experience."

In premise and design, and in its concentration on issues of language and speech, repetition, and duration beyond the threshold of boredom, **The Last Clean Shirt** anticipates later, influential films in the international avant-garde, including the works of Michael Snow (**Wavelength**, **Rameau's Nephew**), Hollis Frampton (**Critical Mass**), Robert Nelson (**Bleu Shut**), and Joyce Wieland (**Solidarity**, **Pierre Vallières**), as well as Jean-Marie Straub's and Danièle Huillet's didactic road movie, **History Lessons**.

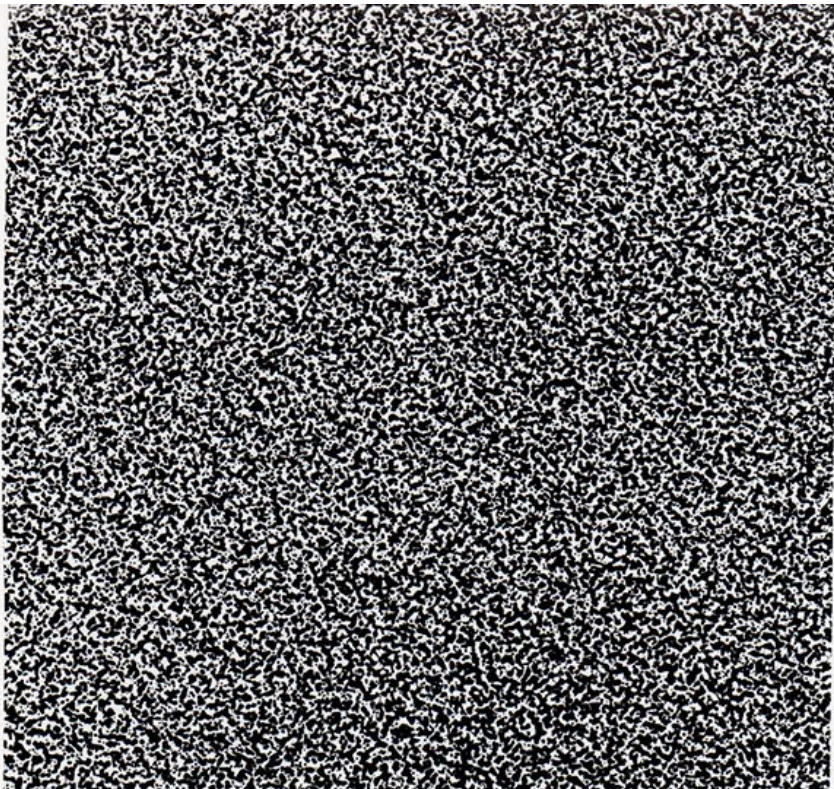
#### **Blaine Allan**



Delphine Seyrig in **Pull My Daisy** (Alfred Leslie/Robert Frank)

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