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JONAS MEKAS: A PORTRAIT OF A POET AND A FILM-MAKER

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With the conscious mind we are able,
at most, to get within reach of the
unconscious process, and must then
wait and see what will happen next.

Carl Gustav Jung

Jonas Mekas belongs to "the cold war generation", as contrasted against the same generation in Russia known as "the builders of Communism", generations that have lived through all the desperation of W. War II and the resulting upheaval. Mekas was born in 1922, and grew up in free Lithuania, immersed in peasant farm existence. Later he studied literature and became acquainted with the western and eastern thinking, which greatly influenced his later creative work. Before Lithuania fell under Communism for the second time in 1944, Mekas was deported to Germany for forced labor. It is here that he started writing poetry and fairy tales.

After four years in Germany he migrated to the United States and settled permanently in Greenwich Village (to day he lives in uptown Manhattan). Here, with a filming apparatus slung over his shoulder and with the voice of an aggressive moralist, he became one of the leaders of the dissatisfied generation which, perhaps, does not know what it wants, but is aware only too well of what it does not want: — old values, and boredom while waiting for something new to happen.

If Mekas were to write poetry in English today he would be grouped with the beat generation of Allen Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti or Gregory Corso, who seem to provoke their readers with absurdity and get them to react violently. But he is not really part of the beat generation. If by exterior appearance he has some of its characteristics, his originality is not artificial but stems from within, from his habits and concern with other things than his person. We could not imagine Jonas Mekas otherwise. The spirit of the avant-garde is the only thing he has in common with the beat poets.

Mekas is a controversy unto himself. Experiencing deeply his own inner life, he at the same time pays a great deal of attention to man as a social person, anxious about everything connected with him. In life, art and literature, Mekas is searching for the man of the future, who is struggling with the man of today. Mekas rejoices in finding a creative person. "There is something good and happy", he says, "when you are touched by someone who has that gift". "You begin to feel a pleasant breeze of happiness" he writes in his column in the Village Voice. Perhaps because of this we find so much optimism in his manifestoes. One can discern there a kind of mystical direction in life, the desire to embrace the universe and establish a community of love.

Mekas — the Lithuanian Poet

It is possible to speak several languages, but to be only in one. People like Nabokov or Conrad, are exceptions that confirm the rule. Among Lithuanians, there is Oscar W. de Lubicz Milosz who in French wrote the most beautiful mystic poetry of this century. The Russian poetry of J. Baltrušaitis is far better than that written in Lithuanian. But there is hardly anyone in Anglo-American literature, should we even include the generation coming out of the American universities only now. Jonas Mekas has a fairly good acquaintance with the English language, as we see from his weekly column, the

"Movie Journal" in the **Village Voice**, and his work as chief editor of **Film Culture**. But he does realize his expressive limitations. He has written some tentative poems in English, in the American avant-garde mood, which in language and imagery are far inferior to his Lithuanian poetry.

Mekas' first volume of poetry — **Semeniškių Idilės** (The Idyls of Semeniškės) — was written in 1948, just before coming to the United States.¹ It was published only in 1955 and was awarded the Lithuanian Writers Association prize. The volume is a set of 24 short poems, called "**idilės**", which in name and content are reminiscent of Theocritus, **Works and Days** of Hesiod, the bucolics of Virgil; or in Lithuanian literature, of **The Seasons** by Kristijonas Donelaitis. Mekas, however, is far removed from them in time and space and any resemblance to former bucolic poetry is coincidental. Another Lithuanian poet Henrikas Nagys has remarked that "Mekas' idyl is an idyl of the twentieth century — the remembrance of a lost paradise",² in this **Semeniškių Idilės** differ from the mythological and symbolic idyls; in the former, to quote Nagys again, "there is little joy, and no carefree play of frolicking over ancient meadows."³

Mekas is authentic in his feeling for peasant life; as he once said, he is one of them. Mekas the poet is at the same time a Lithuanian peasant, a man without the scythe and the plow, with nothing but his own coarse hands, left looking back with the sorrowful face of a tiller of the soil.

In his introductory poem Mekas emotes:

I look back toward you,
Blue horizons of my childhood

This is one of the few personal expressions of his feeling. Mekas' position was the result of choice — he often consciously fought against the flow of lyrical feeling, following closely T. S. Elliot's advice that "the poet's job is to escape personality".

