

2018

Nathaniel Dorsky: religion, Buddhism and film

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

NATHANIEL DORSKY:
RELIGION, BUDDHISM AND FILM

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2018

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Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Bryan Stone for his dedicated advising of this dissertation. I would also like to express my gratitude for the academic guidance and inspiration of my committee members: Roy Grundmann, David Eckel, Charles Hallisey, and Laura Harrington.

In addition, I would like to thank my friends Seema Golestaneh, Adam Shinar, and Stephanie Secolsky for their humor and intellectual and emotional support.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest appreciation for my husband Nathan Stein for his quiet and steadfast presence at every point along the way.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the life, films, and manuscript, *Devotional Cinema*, of American Buddhist experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky (1943-present). Dorsky's work shifts the point of intersection between religion and film from the ability of movies to immortalize subjects, engage with eternal themes, or provide experiences of transcendence to the immanence of the materials of film, and by extension the contingency and impermanence of our lives. His approach has developed religious meaning in keeping with particular Buddhist teachings and meditation practices by opening up possibilities of how films might *do* religion, revealing the ways the study of religion and film can become a means of expanding and refining our vision of religion itself.

Dorsky's life intersects with a variety of significant institutions, leaders, and communities of American Buddhism and avant-garde film from the 1950s to the present. His story illustrates a history between religion and film unique in its fluidity, hybridity,

and symbiosis: he has studied Buddhism with Asian Buddhist emissaries like Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who engaged in and wrote about filmmaking as a mode of Buddhist knowledge; he is among a collection of American avant-garde filmmakers who experimented with Buddhist ideas and practices in their lives and work; and has been a friend and follower of Stan Brakhage, a leader of a particular lineage of 1960s avant-garde film, who voiced religious devotion to film itself. By situating Dorsky within American Buddhism and avant-garde film, I consider the religious depth underlying his work, challenge definitions of authenticity present within Buddhist and religious studies, and examine the intensity and diversity of religious aspirations among filmmakers and enthusiasts. Doing so encourages a reading of *Devotional Cinema* and Dorsky's films that highlights the physicality and temporality of film in religious understanding, emphasizing the worldly, material, diverse, contingent, and impermanent dimensions of both.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American Buddhist experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky writes in his book *Devotional Cinema*:

The relationship between religion and cinema is something that I have spent my life thinking about—not where religion is necessarily the subject of film, but where *film itself*¹ is the spirit or experience of religion. (Dorsky 2014, 17)

This project is a study of Dorsky’s life, his films, and *Devotional Cinema*, inspired by the question of what it means for “film itself” to be the “spirit or experience of religion.”

Dorsky’s life provides a window into a historical and theoretical intersection between American Buddhism and a particular vein of avant-garde film exemplified by filmmaker and theorist Stan Brakhage, where reflecting on the material contingency and impermanence of film becomes a shared nexus of religious seeing and practice. Thinking about Dorsky and his work in the context of other work within the field of religion and film shifts the point of intersection between religion and film from the ability of movies to immortalize subjects, engage with eternal themes, or provide experiences of transcendence, to acquainting us with the immanence of the materials of film, and by extension the contingency and impermanence of our lives. Studying Dorsky’s work, which develops religious meaning in keeping with particular Buddhist teachings and meditation practices, opens up possibilities of how films might *do* religion;² while revealing the ways the study of religion and film can become a means of expanding and

¹ Italics added for emphasis

² This phrase is in response to Melanie Wright’s question of “how film might move from depicting religion to ‘doing’ it.” See Wright 2007, 4.

refining our vision of religion and the way religious thought can inform methodology in the field.

Born to Jewish parents of Russian descent in New York City in 1943, Dorsky in his life has wound his way among institutions, leaders, and communities of American Buddhism and avant-garde film in New York City, Boulder, and San Francisco, from the 1950s to the present. His life has intersected with Asian Buddhist emissaries like Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who engaged in and wrote about filmmaking as a mode of Buddhist knowledge; a collection of American avant-garde filmmakers who experimented with Buddhist ideas and practices in their lives and work; and Stan Brakhage, a leader of a particular lineage of 1960s avant-garde film, who voiced religious devotion to film itself.

I first came to know of Nathaniel Dorsky through his manuscript *Devotional Cinema* which was given to me as a gift in 2006. The little yellow book hit a real nerve for me. Dorsky's gentle, phenomenological articulation of the strangeness of what it felt like being in the world; his description of "intermittence" and unknowing and the ability of film to provoke certain kinds of tenderness, openness, and healing resonated with my own feelings around certain movies—particularly the films of Bengali director Satyajit Ray.

I only came to see one of Dorsky's own films several years later, while I was teaching a class at the Coolidge Corner Movie Theater in the Brookline neighborhood of Boston as part of my ministry assignment in divinity school. The class, attended mostly by local retirees, would include watching a film in conversation with a religious text and

discussing the relationship between the two. We read *Devotional Cinema* and then ordered Dorsky's film *Triste* from Canyon Cinema, which arrived in a big flat white box in the mail a week later. The projectionist at the Coolidge was thrilled with the opportunity to thread up the projector, as the theater was projecting fewer and fewer actual films and increasingly switching over to digital. The response by the class to both *Devotional Cinema* and the film *Triste* was mixed to say the least: ranging from gushing excitement, to bemused curiosity, to apathy, to genuine offense at what some found to be highly pretentious and obnoxious material.

Dorsky and his work have only grown in popularity and recognition in the intervening years. As J. Hoberman notes regarding the response to a screening in 2000 of Dorsky's films, "Given the relative lack of critical attention, who would have predicted the crowds that packed the Walter Reade (cinema of Lincoln Center for the Arts) last month for an evening of lyrical diary-films by Nathaniel Dorsky?" (Hoberman 2000). To date, Dorsky has had screenings at the Museum of Modern Art; the Centre Pompidou; the Tate Modern; the Filмотека Española, Madrid; the Prague Film Archive; the Vienna Film Museum; the Pacific Film Archive; the Harvard Film Archive; Princeton University; Yale University; the Anthology Film Archive; the Toronto International Film Festival; and the Whitney. Dorsky also received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1997, and grants from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the LEF Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the California Arts Council. The 2015 New York Film Festival held a five-day retrospective of Dorsky's thirty-three short experimental films titled "Luminous Intimacy: The Cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky and

Jerome Hiler,”³ which played to a packed house. Gavin Smith, editor of *Film Comment*, introduced Dorsky and his partner Jerome Hiler as “two of the greatest filmmakers alive,”⁴ and the program was celebrated by film critics including Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times*:

Every so often while watching the work of Nathaniel Dorsky, I let out a yelp of joy. Mr. Dorsky makes blissfully beautiful films that don’t tell stories but instead explore the world, the medium and our relationship with each... Their actors, as it were, are the objects, the flowers, trees, animals, people and cars that slip in and out of the frame, although it is film—fragile, alchemical, magical, lush and luminous—that is the star. Like the gold and silver in illuminated manuscripts, his film creates a radiant glow that suggests why Mr. Dorsky calls his art devotional cinema. (Dargis 2015)

My friends and I waited in line two days in a row recently at the Anthology Film Archives before we were able to get tickets to his latest screening. The remarkable upsurge of interest in Dorsky may speak not only to a revitalized interest in the avant-garde, but to a hunger for radically meditative films.⁵ While much of the critical response to Dorsky’s work has been overwhelmingly positive, I still hear from some academics and film enthusiasts that they do not fully understand the fuss. A common critique is along the lines of, “his films are very beautiful, but I am not sure if there is a there there.” I have sat in film audiences of his works where people have been moved to tears during his screening and question-and-answer sessions; I have also sat next to a pair

³ See Dorsky October, 2015.

⁴ “For the last six decades, Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, partners in life and in cinema, have taken their cameras out into the world and filmed gestures, moods, atmospheres, states of being, light and darkness, movement and stillness. Hiler’s register is ecstatic and polyphonic, Dorsky’s devotional and poetic. And, simply put, they are two of the greatest filmmakers alive” (Smith 2016, 50).

⁵ For commentary on upsurge of interest in the work of Dorsky and similar filmmakers see Sitney 2002, 436.

of women at a screening who kept heckling about how “the emperor has no clothes.”

When I first gave a copy of *Devotional Cinema* to a religious studies professor interested in film, her response was, “I don’t get what he’s talking about,” but when his films were screened at the Harvard Film Archive, she felt like she finally understood his theory.

This is only to say that there is a great deal of subjectivity and variance in the reception of his work, and this project provides only one possible frame for thinking about its significance.

My hope is that studying Dorsky’s work enriches the conversation in the field of religion and film, and conversely that methods and perspectives from the study of religion and film, particularly in relationship to American Buddhism and the avant-garde, deepen our understanding of Dorsky’s work.

Dorsky’s Films

At the point that I am writing this thesis in the winter of 2017-2018, Nathaniel Dorsky has made at least forty-nine short films over the last fifty-five years, and he is still producing new work. The following provides a general overview of these films in terms of particular trends and directions in his artistic development. A more detailed analysis of individual films will be included throughout later sections.

With the exception of his three earliest films that included sound, Dorsky’s films are silent poetic shorts, screened at 18 frames per second (silent speed), always shot with Bolex on 16mm film, originally on Kodachrome stock, though in the last decade on color negative made by Eastman Kodak and Fuji. Dorsky’s choice of 16mm comes out of a

need for a balance of artistry and personal mobility—8mm felt too unprofessional and 35mm required too heavy a camera and was too expensive to purchase and develop. 16mm also adds subtly to the humility of Dorsky's work—its aspect ratio makes it more amenable to close shots than landscapes or horizons, which can take in the whole of the view. His prints are only developed by Cinema Lab in Denver, which is run by students of Stan Brakhage. Dorsky then edits his films himself in his cellar using rewinds, a viewer, a splicer, and a projector. Part of Dorsky's attachment to working in film instead of digital comes from his attachment to the physicality involved in the process. The idea of editing in digital on a computer is highly unappealing in its lack of bodily engagement. His finished work is then only handled by approved projectionists and run through vetted projectors. This fussiness of form belies a deeper intention to reflect on and engage with the materials of filmmaking and the subtle, nuanced states of awareness cultivated by these precise formal choices. At the same time, these choices mean that Dorsky is almost entirely personally and solely involved in the production from beginning to end, in contrast to more commercial film which relies on a larger crew and collection of resources.

Dorsky's films can be read in keeping with and as inspired by not just 1960s avant-garde filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos, but also feature film directors like Yasujiro Ozu. Dorsky also often references other artistic mediums in describing his work: characterizing his films as poetry and citing the ballets of George Balanchine and stained glass as sources of inspiration. Dorsky's films, especially in the last three decades, tend to focus on liminal imagery and plant life, which resist story or

language and gently coax the viewer into a place of “unknowing” or “uncertainty.” The texture of the film stock, the rhythm of the editing, the composition of the frame, the light on the screen are always as much the subject of his films as the imagery itself.

Dorsky’s first three films, *Ingreen* (1964, 12 minutes), *A Fall Trip Home* (1964, 11 minutes), and *Summerwind* (1965, 14 minutes), are shot in Dorsky’s childhood hometown of Milburn, New Jersey, and exhibit his only use of sound or actors. Of all Dorsky’s work, *Ingreen* may be most in keeping with the ethos of 1960s Greenwich Village avant-garde film in its synthesis of aesthetic and overt socio-political critique. The film is built around shots of a young man masturbating, intercut at an increasingly fast pace with images of his hometown and family. Stylistically, in all three films Dorsky plays with superimpositions, unusual lens work, and rapid editing, which challenge coherence and aesthetic expectations cultivated in mainstream cinema. While developing and continuing these aesthetic techniques, Dorsky has since shied away from charged, conflict oriented, overtly iconoclastic, and sexual subject matter within his own work.

Hours for Jerome Parts I and II (1966-70, 21 minutes; and 1982, 24 minutes, respectively) take their titles from the *Book of Hours*, the Catholic prayer book of the Middle Ages, and detail Dorsky and Hiler’s shared daily life in Manhattan and in rural Lake Owassa, New Jersey. Dorsky has described these films as the most sentimental films he has made, in that they have a strong sense of memory of a very particular moment in time in a relationship. While there are a handful of shots of Hiler throughout both films, most of the images touch on the surrounding objects of the moment—driving

across the Manhattan Bridge in the rain, coffee cups, sleeping cats, steaming pots, swimming in a lake, frozen ponds, apple orchards. The images of Hiler are lovingly shot and taken unassumingly—Hiler sleeping with the covers pulled around him, light and shadow softly moving across his face; Hiler's silhouette as he stares out a window into the snow; a quick shot of Hiler shyly smiling mid-conversation; or slowly running his fingers through his hair shot at a slow speed. The footage was compiled over the course of four years but then collapsed into what seems a single year—Part I covering spring and summer, and Part II touching on winter and fall. Both are shot in Kodachrome II, which lends the blues a turquoise color and the trees a golden enamel feeling.

Pneuma (1983, 28 minutes), *Alaya* (1976-87, 28 minutes), *Ariel* (1983, 16 minutes), and *17 Reasons Why* (1985-87, 19 minutes) are perhaps Dorsky's most actively minimalistic films and experimental works. *Pneuma* is a compilation of raw and outdated reversal film stocks, sometimes re-photographed in closer format, which have been processed without being exposed. *Alaya* works as almost a sibling film to *Pneuma*, such that the film is composed entirely of different images of sand and pivots on interaction between the sand and the film emulsion. *17 Reasons Why* is made on a collection of disposed Super 8 cameras with 8mm film which is then projected un-slit, so that each shot is composed of four frames with two parallel but distinct narrative strips with the sprocket holes visible on the sides. *Ariel* simply exhibits hand-processed color stock, where Dorsky manipulated the surface of the film in its development. These four films make the materials of film the primary subjects of the work.

Triste (1974-96, 18.5 minutes) and *Variations* (1998, 24 minutes) are stylistically transitional works in Dorsky's artistic trajectory. *Triste* is composed of a collection of scrap shots from film shot over fifteen years with ten to fifteen different emulsions brought together on an inter-negative. This marks a midway point between the highly experimental, minimalistic work of films like *Pneuma*, *Alaya*, *17 Reasons Why*, and *Ariel*, and his later films. The film includes more complicated and dynamic subject matter than his other avant-garde work, but works with a greater sense of collision and conflict between shots than his later, more balletic tone. With *Triste*, Dorsky moved away from dialectical montage towards what he describes as "polyvalent montage" or "open form," where the editing moves beyond the kinds of binary tensions prominently visible in films like *Hours for Jerome* and allows the shots to speak to each other in a subtler language across technique, color, speed, focus, and depth.

Variations marks a beginning point in Dorsky's career on several fronts. Because of the discontinuation of other Kodachrome stocks, beginning with *Variations* Dorsky's films are shot on Kodachrome 25 and printed on reversal print stock. *Variations* is also the first film that Dorsky shot after having developed a sense of "polyvalent montage" or "open form" in editing together *Triste*. In other words, Dorsky had an editing scheme in mind when he filmed *Variations* and shot his subjects with this in mind. Between *Triste* and *Variations*, Dorsky was in a car accident in which he suffered a concussion that lowered his tolerance for sensory stimulation for many years. Dorsky credits the shift in the emotional tone of his films beginning with *Variations* to this accident. Dorsky describes then needing to take a more "loving" and "accommodating" approach to his

films. There were greater hints of anger or dissatisfaction in *Triste*; in *Variations* there is a turn towards ease and tenderness, rather than provocation or stimulation, in the montage, camera movement, and content. Where in *Triste* there are a collection of faces and some scenic shots, *Variations* looks closely at layers of shadow and light—slightly out-of-focus shots of water and light with reeds in the foreground; crisp black-and-white images of hands gesturing in slower motion, casting shadows on tablecloth; cuffs of tweed coats swaying subtly; smooth yellow round lemons with eclipsed sides. As will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters, *Pneuma*, *Alaya*, *Triste*, and *Variations* can be read as a progression that mirrors aspects of the meditation outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*—the foundational Buddhist text of *Vipassana* “mindfulness” meditation practice. Both the practice and these films progress from grosser to subtler objects of attentions: shifting attention from basic physical and material dimensions of film and the human body, and bringing attention to increasingly complicated, layered, and dynamic imagery and states of consciousness.

Following *Variations*, Dorsky produced eight more short films on Kodachrome 25 reversal print stock, all of which maintain the gentleness of tone, attention to polyvalent montage, and shooting with an editing scheme or final product in mind. The films vary subtly in terms of urban and rural content, light quality, montage pacing, aperture work, and focus. Some of these films, such as *Song and Solitude* (2005-06, 21 min.) and *Threnody* (2004, 25 min.), have a more introverted quality, as Dorsky softens focus or intentionally shoots imagery out of focus, keeps the aperture partially or waveringly open, or emphasizes darker tones, with slivers of light or lighter color

breaking through. Other films, like *The Visitation* and *Arbor Vitae* (1999-00, 28 min.), have an extroverted feeling, with wider angle shots, faster cuts and camera movements, and a brighter palate. Some films, like *Sarabande* (2008, 15 min.), have a more linear feeling in both form and content, the camera often panning horizontally along ribbon-like objects. Others, like *Arbor Vitae*, spend more time with grid-like patterns, which draw attention to the square of the frame around the patterns. *Compline* (2009, 18.5 min.) is the last film Dorsky was able to shoot in Kodachrome and marks the end of this particular epoch in his work. As *Compline* is the last prayer of the evening in the Christian tradition of the canonical hours, so does this film mark an end of a particular film stock and express a last moment of devotion in and through the film itself.

Aubade (2010, 11.5 min.), *Pastourelle* (2010, 16 min.), and *The Return* (2011, 27 min.) are Dorsky's first experimentations with color negative film produced by Eastman Kodak and Fuji following the discontinuation of Kodachrome. Dorsky describes some film stocks as having more "profound" and more "frivolous" areas, and these films were about finding the deeper spaces in terms of light, color, and texture with the stocks. As an aubade is a morning song, the film *Aubade* is about a first experimentation with light on a new film stock. Both *Aubade* and *Pastourelle* are slightly underexposed and hence darker than Dorsky would have liked. *Pastourelle* stands out among Dorsky's work in its documentation of the rise of digital culture in San Francisco and the tension developed between organic and inorganic subject matter. *The Return* is unusual in its inclusion of landscape shots, inspired by the proclivities of Fuji film.

Having gotten a stronger feel for working with color negative film from 2012 to 2014 Dorsky had a flurry of productivity in which he shot and completed about three films a year. Many of these works revolve around particular stretches of time in which the shooting and editing occurred: emanating from and studying the mood and light of particular months—*April* (2012, 26 min.), *December* (2014, 18.5 min.), *February* (2014, 14.5 min.)—and seasons—*Spring* (2013, 23 min.) and *Summer* (2013, 22.5 min). There are subtle shifts in the predominance of urban and vegetative subjects, crisp extroverted images, and tendencies towards greater liminality within and between films. Because *April* was shot with a particular negative by Eastman Kodak that was especially amenable to photographing people and buildings, this film stands out among Dorsky's other work in terms of the unusual amount of attention to both. There is a sense of Dorsky's camera engaging more with a public world of people in cafes, looking at phones and laptops. The final shot is unusual in its long take of a woman's face gazing into the distance. *Song* (2013, 18.5 min) by contrast is a real return to liminal, internal imagery and style. *Spring* operates as a garden in itself, dwelling almost entirely among plants and light that overwhelm the frame.

Avraham (2014, 20 min.) is Dorsky's foray or experimentation with "Jewish" inspired filmmaking. This film was made in light of Dorsky's studies of Hasidic mysticism with a San Francisco rabbi, who encouraged him to make a "Jewish film." The title comes from a relationship between the material and the story of Abraham and Isaac, and an abstracted sense of struggle in the film itself, such as the study of paper towels caught up in a set of bushes being blown by the wind. The title, or the sound of

the word *Avraham*, itself served as inspiration for the material, where Dorsky would ask himself if the image resonated with the heaviness of the word. There is a moment in which Dorsky films a sequence of an artificial plastic plant in the window of a store, that with the angle and editing becomes a strange stream of blue. Where Dorsky's other work often has a floating feeling, this film has a heavier, more static quality. Rather than shooting collections of branches, Dorsky often emphasizes the trunks of trees within this film.

Intimations (2015, 18 min.) and *Prelude* (2015, 20 min.) were the first films that Dorsky tried to make that did not arrive as quickly as his previous collection and took many months to shoot and edit. Where Dorsky's previous work was shifting towards greater degrees of subtlety and stillness, if not sedation, these films in his own words were an attempt to get a little more "rough house." In these works, he returns to techniques like time-lapse photography, which speed things up and jolt the viewer into a sharper state of wakefulness, in ways he had not done since works like *Hours for Jerome*.

Dorsky's six films from 2016 and 2017 shift almost entirely towards plant life, studying the plants in the dryness of the California drought and moving into the lushness following the return of rain. *Elohim* (2017, 31 min.), *Abaton* (2017, 19 min.), *Coda* (2017, 16 min.), and *Ode* (2017, 20 min.) work as a complete collection of footage of plant-life taken in the San Francisco Arboretum in Golden Gate Park in different seasons of a single year. Dorsky describes this deep attention towards flowers, plants, and branches (which has always been a part of his work, but even more so recently) as motivated by a sense of plants being "real allies to the psyche," and an often ignored or

taken-for-granted dimension of the contemporary world. Plants, he says, offer him a “language” for his films.

Dorsky’s attention to plants and away from human life in some ways reduce the egoic dimensions of other film experiences, where facial close-ups and emphasis on plotlines and human dramas dominate. Plants have a cooler emotional charge and ask people to engage with the plantlike, organic, dimensions of their own being more than psychological narrative. They ask viewers to see their faces as plant-like and study the facial dimensions and personality embedded in the veiny surface of leaves. Finally, these films draw attention to the material and artistic dependence on light of the film, like their plant subjects, layering the metabolism of luminosity and highlighting the organic qualities of film itself.

Finally, I would like to note that Dorsky has several films that were made in response to the death, dying, and mourning of a variety of individuals within Dorsky’s life from both the American Buddhist and avant-garde film communities. I will discuss these in greater detail within subsequent sections, but they include: *Threnody; Song and Solitude* (2005-06); *April, August and After* (2012, 18.5 min.); *Alaya*; and *Ossuary* (1995-2005/2016, 43 min.) These films integrate the presence, passing, and absence of the people they grieve partially in attending to the presence and transience of the film materials themselves. Dorsky also has a collection of films known as the *Kodachrome Dailies*, made in the spring of 2016, when Dorsky began editing together outtakes or scrap materials from Kodachrome films he made between 1992 and 2009. Because of financial constraints, these films are edited together as originals without any kind of work

print and with cement splices. These choices, however, contribute to the humility and transience of the work—if damaged in a projector, the images are gone for good—and act as a final tribute to the materials of Kodachrome themselves. *Ossuary* sits explicitly at the intersection of Dorsky’s “grief films” and the *Kodachrome Dailies*, simultaneously celebrating and mourning the life and ending of a friend and of Kodachrome.

Dorsky in the field of Religion and Film

S. Brent Plate argues that looking at film within religious studies illustrates the diversity of religious engagement and has become a lens through which to expand and refine our understanding of religion itself. He writes:

Film and religion studies can continue to play a vital role in the shaping of religious studies and not merely by being an appendage to the discipline... First, film and religion studies is moving beyond the Christian-Hollywood matrix and displaying the varieties of global religious experiences and traditions as mediated through film. Second, religious approaches to film are helping to point out the constructed nature of vision by making links between visual representation and the creation of socio-religious worlds. (Plate 2005, 3097)

Looking closely at Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* in light of other work within the field of religion and film helps not only to diversify our vision of religion, but consider the ways religious doctrine and practice inform methodology in the field.

Dorsky’s theory, unlike that of other theorists in the field, is conditioned by his particular immersion in 20th century American Buddhism and avant-garde film, which is reflected in the ways his theory distinguishes itself from that of other theorists.

Devotional Cinema is unique among writing in religion and film: its devotion is directed towards the material world and the physical properties of film itself; film is not a medium

for religious content, but “itself” the “experience” of religion. Dorsky’s approach to ethics in *Devotional Cinema* is more phenomenological than sociological, emphasizing subtle physiological states of health and illness, instead of depictions of race, class, gender and social injustice. Dorsky’s ethical concerns are more about the materials of film being exploited for the purposes of plot absorption, than perhaps a woman’s body being exploited on screen; or the neglect of attention to the intermittence of the film, than the neglected depiction of particular social narratives or world.

While film directors writing about religion often associate the religiosity of film with sublime emotional struggle or prophetic anger, Dorsky emphasizes fine states of emotional equilibrium. Where some can equate religious experience with a sense of awe, power, or immortality; for Dorsky religious experience is one that calls experience itself into question and studies the transience and conditioning at the heart of the structures of experience. Where some emphasize transcendence, Dorsky describes “transformation,” “alchemy,” “presence,” or “nowness.” Films like Dorsky’s *Pneuma* (among others) ask viewers to pay immediate attention to the film stock itself, by making the film-stock the subject of the film; other films like *Elohim* play with the aperture to create flashes, which can jolt the attention to the imminence of the light in the film itself.

Understanding the depth of Dorsky’s engagement with and affinity for specific Buddhist teaching and practices, which strongly emphasize compassion; and the films of Yasujiro Ozu, which embody Buddhist inflected Japanese aesthetic principles like “mono no aware”—which mean “sensitivity or empathy” to the “transience of things” (Parkes 2017)—speaks to the ways the warmth and gentility of Dorsky’s tone deviates from other

work within the American avant-garde film community, particularly that of his mentor Stan Brakhage. While many American avant-garde filmmakers like Dorsky sought to develop films that emphasized their own conditioning, or employed reflexive techniques, the intentional lyricism, vulnerability, and tenderness within Dorsky's theory and films departs from the some of the conflict orientation, or intellectual chill of his peers. For Dorsky, attending to the material properties and form of film is essential to its religious potential, highlighting how methodology in the study of religion and film can be informed by relationships to bodily or worldly life.

Critiques of the field of religion and film have addressed gaps in both content and methodology. Regarding content, scholars argue that there has been limited attention to work outside the "Christian-Hollywood matrix." In terms of methodology, scholars like John Lyden, in *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, argue that approaches have largely been split between the theological and the ideological. Lyden, along with Clive Marsh (2004), Brent Plate (2008) and Melanie Wright (2007) argue that there needs to be more attention to film as religious practice, or film as religion. Others like Melanie Wright, Francisca Cho (2008), Crystal Downing (2016) and Dennis Ford (2016) claim that there has been a lack of attention to film form. Gaps in form and content within the field may not be unrelated-- ideological approaches to film and the lack of attention to film form in religious studies concerned with film may be informed by certain theological assumptions about the nature of religion, built on the dominance of particular religious content and exposure. Discomfort with thinking about film *as* religion may be rooted in certain iconoclastic and image resistant theologies. Inattention to form in the study of

religion and film, may connect to the lack of literary approaches to religious texts. Within film-studies there have been trends of suspicion of the mechanisms of film based on a presumed passivity of the spectator, which at times seems strikingly intertwined with the medium's potential to engage in religious indoctrination.⁶ This is most apparent in what is known as “apparatus” theory in the 70's and early 80's, led by thinkers like Jean-Louis Baudry, whose work will be analyzed in subsequent sections.

I also argue that approaches within film studies that have emphasized aesthetics and form in thinking about religion have often privileged aesthetics and forms in keeping with their own particular religious leanings or hierarchies. Film theorist Andre Bazin's theories about the religiosity of film form in this initial essay concern a conflict between Catholic and Protestant aesthetics and sensibilities—aesthetics of abundance and spectacle, versus a sparse aesthetic directed towards internal life. Bazin demonstrates an ambivalence towards his own Catholicism, and modes of Catholic expression on the screen. He identifies a natural relationship between the ornamentation, spectacle, physicality, iconography, and externality of Catholic practice with that of film production.⁷ On the one hand, Bazin demonstrates palpable resentment towards more Protestant productions. In describing his internal conflict around Jean Delannoy's film adaptations of Henri Queffelec's book, *God Needs Men*, Bazin writes: “One can see in

⁶ On the grounds for this analysis, see Rosen 1986, 281.

⁷ “Everything that is exterior, ornamental, liturgical, sacramental, hagiographic, and miraculous in the everyday observance, doctrine, and practice of Catholicism does indeed show specific affinities with the cinema considered as formidable iconography, but these affinities, which have made for the success of countless films, are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them” (Bazin 1997, 63).

this theological happy ending a craftiness whose intent is not particularly pure. I fear that our Protestant filmmakers have let their own apologetics show through,” and “Although this ending is likely to reassure the Catholic viewer, it leaves the Protestant one feeling secretly victorious, even exalted, over its evasion of the real issue”(Bazin 1951, 67-68). Both of these lines point to Bazin’s suspicion of Protestant filmmaking as a more political agenda to disparage Catholics, cloaked in seemingly spiritual terms. This said, he admires the internality and the sparse aesthetic of the more Protestant religious film. He writes: “Although the Protestant sensibility is not indispensable to the making of a good Catholic film, it can nevertheless be a real advantage” (Bazin 1951, 65). Bazin searches for a higher mode of Catholicism in cinema that expresses a more internally profound spiritual engagement; paradoxically, he associates higher religious engagement with an internal life, which he associates with Protestant sensibilities. Bazin’s theory illustrates the ways in which theology and religious identity can become intertwined with aesthetic critique in the study of film.

Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* is unusual in that it reimagines the relationship of religion and film in keeping with values and aesthetics specific to particular worlds of American Buddhism and avant-garde film, where attention to the form and materiality of film is central to its religious engagement. Finally, I argue that new work in the field of religion and film, which prioritize attention to the medium, also advocate definitions of religion premised on transcendence, which undo attention to the medium itself. Perhaps the most radical break Dorsky makes with existing work in the field is to argue that the point of intersection between religion and film is less its ability to immortalize its

subjects or engage with the eternal, but rather in the ability of film to acquaint us with our own impermanence. Dorsky's fastidious attention to the materiality of film – stocks, projection speeds, quality of light, shots and cuts -- are intimately related to Buddhist meditation practices which attend to the structures of perception and materiality of experience as a means of deepening our understanding of the conditioning and impermanence of our being. Plate argues that in the study of religion and film greater attention needs to be paid to the avant-garde, because it is in itself a spiritual discipline similar to Buddhist mindfulness practices.

Like the Buddhist orientation towards 'mindfulness', the religious cinematics of avant-garde films develops as a spiritual discipline (understanding 'spiritual' as indissociable from 'material'). By returning viewers to the everyday through de-familiarization and re-familiarization, the cinematic ritual of avant-garde film offers the possibility for aesthetic, ethical and religious renewal. (Plate 2008, 69)

Dorsky embodies this synthesis of Buddhist meditation practices and avant-garde filmmaking and amplifies its potential through his films and film theory. Studying Dorsky's work furthers Plate's observation by looking at Dorsky's conscious attempt to bring his experiences with Buddhist meditative practices into conversation with film viewing and theorizing as an avant-garde filmmaker. At the same time looking at Dorsky provides a more specific illustration of both avant-garde film and meditation practices, which highlights the heterogeneity of both.

One core aspect of most Buddhist meditative practices concerns attention to impermanence (*anicca*) and Dorsky's work is especially radical in its suggestion that film can be a practice of observing the moving, passing nature of our being and world.

The concept of impermanence is fundamental to all Buddhist schools: Everything that exists in this world. No element of physical matter or concept remains

unchanged. Things in the world change in two ways. First, they change throughout time. Second, everything in this world is influenced by other elements of the world, and thus all existence is contingent upon something else. (Anderson 2004, 23).

Dorsky's work creates the conditions for reflection on our own passing and contingency by attending to the passing and contingency of film. Dorsky's theory operates in contrast to threads within religious studies approaches to film and film studies approaches to religion, which have looked at the intersection between religion and film, in its ability to preserve or immortalize or as a mode of transcendence. Studying Dorsky's work, which develops religious meaning through reflection on impermanence, opens up possibilities of how films might *do* religion, while revealing the ways the study of religion and film can become a means of unpacking the construction of religion within the field of religion and film.

Religious Studies Approaches to Film

The study of religion and film came of age in the late 1980s with the establishment of the category of "Religion and Film" at the American Academy of Religion, and the founding of the *Journal of Religion and Film* at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. In the last decade or two, there has been a surge in publications and a growing number of undergraduate and graduate courses devoted to the study of religion and film. While there are logistical explanations for this growth—including the availability of technology and the popularity of such classes among students in a time

when humanities departments are looking to grow class sizes⁸—there are ways that the study of film within religious studies participates in unpacking core concerns about the definition of religion, in the study of religion. Plate argues that looking at film within religious studies illustrates the diversity of religious engagement and has become a lens through which to expand and refine our understanding of religion itself (Plate 2005, 3097). Similarly, John Lyden argues that the study of religion and film allows us to challenge the boundaries between that which is deemed religious and the merely cultural. Plate writes: “Film and religion studies can continue to play a vital role in the shaping of religious studies and not merely by being an appendage to the discipline... First, film and religion studies is moving beyond the Christian-Hollywood matrix and displaying the varieties of global religious experiences and traditions as mediated through film” (Plate 2005, 3097). As Mitchell and Plate document in their introduction to the *Religion and Film Reader*, most writing on religion and film has had a Christian orientation⁹ and only

⁸ See Mitchell and Plate 2007, 2. As John C. Lyden acknowledges, the “surge” of courses in religion and film has developed in part due to the growth in technology—the availability and ease of screenings films in classrooms—and to the demand and interest in visual mediums by students and those interested in popular culture and interdisciplinary scholarship within the field of religious studies (Lyden 2003, 1). Wright argues that studying ‘religion and film’ provides a route into the examination of various topics of interest to religious studies, including the interpenetration of religious and cultural ideas and forms, and the processes at work in mythopoesis and meaning making (Wright 2007, 5).

⁹ Mitchell and Plate write: “Part 4 includes readings from Christian theological and biblical studies perspectives. We have given a large amount of space to these chiefly because this is where the majority of the current English-language writings have focused... Films have been and are being put to use by theologians and biblical scholars in a myriad of ways. Books on Jesus or Christ figures in film continue to proliferate, as do intertextual works on the (Christian) bible and film; meanwhile there are only a handful of scholarly works that address Buddhism or Islam” (Mitchell and Plate 2007, 5).

a handful of scholarly works have addressed film and the concerns of traditions like Buddhism and Islam (Mitchell and Plate 2007, 5). Dorsky's work offers an opportunity to deconstruct our vision of religion and renegotiate it from an underexplored perspective in the field of religion and film.

Second, Plate argues, "religious approaches to film are helping to point out the constructed nature of vision by making links between visual representation and the creation of socio-religious worlds." He claims that religion and film are *like* each other and that their similarities exist on a formal level through their ability to frame a slice of reality. He writes: "the result of both religion and film is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or a world we wish to avoid at all costs" (Plate 2008, 3). He then hypothesizes "by paying attention to the ways films are constructed, we can shed light on the ways religions are constructed and vice versa" (Plate 2008, 3). Dorsky takes Plate's work further by investigating the intersection of perception and *internal* worlds (beliefs about ourselves, our realities), not just socio-religious ones. Dorsky renders the study of the construction of vision a form of religious practice in itself.

Other concerns among religious studies approaches to film are methodological. Melanie Wright argues that most studies of religion and film employ a social scientific or theological approach, which emphasize religious and theological content, leaving film studies and attention to form peripheral to the conversation (Wright 2007, 11). Crystal Downing strongly echoes Wright's critique: "Ironically the majority of books extracting salvation from cinema talk more about what movies *tell* us through well-crafted story

lines than about the artistry one can *see* on the screen... They discuss religious and philosophical implications of what people say and do in movies, while largely ignoring what cinematic techniques say and do. As a result, they miss much of what is *good* about cinema.”” (Downing 2016, 17). Such arguments are part of what has been described as the “third wave” of religion and film scholarship, which has occurred in the last decade and has attempted to move away from literary models towards medium-specific approaches, a desire to engage more in film theory (see Plate 2008, ix). While these critiques are relatively new to religious studies of film, it should be noted that these arguments were taken on within film theory’s semiological inquiries in the late 1960’s, which sought to distinguish written and cinematic languages.¹⁰

The change in the content of study in religion and film runs parallel to a renewed attention to medium-attentive readings (See Plate 2008, x). Dorsky’s work suggests that attending to the material and formal dimensions of film—film stocks, projection speeds, shots and cuts, shadow and light—is part of a meditative practice, which understands enlightenment as occurring in and through the world. *Devotional Cinema* invites readers to regard the study and viewing of film as a spiritual exercise, connecting scholarly methodology and religious practice.

I believe that Dorsky’s simple but enigmatic phrase “where film itself is the spirit or experience of religion” brings together (and can also be better understood when read in relationship to) avant-garde film theory like that of Stan Brakhage, and particular tenets of Buddhist philosophy and aesthetic theory. Malcolm David Eckel studies Indian

¹⁰ For more on this, see Rosen 1986, 7.

Madhyamaka Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Bhavaviveka to understand how images of the Buddha have been a means of mental cultivation and also the site and embodiment of the deepest principles of Buddhist understanding (Eckel 1992, 1). Eckel argues that applying a Western theological or philosophical lens to images of the Buddha misses the immediacy and strength of their religious efficacy. Eckel writes of Bhavaviveka:

His works are a warning not only to those who think that the categories of Western theology can be applied to Mahayana thought but also to those who think that this tradition can be represented in the dualistic categories, such as the sacred and the profane, found in the phenomenology of religion. Bhavaviveka criticizes dualities of all kinds, and the duality of the sacred and profane is as vulnerable as the duality of God and creation. Nor does he spare the seemingly 'religious' categories of traditional Buddhism. His approach to the concept of nirvana is epitomized by the famous statement, 'There is no difference between nirvana and samsara,' and his approach to the Buddha follows Nagarjuna's equally negative claim that 'the nature of the Buddha is the nature of the world: the Buddha has no nature and the world has no nature.' (Eckel 1992, 6)

According to Eckel, it is specifically Bhavaviveka's ontology and phenomenology which enables images of the Buddha to be a locus of religious understanding. By extension, it is through studying the nature of the images of the Buddha that Mahayana philosophy can be cultivated.

Francisca Cho echoes extends Eckel's point to film: She argues that film can become a particularly efficacious means of illustrating Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and Mahayana philosophy can enhance an appreciation of film. She writes:

Buddhist seeing is marvelously realized by cinematic projections, and the art of film is substantively dignified by Buddhist perception. (Cho 2009, 176)

She argues that Buddhist aesthetic theory can circumvent certain traditional Western ontological and phenomenological approaches to film, which belittle the religious efficacy of the medium:

Buddhist semiotics authorizes the use of religious signs because they are effective teaching devices that suffer no ontological deficiency relative to the absolute emptiness they are meant to signify. (Ch 2009, 176)

Buddhist tradition rejects the distinction between signifiers and signified, sanctioning the conclusion that cinematic illusion is ontologically no different than life itself. (Cho 2009, 163)

Because in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy ultimate reality is understood in and through the conventional, interdependent and fluid world, she argues that Buddhist approaches to film are unencumbered by fears of idolatry and modes of iconoclasm found within certain Western theological and philosophical lineages. David E. James writes of Stan Brakhage's similar intent through his films and film theory to challenge Western ontological claims which render the viewer and the film as too statically separate and different. Analyzing Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* (1963) manifesto for avant-garde film and its religious aspirations), James writes:

Brakhage's project is thus to return to continuity what film history, in its reproduction of Western ontology, has distinguished as three separate realms: the phenomenal world; the optical apparatuses, both mechanical and biological; and the work of the brain... In the integration of these realms, the dualisms that sustain almost all other uses of film—the dualisms of subject and object, of physiological and psychological, of perception and creation, and of vision and its instruments—are subsumed in a single gestalt. (James 1989, 43)

Furthermore, it is specifically by setting in motion and challenging distinctions set in place by Western dualisms that Brakhage argues film engages in religious vision. He writes:

Unknowingly, as innocent they await the priests of this new religion, those who can stir the cinematic entrails divinely. They await the prophets who can cast (with the precision of Confucian sticks) the characters of this new order across filmic mud. (Brakhage 1963, 199)

Brakhage imagines certain avant-garde filmmakers as new religious mystics who in their phenomenological and ontological experimentation with the medium of film engage in new modes of religious seeing. The depth of Dorsky's lived engagement with avant-garde film (specifically Stan Brakhage,) and Buddhist teachings create the ground for reading these two lineages in conversation with one another. Both Brakhage's poetic, romantic school of avant-garde film and this tradition of Buddhist aesthetic theory cited by Eckel and Cho aspire to collapse dualities between subjects and objects, signifiers and signified, artistic representation and its referents, conventional and ultimate realities. Most importantly, both traditions locate religious understanding in and through a changing, interdependent and conditioned world, and thereby, in and through film itself.

The expansion of religious content and concern for the medium may not be unrelated developments. When Wright describes the ways austerity and iconoclasm may signal spirituality in certain traditions, but that Hinduism associates the divine with superabundance, she not only points to how attention to aesthetics and imagery within films highlight religious difference, but also suggests how attention to Hindu approaches to film highlight the significance of aesthetics in religious expression. Francisca Cho further argues that attitudes towards the medium of film are religiously embedded. She argues that Buddhism has a special affinity for film, because its technological capacity to make illusions feel "real" enables an understanding of Buddhist philosophies of "emptiness," where film becomes a tool of awakening. Film can become a means of understanding the illusory nature of our own narrated lives, while encouraging deep seeing of that which we ignore in our everyday lives. Cho claims that where Christian

theology has a fear of confusing the signifier with the signified, or the icon with the deity, Buddhist ontology dignifies film, by sanctioning and empowering the use of images in religious understanding (Cho 2009, 164). Cho makes a strong case for the ways religious philosophy and theology can inform attitudes and approaches to film. Similarly, when Downing argues that gnostic theological approaches to film have obscured the significance of the medium and builds on a theology of salvation through the body of Christ (Downing 2016, 10), she implicitly acknowledges that different theologies and religious philosophies privilege the reading of medium more than others because of existing theological relationships to the body and the material world. Furthermore, the study of religion and film is frequently situated at the fulcrum of concerns about sexuality. Dominant theological attitudes towards sexuality in the field not only inform feelings about the watching and study of movies at large, but also impact medium-oriented methodologies.

In recent years there has been a similar push for the study of religion and film to move from studying religion as content within film, to film being a mode of religion in itself (Plate 2009, x). Melanie Wright asks how the field of religion and film might move from studying the way film depicts religion to *doing it*—first as a narrative producing mechanism, and secondly as a medium that can try to manifest the un-representable (Wright 2007, 4). Lyden and Dwyer have addressed Wright's primary concern through studying film as mythology (See Dwyer 2006 and Lyden 2003). Others, including Plate and Clive Marsh, explore cinema-going as religious practice and functioning in relationship to religious ritual (See Marsh 2004 and Plate 2008). *Devotional Cinema*

speaks directly to the latter half of this question. Returning to Dorsky's opening line: "The relationship between religion and cinema is something that I have spent my life thinking about—not where religion is necessarily the subject of a film, but where film itself is the spirit or experience of religion"(Dorsky 2014, 17). Defining religion on Dorsky's particular terms is precisely what enables a conversation about film as the "spirit or experience of religion" through "film itself." Further, *Devotional Cinema* models how the study of film within religious studies can be its own mode of religious practice.

Defining Religion in the Study of Religion and Film:

Lyden argues that in the study of religion and film there needs to be a recognition that whatever definitions of religion we employ, each definition represents an interpretation of religion from a very particular viewpoint. He references Jonathan Z. Smith's argument that "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study" (Lyden 2003, 36). Lyden argues that in addition to ignoring diverse modes of religious engagement, the theorization of religion and film has tended to obscure the fluidity between religion and culture (Lyden 2). Addressing the political ramifications of essentializing religion in the study of religion and film, Lyden writes that "we can find ourselves shortsighted when we encounter a diverse form of religion—as for example the European colonists who came to America did... Perhaps they feared to give such practices the label of 'religion' because doing so might require an acknowledgment that these practices are as valid or true as their own"(Lyden 2). Here he points out that what gets labeled as religious is embedded in certain power dynamics that can delegitimize or

create hierarchies of religious activity. Lyden identifies the political stakes in the study of religion and film in how it chooses to define the word “religion.”

Lyden divides the study of religion and film into two categories: theological and ideological. He outlines a common collection of theological approaches to film as originally described by 20th century neo-orthodox American protestant theologians Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Niebuhr sets forth a fivefold typology of ways in which Christians can engage with culture: Christ rejecting Culture, the Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ Transforming Culture (Lyden, 13). Tillich’s “Unconditional is not a thing within the world, but the depth of meaning present for all things in the world” (16). Lyden argues that Protestant theological approaches to film have often emphasized the “Christ and culture in paradox,” or Christianity and film in dialogue with one another. The problem with this approach, according to Lyden, is that it assumes a duality or independence of religion and film from one another. Lyden states that Roman Catholic theologians emphasize the “Christ above or completing culture” approach in which films affirm a form of universal religious transcendence, but ultimately need Christianity to complete them. Lyden critiques this approach for its assumption of a “generalized sense of transcendence” (23). Lyden argues that both Niebuhr and Tillich ultimately view the relation of religion to culture in the prophetic mode in which the primary task of a theologian of culture is to critique the culture in light of one’s own religious tradition. While Lyden does not feel that religion should not be critical of culture, he does feel that theologians need to be more aware of the construction of their perspective or “more honest about the sources of

their judgment and admit that we are creations of multiple cultural influences beyond what we explicitly identify as our religious backgrounds” (16).

Lyden distinguishes the ideological from the theological, but I would argue that there are unconscious assumptions about the nature of religion, rooted in very particular theologies, that fall into Lyden’s ideological category. This is an example of the ways the definition of religion and religious content can inform the lens applied to the study of religion and film. One such work that Lyden identifies as ideological rather than theological is Margaret Miles’ work *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Miles is concerned that popular movies have in many ways replaced religion in American culture when it comes to informing how we should live. She looks at the relationship between “seeing and believing,” or the ways that visual culture shapes American values. She argues that religion is found in popular film often in its rejection of religion, expressing the anxiety American society has towards religion. To Miles, popular film reflects a popular consensus that religious practices are ineffective, and that religious beliefs are wrong, misguided, and dangerous, reinforcing a public rejection of religion (Miles 1996, ix).

The centrality of “belief” at the intersection of religion and film is implied by the title. Margaret Miles describes two approaches to writing on religion and film that she has encountered: the first by conservative religious groups deploring Hollywood as the “Whore of Babylon,” and the second by movie critics who “found religious themes—alienation, grace, forgiveness, or redemption—in films whose content was not explicitly religious”(Miles 1996, xii). Miles describes the second approach as dealing implicitly

and generally with “religious” themes, but “alienation,” “grace,” “forgiveness” and “redemption” are not universal religious concerns or priorities. Religion, by Miles’ definition, has to do with “an articulation of a sense of relatedness,” and movies have become prime sculptors of class, gender and race relations. This said, she feels that films are too limited to define and inspire love in the way that religion has historically. She wishes to reinvigorate a Christianity that makes social justice the forefront of its theology and activity, while becoming more vocal in its critique of the secular sphere. In Miles’ attention to the ways films shape “how we should live,” her emphasis on racial, gender and class inequality is a register of religious ethics more traditional to particular American Christian movements of social justice (which she acknowledges) that focus on socio-structural ethics, as opposed to the subtler ethics of self-cultivation within Dorsky’s theory, which emphasize fine states of physiological and emotional equilibrium and awareness. In the end, Miles’ ideological film takes on a prophetic approach, blurring the boundary between the theological and ideological.

Within Jean Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory and Margaret Miles’ scholarship of religion and film *Seeing is Believing* there is a shared reliance on the allegory of Plato’s cave from the *Republic* as precursor to film to explain the dangers of ideological and religious regression through film as a medium.¹¹ Baudry turns to Plato’s myth of the

¹¹ Miles Brings up Plato’s myth of the cave as an apt anticipation of film and writes “Audiences can only metaphorically be described as chained to their seats and unaware that the film they see is not reality. And even the most insightful critic does not finally ‘look directly at the sun,’ as does the prisoner in Plato’s myth. Nevertheless, the myth of the cave uncannily anticipates—by approximately twenty-three centuries—cinema’s mechanics and effects” (Miles 1996, 6). For Miles, films are not only like Plato’s caves,

prisoners within a cave who are victims of being trapped in an illusion of reality—the film apparatus (screen, spectator, projector) through its use of light and darkness, forced immobility, and the power of projection—to create a state he refers to as “artificial regression” (Baudry 1975, 313). Intriguingly Baudry’s concern regarding the filmic apparatus is its ability to be a tool of religious indoctrination: “What emerges here (in outline) is the specific function fulfilled by the cinema as support and instrument of ideology. It constitutes the ‘subject’ by the illusory delimitation of a central location—whether this be that of a *god*¹² or any other substitute”(Baudry, 1975, 295). Here, ideology is read as a displacement of or sublimation of a belief in a particular god and in some ways an elision of theology. It is perhaps precisely the ability of film to be an instrument of crude or simplistic religious doctrine that makes it so problematic for Baudry—it could be argued that fear of religion, drives a fear of film as a medium within this context. Moreover, Baudry’s wording elides theology with ideology, pointing to the difficulty of parsing the two within the field of religion and film.

The ethics of *Devotional Cinema* are implied in practice in a way similar to many American Buddhist practices: there is less attention to identity politics and particular social justice movements and greater attention to subtle, energetic states of wellbeing.¹³

Dorsky writes: “There was something in the actual nature of cinema, its view, that could produce health or illness in an audience. There might be film that had a very meaningful

in many ways they are worst, in that the film keeps the viewer trapped in the cave as opposed to encouraging an ascent towards the light.

¹² Italics added for emphasis

¹³ For historical attention to virtue ethics in the Insight movement and the growing politicization of American Buddhist ethics see Fronsedale 2002 and Rothberg 1998.

subject but was so inelegantly handled that it actually left one feeling unhealthy or alienated” (Dorsky 2014, 23). Dorsky attends to “health” vs “illness” rather than “sin” and “goodness” and avoids an ethic that centralizes racial, gender, and class justice in its mode of thinking. The health or illness of a film is not in the content but in the “elegance” with which the content is attended to. Dorsky speaks of film as a realization—not of social inequality but of experiential unknowing:

I don’t even know how I’m speaking. All I know is I can participate in this situation. At first this realization may seem disconcerting. We might try to escape or distract ourselves. But the more we are able to relax and accept the absolute presence of our situation and then begin to recognize its formal qualities, the greater the chance we have to transmute it. With humility we can perform an act of alchemy and transform what might feel like leaden claustrophobia into an expression of openness and clarity. (Dorsky 2014, 19-20)

The transformation and transmutation Dorsky describes may have social implications, but it is fundamentally located in the transformation of the individual’s perception through phenomenological exploration and acceptance of one’s own being. This is practiced in Buddhist *bhavana* meditation or mental culture, which Rahula outlines, and particularly *vipassana*, which cultivates “insight into the nature of things, leading to the complete liberation of the mind” (Rahula 1974, 63) through observation of body, feelings, sensations and thoughts (Rahula 1974, 69). Here, liberation begins internally through a shift in the individual’s perception rather than participating in the liberation of the socially oppressed. Thinking about Dorsky and Miles in light of one another illustrates the possible presence of particular religiously grounded assumptions in “ideological studies” of film (Lyden 27).

Lyden's definition of religion for the study of film creates a particular view of religion, which doesn't serve an understanding of Dorsky's work that studies the paradoxes or fixity of the real and that unpacks or resists the symbolic as a mode of religious practice. Lyden develops a relationship between religion and film based on "religious power" with particular attention to mythology. Dorsky's approach to religion and film is non-narrative and one which is more rooted in delicacy and vulnerability than power. While Lyden recognizes the flexibility of the definition of religion for his particular project, he finds Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, which also emphasizes power, most "helpful and comprehensive" (Lyden 42). Geertz's definition consists of five aspects:

1) a set of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz quoted by Lyden 2003, 42)

This definition however comes eminently under critique in "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in which Talal Asad examines not only religion as a social construct, but the politics of its classification as a distinct entity from the secular, as in Geertz's article "Religion as a Cultural System." Asad argues that the roots of anthropological definitions of religion have very particular historical roots with specific political motivations. He writes, "Thus what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident... is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history"¹⁴... religion has

¹⁴ Asad argues that this abstracted and universalized definition of religion developed in the seventeenth century following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman church and consequent wars of religion. See Asad 1993, 184.

come to be abstracted and universalized” (Asad 1993, 184). Asad criticizes a definition of religion that centralizes belief in a supreme power and renders practices (its ordered worship) and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life) similarly universal, but secondary (Asad 1983, 245). The political motivation of such a classification, Asad argues, was to separate religion from the political sphere, distinguish it from the natural sciences and provide a basis for judging and comparing other religions (Asad 1983, 245). Asad specifically argues that the boundary between religion and politics fails to translate to Islamic contexts,¹⁵ as does the emphasis on faith and belief above practice and activity in the world.¹⁶

Lyden’s use of Geertz’s definition is also problematic in the context of Dorsky’s work, which is inherently about collapsing the symbolic and unpacking the fixity of the real. Thinking about film *as* religion in the context of *Devotional Cinema* relies on moving away from the notion of film as religiously significant only insofar as it points to something religious beyond itself. As Asad argues that the definition of religion has served to separate the religious from the political sphere, so does the definition of religion in relationship to the study of film impose boundaries between theology, ideology, and methodology that rely on specific, not universal, assumptions. Looking at Dorsky’s work in light of definitions of religion employed within the study of religion and film furthers

¹⁵ Asad writes: “The attempt to understand Muslim traditions by insisting that in them religion and politics (two essences modern society tries to keep conceptually and practically apart) are coupled must, in my view, lead to failure” (Asad 1993, 179)

¹⁶ Asad: “Geertz’s treatment of religious belief, which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one, because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world” (Asad 1993, 187).

this critique, by defining religion on a distinctive set of terms, and serves to expand our vision of religion itself.

