



ART, FILM, INTERVIEW, REVIEWS

## “There is magic to be found in everything” – Looking at films by Nathaniel Dorsky

by MLP, edited by Martin Bremer | Photo by Verena Baumann | April 6, 2020

The following is a reproduction of an article written by Maximilien Luc Proctor for Ultra Dogme, a Berlin-based film and music blog ([ultradogme.com](https://ultradogme.com)). If you'd like to support Ultra Dogme, you can do so by visiting: [patreon.com/ultradogme](https://patreon.com/ultradogme).

The original article can be found here: <https://ultradogme.com/2020/04/06/dorsky/>

Nathaniel Dorsky began shooting on film in the early 1960s. He worked for many years as an editor and cameraman on various commercial film projects, which often had little to do with his personal interests as an artist. For him, there is a strict separation between a film made for money and a film made for personal reasons, and those personal reasons have kept him hard at work lately. “Of course both types of filmmaking have overlapping skills, as filmmaking is filmmaking,” says Dorsky.

While 1964 & '65 saw the completion of a trilogy via the titles *Ingreen*, *A Fall Trip Home*, and *Summerwind*, it wasn't until the '80s that he began to finish the editing of a number of works shot throughout the two preceding decades. His first magnum opus, *Hours for Jerome*, a two-parter named after his partner Jerome Hiler and running a combined 45 minutes, is listed as having been made between 1966/70-1982. That is to say, as far as I understand, it was filmed from 1966 to

## PETER BLUM GALLERY

1970, and then finally edited as a whole in 1982. In 2012 it was added to the U.S. National Film Registry. Despite such notoriety, his work remains difficult to see.



*Hours for Jerome*

Dorsky continued to produce a handful of works throughout the '90s – including the integration of footage shot much earlier – until the 2000s saw his productivity boom, during which he completed forty-one short films over twenty years. In 2017 he released his second magnum opus, a 137-minute film in seven parts, titled *Arboretum Cycle*. The following year saw another title appended to the cycle, *Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle)* — although this installment is typically screened independently. After hearing the rumblings of its superhuman beauty and otherworldly qualities, I found myself yearning to witness Dorsky's work firsthand.

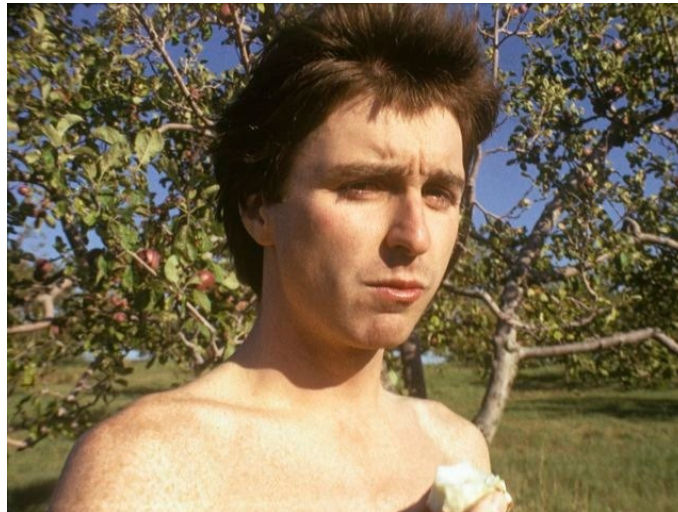
So much of film history is readily available thanks to the technological advancements made in my lifetime. My curiosity was further piqued by the absolute unavailability of Dorsky's films — he has never allowed for the digitization of his filmography, which was shot entirely on celluloid. His reasoning for staying loyal to the medium is explained on his blog. However, late in 2019, he also announced the first-ever authorized digitization of one of his films, *17 Reasons Why* (1985-87), for the occasion of MoMA's exhibit, *Private Lives, Public Spaces*. Finally, someone could afford to produce a digitization which did justice to Dorsky's preferred silent speed projections. (While most of his work is intended for projection at 18 frames per second, *17 Reasons Why* is screened at 16 frames per second.)