Mekas is mainly concerned with the peasant spirit, the spirit of his native village. He depicts his own people, their work, winter worries and troubles, or the joy of summer; where

every footstep of earth speaks and breathes
yet of one's ancestors

He narrates with poetic sensitivity the difficult and bucolic life of a peasant; his own reawakening to nature, beauty, the mud of his own yard which he does not seek to justify, and to that extraordinary youthful wonder and delight with the small world surrounding him. Be it the marketplace offering sweets and color to the palate, be it berry-picking, or the fragrance of a summer night — everything surprises, everything moves him. Autobiographical experiences spring forth in panoramic form, as though viewed from a mountain. He speaks to this mute world with extreme sensitivity and perceptiveness, no longer expecting an answer. To him, it holds so much tender melancholy not yet lived to the full, so much nostalgia not fully expressed — restrained, but seen between the lines.

It is unusual for an avantgardist, such as after all Mekas is, to deal with nature so closely, and with such realism. His descriptive means are from the vocabulary of nature, which, in Lithuanian, is particularly rich. Natural events, sounds and smells, everything that is so dear to the Lithuanian peasant, who has lived for centuries in response of the phenomena of nature, is recorded in this descriptive set of poems.

In onomatopoeic language Mekas describes the spring rain and its odor, the rumbling of thunder, the coarse daily lot of a peasant, and that peace of a human being tied to the earth, where life is born, flourishes, blossoms and dies in simple biological order.

The solitude of man is extremely real in Mekas' idyls. Mekas is alone before nature and its force. He stands not against the human being, but nature itself, which in its turn, is the transmutation of man:

but somewhere, from the village, from the hump-backed farmsteads,
down a narrow, herd trod path,
creaking sway the loaded dung carts,
lurching slowly, with the horse's every step —
and in a great-coat carefully pulled over,
with lowered face,
as if every step were all of time,
like fate itself walks the farmer.

Mekas' avantgardism is more mental than verbal. In his poematic structure he does not use what we could call "jiujitsu" phraseology. There are no "catchwords" that we usually see in beat poems. He says what he has to say simply and easily, and his poetry is as clear as falling water. He does not employ word-play, futile estheticism, paradox, irony, or desperate metaphors. Simply, as befits a peasant's fate, he tells of the yellow barley fields, shepherd fires in the wet solitude of autumn, the white shimmerings of winter, and the heavy log carts, red clay stoves, tomorrow's market carts, and the drenched roads of October.

Mekas is not a poet of love or death. He is a poet of the soil and of life. The fragrance of flower, the smell of earth or the stable mean more to his senses than passion, love and hatred; as if he came from a part of the earth where men are without passion, and good and evil are unknown or unnecessary terms. However, Mekas' man is very concrete and earthly, as we see described in his diary:

... he's barefooted and... his cap is inhuman ... it has grown out of his earth, his surroundings. And his garb, and his character and jokes, everything has grown inseparably together. ...

He walks with hands stuck in his pockets, barefooted, and everything goes together and fits, and his cap, and jacket, everything fits and is beautiful, organic, with its coarse, chopped beauty of a farmer... He is simple, not lied, he is in the rough, when one looks at him, he is indistinguishable from his own soil.⁴

This is the hero of Mekas' poems. He is impersonal, unknown, but still he is an individual human being — perhaps the poet himself. Unobtrusively this "I" comes forth in every poem ("I remember... and perhaps I'm crying... with a torn and burned out heart..."). His recurrent asking, "Where are you", calls forth the shadows of those men whom he describes, like things, with the simplest realism:

Where are you, old Ignotas, who used to come every autumn,
With your flax scutch, and hooks, to mow the rye
To comb the flax, or dig up the potatoes —
Where are you, Martynas, who in white linnen trousers,
Used to pick up the milk cans every morning,
And clatter down the road to the dairy.

The peasant farm existence, so often but never fully described in Lithuanian literature, is transmitted in his poetry in fragments, but with emotion.

Mekas' chosen realistic form is most difficult to work with when emotion threatens to smother all objectivity. However, it is not realism in the simple sense. Mekas himself describes it as "magically realistic", thought out in depth, precisely formed, and transmitted with sensitivity. It is as if fantasy, drenched with memories of the realism of experienced rhythms, sounds, words, and thoughts, became embodied in the earth, and eventually turned into poetry.

