PETER BLUM GALLERY

NATHANIEL DORSKY

NATHANIEL DORSKY

Born 1943 in New York, NY
Lives and works in San Francisco, CA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2020 *Interludes: New and Recent Films by Nathaniel Dorsky*, Co-presented by San Francisco Cinematheque and Canyon Cinema, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA

2019 *Currents: Re-Viewing Cineprobe 1968 – 2002*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Private Lives Public Spaces, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Live Cultures, Close-Up Film Centre, London, England
Out of the Vault, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
Margaret Tait 2: Elective Affinities, Filmmuseum, Vienna, Austria

2018 Nathaniel Dorsky, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA
UNCONSCIOUS RATIONALE: Artists Amend Reality, Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Arboretum Cycle (premiere), SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA
Nathaniel Dorsky: Four Films, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
Nathaniel Dorsky: Four Films, SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA
Nathaniel Dorsky and Devotional Cinema, Rufino Tamayo Museum, Mexico City, Mexico

2017 *Poetic Cinema: Films of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler*, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY

2016 Speed Museum, Louisville, KY
David Totah Gallery, New York, NY

2015 *Film Stills*, Peter Blum Gallery, New York, NY
Films by Nathaniel Dorsky: How Delicately the Light Imbues our Fleeting Life, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
Luminous Intimacy: The Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, NY

2014 *Film Stills*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museu do Cinema, Lisboa, Portugal
Contemporary Arts Center, Vilnius, Lithuania

2013 Light Industry, Brooklyn, NY

2012 *Whitney Biennial 2012*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA
Seeing and Awakening: New Films by Nathaniel Dorsky, REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA

2010 *Nathaniel Dorsky*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
Works by Nathaniel Dorsky, SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
2006 *Lightcone Preview Show*, Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
2004 London Film Festival, Tate Modern, London, England
2001 *ExperimentaDesign*, Musée de Louvre, Paris, France
2000 Whitney Biennial 2000, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

SELECTED SCREENINGS

2019 *3x2 from the Light Cone archive: Dorsky / Lowder / Saïto*, Pupille e.V., Frankfurt, Germany
GRAN LUX, Saint-Étienne, France
THE 10TH ANNUAL EXPERIMENTAL LECTURE | Nathaniel Dorsky: *Montage and the Human Spirit*, Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia
2018 2018 Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
Block Cinema, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
Centro Galego de Artes da Imax, A Coruña, Spain
Sheffield Doc/Fest, Sheffield, UK
Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY
Punto de Vista International Film Festival of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain
18 at 18: Nathaniel Dorsky at Duke, Duke University, Durham, NC
2017 Northwest Film Forum, Seattle, WA
Silent and Sanctuaries, Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, CA
Cinema before 1300, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA
Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY
Conversations at the Edge, Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago, IL
2016 New York Film Festival, New York, NY
John Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD
The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, NY
2015 New York Film Festival, New York, NY
Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY
Denver Film Festival, Denver, CO
OFFoff Art Cinema, Ghent, Belgium.
Centro Galego de Artes da Imaxe, Coruña, Spain
British Film Institute Southbank, London, England
Gijón International Film Festival, Gijón, Asturias, Spain
Courtesane Film Festival, Ghent, Belgium

2014 Vienna International Film Festival, Vienna, Austria
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia
Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, Hawick, Scotland
2013 Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
The Illuminations of Nathaniel Dorsky, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA
The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, NY
2012 International Film Festival Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands
Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, NY
Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, MI
2011 *Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art*, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY
Image Forum Festival [in three cities], Tokyo; Fukuoka; Nagoya, Japan
Signals: Nathaniel Dorsky, Rotterdam Film Festival, Rotterdam, Netherlands
Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia
2010 London Film Festival, London, England
Nathaniel Dorsky Filmshow, National Film Archive, Prague, Czech Republic
New York Film Festival, New York, NY
Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY
2009 *The Histories of the Avant-Garde Part I*, The Workingmen's Club London, England
2008 Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
2001 New York Film Festival, New York, NY
2000 *Nathaniel Dorsky: Intimate Light*, Lincoln Center, New York, NY
1998 New York Film Festival, New York, NY
1965 Festival of Two Worlds, Spoleto, Italy
Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, MI

FILMOGRAPHY

2019 *Canticles*, (16 min).
Interlude, (11 min)
Apricity, (22 min)
2018 *Calyx*, (13 min)
Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle), (13.5 min)
2017 *Arboretum Cycle* (137 min.) Comprised of:
Epilogue (15 min.)
Monody, (16 min.)
September, (20 min.)
Ode, (20 min.)

Coda, (16 min.)
Abaton, (19 min.)
Elohim, (31 min.)

2016 *Ossuary*, (43 min.) [1995-2005, Original Kodachrome only]
Death of a Poet, (21 min.) [2003/2016, Original Kodachrome only]
Other Archer, (9 min.) [2003/2016, Original Kodachrome only]
Lux Perpetua II, (31 min.) [1999-2002/2016, Original Kodachrome only]
Lux Perpetua I, (23 min.) [2000-2002/2016, Original Kodachrome only]
The Dreamer, (19 min.)
Autumn, (26 min.)
2015 *Prelude*, (18 min.)
Intimations, (20 min.)
2014 *Avraham*, (20 min.)
February, (16.5 min.)
December, (14.5 min)
2013 *Summer*, (22 min.)
Spring, (23 min.)
Song, (18.5 min.)
2012 *April*, (26 min.)
August and After, (18.5 min.)
2011 *The Return*, (27 min.)
2010 *Aubade*, (11.5 min.)
Pastourelle, (16 min.)
2009 *Compline*, (18.5 min.)
2008 *Sarabande*, (15 min.)
2007 *Winter*, (21.5 min.)
2005-06 *Song and Solitude*, (21 min.)
Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude (Reel 1), (40 min.)
Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude (Reel 2), (40 min.)
2004 *Threnody*, (25 min.)
2002 *The Visitation*, (18 min.)
2000-01 *Love's Refrain*, (22.5 min.)
1999-00 *Arbor Vitae*, (28min.)
1992-98 *Variations*, (24 min.)
1974-96 *Triste*, (18.5 min.)
1985-87 *17 Reasons Why*, (19 min.)
1976-87 *Alaya*, (28 min.)
1983 *Ariel*, (16 min.)
1977-83 *Pneuma*, (28 min.)
1980-82 *Hours For Jerome Part 1*, (21 min.)

Hours For Jerome Part 2, (24 min.)
1966-67 *Two Personal Gifts a.k.a. Fool's Spring*, (with Jerome Hiller), (7 min.)
1965 *Summerwind*, (14 min.)
1964 *A Fall Trip Home*, (11 min.)
Ingreen, (12 min.)

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS
eye Film Institute Netherlands, Frankfurt, Germany
Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA
Image Forum, Tokyo, Japan
Le Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
Les Archives du film experimental d'Avignon, Avignon, France
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

AWARDS
California Council for the Arts, 1997
Foundation for Contemporary Performance Art, 2000
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1998, 1997
LEF Foundation, 2001
National Endowment for the Arts, 2005, 2002, 1988
Peter Reed Foundation, 2010
Rockefeller Foundation, 2005, 2003

FILM AWARDS
2018 *Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award*, San Francisco International Film Festival
Jean Vigo Award for the Best Direction, International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra Punto de Vista
2015 *Stan Brakhage Vision Award*, Denver Film Festival
2013 *Best Experimental Documentary*, Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival
2011 *Tiger Award for Short Film*, Rotterdam International Film Festival
1967 Emmy Award for Art Cinematography, for *Gauguin in Tahiti*

PUBLICATIONS
Dorsky, Nathaniel, *Devotional Cinema*, Tuumba Press, 2003
Dorsky, Nathaniel. "The State of the … Art," *Cinematograph*, 1985.

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Kenigsberg, Ben. "At MoMA, Home Movies That Reveal the World", *The New York Times*, October 18, 2019

Kashmere, Brett. "Autumn Erotic: Nathaniel Dorsky's A Fall Trip Home", *Canyon Cinema* (online), September 19, 2019

Carlson, Matthew. "INTERVIEWS: Nathaniel Dorsky on celebrating light and celluloid", *ARTFORUM* (online), February 8, 2019

2018 Dargis, Manohla. "The Best Movies of 2018", *The New York Times,* December 7, 2018.

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Sicinski, Michael. "Toronto: Wavelengths Preview — 'We Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Contrarians'", *MUBI: Notebook* (online), September 5, 2018

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Coldiron, Phil. "Light on Leaves: Nathaniel Dorsky's 'Arboretum Cycle'", *Mubi: Notebook* (online), May 11, 2018

Goldberg, Max. "The Sacred Wood: Nathaniel Dorsky's Arboretum Cycle", *The Brooklyn Rail* (online), May 1, 2018

Swinkels, Niels. "Mother, Sister, Daughter, Marvel ~ Ensemble for These Times ~ Timon of Athens ~ Nathaniel Dorsky", *KALW* (online), April 4, 2018

Qian, Selena. "Experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky to screen 18 short films over four nights", *The Chronicle* (online), January 31, 2018

2016 "Nathaniel Dorsky," *The New Yorker*, January 4, 2016.

2015 Dargis, Manohla, "The Best of Movies of 2015," *The New York Times*, December 2015.

Taubin, Amy. "The Best of 2015," *ARTFORUM*, December 2015.

Taubin, Amy. "The Last Picture Show?" *ARTFORUM.* October 2015.

Polacek, Jeremy. "A Pair of Filmmakers Captures the World in 16mm," *Hyperallergic*, October 2, 2015.

Cutler, Aaron. "Dorsky and Hiler: Open to Life," *Fandor*, September 27, 2015.

Dargis, Manohla. "For Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, Film Is the Star," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2015.

2014 Duhamel, Marie-Pierre. "A Note from Viennale," *Notebook*. October 30, 2014.

Kasman, Daniel. "Viennale 2014. New Films by Nathaniel Dorsky," *Notebook*, November 5, 2014.

2013 Nelson, Max. “Interview: Nathaniel Dorsky,” *Film Society Lincoln Center,* October 15, 2013.
Reed, Gus. “NYFF51: Nathaniel Dorsky’s ‘Song’ and ‘Spring’ Recall ‘Diamonds’ of a Bygone Era,” *Film Society Lincoln Center,* October 17, 2013.
Kasman, Daniel. “NYFF 2013. Mind, Body, Soul.” *Notebook.* October 11, 2013.
Savirón, Mónica. “Revista Lumiere’s Mónica Savirón reviews Nathaniel Dorsky’s Song and Spring at the NYFF, 2013,” *Lumière*. 2013.
Sicinski, Michael. “TIFF 2013: Wavelengths Experimental Films – The Shorts and the Mediums,” *Notebook,* 2013.
Sitney, P. Adams. “Labor of Love, a review in Artforum of Jerome Hiler’s Words of Mercury,” *ARTFORUM,* March 2012.
2012 Dargis, Manohla. “Against the Odds, Smart Films Thrive at the Box Office,” *New York Time,* December 16, 2012, page AR14.
Dargis, Manohla. “Unseen Guide’s Silent Journeys to Lyric Nature The Startlingly Beautiful Films of Nathaniel Dorsky,” *The New York Times,* April 13, 2012.
Goldberg, Max, “Rites of Passage”, *San Francisco Bay Guardian,* June 5, 2012.
2010 Berkson, Bill. “For the Ordinary Artist,” *BlazeVOX,* 2010.
2007 Sitney, P. Adams. “Tone Poems: P. Adams Sitney on the films of Nathaniel Dorsky,” *ARTFORUM,* November 2007.
2001 Kite, Mary. “A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky,” *Poetry Project Newsletter,* February 3, 2001.

The New York Times

THE DECADE IN CULTURE

The 10 Most Influential Films of the Decade (and 20 Other Favorites)

Our co-chief film critics say these were the films of the 2010s that made a difference in the world of entertainment and beyond.

By Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott | Nov. 24, 2019

Manohla Dargis's Favorites

Nathaniel Dorsky *December 1*, 2014, archival pigment print, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

'Luminous Intimacy: The Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler' (2015)

Some of the happiest moments in my recent movie going life have been spent watching the cinematic reveries of Nathaniel Dorsky. Working in 16-millimeter film, Dorsky makes short, silent works filled with everyday ecstasies — shifting shadows, nodding flowers — that capture the magnificence and ephemera of both the medium and the larger world. This dual retrospective, which ran as part of the 53rd New York Film Festival, served as my introduction to the work of Hiler, Dorsky's longtime partner and an artist whose film "In the Stone House" is an eloquent, transcendent ode to their life together, the changing light and the passage of time.

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

At MoMA, Home Movies That Reveal the World

"Private Lives Public Spaces" is a thought-provoking show of neglected footage from the museum's collection. With little background information available, you get to play historian and detective.

By Ben Kenigsberg
Published Oct. 17, 2019 Updated Oct. 18, 2019, 10:40 a.m. ET

Footage from 1937 titled "Moving Day at the Museum." Credit Ione Ulrich Sutton; via the Museum of Modern Art

The reopening of the Museum of Modern Art on Monday will bring new film retrospectives and the return of regular moviegoers to their favorite seats. But good luck entering the theaters without stopping short. "Private Lives Public Spaces," the new video exhibition at the galleries outside the two main movie auditoriums, boasts around 47 hours of footage running on loops on 102 screens. The installations constitute a season of programming on their own.

Drawn from MoMA's archives, the loops are of home and amateur movies — "the largest body of unseen and underappreciated moving-image work on film," in the museum's formulation. These movies were for the most part not intended for viewing by the public, let alone alongside other works, and taken together they run the gamut from amateurism to

outsider art, from arcana to valuable additions to the oeuvres of established experimental filmmakers.

While the films have been loosely organized by theme (celebrities, families, politics), the exhibition presents them with minimal commentary. This is partly because of a lack of information on orphan works, but it also has its benefits. The movies are allowed to speak for themselves, a mode that encourages a museumgoer to assume the roles of detective and historian.

Descending the escalator, you confront — in explosive fashion — a wall of MoMA's own home movies. "Nitrate Storage Cabinet Tests" (1994), which was shot outdoors, shows reels of flammable nitrate film stocked in different types of cabinets; the museum was trying to determine the best way to store the combustible material. Fuses are lit, and the cabinet either keeps the fire relatively contained, or a cloud of smoke engulfs the image, and the grass below gets singed.

Next to it, footage of the packing up of "Guernica" for return to Spain in 1981 plays on a giant screen. A 1954 film attributed to the museum's publicity department — of Andean art lent to the Legion of Honor in San Francisco being packed up for transport back to MoMA — now doubles as a documentary record of that California city, as trucks carrying crates labeled "WORKS OF ART" cross the length of the Bay Area peninsula to reach the railroad.

These images are ghostly in more ways than one. Nitrate film hasn't screened at the museum for nearly 20 years. And while every work on display originated on celluloid, all of these are digital scans — in some cases, by filmmakers who have long resisted showing their works on a medium other than film. But Nathaniel Dorsky's 1987 film "17 Reasons Why" has become a riveting four-monitor installation, a collage of nature, commerce and color filled with mirroring and rhyme effects.

Categorizing a work by Dorsky, a leading light of the experimental-film world, as a home or amateur movie feels like cheating; he is a known artist, and "17 Reasons Why" has screened publicly before. But accidental avant-gardism can be seen in "New York," circa 1981 and credited to Victor Ginsburg. This deliriously expressionistic film captures the rain-soaked, neon-lit streets of Times Square and a diner in Chelsea. In other reels, Ginsburg evocatively frames the Statue of Liberty in the distance through a hole in a Spanish-language no-trespassing sign. A woman in a sailor hat dances in Liberty State Park in New Jersey in what looks like a scene from a musical. (Most of the films are silent, although snatches of songs and voices — like Ted Kennedy at a 1980 campaign rally filmed by the father of the MoMA curator Rajendra Roy — reverberate throughout the gallery.)

According to the curator Ron Magliozzi, the museum knows little about Ginsburg, but of course that is the nature of an exhibition effectively culled from the institution's own attic. On a tour of the show, Magliozzi suggested that amateur movies can constitute a "record of diversity and difference" that Hollywood films of the equivalent time periods often worked to obscure.

One of the highlights is a loop of nearly three hours of home movies by the Jarret family of Pittsburgh. There is nothing overtly special about much of what they depict — birthdays

and other celebrations, family members dancing at home, an excursion to a beach or a ride on a roller coaster — but for the fact that these films (and probably not too many others) serve as a record of life in Pittsburgh's historically African-American Hill District from 1958 to 1967.

Many of the movies in this exhibition were not stored carefully over the years, and the degradation of this particular film, shot on 8-millimeter, is in its own way poignant, an almost literal illustration of the concept of erasure. At times, the image dissolves into a Jackson Pollock-like abstraction. During a fall street festival, residents of the Hill District and the scenery of the neighborhood compete with the imperfections of the film stock.

The show invites questions of who had access to cameras and when. It's no surprise to see, for instance, a home movie circa 1915 from the Pathé family, pioneers in film production. You are repeatedly prompted to question the definition of a home movie, especially the ones shot — in a credited or uncredited way — by a professional cameraman. A 1927 film from the industrialist Wise family of Cleveland shows Samuel Wise and his friends comically "roughing it" on a lake in Canada. The silent-film actress Colleen Moore looks to have been a cutup on her own time, posing with a St. Bernard in a convertible. In a film from about 1928 of a garden party hosted by the German screen star Conrad Veidt, the actor Emil Jannings has the presence to the enter the frame with a dog under each arm, and Greta Garbo smiles (she doesn't quite laugh) while playing with a child. Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and his wife, Mary, as Hollywood royalty, were able to add titles and intertitles to "A Personal Production," a film of their baby — one of relatively few movies here shot in the decidedly non-home format of 35 millimeter.

As you walk through the exhibition, lines between professionalism and dabbling seem to dissolve. Are we watching editing or simply a camera being started and stopped? Are these superimpositions deliberate or accidental? Does it matter?

Because the works have different running times, they are bound to align in different ways for different visitors. But catch two clips in your eye at just the right moment, and bits of happenstance emerge. Trucks depart museums simultaneously in 1937 and 1954. The 1942 Ice Follies filmed by Russ Meyer — who knew the king of the nudies ("Beyond the Valley of the Dolls") shot wholesome home movies? — are met with a response from Sesame Street characters figure-skating in another part of the room (in a film of a "dream trip" by an unidentified filmmaker).

The possibilities for connections are almost infinite. And at its best, "Private Lives Public Spaces" unfolds like rediscovered film history.

"Private Lives Public Spaces" is on view beginning Monday through July 1 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan. For more information, go to moma.org.

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 18, 2019, Section C, Page 17 of the New York edition with the headline: Home Movies That Reveal the World. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

Autumn Erotic: Nathaniel Dorsky's A Fall Trip Home

By Brett Kashmere, September 19, 2019

Image: Nathaniel Dorsky, *A Fall Trip Home*

In the Shreve High football stadium,
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
Dreaming of heroes.
All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home,
Their women cluck like starved pullets,
Dying for love.
Therefore,
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
At the beginning of October,

And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.
James Wright, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" (1963)

In America, fall is football season. An evidently irresistible cultural form despite our awakened comprehension of its traumatic aftereffects, the game's popular appeal depends upon mediation. (This makes sense to me, elementally. Have you ever attended an outdoor football game in Ohio in October?) College football and NFL contests dominate the TV schedule from September to January, spilling further and further across the weekly grid: from Saturday and Sunday afternoons in the 1950s and 60s, to Monday nights (starting in 1970), then Sunday nights (as of 1987), and, since 2006, Thursday nights. Today, game footage is captured with high-speed cameras from every conceivable angle, repeated and dissected in slow motion replays, supplemented by torrents of statistics and a parallel fantasy football industry, in which players become interchangeable with, and reduced to, their data profiles. Mediated football's affective, sensual pleasures are partly defused and redirected by its high-tech, scientific presentation.

As the media scholar Margaret Morse notes, "Football on television is a world of representation which has abandoned Renaissance space and Newtonian physics – but not the claim to scientificity of sport."[1] This recourse to scientific-investigative observation and statistical fixation is a means by which the erotic spectacle of football, wherein men are permitted to touch each other in a variety of aggressive and affectionate ways, is disavowed by its majority straight male audience. The anthropologist William Arens remarks that, while in uniform, "players can engage in hand holding, hugging and bottom patting that would be disapproved of in any other {straight} context, but which is accepted on the gridiron without a second thought."[2] And as the folklorist Alan Dundes observes in his psychoanalytic interpretation, the sexually suggestive terms of American football – "penetration," "tight end," "hitting the hole," and so on – combined with the game's structural goal, of getting into the opponent's end zone more often than the opponent gets into yours, imply "a thinly disguised symbolic form by, and directed towards, males and males only, {that} would seem to constitute ritual homosexuality."[3]

Few have lensed this symbolic ritual and pageantry of masculinity as sensuously as the film artist Nathaniel Dorsky. Even more remarkable, Dorsky's delicate handling of the game and its defining season was made at the tender age of 21. The second film of a career-opening trilogy, *A Fall Trip Home* (1964), like its sister films *Ingreen* (1964) and *Summerwind* (1965), is restrained in its visual concept and skillfully executed. Partially inspired by James Wright's football poem "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," Dorsky's subjective camera interleaves Northeastern foliage with the tangled, swirling, and collapsing bodies of adolescent footballers as well as close-ups of rapt onlookers. The flow of images is modulated by montage editing, slow motion photography, and floating superimpositions. *A Fall Trip Home*'s fluid construction was achieved through

intuition and simple means, using a synchronizer and A/B rolls: “At that time, I can’t tell you how much one was winging it,” Dorsky explains. “You’d imagine this over that, then this over that. You didn’t really see it, until you got it back from the lab.”[4]

The film begins with an extreme long shot of a train, echoing the title, with fog rising from the distant tree line. A progression of blue-green forested hills and flora follows, signaling early fall. Dorsky’s landscape impressions meld with snippets of kids playing pickup football in a grassy yard, a high school stadium, pieces of mundane game action, a marching band, pompoms, and a cheering audience in dissolving cascades. Throughout the film’s 11-minute running time, images surface, assemble momentarily, then vanish and reemerge. Outside of its initial framing, the film adheres to a nonlinear logic; documentation is suffused with qualities of remembrance and fantasy. A mixing of film stocks adds to this perception of disjunctive timeframes. Most of *A Fall Trip Home* is shot on Kodachrome II, “the greatest stock they ever made,”[5] but a passage in the middle of film, of imagery we saw earlier in full color, appears in black-and-white. A grainier, high-speed color stock is used for the final nighttime sequence, accentuating the juxtaposition of exterior and interior scenes visually and temporally.

Dorsky describes the film as “less a psychodrama {though it is that} and more a sad sweet song of youth and death, of boyhood and manhood and our tender earth.”[6] Dissolves between visuals of players and leaves emphasizes the themes of transformation and maturation. Tenderness is the film’s foremost emotional register[7] until the conclusion, when *A Fall Trip Home* takes a sharp turn towards psychodrama. This shift in tone, from affection to anxiety, follows a move into the filmmaker’s family home. We see his mother at the kitchen window backlit by artificial light. It’s getting dark out, and Dorsky is seemingly being called inside. With this move, from public/social/day into private/familial/night, we are cut off from the reverie of male teenaged bodies inscribed in slow motion and layered assemblage. That spell has been broken by the domestic setting. Here we see black-and-white images of planes dropping bombs, connecting football to war, re-photographed off a television monitor. A sense of despair, claustrophobia, and unease attends this final passage. Returning home also entails a reminder of what one needed to leave in the first place.

Roughly speaking, *A Fall Trip Home* is what its title asserts: a return to the filmmaker’s hometown of Millburn, New Jersey, shot intermittently over the course of a season with his Bolex. At the time, Dorsky was living in Manhattan, a 35-minute train ride away, and attending film courses at New York University. What might be of visual interest to a young artist honing his craft, and, as Scott MacDonald writes, “coming to grips with the combined excitement and terror of gay desire,”[8] upon returning to the autumnal suburban landscape of his childhood? Given the time, place, and circumstances of its production, it’s not surprising that *A Fall Trip Home* would focus upon the poetic and aesthetic aspects of football within the context of a seasonal rite, staged here as going

home (crucially as a subject in flux). More accurately, it seems fitting that Dorsky would cast his eye on the male homosocial sphere of football, with its regiment of intimate male contact, as subject matter.

As Dorsky explains, "Like a lot of kids, I loved playing touch football after school. I was crazy about it. I mean, in the fall. You only played football in the fall, and you only played baseball in the spring. I loved playing touch football, but I was never on the level that I would want to play varsity high school football. In fact, I was in the marching band. {Laughs.} I was in the orchestra, and then the orchestra was the marching band during football season. So I did go to all of the football games, as a band member."[9]

Dorsky's recollections of football are framed within the pleasures of performance, looking, and accompaniment (as band member), at a remove from the competitive and violent physicality of organized tackle football. *A Fall Trip Home* mobilizes these personal threads into a fascinating counter-narrative of masculinity and erotic longing through primarily visual means – though unlike the majority of Dorsky's films, *A Fall Trip Home* does have a soundtrack. Japanese flute music, discovered by the filmmaker in a record store in San Francisco's Japantown, contributes to the film's pensive mood and complements the slow-motion imagery. In eschewing the bombastic music most commonly associated with high school and college football – that of the percussive, upbeat marching band – for a solo performance of elegiac, non-Western music, Dorsky heightens his idiosyncratic presentation of this American game.

Image: Nathaniel Dorsky, *A Fall Trip Home*

A Fall Trip Home is also notable in the way that it anticipates formal advancements in sports media language. Dorsky's film was shot at the same time that NFL Films was being conceived as a publicity instrument of the National Football League – the ultimate marriage of sports, advertising, and corporate media. Both Dorsky, working with film individually and noncommercially as an artist, and NFL Films, an institutional, large-scale documenting apparatus, used slow motion cinematography and color 16mm film to evoke distinctive visions of football: compassionate in Dorsky's case, while mythic for NFL Films. The grainy texture of 16mm and the vibrant, high-contrast range of Kodachrome reversal convey a sense of romanticism and nostalgia. Unlike video, which imbues immediacy and "presentness," film images carry an intrinsic archival effect, a sense of the past. And unlike the slow motion of the instant replay, an electronic process associated with analysis, Dorsky's use of the technique affirms the theme of, in his words, "a melancholy struggle. I realized that if you slowed down the football players it would turn more into… not a bromance {laughs}, to use a modern word, but slightly eroticized."[10] John Fiske similarly observes that the use of slow motion in mediating sports functions "to eroticize power, to extend the moment of climax."[11]

Dorsky's film speaks to one of the foremost paradoxes of football. Forged in the culture of the late 19th century Ivy League, football has long been an emblem of white supremacy and heterosexual power, organized as a colonizing conquest of an opponent's territory. At the same time, football is a homosocial enclave that authorizes the objectification of male bodies for a primarily male gaze: a fraternal exchange which belies the game's homophobic culture and its racist practices. As scholar Thomas Oates describes, "From its earliest days, football has been a complex and conflicted cultural text, in which seemingly straightforward assertions of the power of white men consistently involve an undercurrent of uncertainty and anxiety."[12] In *A Fall Trip Home* this undercurrent is expressed by a desirous yet detached subjectivity. Male bodies are captured on film, slowed down, studied, but also obscured under layers of superimposition. The film's specular gaze is complicated by aesthetic rather than scientific mediation. Here, a game in which masculinity is defined and affirmed unfolds in front of the camera, but its homoerotic traces are "masked by the (supposedly) hypermasculine setting of football."[13] The erotic undertones of *A Fall Trip Home* are circumscribed within the seasonal frame. "I always found … like the composer Mahler, there's something erotic about autumn, because it's a season of death, of dying," Dorsky notes. "That kind of thing sometimes intensifies a kind of erotic compensation, of life itself, as opposed to death."[14]

A Fall Trip Home's sensuality circumvents the accepted mythology of American football and in doing so complicates the dominant image of masculinity as embodied and expressed in popular media coverage of the sport. By shifting focus away from heroism, winning, and depictions of physical strength, *A Fall Trip Home* offers a gentle queering of football's construction of manliness. At the same time, it highlights – and savors – the homosocial conditions that football creates.

Homosociality provides an important context for understanding what goes on when men watch other men perform in the sporting arena. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that "'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences {to describe} social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." Football's sexually violent hazing rituals are an example of the fear (heterosexual panic) produced by homosociality. "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,'" Sedgwick continues, "of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted."[15]

Football, through its enforcement of homosocial but often homophobic behavior, adherence to male authority, and suppression of individual speech, teaches patriarchal thinking and practice. The consequences are considerable. As bell hooks notes, "To indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings."[16] Football's culture of violence stems in part from this condition of denial. The tenderness and poeticism that underpins Dorsky's representation draw, as Sedgwick puts it, the homosocial into the orbit of desire and the potentially erotic. If even for a handful of moments, the viewers of *A Fall Trip Home* are accorded "the ambiguity of sexual orientation in the liminal state of love for and identification with the object of desire."[17]

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1. Margaret Morse, "Sport on Television: Replay and Display," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 49. ↩
2. William Arens, "An Anthropologist Looks at the Rituals of Football," *The New York Times*, November 16, 1975, 238. ↩
3. Alan Dundes, "Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football," *Western Folklore* 37, no. 2 (April 1978): 87. ↩
4. Nathaniel Dorsky, telephone interview with the author, July 16, 2018. ↩
5. Dorsky, interview. ↩
6. "A Fall Trip Home," Canyon Cinema website, http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=802 ↩
7. This quality of tenderness separates *A Fall Trip Home* from celebrated mainstream cinematic treatments of the sport, such as *North Dallas Forty* (1979) and *Any Given Sunday* (1999), which often explore the visceral brutality and degrading aspects of football's professionalized variant. ↩
8. Scott MacDonald, "Nathaniel Dorsky," in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 78. ↩
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14. Dorsky, interview. ↩
15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-2. ↩
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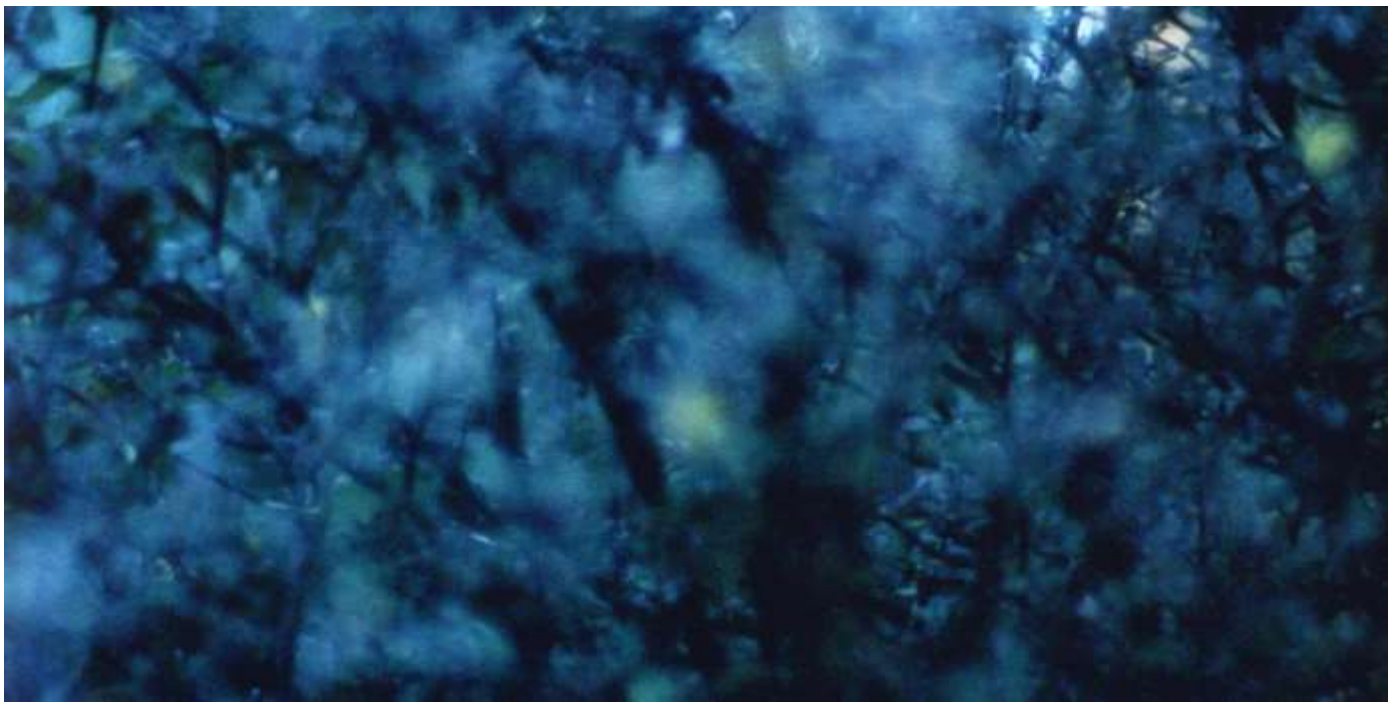
ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

NATHANIEL DORSKY

February 08, 2019 • Nathaniel Dorsky on celebrating light and celluloid



Nathaniel Dorsky, *Monody*, 2017, 16mm, color, 16 minutes.

Nathaniel Dorsky treats celluloid as a medium for ceremony—silence and light are concerns he has explored in his films since the 1960s. His latest work, Colphon (for the Arboretum Cycle) (2018) *will screen at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive on February 9.The entire* Arboretum Cycle, *which comprises seven films shot in the San Francisco Arboretum between 2017-2018, will also screen there on February 15, 2019.*

THERE WAS A DROUGHT IN CALIFORNIA for five years, and then in autumn of 2017 there was a huge amount of rain. I went to the San Francisco Arboretum the following spring and realized I wanted to make a film about the way the plants there manifest in light or vice versa. I made *Elohim*, which is about an awesome sense of birth, with a burning bush quality—bushes inflamed with light, for instance—and the cycle came spontaneously out of that. I sent the footage off to the negative cutter,

and two weeks later I walked into the garden and realized that it was becoming more adolescent, so I made *Abaton* and sent that off. Then the garden began to mature in the late spring. I made *Coda,* thinking that was going to be the coda to *Elohim* and *Abaton*, and then it was past the coda and it was summer, and then there were the first qualities of death, things starting to turn red and drying out. I made *Ode,* and then it went on and on until I made *Epilogue*. The seven films were not planned, but it was a wonderful year to be involved almost week-to-week with the progression of the earth.

I didn't want to make a film that depicted a garden or plants or flowers, but one where the film itself became like a plant that could fill with light. I began to let the aperture function in a way that paralleled the expressions of mood in the psyche. I could feel as a breeze was coming into the garden, and I would open the lens and let it fill with light, using the Bolex like a clarinet, and then I would feel in my own psyche fear or sadness, and darken down, and then restart towards some hope, to find light again.

When I was ten, back in '53, I fell in love with Disney wildlife films; there's one called *Beaver Valley* and there's another about the four seasons titled *Nature's Half-Acre*. This was the first time I saw an animation of a flower blooming, that kind of magic. I realized that you could make one yourself. I had a neighbor and we made films about animals in the neighborhood—we had an 8 mm silent film camera and we'd go off with our bikes and our camera and into a forest. Those Disney films were important early influences, especially in my twenties, when I was naming films after the seasons. I made three sound films in one year—*Ingreen, A Fall Trip Home,* and *Summerwind*; after that, I wanted to make a silent film. I went from trying to find a language within the pictorial image to a language based on imagery that activates parts of the psyche which normally aren't activated by film.

My friends in my late teens and early twenties were all autodidacts—we were seeing Stan Brakhage for the first time, and we took silence more seriously. He was making a syntax of everything that was wrong, like overexposure, underexposure, out-of-focus, jump-cuts—it all became the positive language of a kind of poetry that was extremely vital at that moment. To us, sound cinema was a more socialized sense of yourself, whereas the landscape of poetry was your own psyche. We had the intuition that with silence there was the potential of creating a film language that was intrinsic to the nature of film—we all thought of cinema as a shrine, and Jonas Mekas was often trying to acquire an abandoned church or synagogue in the Lower East Side. We were interested in the possibility of a cinema Mass. The silence required more participation of the audience; they had to give themselves more, but they would get more. There's a chance to go deeper with silent cinema.

— as told to Matthew Carlson

The New York Times

The Best Movies of 2018

MANOHLA DARGIS | DECEMBER 7, 2018

The year's best movies include, clockwise from top left, "Minding the Gap," "First Reformed," "Burning," "Happy as Lazzaro" and "Private Life."CreditCreditClockwise from bottom left: Jojo Whilden/Netflix; Hulu; A24; Well Go Usa; Netflix

What Could Have Been

Some of the most inspiring films I watched this year were made by women who wore long skirts and high-button boots and couldn't yet vote for president. You can find some of their work in "Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers," a recently released DVD box set from Kino Lorber and the Library of Congress. (The Blu-ray version has more titles.) Some of these movies were featured in a program at Brooklyn Academy of Music that ran in July, one of several surveys that this vital arts center has dedicated to forgotten and overlooked female directors.

The more I watched these films from the beginning of the 20th century, the more I began to think about the movie world — the Hollywood — that could have been. By the late 1920s, women were largely shut out of directing in the American industry until the mid-1960s. If film pioneers like Lois Weber and Alice Guy Blaché had continued, it's possible that a radically different movie world might have emerged. In my alt-Hollywood fantasy, female and male filmmakers would have worked side by side, perhaps giving us unimagined stories and heroines. That history in turn might have laid the foundation for an equitable present rather than an industry defined by entrenched sexism.

This inequity shows no real signs of abating, presumably because sexism has never damaged the movie industry's bottom line. As of this writing, only a couple of the top 20 movies at the domestic box office have female-driven stories; in a few titles, the prominent female character shares the

screen either as part of a romantic couple or a family. None of the 20 were directed by women. And then there is the continuing fallout from the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the #MeToo movement, which my colleague Brooks Barnes reported in November are greatly contributing to a "profound malaise" in the movie capital.

"Yap, yap — go back to your kennels," a movie producer said of Time's Up, the advocacy group formed in January by producers like Shonda Rhimes and performers like Reese Witherspoon to fight workplace sexual harassment. Barnes was startled by the movie producer's comment. I was only surprised that he had been honest, even off the record. This producer is just one power broker, but he represents a mind-set that is responsible for mainstream industry that feels both creatively and ethically bankrupt. At this point, I wonder if it would be better for the powerful women in Time's Up to forget about changing the old industry and just burn it down so they can rebuild it

This malaise has other sources, including the effect Netflix and Amazon are having on the big studios. Then again, these same studios — with their sequels and superheroes — are busily doing their part to turn American cinema into a gushing stream of uniformity. This seems unlikely to change especially given that in July the Walt Disney Company solidified its plans to buy Fox, thereby destroying one of the studios that created Hollywood. Opponents of the proposed deal include the Writers Guild of America West, which severely criticized the merger for furthering the media consolidation that has drastically limited competition.

