

**Entering the Cave:
Experiencing the Sublime in the Devotional Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky**

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We have all experienced moments when we realize that what is happening is dividing our lives into the time before and time after this very moment. These are transformative experiences that change us forever. One that remains vivid for me was my first visit to the cave of Niaux in France, one of the few illuminated Paleolithic caves where visitors were still allowed to view the wall paintings by lamplight.¹ With the long and arduous hike into the cool interior of the cave, I left behind the modern world and with it Walter Benjamin's musings on the state of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. I had entered a time and space where the aura of art prevailed. When our small group arrived at the entrance to a high domed "gallery," our guide told us to lay down our kerosene lanterns. She took up one lamp, and in the flickering firelight, she illuminated the great Salon Noir where magnificent figures of ibexes, bison, and horses were painted on the surrounding walls.

My first thoughts remain vivid to this day: these are not just paintings; this is the birth of cinema! The beautiful animal figures seemed to move in the intermittent light, a haunting representation of the living real bordering on the mysterious unknown. I felt with great conviction that there was nothing dividing me from the people who had painted these images. We may have been separated by thousands of years, but in that space, we were both present, artist and viewer, in the now. Whatever it was that made me a human being was what pulsed in the heart and soul of the painters of these magnificent friezes. I also thought of Plato's cave and how early Greek philosophy rejected ancient religious practices, scorned for trapping reality in a flickering image world of appearances. And finally I thought of my mother, a Sunday painter who more than anyone would have loved to be at my side to see these remarkable images in the firelight.

I never got to tell my mother about the cave and its wonders. Within a few days, she had died of a heart attack. In the tumult that followed, I thought it was death that had changed my life forever, but looking back, I realize it was also the flickering images dancing on the walls: my mother had stepped outside of relative time into the eternal Now, which is where those Paleolithic artists and I had met in communion across millennia. Such art is capable of revealing to us who we are and what really is.

This experience is what I seek in art, when the passage of time, which flows along unheralded and unexamined, suddenly shifts and I am brought into a heightened awareness of Being. Another way of saying this is that what I search for is the spiritual in art, an admission that still makes one suspect in any respectable gathering of art critics, curators, scholars or politically-correct academics.

A few artists have led me to such profound moments of awareness. One of these is Nathaniel Dorsky. I first saw his silent 16mm films at the New York Film Festival in the late Nineties. I wondered why I had never heard of his work before, not knowing of his long history with the experimental film movement and why, with his film *Triste* (1996), he had broken a 15-year absence by screening his new, mature work. I was overwhelmed by his short, silent-speed films that seemed to leave one in an open-ended space of contemplation. Dorsky seemed to take us inside the image, obeying a logic of contemplation that I think has more to do with the inhalation

¹ Today visitors are given flashlights to view the cave and its paintings.

and exhalation of breath than film theory. And his images, lasting anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, often seemed to contain entire universes—full of sudden surprises, changing emotions, shifts in light, focal length, and apparent content. Awe—a word that has become trivialized of late—is the word that best describes my response to his work. Wonder. Amazement. Delight.

P. Adams Sitney, writing about the sensuality immanent in Dorsky's imagery, praises it for its reductive minimalism. Sitney observes how Dorsky's films provide 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 his imagery suggests its evanescence. He also notes that Dorsky's polyvalent editing allows him to organize the shots and rhythms of a film so that associations resonate several shots later. As a result, viewers don't know what is happening or why until after a scene has past. In an interview with the poet Mary Kite, Dorsky commented: "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

Seeing Dorsky's films requires effort: they are not available on video or for streaming on-line. You have to watch them in the dark with a special 16mm projector that can be adjusted to silent speed—18 frames per second (fps). The rarity of Dorsky screenings produces a feeling of anticipation and pilgrimage for those who rent cars or take long train or bus rides to arrive at screenings in remote locations. There is also a sense of adventure, dedication, and purpose involved to going to see his films, and this contributes to the heightened experience of viewing his silent bursts of visual alchemy.