His lines tend to prose, are even heavy, burdened with large words, loaded with the earth itself; but they are so natural, so unfabricated, as if he were speaking "in the misty vastness of autumn fields".

Were it possible to translate Mekas' poetry to prose, it would remind one of Hemingway's poetic prose in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Like Hemingway, however, Mekas is concerned with the essence of things, where every smell and color make up the fabric of life:

But in the evening, when with our hair still wet,
after fresh, poured o'er white potato soup,
we'll retire in the fragrant haylofts
ah, then will smell the fresh on the body white linen,
white linnen cloth.

The second selection of Mekas' poetry differs from the first in its lyrical tone. **Semeniškių Idilės** dwell on the earth of one's fathers, whereas **Gėlių Kalbėjimas** (The Talk of Flowers) speak of flowers and love.⁵ If the first selection depicts bucolic movement of life in Lithuania, then the second is an expression of that nation's lyrical feeling:

Flowers die
and return to the soil,
touching faces
with the same fragrance.
And a tulip,
and a field pebble,
a face:
Every
touching
of things
touches anew.

In light rhythm, thrifty words, and with fragile, subtle smoothness, Mekas reminds us of old Lithuanian folk songs, which have influenced our poetry for centuries, with a relationship as unavoidable as that between the earth and the rain.

The rain motif and water images, as we already notice in **Semeniškių Idilės**, repeat themselves persistently, like old symbols of life and death, full of ritualistic meaning:

For love is like the wind,
and love is like the water —
it warms up with the spring
and freezes over — in the autumn.

Or again:

Let rain fall,
let it rain.
Rain without whims,
and rain without suffering.

These last fragments, so to speak, written between Europe and America (1948-1952), contain something that Mekas has saved from his native land.

From the unpublished selection **Iš Reminiscensiju** (Reminiscences), a few poems have been printed in Lithuanian magazines.⁶ One can tell just by looking at the title that Mekas returns to the tone of **Semeniškių Idilės**.

"Somehow all seemed then very simple,
so daily life the music, and the sun,
and play. Not as just now,
from a distance — so festive,
so full of sunshine.

Here Mekas uses his usual symbolism, only now his landscape is that of Connecticut or Camp Oscawana, the Hudson or New York. Every landscape speaks intimately now, for his native land is no longer there — still life is beautiful and one needs to continue living. In these poems Mekas turns to philosophy and mysticism, of the real, actually existing kind. He makes peace with fate and begins to find new values in the everyday things which surround him each morning.

Mekas as a Short Story Writer

Not any less poetic is Mekas' prose, starting with fairy tales and ending with sharp manifestoes, full of social and political or national outflares.

Mekas started writing fairy tales around 1947, with his brother Adolfas Mekas publishing three selections: **Trys broliai** (Three Brothers), **Iš pasakų krašto** (From the Fairland), and **Knyga apie karalius ir žmones** (A Book of Kings and People). These tales, meant for grown up children, abound with symbols, suggestions, and dreams. The themes of his fairy tales are sometimes a bit naive, but never dull. At times they become allegorical, with a concrete moral lesson. Here Mekas the moralist starts developing into what he later becomes in the NEW AMERICAN CINEMA (NAC).

His first true accomplishment came with **Proza Nr. 1** in 1947 and **Proza Nr. 2** in 1951, where for the first time Mekas dared to use a vocabulary alien to Lithuanian writers for purposes of naturalistic description of certain circumstances of human life, often passed over for puritanical reasons.⁷ Mekas broke this tendency. Perhaps he found the traditional means insufficient to express the post-war DP camp mood which he saw and felt, or was influenced more than others by western literature of James Joyce or Brecht. However, Mekas did not continue long in this line, and we see it taken up again only ten years later in his films.