The proof of these limits is evident at the box office, which in recent years has been dominated by branded product, much of it owned by Disney. The studio again leads the box office, having thus far gobbled up a staggering 27 percent of the domestic market share. (A decade ago, it released more features and had less market share.) You can like Disney movies and still believe that oligopoly is bad for movie culture. The same is true of Netflix, which has been showing its muscle in the movie world to feed its platform and which is where Joel and Ethan Coen's "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs" is currently crammed among its thousands of good, bad and indifferent titles — all ready to watch, pause, forget.

10. 'Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle)' (Nathaniel Dorsky)

With their gently nodding, brilliantly colored flowers and shifting shadows, Dorsky's heart-soaringly beautiful films are reminders that cinema is also about light and form.

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 9, 2018, on Page AR12 of the New York edition with the headline: The Best of 2018 Film. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

CHICAGO READER

Ecstasy on film: Nathaniel Dorsky discusses *The Arboretum Cycle*, his latest work of devotional cinema, which he'd prefer you watch alone

Posted By Ben Sachs on 09.24.18 at 06:00 AM

DANIEL BOGDANIC Nathaniel Dorsky shooting *The Arboretum Cycle*

This Friday at 7 PM, Northwestern University's Block Cinema will host one of the major cinematic events of the year with the local premiere of *The Arboretum Cycle* (2017), a collection of seven interconnected short works by veteran avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. One of the country's most important living film artists, Dorsky has been making meditative, generally rapturous movies since the early 1960s. He has described his practice as "devotional cinema" (he also wrote a book with that title in 2003), referring to the potential of movies to engender spiritual experiences. *The Arboretum Cycle* is doubtless one such experience. Shot in the San Francisco Arboretum over the course of a year, the work consists of silent shots of plant life, skies, and other natural phenomena. Dorsky's compositions are consistently inspired; eschewing wide shots, he forces viewers to lose themselves in minutiae. Last week I telephoned the filmmaker (who will attend Friday's screening) to discuss the cycle. Our far-ranging conversation came to touch upon spirituality, the ethics of editing, and what it's like to be a plant.

I'm not a religious person, but I often find spiritual experiences through art. For that reason, I admire your concept of devotional cinema—it speaks to the transcendent feelings I've had when engaging with meditative or ecstatic filmmaking. Could you discuss how you developed

this concept over the years and how it informs your filmmaking?

The name "devotional cinema" came from walking around the Art Institute of Chicago. I was showing films in Chicago some years ago, and I noticed in the museum that they called various works devotional works. Usually they were altarpieces of some kind. Like, they had this collection of Italian *tavolas*, these little triptychs that folded out—they were portable shrines that you could get during the Renaissance and carry under your arm. And these altarpieces were in themselves sublime and contemplative. If I were an artist at that time, that's what I would be making, probably.

Since the very beginning of my being involved in the American experimental film world in the early 60s, there was always some sense of [cinema] being like a church. There was this whole idea of wanting, on the Lower East Side, to find some church or old synagogue and turn it into a theater, with the screen being the altar. So that was all there, when I came into that world. . . . Also, when I was in my early 20s and smoked a lot of weed and watched and loved and respected the screen, I saw what different people could do with projectors and a screen to affect the spirit or the mind directly—not through narrative content, but through the actual kinesthetic qualities of cinema.

The way [the concept] came about, I was asked to teach a semester-long course at UC Berkeley—the generic "Avant-garde 101" course that all the students would take even if they weren't interested in film because it sounded like an easy course. I had never taught a semester—I had done an hour or two in somebody's classroom—and I began to prepare the class over the summer by walking around. I knew that Emerson—whose essays we all love and admire—had his notebooks, which had the stuff he'd write down daily and which would eventually develop into the essays that are so famous now. So I had a notebook and I just thought about things. And the basic structure of the class became the structure of the book.

I think that course was called "Film in Search of a Language," because I said that the most interesting thing to me about experimental film was the search for an intrinsic film language. I wasn't so interested in the "naughty" films or the extremist films. I was interested in ones that actually began to find some union between the essence of cinema and the ability to express something with that essence that wasn't based on theater or poetry. . . . Later, I got a chance to give a lecture at Stanford, just in a classroom, and I gave a talked that condensed [my course] into an hour-and-a-half-long talk. I called it "Montage and the Human Spirit," because it was an editing class that I was speaking in front of.

Then I was asked to give the keynote speech at this film and religion conference they were having at Princeton. I never really went to college—I mean, I went for a couple of semesters—so I didn't really know what a keynote speaker was. But I warped that same lecture, and that time I called it devotional cinema, after those things I saw in Chicago.

To go further into the relationship between montage and the human spirit, how do you go about editing a work like *The Arboretum Cycle*? The work, like many of your films, is soothing and meditative, but it doesn't rely on long takes the way some experimental films do. How do you decide on the length of your shots and when you choose to cut from one shot to another?

You see, I have actually been a meditation student, but I'm a sloppy meditator. I've studied with some very marvelous Tibetan teachers since the early '70s and . . . Well, to back up a little, I think

duration in cinema is not necessarily contemplative. It gets labeled as contemplative because shots are held for long, but that isn't necessarily contemplative at all. That can just be sadistic at worst or, at best, it can be a pose of some sort. I also notice that [filmmakers] use duration in combination with montage, and I personally find that form to be not full-hearted. Because at a certain point you're just waiting for the cut. Then the cut happens finally, and you go, "Oh, now I'm going to be *here* for 20 minutes."

For my own sense of timing, I'm limited on a practical level by the length of a Bolex [16-millimeter camera] wind, which is about 25 to 30 seconds. Of course, I could put a motor on my camera [to extend the length of the wind], but that's not quite who I am. I like to wind up. So, first of all, there's that built-in limitation. But, really, what it comes down to is holding a shot to the point where it ripens. Sometimes, in the montage, you want a shot to go a little bit beyond this point of ripening, because if the next shot has a lot of activity to it—say it's a moving shot of some sort—you might want to hold it a little longer to build up just a little bit of anticipation. Then the release of energy into the next shot is alive and manifest. If you hold a shot for too long after it ripens, then it begins to create discursive thought on the viewer's part. If you're going beyond the ripeness, the viewer thinks, "How long is this shot going to be?" And that isn't contemplative.

Cutting a film is very much like being a good lover or a good host. You offer something—not too much, not too little—and you're aware of what's going on in [the viewer's] mind. Sometimes after a preview screening, I'll trim some shots by, like, four frames, because I realize [the film] is just starting to get self-conscious. I'm beginning to go from the present moment into a secondary analysis moment. So I like to try to cut before the mind begins to decay into self-consciousness. . . . The montage should come out of the inner necessities of the work itself.

Film is often quite shallow, and in experimental film, the shallowness is often because the films are never responding to themselves. There's always an external hand or voice making the next move. So, in a way, the film never deepens; it's always in the same place. It should be a very organic response to reality, like when you know whether you're full or hungry.

Can you give an example of when you were making *The Arboretum Cycle* and the work responded to itself?

That happened all the time. The cycle started out as only the first film, *Elohim*. That's what it was going to be. And after I sent *Elohim* off to the negative cutter, I went out to the garden again. It was three weeks later. [I shot *Elohim*] in early spring; now we were in full spring. I got inspired, and I shot *Abaton*. And then I finished that and sent that off the lab; now I thought it was going to be a two-part film. Then I said, "Oh no, there's still a bit of late, late spring and early summer. There's this other kind of lightness." So I shot a coda, which I called *Coda*. Then I didn't stop. I went for 12 months. It was not planned that way. So in that way, the whole work was a response to itself—it came spontaneously through the year. It just flowed out of me and through me.

As for the editing within the films, there was no way I could have any idea about this movie. The only idea I had about the movie was that each section would be representative of the time of year [when it was shot]. And that wasn't really an idea; it was what the garden was, or is. But within the cutting, I had no plan but to choose the first shot and then see what was interesting after that first shot, what kind of energy would be most elevating or enlightening or invigorating.

Can you talk about the significance of these titles, *Elohim* and *Abaton*?

First of all, you must realize that the titles are just titles. They have to have a name like your dog has to have a name, right? You don't really question if your dog's name is Bipsy. What does Bipsy mean? It's Bipsy. So, on a certain level, they're handles, the titles. But they have to have some resonance for me. "Elohim" is Hebrew for "divine beings." It's actually a pre-Judaic word. In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis, God is referred to as Elohim, but Elohim is a plural, and this has driven religious scholars nuts. . . . I thought, the first film [depicts] early spring, which is kind of the awakening, looking around at the energy and so forth, and that's how it became *Elohim*.

Then the next film came along and I needed a title, and an *abaton* is a dormitory for sacred sleep in Greek healing centers. The most famous one was in Epidaurus, which I wrote about in *Devotional Cinema*. And the abaton was a safe place where you had this drug-induced sleep—maybe after some mushrooms and wine—and you cured yourself through dream revelation. So I just called [the film] *Abaton*. I couldn't defend the decision in court, though.

You mention these drug-induced or heightened experiences. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was 20 years old, and around that time, I looked back on my adolescence and started to realize how the disease had manifested itself before I was aware that I had it. I realized that the beginning of spring would always trigger a manic phase in me—I think it had to do with the increased daylight. I would have this preternatural surge of energy.

I understand. And did the greenery seem exquisite?

Yes, very much so.

I just want to interject—and then you can go on with your story, please—but there had been a

drought in California for five years [before I shot *The Arboretum Cycle*]. It only rains in the winter here, and if it doesn't rain in the winter, it's terrible. Because there's no snowpack. . . . So, it rained a lot starting in November, which is very early here. It just poured and poured. So that following spring released, like, five years of held-back energy. It was the most gorgeous spring. The earth was so alive, the plants . . . everything was going wild. And I got intoxicated by it, just drunk on how gorgeous the plant world was and the sky and the blowing clouds. Anyway, go on.

What you're describing is exactly what I experienced every spring when I was a teenager. When the plants were starting to bloom and the sunlight was hitting them in such a way, it was like being intoxicated. I've taken medication for 15 years now, and so I haven't experienced that mania in quite a while. In fact, I hadn't even thought about it for years. But when I was watching *The Arboretum Cycle* the other day and I saw the shots you captured of sunlight intensifying on leaves and flowers, I was taken back immediately. I've got to say, it felt good to experience that euphoria within this safe context of art, rather than have it erupt unexpectedly within me. What I'd like to know is, how did you capture light changing ever so gradually? It must have been fortuitous.

Let me tell what I was inspired by, and then I'll answer your question. San Francisco is often foggy, especially in the summertime. But where I live, near the Arboretum, which is not that far from the ocean . . . there are often days when the sun is dodging and ducking in and out of the fog. So things are getting lighter and darker all the time. I used to try to shoot that, because it's such a phenomenon here. There are times in the film when [the light effects] are actual, but the other times I did them myself, with the aperture of the lens. I got very deeply into it, very in the zone, so I would feel when the breeze was beginning and when I wanted to open up the light. I became a plant, in short, and joined the other plants in the reverie of the light.

From *Abaton*, the second piece of *The Arboretum Cycle*

Had you shot work in the San Francisco Arboretum before?

Oh yes. I have many films that have images from there. It's in walking distance from my apartment. It's a lovely place to hang out—it's like a sanctuary. You feel safe there. Like, you can leave your camera on a tripod, walk 20 feet away and look at something and know that nobody's going to run

off with it. It's a wonderful place to have a toke, you know. There are benches. . . . You can have the freedom to stand and stare at a plant for a few minutes without feeling strange or like you're outside of the social order.

Was anyone else at the preview screening besides you?

Just Block Cinema's programmer.

So you had a private screening! That's great. You're very, very lucky. I've seen it myself in private screenings with, like, two or three people. That's the best. There's nothing better than that.

I'm sure you also like it when the theater is full of people who want to see your work, right?

My vanity does, of course. But in reality, I don't know if that's best for the audience. I think five people at a time would be best. That way, you don't have other people's discursive rustling taking you out [of the film]. My films are very loved in New York, and we had three nights in a row of *The Arboretum Cycle* at the Anthology [Film Archives]; it was full every night. I wondered, "Are these New Yorkers going to want to see a whole film about a garden, flowers, leaves, and light?"
But people were into it. It was quiet—you could tell it was happening. I was very fortunate with this film, because, in a way, the three graces came together on it: the grace of light, the grace of plants, and the grace of cinema. They all became sisters in union.

This came out of years and years of experience of shooting with a Bolex. It was made by someone who's been shooting with a Bolex for 50 years, although I kept it casual—I didn't make it too pristine or too precise. I wanted a little sense of relaxation, as if you were actually seeing camera footage. So I left in flash frames and stuff, which I thought were duly expressive. I wanted to give the audience some of the pleasure of what it's like to see camera footage transformed into sublime montage.

Speaking of quiet, silence is an essential part of your films. . . .

Well, it's cheap.

Have you ever made films with a soundtrack?

I made three sound films when I was 20, but then the group of filmmakers I hung out with in New York—we admired the silent filmmakers. We thought they were more serious. Not that there aren't great sound films, but we thought that a lot of time, the silent films had this rigor of speaking with the film. . . . You know, a sound film is a double-sense medium. It speaks to your ear and eye. And the ear and the eye together produce a more socialized reality. A sound film is like your social sense of yourself, whereas I think a silent film is like your more intimate, vulnerable, private sense of yourself. It seems extraordinary that with film you can actually share silence with someone else—and not in a passive way, but in an active way, where the silence is palpable. It's an offer of tenderness and love to the audience.

MUBI
Notebook Festival

Toronto: Wavelengths Preview — "We Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Contrarians"

An early look at all of the short and feature films in the Toronto International Film Festival's most essential section, Wavelengths.

Michael Sicinski 05 SEP 2018

The following review of Colophon is part of a larger article previewing the films at the Toronto International Film Festival's 2018 Wavelengths program.

Dorsky's newest film is intended to serve as a coda to his monumental *Arboretum Cycle*, although it also serves as a coherent work in its own right. Seen either way, there is a remarkable coherence to this film that should certainly not surprise anyone familiar with Dorsky's limpid, formally exacting cinema. At the same time, for a filmmaker who has tended to restrict himself to series of present moments that hang together according to strictly cinematic logics – rhythm, composition, duration, and the like – there is something uniquely rhetorical at work in *Colophon*. This three-part film feels in part like an exegesis on behalf of a particular kind of filmmaking, as well as a particular perspective on the world.

The first part of *Colophon* is decidedly urban, and as a chronicler of the designs and patterns of San Francisco life, this is not new territory for him in and of itself. However there is an unusual emphasis on flatness, especially as reflected in digital signage. We see reflections of actual moving people and vehicles, but almost all of it is channeled through large-scale video monitors displaying ads. This results not only in disparities of scale, with large human images often looming over the actual living figures in the frame. It also coats much of the first part of *Colophon* in horizontal scan lines, as if the city (and the film) were being colonized by video technology. (In one key shot, we see a woman waiting on a street corner as she is emblazoned with an overlay of such digital images, and it feels like a visual bombardment.)

This is not to say that the digitized urban images do not have a beauty of their own. But it is a highly mediated beauty, sifted through layers that interrupt one another, clashing rather than harmonizing. This sets the stage

for the second part of *Colophon*, which represents a return to direct natural imagery. Several things happen in this second part that are noteworthy, and that lead to this question of at least partial argumentation on Dorsky's part. First, there is the respite of getting away from the televisual and back to what we have come to expect from Dorksy's recent film work: exquisite cinematic examinations of flora, serving as opportunities for studies in light and space. But these initial expectations are themselves soon upended by *Colophon*.

In several shots, Dorsky introduces broad, all-over fields of color, hazy and indistinct. Very gradually, out of black, he fades in on an image that reveals a group of flowers or a patch of underbrush. (One such shot has hints of motion, which we come to recognize as bees traversing the meadow once the focus is clearer.) What is happening in these shots serves to echo the scan line shots in the first part of the film, as if to demonstrate that cinema can replicate the fuzzy patches of dots and lines that *is* digital imagery, and can do it with more control, provided one knows how to use its tools. The dominance of video is less a question of convenience than one of a generalized rendering of the visual world in standardized, repeatable patterns – "seeing between the lines" – that militate against wonder and discovery.

From there, Dorsky provides a kind of master class, displaying the multitude of ways that cinema can alter our perception of things. He employs slow fades-in, rapid differential apertures, time-lapse, light bleed onto the edge of the frame, and again, various patterns of rack focus that bring otherwise still phenomena to life before our eyes.

In the final part of *Colophon*, Dorsky shows us what appear to be expanses of algae on water, and the formal control with which he brings these visions to the screen is simply breathtaking. We see individual bubbles of aerobic respiration, behind which we see the water, and trees above the water reflected in the surface of the pond. In addition to the multitude of deep greens transmitted in these shots, they also communicate unexpected depth along the humblest of surfaces.

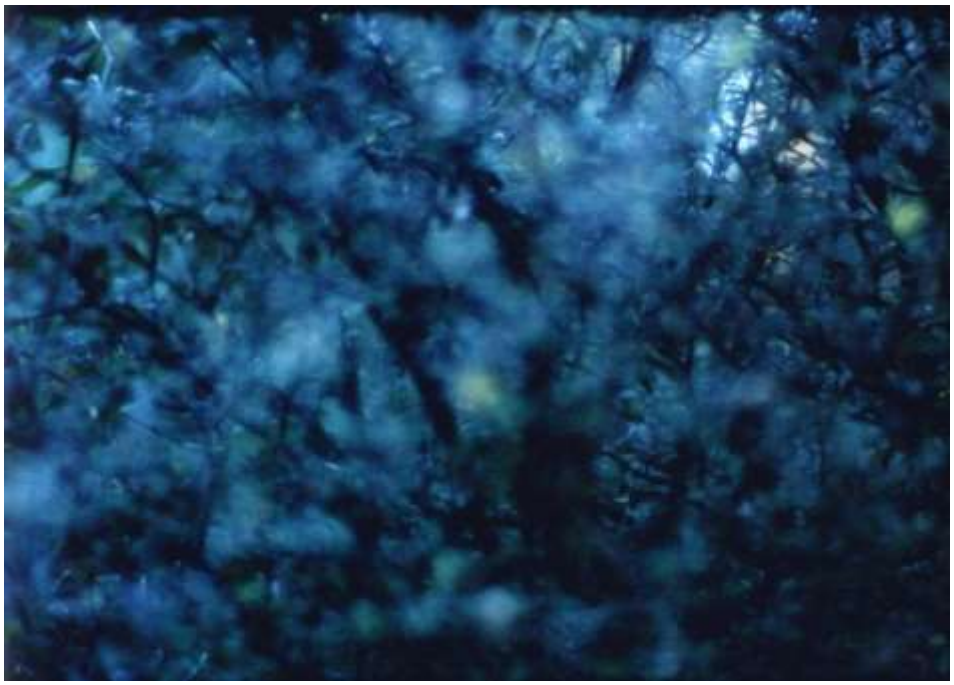
This is perhaps where we can take *Colophon* itself a bit more deeply, as postulating a philosophy of seeing. It's not just that things are more complex the more you look at them, although Dorsky's cinema certainly bears out that truism. It's that we are actively encouraged to see the world around us as flat, unidimensional, reducible to pure data. In fact, most of our dominant optical technologies are organized to encourage such cursory scansion. One could argue, as I think Dorsky's films implicitly do, that there is a unique richness to the cinematic image that reinvests the visual world with a depth and tenderness that other media cannot quite match. But more than this, *Colophon* is a three-part poem of protest that pleads for a particular form of sensual engagement, a look of love and investiture, over and above the instrumentalist glance. Dorsky shows us that time is what allows the world around us to return our gaze, to love us back.

THE INTERNATIONAL FILM MAGAZINE
Sight&Sound

Nathaniel Dorsky's Arboretum Cycle: the photosynthesis of film

The artist-filmmaker captures a rare sculptural quality of light in his latest work, which comprises seven films of plant life in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, plunging the audience into the undergrowth.

Matt Turner
31 July 2018



Monody (2017), from Nathaniel Dorsky's *Arboretum Cycle*

Most filmmakers think about light when making films. All film is light, after all; every image in every film needs the light that illuminates it in order to exist – for capture, and for projection. Yet few think about it quite as much as artist-filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. As he writes in his book-cum-manifesto *Devotional Cinema*, "beyond everything else, film is a screen, film is a rectangle of light, film is light sculpture in time"; to not consider it deeply would be to disregard film's most essential property.

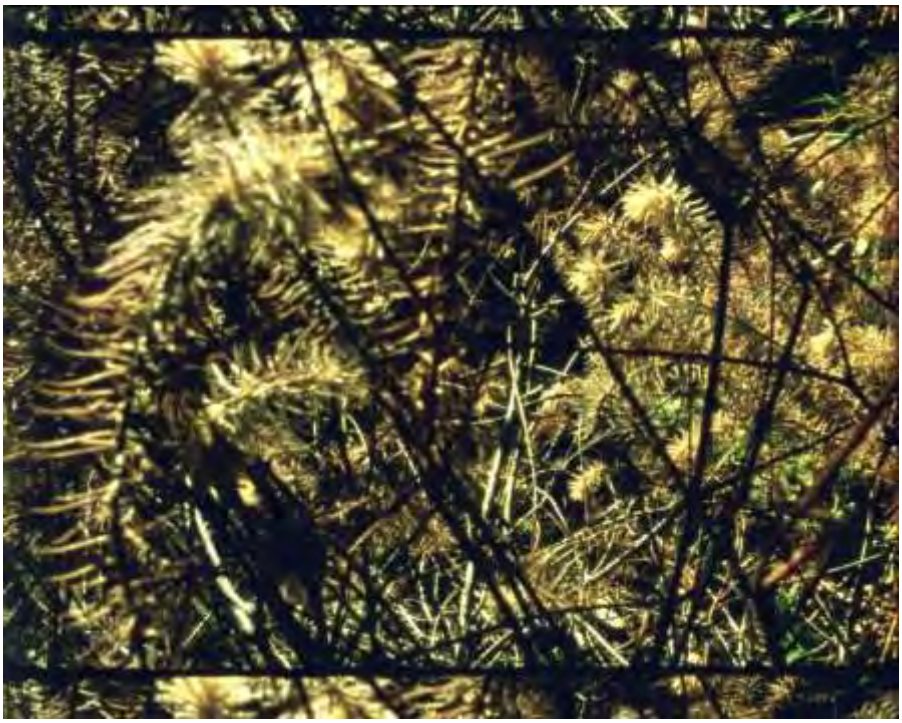
Immediately after this line, he asks a few hypothetical questions. "How does a filmmaker sculpt light in harmony with its subject matter? How can light be deeply in union with evocation? How do you construct a temporal form that continues to express nowness to the

audience?" In the book – a short text making the case that cinema, when handled correctly, can (and should) be a transcendental experience – he asks these questions as much as a film-viewer as a filmmaker. Some of the clearest answers, however, arrive in his latest work, a seven-film-long cycle of short films made in the Strybing Arboretum of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park titled ***Arboretum Cycle***.

Nathaniel Dorsky with his 16mm Bolex film camera

"Films needs light as much as anything else," Dorsky said, speaking to the audience over Skype after a screening of the cycle at Sheffield Doc/Fest. Explaining the genesis of this particular series, he described standing within the arboretum, located just a short walk from his home, and feeling a sense of earthly connection that is perhaps familiar to a filmmaker with a uniquely developed sensitivity: "I could feel the breeze, the texture, the light, the air."

He describes the film that resulted from this, *Elohim*, as something that "happened organically", but also something he made with a specific authorial intent: "I wanted the film itself to breathe light." Beginning as a single film, it grew into a series of seven – the first filmed in February and the last in December – all contained within that same arboretum, crossing the seasons and charting the changes (of light and darkness; weather and wildlife; growth and decay) contained therein. Both micro and macro in focus, the *Arboretum Cycle* shows what Dorsky has called "a complete year in the world of light and plants", depicting all of light and, by extension, all of life.



Epilogue

Though the arboretum's grown environment is the ostensible focus, light is the principle subject of the series, and of large parts of the filmmaker's career. Dorsky is now 75 years old and every bit as awake to the world's vitality as he has ever been. Across more than five decades of filmmaking, shooting (and screening) always and only on 16mm, he has explored the ways in which light falls – on landscapes, objects, structures, landscapes and, occasionally, people – and how the camera can be used to reflect the indelible, ineffable beauty of this.

His films consistently achieve this through a delicacy, acuity, immediacy and above all a benevolence of vision that radiates into the viewer's core, enlivening them to the world and its minute details, enabling them to see and sense each observance as it is – or rather, as more than it is. The films afford a focus and proximity to the object that is unusual in ordinary life; the effect is amplified through a style of non-linear editing that permits each image to be devoted an undivided attention, whilst still allowing for the accumulative emotion of the sequencing of consistently beautiful images that communicate with each other subtly and largely subconsciously. As a viewing experience, his films are both energizing and exhausting, at once too much and not enough. They are films that encourage hyperbole, and defy description. The viewer leaves the cinema in a state of bodily awe, largely unable to describe or recall the specificities of what they saw, instead feeling a more generalised sense of alertness and sensitivity, a tingliness and warmth that often transfers to their subsequent experience of the outside world.

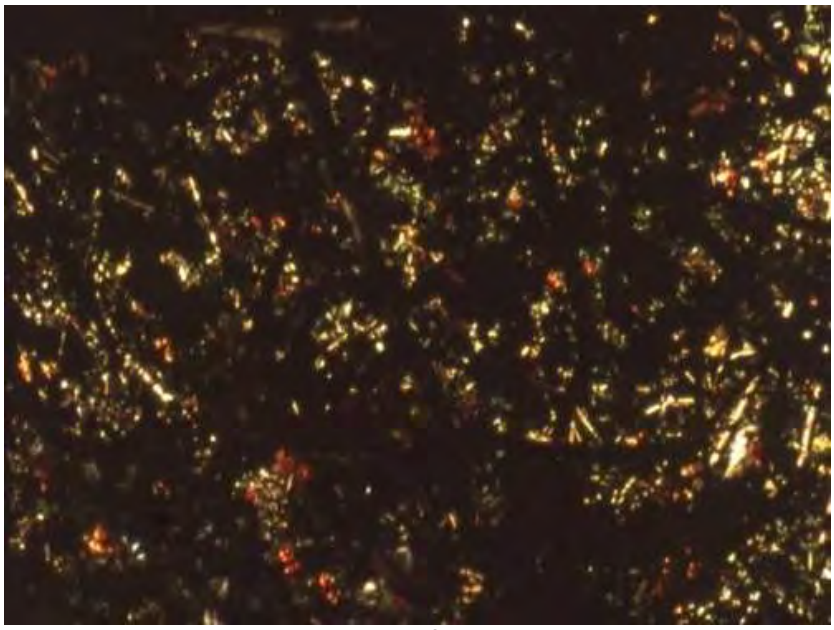
Elohim

Yet ***Elohim*** begins without light. Small white splotches emerge from a total black as the camera's lens opens wider, slowly letting light in. The eye adjusts and these formations can be seen to be white flowers sprouting on a bush that fills the frame. The aperture continues to adjust, leaking light in and bringing more of the scene into view until all of it can be seen, and then none, as the white consumes the black.

This repeats from a number of perspectives and angles, Dorsky examining the garden's first growths with curiosity and concentration. This same technique is seen across the whole cycle, manufacturing movement within a fixed perspective frame through aperture change and the dilation of light. Shifts within shots sit alongside straight cuts, action is created where there is essentially none. The first sense is of wonder – at this seasonal emergence of new life, and at how the properties of light interact with it under the ever-adjusting camera's varying gazes.

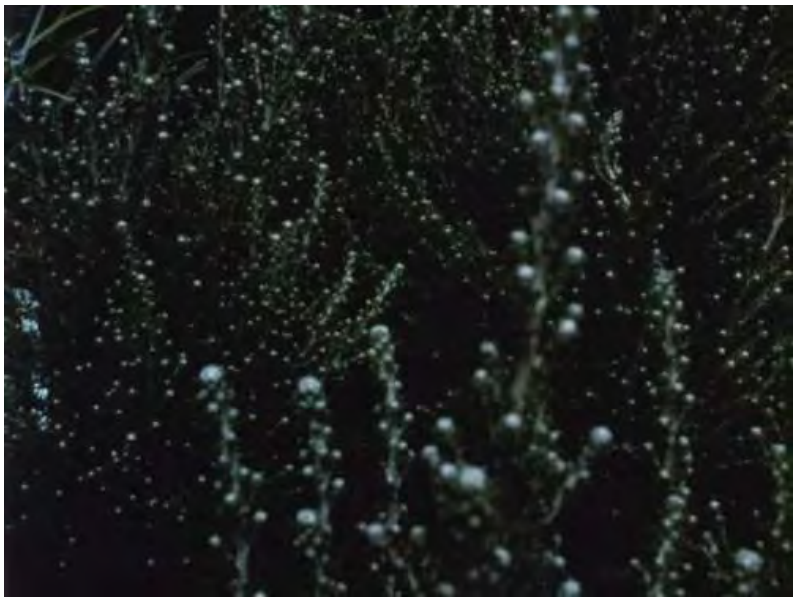
Abaton

Next, with ***Abaton***, something similar, but offering maybe a greater resplendence. Many more flowerbeds can be seen at a distance, the same exposure undulations bringing them in and out of sight and definition. Flickers and soft flashes and a heightening of rhythm, alongside focal shifts within the frame that obscure some elements and direct attention towards others, manipulating the viewer's gaze and creating interplays between areas of the frame's foreground and background, establishing depth within fixed positions, further movement within a fixed frame. Elements of the changing weather enter the image, flutters of wind adding movement to the image's growing sets of objects as more erratic patterns produced by the fluctuating natural light disrupt the scenery's base serenity. Springtime's first blessings are looked upon, low down and in and out of light.



Coda

Coda and ***Ode*** see the arrival of summer, and with it new qualities of light, new weather, new soil conditions, new plantlife and, eventually, the first signs of decay. Seen among the widening, sometimes repeating base of images are a variety of shrubs, trees, grasses, reeds and a seeming infinity of blossoms, berries and bracken, mostly shot within a proximity that gives the effect of submergence, masses of vegetation consuming the frame with very rare glimpses of the sky, and never any glimmer of any human presence other than the filmmaker himself.



Ode

The effect is that the environment feels less like a garden than a forest, and the camera (and viewer, by this point well-connected, absorbed into the cycle's rhythms) less of a flat observer than an active dweller within the space, so well established by now that it seems like the various vines may have entangled with and grown around Dorsky during his time spent in the garden. In these two parts there is a greater variety of colour; the same focus tricks used over floral washes achieve particularly rich canvases of abstraction where the objects within the frame often become impossible to determine. Hot reds and vibrant purples bloom magnificently before wilting in the summer heat; Dorsky's increasingly abstract palette mutes into muddier browns and denser reds.

The autumnal sections ***September*** and ***Monody*** feature, amongst other things, a large tree, centralised and distanced in a way that little else is within the cycle, as well as a focus on the throbbing colours of the garden's second growth, a variety of richly hued florae doted upon with a devotion that seems almost to reflect the amount of time Dorsky has now spent fixated on this one part of his local environment.

September

The cycle's concluding part, ***Epilogue***, is particularly sensuous but in a different way, the imagery lent a density by winter's dampth and darkness. The thick undergrowths take on a claustrophobic quality as the darkness is largely no longer manufactured through lens adjustments but a result of the natural gloom.

Here – having spent so long in the undergrowth – is where viewers might start to see things that are not necessarily there. (Over Skype after the Sheffield show, Dorsky asked us for feedback on this first uninterrupted screening of all seven parts – he was still experimenting with screening breaks to work out how best to present the cycle.) Some may see "hallucinations", in Dorsky's word, that are a product of both the continual attention induced by the viewing experience and the dark qualities of the images themselves – a product of the now decaying and collapsing plantlife strangling the increasingly delicate winter light. As before, Dorsky open and closes his lens, filtering the rays, displaying as much affinity for capturing the low light as he has catching it at its brightest.

Epilogue

In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky wrote: “When a filmmaker is fully and selflessly present, the audience becomes fully and selflessly present. The filmmaker’s physical relationship to the world manifests as the camera’s relationship to the image and becomes the audience’s relationship to the screen. To the degree that a filmmaker can relate directly to the heart of an object, the viewer will also relate directly to the heart of an object. The audience will see the screen as the camera sees the objects, and a great unity of heart will take place between filmmaker and audience.”

His *Arboretum Cycle* is one of the purest, clearest and warmest evocations of this conception, a most direct relation between object, camera, screen and audience, a dismantling of distinctions between these four things through a totalising, continual immersion within the fluctuations of the light of the undergrowth. Or, as Dorsky put it in the Q&A at Sheffield: “I became a plant.”

And yet, though the cycle ends in near-darkness, it seems that Dorsky remains drawn to the light. In the time between the Arboretum Cycle’s screening at Sheffield and now, Dorsky has announced another chapter, of sorts, a second springtime. Not made to be shown along with the Arboretum Cycle, but still attached to it, *Colophon* (for the *Arboretum Cycle*) is a new three-part, 13½ minute film that sees Dorsky back in the garden. Not an eighth part, it is instead apparently “a new thing, a spring later, a different maker, so to speak”. The seasons restart; the cycle resets.

Two Hats: **Personally made** films and those films worked on.

by Nathaniel Dorsky

June 24, 2018

Ever since I was nineteen years old I have worked on films either as a cameraperson or as a film editor, or sometimes both. These films usually fall within the practical categories of the film industry: *educational films*, *documentaries*, and *feature length fictional films*. This is how I have made a living during my lifetime and how I have supported my more personal film work.

Nathaniel working as a production assistant on *Nothing But a Man*, directed by Michael Roemer and Robert Milton Young, 1963

In 1963, a year before I presented my childhood trilogy of sound films, Ingreen, A Fall Trip Home, and Summerwind, I made a film, *Catch A Tiger*, which showed the activity in two nursery schools that experimented with allowing four year olds to improvise in music and visual constructions and assemblages. I was inspired to do this by my mother, Blanche Dorsky, whose nursery school was one of the two presented.

1963 Teen-age Movie Contest Winners

Kodak's first teen-age movie contest was a smashing success. It turned up some of the finest movie-making talent you could imagine. Not from pros, but from youngsters! Titles and synopses of prize-winning films given here will tell you what they were shooting. Our heartiest congratulations to all entrants.

And a special congratulation to nine of the contestants whose films have been chosen by CINE (Council for International Non-Theatrical Events) for possible showing in overseas film festivals. It was CINE and the University Film Producers Association who asked our help in locating outstanding 8mm and 16mm movies made by young people, and we want to thank them for their cooperation and help in judging.

Judges for the contest were: O. S. Knudsen, Iowa State University; J. E. Oglesby, Virginia State Board of Education; I. L. Senn, Purdue University; James Card, George Eastman House of Photography; and John Flory, Advisor on Non-Theatrical Films, Eastman Kodak Company.

JUNIOR CATEGORY (12-15 years of age):

First Prize: SON OF WAR SHORTS, Philip Snyder, Jr., 13, Lawrence, L. I., N. Y. (8mm color film with magnetic sound track. Story of the battle of Iwo Jima, as acted by kids, including the raising of the flag on Mt. Suribachi.)

Second Prize: BATTLE FOR THE SKY, Luther Guy Wright, 15, Lynchburg, Virginia (8mm color film, silent. Animation showing man's conquest of space. Enactment of the building of a space station.)

Buddies, James Liban, 15, Milwaukee, Wisc.; *No Time at Noon*, Tanas Milovich, 15, St. Louis, Mo.

SENIOR CATEGORY (16-19 years of age):

First Prize: THE TOURISTS, Albert Ihde, Jr., 19, Nutley, New Jersey (16mm color film with sound on separate tape. A teen-age boy and girl enact a grim, but amusing farce having an O. Henry or Hitchcock type denouement.)

Second Prize: OUR TOWN, Fred Elmes, 16, Mountain Lakes, New Jersey (16mm color film with sound on separate tape. An attractive portrait of suburbia filmed and described by the young people there.)

Third Prize: THE BENCH, Alfred Lowenheim, 16, Plainfield, New Jersey (8mm color film, silent. A tightly-knit animated cartoon done in the best modern style. Has humor and aesthetic distinction.)

Special Award: CONCEPTS OF INFINITY, Miss Marie Pearson, 17, Bethesda, Maryland (8mm color film, silent. A lucid and charming cartoon for teaching young children what is meant by the infinity symbol.)

Honorable Mentions: *For He Shall Conquer*, Larry Klobukowski, 16, West Allis, Wisc.; *The Professional*, William Young, 18, San Francisco, Calif.; *Century 21 Exposition*, Donald Fox, 17, El Cerrito, Calif.; *Embryology of The Chick*, Miss Paulette Curtis, 18, Fayette, Ohio; *A Dull Day*, Vick Giles, 17, Houston, Texas; *Nature Scrapbook*, Bruton Peterson, 18, St. Albans, W. Va.; *Persecution*, Michael Tomlinson, 17, Pacific Palisades, Calif.; *For Thine is the Kingdom*, Miss Cathleen Voss, 18, St. Louis, Mo.; *The Poacher*, Jim Waite, 16, Grangeville, Idaho; *The Lost Walk*, Brian King, Jr., 18, Hartford, Conn.; *Catch a Tiger*, Nathaniel Dorsky, 19, New York, N. Y.; *Blueprint for Murder*, Terry Zahn, 17, Waukesha,

extract from pdf Kodak Movie News Spring 1964

I was fortunate to win an honorable mention in the Kodak Teenage Movie Contest that year at 19 years of age. The prize was two rolls of regular eight Kodachrome II and processing which I used as 16mm (double 8) toward my first personal film, Ingreen, completed when I was 20.

photo by Michael Hausman: Nathaniel shooting for an educational film for Rudolf Arnheim, 1965

A year after making my personal trilogy, I was employed by Gay Matthaei to photograph and edit and help conceive an educational film about four painters for children, *Where Time is a River*. She won first prize in the first Woman's Film Festival. That film led to my shooting the paintings for a CBS documentary on Gauguin for which I was fortunate enough to win an Emmy. Soon after I was employed as an editor by the famous filmmaker and photographer, Ralph Steiner, to complete three visual studies that he had been working on in his later life. Each job led to the next.