Transcendence, medium-oriented methodologies and religious difference

Within writing on religion and film (from both film and religious perspectives) which employ medium oriented approaches, there is frequently an appeal to a language of transcendence, which seems not only to attempt to transcend religious difference, but also to be subtly in conflict with the medium oriented approach. In his book *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader appeals to a language of transcendence in order to transcend religious difference and cultivate a critical category for assessing the spiritual efficacy of film. He opens his book:

In recent years film has developed a transcendental style, a style which has been used by various artists in diverse cultures to express the Holy. Just as anthropologists at the turn of the century discovered that artisans in unrelated cultures had found similar ways to express similar spiritual emotions, so, in cinema, un-related film-makers have a created a consensus of transcendental style. The style is not intrinsically transcendental or religious, but it represents a way (a tao, in the broadest sense of the term) to approach the Transcendent. The matter being transcended is different in each case but the goal and the method are, at their purest, the same. (Schrader 1972, 3)

In some ways, the problem of referring to “religion” instead of the “transcendent” for Schrader is that it immediately runs the risk of particularism and Schrader seeks a more universal religious truth. This paragraph suggests that for Schrader sameness and purity are as intrinsically Holy as they are descriptive of the expression of the Holy in film. Distinct films are not just similarly a part of a pure and transcendental style, but the transcendent dimension of this style is proven in part by its appearance in disparate cultural settings. Part of what makes spiritual emotions spiritual in different cultural

contexts is precisely that it transcends context—the miracle of finding an immaterial essence despite geographical and physical difference.

The language of transcendence, however, implies a hierarchy between the material and the spiritual. Schrader states that it is “matter” which is being transcended in pursuit of the Holy. The transcendent for Schrader seems to be a rarified object or that which is fundamentally other than the material or sensory world. He describes “The Transcendent as that which is beyond normal sense experience (Schrader 5), as well as that which cannot be known or seen (8). He also refers to it as the Holy or Ideal itself, and relies on Rudolf Otto’s description of the “Wholly Other” (Schrader 5). At other times it is a quality, as in containing a “genuinely transcendent, ‘Other’ quality” (9). Moreover, it seems that part of the problem with matter is precisely that it *is* different.

While awareness of religious difference has grown, there is still often writing on the intersection of religion and film whose assumptions about the universal nature of religion play into Asad and Lyden’s critiques—not simply universalizing the essence of religion around one particular tradition, but in doing so creating a hierarchy of religions and separating religion from culture, in which the latter is regarded as inferior. This significantly occurs in some new works, which specifically push for greater attention to the medium’s participation in religious expression.

The publisher Routledge has been a central source of scholarship in the study of religion and film, releasing such titles as *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, *Digital Religion*, and *Media and Social Change*. In the last three years, Routledge has started publishing the largest collection of scholarship in the field, *Routledge Studies in*

Religion and Film, edited by Robert Johnston and Jolyon Mitchell. The series includes several texts that explicitly sit at the intersection of film with Christian theology or biblical narrative themes.¹⁷ This series also includes three collections on the intersection of religion and film.¹⁸ While *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema* includes the paper “The New Aesthetics of Muslim Spirituality in Turkey: Yusuf’s Trilogy” by Asuman Suner, the rest of the content of these collections still falls within the bounds of Mitchell and Plate’s original critiques pointing to the absence of particular religious traditions and non-narrative film.

Routledge has more recently published two books in the field of religion and film directly addressing gaps in methodology and the role of the physicality of film as a medium: Crystal Downing’s *Salvation from Cinema: The Medium is the Message* (2015) and Dennis Ford’s *A Theology for a Mediated God: How Media Shapes Our Notions About Divinity* (2016). Both are oriented specifically around Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement, “the medium is the message.” Downing’s *Salvation from Cinema* often elevates religious difference, but employs a specific theological lens through which to

¹⁷ See Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch and Jon Morgan’s *Noah as Antihero* (2017); Darren Aronofsky’s *Cinematic Deluge*; Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston’s *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* (2016); Sean Desilets’ *Hermeneutic Humility and Political Theology of Cinema: Blind Paul* (2016); David Shepherd’s *The Silents of Jesus in the Cinema (1897-1927)* (2016); Terry Lindvall, J. Dennis Bounds and Chris Lindvall’s *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit* (2016); Alina G. Birzache’s *The Holy Fool in European Cinema* (2016); and Anthony R. Mills’ *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre* (2014).

¹⁸ See Costica Bradatan and Camil Ungureanu’s *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema* (2014); Antonio D. Sison’s *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*; and Milja Radovic’s *Transnational Cinema and Ideology* (2014).

approach the study of religion and film. Downing's narrative of theological approaches to film revolves around the phrase "salvation from cinema" in the field of religion and film: early approaches saw cinema as a source of sin from which people needed saving, while later theologians found redemption through the medium. She argues that theologians and religious studies scholars need to pay more attention to the ways the medium, more than narrative, is the true source of salvation. Downing's work elides a Christian theology of film and as a broader approach to the study of religion and film, by centralizing the paradigm of the hypostatic union of the human and divine in body of Jesus Christ as a template for a methodology in the study of religion and film. She writes:

This, as well, has been the goal of *Salvation from Cinema*: to push scholarship about religion and film beyond the sphere of the same. Employing a shocking analogy—the hypostatic union of human and divine in Jesus Christ—it encourages spectators to consider how the hypostatic union of medium and message exceeds the horizon of pedestrian beliefs and probabilities. It encourages, in other words, metanoia, a word that recurs in the Greek New Testament. (Downing 2016, 176)

When describing recent religious studies approaches to the study of film, she writes, "religious studies specialists discuss salvation from cinema in ways that exceed the particularity of Christianity" (Downing 2). On the one hand she acknowledges that religious studies specialists approach film in ways that hope to exceed the particularity of Christianity, yet she uses a particularly Christian term "salvation" to narrate the history of religion and film.

In *Salvation from Cinema*, Downing writes: "Believers—from multiple religions—look beyond the small screen of everyday reality whenever, through prayer or meditation, they seek connection with someone or something that transcends lived

experience,” and “religious dogma is made up of communally shared beliefs inspired by prophets like Moses, Isaiah, Buddha, Confucius, St. Paul, Muhammad and Joseph Smith” (Downing 114). Here Downing associates religious practice with “belief” and that which “transcends lived experience,” as opposed to that which investigates lived experience, collapses dialectics of transcendence, or prizes action and ritual before such a thing as belief.

The word dogma comes from a Greek word—*dokein*—meaning to believe. Downing defines Buddhism according to Huston Smith: “Buddhism is a voyage across the river of life, a transport from the common-sense shore of non-enlightenment, spiritual ignorance, desire, and death, to the far-flung bank of wisdom which brings liberation from this prevailing bondage”(Downing 46).¹⁹ This description of Buddhism privileges transcendence, unlike that of Dorsky’s, which is much more concerned with the immediate. Here there are physically distinct worlds of ignorance and wisdom, unlike other Buddhist philosophies which argue that the shore of ignorance and the shore of enlightenment are not different. Downing’s definition of religion privileges transcending the “everyday reality,” which Dorsky’s film theory explicitly insists on attending to and remaining with. Implied in Downing’s pun on the phrase “small screen of everyday life” is that salvation through cinema occurs through the transcendence of the medium or the small screen itself.

¹⁹ Dorsky’s Mahayana Buddhist background in many ways collapses the notion of enlightenment as being on another shore. I will address this later on.

A Theology for a Mediated God by Dennis Ford aims at “shifting the focus from media and religion to media and theology” (Ford 2016, 3) and in the words of Clive Marsh provides a “compressed history of the interaction between Christian thought and belief and developments in media and technology”(Marsh 2004, 391). While Ford wishes to move away from the field of religion and film towards a greater emphasis on theology, he still provides a definition of religion which privileges his own theological assumptions rooted in ideas of transcendence:

I think a case can be made that the *sine qua non* of religion is transcendence... Again, Birgit Meyer is helpful here in supporting the connection between religion and transcendence when she says that, for her, “religion refers to the ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendental.” Especially relevant to our own work, she continues by saying that she refers “to this meta-empirical sphere as ‘the transcendent’ because this term best captures the sense of going beyond the ordinary that is at the core of religious sensations.” The “something” that is “wrong” provokes a question which, in turn, speaks to our hunger for resolution or transcendence, which I have just identified as the essence of religion. Thus, for example, the “wrong” of death is transcended with resurrection, eternal life in a heaven, or reincarnation. Our own powerlessness in the face of adversity is transcended with the help of an omnipotent friend who can affect miracles that transcend (by violating) the laws of cause and effect. The despair of history is transcended with hope and the expectation of the arrival of an apocalyptic new heaven and new earth. Grace transcends sin and guilt. The chaos of change is transcended, as it was in Plato with timeless and universal Forms... Empathy and love transcend self-interest and ego. Ritual transforms and transcends daily routines with human meaning. Revelation transcends our normal ways of knowing. The sacred, whenever and wherever it occurs, signals our perception that there is something more, something that we cannot fully articulate or explain, but which nevertheless transcends the profane. (Ford 2016, 7)

Ford’s definition of religion strongly departs from that described in *Devotional Cinema* as well as Buddhist philosophy-- which explicitly challenges distinctions between the sacred and profane. When reading Ford in light of Dorsky, Ford’s universal claims for a

definition of religion premised on transcendence are rendered less convincing. These definitions of religion as transcendence cannot help but appeal to examples within Christian theology and Platonic philosophy which disparage the ordinary, material, daily dimensions of experience.

Again, Dorsky seems far more concerned with the immanent than the transcendent. It is specifically not going beyond the medium or the world or the profane, but going through and remaining in the world that Dorsky encourages and which informs his methodology. Ford specifically emphasizes the supernatural, the meta-empirical, the omnipotent friend, resurrection, the eternal, reincarnation, the timeless and universal, the something “more,” the miraculous and conflicts between despair and hope, sin and guilt, chaos and cosmos, heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane. So much of Dorsky’s theory does the opposite— collapsing the binaries described above, and directing our attention to the mundane, the normal, the worldly, the un-miraculous, the human and the changing and impermanent. Ford’s definition of religion blurs distinctions between the philosophy of religion and theology, and the emphasis on transcendence points beyond the medium.

In both Downing and Ford’s work, their insistence on a medium-oriented approach to the study of religion and film, or to developing a theology of film, seems to exist in tension with one another. In Dorsky’s soteriology the most profound states of consciousness are of, in, and through the mundane material world, which makes attention to the medium of film all the more essential to its religious potential—religious content, theology, and methodology in the study of religion and film are not wholly unrelated. I

would argue that Downing and Ford run into points of conflict in their emphasis on transcendence in their definitions of religion—rooted in their own particular theologies—with their insistence on medium-attentive methodologies. Dorsky’s medium-attentive methodology, whose religious claims exist in and through the world, provides an important counterpoint to these works. Thinking about *Devotional Cinema* in contrast to Downing and Ford’s work illustrates the ways religious content and methodology can mutually inform and reinforce one another in the study of religion and film.

Film Theory as Spiritual Exercise

Pierre Hadot writes of philosophy as a spiritual exercise,²⁰ and Simone Weil describes the cultivation of “attention” through study as a preparation for a “spiritual life” (Weil 92). Similarly, Jose Cabezon describes traditions of Buddhist scholasticism as their own mode of spiritual awakening.²¹ I argue that *Devotional Cinema* can be read as a “spiritual exercise” or “mode of spiritual awakening”—one which embodies its own contemplative practice. In 2005, Tuumba published a revised second edition of *Devotional Cinema* after two new prints of Yasujiro Ozu’s entire body of extant work

²⁰ “Philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way” (Hadot 1995, 265).

²¹ “However, language is not only the canvas, it is also the paint. Besides being the source for scholastic speculation, language is also the medium in which such speculation takes place. Both the exegesis of the Buddhist canon and scholastic discourse generally occur in the medium of language. Finally, there are instances in which language in general becomes the object of scholastic inquiry... Scriptural language as source, exegesis and philosophical discourse as medium, and language generally as an object of reflection: it is in these three ways that language functions in Buddhist scholasticism” (Cabezon 1994, 194)

became available for study. In 2014, Tuumba released a revised third edition, which Dorsky explained: “Since the publication of the second edition of *Devotional Cinema* in 2005, I had the opportunity to teach a semester-long seminar at Princeton University entitled ‘The Character of Space/Space as Character.’ In examining closely Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* in this seminar, aspects of it became visible to me for the first time. I also used this opportunity to clarify a number of small points in other sections of the book” (Dorsky 2016, preface). These revisions hint at the fluidity and meticulousness of Dorsky’s character as well as at the depth of Dorsky’s engagement with film and religion as a theorist. In its depth of attention, patience, openness, and precision, Dorsky’s theorization of the relationship between religion and film is its own meditation, modeling a tone and approach for the study of religion and film that becomes a spiritual practice in itself.

In Schrader’s understanding of the “transcendental style the film,” the critic has a privileged, almost ministerial role or calling. Critics are situated above theologians, aestheticians, and psychologists—who are only able to “interpret” the transcendental style—in being called to demonstrate the spiritual universality of the transcendental style (Schrader 1972 2). The criticism of transcendental art, like the art it critiques, he claims, must take on a “self-destructive process,” dealing with contradictions and verbalizations of the ineffable (Schrader 8). The extraction of the transcendental style from films by critics becomes a mystical art unto itself: “Like the artist, the critic knows that his task is futile, and that his most eloquent statements can only lead to silence” (8). Schrader quotes Roger Fry in saying that the critical inquiry ends at the gulf of mysticism (8). The

critic ultimately cannot analyze the transcendent, only describe the way the immanent points to, and expresses the transcendent (8).

Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema* is perhaps an embodiment of turning film criticism into its own religious practice, while at the same time shifting emphasis from the transcendent to the immanent, from the "wholly other" to the immediately present and questioning the solidity of experience itself. I further argue that studying Dorsky's life and work, enhances a sense of the religious particularism underlying his approach to the intersection of religion and film, grounded in specific dimensions of Buddhist philosophy and film theory by those like Stan Brakhage. Doing so illustrates the ways that the study of Dorsky's life and films within the field of religion and film contributes to an expansion and specification in the understanding of religion.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One: This project's portal into Buddhism is through the life and work of Nathaniel Dorsky, which reflect and interpret a historically, geographically, and sociologically particular mode of Buddhism—late 20th century American Buddhism. This chapter first introduces the challenge of defining Buddhism and the way the definition of Buddhism and religion have been mutually evolving categories. It then details the sociological and ideological particularities within American Buddhism and its unique relationship to the arts, and Dorsky's place within an exchange between American artists and Asian Buddhist emissaries in the 20th century. I then move to the relationship of Asian Buddhist emissaries to film as a medium, and Dorsky's place within that

exchange. Lastly, I situate the relationship between Buddhism and film in continuity with traditional Buddhist aesthetic theory and artistic practice.

Chapter Two studies Dorsky's biography in relationship to American Buddhism and avant-garde film as a means of: first, addressing questions of authenticity and hybridity within American Buddhist and religious identity; and second, illustrating a relationship between religion and film the fluidity and symbiosis of which strongly differ from other first person accounts within the field of religion and film.

Chapter Three: studies Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema* in conversation with particular Buddhist philosophies based on Dorsky's own Buddhist claims for the text and points of correlation. Doing so provides new ways of reading both *Devotional Cinema* and the Buddhist theory underlying his work in ways that depart from the original religious framework in which they were presented.

Chapter Four explores approaches to religion among filmmakers and film theorists like Andre Bazin, Andrey Tarkovsky, Paul Schrader, and Stan Brakhage, and then considers how Dorsky's own theory differs and aligns with existing work within this genre of work. Secondly, this chapter explores Dorsky's theory of religion and film within two critical categories at the intersection of religion and film: "devotion" and "immortality." Doing so points to the ways Dorsky departs from existing work in this genre, to reframe the intersection of religion and film around impermanence and conditional material existence.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM, AMERICAN BUDDHISM, AND FILM

The Challenge of Defining Buddhism

Defining “Buddhism” is a somewhat contentious topic within Buddhist and religious studies, and it is subject to ongoing scholarly debate as to whether it can refer to a coherent and unified religious tradition (Lopez 2005, 1-3). Scholars like Rupert Gettin suggest that the term “Buddhism” may be “an intellectual abstraction,” (Gettin 1998, 2) and others like Keren Derris and Natalie Gummer suggest that it may be more apt to refer to many Buddhisms than a single Buddhism (Derris and Gummer 2014, 2). Donald Lopez argues that the definition of Buddhism is more a contemporary 19th and 20th century construction—co-created by Asian Buddhist teachers, students of Buddhism in the West and Buddhist scholars—than a historical phenomenon (Lopez 2005, 1-7).

The definition of Buddhism has often evolved alongside the conversation within religious studies about the definition of religion itself—at times being shaped to fit the category and at others transforming it.²² In late 19th and early 20th century debates regarding the place of Buddhism within religion, those who limited a definition of religion to the presence of a creator God argued against referring to Buddhism as a religion at all, while others used Buddhism to expand the category of religion to move beyond the necessity of centralizing a creator God. Still some argue that Buddhism has been misrepresented as atheistic to develop a religion compatible with enlightenment

²² Donald Lopez writes that Buddhism “has been variously represented as a form of idolatry, as atheistic religion, as a religion of reason, as a religion of science, and as no religion at all.” Lopez, Donald. “Introduction: Impressions of the Buddha” (Lopez 2005, 1).

ideals, but that ignores or has dismissed the theism of many popular Buddhist beliefs and practices throughout Asia (Ivy 2005, 312). Similarly early studies of Buddhism tended to emphasize scripture, history and doctrine in keeping with missionary and scholastic approaches to the study of religion, but recently attention has turned more towards ritual and material culture, shifting attention towards ritual and material culture within religious studies itself (Silk 2004, 94). More contemporary debates look to Buddhism to refine and challenge understandings of categories like “religious experience.”²³ Robert Sharf draws specifically on Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology to address the ways the discourse of “religious experience” privileges Western notions of experience that assume a duality between “experiencer” and “experienced,” which do not translate to Buddhist or other Asian religious contexts (Sharf 1998, 94-116). Attending to the shape shifting and expansion of Buddhism brings to light the challenges of defining religion itself.

As religion and Buddhism have been mutually evolving categories, so has the development of the definition of Buddhism been intertwined with a growing understanding of the historical particularities of Western or American Buddhism itself. Donald Lopez writes of a contemporary image of Buddhism, which distorts Buddhism’s historical character—“as a world religion on par in history with that of Christianity, a religion of reason, primarily concerned with meditation, devoted to nonviolence and social reform, atheistic and in line with modern science” (Lopez 2005, 2). Similarly, Ian McMahan in the *Making of Buddhist Modernism* makes the argument that what many

²³ For criticism of the term “religious experience” and perennialist approaches to the study of religion see Proudfoot 1985 and 2004, and Katz 1978

Americans and Europeans often understand by the term “Buddhism” is actually a modern hybrid tradition with its roots in the European Enlightenment no less than the Buddha’s enlightenment, in romanticism and transcendentalism as much as the Pali canon, and in the clash of Asian cultures and colonial powers as much as in mindfulness and meditation (McMahan 2008, 5).

This project’s portal into Buddhism is through the life and work of Nathaniel Dorsky, which reflect and interpret a historically, geographically and sociologically particular mode of Buddhism—late 20th century “Import”²⁴ American Buddhism. While a definition of Buddhism may be a contemporary construction and a disingenuous account of Buddhist history within Asia, the emphases on meditation, nonviolence, social reform, artistic practice and atheism--are nonetheless prominent features of a particular Buddhism practiced by many 20th and 21st century American and European Buddhist communities. As Lopez and McMahan suggest, Buddhist interpretations by American and European practitioners have often been the lens through which Buddhism has been defined and reimagined at large, but they are still reflections of a contemporary development of a specific version of Buddhism itself. As a clearer vision of Western/American Buddhism has developed as a historically and geographically localized, diverse and changing phenomenon, so does it expand a larger sense of the geographical and historical particularism of Buddhism and by extension religion.

Buddhism

²⁴ To be defined within subsequent section on American Buddhism

Nagarjuna, the 2nd century Indian Mahayana Buddhist philosopher, famously argued that since all phenomena are empty of independent essence, including the idea of emptiness itself, the reality of phenomena is simultaneously conventional (or nominal) and ultimate (See Garfield 1995, 88). In this vein, Buddhism, nominally or conventionally, refers to a diverse and expansive tradition of texts, philosophies, cosmologies, mythologies, institutions, monastic and lay communities, rituals and spiritual practices, found predominantly within Asia, which trace their origins back over 2500 years to the teachings of a figure known as the Buddha. Buddhist teachings, practices and communities evolved and spread over the last 2500 years from India to the greater parts of Asia, stretching as far west as Afghanistan and as far east as Japan. Today the world Buddhist population exceeds 500 million, 7 percent of the world's population, with 99 percent of its followers continuing to reside in the Asia-Pacific region (Pew 2015).

Western/American Buddhism

In the last century there has been a rise in the number of self-identified Buddhists outside of Asia and a strongly growing visible presence of Buddhism within Western media and culture. While self-identified Buddhists make up a little less than one percent of the American population (Pew 2018), Thomas Tweed, among others, argues that there are easily hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of other Americans who practice Buddhist meditation, subscribe to Buddhist periodicals, read Buddhist literature, attend Buddhist centers and lectures and engage with Buddhist art and thought, while not self-identifying as Buddhist (Tweed 2002, 20). Millions of other Americans have been exposed to

images of the Buddha and Buddhism as well as teachers of Buddhism like the Dalai Lama through pop-cultural references, celebrity converts and news media. “Mindfulness” as a word and practice—taken from the Theravadan *vipassana* tradition—has become prominent within fields from medicine and psychology to business. In keeping with the rising presence of Buddhism in the West, in the last twenty years “American Buddhism” or “Western Buddhism” has become an established subcategory of Buddhist scholarship (Prebish 2002, 66-80).

In Jan Nattier’s seminal paper within social science approaches to American Buddhism, “Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” Buddhists in the United States are said to fall into three main categories: “Immigrant or Ethnic,” “Export or Evangelical” and “Import or Elite” (Nattier 1998, 183-195). The first category, “Immigrant or Ethnic” Buddhism, is the largest and earliest form of Buddhism in America and includes Asian Buddhist immigrants to the United States and their descendants. At the risk of oversimplifying the history of Asian immigration to the United States can be divided into three major waves: the first refers to Chinese immigration in the mid-19th century; the second influx of Asian Buddhist immigrants came from Japan and Korea in the early 20th century in response to social and economic unrest. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which allowed for large quotas (20,000 visas per country) of Asian immigration to the United States brought in a third wave of Buddhist Asian immigrants from all over the Asian world—China, Korea, Japan,

Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Tibet, Taiwan—in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁵

The second category, “Export or Evangelical” Buddhism, with over twelve million members worldwide, refers to evangelical Buddhist groups like Soka Gakkai International (SGI) which developed in China and Japan after World War II. It is most unique in terms of the ethnic diversity of its converts—with the most African American and Latino practitioners in the United States of all Buddhist groups. It is similarly unique among convert American Buddhist groups in that it places greater emphasis on chanting than on philosophical study or meditation practice. Converts were not necessarily seeking out Buddhism, but were rather brought into these groups through interaction with missionaries.

The third category, “Import or Elite” Buddhism, refers to Americans usually of European origins with middle and upper class backgrounds who have the time, educational exposure and resources to seek out Buddhist teachers, institutions and resources. While European trade, colonialism and missionary work in Asia throughout the latter half of the second millennium brought Europeans into contact with Buddhist teachings and practices, it was in the 19th century that there was a major growth of “Oriental” and Buddhist scholarship and the beginnings of European and American travel to the East in search of religious or philosophical wisdom. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau first came into contact with Hinduism and Buddhism through the new availability of translations of texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*

²⁵ For a comprehensive study of Asian immigration to the United States see Takaki 1998.

and the *Lotus Sutra* by European scholars (Fields 1992, 55). The first official converts to Buddhism by Americans of European origins came out of the post-Civil War spiritualist movement (Fields 1992, 83-84) — most significantly Henry Steele Olcott and Madame Blavatsky. Olcott and Blavatsky traveled to countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, India and established the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York City, which sought to promote theosophy among Americans with a particular emphasis on Buddhism. The theosophists published multiple works on Buddhism and money from the center was then used to sponsor Buddhist education centers in the United States and Sri Lanka, as well as helped to finance and promote the Buddhist presence at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in 1893 (See Fields 1992, 83-118). The Buddhist presence at the Parliament led to further growth and interest in Buddhism among Americans (See Fields 119-145). Other historical events and figures in the importation of Buddhism to the US include the collecting and exhibiting of Japanese art by Ernest Fenollosa and Edward Sylvester Morse in the Boston Museum of Art (Fields 146) at the turn of the 20th century, and the establishment of the first Zen centers and societies for Western students by Japanese emissaries like Soyen Shaku, Sokatsu Shaku, Sokei-an and others (Fields 168-194).

The second major wave of Import/Elite American Buddhism and most significant to this project began at the end of the Second World War at the intersection of events within the United States and Asia. On the one hand, a growing counterculture in the United States developed out of disenchantment with traditional authorities, including traditional Christian and Jewish institutions, and took an interest in religious

experimentation.²⁶ Japan produced Japanese emissaries to the United States like D.T. Suzuki and Shunryu Suzuki who looked to re-dignify Japanese culture in the West and reinvigorate Zen, which was in decline within Japan (see Chadwick 1999). The Tibetan refugee crisis and diaspora following the Lhasa uprising of 1959 caused many Tibetan Buddhist emissaries to leave for the United States and Europe and made Dharamsala, India (a place of relocation for Tibetan refugees including the Dalai Lama) a place of pilgrimage and study for Western students (Gethin 1998, 275). Tibetan missionaries began coming to the United States in the early 1970s for the purpose of preserving Tibetan culture and bringing Buddhism to what they saw as a new frontier (Lavine 1998, 100). A second wave of Tibetan Buddhist teachers came to the United States following the Immigration Act of 1990, which granted thousands of visas to Tibetan refugees living in India and Nepal (Lavine 1998, 110). Meanwhile the development of Asian Studies in American Universities in the 1950s and 1960s, in conjunction with founding of the Peace Corps in 1960 as well as the development of study abroad programs in American universities in the 1970s, were the means through which American *vipassana* teachers became initially immersed and educated in Theravada *vipassana* teachings abroad (Fronsdale 1998, 166).

The primary focus of these “import” Buddhist communities is often on meditation practice, and these groups have been primarily affiliated with Zen, Tibetan Buddhist and *vipassana* centers and teachers. Core institutions and teachers which have been

²⁶ For more on Buddhism and American postwar counterculture and the turn to Buddhism as a rejection of Jewish and Christian institutionalized religion, see Alitt 2003, 140-148.

instrumental in the second half of the twentieth century in this regard include D.T. Suzuki's teachings on Zen at Columbia University in the 1950s; Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's San Francisco Zen Center in the 1960s; Vietnamese Zen (*Tien* in Vietnamese) teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching appointments at Princeton and Columbia in the 1960s; the Tibetan master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his founding of the Naropa Institute and Shambhala center in Boulder Colorado in the 1970s; and the development of Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts as a center for *vipassana* mindfulness practice in the 1980s by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, who traveled to Burma, Thailand and India to study *vipassana* in Theravadan monasteries.²⁷

Sociologically, Import American Buddhist communities are unique or at least distinctive in several respects, which inform the doctrinal concerns of many of these communities. First, there is an unusually high presence of female leadership and meditation practitioners within the Western Buddhist community in contrast to traditional Buddhist leadership, which has centralized the question of feminism and the place of women within Buddhist life (see Simmer-Brown 2002). Second, there is an active openness to homosexual and queer members of the *sangha* in American Buddhist life and an explicit interest in discussing sexuality and sexual identity in relationship to the *dharma* (Corless 2002, 256). As Jose Cabezon notes, Western Buddhist attitudes towards sex and sexuality tend to be far more liberal than Buddhist tradition, and Western

²⁷ I will address these teachers and institutions in greater depth and in particular relationship to Nathaniel Dorsky later in this text. These are also only a few of the main institutions and teachers, within each tradition that have been foundational in the development of "import Buddhism" in the US.

Buddhists are not infrequently ignorant of this discrepancy (See Cabezon 2017). Third, there has been a strong point of exchange between secularized American Jews and Buddhist practice within the American Buddhist movement and a high number of prominent Jewish American Buddhist teachers who have adopted the title of JUBU and have actively worked to integrate Jewish and Buddhist lives (see Prebish 2002, 3; Kamenetz 2007, 147-157). The latter two points are perhaps most significant to Dorsky's experience of and within the American Buddhist world.²⁸

While there is a growing number of such Import Buddhists committing to monastic life in Zen, Tibetan and *vipassana* traditions, the emphasis on meditation within these communities is unusual in Buddhist history in that it is largely being practiced by the laity or those living the lives of householders. Similarly, American Buddhist teachers are by and large not monastic, but rather described as “full-time practitioners” living lay lives, more than half of whom are women (Wetzel 2002, 275). While Zen, Tibetan and *vipassana* Buddhism have remained largely separate within Asia, Import Buddhism has been highly eclectic with an exchange of teachings and practice among both American Buddhist students and teachers within these communities. For example, Kornfield and Goldstein, leaders of the Insight meditation movement, taught *vipassana* meditation at Chogyam Trungpa's Naropa Institute; Trungpa developed a a strong interest in Zen arts and practice (Lief 2008, x) and was a long term friend of Shunryu Suzuki (see Turrell 1972), founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. It is not uncommon today for a Tibetan Buddhist monk to lead a retreat at a *vipassana* center, or to hear a talk on mindfulness at

²⁸ To be discussed in greater detail within his biography

Tibet House in NYC. Given that Import Buddhists have often been instrumental in the transmission of Buddhism in the West as scholars and teachers, they have often reimagined Buddhism to centralize meditation practice and particular points of Buddhist philosophy, while downplaying the dominance of other forms of ritual, performance, magic and folklore in lay Buddhist life throughout Asia and within Asian American Buddhist communities (Baumman and Prebish 2002, 3).

American Buddhism and the Arts

Most significant to this project has been the emphasis on a unique relationship between Buddhist and artistic practice and an exchange between Asian Buddhist emissaries and American avant-garde artists within 20th century American Buddhist literature and institutions. While the emphasis on the arts has been present since the 19th century origins of American Buddhism (see Harris 2002, 368-375 and McMahan 2008, 128-159), it was particularly in the 1950s and 60s that an understanding of Buddhism as inherently intertwined with artistic practice developed, through the teachings of key Asian Buddhist emissaries to American audiences. McMahan insists that the articulation of a special connection between Buddhism and art was constructed—especially by 1950s Japanese Buddhist emissary to the United States D.T. Suzuki—“in terms of romantic conceptions of nature, art, creativity and spontaneity” and ignored a more tenuous historical relationship within Asia (McMahan 2008, 13). I will explore this intersection in greater detail and depth through Dorsky’s biography, but the following provides a small preview of what is to follow.

Dorsky came of age alongside a “surge” in American interest in Zen across the country and specifically in New York City, which fostered an exchange between Buddhists and artists. While the first Japanese Zen monk, Soyen Shaku, came to North America in 1893 and there was some literary and academic interest in Zen in the first half of the twentieth century, serious Zen practice communities did not open in North America until 1959; by 1975 there were more than a hundred such centers. New York City was an especially vibrant hub of exchange between Buddhist teachers and artistic and intellectual immigrants from Europe in the post-war era. Sokei-an-Shigetsu Sasaki, a Japanese Rinzai Zen Roshi and student of Soyen Shaku (the first Zen Buddhist master to teach in the United States), founded the Buddhist Society of America on the Upper West Side in 1930, which was frequented by prominent artists and intellectuals of the time.²⁹

Dorsky’s early Buddhist education was particularly informed directly and indirectly by Japanese Buddhist emissary Daisetz Teitaro (D.T.) Suzuki (1870-1966). Suzuki was a Japanese Rinzai Zen author on Buddhism and Zen, translator of Chinese,

²⁹ The center eventually came to be called the “First Zen Institute of America” and moved to the Upper East Side, but remained a hub of publications and teachings on Zen for an American audience. Russian painter, mystic and Tibetologist Nicholas Roerich and his wife Helena Roerich similarly took up residence on the upper Westside and founded what was to be known as the “Agni Yoga Society” and the “Master Institute of Fine Arts.” Helena Roerich was the author of a book on “Foundations of Buddhism” and had translated the work of theosophist Madam Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* into Russian. The Roerich’s emphasized a fusion of artistic and Eastern spiritual teachings in their institutions. Alan Watts (1915-1973) British philosopher, writer and speaker who is known as an early interpreter and philosophizer of Eastern philosophy, had read and met D.T. Suzuki at the World Congress of Faiths at the University of London in 1936 as well as Nicholas Roerich in London before all three made their way to the Upper West Side of NYC. Watts married Eleanor Everett, the daughter of Ruth Fuller Everett, who ran the the “First Buddhist Institute of America” following the passing of her husband Sokei-an Sasaki in NYC in 1930.

Japanese, and Sanskrit literature, and is often known as one of the most instrumental figures in the teaching of Zen to Western audiences. In 1951, Suzuki moved to the Upper West Side of New York City and taught at Columbia University from 1952 to 1957. His students included experimental composer John Cage, beat poet Allen Ginsberg and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, among others. McMahan argues that in reading Suzuki's interpretations of Zen, "We can also see glimmerings of how Buddhism and Zen came to be intimately associated with avant-garde art and experimental, improvisatory music and theater" (McMahan 2008, 130). Dorsky's first exposure to Zen teachings was through accompanying his father to an informal *sangha* within this community.³⁰

From 1971-1984, Dorsky, along with the Beats and other members of the American avant-garde, became engaged in the Tibetan Buddhism taught by the charismatic and controversial Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), Eleventh Trungpa *tulku* of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu lineage. Trungpa is now recognized as a preeminent emissary of Vajrayana Buddhism to the West as a well as a scholar, philosopher, meditator, and "practicing artist" (Leif 2008, ix). As has been well documented, Trungpa took an early interest in art in Tibet, studying monastic dance, poetry, calligraphy, and *thangka* painting (see Leif 2008 x; Gimian 2003). At Oxford in the 1960s, as a Spaulding fellow, Trungpa immersed himself in the study of both European and Japanese art forms (Leif x).

In 1970, Trungpa came to North America and immediately developed an entourage of artists and poets such as Allen Ginsberg, dancer Barbara Dilley, and the

³⁰ I will address this in greater detail within Dorsky's biography.

musician Jerry Granelli. He also connected with Japanese Zen teachers in the United States who stressed a relationship between Zen art and practice—Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Kobun Chino Roshi, and Maezumi Roshi, among others (Leif xi). In the early 1970s Trungpa held multiple conferences that articulated an overlap between Tibetan Buddhist practices and Western arts. Two artistic communities were formed under his auspices: Padma Jong in Northern California and Boulder Craft House, which formed the first artists' cooperative in Boulder, Colorado. In 1974, Trungpa inaugurated the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) as a university rooted in Buddhist teachings with a strong emphasis on the arts. Trungpa's Naropa Institute housed the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics—an integral space for an exchange between avant-garde art and Buddhist practice. Moreover, Naropa became a meeting point for prominent avant-garde artists and Buddhist practitioners including John Cage, Meredith Monk, Jean Claude van Itallie, Colin Wolcott, William Borroughs, Gregory Corso, Robert Frank, Anne Waldman, and Diane Di-Prima. Trungpa articulated an overlap of artistic and Buddhist practices in what he described as “Dharma Art.” Today the Shambhala Center and Naropa Institute serve as sites of ongoing dialogue and integration of artistic experimentation and Buddhist practices (Leif xx).

American Buddhism and Film

In many ways, the technology of film and the teachings of Western Buddhism evolved together in the twentieth century, with film serving as a means by which Buddhism was both reimagined and spread outside of Asia. Many of the most prominent twentieth century Mahayana Japanese and Tibetan Buddhist emissaries to the United

States seemed quite taken by film in their writing and lectures, often using it as a means of explaining or understanding *sunyata* (emptiness) along with other Buddhist teachings about non-dualism, meditation, the nature of the mind, and even student teacher relationships. As “import” American Buddhist communities have placed a strong emphasis on meditation and the arts, they also have stressed meditation as a way of enhancing artistic practice and specifically the practice of film-making.

Several Asian Buddhist emissaries used film as a means of explaining Buddhist *dharma* and meditation practice. Dorsky’s lesser-known Nepalese Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche (1966-present), author of several popular works on Tibetan Dzogchen and founder of the Pundarika Foundation in California, also uses film as a technology to think about Buddhist philosophies of mind. Tsoknyi compared good meditation to older films with longer takes, and said that shallower meditation was like newer films with rapid cutting (Rinpoche 1998, 113). Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), a Japanese Soto Zen teacher who in 1959 founded the San Francisco Zen Center—perhaps the most influential center for the teaching of Zen in the US--has a chapter in his book *Not Always So* (a central text in the American Zen canon) titled “Everyday Life is Like a Movie” (Suzuki 2002, 49). Suzuki argues that the mind is like a screen and the meditators need to see through the illusion of their own thoughts, just as they see a film as comprised of mere lights on a screen (Suzuki 2002, 50). He encourages his students to enjoy and be excited by movies as well as the movies of their minds and he suggests that students think of meditation as a moment of creating a white screen so that they may see the nature of the apparatus of their projections (Suzuki 2002, 51). Chogyam Trungpa

uses the analogy of film editing to explain the illusion of self or *anatman*—in the same way that our minds piece together a storyline from a collection of disparate still frames or images, so do our minds create a continuous story line of selfhood from separate illusory instants. By understanding the illusion and acknowledging the impermanence and conditioning of film, we can understand the transience of our own self-constructions and be made freed (Trungpa 1976, 13).

Trungpa went as far as to experiment in filmmaking himself and to hold workshops on filmmaking (in which Dorsky participated), to develop specifically Buddhist films and to theorize film as a means of Buddhist meditation. In the early 1970s Trungpa hosted the Milarepa Film Workshop to brainstorm the making of a film about the Tibetan saint Milarepa with a collection of American filmmakers (Leif 2008, xi).³¹ In keeping with this project, he led a group of American and European filmmakers on a trip to Sweden to visit the Museum of Ethnographia where several famous Tibetan *tankas* of Milarepa are stored (Leif xi). Trungpa drafted a script for the film, but the film was never completed. All of this experimentation with filmmaking was conducted under the rubric of what Trungpa called “dharma-art” or artistic practices which led to Buddhist understanding or “New Sight” (Trungpa 1974). For Trungpa film could be a means into and expression of the *dharma*. The teaching of *dharma* through film and artistic practice by Tibetan and Japanese emissaries like Chogyam Trungpa, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, D.T. Suzuki and Shunryu Suzuki has roots in Buddhist art and aesthetic theory—particularly the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions in which these teachers were trained.

³¹ To be addressed in greater detail within Dorsky’s biography

Buddhist Art and Contemporary Film: Mountains, Rivers and *Tanka*

Like the term Buddhism, “Buddhist Art” is a contentious category. Some feel that the terms art and aesthetics are rooted too deeply within transhistorical and transcultural absolutes and a term like “Buddhist material culture” would be more appropriate (Lachman 2005, 51-52). Charles Lachman has documented the ways that the image of the Buddha and other forms of Buddhist imagery and iconography have historically been central not only to the spread of Buddhism across time and place, but to Buddhist worship itself (Lachman 2005, 38). This is particularly true of Western Buddhism in which statues and images of the Buddha proliferate not simply within Buddhist religious institutions and museums, but also in restaurants, private homes and corporate offices, driven by an expanding international art market, development of technologies of reproduction and increasing commerce and migration of goods and people across the boundaries of East and West (Lachman 37). Historically, however, Buddhist imagery and iconography has functioned not only as the means by which Buddhism is spread, but also as a locus of Buddhist understanding. The image can move beyond representation and mental cultivation, and become the means and embodiment of enlightenment itself.

Malcolm David Eckel, in his study of a sixth century Indian Madhyamaka philosopher, describes the observation of images of the Buddha as both means of mental cultivation and a revelation of the true nature of reality, as well as the paradoxes endemic to the act of seeing itself (Eckel 1992, 1). An image of the Buddha can become both the means and embodiment of enlightenment through its expression of the concept of

emptiness (*sunyata*): “that everything in the end is empty (*sunya*) of individual identity (*svabhava*) and depends for the appearance of its own existence on an infinite network of other equally empty things” (Eckel 1992, 3). As Eckel notes, although in this strain of Buddhist philosophy everything is empty of stable identity or own-being, not all points in time and space are as equally revealing of their true nature as others (Eckel 1992, 3). In other words, the aesthetics of the image can be more or less revealing of the emptiness of the image.

Janet Gyatso adds to Eckel’s argument in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She explains in her study of Tibetan images of the Buddha how an accurately painted Buddha image does not simply evoke the Buddha – it is the manifestation and conduit of enlightenment:

What is being referred to, or symbolized, is the ground of enlightenment; and that is not something which exists prior to, or independent of, its concrete appearance in the world. In accordance with the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism, nirvana is never separate from the vow to appear in the world to benefit all beings.... The image, partaking in and enacting the proportions, colors and attitudes of an aspect of nirvana, becomes an instantiation of that aspect itself. The very perception of those attributes is thought to remind, or put the viewer in mind of his or her own inherent enlightenment. (Gyatso 1983, 30)

Gyatso points out how the image is both a metaphor as well and an instantiation of enlightenment. She also makes it clear that particular aesthetic choices—proportions, materials, colors—of images may be more efficacious in cultivating the state of mind of enlightenment. Taking this further, enlightenment is always imagined and cultivated through a particular aesthetic conditioning and reinterpretation of the nature of enlightenment itself. Since *nirvana* is no other than *samsara*, enlightenment is always conditioned aesthetically and materially.

In continuity with Eckel and Gyatso's studies of the ways Buddhist imagery participate in cultivating and embodying enlightenment, Francisca Cho has written several articles exploring the relationship of film form to Buddhist philosophy (see Cho 1999, 2003, 2008). Cho argues that film's ability to both simulate and *be* the real, renders it uniquely powerful in Buddhist understanding of *sunyata* or emptiness (Cho 1999, 163) -- all things being empty of self-essence, or full of impermanence, particularity, conditioning and subjective perception. The unprecedented ability of film to make illusions feel "real" enables an understanding of the cinematic natures of our regular lives and the material reality of the world on the screen.

Cho's points are supported by filmmakers like Kim Ki-Duk who expose film as an apparatus of Buddhist knowledge. For example, Kim Ki-Duk's 2003 Korean production *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring* opens with a cinematic gesture to the Chan collection of koans known as the *Gateless Gate*. He suggests that film can be the gate through which we recognize the permeability of ourselves and the world. The screen is itself a false boundary between the reality of the film and that of our lives, between samsara and nirvana, between the monastic and the layperson's life.

Khyentse Norbu, an incarnate Bhutanese lama and filmmaker known for movies like *The Cup* (1999) and *Travelers and Magicians* (2003), describes film as an extension of *tanka* paintings: "Buddhism has a tradition of using all kinds of mediums: statues, paintings, monasteries. And although it's difficult for people to accept, I see film as a modern day *tanka*. Film has so much power because we're conditioned primarily by what we see and hear" (Cho 1999, 163). Norbu's statement creates a point of continuity

between traditional Buddhist practice and contemporary filmmaking, in which an exploration of the conditioning of reality through art becomes a means of Buddhist understanding. In these films, understanding the conditioning of reality and perception through film, becomes central to a contemporary understanding of Buddhist practice.

Ki-Duk and Norbu's films are also the means through which audiences around the world come to understand and view Buddhism, conditioning the vision of Buddhism for both Buddhist and non-Buddhist audiences. In *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*, Sharon Suh critiques the vision of Buddhism perpetuated through films that centralize meditation as the most important ritual in Buddhist practice and make male monastics and/or white people the defining identity of Buddhists (Suh 2015, 2). Suh argues that the Buddhism imaged through film is an "elite" Buddhism, in keeping with modernist, import, Western/American Buddhist understandings, which downplay the presence of Asian Buddhist female laity (Suh 2015, 5). This is only to say that Buddhist film is involved in the spread of Buddhism to non-Buddhist audiences, or part of a legacy of "import" Buddhism, while also imagining Buddhism through the lens of import Buddhism. At the same time, the area of Buddhism and film is reimagining a relationship between religion and film which centralizes particular historical Buddhist relationships to iconography and art—where meditation upon the conditioning of the image is a means to and embodiment of religious practice and understanding. When Shunryu Suzuki Roshi writes the chapter "Everyday Life is Like a Movie" he is in many ways adapting 13th century Zen master Dogen's teachings on paintings of a rice cake for an American audience. Dogen writes: "Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The

entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting.... As buddha-dharma is real, a painted rice-cake is real” (Dogen 1985, 137). He suggests that it is the ironic nature of art that explains the irony of the Buddha and enlightenment. In the famous Dadaist 1929 painting by Rene Magritte *The Treachery of Images*, in which a painting of a pipe is underscored by the words “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (“this is not a pipe”). The joke is, of course, that what we see is not an actual pipe but simply paint on a canvas –we confuse the image with its referent. Dogen stretches this irony further to suggest that a material pipe is itself a form of painting--a form illustrated and understood through our mental constructs.³² A painted image of a pipe and a pipe both exist in the tenuous space of subjective and objective realities. Art and the world alike live in a mobile interplay of materiality and consciousness, such that art becomes the means and nature of enlightenment.

I hope that looking at Dorsky’s biography -- in its American Buddhist hybridity, evolution and particularity--undoes some of the hegemony that American Buddhism has over the definition of Buddhism itself, while making a small contribution to an understanding of the complexity and flexibility of not only Buddhism, but religion by extension. At the same time, I hope that his biography provides an alternative point of entry into the field of religion and film, a point that emphasizes a lived symbiosis between religious practice and film as an artistic medium and a point that emphasizes a

³² Dogen writes: “Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting... As buddha-dharma is real, a painted rice-cake is real” (Dogen 1985. 137).

study of the conditioning of the medium of film in awakened vision.³³ The next step is to read his films in continuity with but also as revisions of certain traditional Buddhist aesthetic traditions.

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³³ To be unpacked and developed in detail in the following chapter

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CHAPTER TWO

Who is Nathaniel Dorsky? Situating Dorsky within American Buddhism and Avant-Garde Film

Authenticity in American Buddhism: The challenge of thinking about Dorsky as a Buddhist filmmaker

The authenticity of the Buddhist identity adopted by American converts comes under critique in works like Stephen Prothero's *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*, where Prothero focuses on one of the first self-proclaimed American Buddhists and founder of the Buddhist Theosophical Society of American Buddhists. The Buddhism professed by Olcott and other Theosophists was more hybrid than their label suggested. Prothero writes that while Olcott's "lexicon was Buddhist...its grammar was largely Protestant" (Prothero 1996, 9). In relation to more contemporary American Buddhism, Donald Lopez has argued that much of what is referred to as Buddhist in the West is rooted less in traditional Buddhist schools than in modern thinkers and texts, however much it may claim to speak for some form of Buddhist "original" (Lopez 2002, ix). Specifically regarding the nature of American Buddhism and the avant-garde, David McMahan in the *Making of Buddhist Modernism* has suggested that there is some disingenuousness in constructing a distinctive relationship between Buddhism and the arts. The articulation of a special connection between Buddhism and art was constructed—especially by D.T. Suzuki—"in terms of romantic conceptions of nature, art, creativity and spontaneity" and ignored a more tenuous historical relationship within Asia (McMahan 2008, 13). Attending carefully to Dorsky's life story heightens an awareness of the external and internal diversity of the American Buddhist story.

However historically disingenuous the narrative of a unique relationship of Buddhism and the arts has been, this was the lived reality of the Buddhism to which Dorsky was exposed—one in which there was an articulated overlap between artistic practices (specifically filmmaking) and Buddhist practices, end goals, prominent figures, institutions and ideas. Understanding this history helps provide a background through which to understand Dorsky's theory regarding religion and film as developed in *Devotional Cinema*. Similarly, I would argue that the depth of American engagement with Buddhism has deepened and evolved substantially since Olcott's time, and Dorsky's life typifies this—Buddhist ideas and practices are less ornamental and far more intimately integrated into his filmmaking practice.

Perhaps the problem is less that American Buddhism is not “Buddhist,” but that it may claim more originality, purity or authority than is justified by its relationship to other forms of Buddhism in Asia. American Buddhists can often be ignorant or naïve about their own hybridity, or to their own digressions from Asian Buddhist teachings, and to the diversity of the American Buddhist landscape. Since Olcott, the landscape of American Buddhism has changed radically, such that heterogeneity, particularity, and complexity both invite and exceed orientalist criticism. There is a moment in *Dharma Bums* where Jack Kerouac observes the character Japhy Ryder (modeled on the Buddhist Beat poet Gary Snyder):

Strangely Japhy wasn't interested in the Buddhism of San Francisco Chinatown because it was traditional Buddhism, not the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he

loved—but I was trying to make him see that everything was the same. In the restaurant we had eaten with chopsticks and enjoyed it. (Kerouac 1958, 364)

This passage illustrates the collapsing of East/West geographical binaries—Kerouac and Snyder are American citizens eating with traditional Chinese utensils while sitting in “little” China, which is itself situated within the US city of San Francisco. Somehow, within (or maybe because of) this occidental/oriental layered space, Ryder/Snyder has a certain myopia—he ignores the traditional Buddhism that surrounds him, but he speaks authoritatively about a totalizing concept of Buddhism that paradoxically fits his own tastes. It is implied that when Ryder speaks of Buddhism to his fellow beats, he excludes a certain set of traditional practices in his illustration, but nonetheless has no difficulty speaking as an authority, or with the pretense of the weight of tradition behind him, ignoring the synthetic and historically contingent dimension of the Zen which he adheres to.

The passage, however, goes beyond illustrating this myopia within American Buddhism to make the critique of that narrative part of its expression. Kerouac’s comment, “But I was trying to make him see that it was all the same,” suggests that his understanding of Buddhist philosophies of “non-dualism” would collapse the distinction between the ironically “traditional” Buddhism of the twentieth-century American Chinatown and Snyder’s favorite Zen intellectual, artistic Buddhism. Thus, Buddhist philosophy (however naively engaged) becomes a source for the critique of its own bifurcations created by American Buddhist modernists. Kerouac, a Buddhist modernist himself, is nonetheless the observer (however lightly) of the reification of Buddhism

within his own Buddhist circles. American Buddhism thus is capable of both monopolizing the title “Buddhist,” but also capable of exploring this error in a Buddhist way—undermining the empirical biases of its own authority as part of its Buddhist practice and attending to Buddhist communities outside of its own.

