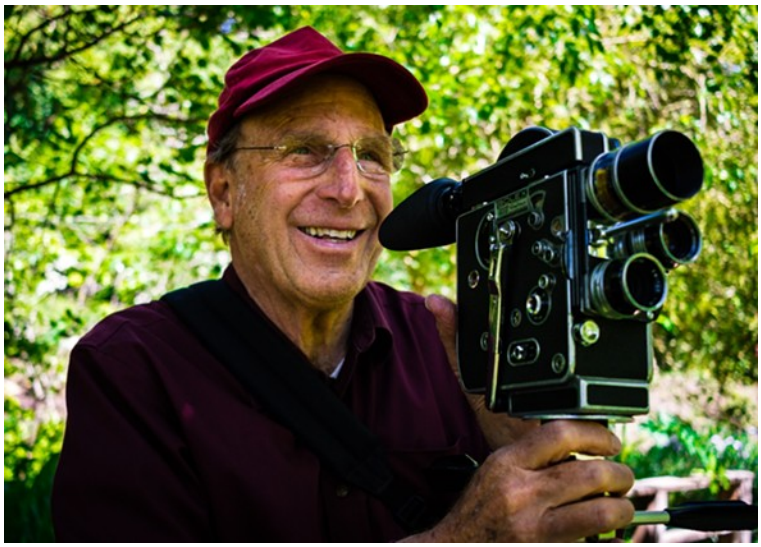
CHICAGO READER

Ecstasy on film: Nathaniel Dorsky discusses *The Arboretum Cycle*, his latest work of devotional cinema, which he'd prefer you watch alone

Posted By Ben Sachs on 09.24.18 at 06:00 AM



DANIEL BOGDANIC Nathaniel Dorsky shooting *The Arboretum Cycle*

This Friday at 7 PM, Northwestern University's Block Cinema will host one of the major cinematic events of the year with the local premiere of *The Arboretum Cycle* (2017), a collection of seven interconnected short works by veteran avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. One of the country's most important living film artists, Dorsky has been making meditative, generally rapturous movies since the early 1960s. He has described his practice as "devotional cinema" (he also wrote a book with that title in 2003), referring to the potential of movies to engender spiritual experiences. *The Arboretum Cycle* is doubtless one such experience. Shot in the San Francisco Arboretum over the course of a year, the work consists of silent shots of plant life, skies, and other natural phenomena. Dorsky's compositions are consistently inspired; eschewing wide shots, he forces viewers to lose themselves in minutiae. Last week I telephoned the filmmaker (who will attend Friday's screening) to discuss the cycle. Our far-ranging conversation came to touch upon spirituality, the ethics of editing, and what it's like to be a plant.

I'm not a religious person, but I often find spiritual experiences through art. For that reason, I admire your concept of devotional cinema—it speaks to the transcendent feelings I've had when engaging with meditative or ecstatic filmmaking. Could you discuss how you developed

this concept over the years and how it informs your filmmaking?

The name "devotional cinema" came from walking around the Art Institute of Chicago. I was showing films in Chicago some years ago, and I noticed in the museum that they called various works devotional works. Usually they were altarpieces of some kind. Like, they had this collection of Italian *tavolas*, these little triptychs that folded out—they were portable shrines that you could get during the Renaissance and carry under your arm. And these altarpieces were in themselves sublime and contemplative. If I were an artist at that time, that's what I would be making, probably.

Since the very beginning of my being involved in the American experimental film world in the early 60s, there was always some sense of [cinema] being like a church. There was this whole idea of wanting, on the Lower East Side, to find some church or old synagogue and turn it into a theater, with the screen being the altar. So that was all there, when I came into that world. . . . Also, when I was in my early 20s and smoked a lot of weed and watched and loved and respected the screen, I saw what different people could do with projectors and a screen to affect the spirit or the mind directly—not through narrative content, but through the actual kinesthetic qualities of cinema.

The way [the concept] came about, I was asked to teach a semester-long course at UC Berkeley—the generic "Avant-garde 101" course that all the students would take even if they weren't interested in film because it sounded like an easy course. I had never taught a semester—I had done an hour or two in somebody's classroom—and I began to prepare the class over the summer by walking around. I knew that Emerson—whose essays we all love and admire—had his notebooks, which had the stuff he'd write down daily and which would eventually develop into the essays that are so famous now. So I had a notebook and I just thought about things. And the basic structure of the class became the structure of the book.

I think that course was called "Film in Search of a Language," because I said that the most interesting thing to me about experimental film was the search for an intrinsic film language. I wasn't so interested in the "naughty" films or the extremist films. I was interested in ones that actually began to find some union between the essence of cinema and the ability to express something with that essence that wasn't based on theater or poetry. . . . Later, I got a chance to give a lecture at Stanford, just in a classroom, and I gave a talked that condensed [my course] into an hour-and-a-half-long talk. I called it "Montage and the Human Spirit," because it was an editing class that I was speaking in front of.

