

## **Light Within Darkness: The Films of Nathaniel Dorsky**

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In the book that we are commemorating, Kandinsky argued that artists, in order to fulfill their promise as prophets and guides to their contemporaries, must move away from materialism toward the internal truth that is the currency of art—"the internal truth of art, the soul without which the body can never be healthy, whether in an individual or in a whole people." Writing in 1911, as he was making his own transition from representational to abstract painting, Kandinsky issued a call to artists to return to an art that recognizes inner meaning and the life of the spirit, rather than the materialist approach of "art for art's sake" that he claimed was squandering the power of art to speak to man's deeper nature.

What meaning could such a call have for today? Is it possible, or even desirable, after the end of the so-called modernist project, to speak with any legitimacy about the "truth" of art? Undoubtedly, the idealism about the role of the artist and the universality of fundamental truth that underlies Kandinsky's words has worn extremely thin in the intervening century. Yet leaving aside his idealism and the archaic language, the larger question that arises from a contemporary reading of his text—the question of whether and how contemporary art relates with the spiritual—is certainly worthy of consideration as we move forward into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As an adjunct to the open discussion that we are planning in the online symposium, we have chosen to feature the work of an artist who exemplifies a passionate commitment to making art that is not afraid to speak to the existence of an inner life. Nathaniel Dorsky makes films that explore the potential of purely cinematic language to communicate a direct experience of the ineffable nature of being. Obviously, I am wary of making such a statement, as it risks reducing a varied and complex body of work (which is by its very nature aiming to express something beyond the limits of language) to a simple slogan or concept that fits the needs of our project.

Fortunately, Dorsky himself has provided a guide to his view and intentions in his book, *Devotional Cinema* (2003). Like the Kandinsky text that is the leaping off point for our exploration of the spiritual in art, it is a slim, potent text. In it, he outlines his views about the nature of the film medium and the potential for it (and by extension, all art) to evoke the mystery of human experience. He has said that he wants to make films that express what it is like to be—films that use seeing as way to express being. As he has stated in an interview, "The idea is not to take pictures of something, but to allow the camera to become of the world and have the screen simultaneously become of the world and become a world."

Dorsky writes of encountering avant-garde films in the early 1960s, works that were discovering a language unique to film, “a language where film itself became the place of experience, and at the same time, was an evocation of something meaningfully human.” This opens the door to the transformative potential of film, which in his view can positively affect the psyche of the audience, offering a potential opening to a deeper appreciation of our humanity. However, for film (or any medium) to achieve that level of expressiveness, it has to join the immediacy of visual perception with an appreciation of the material qualities of the medium.

A key quality of film that Dorsky emphasizes is its metaphorical relationship to how we see. In effect, he argues that when we watch a film, it replicates our experience of vision; our eyes look out of our skull and perceive shapes—light and darkness that our mind interprets as the objects of a solidly existing world. This makes it possible for film to explore the tension between perception and existence—is what we see really out there or is it only an aspect of our mind? In Dorsky’s view, neither perspective is wholly accurate, and his films attempt to achieve what he terms a “transcendental balance” that can point the way to an acceptance of the “transparency of our earthly experience.”

Dorsky works in the tradition of the lyrical film, which, as P. Adams Sitney notes in his book *Visionary Film*, typically positions the filmmaker’s vision as the protagonist of the work. In such a film we are aware of the filmmaker’s presence and vision and have some understanding of how he is reacting to what he sees. In Dorsky’s films we are clearly aware of the intensity of his vision and his presence behind the camera as he seeks out the beauty and mystery inherent in the everyday world. Yet he manages to open up the form by working with the shots in a way that feels more collaborative than authorial, intuiting the internal voices of the images themselves and allowing them to speak for themselves.

It is in this delicate balance between the filmmaker’s vision and the inherent energy of the individual shots that Dorsky demonstrates the strength of his discipline as an artist. Allowing each shot to “ripen” almost to the point of fullness, he draws the viewer into deeper communion with the image only to cut to the next shot, interrupting the viewer’s absorption and engendering a shift in perception, a gap (or break) in the viewer’s attention that brings one back to the present moment. It is as if the “shock” of the cut from one shot to the next, coming as it does at a moment of heightened attention, is the opening to an experience of direct perception, without logic, without preconception, without even a sense of oneself: just seeing what is.

Writing of the artist’s potential to see something other than the purely material world (something less “solid,” less “bodily”), Kandinsky attempted to articulate a position between matter and spirit, the material and the immaterial. That is where he located the work of the artist and the internal truth that he argued only art can discover and express.

Nathaniel Dorsky works with the inherent qualities of film, using images of the purely material world to create work that points to the immaterial. And he is confident of its potential to communicate that experience to the viewer. At the close of his book, he states, “That the

ineffable quality of vision can be expressed by projected light within darkness gives film great power. When a film is fully manifest, it may serve as a corrective mirror that realigns our psyches and opens us to appreciation and humility.”

I find Dorsky’s films to be a potent argument for the ability of film to speak to the spiritual aspect of what it means to be human. It is in that potential to continuously reconnect the viewer with a sense of presence (or “nowness,” in Dorsky’s lexicon) that his films manage to speak to the ineffable, opening one up to an experience that transcends the purely visual and revealing the flickering balance between what is seen with one’s eyes and felt within one’s being. Whether such an approach can be extended successfully to other art forms and the work of other artists remains an open question. It is my hope that presenting his films in the context of this conversation will both enliven the discussion and perhaps point the way to further understanding of the potential role of art in the full expression of our humanity.