Thomas Tweed’s description of American Buddhism in his article “Who is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures” is probably the most inclusive account of what might be recognized as Buddhism in America. Tweed famously bemoans that studies of Buddhism in America have been hindered by their lack of careful attention to the hybridity of American Buddhist identity, and specifically certain groups like filmmakers who fall outside more orthodox definitions of Buddhist adherents and yet interpret the Buddhist tradition for Western audiences (Tweed 1999, 17). Tweed refers to “Cradle Buddhists”—those who inherit the faith—and “Convert Buddhists”—those who chose the faith but often have a hybrid religious life and religious identity. Tweed creates the most generous of American Buddhist categories in what he deems the “Sympathizer” to account for the hybridity and tenuousness of American Buddhist religious activity and identity. Buddhist Sympathizers are those who subscribe to Buddhist literature, as well as unaffiliated meditators, but have yet to self-identify with the tradition. Sympathizers can include “not just Buddhists,” “lukewarm Buddhists,” “Buddhist Interpreters” and “Night Stand Buddhists”—or those with a more loosely defined Buddhist set of associations. Tweed ends exploring “Buddhist Interpreters” as a subcategory of sympathizers--- “journalists, filmmakers, scholars, poets, painters, novelists who represent the tradition for Western audiences” (Tweed 1999, 29). Dorsky perhaps most

readily falls into this category of “Buddhist interpreter.” To explore Dorsky is to respond to Tweed’s concerns—to deepen our understanding of the hybridity, anxieties, and evolution of American Buddhist identity, while providing insight into the artistic interpretation of Buddhism by avant-garde filmmakers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Dorsky’s biography within the field of religion and film

Dorsky differs significantly from other theorists of the intersection of religion and film in that he regarded the relationship between film and religion as mutually beneficial rather than antagonistic. Several core texts on the study of religion and film describe a personal conflict between religion and film. Margaret Miles writes in *Seeing is Believing*, “My own relation to ‘the movies’ is one that may not be shared by many readers. My childhood was spent visualizing the scriptural stories I read and acted out with my sisters. In an iconoclastic branch of Christianity, one in which ‘graven images’ were feared as idolatrous, the only images I saw were on the Sunday School papers I received weekly” (Miles 1996, xi). While perhaps the severity of the iconoclasm of her childhood upbringing was unusual, the tension she describes between religion and film is perhaps not so uncommon in writing on religion and film.

Crystal Downing in her book *Salvation from Cinema: The Medium is the Message* writes, “For many twentieth-century Christians, ‘Salvation from Cinema’ was tantamount to salvation from sin. I discovered this in elementary school when a friend invited me to join her family to watch the Richard Burton/ Elizabeth Taylor film *Cleopatra*. My parents refused to let me go, not because I was too young to sit through Joseph

Mankiewicz's four-hour extravaganza, but because I was old enough to take a stand for my faith. After all, Taylor and Burton had become adulterous bedfellows, both on- and off-screen. Movies, my parents warned, bred a multitude of sinners" (Downing 2016, 1). Downing acknowledges that her own story in which interest in film and her religious upbringing were in conflict with one another may not be uncommon among many in mainstream American Christian households.

Bryan Stone writes, "I grew up in a conservative Christian denomination that taught that it was wrong to go to the movies. The cinema was spelled *s-i-n-e-m-a*, and Hollywood, we were taught, was an industry that was as opposed to Christian values as anything could be. Nothing short of absolute nonattendance at the cinema was understood to be the appropriate response of Christians to Hollywood and its values. My church's position was not intended to be a political statement, nor was it a strategy to bring about change in the industry such as a boycott would be. It was simply an expression of a fundamental desire on the part of its members to keep themselves unstained by the world. They had the idea that time spent in the cinema was not just harmless entertainment, but that through the power of images what is actually happening is that the mind is being transformed by the values, ideas, and desires of the filmmakers" (Stone 2000, 5).

At times the conversation regarding religion and film feels as though it is attempting to navigate American culture wars and speak across the divide—with scholars of religion and theologians negotiating their own ambivalence and attempting to integrate their past and present values and communities. Dorsky is also an American theorist of

the intersection of religion and film, but one whose childhood and biography follow a different cultural current in American history. The American Buddhist counter-culture of Dorsky's background provides an example of hybrid religious engagement—Jewish, Buddhist, romantic, feminist, queer—in which engagement with religion and film were often intertwined and seen as mutually beneficial, rather than at odds.

Melanie Wright critiques a collection of work within the field of religion and film that imply that “religion and film occupy realms that are distinct from or even at odds with one another,” or theorists who have read the expansion of film as linked with a crisis or decline in religious authority or commitment (Wright 2007, 2). She responds by saying that the historical relationship between religious institutions or leaders and the film industry “is not always an oppositional one, and has more often been characterized by ambiguity or positive symbiosis” (Wright 2007, 3). She details evolving relationships between religious authorities and film in multiple spaces: the shift from the destruction of movie theaters by religious revolutionaries in 1970s Iran, to its present day status under *sharia* law as a highly regarded profession; or the range in religious reception of *The DaVinci Code* among a variety of churches in the United Kingdom. Dorsky's story illustrates another evolving and complex relationship between a different film world—the avant-garde—and a religious one—American Buddhism. Dorsky helps see lived symbiotic, ambiguous, and evolving relationships between religion and film while at times collapsing their distinction as separate spheres.

Biography

The following is a biography of Dorsky with particular attention to his religious and artistic complexity and development, which connect to larger trends within American Buddhism, Judaism, avant-garde film.

i. Childhood: Family, Judaism, Modern Art

Nathaniel Berger Dorsky was born in New York City in 1943 to Aaron Dorsky and Blanche Berger, children of Russian Jewish immigrants. Like hundreds of thousands of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews, Dorsky's grandparents immigrated to the United States escaping the Russian pogroms in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and joined the garment industry in the New York metropolitan area.³⁴ Nathaniel was named for Blanche's father Nathan, who owned a clothing store in New Jersey; Aaron's father owned a clothing store at 218 Greene Street in the garment district of Manhattan. Aaron was the executive of a printing company known as Ralsten Grocraft Press in the West 30s near Penn Station in Manhattan. Dorsky remembers Aaron's work at the printing company as "not as deeply humane as he was or smart as he was." He implies that Aaron's study of Zen later on in life was more reflective of his father's humanity and intellect. When Nathaniel was an infant, Aaron and Blanche moved from Manhattan to the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic in Newark, New Jersey—birthplace and childhood home of novelist Philip Roth. In 1948, Nathaniel's family moved to another Jewish neighborhood in Millburn, New Jersey, where Nathaniel

³⁴ For more on Ashkenazi Jewish immigration to the United States at the turn of twentieth century see Library of Congress "A century of immigration: 1880-1924."

attended elementary, middle, and high school. Incidentally, Milburn is the location of Roth's short story *Goodbye Columbus*, which satirizes middle-class Jewish life in the 1950s. Aaron continued to commute into Manhattan for work, and Blanche ran a nursery school in Milburn, "where the kids improvised with instruments, they could play the piano just without learning and they did all these kinds of assemblages of found objects with egg crates and all sorts of scraps, industrial scraps." As Dorsky says, "she was very, you know, 'woo woo'" (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

Dorsky describes his parents as artistically and intellectually engaged, encouraging and facilitating Dorsky's artistic interests. Blanche practiced oil painting and would take Nathaniel out to rural areas to paint with her. Dorsky describes his parents driving into the city regularly on Saturdays to go to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). At the museum, Nathaniel would take a children's painting class, the family would have lunch at the museum café, and then they would attend matinee screenings of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films accompanied by live piano. Saturday evenings they would drive to the Bronx to have dinner with Aaron's family, which Dorsky describes as "very Russian": "There were all these doilies everywhere and a lot of cut glass bowls with walnuts and figs. It was all very Russian. You know, glasses made out of thick red glass" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). In light of this, Dorsky says, "I just remember all these things as a kid. You know I feel a little bit like a Russian filmmaker, you know? I mean all their preoccupation with film form and the revelatory dream of what cinema could do" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky's eye for light, color and texture is evidenced by his attention to the thick red glass in the home of his father's family;

transparent, glassy colors and textures are a common theme in Dorsky's films. In Dorsky's memories of his childhood, art, film, Judaism and family are intertwined with one another. This contrasts with the childhoods of other theorists in the study of religion and film. When Dorsky was eight, his parents gave him a Brownie Plastic Kodak camera that shot 120 film. When he was ten years old, his cousin lent him his first movie camera—an 8mm Revere (regular)—and Dorsky began making movies. His earliest films document scenes from his home town and his mother's nursery school.

While Jewish culture and community informed Dorsky's childhood, he describes his family as only moderately religious. Dorsky's maternal grandmother lived with them through Dorsky's elementary school years. She would light Sabbath candles on Friday nights, but observance of Shabbat ended when she passed away (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky attended Hebrew School three days a week and became a Bar Mitzvah, but in his words, "it didn't quite take hold" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). In an interview, Dorsky describes the stress of moving from "a mostly Jewish world" of his elementary school life to the more mixed world of junior high and high school. He said, "I remember it being shocking going from this mostly Jewish world to where there were all these other kinds of kids... I lived in a Jewish neighborhood, that was maybe two thirds Jewish. I would say it was very gentle. So it was a little shocking when I went to junior high school and I was suddenly mixed in with the inevitable tough Italian kids from the fifties and the very wealthy Protestant kids from Short Hills who were sort of the dominant clique" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky's family and early life are peripheral to "dominant" Protestant American culture.

ii. Early Zen: D.T. Suzuki, Bernard Phillips, Beat Zen

When Dorsky was in high school, his father Aaron began studying Zen through a teacher named Dr. Bernard S. Phillips (1931-present) who had studied and lived with D.T. Suzuki in Japan for several years, and edited and introduced an anthology of Suzuki's work known as *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, published in 1962. Dorsky would often accompany his father to a Buddhist study group led by Philips in Manhattan. The classes met biweekly in an apartment, where they would sit around someone's living room. Phillips eventually became the chairman of the department of religion at Temple University and an influential member of the board of the Zen Studies Society on East 67th Street, which was founded to encourage the work of Suzuki and introduce Zen to the West. Dorsky remembers Phillips bringing Zen into conversation with Hasidic teachings and Western art—a synthesis that has persisted in Dorsky's life, films, and film theory. He remembers “this Buddhist teacher” his father took him to see as a “Jewish guy”—Phillips was both a Buddhist teacher and a Jew (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Regarding Philips' teachings, Dorsky remembers: “He would always teach with this kind of thing where he would bring in the Hasidic stories” connecting Jewish mysticism with Zen teachings (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Poetry, art, counter-culture, and Buddhist teachings were intersectional.

The Essentials of Zen Buddhism emphasizes the intersection of Zen and artistic practices on the grounds of “direct intuitive awareness of primary forms of immediate experience” or “direct perception.” Phillips' introduction is explicitly titled “Zen Buddhism as Creative Religion” in which he makes the very point that McMahan

critiques—that Zen Buddhism has a unique relationship with art compared to other religions. Phillips writes:

Zen is thus the only religion that demands creativity rather than conformity... The experience of most persons with religion could hardly have occasioned the suspicion that religion and creative living have anything whatsoever in common.

(Phillips 1962, xxiv)

Whether or not Phillips' statement about Zen is empirically true, this claim provides its own vision of Zen which are explicitly and uniquely intertwined with and explained through art in conscious contrast to other modes of religious engagement. For Phillips, religion imagined life as art (Phillips 1962, xxviii) and art as a means to religious insight (Phillips xxvii). Dorsky further says regarding Phillips, "I think he probably influenced devotional cinema a lot, because he would talk about Bach" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). The last sentence of the quotation points to the ways Zen was being taught as a lens through which to understand Western art like Bach, an approach that Dorsky himself employs in *Devotional Cinema*. Dorsky's account of Phillips suggests that the Buddhism he was first exposed to was already religiously hybrid, engaged with the arts, and internally diverse.

Dorsky's other portal into Zen was through Beatnik counter-culture. As has been well documented, the Beat poets—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder—were pivotal in incorporating Zen teachings into their literary work and popularizing Buddhism in the 1950s as a key dimension of their counter-cultural philosophy and as an answer to mainstream America's cultural and political ills.

McMahan writes, “The Beats offered Buddhism as a source not only of spiritual renewal in the ‘nuclear age’ but also of social protest, seeing American triumphalism, consumerism, and militarism not only as structural problems but as sicknesses of the soul that Buddhism could help alleviate” (McMahan 2008, 153). In high school, Dorsky would leave the mainstream culture of his New Jersey town by heading into Greenwich Village in Manhattan, where he would frequent poetry and music venues at the heart of the beatnik counter-cultural scene. Dorsky describes his decision to attend college at Antioch in 1960 specifically because of its affinity with beatnik culture:

By the time I went to Antioch it was the only kind of beatnik school, maybe Reed or something, maybe there were only like two or three beatnik colleges in America? Every other college, I remember going on those college tours with my parents. We went to Tufts, but all those places, I said to my parents, “This is just like high school!” I mean it’s got the same vibration. And then we went to Antioch: everyone’s walking around in sandals and playing recorders on the lawn, you know, all that kind of stuff. It was really good for me, because I went from being kind of an outsider kind of person in New Jersey.... It’s so weird suddenly you’re in this whole other group of people and you’re, like, loved, you know, and you’re making films and there’s this complete (trails off). (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Much of Dorsky’s initial engagement with Zen was through his avid reading of Beat poetry and the newly available translations of Zen texts they referenced. Dorsky’s adolescence was peppered with sources of Buddhist or “Eastern” thought—his father Aaron gave him a copy of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and Dorsky listened to Jean Shepherd

and Alan Watts on WBAI “always promoting Zen teachings” (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky remembers Watt’s teachings specifically on “emptiness” and the “no-self” or “the destruction of the ego.” Watts was instrumental in coining the term “Beat Zen” in his book *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (1959). The Zen and experimental art were intertwined when Dorsky first came to know them.

Haiku was translated for American readers by writers like R.H. Blyth (who studied with Suzuki), and Suzuki himself wrote on the relationship between Zen and haiku in talks like “Zen and Haiku” in *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Haiku poetry had a particularly powerful hold on Dorsky—he recalls sitting in the back of his classes in junior high and high school reading haiku by authors like the itinerant Japanese poet Basho.³⁵ For Dorsky the three lines of a haiku created three related but distinct images, which culminated in a euphoric sense of immediacy. He thought that this sense of a visceral awakesness to the imminence created by the third image of the poem, caused by the collision of the two previous related but different images, could serve as a basis for editing film—shot, counter-shot and then visceral nowness in the third. For Dorsky, the

³⁵ Dorsky: “I fell in love with haiku, which I guess you could call a Buddhist text in a sense. You know? And haiku was also part of the Beatnik Zen thing and anyway I used to read, I loved the haikus.”

ZN: “Like Basho?”

Dorsky: “Yeah, I remember very vividly that it’s like springtime English class in high school and reading in the back these haikus during class and, you know, the haikus, when they work, they’re the thing that inspired my filmmaking. So with the haiku, they establish one image and then they establish a related image and then the third thing breaks that, but breaks it open into newness, so I could feel that viscerally when the third thing happened, I would get a little you know, like stunned? Blink? Not blink but you know. I remember looking around and watching the teacher teach and all the kids taking notes and I was in this kind of euphoria of nowness, so that was the beginning of reading Buddhist things.” (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

terse cut of the haiku correlates to the quick blinking of the eye, a new way of seeing the immediate moment *as* immediate and fleeting. Dorsky refers to haiku as a major influence in his approach to filmmaking: he liked its formal ability to cultivate “nowness”—and he is not alone among avant-garde filmmakers in that regard.³⁶ It was at Antioch that he first read Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and also learned to shoot 16mm black and white film on a Bolex in an independent study with a senior student. Beat culture provided a window into a dynamic package of counter-culture experimentation—artistic, spiritual, intellectual, and social.

Dorsky’s account of Zen in the 50s highlights its fusion with experimental art forms as well as its religious hybridity: for Phillips, it was a unique fusion of Zen and Hasidic mysticism; for the beats, it was the fusion of Zen and American Romanticism. Dorsky’s account of this time also speaks to an evolution in his understanding of Buddhism, and even of Zen enlightenment itself. Regarding Phillips, Dorsky states: “He was very interesting, because you know at the time in pop culture Zen was in, now Tibetan Buddhism is more in pop culture. But then Beatniks and everyone was talking about Zen” (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

Dorsky goes on to describe Phillips diverging from popular understandings of Zen teachings focused on sudden enlightenment and introducing an idea of gradual enlightenment: “It took a long time; maybe now it seems obvious, but it took a long time to understand that enlightenment wasn’t some kind of revelatory experience, it was an ongoing reality. You know? Because then (then meaning in Beat literature) you sort of

³⁶ I will address this in a later section.

thought of it as some kind of ‘pow,’ and he taught again and again that you had to understand that it was an ongoing creative process” (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky describes not only a shift, in American Buddhism from Zen to Vajrayana Buddhism in the 1970s, which he himself participated in, but also a shift within Zen teachings from “sudden” to “gradual” enlightenment—or exposure to Soto in addition to Rinzai Zen teachings and teachers. This development is documented in the change in approach to Zen from D.T. Suzuki’s teachings, to the later teachings of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi,³⁷ but Dorsky remembers this divergent understanding of enlightenment being present from the very beginning. While as Dorsky’s earlier forays into Zen had suggested that enlightenment was a singular transcendent event, Phillips introduced a form of Zen that was attentive to everyday life. As Phillips writes in his introduction to D.T. Suzuki’s *Essentials of Zen Buddhism*:

There is no final enlightenment, as there is no final perfection of love, for life is not final or finished. The true Zen person does not look upon *satori* as a momentary experience after which somehow all of life’s problems will vanish. What vanishes is not life’s problems, but man’s exteriority vis-à-vis those problems. He now deals with all problems and with himself from within instead of from without—that is the great difference. As he is now one with his tasks, they are not to him mere obstacles to be disposed of so that he may begin the business of ‘really living.’ His tasks *are* his life. (Phillips 1962, xvii)

³⁷ Fields writes: “D.T. Suzuki, decades earlier, had made *satori* and Zen synonymous: Shunryu Suzuki now did something similar with “practice” (Fields 1981, 229).

Philips teaches a mode of Zen which imagines enlightenment (*satori*) as an ongoing unfolding experience, rather than a unique, final or transcendent one. To view enlightenment as something separate from everyday time and space, would be an unenlightened view—to mentally separate oneself from experience in order to assess it and to then split experience into binary of less or more enlightened states of mind. The goal here is an ongoing union with experience. This mode of Zen is part of all ordinary, everyday tasks. Enlightenment is not about the content of the action, but the approach to the action— being mentally in union with the physical action or with a task like washing dishes. Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* and his silent films all speak to this resistance to the dramatic or sudden and lean far more towards an attentive approach to the everyday, stressing a union of the approach of the film with its content, aligning the light passing through a single green leaf and its gentle swaying in a breeze with the light passing through the film strip and the wavering of the camera.

iii. Avant-Garde Film in New York

In the 1960s Dorsky became part of a particular lineage in the underground film scene in Greenwich Village, led by filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, in which film was articulated as a visionary experience and a meditational practice. Avant-garde filmmaking became almost a religion unto itself, in which the materials of the films became objects of devotion. Brakhage famously described the subject matter of his own films as “Birth, sex, death and the search for God” (Brakhage 1963, 25). Brakhage argues that filmmakers, like religious seers, should challenge the limits of representation to create images of the ineffable— a theory which Dorsky has integrated and transformed in

relationship to his own Buddhist training. While both Dorsky and Brakhage are concerned with the intimacies of filming the everyday and aligning the intimacy of life with the intimacy of film, Dorsky stresses the gradual unfolding of the mundane (like Bernard Phillips description of *satori*), as opposed to the dramatic dimensions of birth, sex, death and the otherness or transcendence implied in “the search for God.”

Brakhage’s idea of film as a visionary experience is conducted through attention to the body in the subject matter of his work, as well as the physicality of the medium, which through their mutual intensity make somatic demands on the spectator (James 1989, 43). These somatic demands are intended to collapse dualities between subject and object, psychological and physiological, perception and creation (James 1989, 43). Dorsky’s films and film theory have a similar orientation, however in contrast to Brakhage, they do not predicate intimacy on intensity.

The growth in alternative film in the 1960s came out of a collection of historical and economic shifts inside and outside the film industry. On the one hand economic growth and the expansion of capitalist economies from 1956-1974, and specifically American economic and political hegemony, inspired a range of “new” movements across artistic mediums and socio-political rebellions (James 1989, 3); this was coupled with the postwar crisis of the Hollywood film industry in the 60s which created an opening for alternative film industries (James 1989, 37). David E. James describes the 1960’s American avant-garde filmmakers as a group who resisted the positions “capitalist cinema assigned them” and as “dissidents” who adopted the labels of “beatniks or revolutionaries, as Blacks or working-class, as women or artists all had in common the

decision to take control of the means of film production, to become themselves producers rather than merely consumers” (James 1989, 10). There was a felt triangulation between the film industry, American capitalism, and the construction of social constraints domestically and internationally built on sex, race, nationality, sexuality and class.³⁸ Avant-garde filmmakers, in resisting the typical means of film production, were also pushing back on their own political marginalization—aesthetic and social rebellion became intertwined (James 1989, 10). Dorsky’s technical and material filmmaking choices are aesthetically motivated, but also driven by the financial constraints built on some of these political ideological origins.

The term “avant-garde” has its roots in a military analogy or the forefront of a military line, attacking social, political, psychological, economic and artistic boundaries. Many of the avant-garde films made in the early 1960s ran into legal and public controversy. Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* debuted in 1963, leveraging sexuality as a mode of iconoclasm, intercutting homoerotic shots of biker gangs with Lutheran Bible study film clips of Jesus on a donkey. Dorsky remembers attending the New York premier. The Hollywood Vice Squad raided the theater where *Scorpio Rising* was to premiere in Los Angeles and took the print and charged the theater owner with lewd exhibitionism. The case went to the California Supreme Court (James 2005, 223). Stan Brakhage was engaged with superimpositions and unorthodox framing around sexual

³⁸ James writes: “The total form of the capitalist mode of film production, then, is the capitalist cinema, and such a cinema is a social process that inserts people into specific positions in the industries, social relationships, and discourses of film production, and thereby into society at large. As capitalist film produces the subjects of bourgeois society, so capitalist cinema produces their subjection” (James 1989, 6).

content in films like *Dog Star Man* (1962).³⁹ In *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangle* (1961) Brakhage includes explicit shots of his wife Jane giving birth to their children. Kodak initially refused to process the film of *Window Water Baby Moving* and threatened to either destroy it or turn it over to the police on account of the content (Macdonald 1988, 64-66). Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) was ruled obscene by New York courts and withdrawn from public exhibition because of perceived sexual deviancy (James 1989, 121). Sexual transgression became a means of social protest through its ability to provoke direct conflict with film codes and institutions.

Of all Dorsky's work, his first film *Ingreen* (1964, 12 min.), may be most in keeping with the overall ethos 1960's Greenwich village avant-garde film in its synthesis of aesthetic and overt socio-political critique and intentionally inflammatory sexual content. *Ingreen* teeters on the edge of psycho-drama—the film is built around shots of a young man masturbating, intercut at an increasingly fast pace with images of his hometown and family. The film concludes with accelerating cuts between the protagonist and his surroundings. The camera then zooms closer into the protagonist's face as he nears orgasm. Dorsky focuses the camera right up to the edge of the image as the character climaxes, pressing the limits of the screen; at the same time the psyche of the protagonist is overwhelmed. The combined escalation in intensity of form and content directs the film beyond the screen towards the audience itself. The alignment of style enhances the social and personal protest of the content—pushing social boundaries

³⁹ I know that this is a reductive description of Brakhage's films from this period, but I am trying to give examples of content and style in his work, which Dorsky engages with in his own earliest films.

through testing the literal limits-- the frame--of the medium itself. The social commentary is imbedded in the aesthetic rebellion. This said, while Dorsky has dropped sexual content from his films, materiality and physicality of both film and the world remain central to his films and theory.

Dorsky's other two early sound films-- *A Fall Trip Home* (1964, 11 min.) and *Summerwind* (1965, 14 min.)— are similarly blunt in keeping with this description of an “avant-garde” in their antagonism towards the dominant American discourse, social mores and main stream film aesthetics. David E. James writes of 1960s avant-garde film: “the film not only speaks of what it is, it speaks of what it is not, it speaks of its other” (James 1989, 12). These other early films construct a sense of an “other” with which they are in conflict. All three films are shot from the perspective of a young adult critically, cynically, and at times nostalgically reflecting on mainstream American suburbia—high school marching bands, football games, American flags. The shots of other humans are taken often from a distance highlighting the sense of distance or disconnected voyeurism of the filmmaker from the community he observes. There is a sense of a loner with the camera looking in from the outside at the sports enthused teams and fans and cutting away to other sources of attention in nature—which the figures in the film seem oblivious to. The motion of the camera and the editing are conspicuously out of synch with the motion of the subject matter, emphasizing a sense of estrangement. These early Dorsky films align themselves with a larger theme in the American alternative scene observed by James: “In cases of ideological dissent or social contestation, the filmic and cinematic alternatives are inscribed in the film itself, both as

themselves and marks of difference from the dominant discourse” (James 1989, 12).

Stylistically, in all three of his earliest films Dorsky plays with superimpositions, unusual lens work and rapid editing, which challenge coherence and aesthetic expectations cultivated in mainstream cinema. While developing and continuing these aesthetic techniques, Dorsky has since shied away from charged, conflict oriented, overtly iconoclastic, and sexual subject matter.

Dorsky’s films are always shot with Bolex on 16mm film. Dorsky’s choice of 16mm comes out of a need for a balance of artistry with personal mobility and independence: 8mm felt too unprofessional and 35mm required too heavy a camera and was too expensive to purchase and develop. 16mm also adds subtly to the humility of Dorsky’s work: its aspect ratio makes it more amenable to close shots than landscapes or horizons which can take in the whole of the view. His prints are developed only by Cinema Lab in Denver, which is run by students of Stan Brakhage. Dorsky then edits his films himself in his cellar using rewinds, a viewer, a splicer and a projector. He claims that the idea of editing in digital on a computer is highly unappealing in its lack of bodily engagement. Part of Dorsky’s attachment to working in film instead of digital comes from his attachment to the physicality involved in the editing of film, but it also has become yet another way in which he remains independent from the contemporary mainstream film industry. His finished work is then only handled by approved projectionists and run through vetted projectors. This fussiness of form belies a deeper intention to reflect on and engage with the materials of filmmaking and the subtle, nuanced states of awareness cultivated by these precise formal choices. At the same time

these choices mean that Dorsky is almost entirely personally, independently and physically involved in the production from beginning to end. This is in contrast to more commercial film, which relies on a larger crew and collection of resources and gives the director less control over the final product. This attention to the materials and physicality of filmmaking is also intertwined for Dorsky with a religious devotion to the materials of film themselves, common among the American 60s avant-garde (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

The avant-garde film scene actively voiced the religious aspirations of its work and has at times become a small cult-like religion unto itself. Parker Tyler writes of “The Cult: more or less refined” in *The Three Faces of Film*. Tyler argues that the American avant-garde cinema has nourished itself on cultic denial of the commercial cinema in general and it has renewed itself periodically through cultic devotions—to silent film, 8mm, and Super-8mm projections, local aesthetics, collegial loyalties, confederacies of sexual preference, and so on” ((Tyler 1960, 430). P. Adams Sitney has corroborated Tyler’s description, writing “the thrall of what film can do lies at the heart of what I’m calling the cult of the avant-garde film” (Sitney 2002, 436). In the mid-1970s, Gregory Markopoulos withdrew his films from distribution and envisioned the ultimate cultic center, a pilgrimage site in rural Greece to be devoted solely to the cyclical screenings of his and Beavers’ films: The Temenos (literally ‘temple precinct’) where he hoped to build a theater and archive eventually (Sitney 2002, 432). Sitney writes: “Larry Jordan’s magisterial *Sophie’s Place* (1986), directly acknowledges the convergence of a religious, cultic site and what he calls his ‘alchemical autobiography’” and “Sophie’s Place” is the Byzantine interior of the Church of Hagia Sophia (Sitney 2002, 432). Religious devotion

to filmmaking materials is something organic to the experimental film scene in which Dorsky has spent most of his life and is intertwined with its socio-political roots.

Dorsky's work can be situated within a particular vein of the 60s avant-garde, which thought of film as an extension of poetry and brought the idealism of American romanticism to film—focusing on the personal, the biological and the quasi-divine (James 1989, 32). It is important to note that not all of the New York 60s avant-garde is as earnestly and militantly romantically idealistic as Brakhage; Robert Frank, Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol are all examples of filmmakers who engage in a much deeper sense of play, irony, if not cynicism within their work. Warhol can be seen as representative of the other side of the spectrum from Brakhage: James argues that if Brakhage's work functioned in opposition to industrialism, Warhol pushed art film closer to industry (James 1989, 58). In 1960 Stan Brakhage published his vanguard manifesto on film in which he theorized avant-garde filmmakers in continuity with religious mystics and iconoclasts. Brakhage writes:

Imagine an eye un-ruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.

The artist has carried the tradition of vision and visualization down through the ages. In the present time a very few have continued the process of visual perception in its deepest sense and transformed their inspirations into cinematic experiences. They create a new language made possible by the moving picture

image. They create where fear before them has created the greatest necessity. They are essentially preoccupied by and deal imagistically with—birth, sex, death, and the search for God. (Brakhage 1963, 200)

For Brakhage, avant-garde filmmakers were in line with Biblical prophets and religious visionaries and played an integral role in social transformation. Brakhage's theory follows a popular genre of experimental film in the 1940s which Sitney documents as the "trance film" that "deals with visionary experience. Its protagonists are somnambulists, priests, initiates of rituals, and the possessed, whose stylized movements the camera, with its slow and fast motions, can re-create so aptly" (Sitney 215). Films that fall into this category include: Deren's *Meshes*, *At Land*, *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*; Brakhage's *Reflections on Black*, *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1955); Curtis Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946), *Picnic* (1948); Markopoulos' *Swain* (1950); and Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947). Maya Deren was a first propagandist for the American avant-garde film and the founder of the Creative Film Foundation (Sitney 343). Deren was particularly interested in the relationship between avant-garde film and religious ritual, and his *Ritual in Transfigured Time* was meant to be the first of several cinematic investigations of ritual. In *Ritual for Transfigured Time*, Deren proposed a complex film correlating the ritual aspect of children's games with traditional rites as they survive in Bali and Haiti (Sitney 35).

While an interest in Buddhism was not a dominant theme of the foundational Greenwich Village experimental film scene, references to Zen and Buddhist terms are still a strong presence within the foundations of filmmaking and film theory, among other

romantic understandings of religion. Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's 1959 film *Pull My Daisy*—a seminal work of the New York “underground film” scene (James 1989, 94) -- synthesized many of the Beat motifs like spontaneous poetry performance, modern jazz, marijuana, homosexuality, and most importantly Buddhism (James 91). The film was made in keeping with the goal of “spontaneous spiritual transformation rather than concrete social action” in which Buddhist motifs are part of the larger spiritually transformative operation (James 94). Kerouac, who wrote the screenplay, supposedly relied heavily on Buddhist meditation which stressed attentiveness to the present moment (James 94).

Maya Deren was born to a Jewish family in Kiev and originally named Eleanora Derenkowskia. When she moved to New York in 1943, she changed her name to Maya—the name of the historical Buddha's mother and also the *dharmic* term for the illusory nature of reality. While I do not want to overplay the significance of Deren's name change—it seems in many ways more ornamental for her persona—as matriarch of the avant-garde film world in 1940s and 1950s, it seems not wholly insignificant that she chose to give her persona a label, that unites Buddhist vision and the project of avant-garde film. The name Maia can also refer to the Greek goddess of mountains and fields, such that the Buddhist reference slides easily into more romantic religious imagery as is typical of transcendentalist approaches to Buddhism.

Those like Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage voiced the aspiration to make a “Cinematic Haiku” (James 94)— the simplified superimposition of 8mm may be compared to the haiku's juxtaposition of two isolated images. In 1948 Deren made her

film *Meditation on Violence*, known as her “haiku film” in which “three degrees of traditional Chinese boxing—Wu-tang, Shao-lin, and Shao-lin with a sword” are described “in a single continuous movement.” Deren sees the film as “a meditation. Its location is inner space, not an outer place. And just as a meditation turns around an idea, goes forward, returns to examine it from another angle, so here the camera, in the Wu-tang section, revolves around the movements of the figure” (Sitney 2002, 31). For Deren, haiku and meditation could be modes of filmmaking:

Meditations investigate extremes, and life, while ongoing and non-climactic in the infinite sense, contains within it varieties and waves of intensity. So this film, as a meditation, proceeded beyond the Wu-tang school, to examine where the Shao-lin concepts of aggression would lead... the climax of this meditation on violence is a paralysis. From which point the return is a reversal. (Sitney 2002, 24)

Inspired by Ezra Pound, Brakhage cites the Noh drama as “the exploration of a single action and all its ramifications” (Sitney 24). Jonas Mekas, godfather of the Greenwich Village avant-garde film scene, made a collection titled “Rabbitshit Haikus.” In 1962 Dorsky’s interest in using Haiku form as a means of thinking about filmmaking is as much a testament to his own engagement with Buddhist teachings as those disseminated by the Greenwich Village midcentury avant-garde film community itself and later reinforced by the San Francisco wing of experimental film.

Dorsky left Antioch after one year to study film at New York University in 1961. At the time, NYU and UCLA were the only colleges with developed film programs. Dorsky left NYU after two semesters, but he continued to work in the downtown film

scene in a variety of capacities crossing paths with many prominent experimental and classical figures in the New York film world. Dorsky “squatted” in an apartment in Greenwich Village on West 3rd Street with several other young aspiring filmmakers. Dorsky happened to meet Jonas Mekas when they were both developing film at Lab TV near Times Square. It is hard to overstate the significance of Mekas not only to Dorsky’s career but to the New York underground film scene at large. In the words of David James:

In no career are the trials and the triumphs of alternative cinema more completely exemplified than in that of Jonas Mekas; in his endeavors as a filmmaker, a theorist, a critic, an archivist, an exhibitor, a distributor, a tireless publicist, and in many cases a self-sacrificing financier of other filmmakers, this self-styled ‘raving maniac of cinema’ was the underground’s nurturing genius... Without *Film Culture*, without the Film-Makers’ Cooperative, without Anthology Film Archives, in all of which he played a major role, the social elaboration of the perceptual and imaginative renewals provided to the individual by the new film would have remained a dream. (James 1989, 100)

Dorsky remembers getting on the subway at West 4th Street with ten rolls of 16mm film and Mekas— “this fellow wearing an olive corduroy jacket”— got on the train with several rolls of 16mm at 14th Street. Dorsky recalls that they smiled at each other, they then got off at the same stop and silently proceeded to the same lab. When they got to the lab, Dorsky saw Mekas’ name on the boxes he was exchanging with the clerk. Dorsky told Mekas that he loved his column in the *Village Voice*. A year after this interaction,

Dorsky invited Mekas to a screening of his 12-minute short film *Ingreen* at his squatter-filmmakers' apartment in the west village. Mekas attended the screening and in 1964 Mekas screened *Ingreen* at the Washington Square Gallery. Mekas wrote a review of *Ingreen* in the *Village Voice* following the screening.

Ingreen, a 12-minute film by Nathaniel Dorsky, was screened at the Washington Square Gallery last weekend. It's hard to tell what it's all about, but I would say it is mainly about green. It is made of beautiful greens... but the esthetic experience is created by the flow and play of superimpositions. The superimposition is coming back to cinema... In New York, the superimposition came back permanently with Ron Rice's Chumlum, with Jerry Joffen, Barbara Rubin's Christmas on Earth, Carl Linder's Devil is Dead, and now Dorsky's Ingreen. (Mekas 1964, 12)

Celebrated experimental filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos attended the screening with Jerome Hiler as well as avant-garde theorist Ken Kelman. In that same year, Dorsky wrote to Brakhage inviting him to a screening of *Ingreen* at his apartment, and Brakhage attended. Brakhage apparently liked Dorsky's film but critiqued Dorsky's use of sound. Dorsky's subsequent films have all been silent. In 1964 Brakhage came to Dorsky's apartment for another screening. Dorsky continued to correspond with Brakhage by mail and attend his lectures and screenings. Later, Dorsky would spend time with Brakhage in the '70s and '80s at his home in Boulder Colorado.

Dorsky's filmmaking developed amidst a specific boom of avant-garde filmmaking in 1960s Greenwich Village that sought a language unique to cinema

(Mousley and Davis 2018), but also alongside the burgeoning work of contemporaries like Martin Scorsese and amidst the American theatrical presence of international film from directors like Yasujiro Ozu and Italian neorealists like Roberto Rossellini (see Graf and Scheunemann 2007). Martin Scorsese was in Dorsky's class at NYU, though the two ran in fairly different circles. Dorsky remembers Scorsese as "very confident (laughs). He dressed in a way that was different from how I dressed. He was like a real Italian. He had these pointy shiny shoes and a sport jacket and he would walk in sort of slapping his feet. Even then he had an entourage, right, two or three people with him. And his editor Thelma was his editor then and we talked a lot about, I mean, I knew a lot more about American film than other people, so I remember talking to him a lot about American Hollywood film, I mean from the forties and stuff" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Scorsese and Dorsky were submitting short films to the same festivals and both of their student films were selected for the 1961 Ann Arbor film festival. Their films were then both critiqued by Gregory Markopoulos on behalf of Jonas Mekas in the same *Village Voice* edition in its coverage of the Festival. The above quote illustrates how closely knit the film scene in NYC was at the time, even across genres.

Dorsky took a job as a projectionist at the New School for a film class titled "Film as Social Comment" taught by Joseph Goldberg, where he screened films by directors like Carl Theodore Dreyer, John Ford, Roberto Rossellini, and other directors who became focal points for *Devotional Cinema*. This class was especially pivotal in Dorsky's education in classical cinema and not just the avant-garde world. Dorsky's films are themselves often compared to the work of feature filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. It

was through Goldberg's class that Dorsky came to know Adrienne Mancia, who served as a curator of film at MoMA and then at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, (Larson 2015) and author and filmmaker Lenny Lipton (most famous for writing the lyrics to "Puff the Magic Dragon"). At the time Dorsky took other jobs working as a cameraman and editor for filmmakers making "industrials" for German film theorist Rudolph Arnheim. Many of Dorsky's films and much of his film theory exceed the world of the avant-garde and are informed by this larger, more classical, less radical body of feature filmmaking. Dorsky's lived relationship with Scorsese is of note given Scorsese's, and his long time screenwriter Paul Schrader's, articulation of film as religious expression in his films and writing.⁴⁰

iv. Avant-Garde Film on the West Coast

As described by Sheryl Mousley and Emily Davis, "Avant-garde film in the 1960s was not so much a birth of a movement as a seismic surge. Building on the influence of earlier figures such as Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and, farther back, the European surrealists, a critical mass of renegades took root in two key metropolises: New York City thrived under the auspices of Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 and then Jonas Mekas' Film-Makers Cinematheque, which eventually grew into Anthology Film Archives; and the Bay Area community flourished with the formation of the San Francisco Cinematheque and Bruce Baillie's Canyon Cinema" (Mousley and Davis 2012).⁴¹

Dorsky's life has been at the heart of the experimental film scenes in both New York and

⁴⁰ To be addressed in subsequent chapters

⁴¹ The other metropolis referenced in the quote is San Francisco under auspices of Bruce Baillie at Canyon Cinema where Dorsky now keeps and exhibits his work.

San Francisco. As discussed earlier, his films were first discovered and screened by Mekas in NYC in the 1960s until he moved to San Francisco in 1971. Dorsky's films are now stored at Bruce Baillie's Canyon Cinema.⁴²

The trend with underground film to think of film as a visionary experience or a meditational practice was expanded upon in terms of the depth of its relationship to Buddhism on the West coast. Asian religions had "currency on many levels on the West coast" and Buddhism was of particular interest to filmmakers because of its emphasis on vision in meditation (James 1989, 128). Bruce Baillie founded Canyon Cinema outside San Francisco in 1962 and soon after it moved to Berkeley. By 1963 there was the Canyon Cinema Cooperative—Nathaniel and Jerome would join in 1971 when they first moved to San Francisco.

Baillie was actively engaged in making experimental films about Eastern religious themes: "The Asian 'saint' in a fusion of Zen, Tao, and Confucian traditions is the first of the heroes proposed by Baillie's cinema. The second, *Parsifal*, logically prefigures the first; his quest seeks the reconciliation of nature and mind that makes the Asian saint possible" (Sitney 2002, 181). His film *Quick Billy* (1971) was meant to be an adaptation of the *Bardo Thodol, The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.⁴³ Sitney points to Baillie's appeal not only to the way he attends to Buddhist content, but also his emulation of particular

⁴² I reference this only to evidence Dorsky's close relationship to the institutional centers of avant-garde filmmaking in the United States.

⁴³ "The essential experience of transformation, between life and death, death and birth, or rebirth. In four reels, the first three adapted from the *Bardo Thodol, The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The fourth reel is in the form of a black and white one-reeler Western, summarizing the material of the first three reels, which are color and abstract" (Quoted from program notes from the Whitney Museum of Art. Sitney 2002, 226).

forms like the Haiku, as in the tradition of Deren and Brakhage: “His first film shows a Japanese gardener, Mr. Hayashi, performing his daily tasks in a few black and white shots. The form is intentionally brief, minor, and occasional; although there is no metaphor or conflict of images, it reminds one of the aspiration first voiced by Maya Deren and later echoed by Brakhage to create a cinematic haiku.” The plastic and formal tradition indigenous to San Francisco, the center of Baillie’s activity, owes something to Eastern and specifically Japanese, aesthetics. Baillie’s religious aspirations for his film in the tradition of avant-garde film appeals to more than Buddhism. His film *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1964) uses the form of a Catholic mass as a template for the editing of the film itself.

Jordan Belson, another highly regarded filmmaker in the San Francisco experimental scene made films with the explicit objective of being vehicles of meditation building upon classical Buddhist mandalas—for example, his films *Mandala* (1953) and *Samadhi* (1967). Belson eventually left filmmaking to become a Hatha Yogi, but returned to filmmaking with *Re-Entry* which relied on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as his source. *Samadhi* was for Belson a true synthesis of his meditation and filmmaking practices, in which the practice of filmmaking itself became its own religious purpose (James 1989, 130). Whereas filmmakers like Deren, Brakhage and Mekas dabbled in Asian religious themes and referenced Haiku and meditation in their filmmaking; Buddhism was always somewhat peripheral to, or merely one inflection of, a larger romantic tradition, which collapsed Buddhist ideas into other modes of religious mysticism. With filmmakers like Baillie and Belson, Buddhist topics and meditation

becomes integral and focal to filmmaking itself. Dorsky's own films and life follow this progression, moving away from the antagonism and iconoclasm of the early avant-garde and becoming increasingly oriented towards a meditative practice.

v. Jerome Hiler

Jerome Hiler has been Dorsky's partner in life and his filmmaking collaborator since the early 60s, occasionally appearing in Dorsky's footage. He has a signature swooping bang which has now gone white. Hiler was born in Jamaica, Queens, New York to an Irish Catholic family and studied painting at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn under the tutelage of Natalia Pohrebinska. In the '60s he began making 16mm film inspired by the work of experimental filmmakers like Marie Menken, Gregory Markopoulos, and Stan Brakhage. For most of his life, Mr. Hiler only screened his work among his circle of friends. However, from 1995 on, his work has been seen more publicly. He has shown his films at London's LUX film series, the San Francisco Film Festival, many seasons at the New York Film Festival, and the London Film Festival, and he was selected by the Whitney Museum of American Art to participate in the 2012 Biennial for a week of screenings.⁴⁴ He has also been a photographer and editor on a variety of feature and documentary films, and he works in the medium of stained glass.

Dorsky and Hiler first met when Hiler accompanied Markopoulos to the screening of Dorsky's *Ingreen* at the Washington Square Gallery. Hiler was a painter at the time and moved in with Markopoulos after his apartment was burglarized and his paints were

⁴⁴ See "Two films by Jerome Hiler now available through Canyon Cinema" (*Canyon Cinema* 2015).

stolen. Hiler stayed on with Markopoulos for a stretch in the East Village and became Markopoulos' assistant, helping him with his films. Prior to meeting at the *Ingreen* screening, Dorsky and Hiler moved in parallel and overlapping worlds attending experimental films at various local theaters and less formal venues—sometimes just a single projector in a room and at other times venues with formal projections booths. They both remember being at the premier of Kenneth Anger's groundbreaking avant-garde film *Scorpio Rising* in 1963 at the Gramercy Arts Theater on West 27th Street prior to meeting one another. In addition to their shared interest in avant-garde filmmaking, Dorsky and Hiler shared a love for George Balanchine ballets, classical music, and a love of Watts' Buddhist broadcasts (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky and Hiler shared an apartment in the village until 1967 when Dorsky and Hiler moved out of New York City and into a home in rural New Jersey, near Lake Owassa and Port Jervis on the Pennsylvania border. The cabin and surrounding area is prominent in several of Dorsky's films, including *Hours for Jerome, Parts I and II* and Hiler's film *In the Stone House*. In 1971 they moved to San Francisco where they currently reside. Recently Dorsky and Hiler's 16mm films have been screened together at the New York Film Festival.

Dorsky has struggled with depression throughout his adult life, which he later came to attribute in part to the social stigma of being homosexual.

And at a certain point I went into a very bad depression, I don't know if you would call it a depression, it wasn't a thing where like I couldn't get out of bed, I just was very... sad and I had lost connection or trust in the world and in my heart and part of that was what I found out later was a fear with being gay. When you

admit that you can get totally paranoid. At that time, it was still an illness and illegal. It was hard to negotiate that when you are fifteen or sixteen. It's hard to negotiate your heart, and you're also a faggot and all that. So it is very hard to be your heart, you sort of lose or create this other thing.

Moving into the cabin with Hiler in 1967 sparked the judgment of his relatives and his depression worsened.

It actually happened when Jerry and I moved in together to the house in the country in *Hours for Jerome*, it's when it got really really bad. You know my family began to relate to me differently... So I got very paranoid, I lost all my stable reference points, they sort of cracked apart. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

For Dorsky pursuing both filmmaking and Buddhist practices were motivated in part to heal from this depression. He describes feeling “fucked up” for the following seven years in which he felt like he had to function “artificially” in order to survive moment to moment. That is the time he claims he began to make his film *Pneuma*, which is a collection of film stocks threaded through the projector without processing. Working with the most basic materials of the film, helped him feel more connected to the physical world (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky describes working on *Pneuma*:

When I began to collect the pure emulsion, that felt really healing, or that's where the healing had to take place. Because each film I make is a healing for the moment you're in, so each moment you need a different kind of healing.

Sometimes this, sometimes that, you know, hot, cold, whatever. So at that time images didn't mean anything to me, but all that swirling grain, that was the level

of my discontent. Then meeting Trungpa Rinpoche and doing the meditation, they had this thing called Shambhala Training. I slowly started to work my way out.

(Dorsky July 9, 2015)

It seems like part of what was healing in regards to the emulsion was paying attention to the subtleties and particularities of each moment. He then connects the filmmaking to the meditation practices in Shambhala Training, in which he was similarly instructed in how to pay attention to the immediacy of each physical moment of the human body, like the emulsion. All this being said, both the causes for both Dorsky's depression and its dissipation are difficult to pin point, as with anyone, and may exceed any of these explanations.

vi. Chogyam Trungpa and Kagyu Vajrayana Buddhism

From 1971-1984, Dorsky, along with the Beats and other members of the American avant-garde, became engaged in the Tibetan Buddhism taught by the charismatic and controversial Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), the eleventh Trungpa *tulku* of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu lineage. Trungpa is now recognized as a preeminent emissary of Vajrayana Buddhism to the West as a well as a scholar, philosopher, meditator, and “practicing artist” (Leif 2008, ix). As has been well documented Trungpa took an early interest in art in Tibet while he was studying monastic dance, poetry, calligraphy, and *tanka* painting (see Leif 2008, x; Gimian 2003). At Oxford in the 1960s, as a Spaulding fellow, Trungpa immersed himself in the study of both European and Japanese art forms (Leif 2008, x). In 1970 Trungpa came to North America and immediately developed an entourage of artists and poets such as Allen

Ginsberg, dancer Barbara Dilley, and the musician Jerry Granelli. He also connected with Japanese Zen teachers in the USA who stressed a relationship between Zen art and practice—Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Kobun Chino Roshi, and Maezumi Roshi among others (Leif 2008, xi).

In the early '70s Trungpa held multiple conferences that articulated an overlap between Tibetan Buddhist practices and Western arts. Two artistic communities were formed under his auspices: Padma Jong in Northern California and Boulder Craft House, which formed the first artists' cooperative in Boulder. In 1974 Trungpa inaugurated the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) as a university rooted in Buddhist teachings with a strong emphasis on the arts. Trungpa's Naropa Institute housed the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics—an integral space for an exchange between avant-garde art and Buddhist practice. Moreover, Naropa became a meeting point for prominent avant-garde artists and Buddhist practitioners.⁴⁵

When Dorsky began studying with Trungpa, Trungpa was experimenting in film production himself. Dorsky first met Trungpa in San Francisco in the Spring of 1971 at a weekend workshop. Dorsky then went to Boulder, Colorado that July for a ten-day seminar with Trungpa known as the “Ten Bhumis,” or the ten stages on the Mahayana Bodhisattva's path to awakening. When Dorsky arrived in Boulder, Trungpa was in the process of making 16mm films. Describing his first meeting with Trungpa in Boulder, Dorsky says:

⁴⁵ See Chapter One

He was very interested in film at the time. I couldn't believe it, thinking "How does a Tibetan thread a projector?" (laughs) – he went and threaded up a 16mm projector and was showing some footage he had shot, so I felt very at home, I thought "I'm feeling very at home." (laughs) (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Trungpa had recently taken a group of filmmakers to Sweden to visit the Museum of Ethnographia, where a series of magnificent Milarepa tankas had been stored with the hopes of developing a film about the Tibetan poet-saint Milarepa himself. He held the "Milarepa Film Workshop" that summer to develop the film. Dorsky arrived at the tail end and contributed to the planning of the film. Trungpa was interested in using film as a means of communicating Tibetan Buddhist content—the story of Milarepa—as well as a form of meditation or a way of "adjusting the mind" and cultivating the tones of the five Buddha families—*buddha*, *vajra*, *padma*, *ratna*, and *karma*.

He wanted to make this film based on what he was teaching them, the Five Buddha Qualities. So it was very beautiful footage. Let's say there would be a rock and then a sprig of pine, like pine needles coming out of the rock. So he would like pan from the rocks over to the pine needles. He was interested in doing these pans where the Buddha quality would change, from one to the other. He was very interested in using cinema; he understood how you could use cinema to adjust the mind. So they were shooting this footage, they were going to make this film called the Milarepa film, that's why it was called the Milarepa film seminar, which was going to be about Milarepa. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

What Dorsky remembers of Trungpa's footage is striking in that it applies Japanese Buddhist aesthetics to Tibetan Buddhist content. This is reflected in the transcript of the workshop itself, where Trungpa regularly refers to Zen imagery to describe how he wants his own film to look. Different Buddha Qualities can be expressed through attention to different physical textures, rather than to narrative description. Dorsky remembers insisting to Trungpa that the film not make the content explicitly "Buddhist" but that the form—shots, cuts, etc.—embody Buddhist meditation practices where subject and object are integrated.

So I went in and had this interview with him, and the two filmmakers were there, and I made him laugh. I said "do you mind if I come at you uncompromisingly," I remember saying this, because I wanted to say the thing I really felt, but I didn't want to be rude. I was being polite, and he laughed. So I said: "If you make a film about Buddhism, it's not going to be as much about Buddhism as if you didn't make a film about Buddhism. If you make it *about*, the film itself should just be it." And then I said to him, my whole shtick about the primordial aspect of film had to do with the shot and the cut and all this. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

While the Milarepa film was never finished due to technical problems, the transcript of the workshop was recorded and titled "Visual Dharma: Film Workshop on the Tibetan View of Aesthetics and Filmmaking."

The workshop and transcript have inspired Dorsky's own filmmaking and theorizing of about the relationship of religion and film (Dorsky July 9, 2015). While Trungpa's films were not preserved, 35mm slides from his photography are available for

viewing through the Shambhala Archives. In looking at stills of Trungpa's films, there are some images, that seem to be uncanny precursors to Dorsky's own work in terms of both subject matter and composition. Trungpa noticeably applies the naturalism of Zen aesthetics to Tibetan Buddhist subject matter—in many images enhancing a sense of empty space within the frame around a delicate tree branch such that it becomes difficult to discern whether the pattern of the branches is cutting through the open sky, or the sky is solid and the branches are shadows cutting through the light before the camera. The image plays with the dialogue between the materials of the film—light and frame—and the materials of the subject—branch and sky.⁴⁶ By doing this, he points to the layering of our perception through self-reflexive techniques in the film. At the same time, the emphasis on delicacy and naturalism in both the subject matter and the approach of the film speak to themes of Japanese Zen aesthetics like cherry blossoms, which bring attention to the transient and refined images of natural beauty to cultivate a refined state of mind as well as an appreciation for poignancy of our transient lives in keeping with Buddhist knowledge (see Parkes 2017).

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of Nathaniel Dorsky's primary Buddhist teachers, subsumes the debate of authenticity and identity within the practice of Buddhism itself, making the debate around the solidity of "Buddhism" a Buddhist practice. Trungpa both represents himself and his tradition and becomes an arbiter and de-creator of Tibetan Buddhist mythos. He self-consciously calls attention to the way Americans may relate to him as some purified arbiter of the truth, to assert a

⁴⁶ See "Branches" (Trungpa 1974)

narrative of Tibetan Buddhism deconstructing such relationships to authority, subsequently reinforcing his authority by appealing to anti-authoritarian sentiments. As it seems necessary to notice the integral agency of Asian Buddhists in the development of Buddhist Modernism and the making of American Buddhism, so does it also seem essential to recognize their place in its theoretical deconstruction.