Then I was asked to give the keynote speech at this film and religion conference they were having at Princeton. I never really went to college—I mean, I went for a couple of semesters—so I didn't really know what a keynote speaker was. But I warped that same lecture, and that time I called it devotional cinema, after those things I saw in Chicago.

To go further into the relationship between montage and the human spirit, how do you go about editing a work like *The Arboretum Cycle*? The work, like many of your films, is soothing and meditative, but it doesn't rely on long takes the way some experimental films do. How do you decide on the length of your shots and when you choose to cut from one shot to another?

You see, I have actually been a meditation student, but I'm a sloppy meditator. I've studied with some very marvelous Tibetan teachers since the early '70s and . . . Well, to back up a little, I think

duration in cinema is not necessarily contemplative. It gets labeled as contemplative because shots are held for long, but that isn't necessarily contemplative at all. That can just be sadistic at worst or, at best, it can be a pose of some sort. I also notice that [filmmakers] use duration in combination with montage, and I personally find that form to be not full-hearted. Because at a certain point you're just waiting for the cut. Then the cut happens finally, and you go, "Oh, now I'm going to be *here* for 20 minutes."

For my own sense of timing, I'm limited on a practical level by the length of a Bolex [16-millimeter camera] wind, which is about 25 to 30 seconds. Of course, I could put a motor on my camera [to extend the length of the wind], but that's not quite who I am. I like to wind up. So, first of all, there's that built-in limitation. But, really, what it comes down to is holding a shot to the point where it ripens. Sometimes, in the montage, you want a shot to go a little bit beyond this point of ripening, because if the next shot has a lot of activity to it—say it's a moving shot of some sort—you might want to hold it a little longer to build up just a little bit of anticipation. Then the release of energy into the next shot is alive and manifest. If you hold a shot for too long after it ripens, then it begins to create discursive thought on the viewer's part. If you're going beyond the ripeness, the viewer thinks, "How long is this shot going to be?" And that isn't contemplative.

Cutting a film is very much like being a good lover or a good host. You offer something—not too much, not too little—and you're aware of what's going on in [the viewer's] mind. Sometimes after a preview screening, I'll trim some shots by, like, four frames, because I realize [the film] is just starting to get self-conscious. I'm beginning to go from the present moment into a secondary analysis moment. So I like to try to cut before the mind begins to decay into self-consciousness. . . . The montage should come out of the inner necessities of the work itself.

Film is often quite shallow, and in experimental film, the shallowness is often because the films are never responding to themselves. There's always an external hand or voice making the next move. So, in a way, the film never deepens; it's always in the same place. It should be a very organic response to reality, like when you know whether you're full or hungry.

Can you give an example of when you were making *The Arboretum Cycle* and the work responded to itself?

That happened all the time. The cycle started out as only the first film, *Elohim*. That's what it was going to be. And after I sent *Elohim* off to the negative cutter, I went out to the garden again. It was three weeks later. [I shot *Elohim*] in early spring; now we were in full spring. I got inspired, and I shot *Abaton*. And then I finished that and sent that off the lab; now I thought it was going to be a two-part film. Then I said, "Oh no, there's still a bit of late, late spring and early summer. There's this other kind of lightness." So I shot a coda, which I called *Coda*. Then I didn't stop. I went for 12 months. It was not planned that way. So in that way, the whole work was a response to itself—it came spontaneously through the year. It just flowed out of me and through me.

As for the editing within the films, there was no way I could have any idea about this movie. The only idea I had about the movie was that each section would be representative of the time of year [when it was shot]. And that wasn't really an idea; it was what the garden was, or is. But within the cutting, I had no plan but to choose the first shot and then see what was interesting after that first shot, what kind of energy would be most elevating or enlightening or invigorating.

Can you talk about the significance of these titles, *Elohim* and *Abaton*?

First of all, you must realize that the titles are just titles. They have to have a name like your dog has to have a name, right? You don't really question if your dog's name is Bipsy. What does Bipsy mean? It's Bipsy. So, on a certain level, they're handles, the titles. But they have to have some resonance for me. "Elohim" is Hebrew for "divine beings." It's actually a pre-Judaic word. In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis, God is referred to as Elohim, but Elohim is a plural, and this has driven religious scholars nuts. . . . I thought, the first film [depicts] early spring, which is kind of the awakening, looking around at the energy and so forth, and that's how it became *Elohim*.

Then the next film came along and I needed a title, and an *abaton* is a dormitory for sacred sleep in Greek healing centers. The most famous one was in Epidaurus, which I wrote about in *Devotional Cinema*. And the abaton was a safe place where you had this drug-induced sleep—maybe after some mushrooms and wine—and you cured yourself through dream revelation. So I just called [the film] *Abaton*. I couldn't defend the decision in court, though.