*Hours for Jerome*

As I began to dive beyond my surface knowledge of the New American Cinema, I learned of less-talked-about filmmakers who were still of tremendous importance to the formation of the medium and its possibilities: Gregory Markopoulos, Ron Rice, Harry Smith, Jack Smith, Carolee Schneeman, Shirley Clarke. Yet, another name which kept popping up was Jerome Hiler's. He appeared time and again on the fringes, assisting Markopoulos on, and even creating some props for, *The Illiac Passion* (1964-67), as well as shooting the photograph of Markopoulos which later served as the cover of *The Visible Press'* 2014 tome, *Film as Film: The Collected Writings of Gregory J. Markopoulos*.

Screenings of Hiler's films have proven even more challenging to locate than those of Dorsky, at least in Europe (or more generally outside the states of New York and California). I eagerly await the opportunity to see more of the promise exuded by the only excerpts I have managed to find in this video profile: *Jerome Hiler's films are also distributed by Light Cone in Paris, with five titles currently in their library and several others soon to be released. In the U.S. his work is distributed by Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. For anyone interested in learning more about Hiler's artistic practice, I highly recommend this in-depth interview.*



*Hours for Jerome*



## PETER BLUM GALLERY

Shortly after hearing about Nathaniel Dorsky, I began to keep an eye on Light Cone, the Paris-based distributor of his films for Europe. By virtue of their website's remarkable 'Agenda' feature, which lists any upcoming screenings as soon as the prints are reserved for rental, I discovered a summer screening hosted by the Multimedia Institute Zagreb and knew I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I got in touch with Petar Milat, gracious host of the screening, and found out that they were not only exhibiting the works for free, but had also produced a Croatian translation of Dorsky's vital 2003 text *Devotional Cinema* to mark the occasion. (Petar also generously gifted me copies of two of the institute's latest translations, *Film and Art After Cinema* by Lars Henrik Gass, and *Tomislav Gotovac – Life as a Film Experiment* by Slobodan Šijan.)

The first night of the program consisted of *Hours for Jerome*, *Triste* (1974-96), *Variations* (1992-98), *Arbor Vitae* (1999-2000), and *Love's Refrain* (2000-2001). The second night was the third-ever European screening of the *Arboretum Cycle* (2017), with breaks added according to Dorsky's personal instructions; *Elohim*, *Abaton*, *Coda*, *Ode*, *September*, *Monody*, and *Epilogue*

Before you've seen them, it's not easy to describe what makes these images so special, they are *images* first and foremost. Once you have seen them, their imprint in memory is remarkable, as they are so easily summoned by simple descriptions: my notes were littered with phrases like "tree shadow on escalator" or "text shadow on curtains," which bring the images to the mind's eye in a way that feels precise and clear. "Clouds trapped between buildings."



*Arbor Vitae*

Countless images re-manifest in various forms: a white horse in *Triste*, a brown horse in *Arbor Vitae*. The color red, cars, reflections, stark afternoon sun which produces well-defined shadows of flowers, leaves and branches. In *Variations*: golden fingernails pointing out golden jewelry. A shimmering golden sea. Baseball & Tai chi. The text's shadow from the transparent door floats over the patrons as they enter. An abandoned cigarette. A plastic bag blowing in the wind. A high heel on golden asphalt. Golden leaves. *Triste* opens and closes with Brakhage-esque abstractions.

A number of appearances build our intimacy as an audience with Jerome. When he makes his first appearance in *Triste*: it is striking to see him over twenty years later, and only twenty minutes after *Hours for Jerome*. The latter begins with a glowing miraculous light. Then, extreme close-ups of TV static interspersed with such small gifts as a record spinning in close-up: light reflected into

swiveling blue on black. A flickering telescope-cropped view reveals itself to be the moon. An airplane is transformed into a jittery UFO. A rapid stop-motion zoom-in-and-out dismantles the trees' stability.

I strive here to capture the 'concrete' elements of the film images rather than the feelings they stirred in me if only for the sake of sharing their direct contents with those who have not yet had the chance to witness them firsthand.

