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The Sacred Wood: Nathaniel Dorsky's *Arboretum Cycle*

by Max Goldberg

The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them...

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

Strange as it sounds, I sometimes think that Nathaniel Dorsky's films are never clearer than when they slide out of focus.

Dorsky often remarks that his films work best when the viewer isn't trying to understand them, but these shots make sure of it.

With nothing to do, the mind is apt to grow restive, drowsy, or both. But in that moment of abandonment, we may yet come

back to our senses. All it takes is a bug flying across the

foreground of the shot, or even a speck of dirt flecking the 16mm print, to realize, with a start, that the image itself is in fact perfectly in focus. We are so habituated to thinking of focus in terms of the thing being photographed that it can feel a little woozy uncoupling the two, but we taste the difference when the film cuts back to a standard focus shot and it seems to float, suspended in open awareness.



Epilogue.

However it is that Dorsky's poetic films clear the ground for this kind of intensely subjective activity, *Elohim* (2017) makes a special point of it. In its radical simplicity and unbroken emphasis on seeing as such, the film hearkens back to his *Alaya* (1976-1987), an intimate epic composed entirely of shots of sand and, for me, one of the most beautiful films ever made. *Elohim* is also a single-subject work in the sense that it was shot entirely in Golden Gate Park's arboretum. Dorsky's films are primarily shot within walking distance of his apartment—one thinks of Thoreau's having "traveled a good deal in Concord"—but there is an appreciable difference in limiting himself to a single location and thus removing the drama of cutting from place to place in the montage.

Elohim's place-based framework corresponds with a deeper shift in Dorsky's filmmaking style. As he remarked to Scott MacDonald in a 1999 interview, "When you go into polyvalent editing ... the *place* is the *film*." In Dorsky's work that place can be thought of as a garden, gracefully anticipating the viewer's needs for sunlight and shade, enjoyment and sanctuary. But in *Elohim*, the garden is a given. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, then, the montage feels less taken up with its own articulation. In Dorsky's earlier films, the exploratory spirit of the camerawork is tempered by the exacting justice of the cuts—a balancing act aptly conveyed by Jack Spicer's line, "Love makes the discovery wisdom abandons." In *Elohim*, as in *Alaya* before it, the balance bends back towards first sight and a more primordial sense of order.

This unobtrusive editing can make it feel like we are watching raw camera footage. Another measure of *Elohim*'s nakedness is that many of the most dynamic shifts occur within shots, with Dorsky adjusting the aperture to open the landscape to sunlight or send its bright points diving into darkness. (I've heard the filmmaker liken these improvisations to vibrato, but for me the effect evokes a breathing animal.) Many of the actual cuts are hidden in these dark patches, such that it can be difficult to discern where one shot ends and the next begins. In this way, the allover approach to composition is extended into the realm of montage.

There were earlier intimations of this realignment, especially in *Avraham* (2014). Inspired by his study of the Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov, Dorsky made the piece by walking around and exposing film whenever he encountered something that seemed to be of Abraham. Maybe because the film wants to stay true to these found illuminations, there is a straightforward, successive quality to the cuts. The difference is that where *Avraham* goes in search of the miraculous, *Elohim* dwells in it.

Avraham concludes, magnificently, with a tree rooted in standing water: a vision of unification, and a premonition of the grand arboretum adventure to come. At early screenings of *Elohim*, Dorsky would let on that he had already cut another arboretum film, all the while maintaining the circumspect air of a ballplayer not wanting to jinx a hitting streak. Well, now it can be written: the *Arboretum Cycle* spans seven films and the arc of a year (the first, significantly, following California's ferocious drought). *Elohim* is followed by *Abaton*, *Coda*, *Ode*, *September*, *Monody*, and *Epilogue* (all 2017). It's not the first cycle in Dorsky's oeuvre—the quartet of *Sarabande*, *Winter* (both 2008), *Compline*, and *Aubade* (both 2010) made for a fitting farewell to Kodachrome—and really this seven story mountain is the least monumental of epics. Each shot gives way, light as a feather, a quantum of pure presence.

Given *Avraham* and the fact that the first shot of the *Arboretum Cycle* says "Elohim," I find myself reaching for Abraham Heschel's *The Sabbath* for a better handle on the nature of Dorsky's commitment. "Judaism," Heschel writes, "teaches us to be attached to holiness in time ... to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year." Dorsky has himself often remarked on the sabbath quality of his films, but the *Arboretum Cycle* resonates especially strongly with the injunction to rest, to touch time immemorial. In the same interview with MacDonald, he refers to Stan Brakhage's observation that *Triste* (1974 – 1996) lacks vanishing points and thus any suggestion of an outside observer. The *Arboretum Cycle* does something similar with time. Unlike Dorsky's earlier films, there are no people walking into cafés, no cars floating down the street—no actions, in other words, with a clear beginning and end. Here things only flutter and swirl: branches in the breeze, sunlight in the branches, dabbed by eternity.

The experience of watching the *Arboretum Cycle* in its entirety is in some very large sense stunning. It is also reinforcing, with two hours being ample time to take root and bear fruit in the quality of attention. *Elohim* becomes clarified as a kind of purification ritual, its exquisite stillness persisting into *Abaton* until an extraordinary gust of wind—and with it the thunderous applause of trees—sets us on our way. This

flourish is of a piece with the crescendos that leave so many of Dorsky's films on high, but the other films of the *Arboretum Cycle* merely take a short bow before making way for the next turn of the season. By *Monody* and *Epilogue*, it begins to feel that the forest is filming itself. (The fact that we see the arboretum alternatively as garden and forest speaks to the cycle's free reign in the imagination.) Nothing so tangible as a diary, the *Arboretum Cycle* nevertheless conveys the human-sized happiness of Emerson's "Circles:" "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle." Questions pertaining to both logistics and metaphysics lead back to the same place: the art practice as second nature.

For the viewer, the *Arboretum Cycle* may prove more medicinal, accentuating those meditative, pastoral aspects of Dorsky's filmmaking that go against the grain of a culture that would only capitalize on our attention. In this sense the most important thing about the arboretum is not that it is beautiful, but that it is close at hand. Cinema has from its earliest beginnings promised the moon, but the *Arboretum Cycle* asks what it's like having nowhere to be. There is very little sky across these seven films, but the golden light suffusing *Epilogue*'s final shots leaves little doubt that heaven is everywhere you look.

The *Arboretum Cycle* will screen at Anthology Film Archives, May 11 – 13, 2018. (anthologyfilmarchives.org)

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