You mention these drug-induced or heightened experiences. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was 20 years old, and around that time, I looked back on my adolescence and started to realize how the disease had manifested itself before I was aware that I had it. I realized that the beginning of spring would always trigger a manic phase in me—I think it had to do with the increased daylight. I would have this preternatural surge of energy.

I understand. And did the greenery seem exquisite?

Yes, very much so.

I just want to interject—and then you can go on with your story, please—but there had been a

drought in California for five years [before I shot *The Arboretum Cycle*]. It only rains in the winter here, and if it doesn't rain in the winter, it's terrible. Because there's no snowpack. . . . So, it rained a lot starting in November, which is very early here. It just poured and poured. So that following spring released, like, five years of held-back energy. It was the most gorgeous spring. The earth was so alive, the plants . . . everything was going wild. And I got intoxicated by it, just drunk on how gorgeous the plant world was and the sky and the blowing clouds. Anyway, go on.

What you're describing is exactly what I experienced every spring when I was a teenager. When the plants were starting to bloom and the sunlight was hitting them in such a way, it was like being intoxicated. I've taken medication for 15 years now, and so I haven't experienced that mania in quite a while. In fact, I hadn't even thought about it for years. But when I was watching *The Arboretum Cycle* the other day and I saw the shots you captured of sunlight intensifying on leaves and flowers, I was taken back immediately. I've got to say, it felt good to experience that euphoria within this safe context of art, rather than have it erupt unexpectedly within me. What I'd like to know is, how did you capture light changing ever so gradually? It must have been fortuitous.

Let me tell what I was inspired by, and then I'll answer your question. San Francisco is often foggy, especially in the summertime. But where I live, near the Arboretum, which is not that far from the ocean . . . there are often days when the sun is dodging and ducking in and out of the fog. So things are getting lighter and darker all the time. I used to try to shoot that, because it's such a phenomenon here. There are times in the film when [the light effects] are actual, but the other times I did them myself, with the aperture of the lens. I got very deeply into it, very in the zone, so I would feel when the breeze was beginning and when I wanted to open up the light. I became a plant, in short, and joined the other plants in the reverie of the light.

From *Abaton*, the second piece of *The Arboretum Cycle*

Had you shot work in the San Francisco Arboretum before?

Oh yes. I have many films that have images from there. It's in walking distance from my apartment. It's a lovely place to hang out—it's like a sanctuary. You feel safe there. Like, you can leave your camera on a tripod, walk 20 feet away and look at something and know that nobody's going to run

off with it. It's a wonderful place to have a toke, you know. There are benches. . . . You can have the freedom to stand and stare at a plant for a few minutes without feeling strange or like you're outside of the social order.

Was anyone else at the preview screening besides you?

Just Block Cinema's programmer.

So you had a private screening! That's great. You're very, very lucky. I've seen it myself in private screenings with, like, two or three people. That's the best. There's nothing better than that.

I'm sure you also like it when the theater is full of people who want to see your work, right?

My vanity does, of course. But in reality, I don't know if that's best for the audience. I think five people at a time would be best. That way, you don't have other people's discursive rustling taking you out [of the film]. My films are very loved in New York, and we had three nights in a row of *The Arboretum Cycle* at the Anthology [Film Archives]; it was full every night. I wondered, "Are these New Yorkers going to want to see a whole film about a garden, flowers, leaves, and light?"
But people were into it. It was quiet—you could tell it was happening. I was very fortunate with this film, because, in a way, the three graces came together on it: the grace of light, the grace of plants, and the grace of cinema. They all became sisters in union.

This came out of years and years of experience of shooting with a Bolex. It was made by someone who's been shooting with a Bolex for 50 years, although I kept it casual—I didn't make it too pristine or too precise. I wanted a little sense of relaxation, as if you were actually seeing camera footage. So I left in flash frames and stuff, which I thought were duly expressive. I wanted to give the audience some of the pleasure of what it's like to see camera footage transformed into sublime montage.

Speaking of quiet, silence is an essential part of your films. . . .

Well, it's cheap.

Have you ever made films with a soundtrack?

I made three sound films when I was 20, but then the group of filmmakers I hung out with in New York—we admired the silent filmmakers. We thought they were more serious. Not that there aren't great sound films, but we thought that a lot of time, the silent films had this rigor of speaking with the film. . . . You know, a sound film is a double-sense medium. It speaks to your ear and eye. And the ear and the eye together produce a more socialized reality. A sound film is like your social sense of yourself, whereas I think a silent film is like your more intimate, vulnerable, private sense of yourself. It seems extraordinary that with film you can actually share silence with someone else—and not in a passive way, but in an active way, where the silence is palpable. It's an offer of tenderness and love to the audience.