"About Paul, his Departure and Return" is a short story of this period, less than 15 pages long. It's a story of a being with no desire for life or even will for suicide. Paul stays in bed, eating community kettle soup and quarrels with his roommates; he has no way out, no chance for a job, being a burden unto himself and others, a real displaced person of any period. However, one day tired of hopelessness, he quits the camp and goes out, hopping onto the nearest train. After the initial delight with freedom wears off, he begins to feel the same as before — useless, just an object for fun or remarks. Nothing changes outside of him. But between his departure and final return he does discover something — a human being:

A strange thing is man. A piece of meat. Riding around like this much longer you could cook alive. Bodies are so hot pressing against each other. You can feel them through clothes. What a juicy girl. All young bodies are juicy and crisp.... It takes all kinds. Collapsed bodies, fat and bloated, steaming, heavy bodies and flabby ones, elastic bodies encased in tight clothes, bodies hidden and exposed, bodies denuded, dewy. And lips. Red cherry, ripe and dry, clever and wise, and chapped lips moving in stiffling mucus, the last saliva, lips closed and lips frightened, surprised. They say, don't look at a nude body, it's a sin. But what beauty! What good is it, if I won't see I'll think of it all the time. It's not for me to figure out what's good or bad...

The second issue of **Proza** comes with more maturity and a richer vocabulary. Narration is simpler, more direct and creative, revealing personal experience. "Fete de Roses" is a short story new in tone and form, unified by depth of thought, with a certain poetic atmosphere later seen in his film. Here is a characteristic example of an auto-confession:

Since childhood... I'm a man very introspective and sensitive. In high school and the university they used to take me for a poet, a musician and painter — depending on whom I came in contact. I was patient to all these arts, and knew them well, but I was not creating anything myself. Being satisfied with the inner experience itself, I didn't want to put anything down on paper; to me it seemed completely unnecessary.

Today Mekas keeps a scrupulous personal and a film diary, so that no situation, emotion, or experience worth attention goes unrecorded.

Mekas and the New American Cinema

It all started in 1949. Mekas landed in America, bought a film camera, and set out to look for the new man whom he had already glimpsed lost in post-war Germany. He knew what he wanted and went slowly to his purpose without fear and compromise, often through disillusion and error, facing reality and doing what he could under the circumstances. More by intuition than method, more through improvisation than study, more through emotion than logic, but nevertheless with discipline, he started a fight for ideas, for the arts, the chance to be creative; and later, more concretely, for the New American Cinema. He was its founder, leader, and one of the most important moving forces. Being aware of the social mission of the film-maker, he felt an important obligation to society other than entertainment.

Every art, no matter how far removed from literary expression, often needs to be presented verbally — though philosophy of art and critique are not essentials, without them it would be difficult to understand and present painting, music, or the ballet. It is the same with cinematic art.

Mekas spends a good part of his time presenting this art to the audience "for the advancement of a more profound understanding of the function and aesthetics of cinema", as he said in his first issue of the magazine *Film Culture* in 1955. In its discussion and constructive analysis, *Film Culture* somewhat resembles *Cahiers de Cinema*, and Mekas proudly affirms this in his manifesto:

We side with *Cahiers de Cinema* in our interest in making films and in our search for a living cinema, a cinema in action. No respectful liberation, no messages, no esthetics can bind us to anything. We mistrust all film theories and the entire traditional line of film criticism in America. We have the whole field of cinema open before us — for experimentation, re-evaluation, creation.⁸

The magazine was a good platform to start a movement, to clear ideas, to put down some statements — and a means to begin a fight.

In film-making, everyone had been waiting for a new surge for some time. The antimony of business and art could not stand together any more, and some break between them was expected. The New American Cinema (NAC) proposed to liberate the artist from commercial involvement and center his purpose in searching for art. Enthusiasm and courage is what this movement needed when the odds seemed against it. Jonas Mekas, in the summer of 1960, wrote a manifest in *Film Culture*:

The New American film maker seeks to free himself from the over- professionalism and over-technicality that usually handicaps the inspiration and spontaneity of contemporary cinema, guiding himself more by intuition and improvisation than by discipline; he aims desperately, as his colleague action painter, or poet and dancer, at art in its very flight, at a free, a spontaneous inspiration: as an action and not a status quo; art as various states of feeling and not as a series of facts, nature-morts, or pastiches. And since the main tendency of a modern American film-maker becomes "to grasp life from within and not from without" (Suzuki) by loosening the sensibilities, these films could be described as a SPONTANEOUS CINEMA.⁹

Undoubtedly the movement is unique. Neither "La Nouvelle Vague", the neorealism in Italy, nor the free cinema of Great Britain has the freedom afforded by NAC. Everyone with a little talent, a lot of ambition, and a freshly made roll of film is welcomed to show it, even though his taste and technique differs from everyone else.