In film notes for the Canyon Cinema catalog, Dorsky explains the importance of silence and speed in his films:

The major part of my work is both silent and paced to be projected at 18 fps. (silent speed). To project my silent speed films at sound speed (24fps) is to strip them of their ability to open the heart and speak properly to their audience. Not only is the specific use of time violated, but the flickering threshold of cinema's illusion, a major player in these works, is obscured.

It is the direct connection of light and audience that interests me. The screen continually shifts dimensionally from being an image-window, to a floating energy field, to simply light on the wall. In my films, the black space surrounding the screen is as significant as the square itself. Silence allows these articulations, which are both poetic and sculptural at the same time, to be revealed and appreciated.

When I first saw Dorsky's work, I didn't know he was a Zen Buddhist, although the meditative nature of his works, with the absence of sound, the careful observation of light, and the odd but inspired incongruities of the material world should have tipped me off. I was studying Jewish mysticism at the time, and Dorsky had just released *Arbor Vitae* (*Tree of Life*, 2000). I wondered if he was alluding to the light at Creation that proved too powerful to be contained by all the vessels that the Ein Sof had created for it. And so the Light shattered into millions of sparks, some of which were trapped in material existence. According to kabbalistic tradition, the human task of *tikkun* (mending) is to free those sparks and return them to the Divine.³ In this film with its

² "Tone Poems," P. Adams Sitney, *Artforum*. Nov 2007, 46: 3, p.341-346.

³ Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Harper San Francisco, 1996, p. 15.

fragmented images including shattered mirrors reflecting the light of day, Dorsky seemed to envision cinematically and thematically the challenge of *tikkun*. I borrowed a car and took four of my students to Princeton to attend the seminar he gave on religion and cinema in 2001. Eric Zechman was one of them. Plucking up my courage, I cornered Dorsky after the lecture and asked him what he thought of my kabbalistic interpretation of his film. Thus began a warm professional friendship, and years later Dorsky has referred to the similarity between his ideas about “the energy at the moment of the cut” to the Jewish notion of holiness embedded in corporeal nature.⁴

The seminar also led to the publication of Dorsky’s exquisite monograph, *Devotional Cinema* (Tuumba Press, 2003).⁵ In it he writes that devotion is not about a specific religious form. “Rather, it is the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation. When film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world. It is alive as a devotional form.” (18) Dorsky observes how a film can produce a state of vulnerability in the audience, and “this heartbreak, this not not-knowing, is the catalyst that brings forth our renunciation and connects us to devotion.” (22)

He also writes about the movie theater as an illuminated room, a space of darkness comparable to the Paleolithic caves or the Gothic Cathedrals, where we see the visual world “as self-luminous and resting on a profound vastness, the mysterious darkness of our own being.” (26) For Dorsky cinema can make “the internalized Medieval and externalized Renaissance ways of seeing unite and transcend themselves” and thereby achieve a “transcendental balance” that unveils our earthly experience. Within this balance point the potential for profound cinema exists. (27-28)

I hope that those who are able to attend this symposium screenings of Dorsky’s four works—*Sarabande* (2008, 15 min.), *Compline* (2009, 18.5 min.), *Aubade* (2010, 11.5 min.), and *Winter* (2008, 21.5 min)—will discover this healthy balance Dorsky intends. Each is a work of compassion, as filmmaker Warren Sonbert says.⁶ Dorsky’s brief yet suggestive comments about each title leaves much to the viewer’s own imagination. Whether the film arises out of a poetic or musical form or a monastic prayer, it can propel us to a moment of transcendence. See what happens to you in the cave of Nathaniel Dorsky’s sublime, devotional cinema.

⁴ Sitney.

⁵ Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 2nd revised edition, Tuumba Press, 2003.

⁶ Sitney.