After the screening I reached out to Nathaniel to see if he might be willing to answer a few questions. I had originally planned to provide them here as a lesson in humility: I made the mistake of trying to sneak several questions into each 'individual' one — after we had agreed on seven — and as such was promptly put in place by single-sentence (often one-word) responses. Months later, upon seeing a near-final draft of this article, Nathaniel noted that he had no memory of the 'interview' until seeing it here, and that it was clear based on his short answers that I had caught him in a terse mood at the time, leading him to offer to improve upon those answers. I present here the revised answers.



*Love's Refrain*

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**MLP: 1. On several occasions you've mentioned Freud and his comments about shapes being formed on the insides of our eyelids while we dream. Do you ever take inspiration from your own dreams? That is to say, I understand you usually make a film by going out into the world with an open spirit and making discoveries, but do you ever see an image in a dream which you are then compelled to seek out a parallel for in the physical world?**

ND: I only recall once trying to create a visual effect that I witnessed in a dream. But basically, no, I do not use images from my dreams... but I do very much try to watch my mind, especially upon waking or dozing off, to see how the mind constructs image progressions from moment to moment.... that is extremely important to my filmmaking.

**2. Do you consider your work to be a part of Transcendentalism?**

Very much in that spirit. I remember in junior high school doing an oral report on the

transcendentalists and the beat poets.... since very young I have been very taken with the traditions of mysticism in art.



*Monody*

3. I know you admire the work of Dreyer, Bresson, Ozu, Ford, Rossellini, Brakhage, Chambers. You've cited in particular the pioneering power of *Stagecoach*, *Ordet*, *Anticipation of the Night*, and *Hart of London*. Have you seen any specific work made in the last decade (or by more contemporary filmmakers in general) which seems intent on pushing what you call "the intrinsic film language" forward in similar ways? Do you consider your *Arboretum Cycle* an attempt at such a push?

Yes, the Cycle was a return to a film on a single subject... in the late seventies I made a film called *Alaya* whose visual subject was only sand and wind... after two decades of polyvalent editing, I had an innate desire to go deeper by limiting myself of only shooting in this local garden eventually over 12 months and including no other images in terms of subject matter.



*Abaton*



I very, very, very rarely see a contemporary experimental film that goes beyond the decorative. It is all a little sad to me.... a young filmmaker, [Zack Epcar](#), is one of the very few who I have seen who understand that film must grow from its own needs and not be simply manipulated image progression from the outside, so to speak.

**4. You've spent your life learning "how to translate the randomness of everything into the container of the film," and after *Triste*, which was shot entirely on a tripod with a zoom lens, you made the switch to shooting *Variations* completely handheld and without zooms. Did this technical change help at all in smoothing the translation process?**

The trouble with the zoom lens, which I very, very rarely used to zoom in a normal fashion, is that the length of the lens brings your balance point of a lens far out front of the camera. Using the simple three prime lenses allows for a much more intimate caress of the world... a much better sense of love making rather than collecting the world as an object.



*Triste*

**5. Many of your dark shots of flowers and plants end up looking like images of the cosmos, or the shadows of branches on concrete resemble neurons, and often take some time to settle in before we understand what we are actually looking at – it's a beautiful effect. Was this a conscious decision to make the familiar seem alien or a natural result of your process?**

One tries to touch on the universal form rather than specific nameable objects. One is trying to "see" the unseeable, to bring forth the depth and mystery of the created situation we take for granted as "life".

**6. While watching your image of a plastic bag blowing in the wind (in *Variations*) I couldn't help but recall *American Beauty*, in which a kid with a camcorder captures a similar image (though yours of course came several years earlier). Do you think of yourself as an amateur? And to what degree do you find Brakhage's essay *Defense of Amateur* important**

to today's film culture?

The amateur at best is not using film for capital gain or recoupment.... the amateur takes the risk of love.



*Ode*

7. As someone who became interested in cameraless films based on the materiality of celluloid (I'm thinking especially of the Brakhage-esque beginning and ending of *Triste*) but grew up primarily with access to digital equipment (I did shoot a few rolls of 16 in college and I have recently joined a celluloid lab collective), I have attempted to reproduce some of those abstract textures digitally, in a way which plays to a few of digital's strengths. I know that as a true celluloid purist you already consider Kodak after Kodachrome to be 'wimpier,' but do you think attempts to develop similar aesthetics digitally are in vain, or that there might be some magic to be found there as well?