Trungpa cultivates a history of exoticism of Buddhism, to remove a sense of exceptionalism from the tendency to exoticize. He simultaneously undermines the Orientalist approach to Tibet and Buddhism and those that would decry the orientalism of Tibetan practice as somehow unique within the history of Buddhism. Chogyam Trungpa makes difficulties of authenticity and exoticism a dimension of Buddhism itself, reading the idiosyncrasies of American Buddhist transmission as historically continuous with the transmission of the Buddha's teachings between legendary Tibetan Buddhists like Marpa and Milarepa. Milarepa expected Marpa to be a great scholar and a saintly person, dressed in a yogic costume with beads, reciting mantras, meditating. Instead he found Marpa "working on his farm, directing the laborers and plowing his land" (Trungpa 1973, 39). As Milarepa must move beyond othering Marpa, so must Trungpa's students move beyond their expectations of the Tibetan other with Trungpa. The Asian "Buddhist" elements that have been adopted are hybrid themselves—the subject of centuries of historical and geographic adaptation.

Trungpa's notion of Buddhism as a "living experience" both reinforces the history of revitalization within Buddhism and licenses his own interpretations and creativity as having historical precedents. Reinterpretation is in fact a traditional move. He writes:

“Perhaps many of my readers are familiar with the stories of Naropa and Tilopa and Marpa and Milarepa and Gampopa and the other teachers of the Kagyu lineage. It was a living experience for them, and it is a living experience for the present holders of the lineage” (Trungpa 1973, 17). Trungpa walks a line between tradition and innovation and perhaps leans a little more heavily towards the latter, but none the less makes that leaning traditionally Buddhist. By extension, Trungpa’s filmmaking and interest in not only American filmmakers, but Japanese Zen arts and aesthetics, points to the ways the story of American Buddhist filmmaking is not simply the appropriation of Buddhist ideas by white Americans to validate their own counter-cultural tendencies. Trungpa wanted to interpret the story of Tibetan Buddhist saint Milarepa with American filmmakers and through Zen imagery in a way he sees as historically in keeping with the ambiguity and evolution of the traditional story of Milarepa himself. Dorsky’s filmmaking and film theory is similarly layered in keeping with the lived realities of American Buddhism, if not Buddhism at large. Looking at both Trungpa and Dorsky and their relationship to one another and film, tells a messy, human story about religion and film in which power, agency and appropriation is more complicated than that suggested by either an essentialist romantic orientalist story of Buddhism, or an orientalist critique.

Dorsky claims that his own film *Alaya* was made directly in response to the seminar and completed in the wake of Trungpa’s death more than a decade later. Dorsky remembers resolving to finish the film while attending Trungpa’s traditional funeral and cremation. The ritual of making that film seemed like the most apt expression of Dorsky’s grief and at the same time the most appropriate gift to someone like Trungpa

who was both a filmmaker and Buddhist teacher (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Johanna Demetrakas who was the wife of the cameraman for the Milarepa film (Baird Bryant) went on to direct “Crazy Wisdom: The Life and Times of Chogyam Trungpa.” Dorsky was shooting footage of Trungpa at the time and one of his shots is included Demetrakas’ documentary of Trungpa’s life—it’s a large close-up of Trungpa in a suit with an Indian bed spread in the background. Trungpa did eventually direct a short 16mm film on calligraphy as meditation practice called “Discovering Elegance” in 1980. Dorsky continued to study with Trungpa over the next fifteen years—travelling out to Boulder for seminars and attending Trungpa’s talks when he came to San Francisco. Like many of Trungpa’s students, Dorsky describes in detail Trungpa’s power, charisma, controversy, and mystery.

Dorsky describes the evolution of Trungpa’s community from an anarchic space to a more formalized institution, while Trungpa’s alcoholism became worse and his health deteriorated. From 1971-74, the site was known as “the land.” Trungpa had a small cabin and his students set up tents around him. Trungpa would lead meditations and teachings and then hold a question and answer session. There were few rules, and in Dorsky’s words, people were “just hanging out.” The relationship between Trungpa and his students was initially informal. As Dorsky describes, Trungpa’s students initially had nearly total access to him, going so far as entering his room without permission while he was sleeping and just waiting for him to wake up (Dorsky July 9, 2015). The style and scene were of an egalitarian, utopian community, which suited the experimental, counter-culture of the ‘60s and ‘70s in which it was operating. The lack of boundaries, however,

were fundamentally unsustainable. The space and relationship between teacher and student changed in 1974 with the the founding of Naropa. Dorsky remembers Trungpa instructing his students to develop a more hierarchical relationship to him, saying that he was no longer their friend, but their king (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

The original intimacy and egalitarianism that Dorsky had enjoyed with Trungpa dissolved, and Trungpa became increasingly set apart and above. Dorsky documents the unique paradox of Trungpa: his obvious personal decline and debilitation, while still carrying tremendous weight as a spiritual leader of this community. It is precisely this paradox, which speaks to the vision of enlightenment in this context: one can be enlightened in spite of, or in the midst of serious addiction and altered mind states.

Dorsky describes Trungpa as otherworldly or on “another level” such that his teaching is almost miraculous or inexpressible. Trungpa’s alcoholism is almost part of the extraordinary or extremity of his character. Dorsky speaks repeatedly about the extraordinary aspects of Trungpa, in which there was something in Trungpa’s person that could inspire extraordinary mind states.

I remember looking into his left eye for some reason and just going like “What’s really going on here?” you know? And all of a sudden I started to go into this place I’d never been; a place that he wrote about, but I wasn’t thinking about, in this great prayer that he wrote called the *Sadhana Mahamudra*. Anyway, I’m looking at him and all of a sudden I went into this place that was beyond the stars, it was beyond the universe, and it was a place that was almost, like, in those Buddhist texts a bare tree with like birds screaming. And then I got a little scared

that I was being rude, you know. Then my ordinary mind took over and I went “oh” and it was sort of like at that moment he showed me something beyond any social idea of what reality is, even mystical reality, it was beyond any of it. So yes, he was very, very strong. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Here, Dorsky distinguishes between ordinary and extraordinary mind-states. Trungpa inspires access to otherworldly places—“beyond the stars” and “beyond the universe”—expanding Dorsky’s sense of the potential of reality. Trungpa’s almost magical powers are contrasted with the fact that he is dying quite young and very weak. This contradiction speaks to the way Trungpa’s world seems to have exceeded common sense understandings of reality. The Tibetan Buddhism that Dorsky encountered through Trungpa, was specific to the personality of Trungpa, but also not wholly unheard of in the Tibetan Kagyu, sect which strongly emphasizes the charisma and role of the guru in awakening. Trungpa regularly saw himself in the stories of the founding fathers of the Kagyu lineage, like Marpa and Milarepa, who were notorious wild men. Milarepa is especially well known for killing many people in an act of rage and revenge, being an alcoholic, as well as a musician and poet. It was also a moment in American counter-cultural history at the height of radical experimentation; Trungpa’s teachings capitalized on that momentum.

Dorsky observes the uniqueness of Trungpa in light of other Tibetan Buddhist emissaries, particularly in regard to the kind of authority he projected and the kind of social dynamic that developed around him.

I've studied with other Tibetan teachers since, and there's not such a big deal, like everybody loves the teacher totally, but there isn't such a big deal about who the teacher is, who's getting to have dinner with him, where they're going (facetious). That scene was totally that way: it was just completely like this hierarchy of a court where you always wanted to know what the king or the emperor was doing and how close did you know the emperor. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Brakhage was living in Boulder at the same time Trungpa was teaching there, and Dorsky remembers Brakhage being highly critical of Trungpa and his influence over those like Allen Ginsberg and other artists. Brakhage's adherence to iconoclasm clashed with Ginsberg's collection of religious icons. Dorsky's experience of Tibetan Buddhism through Trungpa was one of extremes—utopian and borderless, then hierarchical and authoritarian. That vision of Tibetan Buddhism has changed for Dorsky as he has been exposed to other teachers.

vii. Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Nyingma Vajrayana Buddhism

Following Trungpa's passing in 1987, Dorsky began studying Dzogchen with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a Nepalese Tibetan Buddhist teacher within the Nyingma lineage, founder of the Pundarika Foundation, and author of several influential texts in American Buddhist practice. Tsoknyi was born in 1966 and was recognized as a tulku at the age of eight. When he was thirteen he was brought to Khampagar Monastery at Tashi Jong in India, the seat of Khamtrul Rinpoche. Tsoknyi began teaching in the United States in the '90s. The Pundarika Foundation was established in Crestone, California in 1994 to support his teachings and humanitarian work. He has published several books including

Open Heart, Open Mind, Carefree Dignity, and Fearless Simplicity. He is described as having “a keen interest in the ongoing dialogue between western research, especially in neuroscience, and Buddhist practitioners and scholars” (Pundarika Foundation).¹⁵ The latter illustrates a more recent trend within the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism to American audiences: people are interested less in the radicalism of “crazy wisdom” and more in the sober, scientifically informed study of meditation as a mental health tool.

Dorsky began going to Crestone to study with Tsoknyi in the early ‘90s when he attended a ten-day seminar while he was working on his film *Variations*. Since then Dorsky has returned for 10-20 day retreats every two years or so. Tsoknyi provided a counterpoint to Trungpa’s approach: where Dorsky describes Trungpa as being “on another plane,” almost like an “acid trip”; Tsoknyi’s approach was earthier and more committed to gently grounding people in their bodies. Dorsky describes Tsoknyi’s approach to meditation as being about slowing down and observing their physical bodies, similar to Theravada *vipassana* practices.

he started to work a lot in the last years with getting people to, how to calm your whole body down. He says that it’s a particular western problem because of all the speed. Where another society might have other kinds of obstacles. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Trungpa was interested in a Tibetan Buddhist practice that aligned with the momentum of wild experimentation of the American counter-cultural ‘70s, while Tsoknyi identifies “speed” as a problem and offers a practice attentive to slowing down. While Trungpa was openly alcoholic and was known for his affairs with students, Tsoknyi presents a

more disciplined Buddhist life, or at least strives to do so. If Dorsky's films take the inspiration of Trungpa's project to develop "dharma vision" through film, his films and film theory imagine a dharma more closely aligned with Tsoknyi's Nyingma teachings in their gentility and subtlety.

viii. Return to Zen and Judaism: Baal Shem Tov, Bernie Glassman

Dorsky in recent years has developed a renewed interest in Judaism, paying particular attention to Jewish mysticism through a wealthy temple in San Francisco known as Emanuel, which provides free services, classes and food. Dorsky began studying Hasidic interpretations of the Torah on Shabbat mornings with a Rabbi named Lawrence Kushner at the temple, who is an expert in Jewish mysticism. While there were some gaps, Dorsky's childhood Hebrew education kicked back in "now at least in class, even though I don't have the vocabulary, at least phonetically I knew the reading and that was gratifying." Referring to his renewed interest in Judaism and studying with Rabbi Kushner: "I think it strengthened me, there was this part of me that was kind of a shadow and all of a sudden, it was like this shadow thing that didn't really go, I mean you're proud to be Jewish and all that, but the religion seemed like a shadow thing, it just seemed unsuccessful and not for me and then he taught me how it was for me" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Just as D.T. Suzuki, Chogyam Trungpa, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche tailored their Buddhist teachings to the particular interests and needs of their American students and in doing so reimagined Buddhism itself; so does Rabbi Kushner seem to reimagine Judaism according to its own mystical tradition, to cater to the interests of Jewish students like Dorsky who have left Judaism for Buddhism.

He says, because of the mysticism and the assimilation to Europeans, they threw out everything that was eastern and mystical. So I said to him “I would ask my rabbi when I was twelve, what is eternal life? And the rabbi would say ‘Oh people remember you after you die’ and you were twelve and I thought that didn’t do it...” And he said that that was a typical answer then. He said that when he went to rabbinical school for six years, the Zohar wasn’t mentioned once, there was just no, it was just all. So he feels Judaism lost out. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Dorsky’s complaint about his experience with Judaism is that it provided a world-view that was too materialist and neglected more mystical, spiritual matters; i.e. the rabbi he grew up with provided an earthly view of immortality, that people remember you after you die. Kushner tells Dorsky a history of Judaism in which Jews betray their authentic spiritual teachings to assimilate to European enlightenment culture and hence neglect texts like the Zohar. In the same way that D.T. Suzuki plays up a vein of Zen teachings that emphasize the arts in spiritual practice to appeal to his students, so does Kushner play up Hasidic mysticism as the true Jewish teachings to retain Dorsky as “part of the tribe.” Those Jewish teachings with which Dorsky is familiar are in an ironic moment rendered less authentic, as attempts to appeal to the ideals of an external culture and the nostalgia for a truer Judaism, which has been neglected. American Buddhism is not alone in its struggle for authenticity.

Dorsky then read Martin Buber’s *Hasidism for the Modern Man* and subsequently signed up for a class on Martin Buber and another class on Baal Shem Tov at the same temple. He also began attending the Mission Minion in the Women’s Building: “But this

mission minyan was fun, I was touched that there are all these people who can sing all these Hebrew prayers for an hour and a half and know everything. I was really touched that everyone could read Hebrew, I liked it a lot.” Whereas Dorsky associated joyful religious experience with Tibetan Buddhism, the Judaism he encounters at the minyan changes this: “I was like totally Tibetan Buddhist and all of a sudden there were all these people and for an hour and a half I was with all these people singing and praying, banging their feet with drums, very joyful, and it was very, very nice.” While Dorsky has never said this explicitly, it seems that in addition to the lack of attention to spirituality in the Judaism he was raised with, there was also some stigmatization around his being gay with his Jewish family members, while the counter-cultural Buddhist scene was more welcoming. Dorsky’s increased involvement with Buddhism and disconnection from the Jewish community corresponds with his coming out as gay to his wider community. The conservative and reformed Judaism he is returning to later in life is one which has gone through many changes in regards to women’s equality—a minyan in a “Women’s Building,” women rabbis (the rabbi Kushner’s daughter is now a rabbi) and the acceptance of homosexual congregants.

Congregation Emanu-El’s mission statement explicitly welcomes Jewish members of the LGBTQ community (Congregation Emanu-El 2018). Dorsky describes feeling welcomed into the Jewish community in San Francisco in ways that he did not feel when he was growing up, and he appreciated the effort by the community to cater to his needs (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Judaism in the 50s was reflective of conservative American culture in the ‘50s, but, as Dorsky has acknowledged, there have been changes

in many sects to be actively more welcoming and inclusive of more liberal values. Another point of note, which Dorsky regularly refers to, is that these services and classes at the temple and minyan are free,⁴⁷ whereas meditation centers and retreats are increasingly expensive. Dorsky notes a reversal, where the Jewish community feels more inclusive of him than the Buddhist community: “when you go into these Jewish things, they’re all like, nice to you. And that isn’t like Buddhism where people can be a little competitive, like who’s more enlightened or realized” (Dorsky July 9, 2015). This perhaps speaks to the shifting stability and insecurity of both Buddhist and Jewish communities in San Francisco.

At the 2015 NYFF Dorsky was asked by an audience member about the place of God in his films. Dorsky’s response was striking in its appeal to the language of “unknowing” used by contemporary Jewish Zen master Bernard Glassman Roshi, founder of *Zen Peacemakers Order*.

Dorsky makes the case that a “sacred” film is one that respects that sense of “unknowing” and that a “prayerful film” is one that touches on “unknowing.” Glassman practices what is known as “engaged Buddhism” which is a new turn in American Buddhism, in which social service and political activism have become a salient part of practice. Glassman, like Thich Nhat Hanh, approaches the problem of suffering from the perspective of “beginner’s mind” and “don’t know mind” and speaks of the ethical

⁴⁷ “They were free, they had food, this wealthy temple. And he doesn’t have to raise money for the temple, all he has to do is come and teach and he’s a fantastic teacher. Someone told me about him and it’s free and I love this temple, it’s really a wealthy temple big dome and I’m really poor so I like that stuff” (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

efficacy of “unknowing.” Glassman has brought this term into conversation with his own Jewish background and Hasidic teachings. In an interview with Christopher S. Queen, the following was said regarding the lesson of “unknowing.”

For me it fits in with my Jewish background. In contrast to the whole rabbinical tradition of Talmudic learning and scholarship comes the mystical tradition of Kabbalah and Hasidism, where all the earthly qualities and emanations come from the infinite *Ein Sof*. And the Sufis have some of the same ideas. But the important thing is that Not Knowing was emphasized by my teacher Maezumi Roshi, and it fits my temperament. It just makes so much sense to start from Not Knowing. (Queen 2002, 333)

Dorsky has recently come into direct contact with Bernie Glassman at a mutual friend’s home in Paris, where they bonded over an interest in Hasidic Judaism and Buddhism: “So I have friends who I stay with in Paris and she’s a Zen Roshi and Bernie was staying there this last November when I was there also and I was telling her about Kushner and Arthur Greene and he said “Oh, you know Arthur Green’s fabulous, he’s big into Buddhism.” The book Dorsky remembers using for Kushner’s class was by Arthur Greene, a professor at Brandeis, who, according to Dorsky’s conversations with Bernard Glassman Roshi, has an affinity for Buddhism.

While Glassman and Greene are comfortable bringing Jewish and Buddhist teachings into conversation with one another, Rabbi Kushner has been more explicitly critical of Jews engaging with Buddhism and being syncretistic or hybrid in their religious identities and practices.

I was out at the fruit and cookie table, and he said “What’s your religious training? He said to me” So blah, blah, blah and then I told him I got involved with Tibetan Buddhism, so he looked at me and says “Is this real or is this a dream?” I said “Really?” and he said “Yes, tell me, is this real or is this a dream? You’ve got to make up your mind. Cause,” he said, “for Judaism this is real.” He thinks that calling this a dream is not good. He, on the other hand is very parochial, he feels, he says, it’s a little dramatic, “that the second holocaust,” he’s my age exactly, “was losing our generation to eastern religion.” So he has a slightly derogatory view about Buddhism. I said to him “The trouble is you have taken the best of Judaism, the very, very best and compared it to mediocre Buddhism. If you took the best of Buddhism and compared it to mediocre Judaism, you can do the same thing. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Kushner insists that Dorsky make a choice to be a Jew or a Buddhist, and he sees the mixing of Judaism with other traditions as a violent tragedy. Recently, Rabbi Kushner encouraged Dorsky to make a “Jewish Film,” to which Dorsky replied “You want me to animate matzos?” The same conversation inspired Dorsky to make a film called *Avraham* in 2014: which is an abstract interpretation of the Akedah or the Binding of Isaac. Kushner also insisted that Dorsky figure out a way to observe Shabbat: “Kushner would say something, he would say, you have to somehow make something of Shabbat, if you don’t make something of Shabbat you know.”

In spite of Rabbi Kushner's aversion to Dorsky's interest in Buddhism, Dorsky has found points of compatibility between Mahayana Buddhist theories of emptiness and Hasidic teachings.

But at a certain point I realized that with a Hasidic Jew, that it's very Buddhistic, that God is nothing. Or that the Hasidic basic view is that this is God, the main duty of a Jew is to make God happy. How can you make God most happy? Well you can do mitzvahs, or even great mitzvahs, but the way to really make God happy is to be in union with God, which means being in union with this and then you understand from Hasidic Judaism that this is the creation, creation didn't happen, but each moment. So I said to the rabbi "What it does, emptiness becomes God, so it instills emptiness with a kind of strength, no? You know?" So I found that really good for me. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Here Dorsky implies that attending to the present in Buddhist meditation practices becomes an act of mitzvah—or a Jewish moral act in service of union with God. Dorsky interprets God through the lens of *sunyata*, or a world in motion lacking fixed essences. Emptiness becomes reinterpreted as weightier as its association with God "instills emptiness with a kind of strength" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). God is grounded in and through material creation, in accordance with Mahayana Buddhist principles, which similarly locate enlightenment in and through the world.

IV Conclusion

In the *Milindapanha* King Milinda asks the Venerable Nagasena his name and Nagasena replies, "I'm known as Nagasena... it's a generally understood term, a practical

designation there is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use of the word.” The King then says, after some continued debate “Then for all my asking I find no Nagasena. Nagasena is a mere sound” (*Milindipanha* 2008, 106-107). Similarly, the “Buddhism” of American Buddhism is a generally understood term, a practical designation, a word, a sound, which includes an eclectic, changing set of communities, texts, and practices. Perhaps the most defining “Buddhist” element of American Buddhism is the adoption of the term “Buddhist” along with its subsequent capacity to reflect on the “emptiness” of that label. Dorsky’s life and religious identity is made up of many moving parts and is as multifaceted and mobile as the American Buddhist world he has been deeply engaged with over the latter half of the twentieth century. Nathaniel Dorsky’s religious and artistic autobiography speaks to the hybridity, fluidity, and layered-ness of religious identity, especially American Buddhist identity and follows larger trends in twentieth century American Buddhism. His life also provides an alternative, complimentary, to the American Protestant approach to the study of religion and film.

Dorsky’s life has been a part of both Jewish and Buddhist currents—at times more intensively Jewish, and others, more Buddhist. Occasionally his Jewish and Buddhist inclinations have found common ground: fusions of Hasidic mysticism and Zen practice. At other times, they have come in conflict: studying with a Rabbi who saw the turn of Jews to Eastern teachings as a “second Holocaust.” Dorsky’s engagement with Buddhism has evolved alongside developments in twentieth century American Buddhism—from the Zen of D.T. Suzuki, to the Tibetan teachings of Chogyam Trungpa

Rinpoche, the Dzogchen of Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and the Zen of Bernard Glassman Roshi. Dorsky's encounter with Zen has at times been more reflective of sudden schools of enlightenment and at other times more gradual schools of enlightenment. His understanding of enlightenment has shifted from an emphasis on "awakening" to one that emphasizes "unknowing." Meanwhile Dorsky's understanding of Tibetan Buddhism has shifted from the psychedelic, anarchistic and guru centered "crazy wisdom" Kagyu world of Trungpa, to the more grounded, egalitarian compassion oriented approach of Nyingma teacher Tsoknyi. His life also documents a transition in American Buddhism towards the social justice or "engaged Buddhism" of Bernie Glassman and a shift from partnering with radical artistic experimentation to grounding meditation practices in service of greater mental equilibrium.

Dorsky's filmmaking history is similarly amalgamated. While he has largely been part of the American avant-garde filmmaking communities of New York City and San Francisco, he has also been significantly influenced as a viewer, projectionist and theorist, by the international classical canon of feature films by those like Carl Theodore Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu, and Roberto Rossellini to name just a few. Dorsky has participated in an experimental film community which has at times imagined itself as its own cult or religion, and at other times as an extension of perennial mystical religious themes. The role of eastern teachings in the avant-garde film scene can itself at times be fraught with questions of authenticity as the ornamental use of oriental themes has been part of a fertile Romantic tradition in American religious history. Dorsky's life has wound its way with Jews who became Buddhist teachers and theorized the role of the arts

in Buddhist practice, Tibetan Buddhist masters who have engaged in filmmaking, filmmakers who practice Buddhism. At times it is difficult to tell whether Dorsky developed an idea of “haiku filmmaking” through his reading of haikus, or through the films and theory of those like Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Bruce Baillie in their development of “haiku cinema.” While Dorsky has been with his partner Jerome Hiler for almost five decades, through huge developments in attitudes towards homosexuality in American history (from changes in sodomy laws to the passing of marriage equality), he went through a period of sexual experimentation with women in his twenties.

Dorsky’s life resists easy claims of causation and authenticity in the study of religion, while reflecting the messy, diverse, religious fertility of American urban cultural epicenters like New York City and San Francisco: places which are often characterized as secular, Godless spaces in the American culture wars. Prothero defines culture wars as “angry public disputes that are simultaneously moral and religious and address the meaning of America” (Prothero 2016, 9). In many ways the study of religion and film as a discipline is informed by and sits at the center of these disputes. Attending to Dorsky expands the definition of American religion and provides new ways of envisioning the relationship between religion and film through an urban, experimental, American, Jewish, Buddhist, gay, lens. Prothero points to the mis-representation of the “culture wars” in America by the religious right as “a battle between the Godless and the Godly” (Prothero 2016, 10.) Dorsky’s life further challenges that binary vision of American religious life. Most importantly, Dorsky’s life points to the symbiosis of religious and artistic experimentation and practice; this is in contrast to the antagonism between the two so

often described in the study of religion and film. Finally, Dorsky's life expands and specifies not only a vision of American Buddhist life, but by extension an understanding of the messiness and breath of Buddhism and religion in relationship to film.

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**CHAPTER THREE:
What is *Devotional Cinema*?**

Introduction

Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema* was originally published in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* by the film department of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and edited by Mary Lea Bandy (the late chief curator of the MoMA's film and media department) and Antonio Monda (Associate Professor at NYU). The text accompanied a MoMA Film at the Gramercy Theatre Program in the winter of 2003-2004. In their introduction to *The Hidden God*, Bandy and Monda ask, "Is God, His presence or absence, the inmost theme of any story" (Bandy and Monda 2003, 10)? They continue, "It is said among some of the faithful that there is no such thing as an atheist, there are simply believers and heretics. Our essays show a variety of reactions to this teaching" (Bandy and Monda 2003, 12).

These lines, and the introduction at large, reveal assumptions about the universality and primacy of a capital "G" God—referred to with a capital "H" "His"—in storytelling and film, and similarly the significance of belief, faith, and binary systems of believers and heretics in world religions. They write, "We were also concerned to explore spirituality elsewhere in world cinema, and there are essays here on films from Africa, the Middle East, and Japan," without questioning whether "world cinema" and spirituality elsewhere in the world easily answer to questions of belief, heresy, and God, or similarly centralize such concerns. The conclusion to the abstract reads, "The book and exhibition are intended not as an encyclopedic anthology but, more humbly, as starting points in the study of an eternal theme," suggesting that the concerns of the text

are not just geographically universal, but temporally as well. The phrase “eternal theme” suggests that the eternal itself is of universal and eternal concern. Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* calls into question universalizing notions of religion and assumptions about what religion is in theories of religion and film. Reading Dorsky’s work in light of his own particular religious lexicon provides a vision of his work that departs from a language of God and faith.

A publicly and academically unknown dimension of *Devotional Cinema* is that Dorsky aligns film criticism with his understanding of Buddhist theory: a devotional film can be described as a form of *rigpa* (knowledge of the ground of enlightenment), or contain the attributes of enlightenment. While *Devotional Cinema* does not explicitly reference any particular religious tradition, there is an implicit orientation towards specific Buddhist teachings and the presence of language common to the *Dzogchen* Tibetan Buddhist English lexicon. When I raised the question of a possible Buddhist orientation in *Devotional Cinema* with Dorsky, he answered affirmatively—thinking about film as a mode of Buddhist vision and enlightenment was an underlying secret intention of *Devotional Cinema*:

My big agenda with *Devotional Cinema* was to show that there was a synchronicity between the Western tradition of “genius” and Vajrayana Buddhism. That was my idea. Because if you think about it, every reference is to something in Western civilization, but the spirit is completely Buddhist, right? ... in *Dzogchen* they use the term *Rigpa*. *Rigpa* has to do with clear seeing, so the *rigpa*, clarity. I think I felt that film could be an act of genius in some sense and that genius was also selfless and that genius had the attributes of enlightenment. No one’s ever mentioned that and in a way I’m happy, it’s kind of a secret about the book, but I’m surprised that no one’s ever... it seems so obvious, it’s very Buddhist, it’s all about Western culture... So the real secret or the secret thing is that thing that I really wanted to bring into union, you know Mr. B and Mr. B (Balanchine and the Buddha) (laughs). (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Great art or works of “genius,” Dorsky argues, have some of the core “attributes of enlightenment”—“clarity,” “selflessness,” and “compassion.” What makes the ballets of George Balanchine “genius” can be articulated through Buddhist terminology; alternately, Balanchine’s ballets can provide a new vision of Buddhist enlightenment. Reading *Devotional Cinema* in light of Dorsky’s own claims about the Buddhist ideas behind his work enhances and refines our vision of *Devotional Cinema*. Dorsky’s biography and own claims about his Buddhist intentions for *Devotional Cinema* invite such a comparative reading and investigation of the roots of his vocabulary.

Reading Dorsky in conversation with certain Buddhist teachings highlights the ways his views of religion depart from the framework in which they were originally presented. Dorsky was exposed early in his life to Buddhism through Zen teachings; he then trained for many years in the Kagyu lineage of Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism with Chogyam Trungpa. In the more recent three decades, Dorsky has studied *Dzogchen* with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a Nyingma Tibetan teacher (see Chapter 1, which addresses Dorsky’s lineage in greater detail). *Devotional Cinema* most specifically resonates with *Dzogchen* principles like *rigpa*, but also speaks to larger ideas within the American Buddhist canon. Thinking about *Devotional Cinema* in light of some of these particular Buddhist ideas enhances our view of the text, and by extension expands our vision of religious approaches to the study of film. Dorsky rewrites the idea of religious devotion in accordance with his understanding of particular Buddhist and artistic principles common among the American avant-garde. He turns devotion away from the celestial or the

Godly and towards the material, the human, the artistic, the representational, and the worldly. He shifts the approach of religion from faith and belief to an investigation of the intersection of perception and matter. He emphasizes the impermanent over the eternal. He moves away from a language of transcendence towards one of presence, alchemy, transformation, and nowness. The following chapter is divided into two sections: the first section provides an analysis of *Devotional Cinema* and the second addresses the Buddhist context of *Devotional Cinema* as illustrated by examples from Dorsky's own films.

I What is *Devotional Cinema*?

i. Devotional Cinema

Nathaniel Dorsky's manuscript *Devotional Cinema* was originally presented as a John Sacret Young Lecture on March 30th, 2001, at Princeton University, as part of a conference on religion and film, and it was first published as part of the Museum of Modern Art's *Hidden God: Film and Faith* collection in 2003. The thirty-five-page original document consolidates a series of ideas Dorsky developed while lecturing at the University of California, Berkeley; the San Francisco Art Institute; and Stanford University. *Devotional Cinema* was then released as its own book in 2003 by Tuumba Press. Since then it has been translated into Italian (*Il dio nascosto*), French (*Le cinema et la devotion*), Spanish (*El cine de la devocion*) and Chinese. *Devotional Cinema* is widely circulated and frequently referenced in scholarship on religion and film.⁴⁸ Angela Zito, co-director of the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, describes

⁴⁸ See Bandy and Monda 2003, 261-280; Mitchell and Plate 2007, 389, 407-15; Suh 2015, 125-126; Downing 2016; Smith 2012; Zito 2007 and 2012; Hudson 2012.

Devotional Cinema as a “small masterpiece” illustrating “film itself as ‘the spirit or experience of religion’”(Zito 2007). Nevertheless, neither Dorsky nor *Devotional Cinema* has been studied in depth within the academic community, nor in specific connection to Dorsky’s Buddhist background.

In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky explores the relationship between religion and cinema, not where religion is the subject or content of a film, but where he says “film *itself*” becomes “the spirit or experience of religion.” He argues that when film deepens awareness of the nature of our own being, it can elicit specific states of vulnerability, humility and self-awareness, which Dorsky describes as “devotion.” According to Dorsky, the material properties of film mimic our physiological presence in the world. Dorsky argues that films are crafted in a way that heightens these parallels between film and ourselves; film can enhance our awareness of our own human condition. He implies that this state of “devotion” is *the* religious experience (Dorsky 2014, 17). Through its basic materiality, devotional cinema develops a set of formal equilibriums: subjectivity and objectivity; relative and absolute time; knowns and unknowns. Additionally, he insists on an integration of form and content, between the material properties of the medium and its subject matter. Lastly, Dorsky insists that a director should follow a sequence of vision, language and concept moving the viewer beyond discursive thought. Dorsky writes, “Viewing a film has tremendous mystical implications; it can be, at its best a way of approaching and manifesting the ineffable” (Dorsky 2014, 28). Watching a devotional film can engage a viewer in pressing the limits of representation to express that which exceeds representation, while also manifesting a paradox of transience

and continuity, materiality and consciousness, subjectivity and objectivity, at the heart of experience.

According to Dorsky, certain filmmakers are better than others at amplifying the parallels between cinematic and human forms, as well as adhering to certain equilibriums, sequences and integrations. He illustrates each of these arguments through the work of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson, whom he sees as exemplary directors of devotional cinema. To assess how devotional a film is, the criteria are the degree to which a director can maximize the concordance between film and human beings, manifest certain equilibriums and sequences, and “[open] our hearts.” Dorsky’s religiosity is uninterested in a transcendent other, or in viewing film as “symbolic” or merely a medium for religious content. Dorsky directs religious devotion to physical properties of film as a medium, and by extension to a living and immediate world.

ii. Introduction

In the “Introduction” to *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky states that he wants to talk about devotion and how it manifests through cinema. He says this idea originated from his experience with avant-garde films in the 1960s in which there was an exploration of a language unique to film which enabled the viewer to have an experience of the film while evoking “something meaningfully human.” The form of film, he argues, can create an experience of “aliveness” or “revelation” (Dorsky 2014, 17).

This aliveness or revelation comes from a “concordance” between film and the “human metabolism,” where film is understood as a “metaphor for our being” (Dorsky

17). He writes: “Film’s physical properties seemed *so* attuned to our metabolism that I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor or model for our being, a model which had the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of spirit, and to become a form of devotion” (Dorsky 18). In other words, film’s physicality mimics our own, and through this direct and intimate relationship, has a capacity to transform us, thus functioning as a form of devotion. Dorsky’s use of the word “metabolism” emphasizes the physiological dimension of film viewing.

iii. The Formal Situation

Dorsky next turns to describing how he understands the human condition. The distinguishing factor of being human is our capacity to both participate in and observe our condition—humans are both “victims” and “appreciators” of material circumstance. This realization of our lack of control of our circumstances and yet participation in them is what makes us human. Though frightening, relaxing into or being present to this self-awareness or realization of our human condition creates the potential to “transmute” our circumstances (Dorsky 19). This transformation of discomfort into openness and clarity is a form of “alchemy.” He asks: “But how can cinema be an act of alchemy” (Dorsky 19)? Transmutation, transformation and alchemy define the religious experience Dorsky thinks film has the potential to cultivate (Dorsky 19).

iv. The Post-Film Experience

In “The Post-Film Experience,” Dorsky focuses on the ways films can alter our perception and cultivate disarming emotional states. He describes an experience from his childhood of attending a movie, which led to the de-familiarizing of his familiar

environment (Dorsky 20). I include the full text here because the simplicity, tone and precision of Dorsky's writing are as essential as his explicit argument is to his message.

He writes:

As the last film ended, the green metal side doors opened into the late-afternoon light, and we walked up the alley onto the street. I remember having the oddest sensation. The texture of the sunlight seemed strange, and people's voices sounded distant. In front of the theater cars were whooshing by storefronts. Quite suddenly, the normal things that were my usual reference points, everything that had been familiar to me in my hometown, all its archetypes and icons, became eerie and questionable. I felt alien and estranged. I remember walking home alone through the park and passing the duck pond and the baseball diamonds, and then down a small path, a dirt shortcut worn through the lawn that eventually disappeared into the grass. All these little details were presenting themselves to me in a way I was unused to. It was truly disturbing. Eventually I got home, and it seemed quite odd that I was in my house. I was feeling this quite strongly and was trying my best to recover from the giant hole that had opened in the middle of my head. I remember having to get some things out of the refrigerator to reorient myself and make it all right again (Dorsky 20).

This passage models and illustrates a type of attention to experience as much as it makes an argument. Even in his theorization of film, Dorsky makes the theory its own poetic end. He describes another experience of attending Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* in early adulthood which was highly "disarming":

After the film, the audience entered the elevator in order to descend to the street, and I noticed that everybody was unusually available to everybody else. People had tears in their eyes. Usually the time in an elevator is "no" time. We either stare up at the numbers or down at the floor, trying to deny the intimacy of the situation. We wait for this "no" time to be over so that we can resume our lives. But in this case everyone was completely accessible and vulnerable to one another, looking at each other, all strangers within the intimate compartment of the elevator. (Dorsky 22)

In both of these descriptions of Dorsky's experience of film, there is a deepened attention and intimacy with the mundane or ordinary details of physical life—refrigerators, elevators, afternoon light, duck ponds, the unremarkable markers on routine

paths home, the sound of cars in the street. Dorsky's theory attends to the delicacy of sensory experience—textures, colors, sounds, motion. The emotional tone is consistently vulnerable, tender, and at times contains discomfort and heartache. The connection Dorsky describes of this cinematic religious experience is less a connection to a God figure than a horizontal connection and availability to other humans, premised on a shared vulnerability.

Reemphasizing the physicality of film viewing, Dorsky ties aesthetic critique to medical health and illness. Referencing Greek theories of medicine, he argues that film, through its form, has a capacity to produce health or sickness (Dorsky 23-24). He surmises that “There was something in the actual nature of the cinema, its view, that could produce health or illness in an audience. There might be a film that had a very meaningful subject but was so inelegantly handled that it actually left one feeling unhealthy or alienated” (Dorsky 23). Illness is associated with a state of imbalance; health correlates with certain types of alignment, relaxation and attention to the present: “The sanctuary of Epiduras was created in order to let citizens realign themselves and awaken to the full energy of the present. Long periods of relaxation and sleep, called ‘temple sleep,’ were followed by theater pieces, chanting and poetry. All this took place in a setting of sublimely proportioned architecture” (Dorsky 24). The emphasis on relaxation in Dorsky's description of religious experience is particularly striking in contrast to other theories of religion and film which emphasize intensity (this will be dealt with in greater detail further on).

v. Alchemy

Dorsky argues that alchemy, or a transformation from discomfort to openness and clarity, relies on the integration or union of form and content. He writes, “the form must include the expression of its own materiality, and this material must be in union with its subject matter” (Dorsky 25). In devotional cinema, the form must engage and mirror the technical components of its composition. The examples he provides include cave art, which plays with contours of cave walls to enhance the hallucination of horses and bison depicted in them; Egyptian sculpture, which is as much about the unceasing nature of stone as it is about the unceasing glance engraved in it; stained glass, which harnesses its own luminosity; Bach’s expression of skeletal fingers pressing down on pipes as melodic evocations of prayer; Mozart’s “texture of instrumentation,” “key changes,” and “melodic line” tapping into “what it is to be fully human” (Dorsky 25). Therefore, for a film to participate in devotion, it must engage the unique properties of its specific materiality (Dorsky 26).

vi. The Illuminated Room

Film must not only take into account its own materiality, but is unique in its capacity to reflect upon the materiality of human experience by extension. Film’s materiality has unique resonance with the human body, and one such parallel concerns what Dorsky refers to as “the illuminated room.” Dorsky argues that we take seeing for granted, and film allows us to appreciate what it means to see, by placing viewers in a dark room facing an illuminated screen. The illuminated screen is a metaphor for our own vision, which looks out of a dark skull onto an illuminated world (Dorsky 26). Film

makes us not merely participants in our existence but observers of it. By heightening our self-observation, film participates in devotion.

He then develops a second argument regarding the vision of the film. A film must balance a sense of subjectivity and objectivity to truly replicate human vision, which he illustrates through a difference in perspective within art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dorsky asks questions about subjectivity and objectivity and concludes that our vision takes place between the two (Dorsky 28). Our perception impacts the world that we see, and the world is there for us to perceive. He argues that the art from the Middle Ages has a heightened sense of subjectivity and internality, where we are potentially the source of illumination of what we know of the world. Cavernous cathedrals mimic the mystery or vast unknown of our being, with stained glass our bubble of illumination suspended within (Dorsky 27). By comparison, the Renaissance world is oriented more objectively outside of ourselves-- internal vastness vanishes from psyche and the external world becomes the site of objective exploration. Cathedrals become brighter; the unknown diminishes in pursuit of a new sense of science (Dorsky 28). Dorsky concludes that film replicates our experience of vision and its subject-object interplay (Dorsky 28-29). When a film causes its viewer ill health, it is the result of an objective or subjective imbalance. Film that is too subjective is pretentious, overwhelmed by the director's vision. Film that is too objective ignores its own existence, like an airplane movie whose goal is merely to get you through an uncomfortable flight. Dorsky implies that in the subject-object negotiation of our vision

is the ineffable, and that film achieves a “transcendental balance” when it can unite Medieval and Renaissance means of vision (Dorsky 28).

Dorsky moves on to a necessary sequence of priorities in the making of a devotional film, which he describes as hierarchy of “vision, language and concept,” in that order, and critiques films that lead with a concept or language-based idea (Dorsky 30-31). The balance of subjective and objective vision within a film impacts this proper sequencing of vision, language and concept. It seems that when a film leans too much towards subjective or objective vision, it automatically inverts the vision-language-concept sequence, compromising its devotional potential. Dorsky’s theory strongly seeks to transcend language and conceptual thought.

vii. Intermittence

A second point by which the material properties of films mimic or parallel the human form is what Dorsky refers to as “intermittence.” When a film is able to highlight its own intermittence, we come closer to our own being by extension. Intermittence has two aspects: the “*First Aspect*” of intermittence in film has to do with the quality of light, or the rapid-fire flicker of the projector (Dorsky 31). He argues that the film we are watching is not a solid thing: like our vision, there are black frames or blinks. Films help us recognize that our existence is not solid either, that our visual experience of daily life is akin to the intermittence of film (Dorsky 32). He argues that “Intermittence penetrates to the core of our being, and film vibrates in a way that is close to this core” (Dorsky 32). Through experiencing a form of intermittence that is similar to our own, we are brought closer to understanding the intermittence of our own being. The intermittence of

our vision touches on a larger intermittence of vacillating between existence and non-existence of our being (Dorsky 32).

The “*Second Aspect*” of intermittence in film has to do with montage or the interplay of shots and cuts (Dorsky 32-33). Dorsky argues that our lives reflect this interplay of shots and cuts—our own minds are full of gaps, and our perception shifts between our internal images and external images. Montage is able to touch on or replicate this truth (Dorsky 33). Intermittence is reflected in both our vision or perception, but also in our being itself. Experiencing the intermittence of film points us not only towards the intermittence of our vision, but to the intermittence of our being. Accepting intermittence “aerates life” and “suffuses the solid world with luminosity” (Dorsky 32). Films have to trust and leverage this intermittence to be devotional. If a film’s montage fills in too many blanks, it violates experience. Such films are “too solid” or “acts of rudeness” (Dorsky 33).

viii. Time

The third important way that film’s materiality mirrors human materiality, in addition to the illuminated room and intermittence, is its need to express itself in time. Like human lives, films have a beginning, middle and end. Dorsky argues that there are two types of time in filmmaking: first, “relative time,” progressing from first to last shot, or what Dorsky refers to as “horizontal” time; Second, “absolute time,” “nowness,” “presence” or “vertical time” (Dorsky 33-35). Presence might be the depth of any given moment, while relative time passes under your feet (Dorsky 34). Dorsky argues that film has to balance relative and absolute time. If a film is excessively horizontal or

relative, it may be seductive and absorbing but leaves us feeling shallow and used. If it is too vertical or absolute, it numbs mind of the viewer (Dorsky 36-37). Dorsky uses Carl Dreyer as an example of a director who successfully integrates these two types of time, though Dorsky views Dreyer's films *Joan of Arc* and *Ordet* as more successful than Dreyer's other film *Day of Wrath*. According to Dorsky, *Day of Wrath* fails to achieve this balance because the montage remains too driven by the scripted story.

ix. Self-Symbol

Dorsky argues that there is a “self-existing magic of things” that film must tap into so that the image or scene is an end unto itself, rather than creating its meaning by pointing to something beyond the screen (Dorsky 41). It symbolizes itself. The section “Self-Symbol” implicitly returns to his “Alchemy” section, where Dorsky argues that devotional cinema requires multiple levels of form and content integration. He cites Yasujiro Ozu's *The Only Son* (1936) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961) as examples of mastering the self-symbol. He provides a detailed analysis of a scene in *The Only Son* in which a conversation takes place between a mother and son on top of a hill, set against industrial incinerators and the sky. He analyzes the ways particular shots and cuts interact with the scene to create “uncompromised presence” and the “direct experience of poetic mystery”(Dorsky 43-44). Dorsky then turns to a scene in a hospital room, in which a couple comes to visit their dying friend from *La Notte*. Dorsky studies: first, how the “delicacy” of the camera “caresses its characters;” second, how the “clarity of montage,” create “shifts of space;” and third, how the balance of light and darkness develop “aliveness and beauty of film” (Dorsky 45). Dorsky's use of the word

“aliveness” is meaningful in relationship to the death operating in the content of the movie. He says “With this synapse activated, the film is literally living in the minds of the audience” (Dorsky 47). A film moves from inert celluloid to a living medium as it transforms the minds of its viewers.

Dorsky concludes this section with attention to the materiality of the screen and the frame: “the screen or the field of light on the wall must be alive as sculpture” (Dorsky 48). While a film communicates narrative content or iconography, its basic function as “light sculpture in time” must always be meaningful, of value, or “alive” in itself. A film is never just a vehicle for a story; the play of light on the screen or the wall must be taken into account as its own artistic practice.

x. Shots and Cuts

Here, Dorsky argues that a devotional film maintains a balance of shots and cuts. Shots control the empathy for, the connection with, and the view of the subject matter. Cuts are the clarity that reawaken and reframe the view. There is an appropriate kind of dialogue between shots and cuts, and there are individual properties that add to the individual success of each. A shot must express the seer and what is seen (Dorsky 49). Cuts must maintain a particular hierarchy: first, the cut has to work spatially; second, the poetic connections must resonate, and there must be some sense of logic or inevitability (51). He uses the final scene in Dreyer’s *Joan of Arc* as exemplifying this hierarchy and argues that John Ford, Yasujiro Ozu, Jean Luc Godard, Rossellini generally master this hierarchy (Dorsky 51-55). Ozu’s film *Late Spring* is particularly emblematic of a style of

cutting that works as “little awakenings” and the screen becomes “a reflecting pool of surface tension and depth” (Dorsky 53).

An Example of Devotional Cinema

There is a moment in Ozu’s film *Late Spring* that feels exemplary to me of Dorsky’s theories of *Devotional Cinema*. Integrating a sense of self-symbol, time, shots and cuts, intermittence, and alchemy: first, when the daughter realizes that she must let go of her father and move on with her own life, her saddened, downturned face fills the screen, as the sound of the Noh drama she is watching plays in the background; second, a tree fills the frame, sparkling and swaying in the light for several seconds, while the chanting of the Noh drama slowly transitions to the soft orchestra music of the soundtrack; third, the father and daughter walk away from the camera down a diagonal road that recedes into the distance, as the orchestra music continues. As the daughter must loosen her grasp on her father, so does the film gently loosen its grasp on the plot. The cut to the tree, away from the plot, allows a moment for the film to breathe and delicately open in a way that mimics the actual space occurring between the frames of the film reel. This cut, together with the flickering of light playing on the screen itself, develop multiple layers of intermittence. The shot of the tree becomes its own self-symbol as the simple play of light and shadow through the branches, and by extension on the screen, becomes an end in itself. The screen becomes both a simple surface of light play and, at the same time, a deeper window into the image of the tree, which functions as its own screen of light play. The image becomes a play between multiple surfaces and lenses.

Similarly, this sequence is premised on a matryoshka doll of perspectives and stories: the viewer watches the screen and the plot occurring within it, as the characters watch the Noh play and simultaneously each other, and other audience members watch the play and one another. The Noh play itself includes multiple layers of surface and depth through the use of masks, mime, poetic-chanting and music (see Wilson 2013, 4). As the characters move between their engrossment in the play and the world surrounding the play, so does the film move between different levels of engrossment in the film itself—at times conscious of merely the screen and its play of light, and at other times becoming more absorbed in the plot. The montage from the characters, to the tree, and then back to the characters embeds this motion between different levels of surface and depth into the material components of the film itself.

At the same time, there are multiple points of balance in terms of light, composition within the frames and in the rhythm of the editing itself, which restore a sense of equilibrium aesthetically in response to the protagonists' distress. The third shot of the father and daughter walking down the road has multiple balanced diagonals through the space of the road and the fencing alongside it, as well as the strips of light and shadow, which are mirrored in the characters' parallel figures meandering up the center of the frame. Their slow steps are mimicked by the rhythm of the actual cuts between images, creating a balance between various points of film time in conversation with the balance of light. Collectively, Ozu's integration of aesthetic and plot choices on multiple levels can elicit a moment of emotional transformation or alchemy in the viewer,

a nicking at the chest area, as the poignancy of the characters' feelings is mimicked in the sense of the material transience and immediacy of the film itself.

II Buddhist Context/Reading of Devotional Cinema

i. Upaya

The secrecy of Dorsky's Buddhist agenda remains in keeping with his understanding of principles like *terma* and *upaya*, critical to the transmission of the *dharma* or Buddhist teachings in Vajrayana Buddhism. *Upaya* is a critical term in Buddhist hermeneutics, soteriology and ethics, especially in the Mahayana tradition, where it refers to methods skillfully employed by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to assist sentient beings towards enlightenment (Jackson 2003, 871). Dorsky refers to *Devotional Cinema* as his *upaya* or *prajna* wisdom (see Dorsky July 9, 2015) and stresses his desire for the text to allow for a full freedom of interpretation. When asked about why he seemed to employ key Buddhist philosophical concepts within *Devotional Cinema* without using their Buddhist titles—substituting a word like “intermittence” for a Buddhist term like *sunyata* emptiness, or *anicca* impermanence—Dorsky first affirmed the Buddhist underpinnings of his ideas as part of his “secret agenda” for his text; second, he stated that he wanted the book to transcend the particularities of Buddhism and a Buddhist audience; and third, he argued that translating particular Buddhist terms into a more universal language was in itself a form of Buddhist wisdom, (*prajna*) or skillful means, (*upaya*) (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Employing explicitly Buddhist terminology would paradoxically compromise the “intermittence” of the text itself and the direct reading of the work, by weighing it down in conceptual categories and identity politics

(Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky's work is both descriptive and prescriptive—descriptive of his own unique engagement with religion and prescriptive of what he thinks religion should be. Being prescriptive through description is a self-aware move on Dorsky's part in keeping with his understanding of the philosophical precept and practice of *upaya*. Dorsky's ambivalence towards casting *Devotional Cinema* in explicitly Buddhist language originates from a fear of identity politics and reductive labeling, which would obscure or limit the Buddhist vision of the text itself. Not only did Dorsky not want to limit the book religiously, but he also wanted this to be a “filmmaker's book,” or to speak to an audience whose concern for filmmaking exceeded their concern for religion. In *Devotional Cinema*, filmmaking is the focal point, which can be enhanced through its articulation on religious grounds, reimagining religion in such a way that artistic practice is privileged before ideology.

ii. *Terma*

Dorsky describes the process of writing *Devotional Cinema* as his *terma* (forms of hidden teachings key to Vajrayana and Tibetan Buddhism), as he learned this through Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Dorsky July 9, 2015).⁴⁹ The late 8th century Tibetan

⁴⁹ Dorsky states: “Do you know the term *terma* in Tibetan Buddhism? Padmasambhava has all these texts either in real places or in space, and a *terton* is someone who receives *terma*, who receives a pure teaching from Padma. It is somehow hidden and it appears. They are often like Chogyam Trungpa who was a *terton* who received five or six major texts, the Shambhala texts. All these texts all of a sudden came down through him. Like once he was playing poker with some friends and he said, “Please write this down.” All of a sudden, they stopped playing and wrote out this whole text for a few hours. They are often alcoholic, die young, fringe. Have you ever seen any footage of the Tibetan oracle? The official oracle? It's fringe, right? Which I understand. So a friend of mine, a woman, she said that she thought that *Devotional Cinema* was like my *terma*, because that book arrived. I was going to teach a semester at Berkeley in 1990, and I never taught

Buddhist master Padmasambhava is said to have concealed many of his teachings, (*terma*), to be revealed by later Tibetan treasure revealers known as *tertons*, who were supposedly reincarnations of his contemporary students (Dalton 2003, 623-625).

Dorsky's Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa was thought to be a *terton* and many of his Shambhala publications were read as his *terma*. While Dorsky does not see himself as a literal reincarnated student of Padmasambhava, he characterizes his writing of *Devotional Cinema* as an extension of this Tibetan Buddhist lineage of textual transmission.