The NAC shows the other side of American cinema, perhaps not as "entertaining" as a Hollywood production, but certainly more self-critical and authentic. It documents present-day society and the protest of American intellectual rebels against uniformity and mediocrity, against presentation of digested thought and explained emotion in film, against the standartization of mind.

Obviously this protest attitude is not being accepted without some irony and opposition. To this day the American avant-garde is not generally accepted in the United States. Recognition at first came from elsewhere. The NAC participated in European festivals since 1958. In 1961 it revealed itself more fully at the Spoleto Film Festival; afterwards several successive festivals included the NAC in their programs as "the only real American cinema in existence".¹⁰

Even now, however, critics here write: "the American underground film-maker seems to use the cinema as a means of releasing his aggressions against society" (Jean Douchet)¹¹ Which, of course, is true and in most cases that is all the film-

maker seeks. But a group as such does not necessarily have to be "creative", it is enough that it provides an impulse and the opportunity for true talents, who are already appearing on the scene, and who, in most cases, do not play just with the meaningless "aggression against society".

At this point the disorganized and anarchistic movement badly needed some order not only for financial reasons, but so that it could be heard. Mekas took it upon himself to organize and direct the Film-Makers' Cooperative, where anyone may show or see an experimental movie at a publicly advertised time and location, as easily as in a commercial theater. This organization also acts as an international distribution center for the NAC as it did in 1965 by sending films to Stockholm and Latin America. Secondly, it shows to the American avant-garde what is going on at home and abroad. And thirdly, it encourages new forces by finding new talent. This is how Mekas discovered Andy Warhol, Jack Smith and Barbara Rubin.

Mekas as a Film-Maker

Mekas is not only a theoretical leader of the avant-garde. He has produced some feature stories widely shown all over the world, among them **Guns of the Trees**. After having seen this film many times, one thing stands out clearly — the anarchy. It seems Mekas had too many things to say and tried to say them all at once. I am not trying to suggest that this is a good or a bad film, but would merely like to find out what led to some of the confusion.

In this first full length film he tries to apply all of his theoretical knowledge, his vision, and his philosophy. At times it is hard to approach the film because it does not have a concrete story which would be of help, but on the contrary is a mix-up of questions and images without answers, set in a fresh poetic-mood, convincing in language but poor in photography and editing. Most of it is filmed from reality, out in the street. Obviously this experiment needed some very good selecting and editing.

The film starts off with a question which continues through the picture without ever finding an answer: "Why did Frances commit suicide? Why does anybody commit suicide today?" Frances is a young American poet living in lower Manhattan who could easily be confused with one of the village girls. Frances and the other four main characters are looking for an answer to their lives through the eyes of the cameraman, who records the daily incidents of New York life: a village rally, the banks of Harlem, the office of a manager, the party, the park, the police.

The false values of the society, on which Mekas tries to put all the blame for the suicide, are not as new as might appear. Are there new reasons for suicide today other than those that existed in other societies? Of course, as Mekas shows us, the menace of the bomb is something that the other generations did not have, neither was the issue of complete destruction as disconcerting as it is now — but are these reasons enough to justify suicide? If life becomes meaningless, is the romantic suicide a solution? Mekas does not attempt to justify it. What Mekas is really looking for in this film is nicely summed up in a sentence of Gregory, one of the four leading characters of the film:

Take away the police, take the army, take the atom away, and they will have something else. The minds of men must be changed. We shall win, only through the minds of men.

Ben, whose wife is a Negro, says in the movie: "This will probably be the last pure rain. The next rain will be full of strontium..." Why should we live? But to live is the only certain thing. So let us struggle for survival, for only a living man can fight the dark forces which annihilate flowers and eclipse the sun.

Joseph Freeman, in his evaluation of this film says: "we can see that its basic theme is the human condition in our time envisioned under the aspect of eternity."

Where do we turn? To Marxism, to religion?! Mekas the poet chooses a poetic solution which does not satisfy completely, but at least leaves us a little hope: "We are all beautiful sunflowers inside".