Of course, everyone seems amused that I worked on *Revenge of the Cheerleaders*, 1976. Two dear filmmaking friends had made a very successful drive-in exploitation feature called The Cheerleaders. The economic success of that film initiated a request for a sequel by the distributor. Paul Glickler who had directed the first film wanted to move on to better things and gave his filmmaking partner and cameraman, Richard Lerner the opportunity to direct the second.

photo *poster Revenge of the Cheerleaders*, 1976

Richard was kind enough to offer me a chance to shoot a feature film, which was irresistible and I became his partner in the making of this rather strange farce of a teenage movie that was very much influenced by the Republic serials we both loved so much as kids. It was David Hasselhoff's first feature and the school nurse was played by Eddra Gale, the large prostitute in Fellini's *8 ½*.

David Hasselhoff as Boner, captain of the basketball team

The comedian, Carl Ballantine played Dr. Ivory, the school principal, and the evil real-estate mogul, Walter Heartlander, was played by William Bramley who played Officer Krupke in the film version of *West Side Story*. And Cloris Leachman who played Lillie Downs, the waitress at the teenage hangout, had been in *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Eddra Gale as Nurse Beam, the school nurse

We had quite a low budget and the film had to be shot very quickly. I became a co-producer, cameraman/director of photography, co-writer, and assisted in the editing along with Jerome Hiler. Our final polish was done by Russ Meyer's sometimes editor and sound man, Dick Brummer, who was well versed in the low end of Hollywood production. His clarity and strength of experience was a marvelous lesson in editing for us.

It was a wondrous time in Hollywood from a certain point of view… it was the nadir… the early seventies. Weeds were coming through the sidewalk, buildings were crumbling. Vast eating palaces like the Musso & Frank Grill on Hollywood Boulevard were virtually empty at dinner time.This was an era right before the revival generation of *Jaws*and *The Godfather*.

Nathaniel shooting a scene for Paul Glickler's *Back in the USA*, also called *Running Scared* with Ken Wahl, Judge Reinhold, and Annie McEnroe, 1980

Several New Yorkers migrated to LA to work for Roger Corman and other very low budge producers. Andrew Meyer, who had made a reputation in the New American Cinema scene made *Night of the Cobra Woman* for Corman for $100,000, soup to nuts. Martin Scorsese was shooting *Boxcar Bertha* for American International. Jerome and I were staying at the time at the Tropicana Motel, featured years later in Paul Morrissey's *Heat,* and we would breakfast at their infamous grill, Duke's. We would see Marty there in the morning as I knew him from film classes we had taken at New York University. It was a very heady and exciting short-lived period when there was a way for young filmmakers to learn the trade inspired by the low budget features we all had loved in our youth. Many of the low-end production facilities were on their last legs. These establishments: prop houses, odd and historic car renters, mix houses, sound and music effect libraries, optical houses and sound stages, haunted by the glories of the past were available and happy for whatever work there was.

photo by Mark Birnbaum: Nathaniel shooting in Lowell, Massachusetts with Father Spike Morissette for *What Happened to Kerouac*. Father Spike was Jack Kerouac's priest.

About ten years later, Richard Lerner was making a film based on interviews he had shot at Naropa Institute's Conference on Jack Kerouac. I had the good fortune to have the thankless task of shooting images to accompany the very gorgeous audio readings of Jack Kerouac, so complete in themselves.

photo by Mark Birnbaum: Father Spike Morissette was our host in Lowell, and we were taken to wonderful secret places.

One section, using a rare and very private recording Jack made for his girlfriend at the time, Lois Sorrells Beckwith, of*Doctor Sax*, came out really well I thought. That section was entirely shot during a very wintery week in Lowell.
While doing this, there was a falling out with the editor at the time and I had a chance to finish editing the majority of the film. It turned out well, a film titled *What Happened to Kerouac*, 1986, and from that point on I began to work mostly as an editor, mostly on documentaries.

Nathaniel with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Collom, Jane Brakhage's brother, working on *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg.*

Some films that are often mislabeled as being in my filmography come from this period. Some highlights as an editor were working on *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsburg* by Jerry Aranson and Michel Dubois' documentary *The Spirit of Crazy Horse*, but especially for the three feature-length documentaries I did with Owsley Brown, *Nightwaltz*: The Music of Paul Bowles, *The Precious Treasury,* which documented a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in far western Tibet, and *Music Makes a City*, co-directed and written by Jerome Hiler. These three films, each quite different from one another, represent for me my very best work as an editor, working on an entire project.
Two other small projects I love very much are, a short fundraiser photographed and directed by Vivian Kurz, *Jewel Mountain*, narrated by the Dalai Lama, about the great 20th century Tibetan meditation master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the other is Jane Levy Reed's *My Eyes Were Fresh,* The Life and Photographs of John Gutmann.

photos by Jane Reed: Nathaniel editing Jane Reed's *My Eyes Were Fresh*: The Life and Photographs of John Gutmann

I have worked as a professional film and video editor or consulting editor on hundreds of films. This has been an interesting part of my career. As I have gotten older I have been hired more frequently as a film doctor. In these cases the client feels stuck or confused in their process. My fresh set of eyes plus my structural instincts have saved filmmakers weeks or even months of frustration with problems they could no longer see clearly. Each job is a unique challenge. Sometimes I work for weeks, but many times for just a day or two, helping people straighten out their structure so that they can finish themselves; I usually enjoy the people I work with and have learned a lot about filmmaking from these more subject oriented projects. For one thing, it frees me in my own work from journalistic tendencies, and also much of the stern professional advice I have to offer to my clients, I can then offer to myself in my own explorations.

MUBI Notebook

Feature

Light on Leaves: Nathaniel Dorsky's "Arboretum Cycle"

With a new 7-film cycle, it's astonishing to watch Dorsky, long a master of his craft, challenge himself to find new modes of articulation.

Phil Coldiron 11 MAY 2018

Nathaniel Dorsky's Arboretum Cycle *(2017) is playing May 11 - 13, 2018 at Anthology Film Archives in New York and June 14, 2018 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.*

MONODY, Directed by Nathaniel Dorsky, 2017

While welcoming the audience gathered last fall at Anthology Film Archives to see the first four of seven films now known as the *Arboretum Cycle*, Nathaniel Dorsky noted a break, or at least a modulation, from what had come before: the 24 titles—an apt number—from *Triste* (1974-1996) through *The Dreamer* (2016), which he drew together through their concern with "the continuity of the various." These freely espoused works, mosaics of the full breadth of urban life running typically between a quarter and a third of an hour, have made Dorsky's reputation as America's most revered living artist filmmaker (he disdains the term *avant-garde*, and indeed, it would seem to have little coherence in regard to his films). Whether one might care to consider these as a single grand work in progress, at present running to nearly 500 minutes, is a question for another time; Dorsky's phrase is clarifying in any event, particularly when one returns to its source. When I visited with the filmmaker at his home in San Francisco this winter, I inquired if he had a line from James Schuyler in mind: "I salute that various field." Though he had the collected Schuyler quite literally at hand, the reference was not conscious. The phrase had sprung into his head in the moment. As it happens, it had been there for some time. Speaking, in a 2001 interview with Mary Kite for the Poetry Project's newsletter, of Schuyler's dear friend John Ashbery, he noted a danger inherent in the latter's style:

"it opens up relationships that are just a collection of the various, or the continuum or forced forwardness of the various" which Ashbery avoids through the maintenance of "an atmosphere that continues on beneath."[1] Taken together, this is a precise description of Dorsky's own filmmaking during this period, the years of advancing a form of "polyvalent montage."

In the serious attention given to Dorsky's oeuvre to date, perhaps the most common trope is a lightly anguished admission that the films are inhospitable to the usual means available to critical prose for adhering to its object. Because the montage sustains a categorical openness verging on the absolute, in which the duration and content of each shot cannot be anticipated, the usual modes of remembering exactly what it was that one has seen begin to seem woefully inadequate. This is by design: "I don't want to produce mental linkages that can be reduced to language."[2] Or, in a critic's words: "This results in the suppression of a future tense within the film. Each image founds a new present moment."[3] They resist narration from every direction: Dorsky's gloss on this quality is that "the *place* is the *film*": any map would require Borgesian proportions. The turn inaugurated by this new work then lies in his doubling back to a form from his pre-"various" period, particularly the grain studies *Pneuma* (1977-1983; the grain of expired 16mm stock) and *Alaya* (1976-1987; the grain of sand). Though his rhythms, both graphic and temporal, have grown ever more intricate—baroque, even—he has constricted the subject matter to a single category—the botanical—to achieve an odd sense of double exposure: we see both the garden and "the garden," as his montage achieves a new transparency which in no way forecloses on success in inducing a viewer to reflection. The *Arboretum Cycle* is the closest Dorsky has yet come in his attempt to "make the internalized medieval and externalized Renaissance ways of seeing unite."[4]

As evidenced by what follows, this does not alleviate the trouble of adequately describing the work; there is, for example, much that might be learned from taking the prints in hand and conducting a rigorous study of their poetic forms: meter, or even simple rhyming structures. This too must wait for another day, remaining for now in the dark from which the *Cycle* emerges, and often returns to. *Elohim*, the first and longest of the seven films, opens out of this blackness onto the pulsing image of a bush's white blossom. As the frame holds—a canted near shot, not tight enough to be called a close-up—the aperture dilates several times, slightly wider with each repetition until it reaches full exposure. It is a gentle, patient entrance, at once charming in its plain technique and captivating in its primordial rhythm of awakening. Dorsky's typical aspect as "gracious host"[5] is immediately apparent: the manner in which we emerge from sleep so often sets the tone for everything that follows in our day.

Elohim proceeds in this calm fashion for its duration; its mood is one of casual curiosity. When Dorsky began to regularly visit the San Francisco Botanical Garden, a short walk from his home, with his Bolex the winter before last, he did not yet have any conception that he was working toward a cycle: his enjoyment in its making led to another film, and to another, and so on. As such, it

contains a wider array of visual elements relative to the films which followed it. Some—such as its heavier use of figure/ground composition—were excised almost immediately, while others—most notably the aforementioned aperture play and associated oscillations of focus, and regular passages of pixilated imagery—remained integral components of every chapter of the *Cycle*.

Though it moves through its elaboration of possible approaches to the material of the garden at a steady march, laying out one gesture or idea after another in clean delineation, it must be noted that it also contains the single most surprising passage of any of the films. Perhaps two thirds of the way through its half-hour runtime, at exactly the moment it occurred to me on a first viewing how little of the sky had been seen[6], Dorsky cuts to a sequence of three shots, long in distance and short in duration, of enormous bare trees shivering in slightly pixilated motion at dusk, underexposed to near monochrome. They might easily be mistaken for the Dreyer of *Vampyr*. A crisp, cold contrast against the muted greens, yellows, and browns which dominate *Elohim*, this trio of images continues to haunt even the most exuberant moments of the films' trip through life's seasons. Curiously, this densely compacted *momento mori* was the earliest footage to find a place in the completed work.

The first frame of the second film, *Abaton*, offers something like a slant rhyme with that of *Elohim*: both involve blossoms against a green ground, but *Abaton* lengthens the distance of the shot, placing the composition at ground level, rather than amidst the branches of a bush, in the process widening it to take in a larger field of vision. Again, the exposure is brought up from darkness, but here the path to illumination is straighter, less hesitant. This is but a dim account of one level on which likeness functions in the *Cycle*: "openly associate visual language."

But then, a reframing: "Dreams for instance have a mood which pervades the openly associative visual language."[7] As suggested by its title—the sacred site of *enkoimesis*, drug-induced sleep undertaken at temples devoted to the healing god Asclepius—the crucial role of states outside waking consciousness, whether dreamwork or the hypnagogic, begins to become apparent as a formal element in the *Cycle's* second movement. These states were more obvious in the films of the "various," in which the smooth yet disjunctive movement from place to place—recalling Dorsky's phrase, we might simply call this *the movement of the film*—gave an elegant form to the logic along which our dreams tend to proceed: internally sound and externally confounding. The radical alteration of the *Arboretum Cycle* is its relocation of this effect from the level of the film to that of the

shot, as the visual music of exposure begins to stretch the expressive and epistemic capacity of the relation between single frames beyond its usual functions8.

Considerations of this stretching will comprise, or undergird, much of what follows, but let us take for the moment a single example relevant to *Abaton's* concern with dreamwork.. Dorsky's musical engagement with exposure—playing frames "on the level" in quick succession with extremes of under- and overexposure—activates anew the relationship between his, and our, subjective vision and the indefinite vision of the camera, which is taken to be outside of any conflict between the objective and subjective. The old illusionist trick of day for night, a filtered underexposure intended to replicate the effect of nocturnal vision without the hassle of appropriately lighting for finicky film stocks, is redirected toward a vision of waking dream, the night's inviting darkness living frame-to-frame as neighbors with extreme saturations of light beyond even the noonday sun. This may lead us to consider just where it is that the documentary night of moonlight and stars has gone, and to realize that, though the park is a public space, free to residents of San Francisco, it nevertheless closes at 6:00 every evening. Who knows what horrors, depravities, and delights might fill its willing shadows were it open past dusk?

Having reached such a state of mind by the film's finale, a fresh, cooling wind suddenly blows it toward its conclusion. Enlivened, as in *Elohim's* vision of the three tress, by pixilation, the already brisk wind seems to swirl at a baffling rate, a pizzicato volley of frame-notes playing the garden into the mindless joy of spring's arrival. It is the single most ecstatic passage in the *Cycle*, perhaps in Dorsky's entire body of work: a confirmation that the beauty hinted at throughout the film in glimpses of magenta and lilac will soon usurp the green, white, and golden light of winter's final days.

ABATION, Directed by Nathaniel Dorsky, 2017

Coda and *Ode*, covering spring and summer, do indeed arrive with more wonders in the red-pink range of the spectrum than could have been anticipated. If this would seem to imply the more common narrative pleasures of time's passing—the future tense of *Abaton's* early blooms made good by incarnadine eruptions—the deepening of Dorsky's formal facility affords equivalently new depths of visual pleasure, while his attention to the beauty of this beauty's brevity reiterates the seriousness of his time in the garden.

As annotated by the openness of their phonetically resonant titles, *Coda* and *Ode*endeavor to find a form capable of keeping pace with the seasons' abundance of visual event: the sharp curve into the splendor of full bloom and the only slightly less steep descent into the burnt ochre embers of the dry

summer. Having tested the effects to be found in making use of the full spectrum of focus and exposure, Dorsky here reaches a new level of complexity by combining the two, creating short-frame bursts of pulsing or breathing images. Compositionally, he moves close to the realm of abstraction, often filling the frame with semi-patterned, graphic visuals on the cusp of the figurative—a bush lousy with tubular red flowers, a wildflower field in a late De Kooning's tart chartreuse-pink-yellow. The camera has taken root on the tripod, but each frame now floats and flows in the activity of several axes. In the absence of clearly defined figures, the single- or short-frame passages give up the effect of animation and begin to appear as inherent in the life of the garden, a private vision played out only for the camera-eye. The intensity and economy of the direction is at its peak: Dorsky's complete communion with this place is transparently shaped for our vision through minor movements of his wrist, his index finger and thumb.

The felt presence of the filmmaker's hand is, of course, nothing new; it is perhaps the most typical trope of the lyrical film as theorized by Sitney: "The images of the film are what he sees, *filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision*."9 In the films of the "various," Dorsky found his way around the macho traps of the lyrical through sheer serenity; though his style can hardly be called impersonal—anyone who has seen more than, say, three of his films from this period would recognize immediately an image bearing his sensitivity to distinct values of light in the foreground and background—his insistence on openness as a formal determinant has necessarily kept his psyche at a sufficient remove from the images. The lyrical film as perfected by Brakhage insists on the filmmaker's commentary on his vision as a component of each and every frame. Dorsky, in contrast, has situated his sensibility—moods, feelings, tastes, passions—*beneath* the work. It is the mystery one tumbles into only if sufficiently engaged. Here, in *Coda* and *Ode*, this tactic attains a primitive wonder worthy of Cézanne. Though we are surely dissolving into the reflexive co-presence of Dorsky and the objects of his gaze, the manner in which that is achieved—the slight twists of aperture and focus dial on a stationary camera, the soft gestures of one who speaks with their hands—beckons us into an understanding of just how near the fullness of the world is. There is no performance of the sublime ego, no sense that *only* he could have held and manipulated the camera in such a way as to draw out these images. And it precisely in this that they achieve a total union of his vision with the screen. As Dorsky wrote that "Bach's organ chorale preludes are as much an expression of skeletal fingers pressing down on ivory keys and releasing air through pipes are they are melodic evocations of prayer,"10 so he has wedded the mechanics of the Bolex absolutely to his odes to the bounty of spring turning to summer.

As this turn occurs, it brings steadily forth a new element: the crunchy, golden glow emanating from thirsty flowers and leaves, a captivatingly sad majesty which fills the role earlier played by the heavy winter light. The moments of pulsing pink-gold return to the earlier sensation of day and night existing simultaneously: extremes of vivacity and want sit side by side, not personified, by drawing on our capacity to feel compassion for the non-human. This is given a humorously theatrical presentation at the close of *Ode*, in which a lucky white flower is seen amidst a bush's dense foliage, its shadow thrown by diffuse light onto a leaf which sits beneath it. It seems to dance on this verdant stage, celebrating the pleasure of its cool position.

The movement from this image of summer to the title card of *September* is startling, as if the calendar has suddenly insisted that we pay it our full attention. Where the titles which have come before, and those which are to follow (*Monody*, "an ode sung by a single actor in a Greek tragedy," and *Epilogue*) give rather more oblique shape to their material, *September*—the fifth of Dorsky's month films, after *February* and *December*(2014), *April* and *August and After* (2012)—announces from its first frames the arrival of the fall. This complicates the movement of the *Cycle* in several ways. At bottom, it inserts the notion of regular calendar time into one's perception of the material. Though Dorsky, in his introductions, has not been shy about providing the context of the films' production as a background to viewing, it is, to my mind, no difficulty to get lost in the movement of time at a less immediate level: the modulations of color and light overtake one's sense of time as passing day by day toward the close of another week, month, year. Happily, *September* has its own tricks for upending our expectations about what autumn will bring.

My own life, spent only in the extremes of Mid-Atlantic seasons and the seasonal void of Southern California, may have conspired to make me a prime mark for the force with which the garden seems to surge back to life in *September*. Deep perennial green emerges as the dominant color, though it is augmented by an astonishing variety of late blooms. Dorsky responds by pulling back from abstraction—though the use of focus and exposure described above grows even more prominent—into compositions in depth which re-situate his presence as a man with a movie camera moving about a public space. This leads to a most astonishing figurative image: a tree of hard light wood, nearly polished in texture, which seems to dive into the earth, a bed of pink and orange flowers splashed about in its wake. Seen as such, in tableaux rather than textural tightness, its connotations are fully accessible. Among, one imagines, much else, it is mirror (the filmmaker patient amidst the beauty of the garden) and myth (Dorsky's own gloss: Persephone being drawn below), a pair of resonances pointing in the direction of the particular surrealism Dorsky has inherited from Ashbery.

As *September* pulls the viewer in rapidly through a sequence of intricately arranged oscillations, in which alternating views of densely leafed trees curve smoothly out of darkness into exposure and back again as the frame flickers internally thanks to the rate of photography, so too does it end abruptly, in a quick fade which arrives without warning. Having introduced, through the titles, a certain sense of direction and narrative, it is as if Dorsky now feels the freedom to follow Bresson in stopping his film exactly at the moment when it has said what it needed to say.

SEPTEMBER, Directed by Nathaniel Dorsky, 2017

My notes on *Monody* must take the form of a second-order approach, as when I screened the film at Dorsky's home, we were confronted with a terrible surprise: on its maiden voyage through the projector some nights before, the print had sustained a severe scratch running nearly snout to tail. Somewhat miraculously, this damage disappeared in the film's final movement, at a moment in which the image was filled by an intensely overexposed tree, its bare branches lit to such a glow that the screen seemed flooded with light. When the film moved on, the scratch was gone, healed by the overwhelming illumination. No reader will ever experience this particular moment of unexpected grace—the print, of course, was necessarily scrapped—but I report it because watching the film as such proved a useful lesson in how Dorsky's films work on a material level.

Dorsky is the only significant artist I am aware of whose films remain, without exception, unavailable in any digital format; even filmmakers who are resolute in presenting their work on 16mm in public often have digital materials made, either for archival or promotional purposes (or, more simply, because they are editing digitally and finishing on film). Having seen the damaged print of *Monody*, I finally understand why Dorsky has maintained this position. Much discussion today of the distinction between film and digital presentation, even among sophisticated viewers, tends toward locating the particular value of the former in its grain structures, which are taken to be the site of an added depth, the "life" of the image against its ostensibly flat counterpart. Though Dorsky has long shown a tremendous sensitivity to the expressive potential of a particular stock's grain structure—whether engaging it directly in *Pneuma* and *Alaya*, or accepting it into his choice of subject matter, as in the recurrent nighttime scenes in his films of 2010-2011, the years when he was testing the parameters of Fuji stocks following Kodachrome's discontinuation—he has never made a fetish of this look. His films, without fail, present as clean a surface as possible. There is today a tendency to see 16mm, or 35mm for that matter, as a container for a given content; what is inside will simply be seen through more or less grain, but it will be seen all the same[11]. Dorsky's films, in contrast, exist *only on their surface*; there is no content separable from the emulsion which holds a pattern of light and shadow (*Monody*, so far as I could tell, returns to all-over composition as its dominant mode). And so to see this emulsion scratched was not simply an inconvenience, or a barrier to a full experience, it made it impossible to see the film. Dorsky's concern is with nuance, not grain, and this demands a rare fidelity.

What emerged in the brief moments following *Monody's* return to full health was extraordinary: a vision of winter's imminent return, evening's golden light veining shadows deep and long. Its close

sees a dark clearing from something of a height—not extreme, but a marked difference from much of the *Cycle*, in which the camera sits at the level of the human eye or lower. After several beats, the image suddenly pushes out to a longer view, as if the frame were shoved down the z-axis. On a single pass, it was unclear whether this was an optical or physical alteration. In either event, one senses Dorsky reckoning with his obsession with the garden. As the light fades, he drags himself elsewhere and we briefly glimpse a life on the other side of his ritual practice.

The seventh—another meaningful number for serial work—and final movement of the *Arboretum Cycle*, *Epilogue* finds the garden stark and harshly drawn, abounding in clusters of barren lines: the structures which remain when the green has gone. It is mournful, but not dour or pathetic; the energy of Dorsky's vision is undiminished, and he takes full advantage of the compositional options afforded by the shift from dense foliage, which lets the light through in sharp bursts around subtle patterning, to these stems, trunks, and twigs, which draw closer to the effect of action painting: lines can be made to imprint themselves as visual gestures with considerably more force.
Where *Ode* and *Coda* might bring to mind the relaxed compositions of 1980s De Kooning, here the sense is of the elemental architecture of Franz Kline, or Joan Mitchell at her most voluptuously severe, as in her prints for Frank O'Hara. *Epilogue* does not shy away from creeping ends, but it grasps them through the presence of enduring structures, the skeletons of arboreal networks which will continue to expand wherever they find hospitable ground. In both Monody and Epilogue, we see trees heavy with seeds swaying in the breeze.

Dorsky is now an extremely young 75 years old, and the *Arboretum Cycle* expresses this in both directions. It is astonishing to watch an artist, long a master of his craft, challenge himself to find new modes of articulation, as he has done here in building a new film grammar for himself from the ground up12. Inversely, it is astonishing to see films of such formal vibrancy which radiate such wisdom regarding their scale as objects of art, as visions of the world. Fittingly, *Epilogue* concludes with an image which reminds us that this is, after all, a cycle: the heaviest golden light of winter falls sharply again into darkness, illuminating a small patch of leaves. In my mind, there is a flower amongst them, but this seems as if it could hardly be so.

EPILOGUE, Directed by Nathaniel Dorsky, 2017

In their interview with Scott MacDonald, Dorsky's partner in art and life of more than fifty years, Jerome Hiler, used a phrase which strikes me as a nearly perfect description of the social valence of the pair's works: "the politics of gentleness."13 This seems to me particularly apt as regards the *Arboretum Cycle*, a work which eschews rhetoric at every frame, but which nonetheless mounts as convincing an argument as anyone might hope to offer as to what we stand to lose as we recklessly spoil the only world available to us. Lest this brief conclusion be read as an arbitrary left turn, allow me to offer that the experience of moving through the *Arboretum Cycle* is at the deepest level one of increasing the sensitivity of one's consciousness. As Dorsky has generously brought the findings of his time in the garden forth for our delectation, so might we be inclined to complete the cycle, by showing the world the same care.

Notes

1. Mary Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky." Poetry Project newsletter, February/March 2001.
2. Scott MacDonald. "Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky (and Jerome Hiler)." *A Critical Cinema 5*, page 93.
3. P. Adams Sitney. "Tone Poems." *Artforum*, November 2007, page 8.
4. Nathaniel Dorsky. *Devotional Cinema*, page 25.
5. Max Nelson. "Heavenly Host." *Film Comment*, July/August 2016.
6. *Elohim* sees relatively more of it than the others, though given how important the heavenly gaze have been to Dorsky's work over the last two decades as a metaphorical and a compositional element (his most common source of visual relief), its excision registers as even more severe than the absence of his usual urban street scenes.
7. Kite.
8. Dorsky began these explorations with his industry-forced turn to color negative stock early in this decade, and reached a considerable breakthrough with them in his films of 2014-2015, but in the Cycle this visual grammar has for the first time grown full enough to serve as the basis for an entire film.
9. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Cinema*, page 160.
10. *Devotional Cinema*, page 23.
11. The shape of my argument here derives from Ricky D'Ambrose's essay, "On Looks," published in *The Nation* as "Instagram and the Fantasy of Mastery."
12. This is not to say that the form of the *Arboretum Cycle* is entirely without precedent. It follows in numerous ways directly on Dorsky's own films—from the seasonal structure of *Hours for Jerome* (1966/70-82) through the emergence of the rhythmic aperture in his films of the last half decade—while also departing from two other bodies of work in particular: Gregory Markopoulos' films of the 1960s (prior to their re-editing as *Eniaios*), a heritage obliquely gestured toward by the title *Abaton*; and the heavily pixilated botanical and pastoral films produced by Rose Lowder over the last five decades.
13. *A Critical Cinema*, 108.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

The Sacred Wood: Nathaniel Dorsky's *Arboretum Cycle*

by Max Goldberg
May 1, 2018

Epilogue.

The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them...

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, "*Nature*"

Strange as it sounds, I sometimes think that Nathaniel Dorsky's films are never clearer than when they slide out of focus. Dorsky often remarks that his films work best when the viewer isn't trying to understand them, but these shots make sure of that. With nothing to do, the mind is apt to grow restive, drowsy, or both. But in that moment of abandonment, we may yet come back to our senses. All it takes is a bug flying across the foreground of the shot, or even a speck of dirt flecking the 16mm print, to realize, with a start, that the image itself is in fact perfectly in focus. We are so habituated to thinking of focus in terms of the thing being photographed that it can feel a little woozy uncoupling the two, but we taste the

difference when the film cuts back to a standard focus shot and it seems to float, suspended in open awareness.

However it is that Dorsky's poetic films clear the ground for this kind of intensely subjective activity, *Elohim* (2017) makes a special point of it. In its radical simplicity and unbroken emphasis on seeing as such, the film hearkens back to his *Alaya* (1976-1987), an intimate epic composed entirely of shots of sand and,for me,one of the most beautiful films ever made. *Elohim* is also a single-subject work in the sense that it was shot entirely in Golden Gate Park's arboretum. Dorsky's films are primarily shot within walking distance of his apartment—one thinks of Thoreau's having "traveled a good deal in Concord"—but there is an appreciable difference in limiting himself to a single location and thus removing the drama of cutting from place to place in the montage.

Elohim's place-based framework corresponds with a deeper shift in Dorsky's filmmaking style. As he remarked to Scott MacDonald in a 1999 interview, "When you go into polyvalent editing … the *place* is the *film*." In Dorsky's work that place can be thought of as a garden, gracefully anticipating the viewer's needs for sunlight and shade, enjoyment, and sanctuary. But in *Elohim*, the garden is a given. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the montage feels less taken up with its own articulation. In Dorsky's earlier films, the exploratory spirit of the camerawork is tempered by the exacting justice of the cuts—a balancing act aptly conveyed by Jack Spicer's line, "Love makes the discovery wisdom abandons." In *Elohim*, as in *Alaya* before it, the balance bends back towards first sight and a more primordial sense of order.

This unobtrusive editing can make it feel like we are watching raw camera footage. Another measure of *Elohim*'s nakedness is that many of the most dynamic shifts occur within shots, with Dorsky adjusting the aperture to open the landscape to sunlight or send its bright points diving into darkness. (I've heard the filmmaker liken these improvisations to vibrato, but for me the effect evokes a breathing animal.) Many of the actual cuts are hidden in these dark patches, such that it can be difficult to discern where one shot ends and the next begins. In this way, the allover approach to composition is extended into the realm of montage.

There were earlier intimations of this realignment, especially in *Avraham* (2014). Inspired by his study of the Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov, Dorsky made the piece by walking around and exposing film whenever he encountered something that seemed to be of Abraham. Maybe because the film wants to stay true to these found illuminations, there is a straightforward, successive quality to the cuts. The difference is that where *Avraham* goes in search of the miraculous, *Elohim* dwells in it.

Avraham concludes, magnificently, with a tree rooted in standing water: a vision of unification, and a premonition of the grand arboretum adventure to come. At early screenings of *Elohim*, Dorsky would let on that he had already cut another arboretum film, all the while maintaining the circumspect air of a ballplayer not wanting to jinx a hitting streak. Well, now it can be written: the *Arboretum Cycle* spans seven films and the arc of a year (the first, significantly, following California's ferocious drought). *Elohim* is followed by *Abaton*, *Coda*, *Ode*, *September*, *Monody*, and *Epilogue* (all 2017). It's not the first cycle in Dorsky's oeuvre—the quartet of *Sarabande*, *Winter* (both 2008), *Compline*, and *Aubade* (both 2010) made for a fitting farewell to Kodachrome—and really this seven story mountain is the least monumental of epics. Each shot gives way, light as a feather, a quantum of pure presence.

Given *Avraham* and the fact that the first shot of the *Arboretum Cycle* says "Elohim," I find myself reaching for Abraham Heschel's *The Sabbath* for a better handle on the nature of Dorsky's commitment. "Judaism," Heschel writes, "teaches us to be attached to holiness in time … to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year." Dorsky has himself often remarked on the sabbath quality of his films, but the *Aboretum Cycle* resonates especially strongly with the injunction to rest, to touch time immemorial. In the same interview with MacDonald, he refers to Stan Brakhage's observation that *Triste*(1974 – 1996) lacks vanishing points and thus any suggestion of an outside observer. The *Arboretum Cycle* does something similar with time. Unlike Dorsky's earlier films, there are no people walking into cafés, no cars floating down the street—no actions, in other words, with a clear beginning and end. Here things only flutter and swirl: branches in the breeze, sunlight in the branches, dabbed by eternity.

The experience of watching the *Arboretum Cycle* in its entirety is in some very large sense stunning. It is also reinforcing, with two hours being ample time to take root and bear fruit in the quality of attention. *Elohim* becomes clarified as a kind of purification ritual, its exquisite stillness persisting into *Abaton* until an extraordinary gust of wind—and with it the thunderous applause of trees—sets us on our way. This flourish is of a piece with the crescendos that leave so many of Dorsky's films on high, but the other films of the *Arboretum Cycle* merely take a short bow before making way for the next turn of the season. By *Monody* and *Epilogue*, it begins to feel that the forest is filming itself. (The fact that we see the arboretum alternatively as garden and forest speaks to the cycle's free reign in the imagination.) Nothing so tangible as a diary, the *Arboretum Cycle* nevertheless conveys the human-sized happiness of Emerson's "Circles:" "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle." Questions pertaining to both logistics and metaphysics lead back to the same place: the art practice as second nature.

For the viewer, the *Arboretum Cycle*may prove more medicinal, accentuating those meditative, pastoral aspects of Dorsky's filmmaking that go against the grain of a culture that would only capitalize on our attention. In this sense the most important thing about the arboretum is not that it is beautiful, but that it is close at hand. Cinema has from its earliest beginnings promised the moon, but the *Arboretum Cycle* asks what it's like having nowhere to be. There is very little sky across these seven films, but the golden light suffusing *Epilogue*'s final shots leaves little doubt that heaven is everywhere you look.

***The Arboretum Cycle* will screen at Anthology Film Archives, May 11 – 13, 2018. (anthologyfilmarchives.org)**

KALW LOCAL PUBLIC RADIO 91.7FM IN SAN FRANCISCO

Mother, Sister, Daughter, Marvel ~ Ensemble for These Times ~ Timon of Athens ~ Nathaniel Dorsky

By NIELS SWINKELS APRIL 4, 2018

Nathaniel Dorsky, *Intimations 2,* 2015, archival pigment print, 9 x 12 inches

Plus, we catch up with the 2018 San Francisco International Film Festival, ongoing through April 17 at venues across the Bay Area, in a conversation with experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. At the festival, he will receive the Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award, which honors a filmmaker whose main body of work falls outside the realm of narrative feature filmmaking.

Four of Dorsky's recent films will be shown at SFFILM during two screenings, each including a discussion with curator and scholar Steve Anker, on Friday, April 6 (6pm) at SFMOMA, and on Sunday, April 15 (5:45 pm) at BAMPFA in Berkeley.

The Chronicle
The independent news organization at Duke University.

Photo by Nathaniel Dorsky | Courtesy of M.F.A. | EDA
"Love's Refrain" screens Friday at the Rubenstein Arts Center, part of "18 at 18: Nathaniel Dorsky at Duke," which runs from Friday to Monday.

Experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky to screen 18 short films over four nights

By Selena Qian | 01/31/2018

On a snowy evening in 2015, Jason Oppliger went to the Carpentry Shop, just down the street from Smith Warehouse. Now an instructor of Arts of the Moving Image, he was, at the time, a student in the M.F.A. program for Experimental and Documentary Arts, and he was meeting with his Experimental Moving Image class.

This particular class meeting was his first introduction to filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky, who will visit Duke for a showing of 18 of his films in an event called “18 at 18.” Dorsky will show these experimental films at the Rubenstein Arts Center over the course of four nights, Feb. 2 to Feb. 5, starting at 7 p.m. each night. Three of those films will be world premieres — Dorsky completed them earlier this year as part of a seven-film series titled the “Arboretum Cycle.”

Oppliger said his introduction to Dorsky changed the way he thought about making and editing films. He then realized that Dorsky was still creating and screening new films.

“I think that just knowing that this person is around, it’s like, ‘Well, why not? Why not get them here, have them show these films and talk about them because they are here?’” Oppliger said. “It’s so rare to have an artist of that caliber still around, just available, just making work and doing their thing.”

“18 at 18” provides an opportunity for the graduate students in the M.F.A. program to interact with Dorsky and immerse themselves in his work in a way that could not happen otherwise. The screenings are also free and open to the public. Ted Mott, assistant director of the M.F.A. program, said people from as far as Nashville will attend the event because of both the volume of films and the opportunity for a Q&A with Dorsky, who is a well-known figure in experimental film.

“He’s a very revered film artist,” said Tom Rankin, director of the M.F.A. program and professor in the practice of art. “He’s the kind of person that our students study in class, but don’t necessarily imagine being able to see in person.”

Students study Dorsky to understand his vision and the way he constructs his films. They also often read excerpts of his book, “Devotional Cinema,” which Ranking said is now a “classical” text in the teaching of film.

Dorsky has been creating films since 1963, according to his website. He shoots silent films on 16-millimeter film at 18 frames per second, rather than the more common 24 frames per second used in cinematic film. In recent years, he has screened his work at the Northwest Film Forum in Seattle, the Pacific Film Archive and the Harvard Film Archive. Dorsky has also shown his films abroad, such as in a cathedral in Lyon, France.

Due to the technical needs of projecting at 18 frames per second, the department likely could not have invited Dorsky in past years. The opening of the Rubenstein Arts Center, with a new projection booth that has these capabilities, allowed the department to invite Dorsky to screen.

Dorsky also had a role in planning the event. He chose which films to show, and he chose to keep the event at a manageable size.

“He’s passionate about things being what he calls ‘human-scaled,’” Mott said. “He didn’t want the scale of the project to outsize anyone’s ability to experience it.”

Oppliger similarly called Dorsky’s films “generous.” He said the films show the world through a different lens, specific to Dorsky’s vision.

“I think Nathaniel Dorsky is trying to show us the world again in a certain way, in a refreshed form,” Oppliger said. “That’s what I think these films are to me at least, an

experience at getting to explore the world all over again, but through a very specific filmic language that Nathaniel Dorsky has basically developed over the years."

The lack of sound in Dorsky's films creates an increased emphasis on the visual. Mott said silent films tend to feel more "exhibited," with longer shots and more attention paid to the montage.

Rankin said seeing silent films is a "transformative" experience. For people who work with film regularly or did not grow up in the digital age, he said, it is easy to forget that seeing any silent projected film is a new experience for most people. His students start to see the world differently when they learn about the medium.

"They're never the same," Rankin said. "They start working with these little pieces of film that they string together and they start creating a sensibility that light is projected through and it really does change the way that they think about the image."

filmcomment

Heavenly Host

For more than 50 years, Nathaniel Dorsky has been welcoming viewers into a gracious empire of light

By Max Nelson in the July/August 2016 Issue

Nathaniel Dorsky has a tendency, during the talkbacks that often follow screenings of his short films, to answer a question with a second one: "What do you think?" "How did that shot seem to you?" Audience Q&As more often fit the description Dorsky used for bad conversation in his 2003 book *Devotional Cinema*—"an exhausting exchange of self-confirming, predigested concepts"—and his way of running them helps suggest what makes him such a distinctive, unorthodox filmmaker. Dorsky often compares his cinematic methods to the work of keeping up a conversation. Both involve the preservation of delicate equilibriums and the sustaining of carefully chosen tones. Both have the potential, as Dorsky wrote in the same passage, "to be balanced or unbalanced," and both involve handling people with graciousness and care.