There is magic to be found in everything... the mistake is to take the magic of one element and apply it to another... that is decay and a mistake... one must find the essence magic of each individual thing.

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In the email which accompanied the original, shorter answers, he added, "Perhaps I have answered your questions. Perhaps I have less to say these days. I would like to be helpful but perhaps I am not capable right now." And, "Perhaps a conversation would be more helpful. Sorry for love's labors lost."

I trusted a proper conversation would come when the time was right, and most likely not for the purposes of an article.





*Variations*

Slightly dismayed and unsure how to proceed with the piece at that time, I left it on the back burner for further contemplation. Several months later I noticed a new Dorsky screening under his 'Agenda' on Light Cone, and in my own backyard this time: Frankfurt. The program was titled "3x2 aus dem Light-Cone-Archiv: Dorsky / Lowder / Saito" featuring two brilliant films by each of these three filmmakers. Hosted by Pupille – Kino in der Uni, the screening consisted of: Lowder's *Tartarughe d'Acqua* (2016) and *Bouquets 1–10* (1995); Saito's *Trees of Syntax*, *Leaves of Axis* (2009) and *Engram of Returning* (2015); and Dorsky's *Apricity* (2019, in its European premiere) and *Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle)* (2018).

A note from Dorsky about *Apricity*: "The title *Apricity* refers to the warmth of the sun in winter. It is an homage to the writer Jane (Brakhage) Wodening. In speaking to her I mused, 'perhaps your age is the winter and you are the warmth of the sun.'" He has noted that Jane's writing is blessed with "a pure high alpine stream bubbling clarity."

In *Apricity*, Dorsky returns to his usual obsessions, the shadows of letters projected through a window via intense afternoon sun, the color gold (as in *Variations*), heavy blankets of cloud (as in *Triste*), closeups of dense foliage, playing with focus and exposure (as in the *Arboretum Cycle*). But then come some surprises: an extreme close-up of a yellow glob otherwise surrounded by black, bubbles reduced to frantic swaths of tiny rainbows (it took a minute and some context to understand what I was witnessing here), and ending on an actual, clear, fully visible person (Jane Brakhage Wodening) walking through winter trees which have shed their leaves and are just beginning to show their buds, twiggy branches embracing and surrounding her. *Apricity* is a compact amalgam of Dorsky's aesthetic interests and magical abilities — a reminder that his work always breathes.



*Apricity*

On *Colophon's* relationship to *Arboretum Cycle*, Dorsky notes, "Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle) has three sections. It is in the spirit of the early Chinese landscape colophons, a text added to the horizontal scroll at a later date from when the landscape itself was enacted. Colophon was not made to be shown along with the Arboretum Cycle, but a new thing, a spring later, a different maker, so to speak." The film opens with an extreme close-up on pixels, seen through a window reflecting pedestrians. It ends with an extreme close-up corresponding image in nature: spots on the water's surface, reflecting the trees above.

When I wrote to Dorsky again nearly ten months after we first exchanged emails, he was understandably confused, "where are you? Berlin?... where did you see my films?" He is particular about screenings and they are always studiously noted in advance on his blog. I sent him my short video piece, *LIBRA*, mentioning it was strongly influenced by his own work. He answered that he watched it in the middle of "a night with some scare about Corona" and found it helpful. I reminded him of our exchange from last summer and the screenings I had traveled to. He thanked me for being a loyal filmgoer. When I asked if he had been watching any films in quarantine, he replied, "no movies are playing.... only working on my own films... and a very new one, *Lamentations*, just out of the lab..."

As I noted recently on the working methods of James Benning and Hong Sang-soo, I admire the perseverance of filmmakers like Dorsky, who continue to work for the sake of the work, every image a reflection of an innate interest in simply furthering their technique and emotional intention step-by-step; drafting and re-drafting in real time. I admire this method because I find it lends a certain honesty so desperately lacking in so many commercial moving image works. It allows a passion for the pure act of photographing motion to shine plainly on the screen for all to see, and while Dorsky's stringent restrictions in regards to screening his work exclusively on celluloid might seem radical, he's right that the screened reel comes alive in a manner impossible for digital files to fully reproduce.