



# 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."<sup>[1]</sup> 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."<sup>[2]</sup> 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."<sup>[3]</sup>

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.”<sup>[4]</sup>

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,”<sup>[5]</sup> 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.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Dissolves between visuals of players and leaves emphasizes the themes of transformation and maturation. Tenderness is the film’s foremost emotional register<sup>[7]</sup> 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,”<sup>[8]</sup> 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.”<sup>[9]</sup>

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.”<sup>[10]</sup> John Fiske similarly observes that the use of slow motion in mediating sports functions “to eroticize power, to extend the moment of climax.”<sup>[11]</sup>

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."<sup>[12]</sup> 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."<sup>[13]</sup> 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."<sup>[14]</sup>

*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."<sup>[15]</sup>

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.”<sup>[16]</sup> 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.”<sup>[17]</sup>

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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. ↩
9. Dorsky, interview. ↩
10. Dorsky, interview. ↩
11. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), 219. ↩
12. Thomas P. Oates, *Manliness and Football: An Unauthorized Feminist Account of the NFL* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 8-9. ↩
13. James L. Cherney and Kurt Lindemann, “Queering Street: Homosociality, Masculinity, and Disability in *Friday Night Lights*,” *Western Journal of Communication* 78, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 2. ↩
14. Dorsky, interview. ↩
15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-2. ↩
16. bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy,” in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 18. ↩
17. Morse, “Sport on Television,” 57. ↩