It's always been one of Dorsky's primary concerns as a filmmaker to "be a good host," as he has put it. Across his works, no individual image can call attention to itself too loudly or recede too indistinctly into the whole. No excess of attention can be directed toward either the urban bustle of San Francisco, where Dorsky lives and works, or the city's bucolic forests and wooded areas, where he often shoots. To watch nearly any Dorsky film is to be guided through a pattern of hushed, suspended, illuminated visions: light emerging through curtains and bending through glass; light deflected by the surfaces of tables and the bodies of cars; light caught by fabric; light distorted as it passes through water, windows, optical filters, or translucent rocks; light moving across faces, shoulders, and hair; light glittering across the surface of a receding tide; light striking jewels and strings of beads; moonlight muffled and darkened by clouds; sunlight fringing buds and shoots of grass. In their rhythms, textures, and distributions of light, these are unfailingly courteous films—experiments in how hospitable and accommodating moving images can be.

The nine 16mm films Dorsky made before he finished *Triste* (96) vary widely in format and style. The 23 films he's released since are no less tonally diverse, but they have undeniable common ground. These later works are all silent; most hover around 20 minutes in length. (At the outskirts are *Arbor Vitae,* made between 1999 and 2000, at 28 minutes, and 2010's *Aubade*, at just under 12.) They all move at 18 frames per second, which Dorsky has variably called "silent speed" and "sacred speed." Certain subjects catch Dorsky's eye repeatedly in the films he's made since *Triste*: transparent, reflective surfaces like windows or glass doors; bodies of freshwater; storefront displays; meadows in bloom; café patrons, commuters, and people in the street; amateur sports games; cats; tree branches; cloud formations; birds. Sometimes, he'll introduce a radically foreign object into his films: a buttressed, torchlit temple pool in *Spring* (13); a pod-like room that resembles the interior of a space shuttle in *Pastourelle* (10). And yet even when he returns to a familiar image, Dorsky never films anything exactly the same way twice. A shot in *Variations* (92-98) of the moon emerging from behind a layer of cloud carries a radically different tonal

charge than does a much tighter shot of the same subject in *The Visitation* (02), in which the moon's emergence registers less as a softening, consoling presence than as a threatening omen. Both suggest different states of mind than the shot midway through *Threnody* (04) of the moon reflected in a storefront window over a mannequin's shrouded eye, or the shots of moonlit clouds that pile on one another breathlessly in the last seconds of *Compline* (09). When the moon appears in *Summer* (13), it's sheathed in clouds that fly across the screen in time-lapse; when it enters *Hours for Jerome* (66-70/82), one of his earliest, it's as a flickering, latticed orb that looks at first glance like a patch of light seen through a circular viewfinder.

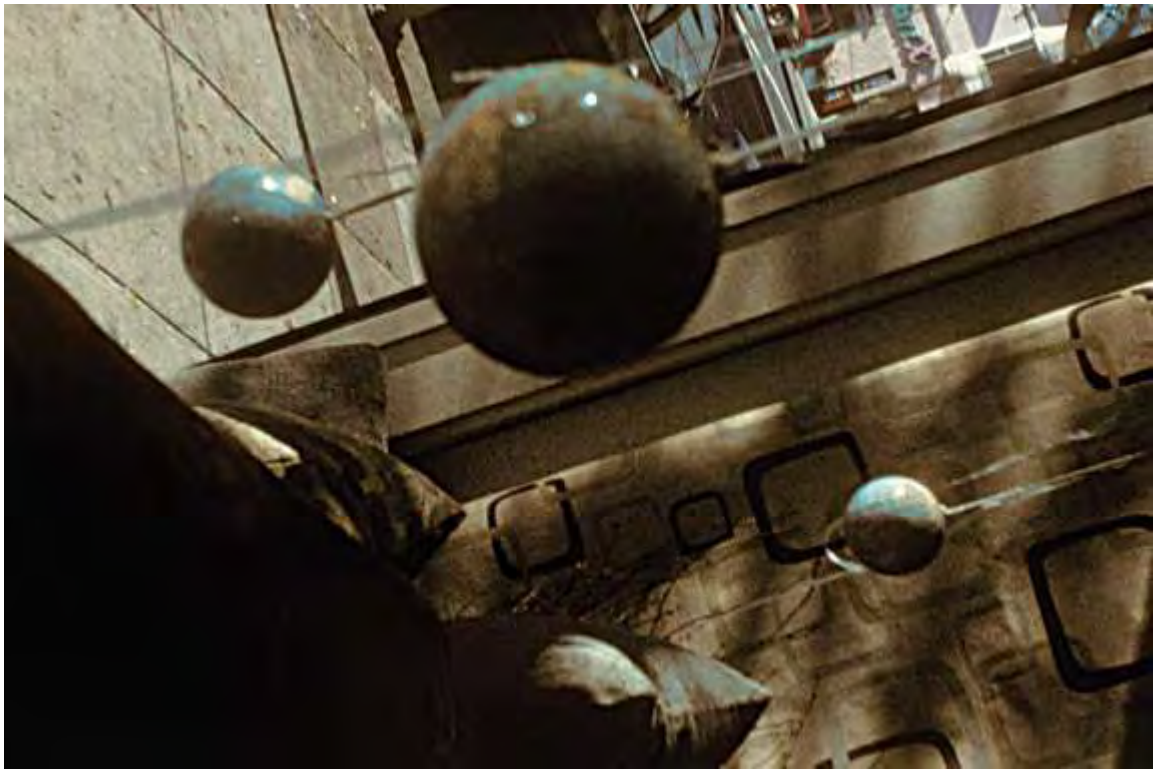
Variations

Each of Dorsky's shots can be taken as a reaction against the one before it. Overpowering images like the vision of the receding tide near the end of *The Visitation* or the virtuosic first shot of *Song* (13), in which a reflected frame-within-the-frame literally flies into full view at the closing of a door, have to be buffered by humbler shots of people, animals, or plants, or by murkier, blurrier shots that make fewer demands on the eye. The concluding sequence of *Song and Solitude* (05-06), for instance, shows a low-contrast image of a cat gazing out of a window; a vertiginous close-up of a preening mannequin in a boutique display lit by shimmering green reflections; a casual glimpse of birds pecking at an unfinished lunch; a dim image of tree branches swaying against a dusk sky; and a flurry of quick, high-exposure shots of white almond blossoms quivering in the wind. One imagines Dorsky deciding that the image of the mannequin and the subsequent volley of shots needed to be separated by an image less lofty and ethereal (the hungry birds), and then cushioned by a more neutral shot on which the eye could rest (the branches). Dorsky has referred to cuts as "refreshments of receptivity." Watch enough of his films, and it's easy to lose your tolerance for movies that treat their viewers' receptivity as an inexhaustible resource—films that bully, rant, aggress, or lapse into monologue.

Born in 1943, Dorsky made his first films in Millburn, the New Jersey town where he grew up. As a 21-year-old, recently out gay man, he left Antioch College after a year to live in New York and take classes at NYU's film school. Photos of Dorsky as a teenager show him already wearing light meters and visiting camera shops, and when he moved to the city he immersed himself in its thriving underground film scene. Slavko Vorkapich was giving a series of influential lectures at MoMA; Stan Brakhage was

presenting *Dog Star Man* volume by volume; Gregory Markopoulos, Jack Smith, and George Kuchar were premiering films that toyed mischievously with their viewers' expectations about aesthetics and sexuality.

It was under these influences that Dorsky made his first three films between 1964 and 1965. The images he took on his visits to Millburn—football games, flags hung in yards, old men playing badminton at an afternoon picnic—seemed to come from the perspective of a lost visitor or a wandering ghost. Like Dorsky's later movies, *Ingreen* and *A Fall Trip Home* (both 64) are rich with shots of windswept flowers and grass, discreetly sensual images of the male body, and scenes of quotidian human activity captured from a muffling remove. What Dorsky would most radically disavow after making these films were their ominous sound- tracks and their overt psychologizing. These were films explicitly about what it was like to grow up gay in an inhospitable place (one shot in *Ingreen* shows a young man falling at the knees of a menacing father figure in the middle of a field), and Dorsky wasn't well suited to their confessional mode. By the time he made *Summerwind* (65), he was leaving his own psychological states unstated, letting them come through in the rhythm and tone of the images themselves.



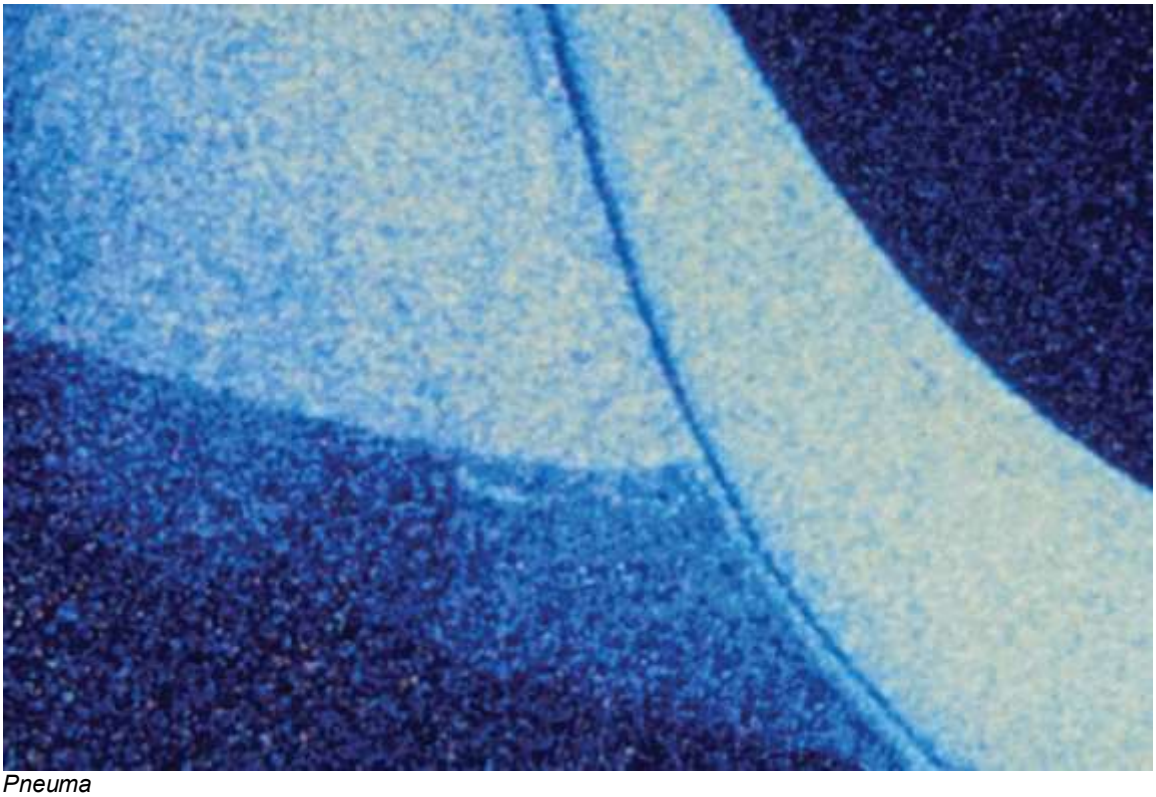
Sarabande

The day after *Ingreen* premiered at the Washington Square Gallery, Markopoulos's younger roommate, Jerome Hiler, met Dorsky at the offices of the Film-makers' Co-op. Hiler and Dorsky became fast friends, then romantic partners and close artistic collaborators. By 1967, the two of them were living together in a small cottage off New Jersey's Lake Owassa. Four years later, they left New York for San Francisco, where they soon settled permanently after an unhappy stay in L.A. to help write, shoot, and produce an exploitation film called *Revenge of the Cheerleaders*. Dorsky found more commercial editing jobs akin to the work he'd done in New York and started collecting bargain-priced, outdated film stocks.

One evening in 1978, he stumbled upon his decade-old footage from New York and Lake Owassa. He spent the next four years stitching the half-edited fragments into *Hours for Jerome* (82), a 45-minute film split into two parts and four seasonal movements. In the movie's first minutes, a sliver of sunlight glimpsed through a forest canopy slowly widens until it nearly fills the screen, and there's an impression throughout the film of long-suppressed memories and associations surging into clarity: images of the

frayed hem of Hiler's jeans rustling as his hands move across his shoes; glimpses of strangers fixing dinner in brightly lit apartments; records of rainy commutes. With the distance of 10 years, Dorsky could weave the original film's more violent passages—several scenes of New York passersby are punctuated with full-screen flashes of aggressive, zigzagging lines—into a pattern that also includes affectionate portraits of strangers and friends, tender interludes, and mischievous juxtapositions.

He wouldn't make another such film for 14 years. Instead, for the rest of the '80s, he put himself through a rigorous set of exercises to acquaint himself with the film stocks—Gevaert, Ilford, Dynachrome—he'd accumulated. *Pneuma* (77-83) was assembled by hand on an optical printer from irregular scraps of outdated color reversal stock. Each image is an expanse of a single dominant color strewn with enlarged film grains that pinwheel in place and cascade across the screen, not unlike the grains of sand that run down inclines or collapse en masse in extreme close-up throughout *Alaya* (76-87), which Dorsky made during this period in Death Valley and Cape Cod.



Pneuma

In *17 Reasons Why* (85-87), Dorsky took more liberties with the materials he'd been studying. He created it with Regular 8mm, a rarely used double-strip format usually split down the middle in processing. When Dorsky asked that the film go unsplit, the resulting strip showed up projected as a string of four-chambered images—two parallel strands of two frames each. The images on each of those frames—rivers, lilies, parade floats, stained and blown glass—would recur in Dorsky's later works, but the tempo at which they move here is unusually quick and frenetic. Watching the film, you only take a breath at the last shot: a cluster of trees swaying at dusk.

As he made these movies, Dorsky was accumulating the footage that would become *Triste*. He edited it on the assumption that a movie's images had to be carefully balanced, arranged in keeping with their density, color, texture, and weight. The shots in *Triste* range from the reverent (hundreds of leaves rustling together against a chapel wall) to the casual (Hiler preparing a meal in the couple's shared kitchen), the precious (an infant's face speckled with refracted sunlight) to the ponderous (another tree branch swaying in the wind after dusk). As they accumulate, every shot gives what it can—its ballasting

heaviness, its loosening intimacy, its disruptive violence, its diverting levity, its startling virtuosity—to the creation of a melody that develops and deepens over the course of the film. *Triste* showed Dorsky trying to purge himself of any remnants of self-consciousness, posturing, or artifice. For its showy, black-and-white passages, Dorsky once wryly called it "my last avant-garde film."

"When I first encountered avant-garde films in the early 1960s," Dorsky wrote near the start of *Devotional Cinema*, "I began to observe that there was a concordance between film and our human metabolism, and to see that this concordance was a fertile ground for expression, a basis for exploring a language intrinsic to film." Dorsky's writings can be cryptic, but the "concordance" they describe is such a basic fact of movie going it often goes unmentioned—that certain arrangements of images jerk their viewers rudely around whereas others seem to synchronize harmoniously with their viewers' internal rhythms. Dorsky's editing is a matter of hitting on the timings that will seem most accommodating and least interruptive to an actual, embodied, exhaustible person. His cuts are based on what audiences will best be able to process, just as his choice of what to shoot depends in part on what a given set of physical film materials will best capture. The relatively abstract *Sarabande* (08) and *Compline* abound in deep purples and blues, linger on sparkling patterns of light, and depend on fine gradations of shadow because Dorsky wanted, with the last of his discontinued Kodachrome, to show what only that stock could do. In more recent films like *February* and *Avraham*(both 14), Dorsky relied increasingly on flickering effects and sudden aperture changes because the color negative stock with which he works now is thinner and less expressive ("wimpier," as he has put it) than Kodachrome, but handles extreme brightness and darkness well.

Triste

Since *Triste*, Dorsky has been steadily isolating certain of his habits and moods and magnifying them to the exclusion of other ones, often in response to specific events. *Song and Solitude* was made in tribute to Dorsky's friend Susan Vigil, who was undergoing cancer treatments during the period when Dorsky showed her the film's weekly rushes. *Threnody* was made shortly after the death of Stan Brakhage, a deep influence for Dorsky and a close friend; *August and After* in memory of George Kuchar and Carla Liss; *The Visitation* over the course of a week in Toronto immediately after 9/11. These are some of Dorsky's most somber films. He made *Variations*, *Arbor Vitae*, and *Love's Refrain* (00-01), three

of his brightest and most buoyant, as he was recovering from a severe concussion and, as he has put it, rediscovering the world.

For all their variations in mood, these films share an unmistakable orientation to the worlds they depict. Dorsky always keeps a more or less wide buffer zone between his camera and his subjects. In *The Return* (11), a shot of two women in a café cuts off the top of their heads, leaving only their eagerly gesticulating bodies; in a number of the shots of San Francisco pedestrians that fill *Song*, it's only revealed midway through that we're looking at the people in question through a window, a door, or a screen. In one post-screening discussion, Dorsky described these nonintrusive points of view as the ones with enough "nobility and dignity" to "allow the audience to have the same relationship to the screen that I'm having to the camera." If the filmmaker *did* too much, if he seemed like a purposeful agent rather than a passive floating consciousness, he would break whatever immersion the audience has in the world of the screen. Viewers would sense his fiddling, manipulative presence behind the images; "the hand of the filmmaker," in a phrase Dorsky often uses, would have broken in.

One might reply that viewers are made of hardier stuff than such phrases suggest, and that we sometimes don't mind a filmmaker's hand breaking into a movie and pushing us around. But if Dorsky's concern for his viewers makes him unusually cautious, he still finds ways to startle and surprise. One of his regular moves is to usher his viewers into sudden, direct involvement with other people—the image in *Love's Refrain* of a hairless, bedridden elderly man gazing into the camera with a faint grin; the frankly erotic passage in *The Visitation* of a woman splashing water over her nude torso; the succession of shadowy close-up portraits midway through *Intimations* (15)—or into moments of quiet domestic intimacy with Hiler, who appears across these films like a watchful, benevolent presence.

Love's Refrain

Dorsky's most recent films are among his loosest and most casual. The aperture adjustments and blurrings of focus Dorsky once left in the cutting room have become some of his central expressive tools. When he captures a cluster of cherry blossoms in *February*, an overcast night sky in *Avraham*, or a blood-red flower in *Prelude* (15), he keeps brightening and dimming the shot, playing at letting in more and less

light, like a pianist alternating quickly between two notes. In Dorsky's films from the early 2000s, everything in the shot tended to be crisp, glistening, and focused; recently, he's started letting fuzzy, ill-defined objects sway in the extreme foreground of his shots or glitter suggestively in the far background. It's as if he has become more comfortable calling attention to the methods behind his films' dazzling displays—exposing the whimsical tweaks and tunings on which he's always relied to achieve his effects.

This is a welcome development. Dorsky's impulse to anticipate his viewers' needs—to palliate, minister to, heal, and relax his audience—has always pushed him to suppress indulgent habits and make tighter, more potent movies. But it has also sometimes limited his freedom of movement and made him unwilling to risk sudden, unexpected gestures that might tear the fabric of the viewer's experience. That he now seems less worried about "breaking in" to the movie or showing his hand as a filmmaker has made his works not less immersive but friendlier and more inviting. He's become so palpably relaxed with his materials and so accomplished at subtly manipulating light and color that his movies have shed their last elements of self-consciousness or strain.

The first half of his new film, *Autumn*, surveys much of what Dorsky has made in the past two decades. Its first minute—a gauzy dance of pearly, pale yellows and pinks—recalls the similarly abstract beginning of *Triste*. The shots of fall foliage that follow, with their aperture adjustments and unfocused foregrounds, could have come from *Prelude* or *Avraham*, and the subsequent, playful shots of department-store displays and streets in San Francisco's Chinatown wouldn't have seemed out of place in *Song and Solitude*. Then, after about 15 minutes, we are ushered somewhere else—into an almost wholly abstract space of light leaks and lens flares, magnified water droplets and narrow threads of blue light, color formations that look like patterned doilies passing in and out of alignment, and jewel-like floating octagons of bright green, red, and gold.

The movie ends on two familiar, reassuring shots of a cluster of red flowers, but we're left marveling at what the previous 10 minutes showed. Where did these images come from? How did Dorsky capture them? What are they *of*? With this passage, Dorsky has led us into new and disorienting territory. Watching it makes you think that his trust in his viewers—their tolerance for abstraction and mystery and surprise—has deepened over the years, that the conversation in which his films are installments has come to a riper and more intimate stage. Dorsky has always acted the part of the gracious host, but the drama of his new films is in seeing him become less formal in his invitations, less worried over the impression he gives, and rightly confident that we'll want to keep revisiting his house of images no matter how dense or unfamiliar they become.

IN FOCUS: *Nathaniel Dorsky's latest short film,* Autumn*, will premiere in the fall.*

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The New York Times

For Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, Film Is the Star

September 24, 2015
Manohla Dargis

Mr. Dorsky's "Avraham" (2014). Credit Nathaniel Dorsky/Peter Blum Gallery, NY

Every so often while watching the work of Nathaniel Dorsky, I let out a yelp of joy. Mr. Dorsky makes blissfully beautiful films that don't tell stories but instead explore the world, the medium and our relationship with each. They're short, averaging around 20 minutes, and visually dense, with layers of pulsing color, churning film grain, shifting light and mutating form. Their actors, as it were, are the objects, the flowers, trees, animals, people and cars that slip in and out of the frame, although it is film – fragile, alchemical, magical, lush and luminous – that is the star. Like the gold and silver used in illuminated manuscripts, film creates a radiant glow that suggests why Mr. Dorsky calls his art devotional cinema.

A must-see retrospective of both Mr. Dorsky's films and those of Jerome Hiler opens on Monday, Sept. 28, at the 53rd New York Film Festival. The two have been together in life and in art since the 1960s, and while their work only sometimes directly refers to their partnership, this series is an inherent testimony to their shared hours, homes and visions. They first met at the New York premiere of one of Mr. Dorsky's earliest films, "Ingreen" (1964). Both were immersed in the vibrant avant-garde cinema scene and particularly in thrall to the work of one of its gods, Stan Brakhage, who rejected the limits imposed by industrial moviemaking (including narrative) in favor of what he called the "untutored eye," which "must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception."

A still from Mr. Hiler's "In the Stone House" (1964-70/2012), which includes images made in the house he and Mr. Dorsky rented in New Jersey. CreditJerome Hiler

Mr. Hiler's output is limited but stunning. For years, he and Mr. Dorsky didn't show their films publicly, preferring to screen them at home for friends. (Mr. Dorsky resumed public presentations in the early 1980s, Mr. Hiler in 1997.) And because the same friends kept looking at the same work, as Mr. Hiler explained in an interview with the writer Max Goldberg, he kept working on the films, cutting and recutting the all-too-delicate physical material. One problem is that Mr. Hiler wasn't working with copies, but instead wearing out his originals with his manipulations. As it does with all living things, time battered and tried to have its way with the films, so it seems faintly miraculous that they look so lovely.

Mr. Hiler's approach to his work adds to its ephemeral quality and explains the different dates (1967-70 and 2012) stamped on "In the Stone House," which he began when he and Mr. Dorsky were about 25 and living in rural New Jersey. On Mr. Dorsky's website, he recounts in a tender meander down bohemian lane that they rented the house, with its two fireplaces and many windows (each pane a screen onto a world, inside and out), for $85 a month. They were poor but found work here and there, including New York. (Mr. Hiler, delightfully, was the first projectionist for Andy Warhol's freak-out, "Chelsea Girls.")

It was in this Waldenesque retreat where they lived with nature, sampled mind-expanding drugs and turned their cameras on each other.

The filmmakers Jerome Hiler, left, and Nathaniel Dorsky.
Credit via Jerome Hiler

Among its virtues, “In the Stone House” is a palpable (and silent) record of specific embodied times and spaces: Here, you soon feel, is where Mr. Hiler lived, here are the paths he walked, the stream he followed. The film takes flight with a series of soft, sepia images of countryside suggestive of 19th-century pastoral landscape photography. These appear and disappear quickly, and are separated by snippets of black that suggest leisurely blinks, as if you (and the cameraman) were closing your eyes on one landscape and opening them on another. This at any rate is what I remember, having summoned these visions from my scrawled notes and memory. Like most movies before home video, most of Mr. Hiler’s films can’t be watched after the lights go up: they’re stored in your memories, not on data files.

These introductory shots also pan and tilt, sometimes with the visible trembling of a hand-held camera, sweeping across snow-covered ground and snow-encrusted tree limbs that introduce the theme of changing seasons and light. In what follows, the camera traces a stream, tours the woods, trails after a pair of men ice skating and hovers around a group of people watching a solar eclipse, some with snippets of film taped to their glasses. (When Mr. Hiler cuts to the occluded sun, it resembles a diluted pupil in an enormous eye.) These country scenes give way to cityscapes with shocks of blue and red, as well as an exquisitely photographed room with an old floral sofa and floral wallpaper, an oppressive bouquet that summons a constellation of ideas about home, family and flight.

Mr. Hiler's "Words of Mercury" (2011). CreditJerome Hiler

These ideas don't overwhelm the film, turning it into a narrative about how Mr. Hiler couldn't go home again; rather, they drift into your consciousness, becoming part of the overall field of meaning. "In the Stone House" is non-narrative, in the sense that it doesn't tell a fictional story with performers and the usual cinematic cues. And, crucially, Mr. Hiler doesn't force connections through his editing, marshaling his images in the service of a story. Rather, each image of a tree, stream and snake has its own integrity and resonates with meanings that at times feel specific to Mr. Hiler (this is the house in which he once lived) and sometimes very familiar (the sofa that might have belonged to your grandmother or the blizzardy New York street that looks like the one you played in as a child).

Mr. Hiler's editing helped Mr. Dorsky find a new way of seeing. In aninterview with the online journal Lumière, Mr. Dorsky spoke about his early influences and epiphanies. It was when he was 19 or 20, he said, while he was "smoking weed, and reading poetry very slowly," that he realized that reading a great poet was similar to listening to Mozart in that every word, like every note, was equally important. "Each note had a psychological and emotional progression to the psyche, each step in itself is completely profound, and that's when I began to wonder could you do that with film," he said. Around that time, Mr. Dorsky asked Mr. Hiler if it was possible to "make a film where each shot kept opening up without any other obligation?" Mr. Hiler, Mr. Dorsky added, had already started down that path.

Mr. Dorsky's "December" (2014). Credit Nathaniel Dorsky/Peter Blum Gallery, NY

Mr. Dorsky has been busy since he resumed public screenings. The retrospective includes more than 30 of his films, including some early sound shorts and the silent, two-part "Hours for Jerome," which he shot while Mr. Hiler was filming "In the Stone House." The title of "Hours for Jerome" is a reference to "The Book of Hours," the medieval prayer book, and while it's tethered to a person, it is also an exultation of the sacred. Mr. Dorsky's work contains some direct references to religion; another film, "Compline," for instance, shares its name with the final prayer service of the day in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet as Mr. Dorsky writes in his book "Devotional Cinema," devotion need not be about a specific religion. Rather, it is about the opening that allows us "to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation."

This may sound squishy to some (stirring to others of us), and classically Californian; in 1971, Mr. Dorsky and Mr. Hiler moved to San Francisco, where they still live. Yet, like other open-minded seekers who came of age when he did, Mr. Dorsky read "On the Road" and he also accompanied his father to Buddhist study groups.

The academic Cameron McLain has underscored the influence of the 14th-century Tibetan mystic Longchenpa on Mr. Dorsky. This influence surfaces in "Devotional Cinema," when Mr. Dorsky writes that "aggressive" editing can mask the "primal reality" of the shots, which "as moments of luminous accommodation, ripen and expand and are popped like soap bubbles by the cut." He also refers to the "emptiness of the view," which I take as a nod to the Buddhist idea that the real world is beyond human understanding.

Central to Mr. Dorsky's films is how he plays with the world of appearances, especially in how he closes the divide between binaries like interior and exterior, human and nature, shadow and light, focus and blur, movement and stasis. In his 2015 "Prelude," one of several films that will have world premieres in the retrospective, Mr. Dorsky includes

images of a blossoming fruit tree, people's shadows sliding across a floor, the undulations of a fig tree's soft green leaves. At one point, he cuts to someone's hand writing at a table behind a puzzling crosshatch of black lines that are only gradually shown to be some sort of window or door screen. The reality of the image, Mr. Dorsky seems to suggest with shots like this, can be revealed only with an open mind, eye and heart.

There are moments in Mr. Dorsky's work where you may not be sure what you're looking at (a flower, a light, a person?) and you find yourself leaning toward the image. To a degree, this searching encapsulates the very experience of movie-watching itself and how we piece together cinematic images to create meaning. For decades, Mr. Dorsky has been on a great search, going out with his 16-millimeter film camera and astonishing eye and bringing back the kinds of humble, rapturous images that many of us forget to see: a beam of light tracing a man's profile, a crimson flower gently bobbing in the wind, a bit of tape flapping in the wind, a mote of dust, a glimmer, a sparkle, a color, a shape. A mystic of a type, he has found new ways of seeing and thinking not just about film, but also the world.

ARTFORUM

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AMY TAUBIN

For American avant-garde cinema, the obsolescence of photochemical film materials and technology is devastating.

"IT'S POIGNANT TO ME that the end of the celluloid era might be found in these fragile 16-mm poems," said Nathaniel Dorsky, one of the most celebrated American avant-garde filmmakers. We were discussing the looming demise of photochemical material—i.e., film—for the recording, printing, and preserving of moving images. The "16-mm poems" are the films that Dorsky has been making for fifty-one years. Thirty-three of them are currently being presented (Sept. 28–Oct. 2) in a retrospective of his work at the Fifty-Third New York Film Festival. The program also includes five films by Jerome Hiler, Dorsky's life partner and companion in five decades of underground filmmaking. Every work in the retrospective was shot and edited on film and is being projected on film. Hiler, who, if possible, is even more radical than Dorsky in his commitment to the photochemical, will show three of his films as camera originals rather than as prints, because for him, the color-reversal film on which they were shot is so "luscious" that he wants to share it even at the risk of permanently damaging the film in a projection accident. (I pity the projectionist who is responsible for this screening.)

Opportunities to view avant-garde films as film projections are increasingly rare. For that matter, it's difficult to find commercial theaters that haven't switched from film to digital projection. This year's antithesis to Dorsky's 16-mm poems, Quentin Tarantino's baroque western *The Hateful Eight* (opening Christmas day), punctuates its trailer with the title card "See It In Glorious 70mm (Ultra Panavision 70)." Like a handful of Hollywood directors, Tarantino is still committed to shooting on film, but only a small percentage of his audience lives in cities where *The Hateful Eight* will be shown as a 70-mm film print. Most viewers will see it in theaters as a DCP (Digital Cinema Package) or digitally streaming on their personal devices—the way I've just seen the trailer. And while there is some loss involved, the digitization of narrative films doesn't undermine their aesthetic qualities and meaning as severely as the digitization of certain, although not all, avant-garde films does theirs. The narrative remains, as do the actors' performances and the film language (editing, mise-en-scène) employed to tell the story. I personally find that even the best digital transfers of filmed narratives look disconcertingly like glossy magazine scans of paintings, but I've taught myself to avoid looking deeply at the image, and occasionally vibrant colorization makes up for the loss. The sensuous reds and yellows in the digital version of Martin Scorsese's *Age of Innocence* (1993), made from a film master, are a case in point.

For the American avant-garde film, however, and particularly for the work of filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Andy Warhol, Dorsky, and some dozen more, who share the modernist project of centering meaning, form, and expression in the specific characteristics of the materials and the processes they employ, the obsolescence of film materials and technology is devastating. Missing when a moving-image work created as film is transferred to digital formats is what P. Adams Sitney—writing in these pages in 2007 in a piece about Dorsky—termed the "elemental visual magma": notably, the grain of the projected film strip; the movement of the film in the gate, which is never perfectly regular; and the flicker of the projector beam—the pulse of the film. In his 2003 essay "Devotional Cinema," Dorsky wrote that when he first encountered avant-garde film in the early 1960s, he gravitated to "those that were discovering a language unique to film, a language that enabled the viewer to have the experience of film itself and, at the same time, allowed film to be an evocation of something meaningfully human." He goes on to write that "film's physical properties seemed *so* attuned to our metabolism that I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor for our being, a model which had the potential to be transformative."

One might argue that any artist immersed in her medium will have experiences similar to what Dorsky describes. Steven Soderbergh, one of the rare narrative moviemakers who shoots and edits the work he directs, and who began shooting in digital in 2002 (exclusively so since 2009), never hesitates to proclaim his distaste for film as material, for anything smacking of fragility in the recorded and projected image—scratches, cinch marks, tears and splices, dirt, instability. For him, digital recording allows "absolute fidelity to reality-based light sources" without any pesky film grain getting in the way. That is not to say his images are artless or that they don't bear the signs of their medium. But Soderbergh's immersion in the digitization of images has affected the way he sees a hundred years of photochemical cinema, leading him to write, perhaps polemically, on his website, www.extension765.com, that the best viewing experience he ever had of a film he considers a master-

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Top row, from left: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Arbor Vitae*, 1999–2000,** 16 mm, color, silent, 28 minutes. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Aubade*, 2010,** 16 mm, color, silent, 11 minutes 30 seconds. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Love's Refrain*, 2000–2001,** 16 mm, color and black-and-white, silent, 22 minutes 30 seconds. Second row, from left: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Triste*, 1974–96,** 16 mm, color and black-and-white, silent, 18 minutes 30 seconds. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *August and After*, 2012,** 16 mm, color, silent, 18 minutes 30 seconds. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Compline*, 2009,** 16 mm, color, silent, 18 minutes 30 seconds. Bottom row, from left: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Pastourelle*, 2010,** 16 mm, color, silent, 16 minutes 30 seconds. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Song*, 2013,** 16 mm, color, silent, 18 minutes 30 seconds. **Nathaniel Dorsky, *The Return*, 2011,** 16 mm, color, silent, 27 minutes.

piece, Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, came not via a projection of the best possible film master in the best possible circumstances, but at home, watching the Blu-ray on a Pioneer Elite plasma KURO monitor. (Don't try to buy one; they've been discontinued.)

With complete awareness that the manufacture of film stock is dwindling, that every year there are fewer labs that process film, and that perhaps only fifty-odd museums, cinematheques, media centers, and educational institutions have 16-mm projectors and projectionists trained to use them, Dorsky continues to go out every day with his 16-mm Bolex because—even using the new Eastman polyester negative stocks, which are calibrated to interface with digital media—his film camera is more sensitive to capturing the movement of light than are digital cameras. "My skills are higher than when I was nineteen or twenty," he remarked in a recent conversation, "so why would I stop?" Later he added that he thinks 16-mm film shows will become more like a live performance. "You might travel to see an opera. You have to go to Madrid to see certain paintings. It might even make film more valued." Dorsky is not completely alone in this idea. Robert Beavers works exclusively

Left: View of the Temenos during the premiere of orders I and II of Gregory J. Markopoulos's *Eniaios*, 1947–91, Lyssaraia, Greece, June 2004. Photo: Jeffrey Stout.

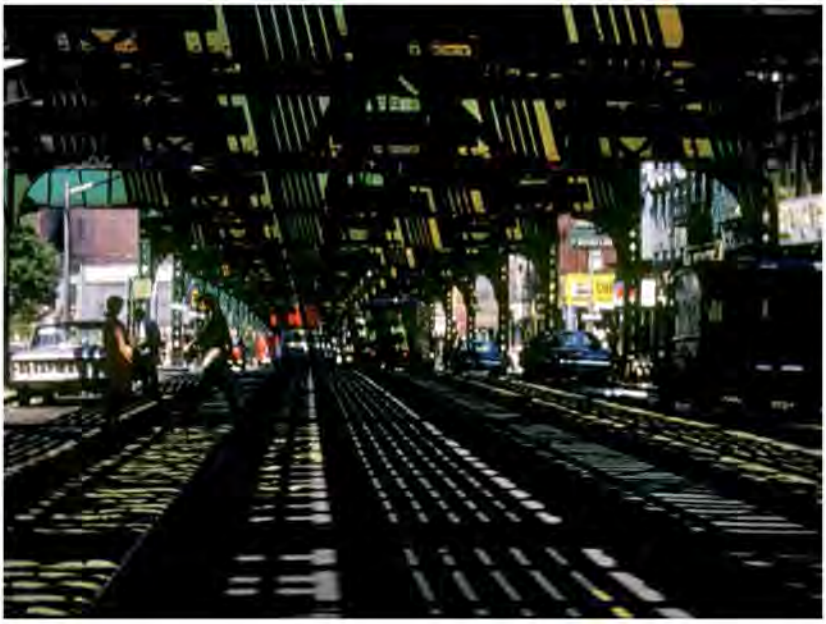
Below: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Hours for Jerome Part 1*, 1966–70/1982. 16 mm, color, silent, 21 minutes.

in film, and the Temenos project—conceived by Beavers's late partner, the avant-garde filmmaker Gregory J. Markopoulos, and carried on by Beavers after Markopoulos's death in 1992—involves both an archive in Switzerland, where the work of the two filmmakers is restored and preserved exclusively on film, and a remote open-air space on the Peloponnesian peninsula where, it is envisioned, the complete cycle of Markopoulos's films—edited into a single eighty-hour work, *Eniaios* (1947–91)—will be projected quadrennially to a growing community of devotees from around the world. I doubt that when Dorsky talks about film screenings as performances he has anything as wildly quixotic in mind as the Temenos.

"FILM MUST BE preserved as film" said Jonas Mekas, looking at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses for asking. Mekas, who in the '60s and '70s built an infrastructure for the distribution and exhibition of avant-garde film (the Film-Makers' Cooperative, the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, Anthology Film Archives), turned his attention to the question of avant-garde-film preservation in the late '70s, providing what filmmaker Ken Jacobs described with some amazement as a permanent home for work that had no commercial value and that wasn't even on the radar of the Hollywood studios or the big film-preservation initiatives worldwide. Anthology is not the only institution that preserves avant-garde film, but unlike the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley; the UCLA Film & Television Archive, where Ross Lipman restored Bruce Conner's 1976 *Crossroads* (see his account of the restoration in *Artforum*, October 2013); the Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles, where Mark Toscano has been working for more than a decade on preserving Stan Brakhage's films; George Eastman House in Rochester; the Film Foundation, which is Martin Scorsese's baby; the Library of Congress; and the National Film Preservation Foundation (the last is not an archive but instead channels funding for preservation to the aforementioned organizations and dozens of smaller moving-image archiving projects), Anthology is the only major American film archive that focuses *entirely* on avant-garde films—those in its own Essential Cinema Repertory and many others as well.