Thinking about *Devotional Cinema* as Dorsky's version of a *terma* points to the particularities of transmission in religious traditions themselves. Not only does Dorsky see *Devotional Cinema* as a conversation between Vajrayana Buddhism and Western art, but he understands his writing of the text in keeping with the process of textual transmission in the Vajrayana Buddhist context. In keeping with this process, Dorsky effortlessly channels the writing after decades of being saturated by the teachings of the American Buddhist world. *Devotional Cinema* can be read as part of the Vajrayana Buddhist canon or among other American Buddhist texts—teaching the *dharma* in a skillfully hidden way to a non-Buddhist audience, through the language of film and film

a semester, and so I spent the summer preparing. What was I going to teach?! So I walked around with my notebook, I had some good smoke, right? And that went on. And then slowly the whole structure came out of nowhere. I mean it came out of old experience of everything I've talked about, but it came to me, all those things, you know? These specific things that could be sourced to different things, you know my father's teacher and everything just came" (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

theory, while reimagining religion on his particular terms. The reading and writing of texts at the intersection of religion and film can be situated within particular religious practices and traditions. Thinking about Dorsky's Buddhist agenda as *upaya* or *terma* highlights the ways methodology in the reading and writing about the intersection of religion and film can be informed by specific religious traditions and practices, while also exceeding their own particularities. Moreover, imagining *Devotional Cinema* as his *upaya* or *terma* illustrates that the agenda to create a universal definition of religious truth based on very particular teachings can have its own religiously specific history.

iii. Dzogchen

In the Nyingmapa school, which preserves the most ancient traditions of Buddhist teachings in Tibet, *Dzogchen* is also known as Atiyoga, a term often interpreted to mean "the Primordial Yoga." Dorsky's line, "I wanted to say these things as though they are primordially true," expresses a desire for universal religious truth, while framing that truth in particularly *Dzogchen* language of "the primordial." *Dzogchen* embraces an array of traditions that, for example, range from a systematic rejection of all praxis to complex systems of Tantric rituals, and from a rejection of all Tantra, including its sexual and horrific elements, to a full incorporation of esoteric funerary and sexual rituals (Germano 2005, 2545). Despite this diversity, however, there is a common rhetorical and contemplative thread that runs through all these traditions, which can be summarized as a tendency towards naturalness, innateness, simplicity/simplification and a strong suspicion of techniques and rule-governed processes of all types (Germano 2005, 2545). *Dzogchen* is widely associated with rhetoric stressing spontaneity, as well as a deconstructive

critique of Buddhist philosophical positions and normative practices (Germano 2005, 2545). It emphasizes devotional visualization practices and thus seems an apt mode for thinking about the devotional potential of film.

Moving beyond *rigpa*, the writing in *Devotional Cinema* at times reflects the particular constellation of language and cadence of many core writings of *Dzogchen* addressed to Western students. In the second to last paragraph of *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky writes:

Devotion is not an idea or a sentiment. It is born out of the vastness and depth of our view. Out of darkness, behind all light, this vastness abides in nowness. It reveals our world. It is humbling and accurate and yet, for all its pervasiveness, it is not solid. (Dorsky 2014, 55)

Consider the multiple points of resonance between Dorsky's previous statement and the following passage by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche on *Dzogchen* instructions:

This is the great vastness, *longchen*, the vast space where everything fits, everything! The non-duality aspect, the great vastness, is unchanging. It has never been fabricated nor is it something we create. What does this mean in practical terms? Devotion is integral to being a Vajrayana practitioner. Wanting to be free of delusion implies accepting that we are deluded. Within our deluded state, we have to learn and believe that we need to create a pure reality. (Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse 2004, 96)

As Dzongsar says that devotion is integral to Vajrayana practice, so does Dorsky specifically centralize the place of devotion in film as religious experience, in the title *Devotional Cinema*. He specifically relates this language of devotional practice to “vastness” and notions of infinity like “pervasiveness” and “everything,” as well as clear seeing or the breaking through of delusion. Dorsky describes what “Devotion” is not—an idea or a sentiment—in a way similar to how Dzongsar describes what *longchen* is not: “It has never been fabricated and it is not something we create.” Both negations are

humbling to the intellect, pointing more to what it is not than what it is. In some ways, Dorsky seems to transfer the characteristics of *longchen* according to Dzongsar to devotion itself. Moreover, they both emphasize a lack of control over something that arises—notice Dorsky’s emphasis on how devotion “is born,” in the same way that Dzongsar says *longchen* is something to which we are passive. The use of the word “nowness” is similarly addressed by Dorsky’s teacher Tsoknyi in his description of *Dzogchen* devotional practice as being “totally focused on nowness” (Rinpoche, Tsoknyi 1999, 200).

Dzongsar speaks of the first step in devotion as “accepting that we are deluded,” and similarly a core aspect of *Devotional Cinema and* Tsoknyi’s description of *Dzogchen* is “surrender” or “acceptance” of the limits of our own minds and our own inherent “delusions.” The greatest of delusions seems to be our belief in our own capacity for control and understanding. Marcia Binder Schmidt, writing on *Dzogchen* and particularly the teachings of Tsoknyi, speaks of surrendering our preconceived notions:

If we choose to train the path of *Dzogchen*, we must be willing to surrender many of our preconceived ideas about the way things are. We must confront the possibility that our own mind cannot figure it all out and face the emotional challenge that we will have to rely on more than our own sense of reality in order to free ourselves from our predicament. (Schmidt 2004, xi)

Similarly, Dorsky writes:

Even the fact that we have ideas or values, or clarity or confusion for that matter—none of this is our creation. We did not make up the fact that we find things beautiful or that people fall in love. After all, I don’t even know how I move my hand or turn my head. I don’t even know how I’m speaking. All I know is I can participate in this situation. At first this realization might seem disconcerting or even claustrophobic. We might try to escape or distract ourselves. But the more we are able to relax and accept the absolute presence of

our situation and then begin to recognize its formal qualities, the greater chance we have to transmute it. (Dorsky 2014, 19)

Dorsky, Tsoknyi, and Dzongsar correspondingly emphasize an acceptance of presumed mistaken perception, the first of which involves acknowledging the limits of our own minds. Both Tsoknyi and Dorsky acknowledge that this is an initially emotionally uncomfortable discovery—Dorsky admits that “this realization might seem disconcerting or claustrophobic,” and Tsoknyi writes of facing the “emotional challenge” of relying on more than our own sense of reality. All three insist that we are deluded regarding reality and that the first step to becoming less deluded is to accept, surrender or notice the delusion itself. What is salient is not just the similarity in content and vocabulary in the writing of Dorsky, Dzongsar and Tsoknyi—Dorsky has also absorbed cadences and tone. In the context of Dorsky’s films, *Dzogchen* practices are ones which gently reflect on the illusion of their own solidity, revealing through reflexive moves the material immediacy and limitations of their own construction and by extension the smallness and material dependency of the viewer’s perception of themselves and their reality. Doing so unhinges the solidity, arrogance, and rigidity of storylines and awakens a feeling of vulnerability and availability in the viewer.

iv. Rigpa

In *Dzogchen*, *rigpa* has a variety of challenging definitions, but it is often referred to as “the most profound form of consciousness” or a “primordial pure form of awareness” (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2223-2224). Some modern translators of Tibetan texts consider the term too profound to be sufficiently rendered into a foreign language; however, it can be described as “awareness,” “pure awareness,” or “mind” (Germano

2005, 2546). Tsoknyi Rinpoche (Dorsky's teacher) describes *rigpa* as an awakened all-pervading state composed of clarity and compassion (Rinpoche Tsoknyi 2004, 13).

Rigpa is said to have the attributes of "presence," "spontaneity," "luminosity," "original purity," "unobstructed" "freedom," "expanse," "clarity," "self-liberation," "openness," "effortlessness," and "intrinsic awareness" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2223-2224). While Dorsky does not speak explicitly of *rigpa* in *Devotional Cinema* or in public, he does regularly employ the lexicon surrounding *rigpa*, as listed above, in *Devotional Cinema* and in public introductions to his work. In doing so, Dorsky renders *Devotional Cinema* a more universally accessible text, while defining religion on his own particular terms.

Dorsky regularly speaks of searching for the "primordial" in question and answer sessions, such as when he describes his film *17 Reasons Why* as "the simple and primordial delight of luminous Kodachrome," (Dorsky Feb. 23, 2013) or promotes *Pneuma* with, "A world is revealed that is alive with the organic deterioration of film itself, the essence of cinema in its before-image, pre-conceptual purity. The present twilight of reversal reality has made this collection a fond farewell to those short-lived but hardy emulsions" (Dorsky March 12, 2013). *Pneuma*, *Alaya*, *Ariel* and *17 Reasons Why* are perhaps Dorsky's most actively minimalistic and experimental films, and perhaps the most explicitly attentive to the primordial dimensions of film. In these films the materials of filmmaking are most explicit or obvious to the viewer because of absence of subject matter, so that the primal materials of filmmaking becomes the focus of attention.

Pneuma is a compilation of raw and outdated reversal film stocks, sometimes re-photographed in closer format, which have been processed without being exposed. Some of the film sources are then optically printed to zoom in extremely closely to images of the grains. The film also works with subtractive color: Dorsky edits certain colors together, which collide and cause the color the eye interprets to be the result of the collision of color, rather than each color seen on its own. The interaction of colors and eyes create the perceived image. Similarly, because of the density and length of the images, the eyes begin to give images different depths and dimensions or to see other images in the emulsion, as though seeing animals in clouds or a Rorschach test. Dorsky edits these strips together for color, texture and rhythm and then threads these through the projector so that the stock itself and the rhythm of the edits becomes the subject of his filmmaking.

Alaya, which works as almost a sibling film to *Pneuma*, is composed entirely of different images of sand, so that the film pivots on the interaction between the sand and the film emulsion. Dorsky chose to largely use Ektachrome instead of Kodachrome stock because the graininess is more palpable in the former, making the overlay of images of sand and the stock all the more visible. Similarly, he selected black and white stock with a charcoal quality that enhances the presence of the film grains and other out-of-date reversal stocks. Some of the particularly out-of-date stocks create a watery bluish tinge. While this is one of the simplest points of subject matter, it also one of the more technically complicated and manipulated of Dorsky's films, relying on the use of a tripod, zoom lenses, artificial lighting and staging. Dorsky shot the film by placing

different types of sand on a tray and using blow dryers and fans to move the sand while filming with a zoom lens and flood lights. At other times, he filmed on a tripod in sandy locations. As the word *alaya* speaks to the pre-existing layer of consciousness, so does the film point to a living pre-existing image. *Alaya* does not just symbolize layered consciousness, it *is* layered consciousness. *Alaya* exhibits the density and vitality of the primordial dimensions of the film image itself and the building blocks of the film image interacting with the film stock to create a sense of texture.

17 Reasons Why is made using a collection of discarded Super 8mm cameras with film that is projected “unsplit,”⁵⁰ so that each shot is composed of four frames with two parallel but distinct narrative strips, with the sprocket holes visible on the sides. *17 Reasons Why* was made when 8mm cameras and film were being replaced by video cameras, and thrift stores in San Francisco were selling them cheaply. Dorsky collected them and found several cameras with the footage still inside, undeveloped. He developed the film and then intercut them with his own shots on 8mm. As *Pneuma* asks that the viewer look directly at 16mm film stock, so does *17 Reasons Why* make 8mm Kodachrome film the primary subject of the piece. The rhythm, color and texture created by the spontaneous editing of new and found footage become the secondary point of focus. As in the collaborations of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, there is an element of chance and improvisation on display in the composition.

⁵⁰ 8mm film can be have exposures on both sides of the film strip, Dorsky opens the film only along one edge and then runs the film through a 16mm projector so that there are four frames and two perforated edges.

Ariel is made entirely of improvised, hand-processed, color Anscochrome stock. The result is a sculptural finger-painting like arrangement of color and pattern on the surface of the film. At the same time, Dorsky at times layers film strips on top of one another, or splices them together horizontally (instead of vertically as is normally done) so that there are two or three different lines of color and pattern in a single image—liquid pinks and blues, aligned with scratchy greens, blacks and oranges, alongside mustard venetian blind like patterns. The colors and patterns highlight the black of the strips surrounding and dividing them—the inherent framing, linearity and bordered dimensions embedded in the basics of the strip. *Ariel* exhibits the tactility of the film surface and the creative potential in the seemingly mechanical act of processing, while also pointing to the depth of the surface of the film itself.

In *Devotional Cinema*, in keeping with the attribute “luminosity,” Dorsky often relies on verbs like “elucidate,” as in “how can it (film) elucidate the formality of our being?” (Dorsky 2014, 20). In other sections he describes our “self-luminosity” (Dorsky 2014, 27). He describes shots as “moments of luminous accommodation” and cuts as that which “re-declare the clarity of the shots” (Dorsky 2014, 50) such that shots and cuts become the material cinematic elements of *rigpa*.

Dorsky urges films to partake in a “living presence” (Dorsky 2014, 39) and praises films that invoke our “innate ability to share in that presence” (Dorsky 2014, 35) and films that allow people to “awaken to the full energy of the present” (Dorsky 2014, 24). He also uses his own invented synonym for presence—“nowness”—where “nowness in cinema deeply respects the nowness in an audience” (see Dorsky 2014, 48-

50). A collection of Dorsky's films that perhaps most explicitly integrate luminosity and nowness are *Elohim*, *Abaton*, *Coda*, and *Ode*, all from 2017. These four films were shot in San Francisco Golden Gate Park in walking distance of Dorsky's apartment. These films follow the end of the California drought and the return of rain. Each film documents a subtle difference in the plants and light—early spring, mid-spring, late spring, and early summer, respectively. Film is made plant-like and plants are made film-like through their relationship to the light. The plants overwhelm the frame and become themselves a screen, made of delicate membranes fed by light. These images recall the cut to the tree in Ozu's *Late Spring*, but absent of a surrounding plot, the plants and the light of the film become the protagonists of Dorsky's work.

In these films Dorsky plays with the camera aperture, often letting the shutter open and close in a single shot, yielding a hovering, flickering effect. At times the aperture closes in such a way that plants appear to be sparkling through the dark, highlighting the intersection of the shadow moving over the subject matter with the shadow cast over the lens itself. In other moments, Dorsky opens the aperture quickly, creating rhythmic flashes throughout the films that reawaken the viewers' attention. The flashes of light function almost like bells in a meditation hall, reawakening the attention to a direct experience of the light itself—to the light of the shot, the light of the projector, and the light of the plants—as the mind begins to wander. Luminosity and presence are often integrated with a sense of effortlessness in many of the shots. The camera simply stays gently for a sustained period of time receiving the light and the image, without manipulating or chasing the image, and the viewer's gaze is encouraged to be similarly

awake but receptive. The receptivity of the sustained shots is balanced by livening of the cuts and the sparks generated by the aperture. Dorsky cultivates multiple attributes of *rigpa* within the same film.

Dorsky not only uses each of these terms—primordial, pure awareness, luminosity, presence, effortlessness etc.—habitually but often in conversation with one another, such as in his above description of *17 Reasons Why*, which connects the “pre-conceptual” to the “pure.” He speaks of accepting “the absolute *presence* of our situation,” transforming that which feels leaden and claustrophobic into “an expression of *openness and clarity*” (Dorsky 2014, 19). These lines employ the words “presence,” “openness” and “clarity” not just on their own but in mutual relationship. In another section he connects clarity and presence: “the depth of its intelligence continues to lie in the clarity of the montage—the way the world is revealed to us moment by moment such that all is present” (Dorsky 2014, 44). Describing the transformative properties of film, he relies on words like purity, effortlessness and presence. Describing Carl Dreyer’s *Ordet*, Dorsky writes, “We are privileged to participate in a rare and *purified* world, a world of transformation” (Dorsky 2014, 38). Transformation happens not through striving, seeking or suffering, but through “accepting” and “resting,” in keeping with the “effortless” attribute of *rigpa*. It is this consistent interconnected constellation of the language of *rigpa* in Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* that makes his claim of the text secretly aiming to think of film as a form of *rigpa* compelling, even if he does not explicitly mention Tibetan words like *rigpa* within the text itself. It is also specifically the fact that he thinks about *Devotional Cinema* in terms of a collection of interrelated

variables that shows how the form of the descriptions of *rigpa* inform the vision that the devotional film takes.

v. *Rigpa* available in and through the world

Crucial for understanding Dorsky's films and film theory, *rigpa* is rooted in and available through each moment of ordinary experience. It is accessible not through the transcendent, but in and through the immediate, material and transient: "*Rigpa* is not said to be accessible only in extraordinary states, such as death and sexual union; instead, it is fully present, although generally unrecognized, in each moment of sensory experience" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2223-2224). This understanding of the most profound form of consciousness as available in, of and through the mundane, mortal, material world is in keeping with a larger core Mahayana Buddhist principle that collapses the distinction between the world of suffering and cyclic existence, known as *samsara*, and enlightenment or liberation, known as *nirvana*. This view is often traced back to second century Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism. The equivalency of *samsara* and *nirvana* is both an ontology and a soteriology. As an ontology, the liberation from suffering takes place in and through the world; as a soteriology, liberation takes place in and through the world, but a world transformed by an awakened vision (Gomez 2004, 604). By extension, in *Dzogchen*, *rigpa* is regarded as the ground or the basis of both *samsara* and *nirvana*, with the phenomena of the world being its reflection; all thoughts and all objects of knowledge are said to arise from *rigpa* and dissolve into *rigpa* (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2223-2224). Enlightenment happens in and through the world, rather than transcending it. As Dorsky

insists, through the lens of *rigpa* one's hand can be a devotional object and inspire devotion ("The total genius of your hand is more profound than anything you could have calculated with your intellect. One's hand is a devotional object" (Dorsky 2014, 41)); similarly, the hospital room in Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961), the smoke stacks and incinerators in Ozu's *The Only Son* (1936). *Nirvana* becomes more about a shift in awareness of the world itself, rather than a shift in the world. Reflecting this worldview, Dorsky writes of films that fail to fulfill their devotional quality:

The sequences *illustrate* something rather than *are* something in themselves...If we do relinquish control, we suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us. In a flash, the uncanny presence of this poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us. Everything is expressing itself as what it is. Everything is alive and talking to us. (Dorsky 2014, 40)

A film that fails at devotion is one that acts as though it is pointing to something important beyond itself—films whose content matters more than their form, films that neglect to inspire the viewer to celebrate the immediate, material dimensions of the film in front of them.

vi. *Rigpa* as unknowing

A subsidiary attribute of *rigpa* significant to *Devotional Cinema* is that it is not accessible through conceptual elaboration or logical analysis. Dorsky's films often defamiliarize familiar objects to break the conceptual filter. For example, in *Hours for Jerome Part I*, Dorsky begins a section with a close up of cat fur streaked by a shadow without the provision of an establishing shot. The viewer only has a sense of color, pattern, shadow and pulsation, without a sense of the word "cat" filtering the image. The shadow across the cat's body intertwines with the natural stripes on its fur, appearing as

simply an image of light and shadow on celluloid. Dorsky then begins to widen the angle, and a sleeping cat comes into view. He then widens the shot further to show two cats intertwined with one another—what seemed like one cat’s fur is shown to be a combination of two. The viewer’s expectations and conceptual interpretation of the image are regularly thwarted and shown to be deceptive; while a direct sensory relationship to a patch of fur and light is cultivated. Similarly, in the *Visitation*, the camera very slowly travels along the edge of a shower curtain. For at least a minute or two the image remains liminal or undefined, until the end, when the object becomes knowable, and what turns out to be a mundane object somehow retains its initial sense of mystery. The process from unknown to cognition can spark release or levity as the edge of a shower curtain takes on mystical dimensions.

In *Threnody* (2004), Dorsky films an angled shot of a store window filled with a bewildering collection of statues and pottery. A statue head is tilted on its side as a counterpoint to the camera angle. The off-kilter angles cause the shot’s orientation to be difficult to decipher. The store window reflects cars moving and a still sky behind the camera; the car windows themselves reflect the store. Meanwhile, the linen of the curtain in the window mixes with a variety of shiny and opaque surfaces. These layers and counterpoints of lenses, textures, and angles create a delicate sense of disorientation and invite the viewer’s careful attention to explore the shot directly, examining which frames are reflections and which are lenses. At the same time, the moving images encourage the viewer simply to look at the opacity and translucence of a variety of surfaces from a sensory perspective, flustering a more cognitive approach.

Dorsky further looks for films to push beyond conceptual thought and logical analysis in his film theory and interviews. The non-narrative dimension of Dorsky's own films speaks to this intent. Films that are not devotional are explicitly said to exist too deeply in the conceptual or language-based ideas: "We are certainly all familiar with moments that are *not* like this. Conversation can often be an exhausting exchange of self-confirming, prestige *concepts* with no real exploration. Everything is already 'known' and is motivated by a need to maintain the status quo of oneself in relation to the other person" (Dorsky 2014, 36). Later he writes, "When the absolute and the temporal are unified, film becomes a narrative of *nowness* and reveals things for what they are rather than as surrogates for some predetermined *concept*. It is the fear of direct contact with the uncontrollable present that motivates the flight into *concept*. The filmmaker seeks the safety net of an idea, or something to accomplish that is already known" (Dorsky 2014, 40). Here again we see an opposition between presence and concept, between the idea/logical dimensions of the mind and direct experience. Similarly, he writes: "The total genius of your hand is more profound than anything you could have calculated with your intellect. One's hand is a devotional object" and "the unknown is *pure* adventure" (Dorsky 2014, 41). There is the ongoing irony that ignorance is associated with the logical, conceptual, and knowing dimensions of the mind, whereas "unknowing" touches on a deeper form of knowledge. This knowledge can be read to be physical. While the "genius of your hand" can be read as speaking to the genius in its design, it can also be read to mean the sheer physical intelligence of the hand itself, which is superior to the knowledge of the intellect.

Understanding the resistance of *rigpa* to the conceptual or discursive helps explain Dorsky's worry that reading *Devotional Cinema* as an explicitly Buddhist text would take the reader away from the vision of the book itself—the label takes the reader too far into the realm of a conceptual sense of self. Anxiety about self-definition can obscure a direct relationship to the language of the book or the vision of the films. In his reference to Ozu, Dorsky crucially suggests that the attributes of enlightenment are better communicated aesthetically precisely because they are to be felt more than conceptualized—to bring the word Buddhist into the text is to move too far into the realm of limiting language.

vii. *Rigpa* beyond subject and object

A last attribute of *rigpa* helpful for thinking about Dorsky's theories is its surpassing of subject and object distinctions, or non-dualism—*rigpa* is said to exist in a state “free from the dualism of subject and object” (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2223-2224). Perhaps the place in which the transcendence of subject and object distinctions in *Devotional Cinema* is most explicitly apparent is in Dorsky's description of that which he calls “self-symbol,” and more specifically his discussion of the screen as its own kind of self-symbol:

... the screen itself is essential to our experience of a film, that it is its own self-symbol... Not to respect the screen as its own self-symbol is to treat film as a medium for information. It is to say that the whole absorbing mechanism of projected light—the shots, the cuts, the actors—is there only to represent a scripted idea... The screen or the field of light on the wall must be alive as sculpture, while at the same expressing the iconography within the frame. Beyond everything else, film is a screen, film is a rectangle of light, film is light sculpture in time. (Dorsky 2014, 48)

The screen becomes both an object of value in itself—a light sculpture—while also being a subjective lens through which we watch the images projected onto it—thus transcending subject and object. In *Threnody*, *Alaya*, *Arbor Vitae* and *Variations*, Dorsky explores different approaches to this transcendence of subject and object through drawing attention to the play of light in the film itself. There is a sobriety or somberness to *Threnody* as the shots become darker and darker until the film turns around, beginning with the shot of sun coming through the trees. The film then becomes progressively lighter. The light moving through the trees begins to mimic the growing light throughout the film. There is a strong attention to radiance and shadow, light growing and collapsing. At times Dorsky follows the light actually expanding or a shadow moving in; and at other times he plays with the aperture and creates an opening and closing of light. Certain shots, such as the camera closing its lens around a spot on a rug until going entirely black, or bursts of light coming through glass, are reminiscent of Brakhage's own films, specifically *Text of Light*, where the play of light becomes the subject of the film itself.⁵¹ The play of light becomes the subject of the films, even as the light illuminates and comprises other subjects, such as trees, rugs, glass. In shots of light coming through glass, there is a layering of the mediation of lenses, while the glass lens becomes an object of attention in itself.

In *Alaya*, Dorsky repeats a sequence that both highlights the presence of the frame and incorporates the frame into the aesthetics of the film. First, the shot opens with still

⁵¹ *Threnody* was made in the wake of Stan Brakhage's death and Dorsky claims is an ode to him.

sand filling the frame, then a breeze begins in the top right corner, and he sustains the shot until the sand blows slowly to the bottom left corner. Each time he returns to this motif of diagonal sand motion, the direction of the sand changes direction, the next time moving bottom right to top left, or top left to bottom right. This accentuates the presence of the frame, while making it a part of the choreography of the image itself. At the same time there is something about these shots that can evoke a strong feeling in the chest—a feeling of the sand moving across the screen of the chest, or the chest as its own screen across which various feelings move in different patterns and directions.

Arbor Vitae has many exploratory shots in bright San Francisco sunlight, which give it a uniquely joyous quality. Often the camera will pan slowly along the edge of a building, a rope, a hose, the stem of a plant, in almost childlike curiosity but closely focused. Unlike Marie Menken's camera, which often dances, swings, and spins, this is a more careful attention to the line itself. Often it is unclear what the line we are witnessing even is—rope, hose, branch—so the viewer looks deeply into the texture of the line itself, in the same way that the camera moves along it. Dorsky then regularly returns to images of grid-like patterns—gates, building facades, the bright pink rubber lacing of a chair. These patterns become a pattern in the film itself, creating additional lines and points of connection across the line of the film.

In *Variations*, there are frequently layers of transparent surfaces and images of water sliding from the top to the bottom of the frame. The frame itself is highlighted by the light on the water sliding from top to bottom of the actual screen on which the film is projected. The screen is its own light play, even as it functions as a screen through which

the viewer views the motion of water. Like the images of water on glass and swans gliding across a lake, water in glass cups and sea horses in a fish tank, there is a watery, slippery feeling to the edits as one image is succeeded by another. Water becomes its own kind of lens onto other objects, and the screen takes on a watery quality of its own—such that subjects through which an object is filtered become objects in themselves, and an object like a screen takes on the liquid texture of its subject. Dorsky writes: “If the filmmaker is not cognizant of the fact that a shot must express both the seer and what is seen, then the film’s view isn’t totally conscious” (Dorsky 2014, 48-49). Understanding and experiencing the screen’s dual subject and object becomes a means of transcending subject and object division. The image must live in conversation between the director’s perception and the world on the other side of the camera.

viii. Bodhichitta

In the *Dzogchen* context, especially in the teachings of the category of mind, *rigpa* can be interchanged with *bodhichitta*, often translated as “an awakened heart” or the enlightened desire of the *bodhisattva* to relieve the suffering of all living beings.⁵² Pema Chodron describes it as “tender, vulnerable and warm,” (Chodron 2004, 8-9) adjectives that Dorsky himself regularly employs when describing devotional cinema. Dorsky also refers to wishing for devotional films or his films to awaken *bodhichitta* or a kind of seeing which is unmediated by the defense mechanisms of conceptual language (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Thinking about *bodhichitta* informs an understanding of Dorsky’s work because of his ongoing insistence on a very particular emotional tone—vulnerable, tender, warm and

⁵² In *Dzogchen* *bodhichitta* can be used to refer to the awakened mind, or *rigpa*.

open. In Dorsky's analysis of Ozu's *The Only Son*, he praises a moment for its "vulnerability," "tenderness" and the openness of the characters to one another with "unguarded honesty" (Dorsky 2014, 43). Similarly, in his analysis of Antonioni's *La Notte*, he describes the camera as "caressing" the characters as they move about the room. This emotional tone is then integrated with awareness or the awakened mind. The mind and heart are moreover shown to be interrelated. Dorsky describes devotional cinema as moments in film where "heart, intelligence, instinct and awareness all come together" (Dorsky 2014, 36). In this line Dorsky merges the "awareness" and "intelligence" in his understanding of *rigpa* with the "heart" quality in his understanding of *bodhichitta*. The most imperative dimensions of Dorsky's understanding of film as a form of Buddhist vision is this joint development of awareness and compassion, in, of and through the world.

August and After was made during and following the deaths of two of Dorsky's close friends—George Kuchar and Carla Liss. Many of the shots are taken within the Hospice in which George Kuchar was dying, specifically in the day room where people were coming in and out to visit and sit with him in a way reminiscent of the scene in *La Notte* cited by Dorsky in *Devotional Cinema*. The film still tends towards abstraction and attention to the small un-contextualized details of the moment, light coming through tinted glass on an angle in an angled shot with a silhouette of a plant in the foreground, a close-up of a tiny locket strung across the frame with an out of focus background and the tiny reflection of a taxi in the gold rounded surface. The film takes on a language of ascent and descent, with escalator and the light growing and fading in and out, for example there is a shot of George Kuchar's brother Mike's harrowed face and then a cut

to a liminal image of a figure descending into darkness. The final shot of a barge slowly moving down river is reminiscent of the final shot of a ferry slowly making its way down river in Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, in the opposite direction of the protagonist's gaze in the previous scene. The barge evokes a similar bitter-sweet sensation of peeling apart and letting go as time chugging along.

The majority of Dorsky's work may express *bodhicitta* in the attentive delicacy with which he observes his subjects—plants, light, shadow, hands, water, sand. It is in the attention to that which would normally be overlooked, the inclusion of images which resist conceptual categorization and their integration with the precise formal choices of his own filmmaking, which lends his films a kind of lyrical tenderness. The tenderness, develops through the attentiveness to the materials of the film and the world. Dorsky has said very little that I know of about film watching as a kind of practice. That said, Dorsky's approach to his subject matter, models a gentle and attentive approach to the world, which suggests a mode and a tone for viewing his films. I know that he treats watching films within his own life very seriously-- he has seen every film Ozu has made at least three times. Having a meditation practice or previous film watching practice that cultivates this kind of gentle attentive examination of visual phenomena may allow more to be seen or experienced in his films.

ix. Impermanence and No-self

Moving beyond the particularities of *Dzogchen*, Dorsky's emphasis on impermanence can be read in conversation with common themes across time and place in Buddhist teachings. Fundamental to most, if not all, schools of Buddhist thought is the

understanding that everything in the world is impermanent, and a deep understanding and insight into impermanence is a prerequisite to enlightened awakening (Anderson 2004, 23). Things in the world change in two ways. First, they change through time. Second, everything in this world is influenced by other elements of the world, and thus all existence is contingent upon something else. Because of this state of interdependence, everything that exists in this world is subject to change and is thus impermanent. Impermanence is the cause of suffering because humans attempt to hold on to things that are constantly changing on the mistaken assumption that things are permanent (Anderson 2004, 23). Within the *Dhammapada* are several core treatises on what are known as “the three marks of existence,” or *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*— impermanence, suffering, and no-self, respectively. These are three fundamental characteristics of the phenomenal world. Verse 277 of the *Dhammapada* addresses *anicca* or impermanence: “All created things are impermanent. Seeing this with insight, one becomes disenchanted with suffering (*dukkha*). This is the Path to Purity” (*Dhammapada* 2006, 72). We suffer because we are constantly trying to hold onto things which are in a state of flux. The more we witness and understand deeply the impermanence of the phenomenal world, the less we cling.

Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and scholar Dr. Walpola Rahula in *What the Buddha Taught* writes: “According to Buddhism, the Absolute Truth is that there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned and impermanent, and that

there is no unchanging, everlasting, absolute substance” (Rahula 1974, 39).⁵³ Similarly, Dorsky emphasizes that the essence of our being is paradoxically its transience, conditioning and relativity. He writes: “Human beings are born, live for a certain period of time, and die. There’s no denying that form” (Dorsky 2014, 19). A page later he rhetorically asks of film: “How can it elucidate the formality of our being and participate in devotion?” (Dorsky 2014, 20). Connecting what Dorsky refers to as “that form” and what he describes as “the formality of our being,” it seems that the goal for Dorsky is for film to “elucidate” the impermanence of our lives. The use of the word “elucidate” suggests that attending to the physical light of the film apparatus can imbue our own sense of self with a greater feeling of transience and less solidity. Dorsky’s poetic tag line for his film *Intimations* (2015) similarly reads, “How delicately the light imbues our fleeting life” (Dorsky May 16, 2015). The parallelism of “delicate light” and “fleeting life” invites the viewer to observe the ways life is made of light—literally in the film, since all of its images are made of light, but also life off the screen. Seeing life as light imbues the seemingly solid with a fragile motion. The delicacy of the handling of light within the film enhances this understanding of our fleeting lives in a way that film as a medium of light projected through a moving celluloid reel can uniquely develop.

x. Two Truths

Dorsky’s section “Time” in *Devotional Cinema* extends from his earlier points regarding intermittence in that, like humans, who are born, live and die, film is a time-

⁵³ While Rahula has come under criticism for his reductionism and distortion of Buddhism to appeal to a Western audience, his writing is part of the American Buddhist tradition in which Dorsky was educated.

based art—the strip of the film has a beginning, middle and an end. But Dorsky argues that there are two types of time, absolute and relative, and human experience, like film, operates in both. Relative time is how any film progresses from the first shot to the last, or how our lives flow from infancy to old age (Dorsky 2014, 34). Dorsky’s language of “relative” and “absolute” time speaks to Nagarjuna’s understanding of what are known as the two truths, which he expounds in the *Root Verses of the Middle Way*, in which the world exists in both “relative” and “absolute,” or “conventional” and “ultimate,” terms. Dorsky reframes this conversation about truth in terms of cinematic time. Dorsky describes absolute time as “nowness” and “presence.” He writes: “Experiencing the relationship of nowness to relative time is akin to walking on a treadmill: the nowness is your presence while relative time passes under your feet” (Dorsky 2014, 34). Absolute time has to do with the quality of our attention, where the passing of relative time is something we are passively engaged in. For Dorsky, the spirituality of film develops through the medium’s capacity to provide insight into the transience of its own materiality and, by extension, its own change and impermanence. The more film can embody, reflect upon and accept that transience through its own material form, the more it participates in devotion. The absolute is always set in motion through its conversation with the relative, and the relative is always the grounds of the absolute.

As in dominant modes of Buddhist thought, impermanence (*anicca*) in Dorsky’s work is not simply about the end of life of all living beings, but penetrates to the subtlest registers of existence—thoughts, feelings, bodies, self and their aggregate parts are in a constant state of flux. This is what he calls the “intermittence.” He writes: “Intermittence

penetrates to the very core of our being, and film vibrates in a way that is close to this core. It is as basic as life and death, existence and non-existence” (Dorsky 2014, 32).

Dorsky argues that intermittence in film operates on two levels, one being the flickering of images—at sound speed there are twenty-four images a second, each about a fiftieth of a second in duration, alternating with an equivalent period of black (Dorsky 2014, 31) — and the second being montage, or the cutting between images and scenes in a film.

Intermittence happens for the human being in terms of both their vision and their physical being. Our vision is intermittent in both concrete and more abstract ways. In concrete ways, we are always blinking, and when we turn our heads, we do not see a continuous stream of images, but rather a series of jump cuts, as it were. Our vision is also vacillating between our internal imagination and our external vision of the world: Dorsky provides the example of driving, where when lost in your own thoughts, you suddenly cannot remember the route you just took (Dorsky 2014, 32-33). He argues that intermittence also “penetrates to the very core of our being,” in that “the poles of existence and nonexistence alternate at an extremely fast speed, and that we float in the alternation” (Dorsky 2014, 32). In other words, as film is moving and vibrating, so are our bodies perhaps vibrating at their most infinitesimal or cellular level. Films that hide this intermittence, according to Dorsky, are “too solid” and “do not respect what we know life to be, it is not what we experience” (Dorsky 2014, 33).

In *Alaya*, Dorsky uses the visual medium of film to evoke the contingency, particles and discrimination of our perception. In the first shot, the flickering lights on a blank dark screen are succeeded by sheets of sand, whose own particles are zoomed in on

and then shown to be in motion. The sand, however, is nothing more than flickering lights on the screen itself. The film sways between the grains of sand and the graininess of both the film stock and the flickering light filtered through the projector, limited by the dark square of the frame. Our perception of the solidity of the screen dissolves into its many moving parts, and we are shown that what we see as perhaps solid is in fact made up of many moving particles and dependent on an almost magical interaction between the materiality of the film and our faculties of perception. *Alaya* reveals the layers of reality operating within the medium and points to an interplay of surface and depth in the development of the filmic image.

The rhythm of the cuts aligns with the blinking intermittence of our own vision and the dulling and sharpening of our attention. *Alaya* brings a felt understanding of the graininess of our own consciousness and its dependency on limited material faculties—bodily and artistic. The film highlights its own materiality and particularity, and the capacity of our perception to then imbue that material screen with a set of meanings. Here, emptiness is not only associated with motion and subject-object interplays, but also with the fullness of the infinite particularity of that which we perceive as solid. “Sand” is made of smaller moving particles, which is then made of an infinite number of flickering particles of light moving through a projector, interacting with the blinking of our own eyelids. The meaning of the film sits in the midst of a set of interactions between foundations—eyeballs, skulls, screens, celluloid, lenses. As the viewer considers the detail and motion of the physicality underlying conceptual life, so might they understand that all the stories and meanings that come with going to the movies are rooted in the

material experience of celluloid interacting with light, full of its own particularities, qualities and motions.

For Dorsky, a central part of religious experience is one that calls experience itself into question. He writes: “After all, I don’t even know how I move my hand or turn my head. I don’t even know how I’m speaking. All I know is that I can participate in this situation,” and, “At the same time we also have the ability to observe this entire experience, to see through the moments of anger, fear, and tenderness rather than just experience them. We are part of our experience and yet we can see through it” (Dorsky 2014, 19). Attached to questions of change and transience are ones of perception and vision, which are themselves in motion. We move between participation and reflection, and this interplay undermines the solidity of who we are and how seriously we take our own thoughts, emotions and sense of self.

Dorsky used a telephoto lens—where the physical length of the lens is shorter than the focal length—and extension tubes in the making of *Alaya* in order to look at individual grains of sand so close that they appear almost as boulders. At the same time, this allows for sand shapes on a tray to take on the appearance of vast deserts or beaches. The use of sand highlights an interplay between the particular and the whole. It is like W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, the rings of Saturn change depending upon the positioning and capacity of the body and technology of the subject who views them: when perceived from a distance, the rings offer an impression of smooth, complete bands; when viewed through a more powerful telescope, they reveal themselves to be a spinning sets of icy geological debris. Our perception comes to know its own

contingency through understanding Saturn's rings as both the smooth bands of light, *and* jagged, orbiting debris. Depending on the material lens, the viewer's perception changes; depending on the positioning or visual capacity of the subject, the object changes. Viewing the particular becomes a means for recognizing the flexibility of our perception. The particular highlights the presence of the whole, and the disparity between the two. Dorsky makes the particularity, mobility, flexibility, and limitations of perception the subject of film itself.

Jose Ignacio Cabezon writes of the ways impermanence and the fact of mortality of all beings, are a "slightly hidden point," according to Tibetan exegetical literature, and hence are something that can come through a combination of sensory perception and inference.⁵⁴ The meditator may learn impermanence through observing changes in physical sensations—the motion of the inhale and exhale, changes in pressure, temperature, texture throughout the body and over the course of a sitting. Physical pleasures and discomforts change, the pain in one's knee may be felt to be changing in quality, location and temperature as you watch it. The pleasurable taste in one's mouth similarly changes in intensity and flavor. Feelings physical and emotional come and go and themselves are moving. When observing sadness and joy, you can feel how these feelings are felt and are moving within the body. Thoughts and trains of thoughts arise and pass away. The quality of one's attention itself changes in quality and focus. The

⁵⁴ Cabezon writes: "The fact of the mortality of all living beings, the fact of their impermanence and their emptiness are all slightly hidden points. They can be ascertained, but only through inference and not simply through the sense" (Cabezon 1994, 99).

meditator begins to learn that all things, when observed closely, are subject to similar kinds of impermanence, and the perception of impermanence within one's person enhances our understanding of perception in the larger world. In other words, the lens through which we view ourselves and around us is similarly subject to *anicca*—change, growth and decay. Dorsky theorizes films as being able to experience that “which is hidden and accept with our hearts our given situation” (Dorsky 2014, 18). Our “given situation,” our own transience, is a slightly hidden point and one which film can provide sensory knowledge of, through its own transient material means. *Alaya* allows a visceral understanding of ourselves as a collection of moving sand castles, where a single grain of sand can take on the physiological weight of a boulder, and a boulder can dissolve into dust, and then into the light of the film itself.

***xi.* Balance**

Dorsky's emphasis on “balance” and “equilibrium” in *Devotional Cinema* echoes a similar emphasis in many foundational Buddhist teachings. Walpola Rahula describes the Fourth Noble Truth in the Theravada Buddhist tradition as the Middle Path (*Majjhima Patipada*), because it avoids two extremes: one extreme being the search for happiness through the pleasures of the senses...; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism” (Rahula 1974, 45). Then there is balance that extends to subtler individual states, such as the equal cultivation of compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*pranna*), or emotion and intellect, according to Rahula's interpretation. He writes: “If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual

side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally” (Rahula 1974, 46). In the practice of meditation, equilibrium can be both the goal and the mechanics of the practice. Rahula writes, “the way of ‘meditation’ aims at producing a state of perfect mental health, equilibrium and tranquility” (Rahula 1974, 67). The practitioner also finds balance in their physical posture—wakefulness and relaxation, grounding and buoyancy, the balance of in and out breathing, and so on. Consider thirteenth-century Zen master Dogen’s meditation instructions:

When sitting *zazen*, wear the *kashya* and use a round cushion. The cushion should not be placed all the way under the legs, but only under the buttocks... Sit either in half lotus position or in the full-lotus position... Loosen your robes and arrange them in an orderly way. Place the right hand on the left foot and the left hand on the right hand, lightly touching the thumbs together. With the hands in this position, place them next to your body so that the joined thumb-tips are at the navel. Straighten your body and sit erect. Do not lean to the left or the right; do not bend forward or backward. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, and your nose in line with your navel. Rest your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and breathe through your nose. Lips and teeth should be closed. Eyes should be open, neither too wide nor too narrow. Having adjusted body and mind in this manner take a breath and exhale fully. (Dogen 1985, 30)

This passage emphasizes precision, symmetry, harmony and lightness of touch.

In the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, meditation on breathing is described as “ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands: ‘I breathe in long’; or breathing out long, he understands ‘I breath out long’. Breathing in short, he understands ‘I breathe in short’; or breathing out short, he understands: ‘I breathe out short’” (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1995, 145). This passage embodies the balance and rhythmic harmony it describes—inhalation and exhalation, short and long breaths, thoughts and action.

Similarly, the lilting sound of the word “Alaya” resonates with Dorsky’s sense of how the sand flowed in his film *Alaya* and became the paradigm for the rhythm of the edits. When Brakhage first saw the film, he commented on its rhythmic, musical quality: “*Alaya* manages a perfection of ‘musical’ light across a space of time greater in length than would seem possible (consider how brief most such perfected works are, such as Peter Kubelka, say) ... and with minimal means of line and tone. ... After about three minutes I began to be aware of the subtlety of rhythm, within each shot and shot-to-shot, which carried each cut, causing each new image to sit in-the-light of those several previous” (qtd. in Dorsky 1987 Dec. 17). Dorsky uses montage, lenses, and lighting to create a balanced pacing that both soothes and awakens the viewer. The motion and patterning of the sand in *Alaya*, in conversation with the rhythm of the montage, in some ways creates a feeling of breathing in and out, long and evenly, similarly cultivating a softened but awakened state of mind. *Alaya* is only one of many of Dorsky’s films that develop a rhythmic montage in their timing of shots and cuts, but can also soothe the viewer through attention to the pacing of the montage in the subtle shifts and jolts.

In the *Middle Length Stages of Meditation*, which comprise the fundamental teachings of *samata* and *vipassana* meditations in the Tibetan tradition, Kamalashila writes of the “preparation for sitting meditation”.

At the time of meditation, a yogi should first complete all his activities and go to the toilet. Then, in a quiet and agreeable place, he should think, “I will place all sentient beings in the state of awakening,” producing the great compassion wishing to emancipate all living beings. He should bow down to all the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* in the universe. He should place a painting or some other images of the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* in front of him or in some other suitable place. He should offer whatever offerings he has, and should praise the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*. On a soft and comfortable seat, he should sit in the full lotus

posture of Lord Vairocana or in the half-lotus posture. His eyes, neither wide open or fully closed, should be directed toward the tip of his nose. His body should be straight, neither bent nor twisted. His attention should be drawn within. His shoulders should be even and his head should not be tilted back, forward, or leaning toward the side—his nose and navel should be in line. His teeth and lips should be in a natural position with his tongue placed at the front of his palate. His breathing should not be noisy, panting, or agitated; rather, his inhalation and exhalation should be as imperceptible as possible, very slow and effortless. (Kamalashila. 2016)

He emphasizes the balance and intertwining of discipline and ease. On the one hand, there is a high level of precision and focus involved in maintaining one's eyes half opened and closed and directed towards the tip of the nose (not just the nose, but the "tip"), or the tongue placed on the palate of the mouth. The attention to the "naturalness" of lips and teeth is paradoxically demanding of focus. On the other hand, there is specific attention to the "softness" and "comfort" of the meditation cushion and the "effortlessness" of the breath. There is an irony in the "effortlessness" of the breath and the effort of sustaining a breath that is in fact slow, effortless and absent of agitation. There is also the development of a vertical axis with the placement of the nose directly above the navel. There is attention to mundane physical needs like using the toilet before practice, together with the more metaphysical instructions to produce compassion to wish to remove the suffering of all living beings. Where this passage distinguishes itself from other seated meditation instructions in a way that parallels Dorsky's own approach to film is the strong coupling of the practice with the compassionate intention to free ourselves, and by extension, other beings from suffering. There is also the employment of an image of the Buddha or other visuals incorporated into the practice, suggesting that visual aids and meditation operate in relationship to one another.

Devotional Cinema, according to Dorsky, depends on a set of equilibriums: subjectivity and objectivity, relative and absolute time, knowns and unknowns, shots and cuts, interior and exterior vision. The first of these equilibriums has to do with subjective and objective perception. Like the half open and half closed eyes of Kamalashila's directions of meditations, Dorsky speaks of balancing internalized and externalized ways of seeing: "it is a balance that is neither our vision nor the belief in exterior objectivity... It is within this balance that the potential for profound cinema takes place" (Dorsky 2014, 28-29). Film must try to balance the perception of the filmmaker with careful attention to the object being filmed. There is also a self-reflexive aspect to this vision: "If the filmmaker is not cognizant of the fact that a shot must express both the seer and what is seen, then the film's view isn't totally conscious" (Dorsky 2014, 49). A filmmaker, according to Dorsky, needs to be "conscious" or self-aware so as to discern their own point of view from the object of vision. Subjective and objective perception are intimately connected to light. For Dorsky, medieval cathedrals' dark vast caverns with stained glass windows suggested a subjective world view: "a sense that the source of illumination wasn't necessarily outside ourselves but that we were perhaps the source of that light," heightening our sense of "the mysterious darkness of our own being" (Dorsky 2014, 27). The Renaissance view that the world was objectively outside ourselves brought with it increasingly clear church windows and fuller illumination, such that "the internal vastness vanished from our psyches" (Dorsky 2014, 27-28). Thus a film is balanced subjectively and objectively, partially through its harnessing of light.

Balance in relationship to intermittence concerns the permission of the flicker. This is partially Dorsky's resistance to digital imagery, which does not allow for the black of the film strip, found between images, to permeate the film. On a more macro level, this requires leaving gaps in montage and in narration, in the case of narrative film. He writes that "if a film fills in too much, it violates our experience" (Dorsky 2014, 33). In other words, films need to leave much that is unknown within the film, so as to acknowledge the gaps in human experience and perception. Balance in *Devotional Cinema* in relationship to time has to do with the balancing of relative and absolute time—"for film to have a devotional quality both absolute and relative time must be active and present—not only present but functioning simultaneously" (Dorsky 2014, 35-36). Films that are excessively relative or horizontal are films whose plots pull us along seductively but neglect the beauty of immediate scenes, shots, moments. An excessively vertical film tends to be pretentious or "so absorbed in its own profundity that it numbs the mind of the viewer" (Dorsky 2014, 37).

III Conclusion

Within the world of religion and film there has been a desire by artists and theorists to bridge gaps between artistic and religious practice. While statements like that of Andre Bazin's "the cinema has always been interested in God" are compelling, they often universalize film's religious engagement based on very particular experiences of religion. Stephen Prothero points out the challenge of thinking about religion in terms of a supreme being: "When it comes to divinity, however, one is not the religions' only number. Many Buddhists believe in no god, and many Hindus believe in thousands.

Moreover, the characters of these gods differ wildly... Is God personal, or impersonal? Male, or female (or both)? Or beyond description altogether?" (Prothero 2011, 2). *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, in which *Devotional Cinema* was first published, provides an example of a tendency towards a narrow view of religion in approaches to religion from a film-world perspective, and Dorsky's work within it.

At the 2015 New York Film Festival retrospective of Dorsky's work, there was a question and answer session with the following exchange, in which Dorsky subtly reframed a question about God and film through a prominent Buddhist meditation approach of "unknowing":

Man: What do you think the place of God is in your films? In your recent films?

Do you think God has a place in your films?

ND: Well that's a first... (laughs)

GS: Say the divine.

ND: Yes of course one first has to ask what you mean by that word. I need to know what that word means to you for me to be able to answer it, because it means a lot of things to a lot of people.

Man: Sure, I guess the divine is a good place, a divine or guiding presence, something (inaudible)

ND: Well I think if we are honest we have to admit that we don't know what's going on, even though there are a lot of explanations and descriptions, it doesn't really touch what's going on. And it seems film has a potential to be a sacred medium, by sacred I mean one that is respectful of that unknowing. I think some of the greatest directors in the narrative form, their films are very appreciative of the fact that we don't know and are humbled by that and are enriched by that. I'm that kind of person, so to speak, and I see the whole idea of using film as a kind of prayerful or something that tries to touch on that is very important. Is that an answer?

Man: First on the God comment. The term devotion is part of your lexicon and I think your films are devotional. (Dorsky October, 2015)

In this exchange, the term "devotion" within Dorsky's lexicon inspires the questioner to project his particular religious associations and vocabulary onto Dorsky's work, asking him where the place of God, or a "divine guiding presence," is in his films.

As Dorsky observes, “I need to know what that word means to you, because it means a lot of things to a lot of people.” Dorsky then shifts away from a conversation about God or its definition as a “divine guiding presence,” and says that film has the potential to be a sacred medium in so far as it respects “unknowing.” Cultivating an “unknowing” mind is a common instruction given in Zen meditation practices, particularly by contemporary teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and Bernard Glassman Roshi, who learned this precept from his teacher Maezumi Roshi. Dorsky knows Glassman and students of Glassman personally. “Unknowing” is the first precept of Glassman’s Zen Peacemakers Order.

The following is from an interview of Glassman by Christopher Queen:

Queen: Let's talk about the first precept of your order, Unknowing. You have a Ph.D. in mathematics and have acquired expertise in countless areas of Buddhist teaching and practice, psychology, business management, finance, and so on. Yet you teach Unknowing. Is this some kind of a Zen trick?

Glassman: In Zen the words source and essence are the equivalent of Unknowing, and they come up again and again. We have the absolute and the relative perspectives about life, and Unknowing is the one source of both of these.

Queen: Early Buddhism in India is very comfortable with notions of knowledge, wisdom, and technique. Yoga, meditation, and philosophy were all developed by experts, the virtuoso monks. But in China a mistrust of words and concepts and intellectualism came into the early Zen tradition from Taoism and we hear about book-burnings and Zen masters who do wild, irrational things to break their students'

dependency on logic and learning. Is this part of Unknowing for you?

Glassman: Yes, and for me it fits in with my Jewish background. In contrast to the whole rabbinical tradition of Talmudic learning and scholarship comes the mystical tradition of Kabbalah and Chasidism, where all the earthly qualities and emanations come from the infinite Ein Sof. But the important thing is that Unknowing was emphasized by my teacher Maezumi Roshi, and it fits my temperament. It just makes so much sense to start from Unknowing. (quoted in Queen 1998, 64-66)

Glassman connects the Zen teachings of “unknowing” to his own background in Jewish mysticism, while contrasting this precept with religious systems in both Judaism

and Buddhism, which emphasize intellectual knowledge. As Glassman distinguishes an unknowing approach from religious traditions within Judaism and Buddhism that emphasize knowledge, so too does Dorsky's emphasis on "unknowing" distinguish itself as a vulnerable mode of perception from the questioner's description of God as a "divine guiding presence," or the presence of a transcendent other within the film. Similarly, Dorsky's use of the term "unknowing" might be most closely rooted in his Buddhist background, but also exceed it and speak to a larger mystical tradition: "Viewing a film has tremendous mystical implications; it can be at its best a way of approaching and manifesting the ineffable" (Dorsky 2014, 28).

