

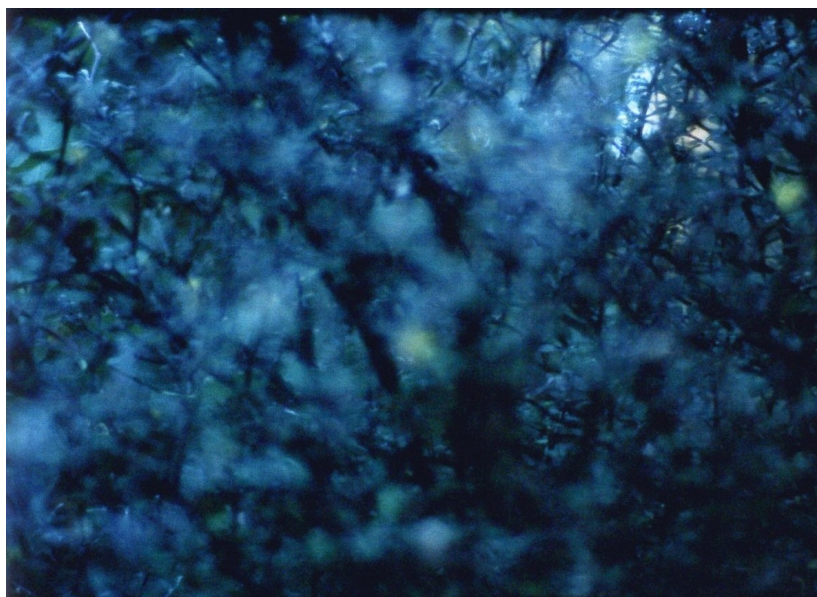
Feature

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 seen⁶, 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.



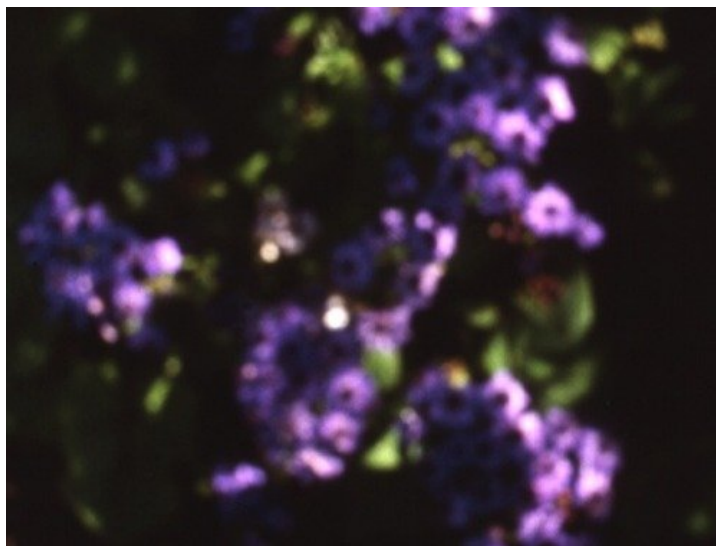
The first frame of the second film, *Abaton*, offers something like a slant rhyme with that of *Elohim*: both involve blossoms against a green ground, but *Abaton* lengthens the distance of the shot, placing the composition at ground level, rather than amidst the branches of a bush, in the process widening 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

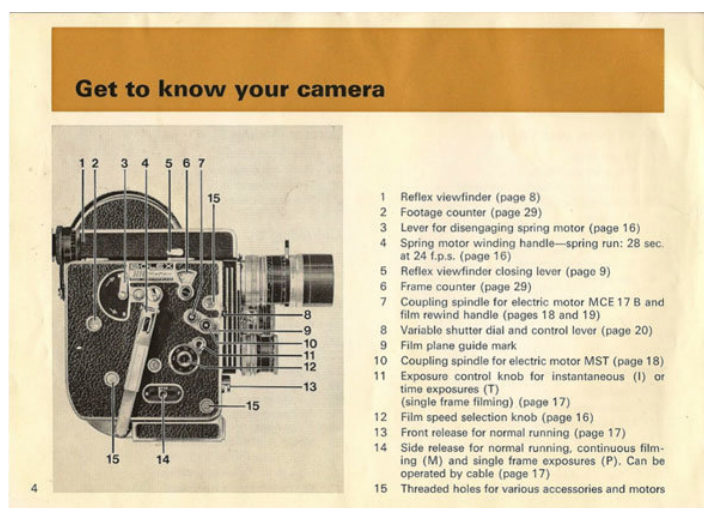
Coda and *Ode*, covering spring and summer, do indeed arrive with more wonders in the red-pink range of the spectrum than could have been anticipated. If this would seem to imply the more common narrative pleasures of time’s passing—the future tense of *Abaton*’s early blooms made good by incarnadine 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 as 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 same¹¹. 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.