Andrew Lampert, Anthology's curator of collections, explained that there were more than aesthetic considerations at stake in Mekas's decree. In fact, Mekas, who in the late '80s put aside his Bolex to shoot in video, was also one of the first avant-garde filmmakers to transfer his films to video for home viewing and study purposes. Film, however—specifically the new polyester negative stock—is far more stable than digital media. It will, if stored in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment, last at least one hundred years. Digital media, on the other hand, is subject to "data extinction" and the interrelated and more pervasive problem of needing to be "migrated"—or, worse, becoming obsolete with every new generation of digital software and hardware. Lampert, who works with extremely limited funds and with artists who are protective of their work but who can also be grossly negligent with respect to its long-term conservation, warns that "there are no definitive solutions in preservation, only temporary fixes, which often lead to new problems."

There are two basic methods for 16-mm and 35-mm preservation. One is purely photochemical: transferring the best existing film materials directly onto a polyester negative master, making any corrections and clean-ups during that film-to-film process. The other is substantially digital: scanning the original film materials frame by frame into a DPX digital master file, where corrections can be made, and then outputting the corrected DPX files onto a film nega-

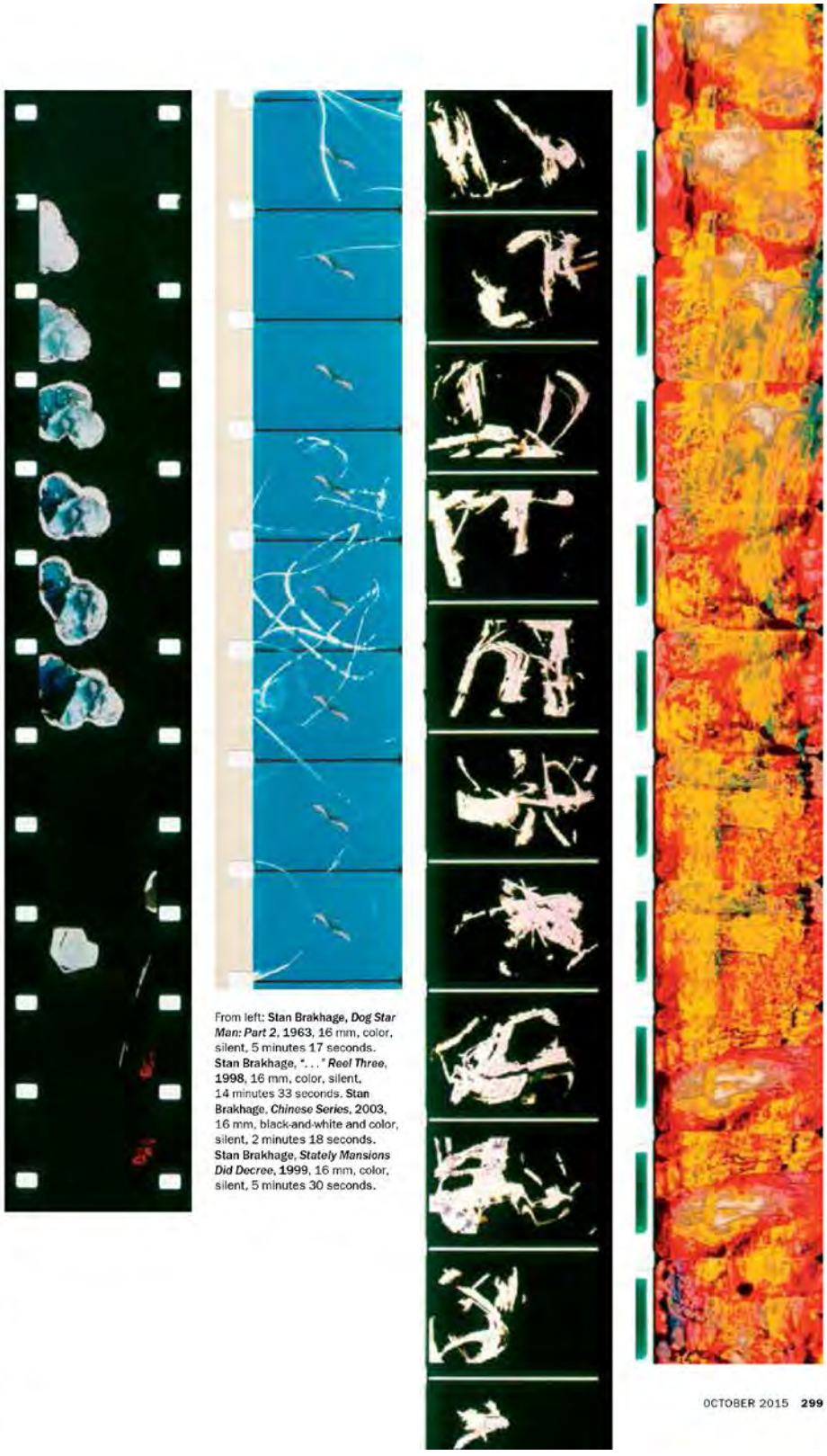


When a moving-image work created as film is transferred to digital formats, it loses what P. Adams Sitney termed film's "elemental visual magma."

tive (the preservation negative). The DPX files can also be used to make an internegative from which exhibition prints can be struck, or to directly make film prints—or DCPs or Blu-rays, if the filmmaker wants the option of exhibiting the work digitally.

For Dorsky, the use of a digital intermediate to generate 16-mm master negatives of his films is unacceptable. Indeed, only one of his films, *Hours for Jerome* (1966–70/1982), has been preserved, and that via the film-to-film transfer method, using funds from the Pacific Film Archive. For three others, he has made internegatives in order to generate exhibition prints. But most of the films in the NYFF retrospective are prints that have been made directly from edited camera originals, as are the single-frame enlargements that will be exhibited next month in Dorsky's solo show at Peter Blum Gallery in New York. In part, Dorsky's decision to stick as closely as possible to camera original is aesthetic. But it is also a matter of money. Since he refuses to allow his films to be digitized, preserving them will not generate revenue, as do the Brakhage films that have been released on DVD and Blu-ray from Criterion and as do Bruce Conner's films, which can be sold as limited digital editions by the Conner estate and by the art galleries that represent him. "Museums should be stepping up to preserve avant-garde film, which is an important part of twentieth-century art history," says Lampert—and some have, albeit to a very limited degree.

Mary Lea Bandy, until 2006 the chief curator of film at MoMA, initiated the preservation of the work of one of avant-garde filmmaking's modernist masters, Ernie Gehr. MoMA currently maintains in its vaults film-preservation negatives of *Serene Velocity* (1970), *Rear Window* (1986/91), and *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991), all of them photochemically transferred onto 35 mm. Gehr says that MoMA is working



From left: **Stan Brakhage, *Dog Star Man: Part 2*, 1963**, 16 mm, color, silent, 5 minutes 17 seconds. **Stan Brakhage, *"..." Reel Three*, 1998**, 16 mm, color, silent, 14 minutes 33 seconds. **Stan Brakhage, *Chinese Series*, 2003**, 16 mm, black-and-white and color, silent, 2 minutes 18 seconds. **Stan Brakhage, *Stately Mansions Did Decree*, 1999**, 16 mm, color, silent, 5 minutes 30 seconds.

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From left: Ernie Gehr, *Serene Velocity*, 1970, 35 mm, color, silent, 23 minutes. Two stills from Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, 1967, 16 mm, color, sound, 45 minutes.

Andrew Lampert, Anthology's curator of collections, warns that "there are no definitive solutions in preservation, only temporary fixes which often lead to new problems."

Ernie Gehr, *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, 1991, 16 mm, color, sound, 41 minutes.

on preserving more of his twenty-two films. He insisted on 35 mm because he believes that 35-mm projection will exist long after 16-mm projection is no more and because the image, at least in these three works, is richer on 35 mm. For the moment, he refuses to allow any of his films to be made available digitally, despite the fact that for nearly fifteen years he has been working exclusively in video and digital media. He explains that toward the end of the twentieth century, he had to face the economic reality that film had become too expensive for him to use. Out of his interest in the long history of cinema, which predates and postdates the century dominated by photochemical, he turned to digital image making in 1998, again with the encouragement of Bandy, who commissioned several video installations from him, including *Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows*, 2005. Digital projection has opened a new context for his recent work in museums and galleries and has allowed him, in site-specific installations such as the fascinatingly layered *Surveillance*, created in 2010 for Madison Square Park in Manhattan, to continue his representation of cityscapes. And while *Serene Velocity* remains a stunningly kinetic transformation of the representation of a single space into a pulsating, shimmering abstraction, his more meditative *Brooklyn Series* (2012) is its digital corollary. Gehr notes that while he has been asked to issue some of his photochemical films on DVD or Blu-ray, and he hasn't quite closed the door on the possibility, no one is interested in producing and distributing discs of his digital work.

WITH THE SUDDEN obsolescence of film projectors, avant-garde film history is being radically rewritten. There are virtually no film projectors in the classrooms of university film departments or art schools, and most of those institutions now have only digital equipment in their theaters. Thus, someone teaching the history of avant-garde film is able to show Brakhage films only on Blu-ray, no matter that, despite the care and technical knowledge that has gone into transferring them, they are denatured in that form and as a result make less impact than did even the worn, faded film prints one so often had to settle for. On the other hand, Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and the other two films of his great camera-movement trilogy (1969's *Back and Forth* and 1971's *La région centrale*) are available only as film prints and therefore almost never shown in classrooms anymore. *Wavelength*, which has been preserved photochemically on 16 mm, could not survive digitization, for two reasons: First, the visual cues through which we read space are different in film than they are in digital, and *Wavelength* is nothing if not a forty-five-minute journey through a space indexed by the optics of the zoom lens. And second, *Wavelength* is an homage to film grain and to the wild variations in representation created via the splicing-together of eighteen mismatched hundred-foot 16-mm film rolls—a celebration of the relativity of all film images.

Unfortunately, *Wavelength* is out of reach except on the occasions when it screens in a museum or cinematheque, which is also the case for Dorsky's films and for Warhol's silent portrait movies—though these last are shown improperly on digital screens every time you turn your head. Such works are impossible to digitize—and not only because the "visual magma" is not translatable, but because many of Gehr's early films, including *Serene Velocity*; all of Dorsky's films; and all the Warhol silents must be shown at silent speed (16 or 18 frames per second), which is a third slower than sound speed. (Although it is hardly remarked on, this is a problem in the

From left: **Jonas Mekas, *Outtakes from the Life of a Happy Man*, 2012**, 16 mm and video transferred to digital video, color, sound, 68 minutes. **Jonas Mekas, *Scenes from the Life of Andy Warhol*, 1966–90**, 16 mm, color, sound, 35 minutes. Photo: Anthology Film Archives. **View of "Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures," 2010–11**, Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Edie Sedgwick*, 1965. Photo: Scott Rudd.

digital exhibition of silent narrative films as well.) And currently, digital players and drives are set to run only at sound speed, or 24 fps. The "fix" is to approximate silent speed by doubling every third frame, which causes a noticeable stagger (despite attempts to cover this up by means of "frame blending" software that throws everything out of focus). For the avant-garde films that are specifically intended to be shown at silent speed, what is lost is the contradiction between the real time of the viewing experience and the representation of time on the screen—what Dziga Vertov called the Kino-Eye's "victory over time."

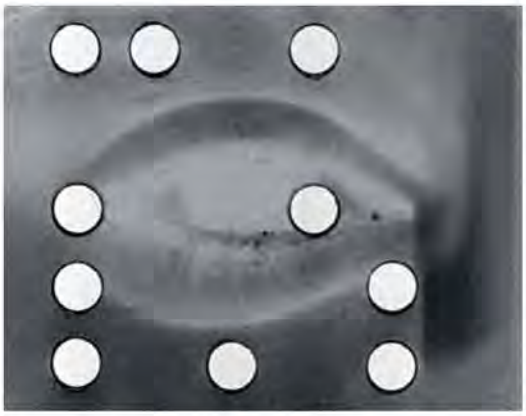
Some of Ken Jacobs's films survive digitization wonderfully, as do most of Jonas Mekas's films—in part because much of their focus is the history of people and places and performance, and only to a lesser degree the materials and qualities of film itself. Working digitally has allowed Jacobs to transfer and complete works such as his seven-hour *Star Spangled to Death* (1956–60/2001–2004), which had become too costly and unwieldy to finish on film. It has also enabled him to preserve signature works that otherwise exist only when he performs them live using specially configured projectors, and has offered him an affordable (and less ephemeral) means of making new works that, like his Nervous System performances, explore illusions of depth in found 2-D footage. But in all the digital exhibitions I've seen of avant-garde works that originated on celluloid, only one maintained its integrity: Bruce Conner's *VIVIAN* (1964), projected at the Paula Cooper Gallery this past spring as part of a show of Conner's figurative work in a variety of media. Conner's films respond well to digitization because their power lies in the kineticism created by his percussive editing rather than in the beauty of sustained images subtly cut together, as in Dorsky's films. According to Michelle Silva, Conner's longtime editor, the important thing is for the exhibition digital transfer, made from the 16-mm film negative, to be projected in the format in which it was made (HD ProRes HQ) rather than being further compressed, which, she says, too many galleries make the mistake of doing. In any event, *VIVIAN* was as exciting as ever, and I watched it five times in a row—something that would not have been possible had it been projected on film. "When it works out well," says Lampert, "you don't really have to think about whether it is film or video. It's simply a moving image."

The problem remains, however, that it *doesn't* always work out well—indeed, in many cases it can't. □

AMY TAUBIN IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *FILM COMMENT* AND *SIGHT & SOUND*. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

Left: **Ken Jacobs, *Star Spangled to Death*, 1956–60/2001–2004**, 16 mm transferred to video, color and black-and-white, sound, 440 minutes.

Right: **Bruce Conner, *VIVIAN*, 1964**, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 3 minutes.



HYPERALLERGIC

A Pair of Filmmakers Captures the World in 16mm

Jeremy Polacek, writer
October 2, 2015

Nathaniel Dorsky, still from *Song and Solitude* (2005-06) (all images courtesy the artist and NYFF/Film Society of Lincoln Center)

The films of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler are silent, brief, and sagely meandering – luminous contemplations of life, film, and the intimacies between the two. They also inspire a curious set of ironies. They are the sorts of films that – now, in the days of hegemonic digital movie making and screens, the spoils and joys of Netflix – you wish you could hold and return to, watch and rewatch, alone somewhere in the illuminated dark. Dorsky, who has spoken frequently of John Ashbery's influence on his filmmaking, described an epiphany of reading Ashbery's poetry – "very slowly, one word at a time" – and longing to reveal that experience and resonance in film.

So why not luxuriate in Dorsky's, and Hiler's, work the way Dorsky has done with Ashbury?

Dorsky and Hiler, currently enjoying a remarkable retrospective at this year's New York Film Festival (NYFF), have worked and shared their lives together since the early 1960s. They are enchanted filmmakers at the terminal edge of film, making and showing 16mm movies beyond the last days of Kodachrome and other

phased-out film stock – into a time when even film festivals themselves, as Dorsky noted in one of his NYFF Q&As, can screen few *true* films. It's a great, almost regressive pleasure, then, to see so many of their works at one time, in one place. Dorsky himself spoke of his delight and surprise at seeing his older films again, and projected so beautifully in the Francesca Beale Theater, almost wishing he could once more create in that way, with that same feeling and atmosphere of 10 and 20 years past. For some of the films screened during the retrospective, it has been a decade or more since he last saw them.

Nathaniel Dorsky, still from *Aubade* (2010)

These films, above all, exist *as film*: something physical, with limitations and potential, that can be manipulated, but only so far, can be seen, but only at some expense. At screenings of his films, Hiler projects his camera originals, and even used to make edits to them. With each further cut or adjustment, each battering screening and passing year, his films degrade and take on the qualities of a palimpsest. Not as prolific as Dorsky (the two occasionally work together but have distinct careers and release pieces under their own names), Hiler makes quiet, aging films that seem to grow more beautiful and lustrous with time. His work is rarified, building up luminous layers through in-camera superimposition: he films and rolls the film back, shooting again over the same stretch, often more than three times. Also a stained-glass artist, he works with a quiet magnanimity, a trust, but also a knowledge of how many layers the film and its footage can accommodate, what he calls filming "with courtesy." *Words of Mercury* (2013), for instance, lovingly explores the capacity of his Ektachrome 7285 film to hold and layer multiple colors and images, reveling in fluorescence: a dark pastoral scene streaked with neon light, a bundle of flower brought up to blazing lime. Hiler rhapsodically pursues the potential of film and the world to change, to respond to opportunity and chance and uncover the "possibility of transmutation."

Dorsky's *Pneuma* (1977-83) and *Alaya* (1976-87) also explore this overlap, or perhaps more accurately the gap, between film and the world, the space between their extremes that connects them. Both works take the "grain" as their subject: film grain in *Pneuma* and grains of sand in *Alaya*. Edited from expired and unexposed film stock, *Pneuma* features a scene where, rephotographing from different distances and approaches, Dorsky finds the grains swelling and contracting, covering the distance between them and then opening it up again. While not intended as a pair (they were split during their NYFF screening, separated by the four-image, camera-bug-eyed *17 Reasons Why*), *Pneuma* and *Alaya* are nevertheless cousinly works, observing in hypnotic, often strikingly similar ways grains in film and out in the world.

Nathaniel Dorsky, still from *Avraham* (2014)

For these two visionaries, film and its emulsion – the stuff that captures and gives the images color – can be expanded, even humanized. Dorsky spoke at one of the NYFF screenings of wanting the film to yearn for the light, of scenes "ripening," ready for a cut. In *Avraham* (2014), one of his newest works, he flits through F-stops, tracking the film through the darkest edge of it emulsion to its upper radiance. There's light and darkness in the reel, but also mood, energy, invitation. Many scenes in his later works hover on the rim of recognition, not quite perceptible, because knowing would somehow be less. Dorsky and his camera delight in the texture of curtains and jackets and the way light look splashed upon or through them; they pause and peer through a web of twisting tree limbs, or stare, entranced, at a lens flair or motes of dust; they alight, out-of-focus, on a clump of grass, finding that its blades appear as the light brings them into being. It can feel effortlessly transcendental – and be perfectly ordinary.

Despite having outlasted numerous film types, Dorsky's career, excitingly, seems to be at its most active and searching point; Hiler, too, is making new works – both completed a film in 2015. Dorsky's *Prelude*, which premiered at NYFF on Monday and will screen again tonight, even announces the start of something new, though he admits he doesn't yet know what. Somewhat ironically, in these late days of film, it is modest, avant-garde artists like Hiler and Dorsky who care for this once mighty medium and help keep it alive, filming rapturous tributes to film with what's left of it.

Nathaniel Dorsky, still from *Song* (2013)

FANDOR
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Dorsky and Hiler: Open to Life

Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler on collaboration, haiku, light and color as 'Luminous Intimacy' opens in New York.

Aaron Cutler, writer
September 27, 2015

Dorsky's 'Intimations'

Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler have been living and filming together for nearly fifty years. The two filmmakers were born in New York City in 1943 and met there in 1964, at a time when both had recently begun working with 16mm in dialogue with older directors such as Gregory Markopoulos and Stan Brakhage. They moved together to rural New Jersey in 1967 and then in 1971 to San Francisco, where they continue to reside today. The two have developed separately as artists while working in tandem with one another. For each, the process of development has even included an extended hiatus from filmmaking, followed by an enriched return.

Neither Dorsky nor Hiler has ever earned a living from filmmaking—Hiler worked as a carpenter for many years, Dorsky as a freelance film and television editor—yet their films have held tremendous meaning for viewers whose ranks have grown over time. The two artists are currently at both the greatest levels of productivity in their outputs and at the greatest points of exposure that their works have received, making the

current moment an appropriate one for this year's New York Film Festival series Luminous Intimacy: The Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler to take place.

Nathaniel Dorksy (Photo by Verena Baumann)

The retrospective will run from September 28th to October 2nd and feature both artists in attendance at screenings. The lineups of its twelve 16mm programs accurately reflect each person's trajectory. Dorsky, who over the past several years has taken prolifically to mounting themed cycles of films, will be represented with thirty-three brief works, including two world premieres. Hiler, a longtime stained glass artist whose superimposition-rich films are often made from materials gathered and fused together over long periods of time, will appear with six.

The concentrated, glistening works of both men burst with the fullness of absorption in life while moving at paces considered enough to allow for contemplation. Most of the retrospective's films will screen silently at 18 frames per second, the standard frame rate for silent film projection and one that Dorsky (who is also the author of the great short 2003 book *Devotional Cinema*) has called "sacred speed."

Both Dorsky and Hiler make spiritual films that render individual quests to find one's place within a surrounding world. Both do so by projecting inner states outward in poetic, first-person fashion. Dorsky's films often move through shadows cast by varied figures, conveying a sense of journeys taken in search of peace-bringing brightness. Hiler's films tend to wander outdoors and sift through layers of light and color, as though creating paths to travel through Nature's immediate chaos.

"Luminous Intimacy" presents personal works that they have signed individually, without giving the sense that either man has acted completely alone. Its body of films offers a mutually pursued openness. Dorsky and Hiler sometimes appear onscreen in each other's efforts, such as in the mirroring *Hours for Jerome* (1966-82, Dorsky) and *In the Stone House* (1967-70/2012, Hiler), and each conveys the sense of having influenced the other even when the influence remains invisible.

Jerome Hiler (Photo by Nathaniel Dorsky)

Aaron Cutler: How did you meet?

Jerome Hiler: At the time I met Nathaniel, I was a filmmaker just taking his first shots. I roomed with Gregory Markopoulos and worked with him on his film *The Illiac Passion* (1967). To give me a start, Gregory loaned me his Bolex 16mm camera, a gesture that I felt I had to live up to.

One evening, Gregory and I went to the Washington Square Gallery and saw what I believe was the first public screening of *Ingreen* (1964). The next day I came by the Filmmakers' Cooperative office, and Nathaniel was sitting at a desk talking to the office manager, Leslie Trumbull. I looked at him. He looked at me. There was some kind of spark. Then I saw on the desk a film can labeled *Ingreen* and said, 'Oh, you made the film last night!'

Dorksy's 'Hours for Jerome Part 1'

Nathaniel Dorsky: I began shooting in regular 8mm when I was ten years old. Eventually I attended Antioch College in Ohio, which, like most American schools back then, lacked a film department. One day I saw a senior shooting an industrial film for the college with a Bolex, and the sight just stopped my mind. For most people who are filmmakers, the first time that you see a real movie camera, it touches your heart in a way that's too exciting to believe. He said that I could arrange tutorials with him instead of going to classes, and so I skipped lectures to work on exposing film, splicing it, and preparing it for printing.

I left Antioch after one year and went to New York at a time when experimental filmmaking was in its most exciting phase. Jonas Mekas wailed away every week in his *Village Voice* column, and Stan Brakhage would come out on stage after screenings and speak for forty-five minutes about a ten-minute film. Jerome and I attended quite a few shows together before we knew each other—for instance, we were both at the premieres of *Dog Star Man: Part I* (1962) and of *Scorpio Rising* (1963). We were getting immersed in that world.

Ingreen was the first film I presented in the avant-garde arena, so to speak, and I made it in about a month—it really just came out of me. That year I made two more sound films and met Jerome.
Hiler: The day that we met, Jonas saw us talking and suggested that we go to a space they wanted to convert into a theater and do a little demolition work. We both said, 'Yes, yes, yes,' because we wanted to get to know each other. The next Saturday we went and, in our own inept way, attacked walls trying to knock them down, while all the while engaging in a long encyclopedic conversation during which we sometimes felt like we were twins who had been separated at birth.

Dorksy's 'Alaya'

Cutler: What influences did you have on each other's filmmaking?

Dorsky: Jerome gave me a birthday present of a film made from a 100-foot camera roll, which was the first film I saw that was completely open to life. He wasn't trying to make a film about life, but rather life itself was the film. I sent him back a little film maybe half a year later, and that exchange eventually became the film *Two Personal Gifts* (1966-67, a.k.a. *Fool's Spring*, and the lone 'Luminous Intimacy' film listed as being co-directed).

I remember being at the house of a poet friend, Michael Brownstein, around that period. John Ashbery had just come out with his collection *Rivers and Mountains* (1966). Michael and I were smoking hashish and I was reading the poems one word at a time, very, very slowly, as though hitting the notes on a piano and feeling the resonances of shifting from note to note, or from one key to the next. While doing this, I began to wonder if one could make a film in which each shot moved to the next only for the sake of its own necessity or pleasure, without serving any exterior need to describe.

I had had the great joy of discovering haiku in high school. Haiku's form is made up of three steps: Establishing an image, enhancing it with a related image, and then breaking altogether. If the break is a great break, then it opens up spirit and presence. It opens up the heart of nowness. I wondered: Could you make a film that kept opening and breaking at the same time? The quest for a way to do so ultimately went on for many years before I could do it. It became a way of life.

In 1966, Jerome was showing a lot of footage to people in his apartment on the Lower East Side. Many of the cuts in the rolls he assembled exemplified these things that I was thinking about. The rolls had no agenda except for being of themselves. The film itself was the subject.

Hiler in Dorsky's 'Triste'

Hiler: I loved Nathaniel's films, and I do believe he loved mine. We were not only collaborating—we truly were inspired by and enamored of each other's images.

Dorsky: We were not easy on each other, though. Supportive and appreciative, but not easy. If one person thought that something was too decorative or egoic or lost in another fashion, it would come up. We were young and in a way too smart to be serious, but quite serious at the same time.

Hiler: Serious and playful. We were serious when we were doing our work, but it was always in the context of play. We eventually ended up living together and shooting all the time. We had screenings at our house in New Jersey for friends who came up for the weekend, or else just for ourselves. We screened rolls side by side or put smaller screens inside larger screens. We put together rolls that we felt would surprise one another. A lot of the footage got wrecked, but I wasn't thinking, 'I've got to get this out to an audience.' We were much more engaged in the process of looking and seeing what we were doing in the most immediate sense.

Cutler: What were you looking for?

Dorsky: I was interested in exploring cinematic language. I wasn't overly crazy about films in which people were being naughty or strange. What excited me were films like those of Stan B., who was seeking a way to put into union the nature of cinema and the poetic needs of human beings. There were a lot of avant-garde films made of silver and other lower metals, but to me finding a union of cinema and psyche was where the gold was.

I took a long hiatus from completing films after finishing my first three because of an interest in silent expression, which Jerome and I both admired. We respected the concept of a visual language, and while we found that sound was sometimes helpful, it often served as an excuse not to find that language.

I shot *Hours for Jerome* (1966-82) during that hiatus and edited many of the sequences. I also started the film *Alaya* (1976-87) and collected all the footage for *Pneuma* (1977-83), but was too fearful to manifest. When I finally did manifest again, as with *Triste* (1974-96), I did so with footage taken from a lot of

failed projects. Even then, I had not yet learned how to shoot in a way that was appropriate to the language I sought. That came later.

Hiler's 'In the Stone House'

Hiler: I filmed my responses to places and environments. After many years, much of this camera original was lost and I saved what was left in the form of two films. *In the Stone House*, edited in 2012, contains material from 1964-71 comprising life in New York and in New Jersey. *New Shores*, edited in 2014, contains material shot between 1971 and 1987 covering life in San Francisco.

After 1989, I took my own hiatus from filmmaking. Film seemed very finite, and I could see how colors changed and faded. I instead started working with stained glass, which is another luminous color projection that I've been fascinated with my whole life. Glass doesn't lose its color. There are 800-year-old pieces that are the same today as when they were created. So I worked with glass and thought that, perhaps, I was even through as a filmmaker. In the mid-1990s, though, I took up the camera again and an old love just came back, this time in the form of a small film called *Gladly Given* (1997). I followed it with *Words of Mercury* (2011) and *Marginalia* (2015), and these three films will comprise one of the retrospective's programs.

Dorsky: There are people who don't see life. The visual world creates only a verbal or conceptual world, and they live in the reality of the verbal as presented by the visual. But there's this revolution that can happen in your mind where suddenly you see the world itself, rather than its representation. Jerome was the person who expanded my sense of vision the most. He helped me reach that point.

Hiler's 'Words of Mercury'

Cutler: How has working with color helped you both?

Hiler: Color is primary for me, along with light. It says a lot to me about the vividness and strangeness of life that we should live in a world with all these colors in it. They're incredibly powerful and they rouse tremendous mystery.

Dorsky: 'Why is the sky blue?' is a genuine question. Why are trees green? Why is the earth brown? Why do colors work as meaning?

Hiler: There is almost no plant in the world that has a gauche color scheme. The leaves of the plants always have a perfect color relationship to the blossom. The plant world tells us of the primal place that color has in living systems.

Dorsky: This has to do with what cinema is, which is a progression of images in time. Color is one of the horses pulling the film. Color, light and the quality of space are what make a film function.

Cutler: What role does the spiritual hold in your works?

Dorsky: The human race has something like a fifty-thousand-year-old tradition of using art as a tool for enhancing spirituality and health. Much of the art that I love is related to sacred and spiritual traditions—in intentions, not in details. There was a long period during which artists were in a healthier position emotionally and spiritually than they are today because they had a purpose in society. They were working for the uplift of the human psyche, and that work gave them important positions. Then that period ended, and artists were put out on their own. Of course, there is also another side to that story.

Hiler: I guess it was the French Revolution that did it. Afterwards, artists had to figure out how to make a living, which created a bitter edge in art that carries through to today. I try to keep that bitterness out of my own expression, because indeed, throughout my life, I haven't made a cent from my filmmaking. I know how

it feels to be cut off from society. But art is still essentially a spiritual process, and that spiritual aspect keeps one from falling down a black hole.

Dorsky: The whole subtext of irony, cynicism and conceptualism in modern art might be a veiled reaction to being thrown out of the world.

Hiler: If there is something that I have faith in, it's that with an open mind, you will get a message back from the world. The world is very trustworthy. Even if you're working alone, it will tell you immediately if you made a mistake and, eventually, whether you're on the right path.

Dorsky's 'Song and Solitude'

Cutler: What does it mean to you both to personally present your films to audiences?

Hiler: The most important part of making films for me is reaching some kind of understanding of why I'm doing them. Something I need, in addition to the film itself, is the presence of someone who has seen it and reacts to it. It's like asking, 'Do you prefer just to talk by yourself, or would you like to have somebody listening to you?'

Dorsky: There's the experience of having read a poet on the page, and then hearing him or her read, and usually it's revelatory to discover these words attached to a personality. You suddenly understand them in a different way. It's the same for me with films and filmmakers I admire. Speaking of poetry, when I myself am in front of an audience and speaking before a film begins, I sometimes explain it as being poetic cinema rather than narrative cinema. In literature the distinction is totally understandable: The audience comprehends what a novel is, what a poem is, and the differences between the two.

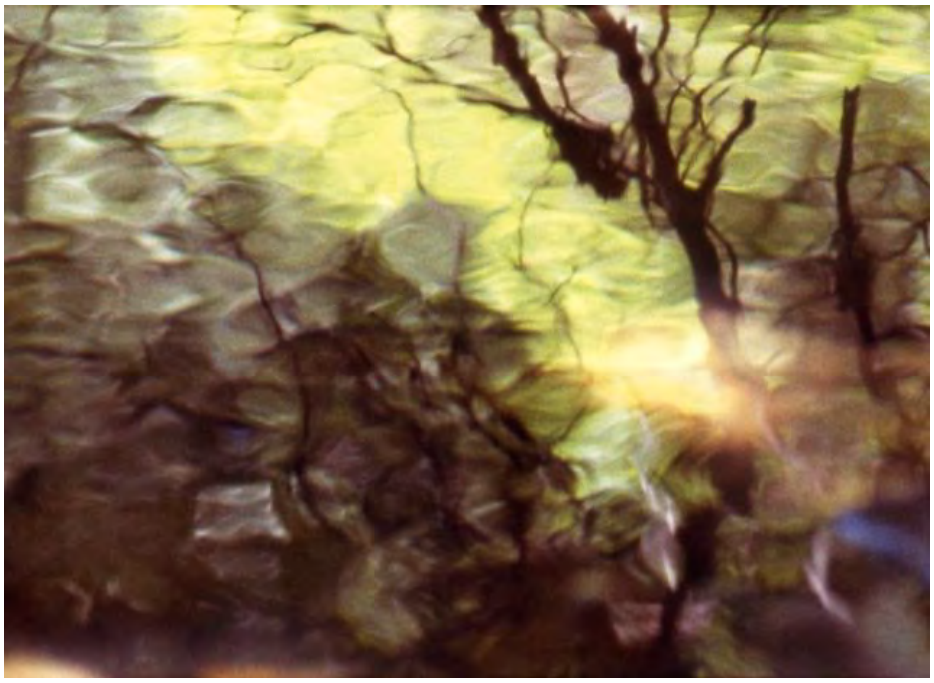
Hiler: The live-est part of a film screening is the audience. There's a palpable, invisible atmosphere around the receptivity of a film that you can almost feel ahead of time. No two showings of a film are the same. The film is not the most living part of a screening—the most living part is the group of people coming together to see it.

Cutler: How concerned are each of you about maintaining a distance from the other's art?

Hiler: I don't see any reason to adjust. We are who we are. We are very close, and yet we're totally different people. Even though our films sometimes reflect each other's imagery and concerns, they are completely different from each other in the same ways that we are.

Dorsky: There is some consciousness on both sides, to be fair. For instance, lately Jerome has been going out of the city to shoot footage, because I have been so much in the city making my films.

Hiler: Yes, Nathaniel has had a tremendous increase in the amount of films he has made lately, and I do not work at that incredible rate of speed. When I go to shoot film in San Francisco, I often imagine a sign popping up in my camera: 'Nick Dorsky was here.'



Hiler's 'Gladly Given'

Dorsky: For a long time I avoided using a 10mm lens because that was Jerome's signature. But we're influenced by each other. Film is a wonderful practice in that it gives you instant feedback. Whatever your distortion is, and no matter how subtle, that distortion is manifested on the screen. If I do something that isn't me—good, but not me—I say, 'There I am trying to be Jerry again.'

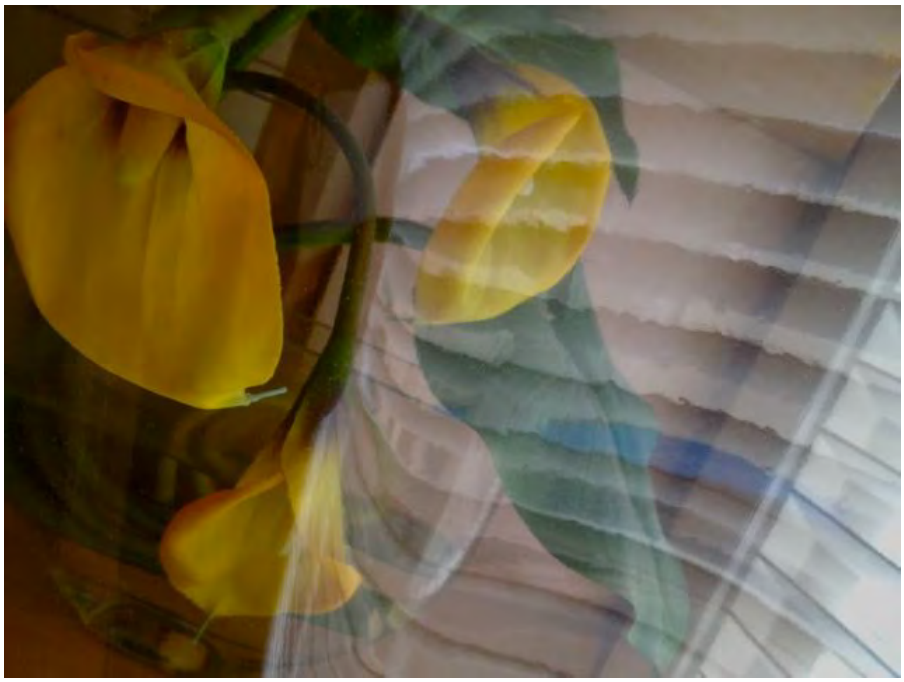
One-person handmade filmmaking offers a chance—in a deeper way than the maker knows—to reveal a person's psyche. You have to find the thing that causes harmony in your psyche. Each of us finds a different way of resolving dissonance into harmony.

Cutler: How do you each feel about your work today?

Hiler: I am the way I am, and I continue to shoot as I always shoot. With that said, it's frightening for me now to be an old man and to be making these old-man movies that are called 'avant-garde.' You look behind and there are no followers. You're 'avant' in front of nobody. As it goes with this stage of life, you don't know what the next step is going to be.

For the first time in my life, I'm sick and tired of stuff I do. It's a physical feeling: I'll put the lens up to my eye and feel revulsion. I have to keep refreshing myself in a way that satisfies me. It's scary and exciting because it feels like the first time that I've ever been in this situation. And I wonder what I'm going to do next.

Dorsky: Revulsion is very important in filmmaking. I'm at a point where each film I make is some rebalancing of the previous one. I've made six films in the last two years. One goes to the lab and I start the next one before a final print even comes back. One film will have a slight imbalance, and then that imbalance is nurtured, cured or healed with the next work.



Dorksy's 'Prelude'

I called my most recent film ***Prelude*** (2015) because it does feel like a prelude to something. I don't know what yet. You go through a rite of passage in making a film, and you come out a different person without knowing where you're going to land.

Thanks go to Mariana Shellard for help with this article.

Information about the retrospective "Luminous Intimacy: The Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler" can be found at http://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2015/sections/retrospective.

Nathaniel Dorsky will receive a photographic exhibition of film stills at New York's ***Peter Blum Gallery*** *shortly after the retrospective concludes.*

More information about Dorsky and Hiler's works can be found here and here.

Aaron Cutler keeps a film criticism website, The Moviegoer, at http://aaroncutler.tumblr.com.

Notebook

A Note from Viennale

October 30, 2014
Marie-Pierre Duhamel, writer

On October 27th night, Nathaniel Dorsky presented four new short films in the lovely red velvet case of the Metro theater of Austrian Film Archive, in meditative silence and gorgeous projection conditions. Dorsky's films are experiences in the discovery of a world beyond (parallel to) ours that only his camera can capture; a world fleeting and luminous, where mystery prevails through unexpected associations in framing, light and color changes between the "ordinary" objects and spaces that surround us. A world painted in light and movement in which one can catch glimpses of fragile eternity. The impression remained long after the screening, and until the morning after: it had become obvious that the next "activity" would not be another screening but a visit to one of the museums of Vienna. And there was Dorsky: in a modest corner of the Fine Arts Academy Painting Collection is a small painting by Jacob van Ruisdael, called "Glade in a wood." Oil on wood, small dimensions (57 x 47 cm), dated 1646.