Yes, Dorsky's work includes "devotion" in its lexicon, which speaks to a larger religious context, but he uses "devotion" as part of a lexicon which heavily stresses effortlessness, balance, luminosity, presence, awareness, tenderness of heart, awakening, vulnerability, unknowing, transformation, the primordial, intermittence, the relative and the absolute, unknowing—a matrix of terms which collectively point to a cohesive religious worldview distinct from the one in which it is framed within *Hidden God: Faith and Film*. He emphasizes the impermanent before the eternal, the worldly before the celestial, unknowing before belief or faith, presence or nowness before transcendence, effortlessness and relaxation before struggle. Understanding *Devotional Cinema* in light of Dorsky's Buddhist background and stated intentions provides an additional if not alternate view of its religious meaning, the field of religion and film and the potential for religion itself. *Devotional Cinema* may be about God for some, or it may be about *rigpa*,

or it may subliminally reframe a vision of God as *rigpa* and rewrite faith on the terms of “unknowing.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

Filmmakers and Film Critics Envision Religion

Thinking about film as a mode of religious expression is not unique to Dorsky as a filmmaker or theorist. The following brings Dorsky's work into a diacritical comparison with a strand of film theory that spiritualizes or theologizes the medium as a mode of aesthetic critique.

I begin addressing theory that unites religion and film by contemporary film scholar Rachel Moore; I then move to the works of classical theorists like Bela Balazs and Andre Bazin; and lastly, turn to the writing of film makers like Paul Schrader, Andrey Tarkovsky, Martin Scorsese, and Stan Brakhage. Each section considers the ways Dorsky's own theories and films align with, illustrate, or contradict their work. Doing so provides a vision of the elasticity and plurality of understandings of religion, from the perspective of film theorists and filmmakers, while also situating Dorsky and his work within an alternative community of thought to religious studies.

Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema* can be read in continuity with elements of these works, but also departs from this lineage in ways that meaningfully direct greater attention to Buddhist theory: particularly the ability of film to reflect on impermanence, cultivate tenderness and vulnerability, and devote attention to the immediate world as a mode of religious engagement. Many of these thinkers assume a universal essence to religion and its relation to film; however, the nature of that essence differs from one writer to the next, illustrating the plurality and variety of relationships between religion and film, particularly in light of Dorsky's work. I then focus on theories joining religion

and film that pivot particularly around, first, ideas of devotion, and then, immortality and impermanence. Laying these theories out collectively and comparatively points to the ways the comparative study of *Devotional Cinema* within religion and film, serves to pluralize and nuance a vision of religion at large.

Rachel Moore

In her book *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (2000), Rachel Moore explores an intersection between religion and film from a film studies perspective, which looks at film as magic ritual of modern life. Moore's book explores the presence of primitivism in early film theory, particularly in the work of Bela Balazs and Andre Bazin, among others. She argues that the film image is an "eminently, modern, magical fetish," both cause and solution to feelings of disconnection, sickness, and isolation in modernity (Moore 2000, 6). She writes:

Unlike most cultures, our culture operates with a remarkably inelastic spirit world and is the only one in which people don't devote a fair amount of time and money to some magical form of ritual healing, divination, or spirit possession. The camera is our one magical tool flush with animistic power to possess, enchant, travel through time and space, and bewitch. In light of this, our theoretical speculations about cinema are akin to the child furtively behind the curtain, or checking out Santa's beard. (Moore 2000, 163)

Dorsky, like Moore, proposes cinema as a potential mode of spiritual healing and in this way *Devotional Cinema* and his films fall within the rubric of Moore's analysis.

However, I would argue that Dorsky's films and theory are more about developing a sense of the ignored elasticity of the material world than an engagement with the paranormal or supernatural spirit world. Where Moore sees her theoretical study of the magic of film as in some ways taking away from the magic, or pulling back the curtain,

Dorsky seems to situate the wonder of film in the interplay of opening and closing the curtain—the ability of sand to become film stock and the filmstock to reveal its own sandy properties; the surface of the film to reveal a perception of depth, before returning to the surface; the ability of blinking to work alongside the cuts of a montage. Dorsky's films resist enchantment, possession, or time travel, often working reflexively to awaken viewers to an immediate present and the bones of the film experience—eyes, light, frames, skulls, cuts. In this way, reading Dorsky in light of Moore points to a plurality of religious engagement with film as a medium, but also the diversity of styles of film.

Moore writes:

I want to further suggest not that we turn, fatigued and alone, from darkness to light, not merely from alienation to proximity, but that with the purchase of the movie ticket, we turn from the rational to the excessive. Like the meanings set loose by labor's exhaustion, the light of the cinema partakes of the qualities of freedom that Eisenstein, Lyotard, and Bachelard illustrate with the phenomenon of fire. The scale alone in the cinema is excessive. (Moore 2000, 132)

Here Moore emphasizes scale and the sense of the excessive in film, which correlates with what she calls “primitive” notions of magic and religion. Dorsky's work feels much more minimalistic and small-scale, particularly within contemporary experience.

Attending a screening of Dorsky's work, especially in New York City, often feels like an exit from the sensory excess of the outside world, and an entrance into quiet and sudden sensory deprivation, in which one can be confronted with the excess of their internal life.

Where Moore associates the spiritual capacity of film with the macro, Dorsky positions the religious experience of film through its attention to the micro and the relativism of scale itself.

Moore also proposes that films fill a need for bodily and interpersonal connection.

She writes:

Perhaps the paucity of bodily felt and contingent experience accounts for why films “touch.” If this is so, it is also the reason why cinema needs to touch those parts of us that are most in danger of atrophy. (Moore 2000, 159)

Dorsky’s work both engages with this need for sensory connection, while taking it to another level: developing a sense of tactility and connection with the physicality of film, exploring “touch” within film, as people lose connection with a medium of film, slowly disappearing from theaters.

Bela Balazs

Bela Balazs (1884-1949) was a Hungarian-Jewish romantic, modernist film critic, theorist, and poet, best known for three major collections of articles on film: *Der Sichtbare Mensch* (*The Visible Man*, 1924), *Der Geist des Films* (*The Spirit of Film*, 1930), and *Filmkultura* (*Theory of the Film*, 1948). Like Dorsky, Balazs expresses a philosophical distrust of empiricist dualisms, which separate the subject of perception from the film object (see Carter 2010 xxv). He argues that film cannot be read as a linguistic sign (see Carter 2010, xxv) and most importantly develops a phenomenological understanding of film through which its spiritual potential is most fully realized (Carter 2010, xxv), with a particular view to avant-garde film (see Balazs 1952, 174-184). Balazs’s theory of the intersection of religion and film is especially efficacious for thinking about *Devotional Cinema*, as well as Dorsky’s films, because of multiple shared points of reference.

Balazs insists that not only is film a distinct language from verbal and written language, but film has a superior spiritual capacity to the written word and indeed the capacity to return to humanity the soul lost with the advent of the printing press and the proliferation of writing (Balazs 1952, 39-41). Balazs's theory of "spiritual experience" through film is rooted in the ability of film to convey facial expression and gesture in new and intimate ways (Balazs 1952, 40). He cites the ability of silent film and its use of close-ups, a technique Dorsky often uses, to show "the hidden life of things" (Balazs 1952, 54). In everyday vision, Balazs argues, we "skim over the teeming substance of life," but through the visual life of film we see "the adventures of beetles in a wilderness of blades of grass... the erotic battles of flowers and the poetry of miniature landscapes," or the "quality of the gesture of the hand" (Balazs 1952, 55). Each of Balazs's lines is a premonition of Dorsky's films, and Dorsky's films are an apt illustration of Balazs's language: Dorsky's films focus on the "hidden little life" of that which we ignore in our everyday vision. Dorsky's films, like Balazs's theory, celebrates an intimacy with the micro-dimensions of experience as a mode of spirituality.

Balazs especially emphasizes the role of the close-up of faces in the spiritual potential of film. He writes of "close-ups which threw a light into the microphysiognomic depths of the human heart"(Balazs 1952, 69); and "the microphysiognomy of the close-up, the intimate play of features, is not susceptible to stylization, and yet it is the very soul of film" (Balazs 1952, 271). Balazs not only points out the spirituality of close-ups of the disregarded details of experience, which aligns with Dorsky's work, but he also emphasizes intimacy, depth, and "heart" with a

tenderness of tone highly reminiscent of Dorsky's own films and theory. Balazs further argues that close-ups lend a sense of face to non-human things or creatures. This anthropomorphism incumbent in film takes on religious references: "When we see the face of things, we do what ancients did in creating *gods* in man's image and breathing a human soul into them. The close-ups of the film are the creative instruments of this mighty visual anthropomorphism" (Balazs 1952, 60). Balazs transforms and collapses two different creation stories within the Book of Genesis in the metaphor of his first sentence: the first creation myth in which God creates humankind in his (their) image, and the second in which God shapes Adam out of clay and breathes life into him. In both references, Balazs toys with the metaphor: first, it is humans who create "*gods*" in their image; second, people bring still images to life by setting them in motion and granting them a soul through anthropomorphic projection. Filmmaking could be said to become religious in its ability to imbue a film's images with a feeling of human connection.

Balazs's theory of faces and close-ups can become a lens for thinking about Dorsky's films. Many of Dorsky's images of nature, like clusters of branches or light on a windowpane, can take on an anthropomorphic or facial quality. Similarly, Dorsky exhibits the liveliness and complexity embedded within the surface or face of the film stock itself—revealing faces in the oil of the celluloid on the unprocessed surface of the film. Conversely, Dorsky's films could also do the opposite: functioning as mirrors which allow people to see themselves and their faces and their storylines as clusters of branches, swimming sand, moving water—depersonalizing and softening the ego behind the perception. To see one's own face as no different from the face of a tree or the face

of the film strip, not only points to the illusion of self embedded in the storylines of our conceptual thought, but also breaks distinctions between the perceiver and the image, highlighting their interdependence and interplay.

Like Dorsky's emphasis on "nowness" or "presence" in *Devotional Cinema*, Balazs stresses the way a silent film scene can break away from a sense of past or future. He writes:

Such things could of course happen only to silent films. For pictures have no tenses. They show only the present—they cannot express either a past or a future tense. In a picture itself there is nothing that would compellingly and precisely indicate the reasons for the picture being what it is. In a film scene we see only what is happening before our eyes. Why things happen as they do, of what they are the result—these are questions to which a thousand different answers could be given in the silent film. The talkie, on the contrary, has words, words which may refer to past or future, which have a logic that determines the place of each scene in the time-sequence of events. (Balazs 1952, 121)

Balazs's comments point to the ways the silence of Dorsky's films enhances his theories of "nowness" or "presence" within *Devotional Cinema*. The use of language within film, according to Balazs, situates the image too much within the conceptual, which brings with it a sense of past and future. The direct attention to image without any verbal mediation cultivates a kind of awakening to the immediacy of the film itself. Balazs' theory points to the ways that silent experimental films like Dorsky's, which tenderly and intimately attend to the often ignored micro-dimensions of existence, can become a spiritual mode of filmmaking, particularly in the evocation of a presence of mind to the immediacy of the film itself.

Andre Bazin

Andre Bazin (1918-1958) is referred to as “spiritual founder of the French new wave” (Cardullo 1997, x) and co-founded the major film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1951. He is also perhaps the founding theorist of religion and film. Scholarship on the study of religion regularly cites his article “Cinema and Theology” and its opening line, “The Cinema has always been interested in God” (Bazin 1951, 61). Bert Cardullo characterizes Bazin as a “missionary of the cinema,” describes Bazin’s “spirit of his humility before the god of cinema,” and illustrates the ways Bazin applied his Catholic education and “spiritual sensibility” to his reading of cinema: “Bazin’s view of film as obligated to God, to honor God’s universe by using film to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality” (Cardullo 1997, xii). As Cardullo notes, “Bazin’s criticism is not remotely doctrinal in its Catholicism, but is fundamentally holistic; its source lies elsewhere than in aesthetic dissection. His true filmmaker attains his power through “style,” which is not a thing to be expressed but an inner orientation enabling an outward search” (Cardullo 1997, xii). The sensitivity of tone in *Devotional Cinema* resonates with Andre Bazin’s writing on neorealism. There is an affinity between Dorsky and Bazin: both show how the viewing, critique, and contemplation of film may be a spiritual exercise in itself; and both initiate a way of thinking about film not as being about religious content, but *as* religion.

Like Dorsky, Bazin’s thoughts on the relationship between religion and film show a certain evolution and uncertainty, but also develop visual uncertainty or unknowing as a mode of spiritual engagement. Describing a shot of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, Bazin

writes: “The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image” (Bazin 1967, xv). Uncertainty, and spiritual uncertainty, is to become a higher mode of both spiritual and artistic engagement. In his most explicit work about the relationship between religion and film, “Cinema and Theology,” when Bazin first makes the claim that “The cinema has always been interested in God,” he means that the cinema has frequently adapted biblical stories for the screen: “The Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles were the first best sellers on the screen, and the Passions of Christ were hits in France as well as in America” (Bazin 1967, 61). He then goes on to outline three types of religious film: (i) Films of Christian spectacles and miracles; (ii) Christian hagiographies or lives of saints; and (iii) stories of priests and nuns. All of these categories concern the depiction of explicit religious, and specifically Christian, content within films.⁵⁵

While within this essay Bazin never moves entirely away from religious content, he does begin looking for a more form-based mode of implicitly manifesting religion through film. None of the three modes of religious film for Bazin have to do with what he calls “true religious experience.” He writes: “The history of religious themes on the screen sufficiently reveals the temptations one must resist in order to meet simultaneously the requirements of cinematic art and of truly religious experience” (Bazin 1967, 64). Bazin’s use of the word “temptations” suggests the way filmmakers must regard their own work as a mode of ascetic practice—resisting external pleasure for more spiritual

⁵⁵ In the three varieties of films that we have just examined, these themes are explicit and visible, since their protagonists are obviously martyrs, saints, priests, or monks.

ones. This line also suggest that film criticism and theology intertwine— high artistic expression is intricately woven with a theology of religious experience.

In watching the Italian neo-realist films of those like Vittorio De-Sica, Bazin more fully develops his theology of film, which approaches ontological ambiguity with a profound tenderness. In “The Myth of Total Cinema,” Bazin argues that the beauty of film is its opposition to scientific approaches to the real: “Cinema owes nothing to the scientific spirit—approximate and complicated visualization of an idea precedes the industrial discovery: In their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (Bazin 1967, 171). In “De-Sica Metteur-En-Scene,” Bazin argues that reality is ontologically ambiguous in that it must be attended to and expressed poetically, which is exemplified in the neorealist films of Vittorio DeSica, which lovingly attend to the world and draw out the beauty of the mundane. He writes:

“My little sister reality,” says De Sica, and she circles about him like birds around St. Francis. Others put her in a cage or teach her to talk, but De Sica talks with her and it is the true language of reality that we hear, the word that cannot be denied, that only love can utter. (Bazin 1967, 177)

Gentle attention to the real, best exemplifies the real and is also the source of a moral argument. Ontology and morality are interwoven and neorealist film plays a central role in making that connection. Bazin implies that in approaching the world lovingly, the ambiguity of reality is all the more apparent and that attending to that ambiguity tenderly is the source of moral life. *Devotional Cinema* echoes many of these

points, but expands and reimagines many of Bazin's arguments through Tibetan Buddhist teachings.

Paul Schrader

Paul Schrader (1946-present) is an American screenwriter, film director, and film critic most known for his writing on Martin Scorsese's films *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and the *Last Temptation of Christ*. In the field of religion and film he is often cited as writing one of the first texts relating the religious potential of film to its form, in *Transcendental Style in Film*. He posits the emergence of a "transcendental style" in film—a universal form for expressing the Holy (the transcendent) or approaching the ineffable. He turns to the work of Ozu and Bresson as exemplifying the transcendental in the East and West, respectively. Schrader concludes that the spirituality of a film can be measured by the degree of its minimalism, or sparseness. Transcendental cinema must use the least abundance to sustain the viewer's attention, and the most sparseness. The abundant sustains the viewer physically, while the sparse elevates the soul (Schrader 1972, 155). The ratio of abundance to sparseness can be a measure of the spirituality of a work of art (Schrader 1972, 155).

Schrader describes the "transcendental style" as occurring in a cinematic arc comprised of three steps. The first step, which he calls the "everyday," is a meticulous representation of the dull commonplace of everyday living. Unlike "realism" in film, this kind of attention to the everyday is only a prelude to the anticipated transcendence of the ordinary. Schrader privileges a feeling of coldness or a lack of feeling in the attention to

the minutiae of the everyday. The second step, “disparity,” occurs in an ironic disunity between the characters and their environment—for example, in Ozu’s work, a disharmony between nature and human struggle. This disparity culminates in a decisive action or a crack, often signaled by weeping, for example (see Schrader 1972, 45-47). The film then returns to the everyday, or attention to the stillness of details, in the third step, which Schrader calls “stasis.” This return to the everyday now takes on a new meaning because of its reading in light of the previous arc. Supposedly, the return to stasis establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality and represent or point to a Wholly Other beyond the film itself (Schrader 49). The Zen koan—when I began to study Zen, mountains were mountains; when I thought I understood Zen, mountains were not mountains; but when I came to full knowledge of Zen, mountains were again mountains—becomes the paradigm of the transcendental style for Schrader (quoted in Schrader 38).

Schrader privileges work that perhaps affirms elements of his own particular theological background—sparseness, austerity, brevity, economy, rigor, purity—while disparaging emotions, earthliness, pleasure, and so on, in what is included in the transcendental. This is most obvious in his comparison of Carl Dreyer’s *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)—which he describes as failing to achieve fully the transcendental style—to Bresson’s *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962). Schrader argues that Dreyer is too concerned with cultivating empathy and focusing on humanity, whereas Bresson spurns empathy and points the viewer towards divinity and away from earthly concerns (see Schrader 121, 123). Dreyer’s cultivation of empathy and attention to humanity operates through

his employment of expressionism: hyperactive camera movement, expressive mise-en-scène, the drama between high- and low-angle shots, cutting away from Joan to shots of faces of judges and crowds, emphasizing the corporeality and naturalism of Joan herself. Bresson's work, by contrast, is more stylized, muted, and abstracted, which lends itself to a greater sense of disparity between the perfunctory and transcendental (see Schrader 126, 141). Their final shots are emblematic of this greater discrepancy: Dreyer's camera pans upward towards the sky, which for Schrader is too obvious; Bresson's camera however stays fixed on the charred cross, which creates a more genuine uplift of the soul of the viewer (see Schrader 126).

Schrader imposes a culturally local grid on phenomena while proclaiming their universality. In more recent interviews, Schrader has acknowledged that his emphasis on minimalist choices originates in his Calvinist background. Lyden writes:

Schrader suggests that the goal of Calvin's theology was, like that of filmic transcendental style, to ascetically deprive one sensually in order to make the window to the transcendent so narrow that the light of faith becomes "blinding." Calvinist theology, which has insisted that "the finite cannot contain the infinite," has long been suspicious of arts that claim to "capture" the transcendent—but Schrader uses the Calvinist insight to develop an aesthetic theory of sparseness, according to which the infinite is never "in" the arts, but the arts can point beyond themselves to the infinite by indicating their own lack. (Lyden 2003, 26)

While, like Dorsky, Schrader looks for ways the material form of film can cultivate religious expression, there is a severity to his language of "sparseness," "deprivation," and "blinding" faith, which contrasts with Dorsky's emphasis on tenderness, intermittence, and intimacy. There is also a drama between the finite and infinite in Schrader's work, which contrasts with the gentle attention to the mundane in Dorsky's descriptions. Most importantly, for Schrader, the film is only ever the means to a

religious other, but religious experience is not in “film itself.” Schrader’s theology of film specifically relies on binaries and hierarchies of matter and spirit, humanity and divinity, earth and heaven, which Dorsky actively collapses, in keeping with Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

Andrey Tarkovsky

Internationally acclaimed modern Soviet and Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky (1932-1986) is known for wrestling with film as mode of religious expression. His book, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema (1986)*, in which he writes about the relationship between religion and film, provides a salient counterpoint to *Devotional Cinema* and other commentary by Nathaniel Dorsky. While Dorsky and Tarkovsky both speak a language of universal religion and its relationship to filmmaking, emphasize the work of directors like Carl Theodore Dreyer and Robert Bresson, and have a fascination with Haiku and its relationship to editing, they are distinct in their theorization of artistic religious expression. Where Tarkovsky emphasizes the pursuit of the eternal, the immortal, the absolute, Dorsky attends to the mortal, the impermanent, the intermittent. Where Tarkovsky is driven towards absolute truth and knowledge, Dorsky actively seeks out the illumination of unknowing. While Tarkovsky sees nobility in suffering, passion, and self-sacrifice, Dorsky pursues delicate states of peace, health, and physiological equilibrium.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Again, at what point is an aesthetic difference, or a difference in emotional tone or style an indicator of religious difference? Is it simply a question of semantics— are both Dorsky and Tarkovsky responding to the same qualities in Bresson, but using a different

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky theorizes filmmaking as a religious vocation: “For art could almost be said to be religious in that it is inspired by commitment to a higher goal” (Tarkovsky 1989, 168). He expands upon this quotation more forcefully and precisely throughout the larger text. Drawing on the *Book of Genesis*, Tarkovsky renders filmmakers Godlike in their creativity and in their capacity to immortalize life. Referencing Genesis 1:26-27,⁵⁷ he writes: “Perhaps our capacity to create is evidence that we ourselves were created in the image and likeness of God?” (Tarkovsky 1989, 241) and referring to the artistic enterprise, “And with man’s help the Creator comes to know himself” (Tarkovsky 1989, 175). Tarkovsky emphasizes God’s role as “Creator” in these lines, to highlight the similarity of creative vocation between God and artist. Tarkovsky stresses God’s role specifically as an “image” maker subtly drawing a parallel between God’s crafting of human beings in his image and filmmaking. For Tarkovsky, films function as extensions of scripture: “These poetic revelations, each one valid and eternal, are evidence of man’s capacity to recognize in whose image and likeness he is made, and to voice this recognition” (Tarkovsky 1989, 39). There are sacred films, like Biblical texts which operate as “revelation” or the material means through which a divine truth is

religious language? Or are both Dorsky and Tarkovsky stretching religious and artistic theories to create a universalizing relationship between religion and film? Is Tarkovsky stretching Basho to fit his own theology? Is Dorsky casting Bresson in more Buddhist terms? Do Tarkovsky’s films theorize a more complex and varied relationship to religion than his film theory’s platonic leanings?

⁵⁷ “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth.’ So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (*The Jewish Study Bible* Gen. 1:26-27).

made known. For Tarkovsky, divine truth is equated with the revealing of an eternal truth. In a multi-layered (if not slightly convoluted) metaphor, “man” as a reflection of God, in turn generates his own set of images or reflections—movies— which function as sacred revelations of the divinity of creation.

In other passages, Tarkovsky imagines filmmakers as Christ-like in their suffering, self-sacrifice, and asceticism. He writes:

It seems to be that the individual today stands at a crossroads, faced with the choice of whether to pursue the existence of a blind consumer, subject to the implacable march of new technology and the endless multiplication of material goods, or to seek out a way that will lead to spiritual responsibility, a way that might mean not only his personal salvation but also the saving of society at large; in other words, to turn to God. He has to resolve this dilemma for himself, for only he can discover his own sane spiritual life. Resolving it may take him closer to the state in which he can be responsible for society. This is the step which becomes, in the Christian sense of self-sacrifice. (Tarkovsky 1989, 218)

For Tarkovsky, materiality and spirituality are fundamentally at odds. Tarkovsky invokes a tradition of explicitly Christian self-sacrifice, embodied in the crucifixion, and the giving up of material and bodily needs for spiritual ones. He extends the metaphor of the suffering artist as a self-sacrificing Christ to other aspects of the Christian narrative, referencing Christ’s healing of the leper through touch:⁵⁸ “The artist cannot express the moral idea of his time unless he touches all its running sores, unless he suffers and lives these sores himself. That is how art triumphs over grim, ‘base’ truth, clearly recognizing it for what it is, in the name of its own sublime purpose: such is its destined role.” The

⁵⁸ “While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ And immediately the leprosy left him” (Holy Bible NRSV Luke. 5:12-13. Oxford: Oxford, 1989).

artist, like Christ, suffers with humanity in the flesh and “touches its sores” in pursuit of a “sublime” and “destined” role. The religious elevation of intense suffering in Tarkovsky’s world view is conspicuously absent from Dorsky’s work.

In Tarkovsky’s writing on the intersection of religion and film there are many more implicit or embedded assumptions about the nature of religion. The parallels between Christ and filmmaker celebrate, or at least ennoble, suffering, self-sacrifice, drama, and passionate faith, while relying on hierarchies of body and spirit. When read in the context of *Sculpting in Time*, lines like, “An artist is never free. No group of people lacks freedom more. An artist is bound by his gift, his vocation,” (Tarkovsky 1989, 168) not only does Tarkovsky emphasize a theology which glorifies suffering and by extension, the artist, but he points to the supremacy of internal suffering to external suffering or the hierarchy of the soul to the body. When he describes the filmmaker like Christ running their fingers over running sores, “running sores” functions almost as a metonymy for the body itself.

Tarkovsky locates religious meaning in passion, suffering, profound internal struggle, and self-sacrifice elsewhere. He describes film, like the religious experience, as “A sublime and purging trauma. Within that aura which unites masterpieces and audience, the best sides of our souls are made known, and we long for them to be freed” (Tarkovsky 1989, 43). There is an assumed violence and traumatic element to the religious experience of film. The text intersperses quotes from Corinthians amidst chapters titled “Art—a yearning for an ideal” and “Cinema’s destined role.” References to scripture serve to add gravitas to the act of filmmaking, and the emphasis on

“yearning” and “destiny” once again privilege a certain melodrama, intense emotion, and grand narrative at the intersection of filmmaking and religious practice.

For Tarkovsky, religion, and by extension the religiosity of art, concerns the pursuit of a Platonic ultimate ideal. He writes: “I speak of the aspiration towards the beautiful, of the ideal as the ultimate aim of art, which grows from a yearning for that ideal” (Tarkovsky 1989, 38). In the line “And with man’s help the Creator comes to know himself,” (Tarkovsky 1989, 165) Tarkovsky suggests that people, art, and filmmaking are an extension of God’s own project of self-knowledge, or at least that God and the filmmaker are so intertwined that their respective projects of self-knowledge overlap and feed one another. Filmmaking is not only an extension and enactment of God’s creation, it is a journey towards God or an absolute: “And so art, like science, is a means of assimilating the world, an instrument for knowing it in the course of man’s journey towards what is called ‘absolute truth’” (Tarkovsky 1989, 165). God and absolute truth are interchangeable for Tarkovsky, and filmmaking becomes a means of accessing God *as* absolute truth. Tarkovsky’s pursuit of divine “self-knowledge” through filmmaking means the pursuit of “God,” “absolute truth,” the “eternal,” the “infinite,” “immortal.” When Tarkovsky writes, “For art could almost be said to be religious in that it is inspired by commitment to a higher goal,” he points to the need for a “high art” as well as a “high religion”—or religion and art premised on a hierarchy and divide of materiality and spirit—the base, the grim vs. the sublime, the sacred, and the profane.

In writing about the necessary faith of the viewer in the filmmaker, there is similarly a hierarchical religious model transposed to the film watching practice that

aggrandizes the filmmaker and asks for the devotion of the viewer, while the filmmaker in turn supplicates to God. Tarkovsky argues that the audience must have faith in the filmmaker as they would in God or a priest: “Only when a person is willing and able to trust the artist, to believe him, can he be sensitive and susceptible to art. In just the same way, for a true faith in God, or even in order to feel a need for that faith, a person has to have a certain cast of soul, a particular potentiality” (Tarkovsky 1989, 42). As the filmmaker is Godlike or Christ-like, so must the viewer cultivate their film watching practice as a religious practice, and watching films becomes an act of faith and subservience to the director, who in turn prostrates themselves before God and the absolute.

Tarkovsky also wishes to transcend religious particularity and argue for a more universal spirituality. To this end he turns to Thomas Mann: “Let us put it like this: A spiritual – that is, significant—phenomenon is ‘significant’ precisely because it exceeds its own limits, serves as expression and symbol of something spiritually wider and more universal” (Mann quoted. in Tarkovsky, 10). It is in this vein of universal spiritualized art that Tarkovsky begins an exposition of Japanese poetry in relationship to film editing: “Haiku cultivates its images in such a way that they mean nothing beyond themselves, and at the same time express so much that it is not possible to catch their final meaning. The more closely the image corresponds to its function, the more impossible it is to contract it into a clear intellectual formula. The reader of haiku has to be absorbed into it as into nature, to plunge in, lose himself in its depth, as in the cosmos where there is no

bottom and no top” (Tarkovsky 1989, 106). He turns to the famous Haiku by 17th century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho:

The old pond
A frog leaps in,
And a splash.

Tarkovsky comments, “How simply and accurately life is observed. What discipline of mind and nobility of imagination. The lines are beautiful because the moment, plucked out and fixed, is one, and falls into infinity”⁵⁹ and “so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity” (Tarkovsky 1989, 107). Tarkovsky incorporates Basho into earlier discussions of religion and art by pointing to the poem’s relationship to “the infinite.” While Tarkovsky acknowledges that Haiku operates on two levels, he also emphasizes the relationship of the poem to the absolute. He writes:

The striving for perfection leads an artist to make spiritual discoveries, to exert the utmost moral effort. Aspiration towards the absolute is the moving force in the development of mankind. For me the idea of realism in art is linked with that force. Art is realistic when it strives to express an ethical ideal. Realism in striving for that truth, and truth is always beautiful. Here the aesthetic coincides with the ethical. (Tarkovsky 1989, 213)

Here things become tricky because it seems that this discussion of “striving for perfection,” the “aspiration for the absolute,” “moving force” and heavy handed, and unilateral “truth” doesn’t feel appropriate in relationship to the playful simplicity and

⁵⁹ Tarkovsky pp. 107.

mobility of Basho's haiku as it vacillates between the relative and the absolute, unhinging any true absolutes.⁶⁰ While Dorsky shares in Tarkovsky's reference to haiku as an editing template for a film and a mode by which film engages in religious practice, the tone and aesthetics of Dorsky's filmmaking and writing are more in keeping with the lightness embodied in the style of the haiku itself, reading haiku more on its own terms.

Stan Brakhage

The origins of Dorsky's work can be readily situated among a collection of filmmakers from the 1950's and 60's like Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Ian Hugo, Willard Maas, Gregory Markopoulos, Sidney Peterson and Stan Brakhage who understand their filmmaking mission with analogies to romantic poetry (James 1989, 2). These allusions to romanticism and poetry both were: first a means of aligning with a medium especially resistant to commercial or mercantile processes of capitalism; while at the same time referencing a tradition of romanticism which made poetry a spiritual locus in its investigation of individual's imagination as the mediator between consciousness and nature (James 1989, 31). Brakhage's manifesto *Metaphors on Vision*, is especially articulate in this regard. He describes the liberation of the eye from conceptual structures as religious practice—learning to see like an insect or cat;

⁶⁰ Is the spirituality of Basho and Tarkovsky the same, just perhaps expressed in a different tone? Perhaps the similarity between the two is the discipline and depth of development to each craft? At what point does a difference in style mark a real difference in religion or spirituality? Thinking about the discrepancies between Tarkovsky and Basho is helpful for exploring the points of difference between Tarkovsky and Dorsky in their theorizing of the relationship between religion and film.

transcending the physical limits of the human eye and inheriting worlds of eyes. Avant-Garde films have the potential to play an integral role in this visual awakening and thus serve a religious function. Certain avant-garde/experimental filmmakers are the priests and prophets who can not only revolutionize film, but revolutionize religion. He writes: “Unknowingly, as innocent they await the priests of this new religion, those who can stir the cinematic entrails divinely. They await the prophets who can cast (with the precision of Confucian sticks) the characters of this new order across filmic mud” (Brakhage 1963, 200). At one point in his essay Brakhage cries out, “So the money vendors have been at it again!”⁶¹ evoking a connection between a tradition of radical and rebellious Christianity and that of avant-garde film. He also suggests that film theory can be its own form of Gospel.

Brakhage argues that in tampering with the material technology of film you revolutionize film and vision simultaneously: “By deliberately spitting on the lens or wrecking its focal intention, one can achieve the early stages of impressionism. One can make this prima donna heavy in performance of image movement by speeding up the motor, or one can break up movement, in a way that approaches a more direct inspiration of contemporary human eye perceptibility of movement, by slowing the motion while recording the image” (Brakhage 1963, 201). He suggests that in taking film off its pedestal by damaging it physically, one can make it all the more spiritually profound. Iconoclasm or cinematic apophysis becomes a means of enhancing its religious engagement. Here—like Meister Eckhart’s “I pray to God to be free of God” or

⁶¹ Brakhage pp. 200.

the Zen Koan “If you see the Buddha on the street kill him”—he encourages damaging lenses and motor speeds, breaking taboos in the religion of film.

Experimental filmmakers work in a marginal tradition of mysticism that deconstructs its medium to heighten its spiritual engagement. Additionally, in playing and tampering with the materiality of the film apparatus, the filmmaker calls into question the myth of ‘absolute realism’ of the motion picture and the absolute objective realism of the eye. The soul for Brakhage lives somewhere in the balance between subject and object; to make the audience aware of film’s materiality is a place to encounter this subject-object interplay and bring people into religious vision. He describes using the “filters of the world” like rain and fog to develop film, increasingly blurring the boundaries between the world of the film and the real world, and pointing to the relativity of reality in both. In undermining the myth of absolute realism in the film apparatus, the film heightens its religious engagement by allowing its viewers to transcend the physical limits of the eye and its own pretense of objectivity. He writes: “Thus ‘reality’ extends its picketing fence and each is encouraged to sharpen his wits. The artist is one who leaps that fence at night” (Brakhage 1963, 202). The artist transcends the limits of the real by identifying the tenuousness or magic of reality. Playing with the subject/object interplay of vision/reality is a religious function, making the filmmaker the priest or prophet for Brakhage.

Brakhage articulates the religious dimension of vision and perception and the integral role of film in that process. Moreover, he shows how religious seeing has to do with a recognition of a subject/object interplay. In film’s deconstruction of its own

mythical relationship to reality, it allows us to religiously understand the relativity of our realities themselves. Brakhage was personally and artistically highly influential for Dorsky, and it is intriguing to see the ways Dorsky both furthers and diverges from Brakhage philosophically and artistically. While the language and films of Brakhage in many ways carry the weight and heavy handedness of Biblical prophecy traditions, Dorsky brings the liberation of the eye into the gentleness of tone and conversation—emphasizing perhaps more the qualities of *Bodhichitta* or a tender, awakened heart,⁶² or *mono-no-aware*⁶³ than one of righteous anger or rebellion.

Reimagining Religious Devotion: Dorsky, Scorsese, and Dwyer

In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky explores the relationship between religion and cinema, not where religion is the subject or content of a film, but where “film *itself*” becomes “the spirit or experience of religion.” *Devotional Cinema* is not only about cinema as a means of religious devotion, but a devotion to “film itself.” In Dorsky’s religious worldview, the ultimate is itself always meditated, and mediation is in itself ultimate. John Lyden, in writing about religion and film, references Paul Tillich’s description of religious devotion:

A truer faith is one that remains focused on the ultimate itself rather than any finite reality. The difficulty with achieving this goal, Tillich explains, is that we never apprehend the ultimate in itself but only through symbols. The trick of avoiding idolatry is then to look beyond the symbol and to see it as a medium for

⁶² See Dorsky 2014.

⁶³ See “the pathos of things, deriving from their transience” (Parkes 2017).

the ultimate rather than the ultimate *itself*. If we fail in this and view the symbol as itself being the ultimate, we have given our *ultimate devotion* to that which is not really ultimate. We can never know for certain whether we have given our *devotion* to the true ultimate or to the penultimate form of it. (Lyden 2003, 38)

For Tillich, film can participate in religious devotion, but the film would be the symbolic medium which points to an ultimate beyond itself and hence devotion is not to film, but to the ultimate it symbolizes. Dorsky's theory collapses the distinction between the "penultimate and the ultimate" and rather explicitly expresses devotion to "film itself."

Martin Scorsese, a classmate of Dorsky's in NYU's film program, in thinking about Roberto Rossellini's *Europa '51* (1952) for *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, describes a mode of religious devotion manifested in film, which provides a productive point of comparison to the devotion described by Dorsky:

When Irene encounters a raving woman in the asylum, she's able to calm her by simply looking into her eyes. At this point, Irene has truly become, or made herself, God's instrument. In the last moments of the film, she waves goodbye to her family, and to all the people she's helped. You feel the intensity of her *devotion*⁶⁴—the purity of it, and the madness of it. And God never comes out of the shadows to lend a hand and clarify the situation for us. Which means that God is hidden in this film in the same way that God is hidden in life—forever immanent, provoking anxiety and inspiring hope. (Scorsese 2003, 77)

⁶⁴ Emphasis added.

Scorsese's mode of devotion follows a human narrative that mediates a relationship between God and the world, where Irene has "become God's instrument." The binary of God and world and the role of God's authority in the religious devotion, is conspicuously absent from Dorsky's text. For Dorsky, devotion is something a film embodies, rather than depicts. Both Scorsese and Dorsky identify religious devotion as a form of vision, and vision as healing: "she's able to calm her simply by looking into her eyes." Scorsese however, is concerned with the way devoted vision operates in the content of the film and the gaze of a particular character—the actions of Irene as played by Ingrid Bergman. For Dorsky, devotional vision is about form, the way a camera engages with its subjects—its use of shots, cuts, lenses, light, distance, projection, film stock. Most importantly Scorsese's ecstatic, masculinist claims strongly depart from Dorsky's gentility and attention to the everyday.

The devotion Scorsese assumes is more fraught than that described by Dorsky—it includes "intensity," "madness," and "anxiety." While Dorsky repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of equilibrium and balance of religious devotion, Scorsese's mode of devotion is one that inherently presses the extremes and limits of socially acceptable behavior and emotional expression. The style of devotional gaze is also distinct. Ingrid Bergman looks fervently and intensely at the sick woman before caressing her head and telling her that she is not alone. In contrast, Dorsky's gaze on his subjects as manifested through his films is attentive, but lighter on his subjects and absent of interpersonal drama.

Devotional cinema depends on a set of equilibriums: subjectivity and objectivity; relative and absolute time; knowns and unknowns; shots and cuts; interior and exterior vision. The first of these equilibriums deals with subjective and objective perception. Dorsky speaks of balancing internalized and externalized ways of seeing: “It is a balance that is neither our vision nor the belief in exterior objectivity... It is within this balance that the potential for profound cinema takes place” (Dorsky 2014, 28-29). Film must try to balance the perception of the filmmaker with careful attention to the object being filmed. There is also a self-reflexive aspect to this vision: “If the filmmaker is not cognizant of the fact that a shot must express both the seer and what is seen, then the film’s view isn’t totally conscious” (Dorsky 2014, 49). Filmmakers, according to Dorsky, need to be “conscious” or self-aware so as to discern their own point of view from the object of vision. Subjective and objective perception are intimately connected to light. Dorsky describes subjective vision as embodied by middle age cathedrals whose dark vast caverns with stained glass windows cultivate; “a sense that the source of illumination wasn’t necessarily outside ourselves but that we were perhaps the source of that light,” heightening our sense of “the mysterious darkness of our own being” (Dorsky 2014, 27). The Renaissance view that the world was objectively outside ourselves was demonstrated by increasingly clear church windows and fuller illumination, such that “the internal vastness vanished from our psyches” (Dorsky 2014, 27). Thus a film is balanced subjectively and objectively by view point, partially through its harnessing of light.

Balance in relationship to intermittence has to do with the permission of the flicker. This is partially Dorsky's resistance to digital imagery which doesn't allow for the black of the film strip, found between images, to permeate the film. On a more macro level, this requires leaving gaps in montage and in narration in the case of narrative film. He writes, "if a film fills in too much, it violates our experience" (Dorsky 2014, 33). In other words, films need to leave much that is unknown within the film, as to acknowledge the gaps in human experience and perception. Balance in *Devotional Cinema* in relationship to time has to do with the balancing of relative and absolute time—"for film to have a devotional quality both absolute and relative time must be active and present—not only present but functioning simultaneously"(Dorsky 2014, 35-36). Films that are excessively relative or horizontal, are films whose plots pull us along seductively but neglect the beauty of immediate scenes, shots, moments. Films that are excessively vertical tend to be pretentious or "so absorbed in [their] own profundity that it numbs the mind of the viewer" (Dorsky 2014, 37).

Rachel Dwyer's book *Filming the Gods* describes the "Devotional Film" and the "Mythological Film" as the two foundational genres of Hindi film (Dwyer 2006, 63). The mythological film builds on stories of Gods and heroes from Hindu mythology found in Sanskrit *Puranas* as well as the epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (Dwyer 2006, 15); the devotional film in contrast builds on the Indian pre-modern *bhakti* tradition of devotional love and depicts the stories of spiritual devotees (*bhaktas* and *sants*) (Dwyer 2006, 63). Between 600 and 1600 CE poet-saints practiced a mode of religious devotion based on a counter-cultural personal relationship with an

anthropomorphized deity.⁶⁵ Unlike Scorsese, Dwyer describes the religious devotion of film through aesthetics and form in addition to narrative content of religious devotion. She argues that the ritual of *darśan*,⁶⁶ common to bhakti practice, in which the devotee and the deity engage in an exchange of looks and in doing so enter into a state of divine time and space (Dwyer 2006, 66), has been extended and adapted for film in Bollywood through a series of shot-reverse-shots: “they show new visual relays of looks between the audience, the devotee and the divine, allowing the audience to relate very differently from the audience of the mythological film, which demands more awe on the part of the spectator, who has to watch from something of a distance” (Dwyer 15). Not only does the film adapt the practice of *darśan* to the screen, but develops a third player in the relationship—while traditional practices occur between the devotee and the image, the devotional film has a viewer, a devotee, and a deity: “The relationship of the viewer to the devotee is complicated as the reverence and devotion for the figure are tied into film-viewing practices and emotional relationships to characters within films” (Dwyer 92).

In addition to the intimacy of this devotional practice, the devotional Hindi film similarly centralizes the passionate and loving feelings of *bhakti* (Dwyer 66). The film, according to Dwyer, is not simply describing or illustrating the character’s religious experience, but makes the film a religious experience in itself (Dwyer 81). Ostensibly, the devotional film develops a new religious practice based on existing film and religious rituals. Like Scorsese’s more devotional film, the *Bhakti* devotion Dwyer describes is

⁶⁵ John Hawley has challenged the historical veracity of this narrative of Bhakti in India. See Hawley 2015 and 2012.

⁶⁶ See Eck 1998.

one that builds on a hierarchical relationship with the divine but is traditionally socially transgressive, or builds on a tradition of social radicalism: “*Bhakti* historically exists in a dynamic hybrid between high and low. Its opposition to orthodoxy—views of caste, gender and ideas of god—often marks it as radical but the glorification of its revolutionary nature and its power as a social movement have often been overlaid and, I argue, this is true of much of what we see in the devotional film” (Dwyer 69). The lack of people in Dorsky’s own films and the lack of references to a transcendent God or appeal to social-justice movements in Dorsky’s writing and films makes this *Bhakti* mode of devotion conspicuously absent within Dorsky’s work. Reading Dorsky, Scorsese, and Dwyer together illustrates the diversity of devotional film, as well as the variations in modes of religious devotion pertaining to vision. Finally, these comparisons point to the ways that the particularities of individual religions nuance what we mean when we talk about film as religious devotion, and serve to expand visions of religion.

V Connecting Religion and Film: Immortality or Impermanence

i. Film as mode of immortality

In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Andre Bazin describes a relationship between religion and film that hinges on a shared pursuit of immortality: “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation... By providing a defense against the passage of time, it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time” (Bazin 1967, 9). He argues that cinema satisfies a primal psychological need for

victory over time and death, by artificially preserving the body and embalming time (so to speak) or recording things in their “duration.” Bazin refers to this psychological need as a “mummy complex” that begins with the religion of the Egyptians. Relating this habit to a religious impulse or practice, he writes, “The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as the continued existence of the corporeal body” (Bazin 1967, 9). Bazin suggests that the religiosity of art in ancient Egypt was integrally related to the immortalization of the human body through the art of mummification. The impulse to immortalize the body exceeds the time and place of ancient Egypt, extending to the portraiture of Louis XIV: “‘How vain a thing is painting’ if underneath our fond admiration for its works we do not discern man’s primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of a form that endures” (Bazin 1967, 167). He then argues that this vain desire for immortality through representation peeks with photography and film.⁶⁷

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. (Bazin 1967, 173)

⁶⁷ See “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation” (Bazin 1967, 166). Unlike the “objective” camera, the devotional film is one which is able to reflect and embody its own subjectivity, relativity, and impermanence.

Photography and cinema have an unprecedented objectivity in representation where people accept the image *as* the model, and the artistry to some degree relies on the absence of the artist's subjectivity. Thus, Bazin argues that photography and film have freed up the plastic arts to pursue their aesthetic ambitions, since film can satisfy the need for preservation. The impulse behind photographs (and by extension motion pictures) is a more developed form of embalming the dead as well as a means of playing God—recreating the world in its own image. The medium has the capacity to play God in its recreation of the world in its image and render its subjects Godlike by embalming them in their duration.

The title of Philip Rosen's book *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* references Bazin's figurative definition of cinema, while also illustrating what Rosen sees as central anxiety of historicity—the relationship between historiography (works of history) and the past or history they are meant to represent. He writes: "It rests on a notion of temporality as a threateningly dynamic force, a threat registered especially in the high valuation placed on stabilizing relations between present and past" (Rosen 2001, xi). Rosen in some ways contradicts Bazin by pointing to the modern particularities of this anxiety regarding history in face of temporality and its relationship to film, but nonetheless validates the significance of anxiety in face of change as being foundationally intertwined with the development of cinema.

The rise of the star system⁶⁸ is one of the more discernable ways in which we can see Bazin's premise-- the immortalizing properties of film as mode of the medium's

⁶⁸ On "The Rise of the Star System" see Cook 2004, 36.

religious engagement in keeping with other religious practices--at work among audiences and other sources of film theory. Maya Deren writes on the religious immortalizing possibilities of film: "I am sure that I am not alone in my affection for those films which raised personalities to almost supernatural stature and created, briefly, a mythology of gods of the first magnitude" (Deren 1946, 106). The "affection" Maya Deren describes for the supernatural qualities of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo on screen reveals the ways the Godlike feeling of the actors can be one of the core pleasures of going to the movies, as well as one of the medium's more obvious points of intersection with religion. Similarly, when first seeing a Lumiere screening, a journalist is reported to have said:

When these apparatuses are made available to the public, everybody will be able to photograph those who are dear to them, no longer as static forms but with their very movements, their actions, their familiar gestures, capturing the speech on their very lips. Then death will no longer be absolute. (Cook 2004, 76)

Crystal Downing, exclaims in response to Cook's citation, "Salvation from the Cinematographe!" assuming a relationship between religion and film premised on the absolute and immortality (Downing 2016, 98). This moment in Downing's work reflects the way assumptions about religion, with the study of film, permeate thinking within religious studies scholarship when thinking about film.

Rachel Dwyer's work in Hindi film similarly explores the relationship of film to the divinizing of its subjects, but within the very particular context of Hindi cinema and Hindu devotional practices. She builds on John Lyden's argument that cinema can become almost its own form of religion, "as like religion, it presents and examines

images, relationships, ideas, beliefs, desires, fears, and brings them to its own specific forms such as the quasi-divine figures of the stars,” (Dwyer 2006, 5) and extends this analysis to the context of Hindi film. She relies on the theories of Mircea Eliade to link the pleasure of the enactment of myth and stories of Gods on film to the pleasure of the suspension of time and the connection to the eternal. She writes of the mythological film: “They move the human into the realm of the gods’ contemporaries, living in an eternal present (or an eternal past) rather than in historical time, a time. The gods join us on earth, bringing their divine presence into our world, making that world new and allowing us to refuse the modern. We can enjoy a ‘religious nostalgia’ and find meaning in a world that can be re-sanctified by re-enacting or re-viewing—the deeds of the gods keeping us in their divine time and sacred realm” (Dwyer 2006, 61). Dwyer seems to argue that if myths are already modes of suspending time and touching the eternal, the medium of film only amplifies this.

Dwyer describes the ways the actors who portray Hindu deities within popular films are then treated as semi-divine figures by their audiences.⁶⁹ She locates the divinizing of actors as at the intersection of (a) a traditional practice of *darśan* in which

⁶⁹ See “some of the earlier stars were particularly associated with their mythological roles, so Shobhana Samarth was best remembered for her roles of Sita, and Shahu Modak for his Krishna... Roy became regarded as a semi-divine figure, and she reports that when she goes out in public, people sing bhajans and touch her feet. Roy was particularly admired for her roles with Trilok Kapur as the divine couple. Many viewers, familiar with her divine role, may well have felt this added to the view of him as a demi-god” (Dwyer 2006, 41).

deities are understood as present within their images and devotees view the image as divine;⁷⁰ and (b) the power of the film screen itself. She writes:

Indeed, one of the great pleasures of mythologicals is seeing one's imagined myths and gods on screen. One may have seen them on chromolithographs but there they are two-dimensional and static, or one may have seen them enacted in popular performances but perhaps amateurishly or from a distance and only from one angle. However, film brings the characters to life, projecting them onto the screen and allowing us close-ups and different angles. Film also allows idealization in that the makers can choose beautiful people and shoot them to look more beautiful; locations can be elaborate or exquisite; and the songs by major composers are sung by the country's best singers. (Dwyer 2006, 58)

Dwyer differs from Bazin in that, while she acknowledges that the film image is uniquely powerful in rendering people more immortal than they are, the image does more than merely preserve the person in their exact likeness, it in fact offers an enhanced vision of the actor.⁷¹ The *Ontology of the Photographic Image*, after exploring the capacity to objectively recreate light, ends on the ironic one liner: "On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language" (Bazin 1967, 16). Bazin acknowledges that while films are a reflection of their models, they are also interpreters of those models— films can not only

⁷⁰ "It may be said that in Hindu thought, the gods are often in this world, and regularly manifest themselves on earth, often as avatars or incarnations or as themselves. Their images, usually in two or three dimensions, are regarded as efficacious. It is not surprising then that in films divine intervention happens through the image itself rather than in the manifestation of the deity in human or part-human form" (Dwyer 2006, 145).

⁷¹ It could be said that mummification and portraiture does something similar, both preserving and enhancing the human body, and enhancing the body in its preservation.

preserve the images of people after death, but interpret those images as immortal simply through their visual language.

ii. Film as mode of impermanence

As mentioned previously, *Hidden God: Faith and Film*, in which *Devotional Cinema* was originally published, reads: “The book and exhibition are intended not as an encyclopedic anthology but, more humbly, as starting points in the study of an eternal theme” (Bandy and Monda 2003, Cover). Here, “eternal theme” suggests that the eternal itself, is of universal and eternal concern and more significantly a point of intersection for religion and film. This said, Dorsky’s *Devotional Cinema* suggests that the devotional film, like Bazin’s “truly religious film,” is one which moves in the opposite direction of film as embalmed body or the immortalized film star— instead embodying and contemplating the impermanence of both body and film. “Devotional films” reveal the way both exist at the whim of time instead of in victory over it. Attitudes towards immortality, the afterlife, and the soul vary between and within religions,⁷² including Buddhism (Neumaier-Dargyay 1997, 87). However, I argue that Dorsky’s approach to film builds on a particular, and nonetheless prominent trajectory of Buddhist thought (particularly central to the American Buddhist canon) which emphasizes the impermanence and insubstantiality of the world and the lack of an eternal spirit, soul, or deity—one which meditates on the transience and conditioning of one’s self to move

⁷² While the pursuit of immortality operates on a variety of registers within various religious traditions, one of the more common and literal ways may be vivid imagining of an afterlife. Alan Segal argues that, “Although not all religions put afterlife in the center of their beliefs, as does Christianity (at least in Tertullian’s estimation), the afterlife is one of the fundamental building blocks of religion” (Segal 2010, 17).

deeper into religious experience. Theorizing film as a mode of impermanence upsets traditional assumptions about the relationship between religion and film, and illustrates the diversity of religious engagement. Dorsky's work functions in direct contrast to mummification or star power, asking how films might operate religiously through amplifying our insight into the transience of being. This insight occurs on two registers: first inviting reflection on how films enhance our vision, understanding, and acceptance of the profoundly subtle mobility and contingency of physical matter and conceptual life; and in other moments, suggesting how films might facilitate peace with loss or become gentle acts of mourning for both director and viewer. Insight into impermanence and loss happens in Dorsky's writing, films, and in the curation and exhibition of his work.

iii. **Impermanence and 2015 NYFF Dorsky/Hiler Retrospective**

Because Dorsky only works on 16mm and refuses to transfer to digital formatting, his films are generally inaccessible outside of archives and festival screenings. The retrospective was thus a rare opportunity not simply to view the full body of Dorsky and Hiler's work, but to honor the medium of film, whose texture and physicality have informed a century of filmmaking and watching experiences, but is now being phased out by digital shots and prints.⁷³ It was an ongoing joke of the organizers and participants that the retrospective was the only site of actual films in the entire "film festival." The rest of the festival was dominated by digital work—if not the original films, then at least

⁷³ In his review of the retrospective, Jeremy Polacek refers to Dorsky as an "enchanted" filmmaker "at the terminable edge of film, making and showing 16mm movies beyond the last days of Kodachrome and other phased-out film stock—into a time when even film festivals themselves... can screen few *true* films" (Polacek 2015).

the prints. Showing Dorsky and Hiler's work encouraged the film community to witness the transience of mediums in the field and explore some of the ambivalence surrounding these shifts. While there was a tendency towards more luddite sentiments, there was also an openness to the visual potential of digital and the deepening awareness of this change by creating the time and space for contemplating physiological effects of different mediums.

