



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 Dorsky (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.

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.



Jerome Hiler (Photo by Nathaniel Dorsky)

PETER BLUM GALLERY

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.

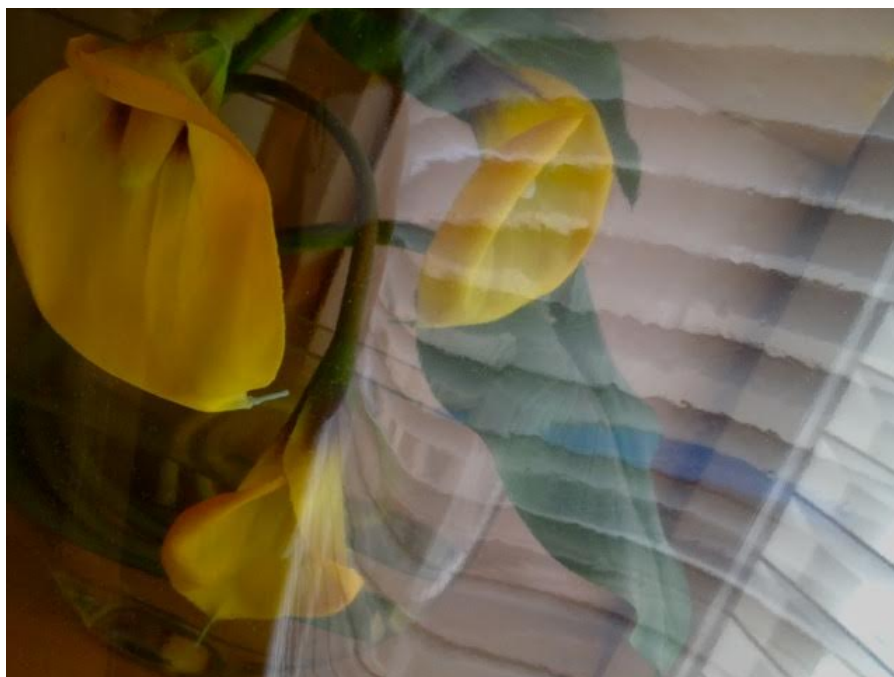
Cutler: How do you each feel about your work today?

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.

PETER BLUM GALLERY

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.



Dorsky'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>.*