The reproduction cannot fully express its reality nor its experience—as words fail to express the subtleties of Dorsky's editing. But see the light on the tree trunk on the right of the painting. The glade. This light has no "logical" source: the sky evokes dusk, the season could be end of summer, the general tone is rather dark…the origin of this light is a fascinating and overwhelming mystery. Is it the last ray of a setting sun finding its way through the thick bushes? Or is it an annunciation of a more spiritual light, a sign of transcendence? Getting close to the painting, one can notice a subtle play of impasto in the upper branches on the left, small dots of black paint that catch the light of the room and produce a subtle flickering, as the white impasto on the tree trunk produce an intense glow. In this modest world of an ordinary wood, light creates movement, light and movement together create an image of eternity. It is because of Dorsky's screening the evening before that I stayed with this painting for a long time.

Avraham (Nathaniel Dorsky, 2014)

The association may seem far-fetched and a personal misinterpretation, but this is one of these things that Dorsky's cinema so generously offers: a renewed attention to the material world and an opportunity to connect experiences and feelings that would remain sadly separated. ■

Notebook

Viennale 2014. New Films by Nathaniel Dorsky

November 5, 2014
Daniel Kasman, writer

December

The Revolutions in 16mm series at the Viennale culminated early in the festival with a night dedicated to American poet filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky, who premiered two new works, *February* and *Avraham*, as well as showed*Summer* and *December* for the first time since their debut last spring in San Francisco's Crossroads series.

Those familiar with Dorsky's films since his notable shift in style in the mid to late 2000s (most emblematically with 2006's *Song and Solitude*) know that describing his films and indeed even differentiating them is a challenge so counter-intuitive that it's very difficult points at what makes these films as silent encounters in dark rooms so precious. No doubt like many, I can certainly enumerate the plenteous and beloved revelations and motifs across the films of the artist's last two decades, including these new ones: clouded suns, foliage verdant and crepuscular, a San Francisco made of dancing, angling glass doors, shop windows, steam and shadow, layers of shapes and fabrics, grills and veils. It is a refined, reworked and re-discovered catalog of occluded reality and revealed visions crossing Yasujiro Ozu's variably charged and releasing "pillow shots" and the

layers through which Josef von Sternberg views the emotions and interactions of the human world. (Ozu's own confusion, which father-daughter film is which, the English language *Spring,Summer*, *Autumn, Late, End, Early, Afternoon* titling, is a light, touching similarity as well.) It is particularly poignant that these new films are being projected at the Viennale alongside the John Ford retrospective, and pairing a Dorsky with a Ford certainly would result in a lucrative experience. Both artists have a preference for repose leading to a contraction (of emotion, of will), and from that intensification, that inward focus, an extension outward into action and expansion.

But this is true of nearly all of Dorsky's recent films, and of these new four as well, each so brimful with beauty, so nimble in thought, fragile in delicacy but agile in movement, that especially in experiencing more than one at a time they can become overwhelming. I am challenged to picture even one of his films as a complete whole rather than as an in-the-moment experience with resonant pulses or images that stay or fade with me. (The film of his I've seen the most, *Saraband*, I have a stronger memory-grip on.) I like to imagine his films whole like a necklace of gems, the 16mm reel a bejeweled strand run through the projector, resulting in a glittering light both evanescent and temporary. When asked after the screenings how he works, the director talked about shooting and then eliminating all that is bad, then all that is good, then all that is very good, and then all that is excellent; what remains is what he assembles, and the assemblies grow "like a crystal": a suggestion of fractal possibilities, organic development, and prismatic material. This highlights the difficult purity and strength, shot by shot, moment by moment, of Dorsky's work, in a medium so unlike poetry where you cannot go back to revisit something past, and to hold a vivid image of the whole in one's head after twenty or so minutes of immaculate, soulful splendor is, for me at least, impossible.

In many ways, rather than show four new works, I'd rather see one film four times, such is not only the richness of the individual experience, but such is an experience which makes me so clearly face my own limitations and inarticulations—in thought and word—after but a single screening. And so I always struggle to have something new to say about Dorsky's new work, even when, throughout the rest of the Vienna International Film Festival, with small clusters of friends it was always the evening with him and his work that came up again and again. So here, then, are spare notes of observations—and even these I can't guarantee that when I speak of one film what I really am remembering are echoes or senses of another.

Summer

The program began with ***Summer***, which itself began in a shot of at least four layers, a warbling reflective surface, that which lay on the surface, that which lay below, and that which was reflected. It is a fitting an opening for a film which pulsated inward and outward with densely muddied layers. It is a clenched film, furrowed, thinking hard somehow, full of active and thick images. So much so, in fact, that Dorsky's characteristic intuitively flowing editing here seems less fluid and provides a greater freedom between the images; the images themselves may be furrowed, the screen tickled by textures (including an extraordinary sequence of barely discerned clouds with a suffocated sun trying to bubble out like lava), but the connection between shot and shot has a greater, more open kind of psychic (to use Dorsky's often-used term) space. Another stand out image: a finger tracing something on glass reflecting the sky, a diagonal slice of billowing fabric to one side. A film of puce, the color of the dusk and nights in John Ford's final film *7 Women*, there is some release: towards the end *Summer* literally alights with a gold-tinted time lapse reverie.

As with a few of the director's recent work, there are a number of shots here and in the other new films that are out of focus or that play with the aperture to adjust the amount of light "entering" a shot dynamically in the moment. (Calling to mind the shot in which John Ford makes the sun "rise" on Walter Brennan waiting for his death at the O.K. Corral in *My Darling Clementin* by having Joseph MacDonald open his camera's aperture.) Dorsky talked after about now consciously working in the last dying years of 16mm as a material and of desiring to explore all the ways to make a single shot look different. But for someone who finds the seemingly intuitive and spontaneous process by which this cinematography discovers things of such moving beauty, this in-camera play seems to reveal or expose the artist's search for something that is magical: we see not just the result but some of the practice (or at least a simulation of that pratice) that reveals the result.

December, one of my two favorites of the group, despite the speed in which Dorsky made it (purposely limiting himself to the month timeframe, and editing it in around ten days) and despite its gloomier colors, felt airier. It could be the greater amount of abstraction, images that don't even seem plastic at all, or it could be a greater unity in form and color, plenty of exclamatory red movements, diagonals, a more ochre-colored film. Aperture play includes making a glowing shot lose its luster only to gain it again, and like this clear "directedness," the film ends on a vision of the sun in which the camera's slow movement, its creeping change in the composition, of a giant red band moving ever closer to that small bright disk, seems very hands-on, very much a human connection between hand of filmmaker, camera in hand, camera and the world before it.

Avraham

Avraham, my other favorite and the newest of the show, begins astoundingly, with shocking throbbing light as barely glimpsed clouds suddenly sear the eyes with glare, the revelation of light. What follows after this creation of the world from abstraction, from piercing luminosity, is a film of true softness, and appropriately wondrous especially when it comes upon light, such that even a pivotal shot of a diaper (!) animated by a park's wind and sun beams seems uncanny and alive. In its making Dorsky compared his approach to that of a bird that separates itself from a flock, finds a branch of its own, looks around at will, then moves on—all movements and perceptions involved mysterious and unexplainable, a bird's behavior the filmmaker said he found deeply compelling. Indeed, the film seems looser, a lightly stretched film, wide-spread, greatly variegated in textures and that unreal quality of the nearly blinding light. Airier and spread indeed until we find a tree in the park—which Marie-Pierre Duhamel has written on—whose unexpected gravity in a cinema so hovering, floating and unmoored, holds the film down, pins its ending to the earth.

February

Finally, there's ***February***, and as you can see my already inadequate report is growing briefer, my overall sense vaguer. This one begins with tendrils of spring—an architectonic shot of arcing plum blossoms and a stoic building edifice behind—before going dark, darker even than *December*, becoming bundled and chill, a true winter film. Or perhaps not winter but that sharp, dry coldness of Northern California nights, and so a nocturne, shrouded. Yet poised in title and in making at the cusp of spring promised at its beginning, there are intercessions of colors, of flowers. I don't recall how it ended; I believe somewhere near or at a throbbing lens flare that seemed an otherworldly Morse code of beaming crystalline messages—light as transient sculpture in the lens—flashed into the crisp scene, but by this point I was feeling whatever the cinema equivalent of museum exhaustion is, an overload on the senses and on the body.

Perhaps *December*'s darkness, ending the sequence of films, was that of the time itself in the cinema, and the spring was the rising lights in the room, the movement from a space of darkness and private solitude to one of light and community. Even the light of the cinema can pale, sometimes—believe it or not!—to that dilating light that pours in upon stepping out into the world. After four such films leaving the theatre was a gasping shock: Dorsky's was a world I did not want to leave; yet moved to some kind of sensorial capacity, I indeed sought some other kind of immersion. Remaining after his films to discuss them generously and beautifully with the curators and the unusually inquisitive Viennale audience, the artist himself helped us move away from the world of the screen and transition into the world in which these films' unrivaled jewels of impressions can be found. ■

film society lincoln center

Interview: Nathaniel Dorsky

October 15, 2013
Max Nelson, writer

Song

Raised in New York on a steady diet of Westerns and Disney True-Life Adventures, Nathaniel Dorsky started shooting 8mm movies at the age of eleven. In 1963, when he had just turned 20, he made *Ingreen*, a boldly symbolic psychodrama about a young man's sexual coming of age. At that film's premiere, he met soon-to-be fellow filmmaker Jerome Hiler, who would become his partner in life and a major inspiration for his work. ("We were filming for one another," Hiler recently said.) In 1971 the two moved to San Francisco, where they've lived ever since. Around the same time, Dorsky entered a decade-long creative silence. He returned in 1982 with *Hours for Jerome*, a 55-minute feature compiled from footage shot between 1966 and 1970. Like all of Dorsky's subsequent work, it's a kind of cinematic lyric poem, entirely silent and rooted in a centuries-old tradition of devotional art (in this case, medieval illuminated manuscripts and prayer books).

The rest of the Eighties found Dorsky experimenting with new forms and materials: 1987's*Alaya* was made up entirely of footage of shifting sand, and 1983's *Ariel*, which had a rare

public screening at this year's New York Film Festival, is a beautiful hand-processed film full of thin, tremulous vertical lines and see-sawing horizontals. It was with 1996's *Triste*—edited from over 20 years' worth of footage—that Dorsky, as he once put it, fully arrived at "the level of cinema language that I have been working towards." Since then, he's made 16 luminous, description-defying short films, each with their own distinct tones and shadings. In films like *Compline* (09), *August and After* (12), and his two most recent titles,*Spring* and *Song*, Dorsky creates what he's often called a "floating world," in which street scenes, household interiors, meadows, rivers and forests are transformed into playgrounds for light, color and shadow. In a field often dominated by frenetic cutting and/or prolonged stasis, Dorsky's films unfurl gradually but steadily in a kind of hushed suspension. They're often attempts to do with light and texture what, in his book*Devotional Cinema,* Dorsky praised Mozart for having done in key changes and melodic lines: to "wed [a] style to the human metabolism in every detail."

I spoke with Dorsky in a tree-lined lawn at Lincoln Center during the 51st New York Film Festival, where his work was screening in Views from the Avant-Garde. He is warm, generous, and contagiously relaxed. After a hectic and occasionally nerve-fraying stretch of festival coverage, watching Dorsky's films can feel like therapy. "As a filmmaker, you have to be a great host," Dorsky said at one point in our conversation. In person, he's no different.

At last year's Whitney Biennial, you said something to the effect that your films were "about aloneness, and about sharing aloneness with the audience." Do you shoot with an eye towards sharing your private, solitary experiences with others, or do you prefer to get lost in your own perceptions and hope that something relatable will come out?

The second. It isn't that you're trying to express aloneness, because then that wouldn't be aloneness. You would only be expressing a concept of aloneness. Because in English the word "lonely" and "alone" are somewhat similar, they get confused. They're actually quite different. "Lonely" refers to believing in yourself as separate from the world. You're lonely because you're separate from the world, or from other things. Aloneness is a realization that everyone is in the same boat; that everyone is actually alone. One of the deepest and most magical mysteries of human life is that we're alone, and yet we're together. Everyone we see around us in this courtyard [gestures around] is the center of their own world, has their own set of problems with their relatives, with their job, with their roommates, with their lovers, with their childhood. Everyone has their own huge drama, and yet all these dramas overlap in the same space of human interaction. We're all mutually alone.

August and After

In literature, everyone is very used to the idea of a novelistic form, which is usually a third-person form involving characters who have problems and resolve them, or not. On the whole, poetry has not been a third-person form. None of these are absolute by any means, but poetry tends to be more an expression of individual mystery. It's the same thing in film. Because making film is expensive, film was used primarily for third-person dramatic purposes, because it was commercially more viable. There was more return for your money. At the same time, the film industry which came out of that situation enabled people with more poetic inclinations to use film as poetry. I guess this goes all the way back to Méliès, and the whole French lineage in the Twenties and Thirties.

I feel that I'm very much part of this poetic lineage: a cinema that is about aloneness. At a certain point in life, I think you realize—or discover—that the more intimate you are, the more you reveal your innermost secrets, the more universal you become. You're being true to your core, and that core is not so basically different from other people's cores. So to be a filmmaker, then, you have to have the faith that your own vision can be comprehended by other people. If you're trying to make films for other people, you're in trouble. In most of the films—especially, of course, films that are based on the return of capital—every effort is made to make the film for other people. It's very seldom, except with the supreme geniuses of narrative form, that any kind of truth or vulnerability comes out. Rossellini, Ozu, Bresson, to name a few, have had that courage to express themselves as who they are. That's the beginning of an answer.

It's an interesting paradox, that you have to dive very deep into yourself to arrive at something that can be shared with others—and something that others share.

Otherwise you're manipulating others, or showing off for others. So many films, especially in the experimental realm, have one idea, and the film just goes on and on: "Here's my idea." There are also many films which are less meaningful to me because the moves made on them come from the

outside. The filmmaker is always outside the film declaring the next thing, as opposed to letting something that's established in the film declare the next thing. When, as a filmmaker, you're always declaring the next thing externally, pushing the film; when your hand is always coming in and moving the film this way and that way, you can be very impressive, like a juggler, but you're actually not helping the people. Ultimately, you're distracting and depressing them. It can be magical and wonderful and thrilling. But there's something about allowing the vulnerability of a film to unfold out of its own needs that goes deeper.

Is the distinction maybe that in some films, each new development is driven by the film's own internal logic, whereas in others each new development doesn't follow necessarily from what came before?

Yes. For instance, during the period of the Ingrid Bergman films, Rossellini was well known for not having a script, for writing the dialogue in the moment. He was in the situation and had the trust to let the magic ferment and happen.

Voyage to Italy

For me at least, though, some of the most transcendent moments in cinema are the result of a director imposing something onto the film that wasn't there to begin with. I'm thinking of the end of *Voyage to Italy*, for instance. It seems as if the movie's logic doesn't allow for that final moment of reconciliation; it has to be imposed from outside. It's a miracle in some way.

And it's a strange miracle. The film is basically a long argument, but it lets that argument resolve in a way that's pretty much within the established language of cinema: a couple kissing. It's a strange moment, because you believe it and you don't believe it. Then, of course, he cuts to a final shot, a shot of almost nothing: some kind of a capitano standing off to the side, with people walking back and forth in front of him. It's a very emotional moment for me. Then the film continues as black

leader, and the music also continues for at least another half minute or more, in black. So it isn't that he tried to manipulate you, that he hermetically sealed up that manipulation and gave it to you as a closed package which you had to buy. It's much more open and interesting than that. It's quite true to life.

He lets the miracle ripple out in the world.

In the black leader, yeah.

I just saw Bergman's *The Magician* for the first time.

Oh, I haven't seen that since I was your age.

In the last shot of the film, after this long series of escalating humiliations, most of the movie's characters are packed into a caravan riding away from the camera. And Bergman lingers for maybe 20 seconds on a lantern as it swings back and forth. He's spent the film piling up all these contrivances, and now he's letting them have their effect on the world. It seems to me, though, that your films rarely make this move of putting something in from the outside.

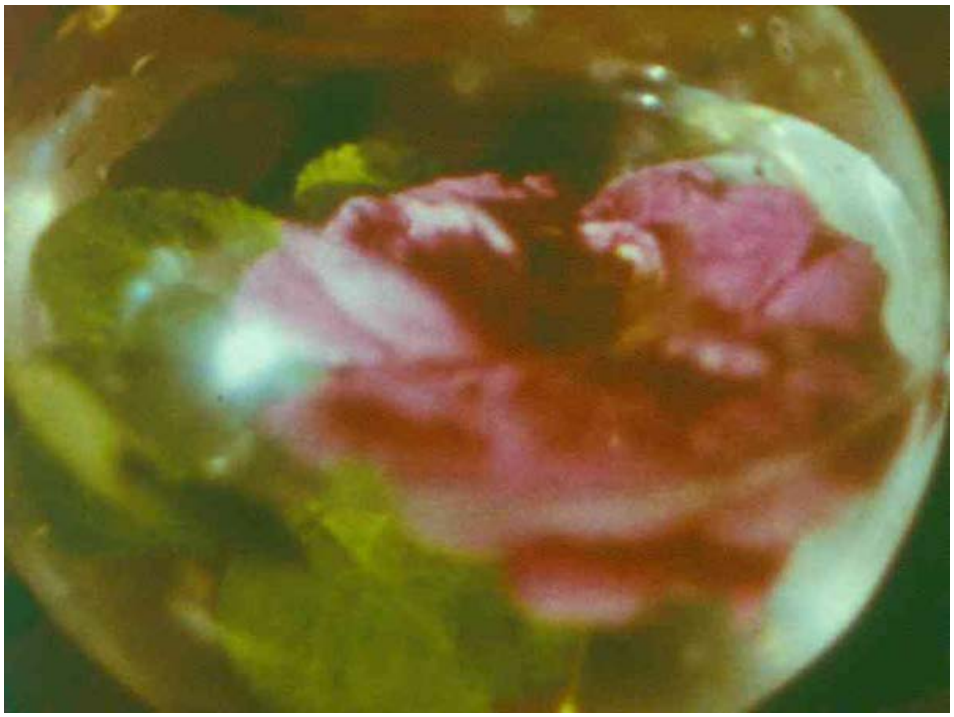
Well, the images and I, we cooperate. We try to work together. Ultimately, they're the boss, and I'm more their servant. You bring them some water, or remind them that they have an appointment in an hour—that kind of thing, that they are too late or too early. I think that, in my films, I'm trying not only to express, but also to bring about and nurture wholeness in the audience. It's a very delicate thing to do. You have to be extremely polite. As a filmmaker, you have to be a great host. You invite people in, you have them sit down, you bring them a drink when they need it, and so forth. There's a slow ripening and nurturing which takes place during the linear time of the film. I think if my hand came in and you felt it, it would produce a concept. It would break the spell. It would be like saying something in the process of making love. If you're making love well with someone, it's all…

Non-verbal.

It's non-verbal, right. And the words are…

Almost an insult, or a kind of violation.

Yes. I think in some way, there's that same violation when you try to manipulate the film.



Anticipation of the Night

At the same time, in a movie like *Voyage to Italy* or *Ordet*, that final moment of manipulation feels necessary. Up to that point, there's been some kind of gap or absence in the structure of the movie, something that can't be satisfied by what's already there and has to be actively filled from the outside. In your films, it's as if the world that you create—or the world that you see—is already complete. You can get to a kind of wholeness without making such an intrusive move.

Well, for instance, let's say you're with a friend. You could be doing anything: looking at a painting in a museum, or going for a walk on a nice day. How do you point something out to them without breaking the bubble? If you say, "Oh, isn't the sky beautiful," or, "I love the way those trees look," it can be quite destructive in a subtle or not so subtle way. But there could be a moment when you tap someone on the elbow, flick your head a little bit, and just assume that they're also there. In other words, there are ways that you could direct someone without taking over and collapsing the moment. I think when you pop the bubble, you've taken over the space. You're saying that your mutually shared reality is now my language.

You want to preserve the experience as it exists in both of your heads. You're aware that it's the same experience, but also that it's a different one—and by assigning a word to it, you might be conflating the two in a way that doesn't exactly work. You'd be making it too objective, too clinical.

At the same time, you want to be generous, to reach out.

Exactly.

It's a very delicate thing. What I love about the cinema is that you can take people on a journey without breaking the bubble. I think that, when you're trying to make a film, you want to give this sense of going with the audience to some place neither of you have ever been.

In my case, I trust that the accumulation of the images over a certain period of time has some kind of resonance, because I've collected them out of my interests. But when I start to build the film, it's really a question of finding an image which is like the door to the film: you present the doorway, then the welcome mat, and then you enter. From there, it isn't like, "I know where we're going, and I'm going to take you there." It's more like, "I don't know where we're going, and we're going to have this adventure." That's how the films are edited: there's a first shot, and then there's a question: where do we go from here?

Do you always edit alone?

Usually when I'm almost finished, or when I feel that it's pretty close, I have two to four different friends who I'll show it to individually. They're usually friends who I can reveal myself to without feeling at all self-conscious. Not an iota of that, or it wouldn't work. Just looking at the film with another person is a little bit like a bullshit test: when the other person is there, the little lies you tell yourself become more apparent. When you're editing a film, you have to be very truthful to yourself. Very truthful. We all lie to ourselves. We cut to something and we wish it was good. It's almost good, and we want it to be good, because if it was good it would be very convenient. Those little lies are very subtle, and whenever one remains in one of my films, it's like [*makes sharp, rebuking alarm noise, like a buzzer going off*].

For instance, there's a shot I would take out of *Song*. It's something I added near the end, and it would have been quite complicated and expensive to take out. I just said, well, I'll leave it there for a while. It's similar in life—if you're in a relationship, for instance, it's like every time you fake slightly, every time you say "yes, dear," or something. Film is a kind of exaggerated mirror of yourself. All you can really do is try to be honest and then look at that honesty, and the film will give you the feedback right away. Filmmakers who don't improve, I always think that they don't see their films honestly. How could you see that and honestly think that's worthy? You know that's dishonest.

This kind of honesty seems to me like a necessary condition for the type of open sharing and communication you spoke about earlier. But what we've been circling around is to what extent that type of communication is possible, when it often tends to involve subsuming each person's individual experience under concepts that don't really fit it. How do you think your films address this problem?

I think that first of all, you have to establish the image. And if you establish an image which is in essence a visual representation of an idea, you're already in trouble. In terms of film narrative, there's obviously a logic to the progression; in that case, your honesty is to a place, and to the nature of human character. That's where your honesty has to be, and where you have to control your own

vanity: say, by passing up the chance to take a great shot when it wouldn't be intrinsic to the need of the characters or the story, or by letting things decay into violence—something all too common in film now. But in film poetry, what I've come upon is that as soon as an image is in itself an image of something, then it's already connected to concept and language. Steve Anker, who ran the San Francisco Cinematheque for maybe 25 years, said to me once—I hate to say this kind of thing but he said: "Why were you the first person to actually make a film that was actually visual? It seems so obvious!" Of course, many films are highly visual in some sense, but their basic organizing principle and driving force is not visual.

Now, this is a delicate, subtle subject. But let's take Stan Brakhage, who for me is a great paternal example of individual filmmaking. I first saw him when I was nineteen and he was speaking at a film show at midnight at the Bleecker Street Cinema. With Stan, there are areas of kinesthetic magic and accomplishment, which are just extraordinary and totally unapproachable, and then sometimes there's a level of meaning which all the visual stuff rests on or is expressive of. And occasionally, I don't feel it's completely integrated. It's compatible, but there are occasional points when the pure cinematic areas become exemplars of the meaning. One is walking a razor's edge as a filmmaker, and it is easy to fall from the sublime to the effortful. Sometimes I feel that with Stan, the visual elements and the meaning are not of the same world. And then at other times, they're unified in a way that no one else could do.

August and After

As for myself, I was trying to see if there was a way I could take meaning, which was at the same time vision, and not have the vision be an ornament to meaning. The vision had to be meaning, but it also still had to be vision.

When I came upon Stan, he was only 10 years older than I was, but had already made*Anticipation of the Night*, *Window Water Baby Moving*, *Sirius Remembered*, and…

***The Dead*?**

The Dead, yeah. And wow, the prelude to *Dog Star Man*. So he was already quite something, to say the least. I was drawn to the romantic idea that one person could go out with a camera and sing their song. That was very inspiring: if you had a couple hundred bucks, you could make a film. At the same time, I was learning about world cinema. I was a projectionist at a course at the New School for about three years in a row. It was taught by a very wonderful man named Joseph Goldberg, and it was kind of a world survey of film which was at that time considered very significant. I was seeing things like *Pather Panchali* and *My Darling Clementine*, Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, Rossellini's*Paisan*, great films. I was drawn by the depth of heart in these movies: how spacious they were.

I was really torn between these two things. It was like Apollo being pulled by two horses. There was this individual, poetic, romantic Brakhagean kind of first-person self-expression, and then there was this other thing which had to do with extreme compassion and tenderness of heart. They seemed like two different things to me. I got genuinely confused. I think that my filmmaking, not by intent but by circumstance, has been—I didn't realize this till late; it wasn't a self-conscious thing, believe me—some attempt to bring together those two lineages.

I love Brakhage's films, but there is something—in some way amazingly, and in some way disturbingly—solipsistic about them. There's a sense in which everything he looks at is exactly what he wants it to mean, or what it means to him. Whereas in films like*Pather Panchali* and *Paisan*, the whole idea, at least on the filmmakers' parts, is to break out of their own heads, to…

To be selfless.

Exactly.

For Brakhage, filmmaking was a manifestation of himself—but it wasn't in a selfish way, because he was interested in how the human mind in general expresses itself using vision. When it came to my own filmmaking, though, I'd be pulled one way, then I'd be pulled another way. There was a lot of struggling. One could admire and love Stan, but one couldn't be Stan. At a certain point, I began to feel where the alchemy was; I realized how you could do those two things. For me, it was a kind of dangerous thing to do. Within the avant-garde, it was sort of a suspicious.

Because you were professing such a close tie to narrative cinema?

Well, yeah. I would say that things are quite different now, but at that time, when the avant-garde was in its American adolescence, it was rebelling against the power of the parents: Hollywood, "narrative cinema," you know. My own feeling is that cinema's strength is in its narrative form, and I mean that in a very wide sense. What I mean by narrative is that it enfolds through its own needs; it develops out of itself. There are a lot of films within the American avant-garde, let's say, which are

a reaction against narrative: you could have only one shot, or some other kind of structuralist thing. But I ultimately find them to be experiments in possibility. They don't have fruition for me.

You need an emotional narrative, if not a literal narrative of events and scenes.

Yeah, it's emotional, or something that activates and stimulates you. You want to activate the audience so it's interesting for them. If you present them a problem already solved or already limited, they have nothing to do.

Maybe it's a matter of finding a balance between taking in the world as if it were a movie playing inside your head, and dissolving into the world to the point of losing your own particular perspective on things.

Between Eastern and Western philosophy, this is one of the basic questions: does the world exist outside yourself, or is it all in your mind? And it seems to me that it's only concepts which create that problem. Actually, it's more magical than either of those points of view. It's unfathomable. If you could understand it, imagine how dull life would be. At a certain point, you have to realize you're in the midst of a deeply magical and completely mysterious adventure. I don't mean to sound sentimental.

Not at all—was it Brakhage who called it "an adventure in perception"?

Yes. There's a point in life when you realize that when you're generous, you have more. People think that if you're generous, you have less. But at a point, when generosity really awakens in your heart, then you have the whole world.

April

NYFF51: Nathaniel Dorsky's "Song" and "Spring" Recall "Diamonds" of a Bygone Era

October 17, 2013
Gus Reed, writer

Nathaniel Dorsky's *Song*

In his final installment from NYFF 51, Critics Academy member Gus Reed takes a look at Nathaniel Dorsky's new work, Song *and* Spring*, which screened in Views from the Avant-Garde at the recent festival.*

Ten years after the death of the composer Anton Webern, Igor Stravinsky famously described him as a visionary whose icily spare compositions fell on deaf ears in his own time, but who nonetheless "inexorably kept on cutting out his diamonds, his dazzling diamonds, of whose mines he had such perfect knowledge." San Francisco-based experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky is, thankfully, very much alive and still creating, but his remarkable body of work thus far – only about two dozen 16 mm, silent short films in nearly fifty years – suggests a similarly steadfast commitment to a meticulously personal vision. In an age where any given film (even one still shot on film) is immediately converted for and disseminated across an ever-expanding number of digital platforms,

Dorsky's self-imposed restrictions on form may seem like relics from a bygone heyday of the American avant-garde.

The opening frames of *Song*, in a single, generous stroke, teach us how to watch Dorsky's films. From blackness, a sliver of light comes into view. The camera seems to tilt, revealing, in crystalline focus, a perspective through a window looking out into light. What precisely we are looking at isn't as important as the process of looking, which isn't nearly as simple a task as we might have thought it was. Hardly any image in a Nathaniel Dorsky film has only one dimension. He places the camera before surfaces that allow to constant reflection and superimposition, so that the moment our eyes encounter a stable focus, we suddenly become aware of an entirely separate field hovering above or lurking beneath our vision. Looking through a store window, our attention dilates between the glass itself, the objects just beyond it, and the warm blur of movement on the street reflected back to us. Traces of human activity haunt the outskirts of Dorsky's frames, never coming fully into center. There is nothing desolate about this human absence, since nearly every image glows with signs of life – human and otherwise.

Nathaniel Dorsky's *Spring*

Not all of Dorsky's beguiling surfaces are uncomplicatedly beautiful – or harmless. Even at its most lyrical and celebratory, *Song* exudes an awareness of impermanence and death; at its most lush *Spring* never gives us the sense of a paradise that didn't grow from dirt. Some images – like a glittering skull made of jewels or the pale synthetic faces of models in storefront advertisements in *Song* – have a sinister wit. Others, like the time lapses of nature in *Spring*, which seem to bloom

from blackness to color and back, seem like poignant, awe-struck reminders of processes beyond human control.

Dorsky's images are not the vehicles of an overriding theme, and he shies away from blunt symbolism. The total absence of story, however, doesn't mean that these films are unstructured, only that this structure is one of interwoven visual connection, not cause and effect. "They say that grandchildren are actually more like their grandparents than their parents," Dorsky joked in a 2001 interview with Scott MacDonald for Film Quarterly. "My method feels something like that: I want each shot to continue to play a role, after the next shot, and the next, has passed." Each image, which illuminates the screen only for a few moments, also resonates after it is gone, as time passes and patterns of light, color and movement collect in the viewer's memory.

In many ways, the experience of watching these two twenty-minute films is more like listening to a continually fluid, mysterious piece of music in a concert hall or observing the relentless motion of dancers' bodies in a ballet. In fact, Dorsky counts choreographer George Balanchine among his chief influences – along with Henry James, Walt Disney, Michelangelo Antonioni, Stan Brakhage, and his life-long partner, Jerome Hiler, whose film, *Misplacement*, screened in the same program with *Song* and *Spring*.

As Dorsky freely admits, there's something worshipful in the close communion with silent images that his films foster. A film played in silence demands a more total surrender on the part of the viewer than one that uses music and voices to smooth over the ambience of a group of people sitting and breathing together in a darkened theater. Exposing an audience to silence, and the unpredictable host of chance sounds – coughs, whispers, shifts in weight, crinkling wrappers, buzzing cell phones – that emerge in this quiet, is a risky undertaking, with equal potential for frustration and transcendence.

Dorsky's films risk their divisiveness. They don't take us out of ourselves or provide a flight into a fully-formed universe so much as they ask us to marvel at the blinding, impermanent luminosity of our own. We may not be used to giving so much of ourselves to an experience at the movies. We may be too exhausted to look deeply, or embarrassed by the sudden intimacy of our exposure to these images and the people encountering them with us. Those willing to surrender, momentarily, to Dorsky's uncommon vision will find that *Song* and *Spring* return, in full, their devotion.

Notebook

NYFF 2013. Mind, Body, Soul

October 11, 2013
Daniel Kasman

MIND

"There is an image, and people believe me when I say I make films, because, well, in the end...because we used a camera, and there is an image," muses Jean-Luc Godard to potential producers in his video pitch, *Petites Notes à propos du film Je vous salue Marie* (1983), shown at the 51st New York Film Festival's retrospective programmed by Kent Jones and Jake Perlin, Jean-Luc Godard - The Spirit of the Forms. "People think everything comes from the camera."
Sometimes I think the images come from inside myself. On rare occurrence, a picture unspools in front of me that in the moment has no antecedent in my mind. Its movement is that of a dream, spontaneously created, this instant's images connected only by the most opaque thread to those behind them. Its future images, those that follow what I am seeing, are not predestined by the reel of film in the projector, but are "generated on the fly," as they say in this digital era, in an unplanned and unexplainable collaboration between submerged thoughts and latent vision. They are created by my mind's eye.

It always catches me off-guard, this cinematic flanking maneuver, slipping through my defenses of expectation, of assumption, of superiority. NYFF's surprise attack came in the form of ***The Chase***—shown at the festival's miscellaneous retrospective program newly re-baptized "Revivals"—a 1946 noir directed by a gag writer for Harry Langdon (including the oneiric *Three's a Crowd*) whose name was unknown to me, shot by an Ophüls' cameraman, and penned by the scriptwriter that connects Nick Ray to Anthony Mann.
Its stark imagery reveals a world of threadbare vacancy found only in one's dreams or in certain Balthus paintings, and the logic which determines what scene will follow the one you are watching remains unknown to the audience. These narratively abrupt yet lugubriously toned story transitions may remain mysterious to us, but not, however, to its somnolescent actor-participants, Robert Cummings, Steve Cochran, Peter Lorre, and Michèle Morgan, all evincing the droopy-eyed stupor of sleepwalkers.

The story vaguely concerns a PTSD-suffering naval vet (Cummings) vaguely hired into the household of a vaguely conspiratorial (but certainly murderous) duo played by a disaffected Lorre and pencil-stached Cochran. Despite the latter's beautiful wife (Michèle Morgan as a screen sister to *I Walked with a Zombie*'s Edith Barrett and Franju's Edith Scob), these two, standing or lounging around with nothing to do but exude luxurious menace, have a languorous, nuanced evocation of both gigolo brothers-in-crime and lazy homosexual lovers. The wife fantasizes of escaping to a Cuba represented by crashing waves so artificially rear projected that it makes *Vertigo*'s white-caps look like documentary, and Robert Cumming shows up on this beach semi-randomly, as dream-objects are wont to do, in an off-beat edit and agrees to flee along with her. As mirrors display unusually full reflections, windows and doorways more resemble secret passages rather than decor, and Havana turns into a crowd and shadow congested nightmare, there are lap dissolves like visions, visions like dreams, and a dreamtime loop suggestive of Ruizian infinity.
This is cinema of the mind all right (joining such other 51st festival selections as Kurosawa's *Real*, Renais' *Providence*, and Ruiz's *Life is a Dream*), wherein the structural causeways of the theatre audience's near-sleep state and the need/non-need to make sense of one image following another takes on labyrinthine ambitions, bound to be thwarted. The night before I saw *The Chase* I happened across a single splinter of *Star Trek: Voyager*'s "Waking Moments" episode, which features an alien race that seems to exist only in dreams, and who refer to those sleepers whom they encounter inside dreams as a "waking species": a brilliant, science fiction'd evocation of televisual flow. A half a century earlier, *The Chase* swaps future science for present science, seeing trauma muffled below its no-frills, stolidly frictionless and starkly surreal surface. Yet the terrifying thing is that Cummings' veteran is himself too much a part of the surrounding stupor, of the half-formed romance, the permeated menace and repressed trauma; he can't be the source of these strange movements. There are no explanations for the characters' waking dreams. And so we are left watching the flickering light with just our own intimations of the instability of the mind's time and vision.

BODY

The mind is the place where two images meet in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, which has always be fascinated by with the ways we see and understand seeing. Yet the filmmaker remains resolutely concerned with the body—the body transformed into an image. (Deleuze: “In Godard, the attitudes of body are the categories of the spirit itself…”, thus the NYFF’s retrospective title. Other body filmmakers on display at the festival: Tsai Ming-liang and Claire Denis.) Never has the body been more at the center of a Godard film than in ***Hail Mary*** (1985), in which he stages a crypto-melodrama between the body and the soul to tell the story of the Virgin Mary.
The body’s hypeman is Joseph (Thierry Rode), in love with gas-pumping Swiss teen Mary (Myriem Rousselas) for two years without once seeing her naked or getting a single kiss. Mary, of course, will embody the soul, but doesn’t realize it until the angel Gabriel & co. show up one petrol-fumed evening to inform her of her immaculate conception. Joseph wrests with himself and with his beloved over her paradoxical bodily state, pregnant but untouched and untouchable, while Mary twists and turns, caresses and clings to herself as if her body suddenly is some ill-fitting shell laid on her—or someone else’s—true being.

Trusting cinematic material to reveal (or cover) this soul, Godard puts the filmed body first and foremost in order to glimpse and understand what animates it. His centerpiece is the double-lanky Myriem Rousselas as a b-ball playing Mary who reveals privately to the camera and later, in a test, to her mutton-faced Joseph her “bells,” “loaves,” and “hedgehog”: a kind of exquisite, questioning—and certainly luxuriating—nudity and physical presence. The material recorded by the camera and the space it occupies is fully evoked by the images: blossoming flowers, spindly legs, craggy

unshaven face, pert breasts, a high school gymnasium, cascading hair, blocky Euro-automobiles, rippling lake water, a 1980s Mary foreshortened like Mantegna's 1480s Christ. The only flatnesses are the moon and the sun, distant, repeated emblems and of godlike suggestion and watchfulness. The camera is unable to render them full, and instead leaves it to the wide, shining eyes of its characters to catch and absorb—or reflect, animated.

Joseph finally professes faith…or understanding…or canny acquiescence to Mary's profound epiphany of her existence, and the issue seems settled, body and soul united not necessarily as one person, but as a couple, two people accepting the both. (And we note a parallel here between Godard's long standing study of the ideal, of the difficulty, of combining work and love: body and soul.) When next we see the two, they are normal, married bourgeois parents, with Mary having to be reminded by a comically exasperated Gabriel that she should be praised for her struggle and sacrifice to remain a pure soul.

Yet despite the tempestuousness of Mary and Joseph's body-soul struggle, Godard's filmmaking is calm and eloquent, nearly untroubled in an era of troublesome productions. Whether we see Mary's soul or not is undoubtedly up to the viewer, but the tender sympathy of this resolutely materialist filmmaker remains resplendent in its beauty and voluptuous in its polyphony of cinematic records—in ways that all but immediately reveal the pulsing meaning and power within the images' forms.