What seems to be so unclear even in literary language was almost impossible to express in cinematography. Mekas' inspiration was more of a poet than that of a moviemaker. But he tried and he will try again to find a movie expression.

Alberto Moravia says about it:

Jonas Mekas' film has nothing of the theatre; neither is it a narrative; nor does it contain images which have a particular formal value by themselves. It resembles, instead, the modern poetry, especially that anglo-american poetry which came after Eliot and Auden.¹²

His last long feature story **The Brig** won a "Saint Marks Lion Grand Prize" in the Venice Documentary Film Festival in 1964. It is a strange kind of movie, taken directly from the stage.

Mekas himself tells how he made this new kind of "cinema verite". The place — off Broadway's "The Living Theatre": the play — "The Brig", written by Kenneth H. Brown; directors of the play — Julian Beck and Judith Malina; subject — "the obsessive atmosphere of a marine jail". One cold January evening "The Living Theatre" was closed by police. The place was dismantled. Jonas Mekas called his brother Adolfas, took three 16mm cameras and went through the passageway of

the subway station to the theatre. The actors began a repeat of the performance of the evening. Mekas with his camera and tape recorder shot everything he could during that last performance, and after four hours of hard work and \$900, he had made one of his best movies in record time and money.

The adventure of this shooting is not any less exciting as the original performance. The film was shown in the second New York Film Festival with controversial commentaries, but none ignored its intrinsic value. The film was considered by many critics to be a documentary, which Mekas termed "absurd". The film, even if taken from the stage, is personal in its shooting and selection of imagery, so that without knowing one could never guess that something other than a real life situation has been filmed. It is so brutal in its expression of raw anguish.

In its intention this film is a polemic made to shock the viewer. If it were not so naturalistic we could call it a nightmare, close to the atmosphere of Bunuel's "Viridiana". In the marines, as presented by Mekas, there is no compassion for the human being as such. Mekas chose the negative approach to man, so as to show the sadness of a human reduced to a terrified robot.

Cahiers du Cinema wrote of the film:

When leaving this film, one promises never to see it again, for it seems impossible to watch such a spectacle twice... While filming it the two Mekases managed not to impose on us anything but facts. No symbols are suggested. One is given to hold on the letters alone. The film is hard as a nut, and the only thing to do is to crush it, without ever asking if this nut is a symbol of the universe.¹³

The Brig reminds me of Sartre's play "No Exit", where hell is made by other people. And this is true of the film, where man builds hell for other people, a hell in which he has to live himself.

What Mekas is attempting to do was well expressed in one of his crusading cries, directed at the avant-garde:

It should be clear by now that the new American arts, and therefore, the New American Cinema, is not an esthetic but primarily an ethical movement. Before any esthetic can be built there are other, more important things to build: the New Man himself. And I would call a fool anybody who could demand of this generation works of art that contain clear and positive philosophies and esthetics. There will be nothing of that! This generation is too young, too alive for that. This decade will be marked by an intensified search and by the further loosening of sensibilities for the purpose of reaching still deeper into less contaminated depths of man's soul, trying desperately to escape the cliches of art and life.¹⁴

Notes

1 Jonas Mekas, *Semeniškių Idilės* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1955).

2 See Nagys' review of *Semeniškių Idilės* in *Literatūros Lankai* (Buenos Aires), 1957, No. 7, p. 29.

3 Ibid.

4 Excerpts from his diary appeared in the Lithuanian cultural review *Metmenys* (Chicago, 111.), 1960, No. 2.

5 Jonas Mekas, *Gėlių Kalbėjimas* (Chicago, 1961)

6 See *Aidai* (Echoes), 1957, No. 1

7 Jonas Mekas, *Proza Nr. 1* (Kassel, Germany, 1947?); *Proza Nr. 2* (New York, 1951).

8 *Film Culture*, 1961, Nos. 22-23, p. 10.

9 *Film Culture*, 1960, No. 21, p. 19.

10 *Cinema 60* (Roma), 1961, Nos. 11-12.

11 See Andrew Sarris, *Show Magazine* (New York), 1964, No. 10, pp. 44-50.

12 *Esspresso* (Roma), 1961.

13 *Cahiers du Cinema* (Paris), Summer, 1965.

14 *Film Culture*, 1960, No. 21, pp. 18-19.