

Nathaniel Dorsky
Winter Light

Thursday, December 16 at 7 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Nathaniel Dorsky In Person
presented in collaboration with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
and in association with the Poetry Center

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. (P. Adams Sitney)

Sarabande (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm color, silent, 15 minutes, print from the maker
Compline (2009) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm color, silent, 18.5 minutes, print from the maker
Aubade (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm color, silent, 11.5 minutes, print from the maker
Winter (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm color, silent, 15 minutes, print from the maker
Pastourelle (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm color, silent, 16.5 minutes, print from the maker

“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.

“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 [Gregory] 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.

“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. [Stan] 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.

“[...] When Dorsky finally edited, from 1980 to 1982, the material he had shot between 1966 and 1970 into *Hours for Jerome*, [Warren] 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.'

“[...] 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.' Encouraged by his poet friends, Dorsky found the inspiration for this concept of cinema in his reading of John Ashberry'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* (1982) remains Dorsky's longest film. This two-part lyric was his first serious effort to create 'a place where film itself can be, can dream.' 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.' 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.

"[...] 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.

"*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.

"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."

Text drawn from "Tone Poems: P. Adams Sitney on the Films of Nathaniel Dorsky," published in *Artforum*, November 2007. The entire article is available at www.canyoncinema.com/catalog/filmmaker/?i=95