SOUL

It would not be surprising if Joseph's conflicted struggle to find the bodiless soul of Mary was, in part, Godard's inquiry into finding a soul in the image-records of material made by the cinema. And

indeed, few in cinema brazenly carry the torch for the soul, few willing to take the risk of failing in order to find and retain the spark. It is truly something that in moving images needs a bearer, like the ending of Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*: someone willing to take the burden, upon once discovering a glimmer, to hold it carefully, tenderly through the entirety of a picture. At the festival, Philippe Garrel, following a tradition wrought by Murnau, continues with *Jealousy* to invest the qualities of light with the humane delicacy and emotional nuances of shining souls. But for an even more pure example, we have to turn to Nathaniel Dorsky. Two of the San Francisco filmmaker's new works were presented on the same reel of film in the festival's Views from the Avant-Garde, *Song* and *Spring*.

Song is the darker hued of the two, showing texture behind textures, images as layers peelable as screens (doors, fabrics, movement) shift in the frame. Depth is later revealed through light, light distant from the camera and hidden behind things, the camera slowly racking focus to push us ever-so-gently through, to the light. Unlike some of Dorsky's previous shorts, these images don't feel found by a camera wandering shadow-obscured corners of the world, so much as ones called into being, a sense of the camera turned on and bringing forth this gentle luminosity.

Befitting its straightforward title, ***Spring*** showcases an active camera, mobile, pushy, so eager to film as to abut and touch its findings. It nearly seems to push open flowers, opening the season (and, surprisingly, the people in it) to the screen, a season both bustling, full of joyful commotion in the images, as well as slowly pulsating, camera-tough, frames webbed with detail. A repeated motif is of opening the aperture and letting in more light, undarkening the image, letting it breath in, deeply.

Each of these films radiates soul, so much so that when the films cut to black to signify their ending, it feels like a rare, fragile light has truly been extinguished, even if the projector is still running and still throwing dark shadows on the screen. What follows that black is a group hush which can come only after the end of something held with such care and suspended with bated breath. ■

LUMIÈRE

Revista Lumiere's Mónica Savirón reviews Nathaniel Dorsky's Song and Spring at the NYFF, 2013

2013
Mónica Savirón, writer

Mónica Savirón took on the task of writing a survey review of nearly two hundred films that were shown at Views from the Avant Garde at the New York Film Festival, 2013. She has informed me that this writing is only the beginning of what she would have liked to be able to say concerning my own work. In the excerpt presented here, Mónica also covers the final show at Views which was made up of my two earlier films, **Ariel** and**Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude** (Reel 2).

Nathaniel Dorsky, a savant in the art of looking and listening back, presented the films Song (2013), Spring (2013), the hand-processed Anscochrome Ariel (1983; same film stock as Stan Brakhage's 1958 breakthrough Anticipation of the Night), and the Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude (Reel 2, 2005-2006). Dorsky brought to the screen the peaceful gravity of film, which seems a means of survival—re-live time as a relief and as a belief. He is a magician of light and color, who possesses the secret concoction for subtile beauty by relying upon a mystic communion between the light and its shadow. Igniting the screen with a flagrant will of transcendence and revelation, his films are a confession that rises from soul to mind. These films have not only the sempiternal charm of celluloid, but are also consecrated to divine aspirations, to achieve true moments of no return. In mystical terms, he is like a cherub with a silent bugle. His work is a

continuous return to the origins, and their visionary, refreshing qualities. His attitude is equivalent to the hermit's decision to stop withdrawing from the world, and to be the world—that place where the subtlest inflections of light become a revelation, when not a miracle. His editing breathes like transpiring needlework, and the film intervals feel like the holes of a crochet. The movement of his camera responds to vertical investigations. Repeated motifs, like the walls we have to climb to access the past, or the sunlight that splatters our mood, elevate the mystery of light to a gift of lucidity.
Reel 2 of the Kodachrome Dailies was shot during the summer of 2006. It reflects the colors engrained in Kodachrome seen through an internegative, and is the footage as it was shot with the discards removed from the work print. The images are the work of a cameraman composing, very much in the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays:

Can crowd eternity into an hour,
Or stretch an hour to eternity.

He searches for The Over-Soul that transcends consciousness with film reflections on nature, animals, people at the street market, awnings blown by the wind, grids, shades, and a need for poetry to sublimate, filming the pages from Ash Wednesday (1930), by T.S. Eliot:

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place

Dorsky lets his images touch one another, enables them to manifest with no verbal handle. It is a work that needs to be seen in an intimate setting, that permits the images to be listened to—expanding the imagination, and allowing the screen to be a floating planet, rather than a picture frame of an eclectic world.

Song is a reaction to Dorsky's previous film, April (2012). He shot the film as winter's solstice was approaching, and San Francisco was getting rainier and darker. Dorsky seeks for the essence of our lives. He wants our psyches to mirror our way of seeing. The camera moves, and time-lapse effects filmed in Sevilla create a sense of vitality. The fixed shots are energized through changing light on the skin of a hand, on a mannequin's face, through the prism of raindrops, the exhaust of a car, or the grids that perforate vision, and change our perspective. Spring shimmers with the beauty of oneiric nature. Reading Dorsky's Devotional Cinema (Tuumba Press, 2003) is like opening a manual of instructions to navigate the waters of this film-dream. His camera acknowledges the formal qualities of the outside world, and transmutes them into elucidatory reflections of our selves. The varied permutations of light and framing substantiate the infinite with open-ended evocations. He shoots the flowers of hibiscus rosa-sinensis, which only open with direct light. In his film, Dorsky increases luminosity in the presence of the flowers. Light and life nurture one another. Film and nature flourish with light. "After all" —Dorsky describes in his book— "here we are, on a planet, illuminated by a glowing star".

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Section 1 Section 2

Notebook

TIFF 2013: Wavelengths Experimental Films – The Shorts and the Mediums

An excerpt from an article on the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival's Wavelengths Series

2013
Michael Sicinski, writer

Nathaniel Dorsky's two latest films exist as independent entities. However, as per the artist's preference, they are being presented as a diptych, both in Toronto (where they are screening with Peter Hutton's Three Landscapes) and soon after in New York (where they'll play alongside Misplacement, the new Jerome Hiler film). This is wise, because the two films both represent new twists in Dorsky's highly refined filmmaking style, and they speak to one another in ways I find quite suggestive. Song is the subtler of the two films, in some respects operating more in line with Dorsky's previous efforts. But if there are certain light and refraction effects that seem familiar (Dorsky won't stop being Dorsky), he is arriving at them in unique ways. The first shot of Song shows a door swinging open to reveal a transmitted reflection of bare winter trees. The image is familiar, but the movement is not; this kind of manipulation of planes is far more straightforward than usual, since in the past Dorsky has preferred to observe objects in glass moving against one another contrapuntally.

Song is a film that incorporates more camera movement and more rack focus than we've seen in Dorsky's films, and again, counterpoint seems to be the key idea here. A frequent tack is the depiction of a thicket of flora, the foreground out of focus, the midrange coming in sharp. What does this do? For one thing, it often creates what I would call "vortex shadows," a deep skein of tangible figure that practically generates its own ground. But it also produces harmony in the evolution of the shot, the focused elements moving with and against the heavier, softer-edged emanations. This, combined with the emphasis on diagonal anchor-forms that put a stake down in an otherwise dissipating image, produce an inevitable musicality that runs throughout Song. (Watch for a stunning gold-glitter skull in shot #10!)

Spring, on the other hand, is easily one of the most kinetic films Dorsky has produced, a strange amalgam of stolen moments of beauty from the human world (city scenes, fragments of portraiture) and a nature study whose visual assertiveness occasionally seems to stop just this side of Rose Lowder. Dorsky is exploring the potentials of mobile camera—one shot that appears to be taken from a boat ride is astonishing, wherein jabbing drops of rain form white diagonal lines in the frame, as if Dorsky had taken a stippling tool and gone Len Lye on his answer print. But even in fields of

wildflowers, where before Dorsky might have held still and allowed the sun and wind to orchestrate the shot, the camera becomes an agent of change, gently charging through the stems and bending them down.

Dorsky's cinema has been transcendently optical, but Spring finds him dabbling in the dark arts of the haptic, bringing a sensuality that was always present in his work right to the fore. When we see charcoal-dark shots that slowly allow images of faces to emerge, or a single shot late in the film in which a cheek seems to be pulling away from the lens, Dorsky is assimilating bodies into the overall "spring" of the plant life, which is the dominant force throughout this film. Whether it's the slow opening of the aperture, which lets light "bloom" onto the scene at hand and into our eyes, or the very frequent penetration of the Z-axis (by stems, branches, an extremely naughty selection of glowing red flowers), Spring is a film that reaches out to us, that asks us to imbibe the flesh of the world.

As for the final shot—first one, and then another pair of men's feet entering a vestibule, its carpeted pathway glowing red-hot in the midday sun—well, how better to celebrate this symphony of dehiscence? Dorsky has already titled a film Triste; perhaps now it's time for Tryst.

ARTFORUM

Labor of Love, a review in Artforum of Jerome Hiler's Words of Mercury

This article appeared along with several color images from Words of Mercury in the March 2012 issue of Artforum during the time in which Jerome was screening that work at the Whitney Biennial

March 2012
P. Adams Sitney, writer

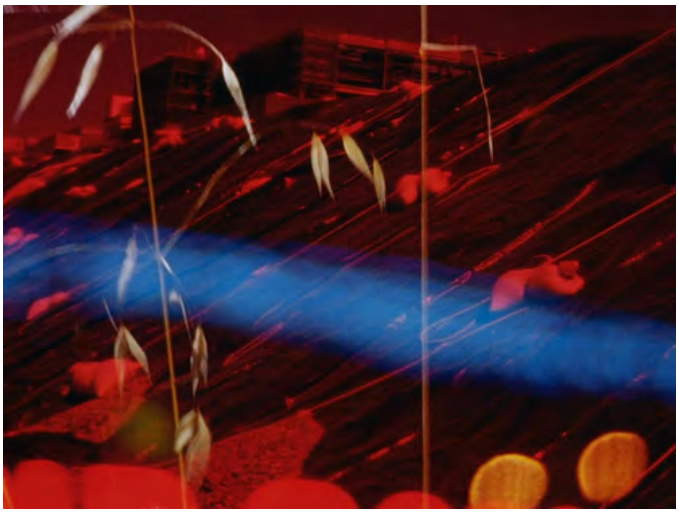
Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile
Varying hi subjects as the eye doth roll To every varied object in his glance …

William Shakespeare, Love's Labour's Lost

Words of Mercury

Jerome Hiler belongs to that rare company of significant if almost invisible filmmakers of the American avant-garde cinema who have hidden their light under a bushel: For decades, Joseph Cornell was reluctant to show his films; Gregory J. Markopoulos withdrew his work from circulation for the last three decades of his life; Wallace Berman would not exhibit his sublime Aleph, which became available only after his death; Dean Stockwell still does not permit screenings of the films he has made. The very few people who have managed to see any of the handful of works Hiler has filmed over the past forty-eight years have praised his cinema highly–

most of all Nathaniel Dorsky, who has been Hiler's partner all those years. Filmmakers David Brooks and Warren Sonbert not only admired his work but evidently learned much from it. Critics Wheeler Dixon (also a filmmaker) and Scott MacDonald have briefly discussed him in their books. Finally, in 1997, Hiler let the New York Film Festival show the camera original of his then recently finished ten-minute short Gladly Given, and last year he screened a new work, again at the New York Film Festival. That film, Words of Mercury, which he completed just in time for the festival, will be included in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, which opens this month, and a program of his and Dorsky's recent works will be presented at Lincoln Center's Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center on March 15.



Words of Mercury

Hiler, a New York-born autodidact, at various times worked for a music copyist, assisted the society photographer Frederick Eberstadt (who commissioned his 2001 film Target Rock), and projected films at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque–all when he was living in New York and on Lake Owassa in New Jersey; in Hollywood, he and Dorsky worked on the exploitation film Revenge of the Cheerleaders (a cult classic from 1976); and ever since, he has lived in San Francisco, working as a carpenter, a caretaker of a convent, and a stainedglass maker; he recently directed, with Owsley Brown III, the documentary Music Makes a City (2010).

The latter project reflects Hiler's obsessive passion for obscure domains of music– in this case, the impressive international roster of composers commissioned to write works for the Louisville Orchestra in the 1950s. Even as a teenager, he boasted an encyclopedic knowledge of medieval and Renaissance music; later, he devoted years to the study of French composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similarly, he is a scholar of stained glass, and he has lectured widely on it as the "Cinema before 1300."

The structural principle of Words of Mercury reflects that of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Notre Dame composers Leonin and Perotin, who alternated Latin verses sung in complex polyphony with verses in plain-chant. Their polyphony highlighted the melodic purity of the plainchant, while the monophonic lines made the multiple voices sound all the richer. In a similar way, especially in the opening half of this twenty-five-minute film, Hiler interlards lengthy superimpositions with one or two shorter shots in a rhythm of alternating poly-optic and monoptic phrases. The superimpositions almost always employ camera movement, and the monoptic shots are typically static. The effect parallels that of Notre Dame polyphony: Following the elaborate superimpositions, the still shots acquire a stressed intensity, giving a distilled concentration to the unobscured movement of reeds in the wind, the flight of birds, or the frolicking of dogs in the ocean. That, in turn, sensitizes the eye to the intricacy and wonder of the next set of superimpositions. The turning point of the film is a monoptic panning movement around a bronze-colored statue of Neptune, incongruously abandoned just out-side the fence of a truck lot.

Jerome Hiler in Love's Refrain

The weathered head of this forsaken god separates the images of winter from those of spring. Since the film was shot primarily in the Bay Area, the seasonal distinctions are subtle. Although there is one monoptic shot of snow in the mountains in the first part of the film, the patterns of hue and tonal value play primary roles in distinguishing the film's two parts. In the spring poem, the interludes of monopsis nearly disappear. Hiler told the New York Film Festival audience that he sometimes forgot what he had filmed on the underlayer of super-imposition, or even that he had already laid down a track of shots, so that the developed rolls of film were a revelation to him.
The contrapuntal rhythm of the finished film transfers and sustains the excitement of the filmmaker's discovery of the in-camera polyopsis, as the long, superimposed compositions slowly unfold. The monoptic shots, too, are carefully timed, with handmade fades that poignantly recur just

before the polyoptic sequences have exhausted their charges.

In a note he wrote to accompany the film, Hiler remarked, “I generally shoot first and ask questions later, but I’m struck at the influences that I see in Words of Mercury because they reach back to the very first times that I saw great 16mm films in the early Sixties: Marie Menken, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage, and my lifetime companion Nathaniel Dorsky.” Hiler’s confession of influences is accurate. Menken pioneered the handheld somatic camera, concentrating on and transforming everyday urban life. By running the camera at a slow speed and sweeping over streetlights and neon signs, she created “night-writing” in her Notebook (ca. 1942-70). The opening superimposition of Words of Mercury similarly layers a dance of jittering lights over a crepuscular landscape, as if the pencil-thin white and colored lines of light were swarming midair before a barely discernible background of trees, as night falls. When the layer of night-writing vanishes, the trees remain as so ft-foe used patches of light floating through the foreground, suggestive of the camerawork of Stan Brakhage and his brilliant adaptation of Menken’s cinematic rhetoric in Anticipation of the Night (1958). In fact, the very play of the superimposition owes a debt to Brakhage, who used two layers, constructed largely by chance operations, in his Prelude; Dog Star Man (1962). But unlike Brakhage, Hiler composed his super-impositions in the camera, spontaneously. In this respect, he was preceded by Markopoulos, who made both Lysis and Charmides in the camera in 1948 and refined the technique in 1966, with rhythmically staccato superimpositions, for Ming Green and the portraits of Galaxie. In-camera superimposition provides a more vivid palette than multitrack printing, and perhaps the most obvious debt Hiler owes to Markopoulos is his color sense.

Jerome Hiler in Hours for Jerome

Viewers familiar with Dorsky’s films who see Hiler’s work for the first time might conclude that his greatest influence has been Dorsky’s mature cinema. For instance, the first monoptic shot–ten static

seconds of a field of overgrown weeds before a bramble of brush–sustains the poetic charge of the previous three-minutelong polyopsis in the manner of Dorsky's stanzaic "open form." Yet one might, with equal justification, claim that Hiler has been the primary influence on Dorsky. For many years, their filmmaking practice consisted largely of showing unedited footage to each other and to a small circle of friends. Dorsky withdrew from public exhibition in 1965. When he resurfaced, in 1980, the open-form lyric mode he had developed brought him a degree of recognition he had not known with his earlier films; this was especially true after 1998, when he began to issue one or two new works each year. What Dorsky calls "open form" and "polyvalent editing" characterize Hiler's films as well, and evidently were as much his invention. In "Tone Poems: The Films of Nathaniel Dorsky" an essay published in these pages in November 2007,1 described this mode as "organizing the shots and rhythms of a film so that associations will 'resonate' ([Dorsky's] word) several shots later," The structural or generic similarities between Words of Mercury and Dorsky's films bring into focus their fundamental differences. The rhythmic tension between poly-optic and monoptic images is unique to Hiler. He is also the more sophisticated colorist. At the New York Film Festival s screening of Words of Mercury and Dorsky's The Return (2011), I was seated beside the German filmmaker Klaus Wyborny, who had never seen films by either man. Deeply impressed, he offered me his first impression with an apt analogy: "If Hiler is Monet, Dorsky is Sisley." Unlike Dorsky, who has a keen eye for human gesture, Hiler nearly eliminates people from his film. The distant figures of two men walking their dogs on a beach, in the winter half of Words, minimally inscribe human presences almost to underline their absence from the rest of the film. The result is an undertone of gorgeous melancholy in which the power of cinema to wring sheer beauty from loneliness becomes a compensation for the mortal, solipsistic consciousness of the isolato behind the camera.

Shortly before editing Words of Mercury, Hiler saw Love's Labour's Lost three times. At the end of Shakespeare's most word-intoxicated comedy, "as the cast is frolicking around," or so Hiler puts it in his note to the film, "a messenger comes in to announce a death, which brings a sudden shift to the very end of the play. One of the most comical characters, now newly sober, ends the play with a quick dismissal of the audience: 'The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo. You that way-we this way," In short, the words of Mercury bear the message of death. By extension, in the images of Hiler's silent film, the visual-rhythmic "songs of Apollo" are tinged with the "words of Mercury." These images, as if delivered by the gods' messenger, Mercury-Hermes, are at once mercurial and hermetic. Their connotative penumbra is the most elusive and daunting aspect of the film for a critic daring to write about it. At the risk of putting too much weight on the title (and on the filmmaker's note), one is tempted to read the conclusion of Love's Labour Lost as a clue to the delicate moods of the film. In the play, the "songs of Apollo" are the two performed just before the end, "Hiems" (Winter) and "Ver" (Spring), which neatly correspond, though in reverse order, to the two seasons of the film. For Shakespeare's frustrated, aristocratic lovers whose labors are lost because of the message of a death, the cuckoo in the song of spring heralds the specter of cuckoldry in that season's erotic frenzy, while the owl of winter wisely oversees the "merry"

consolations of the humblest aspects of domestic life. Hiler's film proffers the wisdom, in turn, of a visually luscious acquiescence to time and to nature's mortal and erotic betrayals.

Words of Mercury carries an undertone of gorgeous melancholy in which the power of cinema to wring sheer beauty from loneliness becomes a compensation for the mortal, solipsistic consciousness behind the camera.

Jerome Hiler in Triste

* Wheeler W. Dixon, The Exploding Eye: A Re-visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Scott MacDonald, A Critical Cinema S: interviews with Independent Filmmakers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) .

Jerome Hiler and P. Adams Sitney will conduct a dialogue at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York on March 18 in conjunction with the filmmaker's participation in the 2012 Whitney Biennial.

P. Adams Sitney on Jerome Hiler's Words of Mercury

P. Adams Sitney. The Author of Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson by Oxford University Press (2008), is currently writing a book on cinema and poetry. Her teaches at the Lewis Center for the Arts,Princeton University.

The New York Times

Unseen Guide's Silent Journeys to Lyric Nature
The Startlingly Beautiful Films of Nathaniel Dorsky

April 13, 2012
Manohla Dargis, writer

The filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky's experimental works, including "The Return" (2011) explore the disconnection between humanity and the natural world. Nathaniel Dorsky

For decades Nathaniel Dorsky has been making work of rare and sometimes startling beauty. If you haven't heard of him, it's because he makes short, silent experimental films that feature brightly colored flowers, bursts of sunlight and shifting pools of shadow instead of characters, plots and stories. Mostly he remains unknown to the larger audience because his work is relegated to that ghetto known as American avant-garde cinema. On Monday a program of his recent work will be shown in downtown Los Angeles at Redcat, an exhibition space in Walt Disney Concert Hall; Mr. Dorsky, who talks about his work in accessible, charming fashion, is scheduled to appear in person. On Friday another program of his work will be at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, also in Los Angeles.

Watching Mr. Dorsky's films is a joy. Explaining why they can have such a profound effect on you, however, can present something of a challenge, partly because the films can't be reduced to the old boy-meets-girl or any other kind of plot synopsis. This means you may watch them once or twice,

perhaps while scribbling notes (and diagrams) in the dark, and then try to consider what you saw. As I recall, the 18 ½-minute "Compline" (2009) opens with glistening bare tree branches that create vertical slashes across the image. What follows initially appears random — pulses of yellow light, flashes of green leaves — but from the vertical lines of purple flowers in one shot and what look like parallel threads of yarn in another, it becomes clear that choices have been made here.

Nathaniel Dorsky Photo by Jerone Hiler

Although the narratively conditioned brain may attempt to piece together a story from these images (once upon a time in winter there was a tree), Mr. Dorsky's work requires a different kind of engagement. These are films created for contemplation, and they both invite and resist interpretation. Consider Mr. Dorsky's fondness for windows that, because of the light, camera angle and his manipulations, turn into mirrors and prisms. In a single image of a restaurant window it's possible at once to see the interior of the empty space with its set tables, the gleaming glass and the street scene reflected in it, a multiplicity that has a material, concrete aspect (this is a restaurant without patrons) and also room for lyricism (this is a restaurant yearning for patrons).

Because the films are silent and don't come with explanatory on-screen text, you can luxuriate in the visual complexity of the images. You may, amid all this loveliness, worry about what it all means. Although Mr. Dorsky gestures in certain interpretive directions, notably with his titles — "Compline" is the name of the final prayer of the day in the Roman Catholic Church — he never forces you down this or that path. Then again, what can the image of eye-poppingly purple flowers *mean*? "Interpretation," as Susan Sontag memorably wrote "is the revenge of the intellect upon art." A few pages later in the same essay, "Against Interpretation," she extols transparence in art (and criticism), writing that it "means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."

Nathaniel Dorsky's "Compline" (2009) Nathaniel Dorsky/Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Art, as Sontag persuasively argued, doesn't stand for something else but is itself a thing, and while Mr. Dorsky's films can inspire explanatory reveries, they are also beautiful objects. His 2009 "Sarabande" — the name of a slow dance in triple time — opens with what looks like the sun or a bright moon shining behind a tangle of dark, bare tree branches and what may be mesh fencing. The shot lasts for about 30 seconds, during which a black blot (a cloud?) moves left, bringing more light into the frame. What follows in the next 14 or so minutes are gently hovering, sometimes layered and obliquely angled images of windows and reflections, as well as more flowers and trees. The film ends with the sun dipping (or rising) behind trees that stretches across the frame.

Here's some of what else you see in "Sarabande": a woman walking through a glass door while pulling and pushing a carriage, a green blur, a yellow circle, two luminescent red leaves in extreme close-up. As one image gives way to the next, a series of contrasts, even gentle tensions emerge: interior and exterior, bright and opaque, sharp and blurred, a perception of movement and stillness. While some of what you see is readily distinguishable, at other times it's impossible to know what you're looking at beyond shifting blots of black. Among the most striking moments are floaty shots of dense, seemingly impenetrable foliage that suggest a tentative, searching presence behind the camera.

Toward the end of "Sarabande" Mr. Dorsky cuts to the orange flowers of some green aloe plants set against a dark blue sky, the camera panning down from the spearlike blooms along the thin stems. The flowers pop out because of their brightness, the clarity of the image and the emphatic camera movement that insistently announces the human being shooting it. The directness of the image

(behold, the bloom) is in contrast to many of the earlier, partially concealed shots, and this progression from the obscure to the obvious literalizes the experience — from darkness to revelation, unknowing to knowing — of watching the film itself.

A scene from “Sarabande” (2009). Nathaniel Dorsky

“If we do relinquish control,” Mr. Dorsky wrote in his short 2003 book “Devotional Cinema,” “we suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us. In a flash, the uncanny presence of the poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us.”

Not all of Mr. Dorsky’s films unfold in the same way, despite some recurrent motifs and juxtapositions, notably between the natural world and its human-made counterpart. Again and again, in images of trees and plants glimpsed through windows and in shadow, there’s a strong sense in Mr. Dorsky’s work that nature is just out of grasp, intoxicatingly near and unreachable. And then abruptly he will plunge deep into a thicket of branches or a tangle of flowering plants that looks like a Jackson Pollock drip painting, the camera moving through the foliage like a bushwhacker or holding steady on the gently bobbing blossoms. In several shots he brightens and darkens the image, a manipulation that underscores the sense of discovery.

There’s a sense of freedom in these visions of nature. Even so, one of the most stunning images in his recent work is of the flower shop seen briefly in the film “The Return” (2011), a shot that invokes a famous moment in Alfred Hitchcock’s “Vertigo” when James Stewart’s character spies on Kim Novak’s mystery woman. Whether calculated or serendipitous — Mr. Dorsky lives in San Francisco, where “Vertigo” is set — the flower store, like all his images of trees seen through

windows, bridges the natural and human-created worlds. Like “Sarabande,” “The Return” ends with an image of the sun pushing past a cloud, as if insisting on its reappearance. Yet while Mr. Dorsky ends with nature, the image’s moody beauty affirms that this is also very much a representation, a devotional song, art.

A scene from “Winter” (2008). Nathaniel Dorsky

In a post-screening discussion at the 2010 Toronto International Film Festival, Mr. Dorsky said his films were of “the world as it comes through the hole of” his Bolex camera. Thoreau said that “you must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.” There’s a similar imperative, an urgency, about being in the here and the now in Mr. Dorsky’s work, even if the world in his films is of his own making. (Thoreau wrote that it was “necessary to see objects by moonlight — as well as sunlight — to get a complete notion of them,” which nicely fits Mr. Dorsky’s duskier imagery.)

Mr. Dorsky, who is 68 and makes a living as a film editor, has said that he can spend months just shooting material while walking around with his 16-millimeter camera, a pursuit he has continued even after his favorite film stock disappeared. Recently, while speaking on the phone from San Francisco, he told a story about a reluctant visit to a friend’s home. He didn’t want to go, but did, bringing his camera with him, as is his custom. During the visit sunlight poured into the room, bathing his friend’s arm in an ethereal gold. The shot made it into “Pastourelle” (2010) — a type of lyric poetry — and immortalized a moment in time and a friendship. “I went out with a camera,” Mr. Dorsky said, in describing his entry into filmmaking, “and tried to discover things.”

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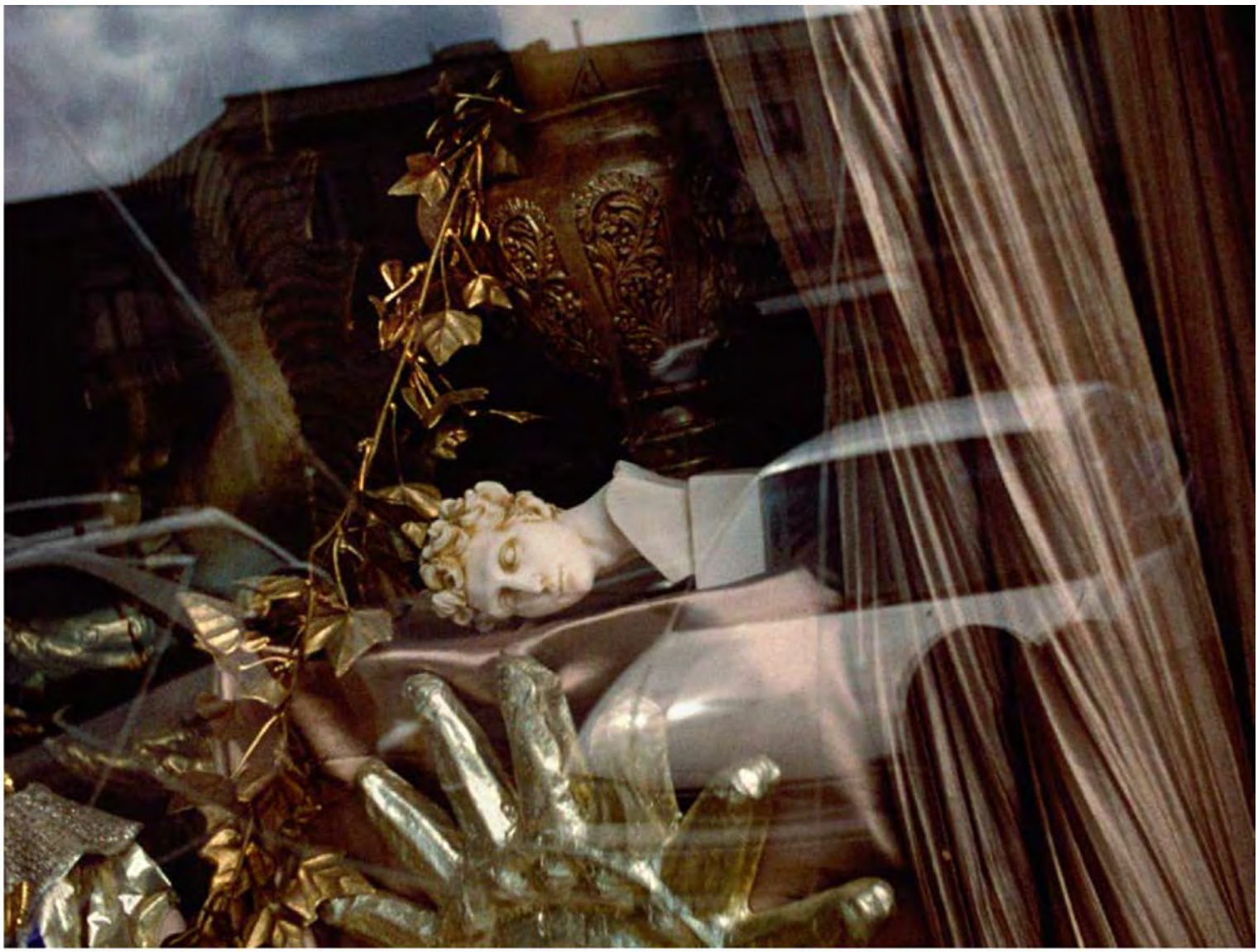

This page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Threnody*, 2004,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 20 minutes.
Opposite page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Alaya*, 1987,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 28 minutes.

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Tone Poems

P. ADAMS SITNEY ON THE FILMS OF NATHANIEL DORSKY

NATHANIEL DORSKY is now at the pinnacle of his powers and reputation as a filmmaker. But he took a long route to his current prominence in the American avant-garde cinema. He had an early start making films, as did most of his strongest peers from the generation who came to cinema in the 1960s. The first works he exhibited, *Ingreen* (1964), *A Fall Trip Home* (1964), and *Summerwind* (1965), established him as a creditable filmmaker at a time when many young aspirants were trying to launch careers. Most of them disappeared quickly and, by the late '60s, that seemed to have been Dorsky's fate as well.

Within the large, unruly flock of filmmakers shepherded by Jonas Mekas in those years there were several coteries. Andy Warhol's was the most famous, of course, and the one that branded its adherents most indelibly. Another was led by Gregory Markopoulos, who generously championed the early work of Warren Sonbert, George Landow, and Robert Beavers (with whom Markopoulos lived in Europe from the late '60s until his death in 1992). Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, another filmmaker as well as an artisan of stained glass, who has been Dorsky's partner for more than forty years, were mentored by Markopoulos. In 1966 they moved from New York to rural Lake Owassa in New Jersey, where they stayed until relocating to San Francisco in 1971. From the time Dorsky left New York until 1982, he ceased to complete and release films, although he continued to shoot and to show his footage to gatherings of friends. This has always been Hiler's practice. He has rarely exhibited any of his work in public. Within the avant-garde film community, the private evenings of film appreciation hosted by Dorsky and Hiler attained cult status.

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This page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Variations*, 1998**, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 24 minutes.
Opposite page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Hours for Jerome*, 1982**, still from a color film in 16 mm, 55 minutes.

Warren Sonbert was a major beneficiary of those screenings. When Dorsky finally edited, from 1980 to 1982, the material he had shot between 1966 and 1970 into *Hours for Jerome*, Sonbert wrote: "*Hours for Jerome* is simply the most beautifully photographed film that I've ever seen; for once the full achievements of what film can do cinematographically is . . . achieved. . . . Here cinema enters the realm of the compassionate; capturing the eye and the mind, in ways unlike the predictable arena of the structural film."[1] By that time Sonbert himself had attained a major reputation within the field. His career parallels Dorsky's in inverse: After making apprentice films in the late '60s, he found his mature style and relentlessly sought venues of exhibition just as Dorsky was withdrawing from the public arena. Sonbert's style incorporated some of the principles Dorsky and Hiler had extolled and exemplified in their private screenings—most notably, an eschewing of the sound track. But unlike Stan Brakhage, who had loudly affirmed the superiority of silent film, Sonbert, Dorsky, and Hiler shared a deep appreciation for several Hollywood auteurs (Sirk, Hitchcock, Ford, and Minnelli) who influenced their compositions, tempi, and montage. In fact, it was this orientation that gave Sonbert, first, and Dorsky, later, sufficient distance to evade the overwhelming influence of Brakhage, for whom their respect and affection grew the more films they produced.

By withdrawing for fifteen years, Dorsky sat out the most contentious period in the history of avant-garde film. Fierce aesthetic battles over the prominence of minimal forms ("structural film") and the status of video art were supplanted by even more acrimonious political disputes over sexism, imperialism, idealism, the importance of theory (especially French), and canon formation. Brakhage was the biggest and most battered target in these academic skirmishes. When Dorsky reemerged, there was a new audience, wary of the political factionalism, eager for the contemplative beauty and the cultic appreciation of cinematic genius he quietly preached. That audience was small at first, but it grew considerably in the '90s, at the very time his filmmaking was attaining its full maturity.

Dorsky, Hiler, Sonbert, and their friends, among whom were the poets Michael Brownstein, Anne Waldman, and Ted Greenwald, nurtured ideas of films that would have no narrative or thematic organization, none of the Aristotelian unities of time, place, or action beyond the immanent rhythms binding one cinematic image to another. As Dorsky once remarked in an interview with the poet Mary Kite, "We spent our youth speculating on an open form of film. . . . The montage that I am talking about moves from shot to shot outside any other necessities, except of course the accumulation of being. It has no external obligations. It is the place of film."[2] Encouraged by his poet friends, Dorsky found the inspiration for this concept of cinema in his reading of John Ashbery's early books and spoke of editing his work in "stanzas." However, his failure to achieve to his satisfaction the open form he envisioned contributed to his blockage of a decade and a half.

At fifty-five minutes, *Hours for Jerome* remains Dorsky's longest film. He divided it into two parts and organized it to follow the seasons. It breaks down into a series of spectacular montage fragments, some of them edited in camera. For the first time he abjured a sound track and took advantage of the silence to project the film at eighteen frames per second, giving its movements a slight retardation. He never returned to sound tracks or sound speed (24 fps). This two-part lyric was his first serious effort to create "a place where film itself can be, can dream."[3] But Sonbert stunned him by pointing out that the editing was "too descriptive." He meant, apparently, that the filmmaker was too loyal to his memories of life in New York and on Lake Owassa, at the expense of the organic form of the film itself. According to Dorsky, "When you go into polyvalent editing, as Warren usually did, . . . the *place* is the *film*."[4] By polyvalent editing, Dorsky means organizing the shots and rhythms of a film so that associations will "resonate" (his word) several shots later. It was important to him not to overstate such associations; thus he eschewed parallel editing, classically practiced by D. W. Griffith and the masters of silent Soviet cinema. Yet, like Eisenstein, he found a model for his film form in classical Japanese poetry and, in Dorsky's case, Chinese poetry as well.

Before assembling *Hours for Jerome*, the filmmaker continued to photograph fragments of his daily life in San Francisco and attempted to make a film by severely restricting his image material to grasses. During this period he also began a film built exclusively on gradations of blackness, but he admits he lacked the courage to complete and exhibit it. Although Dorsky abandoned these projects, the aesthetic satisfaction of editing *Hours for Jerome* and the consequent feeling of rejuvenation encouraged him to complete a series of ostensibly simpler films displaying his love of the basic cinematic material: color, grain, texture, the flickering light of the screen. It was as if he dedicated himself for another decade to a new and rigorous apprenticeship to his art. In *Pneuma* (1983), he used a wide variety of outdated film stock to assemble unphotographed bits of color and light flares, while *Ariel* (1983) achieves similar but bolder effects through home processing of unexposed rolls of defunct Anscochrome. In temporarily renouncing the photographic talent that made *Hours for Jerome* a gorgeous but unwieldy chain of spectacular epiphanies—nearly a catalogue of effects—he forced himself to shape the most elemental visual magma into films that might sustain attention and orchestrate the inherent music of cinematic movement for twenty to thirty minutes, which was to become roughly the timescale of his works until now. Then he slowly reintegrated photography into his art, under severe restraint. *Alaya* (1987) concentrates on patterns of sand as hyperboles of film grain. In *17 Reasons Why* (1987), Dorsky made a 16-mm film from unslit 8-mm rolls, which produce four small frames for each image in two pairs of sequential frames. The side-by-side sets of doubled images deflect attention from the free camera movements and frequent superimpositions within those frames to the generalized impression of filmic representation—that is, to sets of nearly identical rectangles—an impression that Dorsky enhances by sometimes sweeping etched scratches and the marks of chemical processing across all four frames at once. These techniques and similar constrictions had played a prominent role in the structural film phenomenon of the '70s. But Dorsky had no interest in the aggressive use of duration or epistemological parables; instead, he emphasized the sensuality immanent in such minimal imagery. His reductive films proclaim the sheer beauty of filmic light, an approach particularly effective for the small cult of aficionados for whom he projected the edited originals in his home.

Dorsky and his circle nurtured ideas of films that would have no narrative or thematic organization, none of the Aristotelian unities of time, place, or action beyond the immanent rhythms binding one cinematic image to another.