Dorsky chooses to shoot his films on 16mm film and project them at 18 frames per second in order to enhance the intermittence of the image. Digital media tends to create a more matted finish and reduces the shadow spaces between images, which is why Dorsky refuses to transfer his films to a digital format. Because it is so difficult to view his work, watching his films requires a different kind of attention to the passing and uniqueness of the immediate moment of the screening. This provides a real challenge for writing about his work since there are few opportunities to re-watch or rewind and replay sections. This format heightens a sense of the fleetingness and preciousness of that particular moment in time. This project required often travelling to various cities to frantically scribble notes in the back corner of a dark theater or in the projection booth of Canyon Cinema.

Dorsky insists on films being projected at 18 frames per second, which he refers to as "sacred speed," also known as "silent speed," because silent films were originally projected between 16 and 20fps. With sound films, 24fps became the standard projection speed. Dorsky grew up attending silent screenings at the MoMA accompanied by live piano. For Dorsky, silent speed preserves a greater sense of "tenderness," "gentility,"

and “vulnerability” in the image—preserving “imperfections” like “irises in the periphery” and again enhancing the sense of shadow between pictures (see Dorsky October, 2015). Since Dorsky’s films are silent, a slower projector speed is also a little less jarring to listen to than 24fps and enhances the attention of the viewer to the image. As Dorsky says, “a 16mm projector going at sound speed 24fps is really (makes an engine noise) and when it’s at 18, it’s a little more like a cat purring, it’s easier on the nerves.” Again, for Dorsky the sacred is integrated with that which highlights a deeper sense of vulnerability, intermittence, and imperfection than the immortal. It is specifically in and through the material particularity of his film choices which are in themselves sacred, instead of pointing to a sacred other.

16mm film has evolved over the last century, which the progression of Dorsky’s life’s work illustrates. While all of Dorsky’s work is shot on film, he has had to adapt to a variety of stocks as they came in and out of availability over the decades—Kodachrome I, Kodachrome II, Kodachrome 25, Eastman Negative, Fuji, Fuji 200, etc. Dorsky has described each film stock as “almost like a different person” and encourages viewers to attune their own vision to the presence of these shifts within his films. His film *Pneuma* (1977-83, 28min) is a compilation of unprocessed film stocks, which when run through the projector become a story of color, tone, texture, speed, light, and shadow. *Pneuma* is intentionally composed from an extensive collection of outdated raw stock, showcasing the organic deterioration of the film stock, such that the deterioration of the stock is the subject of the film itself. A film like *Pneuma* goes so far as to challenge death as some kind of static, ending pointing to the vigorous activity of deterioration itself. As stated

earlier, the film is unprocessed, ancient, decomposing stocks. It is explicitly a celebration of the demise of reversal filmmaking— demise of something can become a celebration. The film becomes a spin of colors—red, blue, yellow, orange, pink, green, white, yellow in shifting combinations and shades—and shapes—circles, streaks, flickers, dots, specks, smears, jewels, blobs, doodles with smoother and bumpier pixilation. A meaningful paradox this particular film demonstrates is that some of the more deteriorated film stocks in the film are some of the more kinetic and lively. For example, the Anscochrome 400 which was about 20 years out of date when Dorsky made the film creates a long fuchsia and black sequence in the end which flip flops more frenetically than its preceding newer film stocks. Deterioration and death becomes its own source of vitality. Death itself is an active and impermanent process.

Dorsky describes Kodachrome I as having especially high contrast with a specific mode of turquoise blue common to color footage from the WWII era. The films he made as a child were shot on this stock. Kodachrome II was introduced in the 1950s and in Dorsky's opinion is "the greatest Kodachrome" and "the most magical stock" which has an "enamel" quality. Kodachrome II can be found in *Hours for Jerome Parts I and II* and can be seen most clearly in the golden yellow of the trees in that footage. Kodachrome II was discontinued for toxicity reasons and replaced with Kodachrome 25, which according to Dorsky, "was like taking the claws out of a cat" and lacking in "bite," but on which Dorsky shot most of his films until the stock was discontinued in 2002.

Beginning in 2009, Dorsky was forced to switch to color negative, which he found a little pallid and flat due to its original purpose for Telacity. He turned to a Fuji

stock that was a bit more “pictorial” and “painterly,” and in this way more like his beloved Kodachrome. The problem with the Fuji stock was its limited color range, so Dorsky began mixing Fuji with Eastman Negative. Fuji was eventually cancelled as well and Dorsky switched to Eastman Negative, which came out with a more “pictorial” stock of its own. In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky writes, “film’s physical properties seemed so attuned to our metabolism that I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor or model for our being” (Dorsky 2014, 18) and “their expression comes from the material of cinema itself, the cinematic qualities that are deeply akin to our own metabolism... Like our hands, the trees, the drama of the seasons, and the warming and expiring heavens, the basic elements of film must partake in the beauty of the deepest practicality” (Dorsky 2014, 55). For Dorsky, attending carefully to the “deepest practicalities” or “materiality” of film, including its organic disintegration and changes in commercial demand, becomes a portal into understanding the waxing and waning of ourselves.

Many of Dorsky’s films often render the passing of time the central subject of the films themselves: documenting the transience of particular years, seasons, months, or hours in the day. The content is then integrated with the intermittence of the editing, film stock and flickering of the light of the projection to highlight the ephemeral.

Summer (2013, 22.5 min.) describes the dry and rainless quality of San Francisco summers; long days, short nights. *Winter* (2007, 21.5 min.) is said to illustrate the “fleeting, rain-soaked, verdant, a brief period of shadows and renewal” of San Francisco winters (Dorsky June 7, 2008). The marking of light becomes an immediate way to

attend to the change of time both seasonally and daily, which heightens the viewer's understanding of the material transience of the medium and by extension ourselves.

Dorsky's film *Autumn* (2016, 26 min.) explores the tones and sensations of aging while documenting the last months of the drought in Northern California in 2015. He writes: "Autumn, photographed during the last months of the drought year, 2015, is a stately, but intimate, seasonal tome, a celebration of the poignancy and mystery of our later years" (Dorsky May 29, 2016). Dorsky merges the intermittence of the 16mm film stocks and the 18fps projection, with images of an arid autumn in which plants were dying out and finally his own aging gaze. The endings and impermanence Dorsky attends to are layered: personal (his own aging), seasonal (autumn), and environmental (the California drought) and as always, the medium of film itself. By attending to the passing of the natural world and film as a medium, there can be a heightened awareness of our own growing old. *Spring* (2013, 23 min.) was shot in the months following the winter solstice and captures the particular quality of light of the season. Dorsky writes: "I wanted to see if I could make a film that was in itself a garden, a film that like the world of plants, would yearn and stretch in the oncoming light" (Dorsky July 21 2013). Many of Dorsky's shots attend to vegetation, reaching for light moving through shady, or mildly obstructed spaces to heighten to feeling of desire for the light. Dorsky integrates the plants' need for light for photosynthesis with the need for light with that of film. Dorsky's films *April* (2012, 26 min.), *February* (2014, 16.5 min.), and *December* (2014, 14.5 min.) are made of shots specifically taken in and limited to that month in a particular year. *December* specifically addresses the light of the winter solstice; *February* looks at

what is early spring in San Francisco. *April*, like *Spring*, photographs plants stretching towards the light. *April*, however, specifically experiments with a new Eastman Kodak color negative, playing with its own unique relationship to light. By attending to seasons and particular months, these films convey the seasonal nature of our lives and the medium of film.

Dorsky has two films that operate as bookends of the day: *The Visitation* (2002, 18 min.) and *Compline* (2009, 18.5 min.). Both titles are associated with the Catholic canonical hours. The “Visitation” refers to the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary when they are both pregnant with John the Baptist and Jesus (respectively) and is associated with the morning hours or morning prayers of the canonical hours. Similarly, the “Compline” refers to the final prayers at the end of the day in the Catholic liturgy and in certain monasteries, the beginning of “the Great Silence.” *The Visitation* attends to the first beams of light at dawn and receives the light more than it searches out the light, capturing the sense of the light arriving. It is of note that the *Visitation* was shot just after 9/11 when Dorsky was stranded in Toronto because his flight back to the US was cancelled for security reasons. He luckily had Kodachrome stock with him and he spent the week shooting early morning hours in sunny weather. As the imagery of birth, or the beginning of the cycle of a life, is integrated with the beginning cycle of the day, so does Dorsky bring a sense of macro beginnings into conversation with micro ones.

The Compline was the last film Dorsky was able to shoot on Kodachrome so the film functions as a “fond farewell to this noble emulsion” (Dorsky July 7, 2009). Dorsky integrates the ending of the film stock with a final prayer pointing to the sacred

impermanence of the medium itself. The intersection of religion and film occurs through a shared attention to the passage of time. Part II begins with the moon rising behind the clouds with rapid cutting such that the change of time in the day is integrated with the play of time of the medium. The cycle of the sun and the moon becomes the frame for the rotation of the seasons themselves. This film then ends with a new image of sunlight moving through the branches and then a slow fade out, such that the fading and increase of light of the film meets the fading and growing of daylight. Like weekly Shabbat rituals in which the making of the world is integrated into the weekly cycle, and the complete reading of Pentateuch is completed through weekly Shabbat readings over the course of year, so does Dorsky create a collection of concentric circles—years, seasons, months, days into his filmmaking.

Hours for Jerome Part I (1966/70-82, 21 min.) and *Part II* (1966/70-82, 24 min.), like the *Visitation* and *Compline*, derive their titles from the “Book of Hours” or the canonical hours in the Catholic liturgy. As mentioned earlier, these films were shot on the sparkling Kodachrome II stock, which was quickly taken out of circulation for toxicity reasons. The footage was shot from 1966 to 1970 and contains images from the daily life of Nathaniel and his partner Jerome Hiler while living in Manhattan, and then their move to Sussex County in New Jersey. Part I begins with Springtime images and ends in Summer; Part II depicts Winter and Fall. Part II ends on a sequence which simply gets darker and darker until provoking the discomfort of the viewer, like winter went on too long, slogging through February and March. Finally, there’s a little bit of blue sky and ice melting with a coda suggesting a return to Spring.

The film becomes a play of oppositions in both content—rural and urban, outside and inside, night and day, warm and cold temperatures, rainy and dry weather, the micro and the macro—and technique—light and dark shots, color and black and white images, fast and slow motion, close ups and aerial shots, zooming both in and out, mobile and still camera approaches. Dorsky sets up an interplay between molecules of ice and frozen lakes, individual blossoms and groves of trees, cityscapes and single apartments. Our perception of scale is demonstrated to be mobile and changing—at times expansive and at others more contracted. Dorsky also pays attention to the points of transition in content—spring and autumn, melting ice, rising and setting sun, rising and fading moon, Holland tunnel, Queens borough bridge, Westside highway and technique—use of the zoom, opening and closing of lenses, pans, regular presence of black meter between shots.

A unique technique to these films is the play on speed and timing within the film itself. Many of the images are under or over cranked or shot in slow or fast motion. In other moments, Dorsky speeds up the editing or increases the cuts between shots to create a strobe effect. These techniques force the passing of time and the perception of time to become central objects of attention. They also serve as reflexive techniques, which force the viewer to be aware of the craftsmanship and materiality of the images themselves. In Part I, there is an image of a boat on the Hudson river at night, which Dorsky shoots in fast motion. The result distorts the boat to seem like a mere flash of light on the water—subtly pointing to the boat as only a flash of light on the screen. In another section, Dorsky has a slow motion shot where the camera remains in place filming a street where

dozens of people pass one-another walking. A moment of rushing from one place to another is transformed into a buoyant floating dance in the present. In Part II, there are several peaceful images—a man meditating, blossoms on a tree, shadows on a hill—which are sped up or subjected to rapid editing or zooming to cultivate panic, anxiety or fury. All of these moments are dynamic in themselves and in relationship to one another, but also highlight the intersection of the pacing of the filmmaking with that of the content, centralizing pacing, and motion, as subjects of observations in themselves.

Dorsky highlights the intermittence of the light in the film within and between his images. There is one particularly layered reflexive shot beneath the elevated subway in Queens in which the tracks above are intercut with light and the street below then has the shadows of the tracks playing over the light on the floor. As the train moves above and the cars move below the shadow and light flicker back and forth. The play of shadow and light on the floor and in the tracks mimics the image of an actual film strip. The grating of the tracks mimicking both the gaps between individual photographs in the film strip, as well as the side sprockets. Similarly, as the images of the tracks on the street are only the shadow of the grid above, so is the entire image merely a play of light and shadow on the film strip. As the motion of the train makes it look like the shadows are themselves in motion, so does running a still film strip through a projector create an illusion of movement. This shot is then cut into the larger film, becoming its own micro still within the larger interplay of images. In Part II, Dorsky regularly interjects black meter between shots such that the space between shots is edited to mimic the black frames of the actual film strip. In other moments, Dorsky inserts images of Jerome at the

editing wheels and splicer, editing his own films, collapsing the action of editing and film making into an edit of the film itself.

Like many of his other films, Dorsky integrates the daily cycle with the yearly one, and then the progression and materiality of the film itself. Part I opens with a dense shot of dark trees, the sun rises through them and the sunlight eventually overtakes the screen and concludes with an image of the moon rising from the bottom left corner of the screen and moving towards the top right corner. The sunrise merges with the light of the actual shot, such that the viewer becomes aware of the luminosity of the screen simultaneously with that of the sunrise. The image of the moon rising across the screen draws attention to the framing, play of light and shadow, and the timing of the medium itself. Using many of the moon images, with the moon coming through icicles or across the snow, Dorsky played with holding the frame open for five or ten seconds and then quickly cutting with images of Jerome making tea in the cabin. There is a slight strobe effect such that the viewer is forced to be aware of the roll of timing in the shooting and editing of the images themselves. These kind of jarring filmmaking techniques are common of the avant-garde in the late '60s and have become dated in their own right, such that in the context of Dorsky's other work, the viewer observes the passing of these modes of timing as games in themselves.

Repetition and idiosyncrasy of locations, images, and techniques, such that surprise becomes a point of return and repetition highlights the persistent sense of change. Dorsky will often return throughout the film to the same place or object— Jerome, the moon, particular groves of trees, skylines, streets, homes— but at different

seasons and times of day. For example, he repeats a shot of a grocery on 11th Street both in summer and then in the snow during winter. In two of the three times this location is filmed, a truck turns the corner, but in one it moves through the snow leaving behind two parallel tracks. The repetition of location, but in different seasons, heightens an awareness of change. On the other hand, Dorsky will often playfully interject a surprising new image. For example, the roosters in Part II, where bright red of their combs contrasted with white feathers adds another layer of surprise to the eye; or the little old lady in a little red sports car and giant hat on the rainy highway in Part I, where the juxtaposition of scale within the image create a moment of humor. The rhythmic interjection of new material into the regularity of other images, through editing, becomes its own point of regular refocusing for the viewer and is a signature feature of Dorsky's style.

In a conspicuously layered section on the subject of impermanence, Dorsky cuts back and forth between color shots of cherry blossoms at the botanical gardens and black and white images of dinosaurs and taxidermy animals at the Museum of Natural History. The former play on a classic Buddhist poetic motif on the poignant, delicate, and fleeting nature of our lives. The latter highlights an attempt to preserve that which has died or gone extinct. The interplay of color and black and white footage highlights the evolutionary and impermanent nature of the material film itself, while also pointing to the ability of film to preserve that which has died through the reproduction of images. The opposition of color and content provide their own dynamic, playful dance while also pointing to the layering of the consistency of impermanence, and the impermanence of

preservation, particularly in relationship to the material medium of film. This tiny section could even be read as a salient illustration of the play of Bazin and Dorsky's theories on the intersection of religion and film, setting them in conversation with one another, while unhinging the fixity or permanence of the conversation itself.

Since the festival was held in NYC, this film was unique in the ways it attended to the changes the city has gone through since the shooting of the images themselves. Dorsky describes walking down that corner in 2015 where the humble grocery store has been replaced with a chic restaurant. Shots of barren quiet scenes in Greenwich village and meat packing district are now scenes of high-end nightlife. The cherry blossom festival at the botanical gardens and the deteriorating taxidermy animals at the natural history museum, water towers at night, paradoxically remain staples of the NYC world. The impermanence of the city itself is felt acutely by several audience members, including myself, struggling to place particular shots. There was also, I felt, an unspoken poignancy to viewing images of the city pre-9/11. While Dorsky has expressed reservations about the quality of "memory" and "nostalgia" in these films because they veer dangerously near to "sentiment," I think these films lend a sense of the vulnerability, impermanence, and mortality to a seemingly formidable and powerful place.

Dorsky and Hiler are themselves in their seventies and aware of being at the end of their lives' arcs. The retrospective was an opportunity to acknowledge a life's work and development. Dorsky made several jokes about the retrospective being a bit of a memorial and that the next time everyone would be gathered around like this would be for their funerals. There were members of the audience who appeared throughout

Dorsky's films, though decades younger. Jerome Hiler was a frequent presence—older, but with the exact same haircut which involves a dramatic white swooping bang which he is seen brushing out of his eyes in both Dorsky's films and during in-person interviews at the festival. It was striking to see the poet Anne Waldman making her way haltingly through the theater after seeing images of her in her twenties—swimming naked in Lake Owassa and confidently bringing her face up into Dorsky's lens; or pensively writing in the sunlight at a desk, her brown hair from then, now gone white. During the break I found myself talking to some middle-aged men from Woodstock, NY, who appeared as their young hippy selves in several moments in *Hours for Jerome*, meditating or playing poker while smoking joints—but now seemed gathered for an awkward school reunion of sorts.

Several of Dorsky's films were explicitly made in response to the deaths of friends, many of whom were fixtures in the avant-garde film community. He addressed this in my interview with him, and then spoke about this aspect of films in greater detail at the festival. *Song and Solitude* was shot and edited during the last year in the life of Dorsky's dear friend Susan Vigil, who was dying of ovarian cancer. Vigil was a key nurturer of the San Francisco avant-garde film scene—feeding, housing, and befriending filmmakers for thirty years (Sitney 2014, 204). When she was dying and had about a year to live, Dorsky recalls that she would come over to his apartment on Friday afternoons when he would get his footage back from the lab. Dorsky would put a foam mat on the floor because it was difficult for her to sit up, and the two would look at camera rolls for a half hour or so. Dorsky edited the film as she was closely nearing her death, such that

the film, in his words, “was in and around her visits, including her death in a way” (Dorsky July 9, 2015). While not depicting her death, the film contains the feelings around that period of time. The film ends on an image of white almond blossoms at night in a parking lot in Richmond, Virginia, which Dorsky likens to Balanchine’s ballet *Serenade*. A darkening tension increases, and then there is release in light, delicate blossoms (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Dorsky’s description of his Friday afternoons with Vigil suggests the ritual sacredness of the filmmaking process in the end of a life for both the person dying and the mourner.

Similarly, *Alaya* was made in the wake of the death of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1987. Dorsky had begun this film in response to Trungpa’s filmmaking conference, which Dorsky attended in the early 1970s in Boulder, Colorado. Chogyam Trungpa had lectured on the Buddhist yogachara concept of “alaya” and writes in his book *Spiritual Materialism*:

The Yogacharyans solved the mystery by positing the indivisible union of intelligence and phenomena. Thus there is no individual knower; everything is “self known.” The Yogachara school was the first school of Buddhist thought to transcend the division between the knower and the known. (Trungpa 1973, 195)

To this end, the film *Alaya* meditates on the division between the knower and the known, consciousness and phenomena, the seediness or graininess of our knowledge, the screen aspect of the mind and the mind aspect of the screen, or the interdependence of mind and screen to produce the image. Dorsky says in his interview, regarding the making of *Alaya* and the passing of Trungpa:

So when he died, when a great teacher dies like that, it’s not a sad thing, it’s like a dear friend dying, you almost feel them in their purity. So traditionally in the Tibetan tradition there’s like a rain of blessings when someone dies and we went

to his cremation and all of that. I had a job which I wasn't enjoying and wasn't doing so well, so I quit the job and I spent the next three months during that kind of rain of wisdom editing the film. Very much feeling my appreciation for him as I was making it. Trying to touch things. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

Dorsky describes attending the traditional Tibetan funeral and cremation of Trungpa, and then engaging in the editing of *Alaya* as his own filmmaking ritual and practice in response to this death, and as a means of connecting to and touching Trungpa's life and teachings.

Another film of Dorsky's, *Threnody*, was made following the death of his mentor and friend, and possibly the most influential filmmaker of the American avant-garde film scene, Stan Brakhage. Referring to the process of making this film for Brakhage, Dorsky says, "He was such an important figure, so when he died it was harder to pick up a camera without thinking of him, so then I thought the second devotional song will just be, and I tried to shoot a film which had a sense of someone" (Dorsky July 9, 2015). While the film does not depict Brakhage himself, it does contain several shots inspired by Brakhage's work—shots taken through glass, shadows closing down to black on a rug, bursts of light. The final sequence climbs to a view point overlooking the glimmering light on the water in the bay with dark rushes in the foreground inspired by Balanchine's *Apollo*. Dorsky describes this scene as subtly conveying Brakhage's last glance of the earth.

Dorsky's film *August and After* includes footage from the period of time in August, 2011, in which his friend, filmmaker George Kuchar (1942-2011), was in

hospice dying from cancer.⁷⁴ George and his identical twin brother Mike were born in the Bronx and became part of the New York City underground film scene, alongside Dorsky, Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and Kenneth Anger. Like Dorsky, the brothers moved to San Francisco in the 1970s, where they continued making avant-garde films. George eventually became involved in underground comics alongside Art Spiegelman and Bill Griffiths. When George was in hospice, Dorsky and other friends and family gathered around his room as he went in and out of sleep. Many of the shots in the film are taken from within the dayroom and include images of both Mike and George's faces—unusual for Dorsky's style. The rest of the footage comes from around and after Kuchar's death (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Filmmaking practice becomes a mode of honoring the passing of a life and grieving a death.

The details that Dorsky remembers about these times—the foam mattress on the floor in Dorsky's basement that Vigil would lie on, the white almond blossoms at night in Virginia, the shadow closing down on a rug, light refracted through a glass reminiscent of Brakhage's own work, the passing in and out of George Kuchar's dayroom in the hospital—lend a poignancy, gentility, particularity, and humanity to this history of American avant-garde film. Dorsky's work shows that dying has its own continuity, the boundaries of it fluid. The lives of Vigil, Brakhage, and Kuchar become rooted in these

⁷⁴ Dorsky says, "It's called *August and After* because it has some of those images near the beginning, and then it's sort of about what happens after someone dies, like there's this kind of vacuum, the double thing happens like life becomes more empty and also more full, like a double thing, and umm then the film even has a sense of things of coming back into, like after someone dies it's maybe four or five months before you fully come back into the world again yourself" (Dorsky July 9, 2015).

details, rather than in abstractions. His description also speaks to a bigger question of how filmmaking can become a way of both grieving an absence and honoring their lives—like the recitation of Kaddish, or a suspended period of spiritual practice in the wake of a death. Dorsky speaks about a “double thing” following a death as “life becomes more empty and also more full,” and Dorsky’s filmmaking attends to the transience of mediums, people, and moments, deepening the feeling of their presence.

In the spring of 2016, Dorsky began editing together outtakes or scrap materials from films he made between 1992 and 2009, which comprise the five films listed below and which most overtly intertwine the transience of people with the passing of the film stock itself. Because of financial constraints, these films are edited together as originals without any kind of work print and with cement splices. These choices, however, contribute to the humility and transience of the work—if damaged in a projector, the images are gone for good. *Other Archer* (2003 / 2016, 9 min.) is a short portrait of Nick Hoff, Dorsky’s friend and collaborator on *Devotional Cinema*. These shots integrate images of Hoff’s hands and face into larger patterns of light, color, and shadow, so that the human elements are less the stars of the shots and more part of this larger scene. In this way, Dorsky deemphasizes the human drama of the story and rather makes the human story part of a larger landscape populated by shifting non-human elements. The title of *Ossuary* (1995-2005 / 2016, 43 min.) refers to a box of human bones dug up after burial and decomposition. Similarly, this film is an excavation and repackaging of old shots over a decade (1995-2005). This film contains a unique shot where white beads are strung diagonally across the frame so that they look almost like planets, bubbles, or bones

against a black background. Another shot includes a hand in the foreground of the frame, half hidden in shadow, with a cigarette between the first two tips and a chess table in the background, attentive to the structure of the hand itself. *Death of a Poet* (2003 / 2016, 21 min.) contains footage from the weeks leading up to Stan Brakhage's death from bladder cancer and the week in Boulder, Colorado, just after his passing. The film includes shots of Stan's family--Jane (Brakhage) Wodening and a gathering at her house in Boulder with Naropa poet Jack Collom. Each of these films highlights the beauty and preciousness of the impermanence of the materials of film, with its human subjects.

Dorsky's film *April* documents a return to the world after a period of mourning the deaths of George Kuchar and Karla Liss. The film moves from a vegetable world of plants to an urban one, and, in a unique move for Dorsky, ends with a shot of a woman at a café looking off into the distance. There is a sense of moving back into civilization, and the civilization that is there is one populated with digital devices, so there are many shots of people staring into their phones or laptops. *April* experiments with a new negative made by Eastman Kodak, mixed with Fuji negative, which was recently discontinued. The stock was particularly amenable to photographing people and buildings, so this film is unusual in that regard and in its pictorial qualities. There is a moment where a phone cord is stretched across the frame, and the camera follows it until it becomes apparent as a telephone cord. The way the cord flinches and jerks creates an unusual sense of danger, or as Dorsky says, his version of "nasty" (Dorsky October, 2015). A shot that stands out is of a woman in a bright yellow dress with black lines walking down a sidewalk that has the shadow of tree swaying on the sidewalk. Her body

becomes part of the pattern of the scene, and at the same time there is a sense that film has a body, that the film's body sways with light in the way that her body sways as she walks. A sense of people as patterns and patterns as bodies. The images of the people in cafes have a slightly humorous anthropological element, as the subjects are entirely unaware of Dorsky's camera and are wrapped up in some temporary self-seriousness. In a shot of a woman in aviator glasses with a polka-dot shirt staring through the glass of a café window, the viewer observes the gap between how the camera sees her and how she sees herself. This film points to the impermanence of grief itself, a move from fragility and self-protection to greater energy, liveliness, tolerance, and excitement around sensory stimulation.

Dorsky's work has gone through shifts and changes—his early films like *Ingreen*, the experimental avant-garde period, more interior periods, more exterior periods. Some techniques developing, others left aside. The retrospective allowed for insight into his own *aniccha* as an artist, changing, growing, and aging. While some older audience members seemed to enjoy Dorsky's films in nostalgia for the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the younger audience seemed drawn to Dorsky's work almost in search of the traditionalism and de-stimulation of *Vipassana* retreats or mindfulness meditation. As Dorsky acknowledges, the times have changed and people's needs have changed—now “the whole world feels like a psychedelic art form and people are in need of peace” (Dorsky July 9, 2015). Amidst rapid digitalization, Dorsky's request that people immerse themselves in quiet and pay slow, gentle, focused attention to the materiality and physicality of film—and by extension ourselves—can provide an unusual

source of relief. The upsurge of interest in Dorsky may speak not only to a revitalized interest in the avant-garde, but to a hunger for radically meditative films (see Sitney 2002, 436). As *Pneuma* suggests, demise can be a source of celebration and activity in itself. Attending to decomposition and impermanence can become its own source of continuity with tradition—both in film and religion, and one through the other.

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CONCLUSION

Brent Plate argues that in the study of religion and film, greater attention needs to be paid to the avant-garde, because it is in itself a spiritual discipline similar to Buddhist mindfulness practices.⁷⁵ I would like to conclude this project by providing a brief reading of Dorsky's films *Pneuma* (1983, 28 min.), *Alaya* (1976-87, 28 min.), and *Triste* (1974-96, 18.5 min.) in conversation with the *Satipatthana Sutta*. The *Sutta*, translated as "the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness," is an early Theravada Buddhist text from the Pali canon which is often regarded as a, if not the, foundational text on Buddhist meditation practice (Satipatthana Sutta 2005). The mindfulness practice outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta* is intended for the development of *vipassana* (insight). What is meant by insight is an understanding of the "true nature of things," or their transience and, more importantly, their lack of any kind of self or independent and unchanging essence (Satipatthana Sutta 2005). I argue that reading Dorsky's work in conversation with the *Sutta* provides new ways of thinking about Dorsky's work and mindfulness practices, while expanding upon Plate's integration of Buddhist meditation practices and avant-garde film.

Just as the practice outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta* progresses from attending to grosser to subtler objects and states of awareness—body, breath, consciousness, mental objects—*Pneuma*, *Alaya*, and *Triste* provide a similar course of development from

⁷⁵ "Like the Buddhist orientation towards 'mindfulness', the religious cinematics of avant-garde films develops as a spiritual discipline (understanding 'spiritual' as indissociable from 'material')" (Plate 2008, 69).

grosser to subtler dimensions of film. Dorsky said in regards to the making and viewing

of these three films:

I wanted to start at the beginning again. First with a film just about emulsion and then about a film's relationship to sand. And then built forward. Then I guess the next show, starts with *Triste* which is then introducing imagery into the same kind of syntax. So it was like let's start at the beginning—zero, then zero plus sand and then zero plus images and build out from there. (Dorsky July 9, 2015)

While in mindfulness meditations there is an attention to a collective or whole awareness of body, breath, thoughts, consciousness, and feelings simultaneously, these meditations also work to isolate or amplify awareness of different dimensions of the practice at different times. Where *Pneuma* cultivates a direct relationship to film stock, and *Alaya* is a relationship of film stock to sand and consciousness, highlighting the use of lenses more specifically, Dorsky's film *Triste* adds more developed modes of imagery to that syntax, emphasizing attention to the interaction of shot and cut, and more developed modes of imagery.

As the *Sutta* begins with an experiential study of the body, so does *Pneuma* begin with the contemplation of the physical foundations of film. *Pneuma* is a compilation of raw and outdated reversal film stocks, sometimes re-photographed in closer format, which have been processed without being exposed. Some of the film sources are then optically printed to zoom in on images of the grains. The viewer observes the stream of emulsion in much the way a meditator moves his awareness through his body, discovering all the sensation and subtlety underlying the physical experience of awareness. Almost as though looking at close-ups of bone marrow or even blood under a microscope, Dorsky deconstructs the basic materials of film and reveals them to be empty

of self-essence—varied, changing, and alive on their own terms. The *Sutta* encourages the practitioner to observe the material elements of their own body:

There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, fibrous threads (veins, nerves, sinews, tendons), bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, contents of stomach, intestines, mesentery, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, tars, fat dissolved, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine. (Satipatthana Sutra 2005).

Similarly, Dorsky edits different emulsions together without processing them and then threads these film strips through the projector so the viewer can observe the gross material foundations of film—dye, alcohol, stabilizers, camphor, nitrogen interacting with oxygen over different lengths of time. The result is a vibrant and shifting display of motion, color, and texture. The meditator studies the many textures, acidities and densities—dry airy hair and nails, wet viscous mucus, wet semi solid fat, heavy bones, and so on—of the seemingly solid and cohesive “body” to understand the emptiness of essence of body itself. Likewise, Dorsky brings the viewer into studying the variety of film stocks—oily, pasty, buzzing, dripping, flickering— in order to understand the lack of essence in the most basic components of film materials themselves.

Alaya deepens the meditation begun in *Pneuma* by adding a single layer to the stock—processed images of sand. As discussed in Chapter Three, Dorsky’s choice of the word “Alaya” as a title consciously evokes the Buddhist Yogacara notion of alaya-vijnana (storehouse consciousness)—the most fundamental of the “eight consciousnesses” where the seeds of consciousness are stored. *Alaya* can also simply refer to accumulation of seeds or snow or ice like in the word Himalayas. Dorsky’s own articulation of *alaya* is as “the area of your mind that you can’t touch but is always

there.” As the word *alaya* speaks to the pre-existing layer of consciousness, so does the film point to a living pre-existing image. *Alaya* does not just symbolize layered consciousness, it *is* layered consciousness. *Alaya* brings a felt understanding of the graininess of our own consciousness and its dependency on limited material technologies.

The Satipatthana Sutta speaks describes mindfulness of consciousness:

Here, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu understands the consciousness with lust, as with lust; the consciousness without lust, as without lust; the consciousness with hate, as with hate; the consciousness without hate, as without hate; the consciousness with ignorance, as with ignorance; the consciousness without ignorance, as without ignorance; the shrunken state of consciousness, as the shrunken state; the distracted state of consciousness, as the distracted state; the state of consciousness become great, as the state become great; the state of consciousness not become great, as the state not become great; the state of consciousness with some other mental state superior to it, as the state with something mentally higher; the state of consciousness with no other mental state superior to it, as the state with nothing mentally higher; the quieted state of consciousness, as the quieted state; the state of consciousness not quieted, as the state not quieted; the freed state of consciousness as freed; and the unfreed state of consciousness, as unfreed. (Satipatthana Sutra 2005).

The film adds tones, colors, textures, rhythms and patterns to the images of sand, so that the consciousness of film begins to embody different states of mind: contracted and expansive; lively and still; focused and foggy; warmer and colder. Our own consciousness, becomes conscious of the possibility of itself through the film: the film comes to both inform and embody a sense of consciousness itself.

Like *Pneuma*, *Triste* is composed of a mosaic of ten to fifteen film emulsions in varying states of decay; like *Alaya* it includes imagery and subject matter, but now the subject matter is more varied and complicated. Many of the stocks are especially old, giving a subtle variety and at times underlying intensity to its tints and textures. The

emulsion houses various shots taken unrelated to one another over a period of almost twenty years and then edited together into one.

In the same way that our stories of self are made up of a figurative sand-hill of moving particles of matter and perception, so is *Triste* almost like a slightly more developed state of thought built upon the graininess of light, stock, and color. The *Satipatthana Sutra* moves from grosser to subtler objects of contemplation—bones, to consciousness, to feelings—and then from liminal vague states of consciousness or feeling, to more fully formed ideas known as “mental objects.”

And, further, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives contemplating mental object in the mental objects of the Four Noble Truths.

How, O bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu live contemplating mental object in the mental objects of the Four Noble Truths?

Here, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu understands: 'This is suffering,' according to reality; he understands: 'This is the origin of suffering,' according to reality; he understands: 'This is the cessation of suffering,' according to reality; and he understands: 'This is the road leading to the cessation of suffering,' according to reality. (Satipatthana Sutra 2005)

Here, the sutra moves to the contemplation of a fully formed idea or concepts— “the four noble truths,” among many other described mental objects.

Similarly, *Triste* begins to develop more fully formed imagery and thought, almost on the brink of story. The film opens with a collection of shots each held for approximately seven seconds: branches filling a frame sway softly against a grey background, which slips into a hand floating across a page, which turn to rushes in the wind, which give way in a quick punctuated cut to still bright green houses on which Dorsky

refocuses the attention. The film then returns to the softer shifting motion and collection of colors, with the sustained shots of a woman playing a cello, a car ride at sunset and then the reflection of water playing across rocks. This final image speaks back to the original image of the silhouette of tree branches where the filtering and reflection of light is a primary point of attention. The slowness of the motion of the trees and the long length of the shot invites the viewer to witness the motion of both subject—the trees—in contrast with the stillness of the camera's frame. *Triste* vacillates between the more developed and complex montage and imagery and the simple material components of the film itself, pointing to the layering and paradoxes of perception in film itself. Reading *Triste* in conversation with *Pneuma*, *Alaya*, and the *Satipatthana Sutta* may enhance an understanding of the paradoxes of surface and depth, materiality and consciousness, not only in film, but within our lives. Doing so, highlights a point of intersection between Buddhism and avant-garde film embodied in both Dorsky's life and work.

Steven Katz argues that “neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing that they are unmediated” (Katz 1978, 2). Thirteenth century Zen master Dogen not only cites poetry as a means on the path toward enlightenment, but identifies enlightenment as no other than poetry and painting: “Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting... As buddha-dharma is real, a painted rice-cake is real” (Dogen 1985, 137). Enlightenment *is* art. Similarly, Dorsky's films do not describe an ineffable or enlightened state beyond the screen; rather, they can be read as both a means and an embodiment of enlightenment. Their intricate webbing of

experience—moods, gestures, light, shadow, particles, motion, stillness, perspective — engenders tender, heightened states of awareness in their viewers. Dorsky’s films collapse religious experience into the physicality of film itself— its emulsion, shots, cuts, projector speeds, the use of light, film brand, and width.

As Eckel notes in his study of sixth century Indian Madhyamaka Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Bhavaviveka’s study of images of the Buddha: in this strain of Buddhist philosophy everything is empty of self-essence, but not all points in time and space are as equally revealing of their true nature as others (Eckel 1992, 3). In other words, some artwork is more effective at cultivating the mind in Buddhist understanding and revealing the “true nature of reality as well as the paradoxes endemic to the act of seeing itself” (Eckel 1992, 1). An image can become both the means and embodiment of enlightenment through its illumination of the concept of Emptiness (*sunyata*) “that everything in the end is empty (*sunya*) of individual identity (*svabhava*) and depends for the appearance of its own existence on an infinite network of other equally empty things” (Eckel 1992, 3) and exists in a state of constant change.

This project offers a reading of Nathaniel Dorsky’s manuscript *Devotional Cinema* in extension of Eckel’s proposition: while all films may be fundamentally empty of self-essence and a source of Buddhist understanding, some films are more revealing of their own true nature as impermanent and materially conditioned than others, more attentive to points of equilibrium and vulnerability in their aesthetic. Films like these may have the opportunity to bring viewers into an understanding of their own conditioning and impermanence and in doing so, awaken compassion. Such films can be

considered devotional in keeping with a “spirit or experience of religion” defined on particular Buddhist terms, which reimagine an intersection of religion and film premised on ideas of impermanence and material conditioning instead of transcendence. Doing so illustrates the ways religious practices and philosophies can inform methodologies in the field of religion and film, by centralizing *film itself* as a locus of religious understanding.

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Appendix

Interview of Nathaniel Dorsky by Zoe Kelly-Nacht July 9,th 2015

ZN: How do you like to have your films curated? What films do you prefer to place together in a screening?

ND: There are a few different ways to program and the way I did the retrospective or what I did for these programs is I made it very logical (talking about 2015 NYFF retrospective). So someone who doesn't know my work that well, or just because there are so many films, there are 33 films, if we made it poetic, I thought if we did these strange poetic combinations, it might be more frustrating, so this is very simple. So there's a group of films called "Four Cinematic Songs" but I am only going to show three of them because I'm showing one of them at the last show, just because of the timing, it was too long of a show. I thought they wouldn't enjoy them all. I have these things called devotional songs and this thing called "The Quartet," that's pretty, people like that, in that order.

ZN: Why is that?

ND: I don't know, it just seems to work. For instance when Mark McElhatten did a little retrospective at the Anthology Film Archive he said lets show something early middle and late on each show and I loved it. For me it was so wonderful, because as a filmmaker usually when you go around to show films, you show the last films you made, you don't have a chance to mix, so we would show like one of the early sound films I made when I was 20 and then something like *Alaya* or something from the middle and then a later one and that made a really wonderful show.

This is the most conservative (referring to NYFF), I did it the most conservative way people maybe want to see certain films or not see certain films, I was trying to be kind to the viewer, I think they're nice shows, each show is nice, so I don't know. I get lost in the momentum of the new films and the showing of the new films, I haven't had a chance to explore as much as I'd want. I have lots of ideas. Like I have three films I made for someone who died *Song and Solitude*, *Threnody* and *August and After* and I'd love to show those three, I've never seen the three together. But I'd love to see that. I also have four films that are 18 ½ minutes long. Sometime I'd like to show those four films, it would just be fun to see 18 ½ minutes long four times in four different ways. There's all sorts of stuff like that. Someone like Mark can be very inventive with the programming.

The trick is that or the hard part is, it's like with a book of poems and you had to read four poems, you couldn't just read one poem and you couldn't just read one poem, that's the trouble with these showings, you have to show three or four films. Mark is always pushing that I show one film and have a discussion and then show the same film again. So I think there are all sorts of ways to have these showings. I think there are all sorts of

combinations, I think they've hardly been explored, the way it is with venues is that they only show your new work, unless there's a retrospective, but I have a feeling if I slow down, then people could start to show new combinations. I would love that, I'm tired you know of certain combinations, but at least the ones there I know they work, at least none of them are bad. The trouble is you show four films and by the time you're seeing the fourth, you're done, even if it's terrific. It isn't like unfortunately like ballet or classical music where you have an intermission, so you can see a 25 minute ballet a 30 minute ballet, and then have a 30 minute chat and then see another. But in film no one's willing to do intermissions, to try that. The audiences just aren't geared for that. In a way it would be nice.

ZN: It's funny, in India they have intermissions at films screenings, but the films are very very long.

ND: Well they used to that here in America with huge films like *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Olahoma*, certain huge films some of them used to have intermissions. Anyways, sometimes really showing one is the best. Like if I were ever doing anything with a gallery an ideal thing is to have one room. Bruce Connors is the one I first saw do this, and it was fantastic, you build one room and there's only one film shown in that room, that room is that film, and that's very interesting, because when you go in there you no longer see it as a film show, if you saw the same film with let's say two other films at a little film show that the gallery put on, your mindset would be "it's a film show," but when one room is just one film, then it becomes more like a work, and you start to take it seriously as a material thing, that you're going to go in there and see that work and I think that is very very good.

ZN: The films you made in dedication to the people that died, do you feel like the films were made about those people? Or more about your grief?

ND: They were different cases, that one film *Song and Solitude* was made for a friend who died her name's Susan Vigil, she was very responsible for a long period, she and her husband, of the San Francisco experimental film scene existing in the 70's. Their house was a home for visiting filmmakers. She was a dear friend. So she developed cancer and basically had about a year to live. And so during that period of time I would get my footage back from the lab Friday and she would come over every Friday and then I would put a foam mat down on the floor cause she couldn't sit so well and she would lie on the floor and we would look at about maybe half an hour of camera roles, and then at a certain point that was the film. Then at a certain point she got really sick and I edited during that period. So that film was in and around her visits and including her death in a way. It ends with these almond trees in blossoms, these white blossoming almond trees at night. I was actually down in Richmond, Virginia to show films and I came upon this park and I did a nice time lapse. So the film gets darker and darker and then goes into these white light, kind of release. You know *Serenade*? (Balanchine ballet) Of her being taken away to another world.

So then the other one *Threnody* was made for Stan Brakhage's death. What happened is that I had gotten a grant from Rockefeller or something and the grant said "what are you going to do?" and you know you just make it up and so I said I'll make two devotional songs one was called the *Visitation* and then it was time to make the other one and he died. He was very important in my cosmos, and so when he died everything was kind of different. He was such an important figure, so when he died it was harder to pick up a camera without thinking of him, so then I thought the second devotional song will just be, and I tried to shoot a film which had a sense of someone. It's always Balanchine actually (chuckles) almost like the end of the old *Apollo*, not the new ending, you know the one where they go up the stairs? So I thought of Stan, and then the morning light catches them, so I thought of Stan leaving earth and looking back for the last time, so I shot it in that way. So there are some things in it. Have you seen *Threnody*? There's like a shadow on a rug closing down to black and then there are like bursts of light through glass, he shot a lot of films through glass, in other words, trying to strike a balance here. It's like Mr. B (Balanchine) in a way, there is a story but it's not a story, the story is the underpinnings of abstract, things that are abstractly successful, with an underpinning of a story, but the film is not the story. Do you still follow ballet? I always thought that was important, like you have all these people now like Wheeldon and all those people, they're wonderful but when I look at them I don't feel like there's a story under the story, it's decorative, but I don't feel like there's something underneath there isn't a story like lost love, or something you can't have and then you get and then you lose it. All of Mr. B's stories are sort of like that kind of thing, like you're here on earth then there's a lover and then they're gone.

And then the last one is called *August and After*, and that's interesting, that's the death of an experimental filmmaker George Cuchard. He has a twin brother, Mike. I knew them since my early in twenties in New York. And I have respect for them tremendously. Anyway, George got cancer and was dying in a hospice during August and he was very very open, he invited everyone, I can't imagine being that generous, he let anyone who wanted to come visit, you would be there from a certain point when he had to go to sleep to waking up. There would always be people, he was out in the day room and there would always be guests. He was always so courteous, it was amazing. Anyway that was all during August and he maybe died a week after August. So then I started to shoot some footage, I thought, "oh this is too special." I was shooting footage in the dayroom with George and Mike and various people visiting, and then it's called *August and After* because it has some of those images near the beginning, and then it's sort of about what happens after someone dies, like there's this kind of vacuum. The double thing happens--like life becomes more empty and also more full. Then the film even has a sense of things of coming back into, like after someone dies it's maybe four or five months before you fully come back into the world again yourself. So anyway that was called *August and After*. So those are those three.

ZN: I was wondering if you could talk about your choice of camera or cameras and lenses and film stock in individual films.

ND: Well they are all shot with a Bolex. It can do glorious things. It's only limitation is how long a take is, unless you put an electric motor on it. Because of winding up and walking around with it. Maybe at silent speed I think it's about 30 seconds. So that in a way, like any art form is determined by the physicality of the material. Excuse me for going on about ballet. So like a certain dancer is going to inspire a certain *pas de deux* or something. So the camera, part of the nature of the film language is there's not going to be any shot that's longer otherwise, it can do anything.

I shot Kodachrome, which is called a reversal film. So Kodachrome I shot all the way through the film *Threnody* those are all shot in Kodachrome. Oh wait I'm making a mistake. I shot in Kodachrome all the way until the film *Aubade*, *Compline*. Through *Compline* was all shot in Kodachrome. Wait that's not true, most of it was shot in Kodachrome.

Kodachrome doesn't have any grain, and it doesn't photograph sand well, it's too picturesque, so *Alaya*, which is the sand film, was shot this other stock, an Ektachrome stock. It was just called medium speed Ektachrome, was also reversal, so I shot that film with that stock, and I also shot it with black and white stock and also some very out date high speed reversal stocks. Because sometimes you can't tell if it's black and white, the color shots are almost black and white, but the black and white was this nice charcoal kind of texture next to the darkish greenish brown of the other, so it made for a nice palette and then some of those old stocks the out dated ones had turned blue so there are some shots that are kind of blueish. That film I wanted to make a relationship between the film grain and the sand grain so I wanted a grainy stock. It felt all part of one.

So then a film like *Pneuma*, which didn't go through the camera at all is made up of all the different stocks, maybe fifteen different film stocks. I have some of the boxes downstairs, all these very ancient stocks, because that was a celebration of the demise of reversal filmmaking. Otherwise they're all Kodachrome. Or am I making a mistake?

ZN: Are they Kodachrome 25?

ND: Well Hours for Jerome, the first three sound films in Hours for Jerome, were shot with a better Kodachrome called Kodachrome II. Kodachrome had three lives, first it was just called Kodachrome, which is now just called Kodachrome I, which is during the 1940's like if you ever see color footage of WWII like in the pacific and so forth, and there's a particular type of turquoise blue, that Kodachrome I has and it's also very contrasty, and it has a slow ASA, when I started to shoot. I have a film I shot when I was 10 in 1950 and that was Kodachrome I. Kodachrome II started in the 1950's and that was the greatest Kodachrome, that was what Hours for Jerome was, and that's why it looks so almost like an enamel, like those yellow trees and so forth. That was the most magical

stock, but like anything magical it's also toxic. I think they thought it was too toxic or too expensive. So then they came out with this Kodachrome 25 which is like taking the claws out of a cat, you know? it was sort of Kodachrome, but it didn't have any bite. And that's what I shot most of my films on, starting with *Variations* they're all shot with Kodachrome 25.

And then *Triste* that was a transition film, that was made with about 10 or 15 emulsions. That was a mosaic of different emulsions, like Pnema, at the same time I was collecting footage for Pnema, I was also shooting footage on very old stock, I think part of me was a depression or some kind of negativity on my part, somehow I wanted the film and the image to participate together, instead of just having a pretty image, so there are all sorts of distortions from the old footage.

Have you seen *Triste*? That's a nice one. That's going to play with those three devotional songs. I mean those three cinematic songs. That is intentionally including all the hand processing at the beginning and the end. So then after *Compline* I had to switch to color negative and that was the biggest problem, because it was a whole new pallet which is kind of pallid. It's actually a stock designed for telativity, designed to be turned into a digital image, so it's a little bit flat, a little bit neutral, so that electronically you can goose it up in whatever way. So it's not altogether satisfying. The first one I made was *Aubade* and it was only 11 minutes and it was sort of successful as the color negative, but I just kept it short because I didn't know what I was doing. And then I made the film *Pastourelle* and that's also a little flat and strange. Then I decided to try a different kind of color negative that Fuji made, I made this film *The Return* and Fuji negative was more painterly a little bit more like the Kodachrome, than the Eastman negative, but it also had a very limited color range and as the sun went toward the end of the day, from a certain time of the day onward as the light got warmer, it's ability to comprehend color collapsed into these browns and oranges and lost all ability to define color. I don't mean late in the date when the sun is really orange, I just mean semi late in the day, but it also had this painterly feeling, so when I made this film the return it was all about Fuji, and the Fuji told me what speed it was 64, speed 64, so I shot it at that speed, but that was really not the right speed, so everything was a little bit dark and murky.

The next film might be *August and After* and in that film I think I mixed the Eastman Negative and the Fuji. I think *The Return* is all Fuji, I used to know this. *August and After* might be a mixture of Fuji and Eastman color, but mostly Fuji. But I shot it brighter, so it's a little brighter. Oh then I made this film called *April*, I can't believe I know this, but then Fuji stopped. Fuji got cancelled, so there was only Eastman Negative left, and they came out with a new negative which is very pictorial, so with that film *April*, I confess that how beautiful it was as a pictorial medium. So that has a lot of very hard edge straight shots of buildings people because I got fascinated with how it would photograph. What comes next? *Song* and then *Spring* and all the films up till now. I have one I finished a few months ago called *Intimations* and now I have one and I was going to call it *Emanations*, but then I looked at it when it was finished, a couple friends looked at it

and said “this film isn’t called emanations, it’s too internal and so forth” then this voice came up and said the word interlude, so then I thought of calling it interlude. I know it’s kind of common, I don’t know, but my whole theory has been to use common titles and have the film be really good. I remember when I was in high school and I would read a poem for the first time and it was kind of difficult you wouldn’t understand and you would look at the title to get the meaning, and you would think everything is talking about the title. That’s very dangerous, to think of the films as representing the title so that’s why I went and started to go for these very pabulum or very neutral titles. Someone like Stan Brakhage always had these very exotic titles, I somehow didn’t want to introduce any literary elements into the films.

Me: Is that the same for the titles of the sections you have devised for the New York Film Festival?

ND: They said they had to be thirty characters long, so that they can fit on a ticket. I could have made them very fancy or strange or poetic, but then I thought no, I want to make it easy for someone who’s buying the tickets. They go, “oh what is that? What show is that?” So I tried not to be fancy for that part, just to make it easier for people.

ZN: Could you move films from one section into the other without changing the title?

ND: Well there are these films called “Devotional Songs” and the “Cinematic Songs” so I should respect that previous statement.

ZN: So what is the difference between a devotional song and a cinematic song?

ND: Oh, really nothing (laughs). A little bit actually, cinematic songs are the first real expression of this kind of film language. Like with *Triste*, I think of it more like an art song or something Schubert would write. So what are these films? They’re not stories, they’re not avant-garde films, they’re not poems, not quite poems, oh they’re like an art song. Most art songs use the text of a poem anyhow, by some great poet, that’s the tradition, so I see them as cinematic songs. Where the devotional songs like the *Visitation* and *Threnody* have more to do with devotional moments, like when you have a visitation. I thought of the famous paintings of St. Francis receiving the stigmata. I thought of those as devotional songs.

ZN: Going back to films like *Pneuma* and the mosaic of film stocks, how did you choose the order of the stocks within the film?