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This page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Triste*, 1996,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 18 minutes 30 seconds.
Opposite page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Triste*, 1996**, still from a color film in 16 mm, 18 minutes 30 seconds.

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By the mid-'90s he was ready to make another attempt at the open-form, or polyvalent, film of which he had dreamed. He turned to the material he had gathered from random shooting and aborted projects since 1974 to compose *Triste* (1996), thereby initiating his mature style. After thirty years, he finally achieved the mode of lyric he had theorized. Later, Dorsky would quote the acknowledgment of fellow filmmaker Phil Solomon, who told him, "You found a way around [Brakhage]." However, Brakhage had made his own version of a purely polyvalent film in 1972 when he edited his extraordinary *Riddle of Lumen*, also from scraps of film he had saved from earlier projects, in polemical response to Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970). The riddle of the title refers to the question of what holds the shots together, i.e., what they have to do with one another; and the answer too is in the title: light (*lumen*). Within Brakhage's vast corpus of films, *Riddle* represents one of many attempts to still the power of the "egotistical sublime"; that is, to transcend the intense subjectivity at the core of his art. Dorsky, in his major phase, did not so much find a way around Brakhage as find a way to make the most serene of Brakhage's protean lyric modes wholly his own.

Dorsky's reductive films proclaim the sheer beauty of filmic light, an approach particularly effective for the small cult of aficionados for whom he projected the edited originals in his home.

Triste established the model for Dorsky's version of the polyvalent lyric: The shots are leisurely paced, usually between ten and thirty seconds long, without superimposition or rapid camera movement (when there is camera movement, it usually follows a figure in the image). There is no intercutting; very rarely does a camera setup or even an image recur. Consequently, the rare repetitions or recurrences acquire particular emphasis. For instance, two sequential shots of a snake in *Triste* link them to two earlier shots of a horse. A brief sequence near the end, of Hiler in his kitchen, in which the only genuine repetition in the film is a shot of his face, makes him the central presence of the work and associates his image with a brief set of variations on a stone votive angel, in positive and negative.

The prevailing autonomy of the shots in Dorsky's later films evokes monadic worlds, while the montage teases out the preestablished harmony among them (if I may impose unintended Leibnizian concepts here). This is a remarkably delicate process entailing subtle shifts of mood through which an overall psychological tone tentatively emerges and "evaporates" (Dorsky's term). Framing, chiaroscuro, and proximics inscribe the filmmaker's presence in the worlds he reveals. In *Triste* he is a dejected wanderer, barely able to enter a crowded baseball arena but drawn close to an isolated cigarette butt, a submerged shoe, or a slithering snake. But in the next film Dorsky made—*Variations* (1998), using freshly photographed images for the first time in decades—image after image absorbs the rapturous filmmaker, as if the long-awaited achievement of *Triste* renewed the glory of the world for him. In his brilliant short book *Devotional Cinema* (2003), Dorsky wrote:

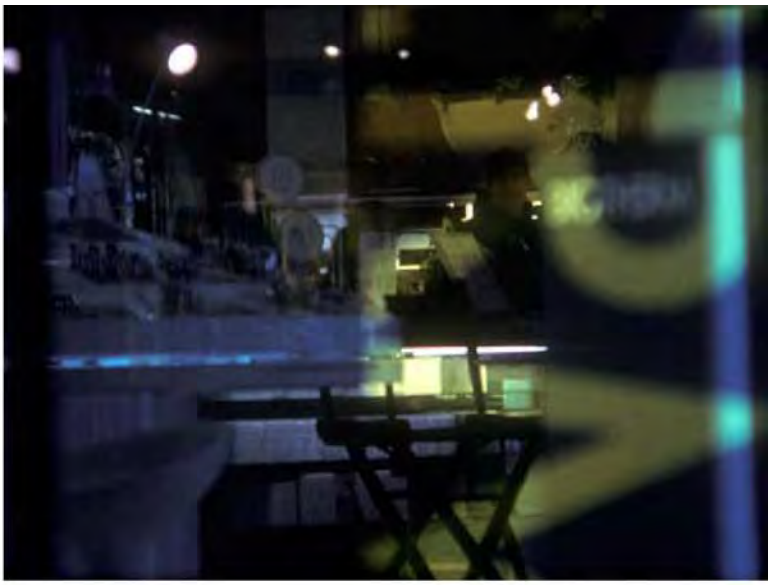
> When cinema can make the internalized medieval and externalized Renaissance ways of seeing unite and transcend themselves, it can achieve a transcendental balance. This balance point unveils the transparency of our earthly experience. We are afloat. It is a balance that is neither our vision nor the belief in exterior objectivity; it belongs to no one and, strangely enough, exists nowhere. It is within this balance that the potential for profound cinema takes place.[5]

At times Dorsky has discussed this "balance" as a resistance to both the first-person and the third-person evocations of a filmic voice or persona.

The seven polyvalent, or open-form, films Dorsky has made since the early '90s register in different psychic temperaments what the filmmaker once called the "mystery of seeing and being."[6] *Triste* and *Variations*, along with the subsequent *Arbor Vitae* (2000) and *Love's Refrain* (2001), constitute a set of "Four Cinematic Songs," while he calls *The Visitation* (2002) and *Threnody* (2004) "Two Devotional Songs." His latest film, *Song and Solitude* (2006), seems to form a triad with the previous two.

Not since Bruce Baillie made his strongest films in the '60s has a filmmaker crammed beauty upon beauty into his work with such Keatsian lushness. *Arbor Vitae*, Dorsky's envoi to the millennium, pushes the banality of natural beauty—butterflies, flowers, birds—to extremes. More than ever before his characteristic urban landscape borders on architectural promotion, but he ultimately overcomes the decorative elegance pervading the film by evoking intimations of the power of gravity that circumscribes the flight of birds and butterflies and holds the skyscrapers rooted to the earth like crystalline excrescences. More powerfully, *Love's Refrain* accumulates images of veils, subtle foreground-background discriminations, reflections and layered shadows, as if to manifest the capability of cinema to "unveil the transparency of our earthly experience." The very tactility of the imagery dialectically suggests its evanescence, until the culminating portrait of the poet Philip Whalen on his deathbed anchors the lyric just this side of the threshold of eternity.

When Dorsky titled *The Visitation*, he had in mind medieval illuminated books of the "hours of the Virgin Mary," in which the Visitation of the pregnant Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, herself pregnant with John the Baptist, illustrates Lauds, the ritual service for dawn. The emergence of light and its subsequent sweep over the surface of the world is the true subject of the film, which seems to have nothing to do with the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. It opens with the only instance of reverse-angle cutting I have found in Dorsky's mature films: We see Hiler from behind, wiping a large sheet of glass (which he will use for a stained-glass work), followed by a shot, through the glass, of his face mottled by the filtered light, as he inspects the pane. This unique opening reminds us that the film camera is a chamber with a glass screen constructed to preserve the moving stains of light that pass through it. Hiler has been the central influence on his partner's films since the two men met at the first New York screening of *Ingreen* at the Washington Square Gallery in 1964. *The Visitation* reflects Hiler's conceit of stained glass as the cinema of the Middle Ages, the one subject on which he has lectured in public. Many of the monadic shots that follow the introductory motif show light penetrating fog, the edges of clouds, display windows, and water. Numerous grids, including shots of chain-link fences, extend the permeable barrier of glass into the realm of other objects. As the film builds to its climax, the lyric seems to be proposing, or testing, a series of culminating images: the sun moving behind and out of a cloud formation shaped like a heart or angel wings; an androgynous young woman fresh from an outdoor pool; the half-moon gliding in the night sky; a bright yellow fish



This page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *Song and Solitude*, 2006,** stills from a color film in 16 mm, 21 minutes.
Opposite page: **Nathaniel Dorsky, *The Visitation*, 2002,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 18 minutes.

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circulating in a tank in a store window; and, finally, layers of flat waves in a dazzlingly reflective sea sweeping vertically over the screen.

As Brakhage intuited, the polyvalent lyric is a riddle in light. Whereas in most lyric cinema the accumulation of images narrows and defines its subject, establishing a thematic and sometimes dramatic field in which the viewer's anticipation can be confirmed or frustrated, the polyvalent lyric constitutionally resists the definition of its subject and abolishes the expectation of a thematic development. This results in the suppression of a future tense within the film. Each image founds a new present moment. With Dorsky's cultivation of the monadic shot, the feeling of an amassing present, reverberating with echoes of the earlier image-worlds, is particularly strong. As the film unpredictably proceeds, each new shot sets in play a minor, or sometimes even major, revision of the fragile interior relations of the images and rhythms that preceded it. The revision is naturally most intense at the very instant of the shot change, but it is by no means limited to that transition. Dorsky has compared "the energy at the moment of the cut" to the "kabbalistic tradition of the Spark of Goodness or sparks of openness" that Jewish theologians have argued constitute the holiness imprisoned in corporeal nature. Thus each cut would draw one of the tiny sparks toward the fire associated with divinity and which the filmmaker, I believe, thinks of in terms of the ineffable coherence of a polyvalent film. For it is essential to him that the coherence remain mysterious. Although Dorsky, who is a consistently helpful and good-natured guide to his work, can easily be led to offer ad hoc accounts of how shot combinations work for him, he is very wary of his own "reductive analysis," lest a film be misread as "a slightly difficult map of a symbolic road that could be understood, or an obscuration of a symbolism that might be defined."

By the time he made *The Visitation*, Dorsky felt he had sufficient mastery of the open-ended lyric form to inflect his photography with intimations of the pervading tone of the film while he was shooting it. That was the case in the two elegies that are his most recent films. From the start he knew he was making *Threnody* as "an offering" to the recently dead Stan Brakhage.[7] In fact, he filmed his shots as if Brakhage were gathering his last glimpses of "the fleeting phenomena of life" as he ascended into the Empyrean.[8] Of course, Dorsky didn't actually signal a mediation of the images as if through a Brakhage persona: The cinematography and editing are manifestly Dorsky's; in fact, there is nothing within the film to associate it explicitly with Brakhage or his works. Within Brakhage's montage, the shot has an atomic function. The incessant fluxions of the handheld camera and the intricate plays of light bind often very short shots together in complex molecular units so that the autonomy of individual shots disappears. Even in *The Riddle of Lumen*, where Brakhage seems to be examining the polyvalent power of the shots, the units never have the monadic self-sufficiency of Dorsky's, and the rhythm Brakhage orchestrates is not immanent.

The "devotional" mode which links *Threnody* to its predecessor elicits an engrossment in the individual shot that would draw the viewer "to participate in its presence" so that the subsequent cut might induce a "visceral" shift in the most "tender" manner. Mystery, suggestiveness, intriguing indiscernibility, or even sheer beauty might be marshaled to invest the monadic image with sufficient "presence," to give a delicate "poignancy" (Dorsky's terms) to the instant in which the image changes through montage. So, a shot of Hiler's hand as he writes meticulously in a journal, or of a shop window in which we can make out a metallic hand and a pseudo-Hellenic bust scattered willy-nilly among other curios (while passing cars are reflected in the window), engages us for several seconds until the encapsulated world of the writing hand gives way to another realm—say, one in which the camera slowly pans down vertical cords with signage in the background, or the foliage of a fir tree replaces the disordered window display. The viewer would not know that Hiler is copying out notes he took at a seminar on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or that the shop is that of a palm reader in transition, or that a striking shot of trees weighted down with snow late in the film was photographed when a blizzard coincided with the memorial service for Brakhage in Boulder, Colorado; yet such metaphysical associations seem to have influenced Dorsky's absorption so that he could use these images effectively as nodal points in the film. The poignancy the filmmaker sought may be a function of the timing of the editing; again and again he turns from a shot, almost sacrificing it, just an instant before we can be satisfied with our scrutiny.

In contrast to *Threnody*, a prevailing darkness at the center of most of its images marks the mourning of *Song and Solitude*. Dorsky made the film during the year his friend Susan Vigil was dying of ovarian cancer. A beloved pillar of the San Francisco avant-garde film community, she had housed, fed, and befriended local and visiting filmmakers for more than thirty years. Her acceptance of her imminent death was heartbreakingly heroic. During her last year she visited Dorsky weekly to look at the unedited rolls of the film as they came directly from the laboratory. Yet she is not the overt subject of the film. The only image of her in it is a close-up of her hands as she reads a poem (T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday"). As in *Threnody*, the elegiac tone emerges from nuances. For instance, early in the film there is a wondrously timed shot of a figure in an orange sweater in a restaurant. The fluctuations of offscreen sunlight bring into prominence and then nearly erase two thin metal shade cords in the center of the composition. Such rhythmic coming and going of light, oscillating through the whole film, regularly puts the central darkness on the verge of illumination. If the delirious beauty typical of Dorsky's cinema is muted in *Song and Solitude*, it is because, one feels, the filmmaker has exercised an extraordinary effort of will not to be distracted from the intensity of sharing his friend's last days.

Dorsky's three most recent films have so subtly refined the balance of timing and shot placement, to address the ephemerality of the monadic worlds of his shots as they supersede one another in montage, that he seems to have taken the emotional range of the film without thematic guidelines to its limits. Yet, as he now awaits the work print of a new film, which he may title *Winter*, Dorsky remains confident that the matrix of the polyvalent open form as he theorized it and put it into practice can continue to sustain major films of the intensity and originality he has given us since the 1990s. □

For notes see page 400.

P. ADAMS SITNEY IS PROFESSOR OF VISUAL ARTS AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY AND THE AUTHOR, MOST RECENTLY, OF *EYES UPSIDE DOWN: VISIONARY FILMMAKERS AND THE HERITAGE OF EMERSON*, FORTHCOMING FROM OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS NEXT YEAR.

Dorsky has compared "the energy at the moment of the cut" to the "kabbalistic tradition of the Spark of Goodness or sparks of openness" that Jewish theologians have argued constitute the holiness imprisoned in corporeal nature.

NOTES

1. Sonbert penned these words for Dorsky to use in promoting his film. His brief remarks were later published in Canyon Cinema's catalogue, in substantially altered form.

2. Dorsky, in Mary Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Poetry Project Newsletter* 183 (February/March 2001): 7.

3. All quotations are from conversations with the author, unless otherwise noted.

4. Scott MacDonald, "Nathaniel Dorsky (and Jerome Hiler)," in *A Critical Cinema 5* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 87.

5. *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 2003), 25–26.

6. In a lecture given at Princeton University in 2001, later to be revised and published as *Devotional Cinema*.

7. From "To Sing Like a Mockingbird: A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," an interview with Michelle Silva (of Canyon Cinema), published December 6, 2006, on the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* Arts and Culture Blog (http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/pixel_vision/2006/12/to_sing_like_a_mockingbird_a_c_1.html).

8. Quotation of Dorsky from ibid.

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Feature

A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky

by Mary Kite

Nathaniel Dorsky has been making 16mm films in the avant-garde tradition since 1964. In recent years, his films have been prominently featured at the New York Film Festival. This interview, in which he talks about the influence of contemporary poetry on his work, took place in August 2000 in San Francisco, where he lives and works.

MK: Do you feel there's a link between your work and John Ashbery's?

ND: When I was twenty-two, friends of mine who were poets in New York introduced me to John Ashbery's work. By coincidence, he had loved the first film I had made. It was called *Ingreen*. When I'd see Ashbery occasionally at parties, he'd come up and say, "I loved that film". Michael Brownstein introduced me to *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Rivers and Mountains*. I read these poems very slowly. Amazing. It became difficult to read other authors. Ashbery's poetry contains a super consciousness about language formed ideas. There's a playfulness with the forms. It assumes there is an agreed upon acknowledgment about what language is. The normal momentum of language is there, but the content is very playful. He uses that momentum while plugging in a variety of specifics that are fresh to the ear. This affected my ideas on filmmaking. Many of his poems, like *The Skaters* for instance, have an evaporative quality. There's a momentary congealing of meaning and then the poem evaporates. It evaporates completely or gets torqued immediately into another sense of continued meaning. A gap or open synapse exists within the logical momentum of materials. The way he weaves motifs allows me to think of visualizing things as they might occur in the language of film. We spent our youth speculating on an open form of film, but the medium is quite different than poetry. It needs its own discoveries. I mentioned this to P. Adams Sitney and P. Adams said, "Well hasn't Stan Brakhage been doing that?" I said, "Stan did it. But when using recognizable images there was usually a literary or descriptive or mythic underpinning associated with it." In other words, a film might be associative or contain a stream of consciousness, but for some underlying agenda or reason. The montage that I am talking about moves from shot to shot outside any other necessities, except of course the accumulation of being. It has no external obligations. It is the place of film.

MK: So there are no borders to it?

ND: Yes, there are no borders. There is no subtle concept behind it that is being filled in prismatically. Cubistically you're not filling in and underpinning. It's the actuality of being one place and then the other and the other. It is a place where the film itself can be, can dream. It can gratify its own needs.

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MK: Like a scroll?

ND: Well you could call it a scroll in the sense that film is linear and it unfolds.

Do you mean landscapes? Well, yes but not quite. The landscapes have an overall descriptive quality. This is a little bit more like an exquisite corpse. Do you know what the exquisite corpse is? Well this is like the exquisite corpse but you know what the previous body part is. Have you ever seen the real ones?

MK: No I haven't seen the originals.

ND: Some of the original drawings are at the Art Institute of Chicago. This is something different. It is reactive to itself. This isn't chance operation. It's interesting. There are works at the San Francisco Modern Museum of Art by Rauschenberg. Have you seen them? There are 97 panels?

MK: I just concentrated on Walker Evans.

ND: Because there are 97 panels . . . you're going to be here through when?

MK: Tuesday.

ND: Well we can go on Monday. There's a room with 97 panels. They are called *Hiccups*. They are each connected by a zipper. Supposedly one can arrange them in any order. In a sense, they're a scroll, not a continuous circle. They resemble John Ashbery's poetry. By reading Ashbery very slowly, one word at a time each word is like hitting a note on the piano. Each word is a resonant stepping stone across a stream. There is an openness to it, but there is definitely an underworld of mood and atmosphere indicative of human effort, usually humorously so. If it didn't have underpinnings, it would fall into what is called in Buddhism "nihilism". The downside is that it opens up relationships that are just a collection of the various, or the continuum or forced forwardness of the various. In that case there's no presence or mystery which blooms just because you've stretched two aspects of the relative world.

At its best, poetry breaks the surface of the relative world. That's where the magic is. It's helping us into a deep appreciation of the unnamable which is being. Because it's unnamable, the only way we can get to it with language is by opening it up. In this way Ashbery and haiku are very similar. It isn't that Ashbery is imitating an Asiatic form or a seventeen syllable form. There is a sensibility of opening, of turning things to open up mystery. Ashbery's *The Skaters* has an atmosphere that continues on beneath. So I think I know . . . I do know that there has to be some kind of atmosphere or it gets too nihilistic. Dreams for instance have a mood which pervades the openly associative visual language.

MK: I'd like to take this moment to ask you about spatial layering.

ND: Yes.

MK: And perhaps ask you if you feel like there's that aspect to spatial layering?

ND: I don't know what spatial layering means. I've never heard that term.

MK: Okay, for instance in the beginning of the Jack Chamber film Hart of London . . .

ND: You saw that?

MK: Yes.

ND: Did you like it?

MK: I thought it was startlingly beautiful but in a very disturbing way.

ND: Yes.

MK: You know it's funny but a lot of people describe John Ashbery's work as having this quality known as "spatial layering" and in your work . . . with references in writing towards Film in Search of a Language, *you space feeling with balance. In your film there's a layering? I was wondering how that might be a sense of "nowness"? Because you have compressions of imagery . . . one on top of another. Like a palimpsest . . . where you take a material and you write on top of it and then erase it to use it again but the previous script is still slightly visible?*

ND: What was that word?

MK: Palimpsest. So in film we have images impressed upon each other which of course forces a consciousness. I was wondering if that could be described as another form of vertical thought? Would that come under "nowness"?

ND: There's an area in the *Hart of London* before the birth suggesting a state between incarnations. We're deciding whether we wish to be reborn. We're floating. There's birth. After birth there's blood, water, fire, and earth. Then it goes

Nathaniel Dorsky at MoMA:

Sunday April 15: Trilogy (*Triste, Variations* and *Arbor Vitae*), 5 pm

Sunday, April 15 and Monday, April 16: Early works (*Pneuma, 17 Reasons Why* and *Alaya*), 3pm

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into the area of the footage where we see an autistic boy with the bird and huge flowers with umbrellas over them? That area of the film is open-ended montage, just moving through things. It is what we're talking about. There is a similar sequence in a slightly earlier film of Chamber's called *Circle. Hart of London* is extraordinary in that it uses different film language during a long mythic form to express and to actually be different states. Film and writing poetry are two different elements. For instance, we could compare renga and filmmaking by taking Basho's rules of resonance which are appropriate to language, but we need to make up our own rules of resonance to some degree which are appropriate to film.

Film has other primary concerns language wouldn't need. It has primary concerns that the language doesn't have. There's a parallel between layering in Ashbery and the layering that takes place in film. Layering (I know that in my own photography there is a sense of layering and so forth) . . . has to do with the idea that we're trying to get a sense of the entire view. There are three layers: there's the external world in front of us, then there's a surface vision of our own eye and there's a dark room from which we view the world. There are three things: a dark room, surface, and the world. If the view is profound, we have a sense of the dark room, the surface and the world . . . all three. Traditionally, sitting in the mouths of caves in Tibet is considered one of the ideal places for meditation. It is a metaphor for film. We're in darkness looking out. So in that sense it layers but that is only within a visual/spiritual context. You mean a layered language I believe. Great narrative filmmakers let us feel the context of the cave. When we look at the screen we feel the screen as a manifestation in darkness rather than just something to represent the "external world" The screen itself becomes a symbol. If we read *The Skaters* it's very much like the layering you are talking about. In *The Skaters* . . . we'll be about to leave on a train. All of sudden we start to think about boats. We're sailing . . . we're out at sea . . . we go way out onto this trip . . . about having the happiest day of our lives . . . it's very funny and romantic . . .we're on a boat . . . sailing . . . and so forth . . . then suddenly we're back on the train. The train is a boattrain. Our minds pop open. Then the train is put on a barge. Now we're going somewhere towards Africa. Maybe towards Morocco? We are on a boattrain. Is that what you mean by layering? Forty years ago Ashbery was at a level of sophistication which makes film feel like kindergarten. Film is such a different medium. We can go other places with it. I do try to get a lot of resonance in my film. In other words, we see something and then it will remind us of something nine shots back. All the time we try to obtain layering . . . synapsing backwards while the film is going forwards. That's all that I have been able to achieve. I haven't been able to capture that magical style of John Ashbery where we're sent someplace and then we're away until we're somewhere else. Finally we return. I don't know if film works that way. But there is the possibility of subtle visual synapsing much like dream-language. Yes, to answer your question, layering is elemental to verticality or nowness.

(continued on page 15)

Dorsky cont.

MK: The one thing that I've noticed in your film is that you were trying to capture the state of nowness in objects. John Ashbery says the same thing about his poetry.

ND: He does?! Have you ever read *Three Poems*? *[Dorsky picks up a book of Ashbery's and begins to read.]* "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave it all out would be another, and truer, way.

clean-washed sea
The flowers were.

These are the examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself." . . .In other words he's saying that you try to be absent and then the moment you're absent something else comes and stands in the place of it. Then one asks, "Who is present?" John pops open the dual concepts that "you" have possessed the mystery and "who are you"? He lifts up what is projected on scrim after scrim. You fill in the blanks and then you think it is contaminated, but who is thinking that? He says, "No it is you who made this therefore you are true." He pulls the rug out once again. It all evaporates. [*reads*] "Have I awakened? Or is this sleep again? Another form of sleep? There is no profile in the massed days ahead. They are impersonal as mountains whose tops are hidden in cloud.
The middle journey, before sands are reversed: a place of ideal quiet." . . . So anyway, I feel that I'm just beginning to get to work with a minutia of that sophistication. Also, in a poem, you can just write anything you need. In film we must have concrete images that are photographed. We actually have the images. Then they need to cut together nicely. Film's major property is visual. Not that poetry doesn't create vision. But in itself, poetry is not required to succeed on a visual level. The delineating factor between the language of poetry and the language of film is that film must succeed visually.

> **There are three layers: there's the external world in front of us, then there's a surface vision of our own eye and there's a dark room from which we view the world.**

MK: Do you consider yourself to be synaesthetic?

ND: Does that mean cross-sensed? Yeah, very much so. I can't read if there's music on. My mind can't isolate one form from the other, easily. But it is not a severe case. It's probably not uncommon.

MK: Does the new film follow this pattern?

ND: The new film that I will show you will be at the New York Film Festival in the fall. Only two or three people have seen it. A friend of mine, Steve Anchor who runs The San Francisco Cinematheque here is very, very bright, very earnest and a very good person . . . he said, "Don't ever explain, even in conversation, what the relationships mean to you because of the openness of them. You shouldn't be reductive. Don't reduce the film for anybody. If someone can't get it, don't try to make them get it by giving them your version. He warned me not to do that in this case." What I've found is interesting. I put certain shots together to create an element of surprise. They offer me something unexpected, but there must be an initial visual gratification. Visually, there's something successful in the transformation from one image to the other. Aftershocks also need poetic resonance and evocation. If your mind can substitute a meaning to the cut, the cut closes down. I'm sure there's a Japanese word for what happens in haiku when you open up mystery. Strangely enough, if the level of the storytelling in the film is successful for yourself, other people will have another story which is also successful for them. In this new film that we shall see, there are birds flying behind winter trees. It then cuts to a shadow on the sidewalk. People are walking through a shadow of a flag floating on the sidewalk. The shadow is behaving in the wind. Therefore, there are two different things in a row behaving in the wind: birds and flag shadows. But then of course, there's a reversal going on. Within the previous shot, the foreground has trees with birds in the background. After the cut, the foreground has walking figures with a shadow flopping around in the background. So what's happened in terms of layering is that the foreground . . . inverts . . . performing an act of sentience. We see a background of birds, to a foreground of walking. The continuity of inversion is that both images are playing with air. I may or may not have mentioned but, Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* postulates how the insides of your eyes morph shapes within your dreams and move them into different things.

MK: How do you approach the action in your films? What is your philosophy on action? How can you relate this to Asian art and vanishing points? I noticed in some of your films there seems to be a diminished vanishing point. I think that in a way this troubles our Western sensibilities and our syllogistic patterns of thought. In other words, by deleting vanishing points and I use this term very loosely, you are acting as an anarchist. But this activity has more of a healing aspect to it rather than destructive.

ND: When Stan Brakhage saw the film *Triste* he said, "This film doesn't have any vanishing points." At first I didn't know what he meant, though I knew what he meant literally. I'm attracted to European paintings that were created in the middle 1400's.

(continued on p. 18)

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Dorsky cont.

During that time, there were few vanishing points. If vanishing points existed they were only an expression within other visual ideas or philosophies. Asian art is saying that life is here and is sacred. It's a dream at the same time it is actual. But in the 1300's European art, to be simplistic, was anti-body or anti-earth. It was the spirit that was actual. It was very flat as earthly expression. After the transition period of the 1400's, the visual creations in the 1500's became pro-body and pro-perspective and pro-vanishing point. This period of transition included both views we have been talking about: all is me and all is not me.

Up into the middle of the 13th century the official philosophy of the church was that all matter was light. There's something about being in a church glazed when all that was sensed as matter is light. It's amusing because when you wander out-of-doors from a structure built within that philosophy . . . everything . . . the ground . . . the earth . . . appears to be pieces of glass. Everything seems translucent. "Form equals emptiness and emptiness equals form," as is said in the *Prajnaparamita*.

Well to get back to the point, if we inspect paintings from the 1400's, even if they are portraitures, the portraits are always counterbalanced with something very detailed. A sense of the world rests behind it. We, the viewers are looking in at something, a person, that is actually there. Both the viewer and the subject are permitted equal presence. Both are included . . . a sublime face-off.

MK: I'd like to hear more about your use of negative capability with Keats.

ND: Yes. Keats. Negative capability is something I was introduced to at Naropa. What it means to me is to respond to a calling or a world we do not know. So negative capability is certainly the essence of haiku. What I learned from Keats essentially wasn't negative capability, however, when I was nineteen or twenty I couldn't understand him. He has "rills" shimmering in long poems. I couldn't understand them but what I realized as I was reading was that they did something to my mouth which was very pleasant. They were wonderful to speak. There was something about the way they formed in my mouth while speaking which was non-aggressive. In my filmmaking I try to work in a way so that the films themselves have a gentleness to the eye, a directness which is comparable to what someone might experience with Keat's language.

MK: Do you feel that form/haiku nested within your film is a temporal seduction?

ND: Like anything that's rather powerful, film has the power to be a great poison or a great enlightener. Film is very temporal . . . in certain ways more than music because one's visual sense is so strong. You're creating a world based on your eyes. As a filmmaker, the chances of poisoning your audience are extreme. On the other hand, because of the power of the temporal form you're locking people into, there is also the ability to utilize the plasticity of the temporal. We can open up the temporal and break it. Change time. Change time from the slavery of the temporal belief system to the verticality of presentness. That's how I work with film. I use film's temporal plasticity to open up the vertical. I use the horizontal to open up the vertical. On the whole, the more successful a film is, the more verticality it opens up. There are films that are purely successful temporally. They tend to be exhausting. They go nowhere. In a way they're ungenerous, but absorbing. Excessively vertical films, on the other hand, don't respect the temporal needs of life.

MK: Is it truly possible to enter into a world without vanishing points? It seems our minds are constantly being trained to operate within a realm of perspective.

ND: Well you see there's something called devotional art. It's funny because I was at The Art Institute of Chicago in early May and there are various panels of painters from the 1300s and 1400's. These are pieces that are done for devotion. There's a form of Italian painting called *tavalo*. They are portable altars that fold. There's a middle and two wings. I guess it's the origin of the triptych. The outside flaps fold in and therefore they cover the sacred areas of the piece. They are devotional pieces ideal for travel and are as portable as a Book of Hours. I was realizing then, how much I admire devotional art. They also had a de Kooning called *Excavations* and it is a huge painting. Looking at it was like an excavation because we worked our way through layers. The devotional doesn't require the embodiment of religious form. My example is the de Kooning. Devotional art subverts temporal compulsion. It's there to inspire the verticality of one's psyche. It breaks the absorption in the relative allowing the mind of devotion to selflessly rest on phenomena. From a Buddhist's point of view the idea of trying to resolve yourself within the relative world is considered futile. I'm a person with neurosis and sometimes it horrifies me. If I'm in a less stable state I will think, "For the next two hours I have to get this done." To what degree does that contaminate the nowness of the situation? It could be picking up shoes or getting things xeroxed. It becomes a temporal fixation bracketing the next area of the day. Then you can make dinner and someone will come over. But this can all come from a reference point of fear. Fear of negative capability makes for an addiction to the temporal.

So to me what's called "art" does refer to devotional art. This means art disrupts temporal absorption. This is not a new idea. When we view Egyptian pieces they disrupt verticality. Art at its wildest best is so vertical that it suggests that death is as present as life. Metaphorically this could be like seeing a film in a dark room, or seeing the world out of our own darkness.

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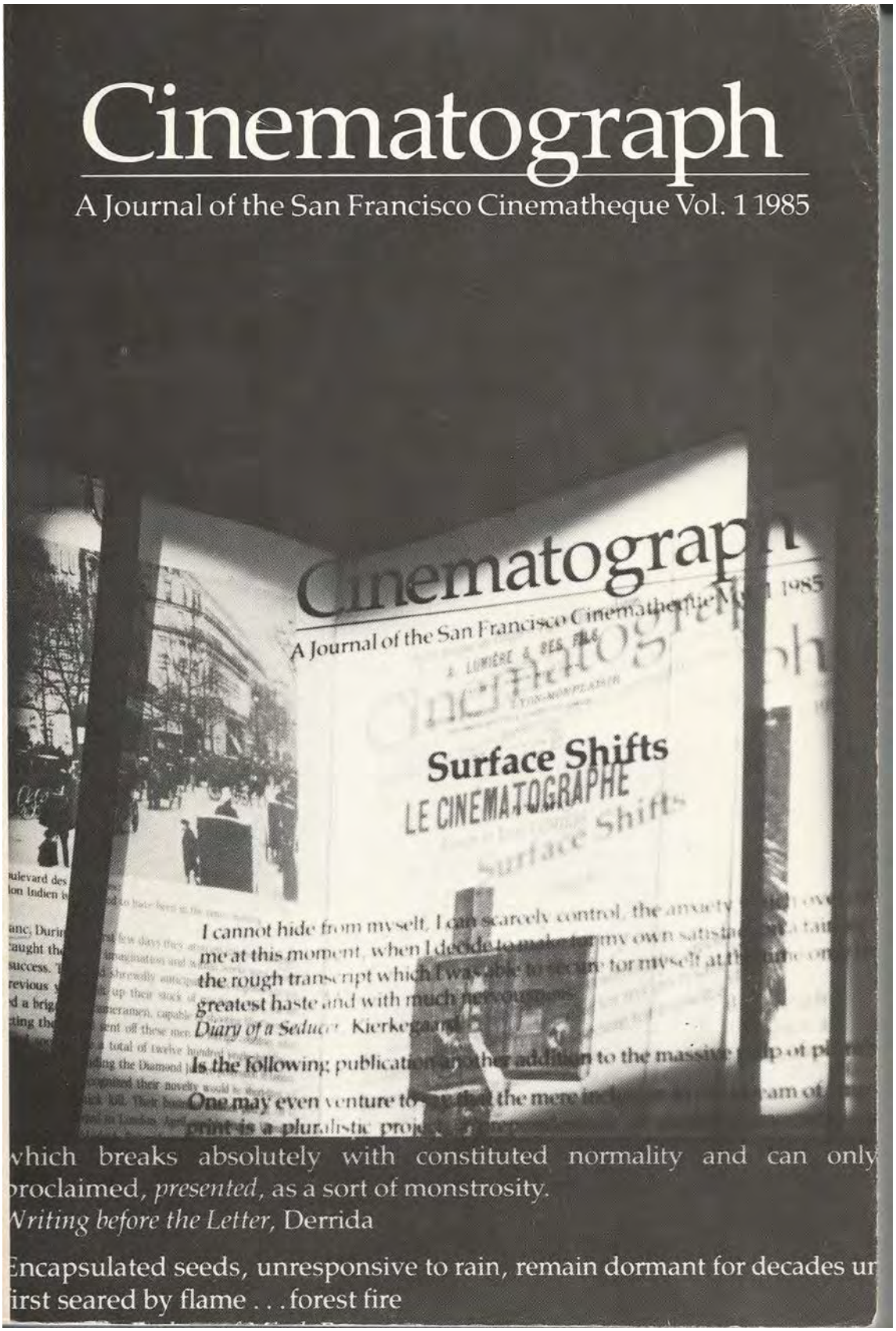

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"The State of the . . . Art"

by Nathaniel Dorsky

The Brakhage show at the Cinematheque was one of those wondrous evenings when mind and body came together and an audience was transformed. We were once again reminded of the privilege and potential of our independent "heresy," an independence which at its best is capable of expressing directly the purity of our experience. How often this independence is abused. How often our cinema is a cinema of the one "bright idea," or a cinema deadened by the will to overwhelm and impress. How often it is swallowed whole by the overly serious or visually frivolous. Our "hand-made" tradition is a unique opportunity in the history of human culture, one which may be seeing its final years. It should not be taken lightly at all. It is extraordinary.

There are a number of things to say about this excellent selection made by Willie Varela, and it is difficult to know where to begin. The evening had its own magic. The audience was completely attentive. The technical presentation, involving a number of projectors, was thoughtfully and precisely executed, and the highly detailed and responsive program notes all helped to create an atmosphere which enabled these delicate works to live and breathe; to manifest in their greatness, to open our hearts and enrich our intelligence.

So much has already been written on the films of Brakhage, the very best of which by Stan himself, that I would only like to comment in two areas. What really interested me most about the show were the regular-8 and Super-8 blow-ups to 16mm, what Brakhage refers to as the "translations." Since the late 1970s a special alchemy has been achieved. The physical lightness and spontaneous touch afforded by the smaller gauge camera is united with the luminosity and full-bodied color saturation of 16mm projection. The slight increase in diffusion and emulsion-presence in these works is the golden reward of this union. Something quite special is happening. The color qualities are subtle and penetrating and the montage simple and direct. There is a spark of energy on the cut, and the shots themselves journey into mystery. This mystery is expressed by a compelling dissonance of composition.

One must single out from this show "Burial Path," a poem of death and

rebirth, and "Unconscious London Strata," the dense and highly achieved work so well described in the program notes that follow, as two first-rate examples of this new alchemy. The latter was edited in 16 mm with footage translated from the Super-8. "Sexual Meditation #1: Motel," a regular-8 blow-up from an earlier period, is also very exceptional. Unfortunately, we in the Bay Area have had almost no chance to view perhaps the supreme works of this process to date, the "Arabic Numerals" series.

"Desert," which was an extremely strong film for me on the show, was shown as a Super-8 print. This work has an uncanny sense of presence, a feeling of life-force. Each shot thoroughly and continuously progresses within itself from the instant it is cut to till the instant it is cut from, then a leap. I have seen a number of others from this 1976 Super-8 series of ten films projected in Super-8: "Sketches," "Absence," "Window," and I must say, though normally I receive little pleasure from Super-8 color prints, these films are enormously successful. The 16 mm translations have been made, but I have not yet seen them.

An additional thought: the increased emulsion-presence or surface texture of these blow-ups resonates with its "literal" image. This resonance between the "seeing-process" and "what-is-seen" becomes itself a direct visual expression, or metaphor, of our own being *and* the world. There is both a unity and duality of "opposites." We are allowed to experience the entire thing.

The power of these recent works and the power of Brakhage films in general comes from their presence of mind. There is definitely someone at home, and this someone who is no one, is in love with reality. And that reality is felt and communicated by a stillness of mind which allows the mystery of the present to bloom in his audience. It is a timeless bloom. Its energy has nothing to sell and no axe to grind. Its fluidity rests on the surface of the eye. No one is maintaining anything. It is the self-existing energy of non-aggression. It is a cinema of unconditional exploration.

The great courage and thoroughness of this filmmaking activity, against all practical odds, is admirable. It is an inspiration. We are not witnessing mere avant-garde-ism, but wholehearted expressions of being. It is not particularly an intellectual or decorative pursuit. If the vitality of our heresy is to continue, we must remember to embrace cinema wholly; reflect clearly and directly our experience, abandon our trickery, and manifest in full ripeness our humaneness and our cinema.