ND: D: Each film stock is almost like a different person, their metabolism. Because pneuma, in Greek, actually it had to do with all the swirling energy, in their medicine they would actually say that your pneuma was off. So each stock is different, some of them are very placid halcyon, others are quite vigorous and aggressive, so I treated them all like a progression of moods. I think I could make that film better today, but I was just

starting, I look at it, and it's like "oh this can be better." People like it, but I'm always cringing about it. But it was a strange idea, all I knew in my gut was it didn't come from a conceptual idea. With that film also I was looking at color after image, if you have a purple shot, I did this with *Hours for Jerome* as well. For instance, like in *Pneuma*, if you have a shot that's purple and you just cut to black, the black would look green, in other words in your eyes, green is the opposite of purple, not in painting colors, but in what is it called subtracted colors? So sometimes I would cut from green to purple, I was working a lot of time with the color opposites, so when I made the cut, your eye would really intensify the color when you came into it, but as your mind slowly got used to it, the color would slowly calm down, so your mind would activate the shots within themselves making them more intense the moment you came upon them, because of the color juxtaposition for the mind. So I was doing everything I could, but I saw them as very human qualities, just like you write a piece of music you have a calm thing and then...

ZN: so what film stocks are a little more aggressive or a little calmer?

ND: In that film? I can't remember at this point. I can't be sure. Like the Ilford may have been a little more rough-house, some of the European stocks were a little less tame than the American stocks. Then there was the Japanese, there's that whole section where there was all this blue and that was Fuji, a very fast roll of Fuji 400 which was at a camera store. It was at a camera store, it was 20 years out of date, I think I gave them maybe 50 cents for it, and then I processed it without putting it through the camera. Because Fuji still had a lab then or was that Ansco, I get them mixed up, it was Ansco. Ansco, which was kind of a minor competitive competitor of Kodak it had a red, I think they were in Binghamton, they had a red box, I have them all downstairs, I think the Ansco was a little more rough-house. Different ones or different black and white ones I can't remember all of them.

ZN: And what makes you choose to use black and white versus color?

ND: In that film?

ZN: Or in *Alaya* for example?

ND: Well I got interested. I noticed with some of the color shots that you almost wondered if they were black and white, so then I decided to shoot some very grainy black and white, Tri-X grainy film. I think I even did things like, you know if you force process film you can make it more grainy, so sometimes I underexposed the films three stops and then I had the lab force it two stops, so that it would still be dark, but it would still be grainy. I was trying to get the grain to be alive a bit, and then I realized that the black and white and the color together, eventually they're all printed onto color, so when the black and white is printed onto color it's slightly compromised as black and white, it becomes some aspect of color even if it's very black and white.

ZN: Do you find that by changing a variable you heighten the viewer's awareness of the film stock?

ND: Well you know you try a cut and if it's successful then it effects you physically, if it's almost successful it can be very beautiful, but it doesn't effect you physically, it doesn't touch you. So I try to make cuts almost like where your finger would be touching your breast plate, so if I make a cut that's pictorial or whatever, where there's sand, or the abstract grain, when the cut works, I feel that something happens to my brain, my brain is released into space. This is where the whole subject of cinema and *dharma*, or cinema as a great teacher of *dharma*, because it can actually, you can get the mind in (searching)

ZN: awaken?

ND: yes, You can get the mind in a certain state and suddenly go like this, and either it's more spacious, or you build up some speed, and you release the speed into like a pool and you can feel your mind, expand out. So when you're working, you are really working with the viewer's mind, letting it expand. And just at the point where it expands too much is at the point where your discursive mind comes in, this is how I edit. I just wait to the point where the mind starts to conceptualize what's happening that's because it's not really happening anymore, then I cut there. You know I cut before it becomes or right before it becomes conceptual. Do you understand?

ZN: Yes

ND: So like with the Buddhism it takes a while to understand, but all thoughts that come up are natural to the mind, they're like a fountain. And the idea of Buddhism isn't to stop the thinking, but it's to catch yourself thinking about the thinking, going to the secondary thinking. So I try to make my films, so every time they start to produce a secondary stage I don't let that happen. So in a certain way it's a tuning fork in a way, you know, the films, they help you tune, they make you stop going off, ideally. It's very interesting, there are times when you are expanding, and the next thing you are going to go to is like a moment, and by a moment, a half a second, further than the point, where it's almost about to get stale and then the movement is kind of welcome. Where if you cut to the movement right before that point, it's almost like you're pulled along, so the viewer's almost like someone's going to fall and then you take them. Like if you were going to cut to something also quite still you wouldn't want to go past that point because then you will have flattened the viewer and you are introducing something to the viewer that's also flat and it would take away the freshness of the energy for the next thing. So if the next thing is going to have movement or take over, you can go a little past that point, because if you didn't go past that point, then it would become a little mechanical. The whole idea is always to keep the viewer awake. So when I edit my films I have to get everything in order and then there are these times when I have these very concentrated screenings because you have to be lucky you're not always there, but you have a very concentrated screening, so sometimes you see that something's a half a second too long, like my mind

spaces out there, then it's not good because the next shot that comes out is a little dull, because you spaced out, but sometimes that little bit of space out is great. I guess it would be like in dance or something where you almost let someone fall.

ZN: So do you want the viewer to be aware of the subtleties of their own experience as they are moving through the film? Do you prefer the viewer be in more of a flow state of awareness, or do you want them to be conscious of the details of the film?

ND: whenever someone comes up to me and reports something very delicate it's always rewarding because you don't know. You are going on the pure faith that your mind is like other people's minds. I mean on some basic level. But you have to, I think that filmmakers that don't have that trust, who are trying to please an audience, that's when the whole thing gets kind of ordinary, no one is taking the lead. You're taking the lead, but it's like you want to be a very good host, or show someone a good time, it's fun that way. Let's say you went to a museum with a person or took a walk in the woods, and they would say "oh isn't that beautiful" yeah, you were both there, not helpful. But this way because you're not using any language. Like a young man wrote to me from Spain last week and he said he had never seen my films, they were shown at this town, he was blown away blah blah blah, I said "oh how old are you?" because he told me he was the son of a fellow who programmed, "I'm curious why you liked them" he said he was 22 and then he said, "first of all your films are very peaceful" so that was very nice to hear, that he could appreciate that, that he understood that they don't have aggression in them and they're also not, and it's not me telling you something, hopefully they're there for you to discover yourself, but it's not like I'm showing off, doing something great or powerful. Which is very easy in film, because film is very powerful. It's easy to overwhelm an audience if you wanted to.

ZN: Can you talk about the peace of your films? That seems like the more radical move as a filmmaker.

ND: So I was an only child, so I have strong only child tendencies, which is that you like to be left alone, so if I make a cut and I feel that there's no awakening and there's no click in the mind like (he taps breast plate with finger) it's just more stuff, this stuff, then this stuff, this, that, this that. It makes me feel sick inside. So you want to go (taps sternum) you want to always reawaken, each cut should refresh the screen, reawaken the space, yeah that's where the gentleness comes in, where you don't reawaken, but you get a bit absorbed this is attached to that.

ZN: Does the peace allow for the space for people to see all this underlying activity in the subtlety of experience?

ND: Yes, definitely. A young man came up to me, almost the same day I saw you in the lobby. He was saying how many creatures there are in my films. He's talking about how you see faces. It's like being in the woods, there are so many creatures, especially in the

later films. I said, “oh that’s great.” It was wonderful to hear because no one ever said that to me. I see all these faces and then these wolves. There are all sorts of shamanlike characters in the films. You don’t always see them the first time, but then suddenly you see a wolf, a lot of that. So when someone starts to see it on that level to me it’s very gratifying, because you know they are really enjoying it.

ZN: Do you hope that your films make people better seers of things?

ND: I never think of it that way, but people tell me that all the time. I try to think about that, like, “what the heck?! all I’m showing is the world that everyone sees.” I think that’s what it is, is that most people, I’ve forgotten it because I went through this transition in my twenties. Most people see the world as language, or that “this is Nick’s apartment”, where my films are floating more on the surface of visual phenomena. I went through that transition in my twenties, I remember when it happened, it was very important. Where you come into direct visual contact with the world. Up until then I would see things that were beautiful or odd, or poignant or sad or happy I would see all these things, but they were still, it’s very hard to describe, they were still in the context of language. Do you know what I’m saying? I wonder if in Buddhism there are words for that. Do you know *bodhicitta*, awakened heart? I guess it has a little bit to do with *bodhicitta*. Where all of a sudden you are, where before that you are seeing the world through this kind of peep hole of language, even if you are seeing how tragic this light looks on this dirt road this afternoon, even if you see all that, you are still seeing it as feeding language, so that’s one of the reasons I keep working on these films because I want to offer that, especially in this digital reality, the 21st century. I appreciated very much what was left for me when I was 19 or 20, you know the things that were left for me to love that other people did. I am at the end of my life I would like to leave things in the world for younger people. So I am very always happy, somehow this generation now in their twenties seem to like these films a lot. They don’t have questions, they don’t ask “why is it silent?” They don’t seem to have any of those questions. Someone who’s forty has all those questions. “Why is it? Did you ever think of using music?” They’re, I don’t know... it’s interesting.

ZN: There’s a renewed interest in materials?

ND: Yeah, I think so, because it’s a little bit spooky. (digital age)

ZN: I was wondering if you could tell me about the lenses that you use in your films? Do you use the same lens?

ND: I usually use three lenses. What is called the 25, which for a 16mm is the normal lens. The 35mm camera, which people don’t have anymore, use to be a 50mm lens. Anyway it’s the 25mm which is normal or what they call normal, and it’s a certain kind of thing, it’s 16mm which is slightly wider and a little bit more embracing and then a 50mm which is a little bit more... but I don’t use the 50mm to condense space, like a shot

of people coming down the sidewalk towards you that's compressed, I use it more, the longer the lens, the less depth of field you have. Do you know about all this? So sometimes you use the 50mm to set up focus and out of focus plains, then the 25mm is more just the look and the 16mm is more encompassing. But what I've noticed, is that with certain films, I can't remember now, I'll get very fascinated for some reason by the qualities of a certain lens, which feels right to me. So lately, in the last two films I just made, I had the 75 mm lens, which is a longer lens, which I hardly ever put on the camera because I always thought it was too "lensey". And the last two films are made with a lot of shots of the 75mm, and I found that so exciting for some reason. It's a whole different thing, but I never use it where I am showing off the lens, like I'm taking a telephoto shot or something. The lenses actually create different kinds of space, more accommodating and I think one is drawn to one or the other at different times.

ZN: Can you remember with *Alaya* what choices you made?

ND: That film was shot with a zoom lens. Except for the very close ups of the grain, you needed a macro lens so you would be very close. So you know with the zoom lens you are always just zooming into, so obviously the close up shots where all the film is grain is telephoto. The sand would be blowing around, up to the level of your knees, so you wouldn't want to bring the camera down there because you would get sand in it, so it was good to be up on a tripod, like you know shoulder length looking down, so you know that one had a zoom lens. With that one I mean there are some landscapes and yeah.

ZN: Is there one lens that you generally use in your films?

ND: No, it changes, it's always those three lenses up until the last two films when I put the 75, I suddenly got excited by it. As I said, it's really like sort of like what colors you put on in the morning, what colors you feel like wearing, I don't feel like wearing that oh I feel like wearing that today, it's a little like at that level.

ZN: Do you ever alter the lighting of your shots? Do you ever create artificial lighting?

ND: The only artificial lighting I have ever had in a film was those super close-ups of the sand in *Alaya*. Because I had to use these extension tubes to get really close and to get the depth of field I had to be shooting up around F11 because it was so extended that the depth of field would be so small that you couldn't focus from the front side of a grain to the back side of a grain, so around F11 you could, so with those I realized I can't do outdoors, so I did them artificially in the cellar using (tela?) photo floods, but that's the only time I ever used any lighting in any film. I've made six films in the last two and a half years, I made maybe 8 films, I don't know when I made *Song*. Two years ago? And I've been more and more doing things to the shots. Like there could be a foreground thing that's too bright and I put my hand up here and I put a shadow foreground thing, I introduce just enough movement. So lately I've been doing a little bit of sculpting using my hands as shadows, to make shadows. I started to do that four or five films ago. It takes a while to get good at it, the animal movement is very different than plant

movement, the muscles and so it took a while. Subtle things that are no big deal, you just take something that was too bright and you put a shadow on it a little. It's like "oh this is easy" and maybe take it off for a while and put it back. You can only do it when you get into the rhythm you've got to get into the zone, the visual nature of it, if you are doing it from your head it won't work, you've sort of got to get like drunk into that world, you know of how all the shadows are moving, which is fun.

ZN: does the making of the film feel like a meditation to you? When you talk about the zone, is that meditative or is that something different?

ND: No it's great. I don't know what word you use. You go out for about four hours and you don't say a thing to anybody, you don't say a word for four hours, that's important. You have to get completely away from the language part of your mind, and you are just looking at things, and then you get further and further into this visual world, the magic of the visual language that is happening that is offered by phenomena. So yes, I guess you would call it meditative, or I don't know what. You're in union with some kind of natural visual song that's going on in the world, and when you're in that then it's really amazing, because you don't know when you're going to push. You are looking through the camera, and it isn't like you go "oh now it's great I'm going to shoot". You're looking through the camera, you're looking through the camera, looking through the camera and all of a sudden your finger just is pushing the button and you arrive and your finger automatically pushes the button. You've arrived and start and often something amazing happens, you arrive and start and you've only got 30 seconds, and then all of a sudden a breeze starts and this other shadow starts that you had never even seen before or something that you've never seen before. Often those times that you feel you are off, you are forcing it. Often times you push and nothing happens. But there's something that happens when you get into the zone a non-language zone, there's the visual world, you know?

ZN: Are there ways you would you say that this state is different from experiences you have had with seated meditation?

ND: No, I think they're similar. Yes, I guess you would say they are very similar. Because you can't grasp, there has to be this moment when there's no you and some other union happens.

ZN: Is this similar to the experience of watching films? Is watching films for you is its own kind of meditation?

ND: Well I watch them carefully. But like you know... Well it's interesting because modern films are kind of a problem, I don't go to many, they're so absorbing. The sound is so overwhelming and now that they're digital and all... I don't know, it depends. Some films you're just absorbed in them, but if I see them I always sit back, I always like

to see the screen and the image. I don't like to be inside the screen, I always like to see the rectangle or the square or whatever. Great films are more meditative.

ZN: In the sense that you are watching but you are also watching yourself watching?

ND: Yes, well you know I make a living as an edit doctor. Especially with documentaries, which I work on a lot. So if I am looking at one, I know the moment that something isn't working and why. It's sort of like being a car mechanic, you hear the engine and you know that something. I guess I am very rare that way. And a lot of times, like when I am working on a film its more fun if you can interact with it, you know where something isn't right and you can change it, than just looking at them.

ZN: Do you want your viewers to hear the sound of the projector as they are watching?

ND: Yeah, I'm not sure. My films are edited that way. The first time I ever saw my films in a real auditorium the sound was amazing. I don't know. The silent experience can be hard for an audience, because with all the people everyone can distract you. But you know the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, when they go to buy a film I bring over a print and there will be four or five people from the staff in a real auditorium and that's the best. That's totally the best and it's completely silent and there's only four people there and you don't have to worry about any of them, they're all there to see them, so the best or the most beautiful way to completely see them is terms of having an audience there. I don't think I'm listening to the sound of the projector when I'm there. Like I never have music on when I'm editing because then I can't feel the silence, the vision. The ear always takes over, because the ear is more basic than the eye. I think the ear is the most basic maybe it has to do with survival or something. Supposedly in the *Bardo*, the Tibetan book of the dead, hearing is the last sense, and I've spoken to various hospice workers and they say that hearing is the last sense. You can still talk to someone who can't even move, they can still hear you, and if you have any sound, like you can even have where there's no soundtrack on a film but let's say the projectionist leaves the amp on there's just like the very quiet hiss of the film with small variations in it, your mind will rest on the sound and your vision will become the ornament, because your attention is resting in the sound. It can make a weaker film stronger, but if a film is really good it can make it weaker because your primary relationship is not to the eye it's to the ear. I've seen certain people's films and I haven't really cared for them. With this one person they left the projector and I saw it when they left the sound on (there's no sound in the film), and the film was much better, because it needed some ground, where with me I am trying to make the vision really the ground. I think that's one of the differences, at least in my own taste. With the greater filmmakers, there's something happening where... it's so hard to put into words, where your eye, the main information is coming through your eye, and the way the film is photographed it isn't taking images to represent ideas either.

ZN: In *Hours for Jerome*, there are places where the footage seems to speed up a little bit. Can you talk about what you are doing with speed in those films?

ND: Well then it was very fashionable, not fashionable that sounds... you know at the time, when I first started doing it, when you first have a camera and then you can do single frames, so there's a lot of what you call pixilation, which is shooting one frame at a time manually, so there's a lot of that, and a lot of times there was a lot of that because I was shooting things at night, and the only way to get an exposure was to hold the frame open, where with digital cameras you can photograph in the darkness. Let's say there's a scene or Jerry making tea or coffee and there's a moonlit night and you see the moonlight on the snow, or the moonlight coming through the icicles, all that's me holding the frame open for five seconds, ten seconds sometimes, to get each frame at a time, just to get the exposure. But you know that language has been sort of taken, you go to Chase Manhattan bank lobby and you see clouds, all that kind of stuff has been so taken into the world of advertising, you know that. Here's a very interesting point. In the early 60's, which was a big flowering of experimental film in America, but it was objectively a time of flowering, and one of the reasons people were so interested in it was because media was so straight at the time. You never saw a handheld movie camera or anything, even if you went to see a film on fishing whatever it was, everything was very straight. So suddenly to go to a theater and to see people making films where they can move a camera any way they wanted or overexposed or underexposed you know was extremely freeing. It is one of the reasons with experimental films that people were drawn to it, but that's what the world needed then, it needed to be loosened up, but now the entire world is like a 60's avant-garde movie. It's true you know it's as hectic. So the world doesn't need experimental film, we're still like stuck in a place of 50 years ago you know? Does the world need this? No. It's not popular. And why? Because the world doesn't need it. So I try to make my films appropriate for what the world needs now and what the world needs now is different from what the world needed 50 years ago.

ZN: What does it need now?

ND: Oh peace. (Laughs) There's twice as many people on the earth as there were in the early 60's.

ZN: I remember the last time I was talking to you, you said that Trungpa spoke to the needs of that particular time. Do you think his work or even his person is necessary now?

ND: Everyone says that it was for that time. It was timeless. There are really two aspects to it. He was timeless. (Pauses) Jerry saw Mr. B unfortunately I never saw Mr. B, did you ever see Mr. B?

ZN: No, he died before I was there.

ND: Jerry used to see him a little bit in the lobby you know at City Center when he was in high school. He would see him talking to these wealthy Russian women and all. I never saw him. Oh! There are these new Balanchine tapes that just came out from

Montreal with interviews of him from the 50's, so that's fascinating, very seldom do you see, I never saw a motion picture of him speaking. But anyway, with Trungpa when you saw him it was timeless, it was forever, it was very very strong, I mean life changing. But the style, the scene and all was of that moment. You couldn't do that now. Right? You would be in jail. (laughs) Or not in jail but you know what I mean, it would be... It was that moment. I always hear people say "gee maybe he did die in time" people say things like that. Have you ever seen that transcript from the Milarepa film seminar? Did I send it to you?

ZN: Yes, you did.

ND: Oh that was nice of me.

ZN: Yes, it was.

ND: I first saw Trungpa when he came to San Francisco in 1971 in late winter or early spring and I went and saw him for a weekend. Then I went out to Colorado that July for a ten day seminar called the Ten Bhumis seminar and that's when I got really interested and involved. In the mean time he had had that Milarepa film seminar right before that. So I arrived and there were some filmmakers there. Baird, he was a very good camera man.

ZN: What was his name?

ND: Baird Bryant. So his wife is the one who made the film *Crazy Wisdom* about Trungpa. I have one shot in that film, it's one of Trungpa in a suit. It's just a closeup with my bolex, he has that Indian bed spread behind him, it's a big close-up. So, he was very interested in film at the time. I couldn't believe it-- he went and threaded up a 16mm projector and was showing some footage he had shot, so I felt very at home, I thought "I'm feeling very at home." (laughs)

ZN: What did Trungpa shoot?

ND: So I was very interested watching him thread the projector thinking "How does a Tibetan thread a projector?" (laughs) and he wanted to make this film based on what he was teaching them, the Five Buddha Qualities. So it was very beautiful footage. Let's say there would be a rock and then a sprig of pine, like pine needles coming out of the rock. So he would like pan from the rocks over to the pine needles. He was interested in doing these pans where the Buddha quality would change, from one to the other. He was very interested in using cinema, he understood how you could use cinema to adjust the mind. So they were shooting this footage, they were going to make this film called the Milarepa film, that's why it was called the Milarepa film seminar, which was going to be about Milarepa. So I went in and had this interview with him and the two filmmakers were there, and I made him laugh. I said "do you mind if I come at you uncompromisingly" I remember saying this, because I wanted to say the thing I really

felt, but I didn't want to be rude. I was being polite and he laughed. So I said if you make a film about Buddhism it's not going to be as much about Buddhism as if you didn't make a film about Buddhism. If you make it *about*, the film itself should just be it. And then I said to him, my whole shtick about the primordial aspect of film had to do with the shot and the cut and all this. So then reading that, I immediately understood everything in the paper and in the seminar thing, on the other hand I was still very confused personally at the time,

I didn't have the clarity, but then I studied with him for the next ten or twenty years, whatever it was, 70 to when did he die? Until he died, so fifteen years. I learned a lot, but it took me a long time. I was working on *Alaya* inspired by his paper, but I wasn't going to make that film because then I wasn't going to make a film where then you saw Milarepa's footsteps in the sand (facetious). My take on it. And then he died, and I had still been shooting it. It was so upsetting and strange. The scene was a little bit fetish like, you know he was very... I've studied with other Tibetan teachers since, and there's not such a big deal, like everybody loves the teacher totally, but there isn't such a big deal about who the teacher is, who's getting to have dinner with him, where they're going (facetious). That scene was totally that way, it was just completely like this hierarchy of a court where you always wanted to know what the king or the emperor was doing and how close did you know the emperor, "you can't tell, you can't tell, we know this secret" and why am I saying this?

ZN: You were talking about the making of *Alaya*.

ND: Right. So when he died, when a great teacher dies like that, it's not a sad thing, it's like a dear friend dying, you almost feel them in their purity. So traditionally in the Tibetan tradition there's like a rain of blessings when someone dies and we went to his cremation and all of that. I had a job which I wasn't enjoying and wasn't doing so well, so I quit the job and I spent the next three months during that kind of rain of wisdom editing the film. Very much feeling my appreciation for him as I was making it. Trying to touch things.

ZN: What was studying with him like? How was it generally set up? Like would you meditate and then have a dharma talk?

ND: Yeah, it changed. At first it was more informal. It was very wild the first. Most people I know loved those first few years, from around 1971- 1974. It was very wild and everyone liked it. It was amazing, because he was more like just hanging out, but it was like hanging out with someone who was hollow, or I don't know how to say it, empty, completely empty but completely there. Like a friend of mine wrote a poem comparing him to one of those chocolate Easter bunnies that are hollow. You know? Like that kind of. But the general format was always that there would be a meditation, then a teaching and then questions and answers.

ZN: And then people would hang out afterwards?

ND: Well in the early times you could just go and into the room, where he was sleeping and just sit there and wait for him to wake up. That's what was mind blowing, all of a sudden there was this strange thing where there was a world without any territory, that's what was mind blowing, you could just like walk in. You know?

ZN: Like no boundaries?

ND: Yes, like no boundaries. Then there became more boundaries just as the scene was about to solidify. I remember at a certain point he said "everyone has to change their relationship to me, I'm no longer your friend, I'm like a king". It wasn't a corrupt thing he just meant that because the scene got too... it couldn't be the same. But the no boundary thing was kind of amazing.

ZN: can you think of an example?

ND: Well just like that. You could just walk into some place where he was sleeping like in the morning and just like sit there. I don't know.

ZN: Was being there in the beginning, do feel like, about religion or about experimentation? For you personally. Also was this all in Boulder?

ND: Naropa didn't start you know until 1974. I mean I saw him out here and at what they called "the land", which is now the Shambhala something or whatever. But then it was just like you would sleep in a tent there were tents. He had a little cabin. It was very strong. You were learning about Tibetan Buddhism, you were learning about enlightenment. There was no question that that was the main thing. I remember he once said, I was seeing him and I was troubled and I don't know what, he was talking about relating to the guru and how there's periods when the guru is very frightening and then at a certain point you become more relaxed with the guru, and I was just talking about that and something related to Buddhism and he said this thing, he said "forget the whole thing and enjoy yourself" and I said "what do you mean?" and I'll always remember, he went like this (makes a hand gesture) "just forget the whole thing and enjoy yourself." He could see what I couldn't see about myself, that that I don't know what I want to say. There were other amazing things that happened later in life with him that were very magical. Should I tell you those things?

ZN: Sure.

ND: I don't know if they are the kind of things where you lay down, that's the thing, you know if they're private? One time he was visiting San Francisco and he had given a talk and he was very drunk. He had drunk a lot, and he was being helped across the room walking because he had a bad leg and his head was like this kind of jack-o-lantern like

this pumpkin sort of. So I started to ask him this question, which was a semi-sincere question mostly basically just wanted attention, you know, so it was a semi-sincere question and I was asking him something about Shambhala training, “could we do this?” It was just an excuse and I guess it was pretty obvious in a way at least to him or something. And then as I’m asking the question, my subconscious voice, whatever you want to call it, this voice, is saying “he’s so drunk what does it even mean that I’m asking him this question, like what are you...” and he just sort of slit his eyes like into slits and then his eyeballs go back and forth like in the slits and you’re going “what is this?” (makes sshhh sshh sound) I didn’t know what happened. And then about a month later--I used to wake up in the middle of the night during that period of my life with terror around four in the morning-- and I woke up with that and suddenly I saw those eyes going like that. I didn’t try to think of it and the terror went away. And you realized that he was actually trying to cut through your lower realm, he was on another level, it was much more primordial. These are the most significant things. That time and about a few months before he died or like six months before he died, he came to San Francisco and was quite weak and everyone was going up and I don’t know what getting a protection cord or whatever and I’m in line and just my nature I’m going “What is this? We’re all on line we’re going up to this person, we’re getting this string.” So I went up there and I remember looking into his left eye for some reason and just going like “what’s really going on here?” you know? And all of a sudden I started to go into this place I’d never been a place that he wrote about, but I wasn’t thinking about, in this great prayer that he wrote called the *Sadhana Mahamudra*. Anyway I’m looking at him and all of a sudden I went into this place that was beyond the stars it was beyond the universe and it was a place that was almost like in those Buddhist texts a bare tree with like birds screaming? You know? And then I got a little scared that I was being rude, you know. Then my ordinary mind took over and I went “oh” and it was sort of like at that moment he showed me something beyond any social idea of what reality is, even mystical reality, it was beyond any of it. So yes, he was very very strong. Most people when they talk about it, they talk about the outrageous things, the this and that and I always think that’s a little booshy. You know? Yeah it was a little bit wild, but the 60’s were wild and the 70’s, it was wild. But everyone talks about the wacko or the strange stories, I never hear people actually talk about the... It was just that. People talk about it like it was some cult, some fetish cult. But there was something right in the center that was on another level than you are used to operating on or thinking on.

ZN: Do you have any idea what happened to the film he shot?

ND: No. I know that later on he went on to make this film called *Discovery Elegance*, that was about this dharma art event. And the only thing I know from the filmmaking is that near the end there was a long sequence where they actually photographed a big arrangement he had made, a flower arrangement, with big branches of pine trees and all this. And I know from the cameraman that he had instructed very carefully like “to stay here for four and a half seconds and then you have five seconds to pan to here.” He was still doing that thing of letting the mind... what was great is he understood that you didn’t

want the film to represent language ideas, you needed the film to be on the same plane as those two stories I told you.

ZN: And who was the cameraman?

ND: Oh I forget. Probably a few different cameramen. So then if you see the film, that one sequence near the end where they look at his thing, that's really his filmmaking. The rest is just very mundane. I don't know. For whatever reasons whether fear, chicken or wisdom, I wouldn't let myself get that close. Somehow I always was going to be me and learn from him, but I wouldn't be that close where I would work on a film with him, I wasn't that kind of person honestly. I couldn't be one of those people, I'm too I don't know arrogant? Or too...? My parents somehow I was instilled with some kind of, for all the doubts one can have about oneself, some other primordial level of self worth. They taught me that somehow. You don't just buy into... Somehow they gave that to me, even though they gave me a lot of other crazy. You know? (laughs) Like anybody.

ZN: I want to ask you about your parents, but before going there I was wondering what you mean when you talk about "film itself"? In Devotional Cinema you talk about "how film itself can be the spirit or experience of religion" and you said it again in terms of when you were talking about Trungpa.

ND: Well I think all the things we've been talking about.

ZN: The materials?

ND: Yeah, the material and the way the material works with space and time all the stuff we've talked about. (Stops talking)

After he died I didn't maybe do anything for ten years and then I met this other teacher that I like very very much. He was very important, starting around *Variations*. This teacher named Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Trungpa was very *Kagyü* with the *Karmapas* and the *Kagyü* lineage and I studied with this other teacher who was also a *Kagyü*, but his father was a great Nyingma teacher, Khyentse Rinpoche. There's this thing by the way, there's this very nice fundraiser which I edited that's on Youtube on Khyentse Rinpoche called *Jewel Mountain*. With Trungpa, because I was a little bit arrogant, or whatever was wrong with me, I never went to this seminar. There was this point where you had to go to this seminar which was three months long and at the end of that you would get what was called Vajrayana transmission. Up until then you would be getting Hinayana and Mahayana teachings. He didn't want to do the Vajrayana unless you went to this seminar. So I never went to that seminar and so I was sort of left in this place that wasn't really quite good. I learned about meditation but the whole thing hadn't come together. Then a friend told me about this teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche who is one of four sons of a very famous 20th century what's called Dzogchen teacher named ... he has a very famous

book called *Open Heart, Open Mind*. Wonderful. He was teaching *Dzogchen*. So I went to this ten-day thing, it was in California and it was just like hand and glove. It was so fabulous cause they give a teaching which is called “nature of the mind” which is what *Dzogchen* is, it’s transmission, and it was the first time I went and it was the first time that what I thought was reality was all the same thing. He has been very helpful.

ZN: And do you study with him regularly?

ND: Less lately because of economics. You used to have to go to Crestone. But I would say at least every two years I see him, and for a period I used to see him at least once a year for at least ten or twenty days of teaching. There’s footage in *Variations* which was shot at the first seminar I took with him. Because Trungpa was so powerful you were sort of very cynical about other teachers and I went in there thinking “what is this? I’ll just go for a few days” and it was great. And I know a number of Trungpa’s students who feel that the combination of these two... Because Trungpa was kind of wrathful and scary and primordial, it was like being with someone who could like, you didn’t know if he could just chop your head off and not care. You didn’t know. You didn’t quite know. I mean he wasn’t like scary that way.

ZN: His personality was a little unstable?

ND: No. Not that at all. It was more that he wasn’t quite on the human plain. Or it was like an acid plane. Have you ever taken any drugs? No, no, you’re a ballet dancer, you can’t take drugs.... So Tzoknyi Rinpoche has been really really wonderful and so getting the pointing out instructions enabled me, you see. When I made *Alaya* which evolved very much from Trungpa I knew that eventually what I wanted to do was to take images of varied subject matter and try to do the same thing. I started with *Pneuma*, which didn’t even have subject matter and then I added sand, right? But it was only one subject. Right? Cause once you introduce two subjects it’s a whole other can of worms because it produces ideas, language ideas. One subject and you get over the sand. So then it was with *Triste* and *Triste* took me about five years to edit it was a big struggle but it was successful in the end, to try to have a language of the various or the union of the various, which is harder because it’s sort of like juggling. You’re juggling and then you light the torch or you light the torches. So I think both of them are very important. But I wouldn’t want to slight Tzoknyi Rinpoche at all. I should show you (talking about Tzoknyi), you want to see?

(Phone buzzes)

In the first ten years he was teaching Western students he didn’t understand them and he realized that Westerners have this problem. That you can’t just teach the *dharma* like you would teach it to Tibetans, because Tibetans have different problems than Western people. He said Tibetans are more earthy people so they are very physical and warm, but with Western people he realized that they can’t really make progress on the path so to

speak because they have too much tension in their bodies. Their bodies are all screwed up with energies so he started to work a lot in the last years with getting people to calm their whole body down. He says that it's a particular Western problem because of all the speed. Where another society might have other kinds of obstacles. Anyway, he was wonderful.

ZN: Do you have a meditation practice now?

ND: No, I wish. I wish. Actually just lately I began again. I'll show you this other thing to. This is *Jewel Mountain*. (looking for clips from the documentary online) This is just wonderful. This is a thing I cut for someone as a fundraiser, very crudely. Oh I should have just gone straight to you tube, you see I'm such a new boy. Here it is. This is a thing that I cut. (Shows *Jewel Mountain*)

(skip to interview in Chinese restaurant)

ZN: Why do you choose to use 16mm over 8mm or 35mm?

ND: I don't know, it's good enough to do something great. When I grew up 8mm was the home movie format and 16mm was kind of professional or semi-professional. It was just the coin of the realm. And 35 mm was too expensive and the camera was too heavy, you know, everything.

ZN: Have you ever shot anything on digital?

ND: A few things just for a living. A film about a winery. But you know the digital is very different. Film relates primarily to light and since in all my films, the basic subject of my films is light, film *is* light. With a digital it's not really light, it's something else. And in digital often the worst something looks, the better it looks digitally. Like if you shot down the shadowy area of this rug it would look better than if you had light coming through trees. At least in the present moment in technology. Also, I like the physicality of it. I like editing with the rewinds and that kind of thing.

ZN: So you have like a splicer?

ND: Yeah, I'll show you. I use the same equipment, except better versions of it, that I used when I was ten. Very simple. Rewinds, a viewer, a splicer and a projector. You would try something and project it and see if it looks good. When I was making films when I was ten it was the same. I laugh to myself. I like to keep it very simple.

ZN: Were you making 16mm films when you were ten?

ND: 8mm. But I have a 16 blow up of one. I laugh to myself because it's been the same thing all my life. You used to go down to get a roll back and sometimes it would take

three or four weeks. You could only send them to Rochester. And a roll would come back and you would be so excited and you would go down into the cellar, my friend's cellar and he had a projector down there and we would project the footage. And I'm doing the exact same thing today. Shoot footage, get it back, bring it down to the cellar. For a living I don't work with computers, I have young people operate the computers, but I think as a hobby, as something I love, as an art form, I love the physicality of it. I don't find it cumbersome. The biggest problem is the cost of shipping it.

ZN: In terms of getting it developed?

ND: Yeah, sending it to the lab and all. I spend a lot of money shipping heavy things.

ZN: Is there a lab you use that you prefer?

ND: Yeah, I've been using a lab since I started shooting the color negative, that's in Denver called Cinemalab. And it's run by students of Stan Brakhage. They were familiar with me, so I get treated very nicely by them.

ZN: Do you ever enjoy films that you watch that are digitally made?

ND: By other people you mean?

ZN: yes.

ND: I like very much *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Did you see that? I confess, you want to know something? I saw it six times, in a theater. Because I don't like any more movies and I liked the movie, of course it was about the same period as my youth in New York. We used to see Dylan and stuff like that when we were 19. The thing is I thought it was a beautiful digital film. There were shots like that scene in Washington square and I thought they did it beautifully.

ZN: And what was it about how they shot it that allowed for it to be beautiful?

ND: I don't know. Sometimes I go to a digital film and I feel like I haven't gone out to the movies, I've just gone over to a friend's house and watched on a large television screen. There's this other film, I think it's called *Motor City* this French film, very wild film, that I thought was a really good digital film. For a number of years everyone was shooting on film and but then they'd do a digital lay off and then adjust all the timings, the colors, all of that and then put it back on film and now they don't have to put it back on film. So you can do things like have a scene all of a sudden where there's hardly any color in it, where it's almost black and white. You can do all these things, it's a whole other look. But a lot of times with the digital, I don't know what it is. I remember seeing that Woody Allen film that was shot in San Francisco and they did a very good job, but I felt like I was watching a television set. But the *Inside Llewyn Davis* I thought

was a wonderful script, the sound mix was extraordinary. You know it won an academy award for it. It was one of the few times that the academy award gave something to somebody that was actually... well you know, I always thought the *French Connection* deserved it and you know it won for editing and it won for best film. *Inside Llewyn Davis* I would go just to listen to the sound mix.

ZN: How do you select the subject matter for your shots? Are there particular geographies?

ND: Well each one is different. Every film is different. I made two films in the last year that were just the name of a month. One *December* and one *February*. And so I had no agenda it was just going to be whatever I shot during that month, so of course it was going to have the qualities of that month, the light. *December* was kind of very dark kind of solstice, you saw an occasional Christmas something in the background, not in an obvious way. So there was that. And then I made a film called *Avraham* because I was studying a little bit for a year with this rabbi, there were these free courses on Hasidic Judaism, and I love the Hasidic masters the Baal Shem Tov and all that and he was a wonderful teacher of them. He said to me “why don’t you make a film on a Jewish subject” and he came to one of my film shows. I said to him “are you joking? Do you want me to animate matzohs?” So he said “No, think about it”. And I came upon the word Avraham and I don’t know, I somehow was just moved by it well it’s almost like Sanskrit “Av-Ra-Ham” like a seed syllable. So every shot I took in that film I would say “Is this Av-Ra-Ham or not?” and I would just know “no it’s not Avraham, I don’t know, I could just tell”. But usually it’s not the subject matter as much as the atmosphere, whether the photography is about a very internal world or an external world.

ZN: Will you just head out with your camera and what comes to you is what you wind up filming or do you have particular things or sites in mind ahead of time?

ND: Sometimes I have particular things in mind but it doesn’t help. Right? You never know. When I was shooting the *Avraham* I was driving down a bush street and out of the corner of my eye I saw this really weird color in the window of a store where sunlight was coming in. It was an artificial plant that had kind of turned blue, a plastic plant, but it just kind of... and I said “oh” and I got out and I shot a really nice sequence there, like of the plant. You’ll see it in the film. So I got back in my car and I said “oh, so what next”. My mind just delivered up and said I should go to the-- it’s not like I’m hearing voices it’s just your mind offers up “go over to the presidio where the tennis courts are and take a walk there.” You know you’ve never done that, so I went over there and I just sort of followed my mind, so I went over there and I was walking behind the tennis courts and it was kind of desolate, sort of sandy and dry and I go “geez why am I here?” and suddenly there’s this thing caught in the bushes, paper towels and stuff, sort of twirling, tortured, blowing around and struggling and all of a sudden it sort of reminded me of the terrible Isaac story, terrible, I said “oh there’s the sacrifice” I mean you know, or there is someone struggling tied up so I shot that. That’s what I mean. When you get in the zone

you just. I feel I'm duller than the world, I'm duller than my mind. My mind is smarter than I am, you know how your mind tells you something and you don't listen sometimes?

ZN: Did you show the film to the rabbi?

ND: Yes. He and his wife came over. Yes, they liked it. They had come to one 16mm show and they were shocked that there were going to be 100 people in a room watching these silent films for an hour and a half. It was just the strangest thing. He was a wonderful teacher but also provincial in a way. I don't know. They said they liked it, but I don't know.

ZN: Did your parents immigrate to the states?

ND: Yes, on both sides. They were both Russian, but my father's came directly from Russia and my mother's came from England, I think.

ZN: And all four grandparents were Jewish?

ND: Yes. Well everyone left Russia, it was around 1900, all those pogroms. It's funny I don't know much about them. They died when I was rather young. My parents had me when they were kind of old. They never talked about the old country. Everyone I know especially Russian Jews, everyone has the same story-- they came over and it was a new life and they didn't want to talk about the other and by the time you were old enough to be interested in it they're gone. I know a lot of people... I have nowhere to trace. I would be curious what your great grandfather did. Yeah, they just didn't talk about it. They wanted to be Americans. My mother's father had a clothing store and my father's father worked in the garment industry in New York, I have his business card. It's something like 218, his name is also Nathan, 218 Greene St. I used to joke that they sold too soon (laughs). But if they had held on to that Greene St. building...

ZN: So your father's father was in the garment industry. And your mom's family?

ND: My mother's father had a clothing store in New Jersey. My father's was in Manhattan. I remember visiting my father's family in the Bronx. It was very Russian. I sort of found it intriguing. There were all these doilies everywhere and a lot of cut glass bowls with walnuts and figs. It was all very Russian. You know glasses made out of thick red glass. I just remember all these things as a kid. You know I feel a little bit like a Russian filmmaker, you know? I mean all their preoccupation with film form and the revelatory dream of what cinema could do.

ZN: The idealism?

ND: Yes, through its form. Because of Eisenstein. My experience is that, maybe this is unfair, but he didn't manifest the subtleties of his theories. Have you seen *Man with a*

Movie Camera? All those films seem torn between wanting to be poetic revolutionaries and being Soviets so all those films have this kind of weird tension between those two tendencies. I realized, I really am a Russian filmmaker. Do you know *Menilmontant* made in Paris in 1926? There's a version of it on Youtube. It's made by a filmmaker who came to Paris, a Russian his name is Dimitri Kirsanov, turns out his real name is Marc David Kaplan. You know? (laughs).

ZN: What were your parents' names?

ND: Aaron and Blanche.

ZN: Do you know what your mom's maiden name was?

ND: Yes, it's my middle name. Berger.

ZN: Your dad grew up in the Bronx and your mom grew up in Jersey?

ND: Yes. And then I was born was in Manhattan, but then my mom convinced my dad to move out to be with her family.

ZN: How old were you when you moved?

ND: I was an infant. We were in New Jersey in this Jewish neighborhood in Newark where Philip Roth was from and then we moved out to the suburbs when I was about five. I was in kindergarten. Actually to a town that Philip Roth wrote about in *Goodbye Columbus*. Millburn. But it was good and bad, the good thing was there were forests, there was a stream at the end of our backyard, you could wander in the woods you could play in the stream, you could ride your bike anywhere. That part was great. Later on, I might have had a better adolescence, let's say had I grown up in Brooklyn or Queens or something. There might have been more... I was a little bit of an outsider bohemian beatnik.

ZN: Where were your parents living in Manhattan when you were born?

ND: I'm not sure actually. I know my mother she used to joke around, she would say "I want to have you in New York, I don't want you to have that you were from New Jersey on your birth certificate."

ZN: What was Milburn like demographically when you were growing up there?

ND: I lived in a Jewish neighborhood, that was maybe two thirds Jewish. I would say it was very gentle. Afterschool sports and all. So it was little shocking when I went to junior high-school and you are suddenly mixed in with the inevitable tough Italian kids from the fifties and the very wealthy Protestant kids from Short Hills who were sort of

the dominant clique and then all that unpleasantness of being an early adolescent and insecurity. I remember it being shocking going from this mostly Jewish world to where there were all these other kinds of kids. Of course it was a good lesson.

ZN: Do you remember the name of the elementary school you went to?

ND: It was called South Mountain School. Someone that I went to that school with sent me an email recently where they showed that South Mountain School is one of the best elementary schools in America or in New Jersey. I don't know what. I can find it.

ZN: And what was your junior high called?

ND: Milburn Junior High and then Milburn High School.

ZN: And what did your parents do?

ND: My father had a printing company in the west 30's near where Penn Station was in New York. He came out of college during the time of the depression and I don't know exactly how he got into that, but he felt a little bit like he had wasted his life, doing this thing that he just got stuck with, he wasn't as deeply humane as he was or as smart. He became very interested in Buddhism when I was an adolescent and I used to go into New York with him and hear this Buddhist teacher talk, Jewish guy.

ZN: What was his name?

ND: Bernard Phillips. I have things that he wrote, they're wonderful. He was wonderful. He would always teach with this kind of thing where he would bring in the Hasidic stories. My father used to go to this study group in Manhattan and then I would go in with him once a week and attend the study group. I loved it. It was very interesting. He was very interested, because you know at the time in pop culture Zen was in, now Tibetan Buddhism is more in pop culture. But then beatniks and everyone was talking about Zen.

ZN: Did he study with D.T. Suzuki at all?

ND: His teacher Bernard Phillips did, he lived with him over a couple of years in Japan. I still have things he wrote. I have extra pamphlets. I still think he was great. I think he was one of my basic teachers. It took a long time, maybe now it seems obvious, it took a long time to understand that enlightenment wasn't some kind of revelatory experience, it was an ongoing reality. You know? Because then you sort of thought of it as some kind of "pow," and he taught again and again that you had to understand that it was an ongoing creative process. I think he probably influenced *Devotional Cinema* a lot, because he would talk about Bach.

ZN: From what age would you go with your dad to his talks?

ND: High school, like 16 or 17. Of course I thought all the adults there were kind of weird as you do when you're 16.

ZN: What did your mom think of the Buddhist seminars?

ND: I don't know. They each had their strengths and weaknesses. My mother was more passionate and emotional, she liked to paint. I would go out with her painting to do oil paintings together, you know. My father was kind of depressed. My mother said he was very depressed after the second world war. I was born during the war. My father had a lot of wisdom, he gave me a perspective through humor about what reality really was and my mother didn't have that kind of wisdom, but she had a very emotional heart. She was also kind of a little crazy, sort of a classic thing where the mom is a little (makes a woosh woosh sound) and the dad is a little depressed. You know that? (laughs) So I feel like that's my soup. Those are the ingredients of my soup. I have all these things. I know that there are things that are in me that I know that are my mother or alike, things that are... One of her worst faults was to say cruel things in a friendly way, to say things that are destructive but in a charming way so you get very confused. They were both very strong. They had a good time, they used to go. Are you from Boston?

ZN: No, New York City. Actually two of my grandparents are also from the Bronx.

ND: Grand Concourse?

ZN: Yes.

ND: Maybe they were brothers and sisters. I was so spoiled. Every Saturday morning we would drive into New York, even though my father had driven into New York the other five days of the week. I can't imagine. We would go to the Museum of Modern Art and I would go to painting class. You would just paint. And then I would have lunch at the museum we would look at paintings and then they would have film shows for kids Saturday afternoon. Mostly silent films like Chaplin and Keaton. I used to see all those with a live piano. Then we would go up to the Bronx and have dinner with the grandparents, my father's parents. That went on for quite a number of years. I was so spoiled, but I learned to appreciate paintings and you know.

ZN: What were your mom's paintings like?

ND: I don't know if I still have any. You know we would do the Sunday painter thing, we would go to a field or something and paint with oils.

ZN: But it was a hobby, not wasn't a career for her?

ND: yeah, no. There's a film I made when I was 19 called *Catch a Tiger* which is partly about her nursery school. She ran a nursery school where the kids improvised with instruments, they could play the piano just without learning and they did all these kinds of assemblages of found objects with egg crates and all sorts of scraps, industrial scraps. She was very, you know... I made a film about it. I haven't looked at it in so long and it would probably make me cry. It was the film I made right before *Ingreen*. I made *Ingreen* and I made that film and then I went to NYU for two semesters when I was 18 or 19. I went to film class. Did I tell you I was in class with Marty Scorsese? And I was not on his crew, otherwise I would be... (laughs) I was the DP on another crew. I still have that film and Mark McElhatten who programs at the, he works for Marty. He's in charge of Marty's collection which is about 30,000 films. And I said, "why don't you show Marty this film, put on this film and see if Marty remembers it." It was the film that our crew made, I have a print of it, I looked at it for the first time in about 30 years, I found it and I realized I could have been a very good DP a feature DP. This is when I was 19 and the film looked really good.

ZN: So you were in the film school at NYU specifically?

ND: Well there were only two film schools in the country then, I think NYU and USC and I had gone to Antioch for a year. I had been making films as a kid and I was walking around the campus and there was this senior with a bolex shooting this 16mm industrial. I went up to him blah blah blah. And he said "You know what? You can go to the dean and ask to do a tutorial with me instead of having a course." There was no film school and so I did that, so he taught me about light readings and f-stops and how to load the camera and montage and how to splice and all that. And then I started to make films, these black and white films with this old black and white film stock at Antioch. And then I stopped going to class. It was like one of those classic things. I was just captivated to the point where I didn't care about anything else and so I told my parents that I should go to New York and go to film school at least for two semesters and that's what I did.

ZN: Why only two semesters?

ND: Because I wasn't that interested in college and then I got a job. At the same time I got a job working at the New School for Social Research. There was a very good film class there, taught by this guy Joseph Goldberg and I became the projectionist. For about three years I ran the projector in the classroom it was just 16mm and so I heard all these discussions about film for about two or three years when I was 18,19,20 and I loved that. And there was a woman who became kind of well known if you knew the New York film world. Her name is Adrienne Mancia. She's in her 80's now, she programmed for the Brooklyn Academy of Music and all this stuff.

ZN: Oh Yeah, I just read an article about her.

ND: Yeah, was it in the New Yorker? She was in that class. So that's when I first met her, I was the projectionist. So we go way back. Oh so I was in that class, and I made this *Ingreen*. And there were two wealthy twin women, very wealthy in the East 60's had a town house that had belonged to Lerner or Loewe who wrote *My Fair Lady* and *Elevator*. So they came up to the teacher and said "We want to make a film about some painters, can you recommend a filmmaker we can use?" and he pointed at me. I was scared to death, I had never had a job. So I risked it and I took it and I did great work and then I left school and began to work in the film industry. At that time, school wasn't so important to make a living. You didn't think twice about leaving a job, there was always another job. It's so different because there were half as many people in the world as now. That's amazing. But it wasn't hard to get a job. Then there weren't that many filmmakers. Now everyone's a filmmaker. Everyone's nephew. Now with the electronic age everyone's a filmmaker, it was more esoteric then so it wasn't so hard. So I just started to get job after job.

ZN: As an editor, filmmaker or DP?

ND: First as a camera man and at a certain point it turned to editing. I would do anything. That part was kind of easy. But I worked for these two fellows for a while, they were making industrials for this famous aesthetic theorist, Rudolf Arnheim. They were making three films for him and I got a job working on them, but I realized after working for them for about five months how much of their time was involved with the business of film. And I thought "I don't want film to ever be a business for me." I'm so spoiled, only child. Anyway I learned my lesson.

ZN: Where were you living at the time?

ND: When I was there at NYU I was living on West 3rd street and then on Waverly place. So all that stuff that was in *Llewyn Davis*. We used to go out on a Thursday night, Dylan would be at this thing called Gerde's Folk City. A lot of people objected to the film because it wasn't historically accurate. What was the club in the film? Oh, I can't believe it. I liked the film because it was just itself, it wasn't really trying to put you in that time with any kind of way. But the script did. You know the whole thing about the abortion, all these things were such major issues. Getting someone pregnant and then finding a doctor who would... All those things were such a part of... And the thing about the share-rides. There used to be these companies where they would pay you to drive a car for someone to some place and then a group of you would get together and share the car. So it was very much like that. You know that trip to Chicago, it was very real.

ZN: What do you remember about Martin Scorsese in film class?

ND: He was very confident (laughs) he dressed in a way that was different from how I dressed. He was like a real Italian. He had these pointy shiny shoes and a sport jacket and he would walk in sort of slapping his feet. Even then he had an entourage. And his

editor Thelma was his editor then. I knew a lot more about American film than other people, so I remember talking to him a lot about American Hollywood film, from the forties and stuff. It was a funny thing, I actually have the Village Voice article. I submitted this film *Ingreen* to the Ann Arbor Film Festival, I think it was the second or third Ann Arbor Film Festival. And Gregory Markopoulos, do you know him? He was on the jury. So Jonas let Gregory write the column that week, because Gregory was going to report on the Ann Arbor film festival. In the article Marty had submitted his NYU short. Mark told me he talked to Marty about it and Marty said “oh I remember that review, but he said Gregory wouldn’t like the kind of films I make,” but he said he remembered and that he liked the showing of *Ingreen*. (laughing) I don’t know why I am telling you this. It was a small world.

ZN: Do you remember when or how you were exposed to the Beats?

ND: Oh yeah, you were in junior high so you knew about beatniks. You know what I’m saying. I used to go in like to the village, the Hungry Eye? I used to go in and hear this terrible poetry about H-Bombs and you know air conditioned banality. You know.

ZN: You would do that when you were in high school?

ND: Yes. By the time I went to Antioch it was the only kind of beatnik, maybe Reed or something, maybe there were only like two or three beatnik colleges in America? Every other college, I remember going on those college tours with my parents. We went to Tufts and I wasn’t smart enough to get in those places or at least in that way, but all those places I said to my parents “This is just like high school!” I mean it’s got the same vibration and then we went to Antioch everyone’s walking around in sandals and playing recorders on the lawn, you know, all that kind of stuff. It was really good for me, because I went from being kind of an outsider kind of person in New Jersey, it’s so weird suddenly you’re in this whole other group of people and you’re like loved you know and you’re making films and there’s this complete new sense of self.

ZN: When did you begin reading Buddhist texts?

ND: I fell in love with haiku, which I guess you could call a Buddhist text in a sense. You know? And haiku was also part of the beatnik Zen thing. There was a guy on the radio at that time and all the smart kids loved called Jean Shepherd and he had this talk show and he was always promoting Zen. Anyway I used to read, I loved the Haikus.

ZN: Like Basho?

ND: Yes. I remember very vividly that it’s like springtime English class in high school and reading these haikus in the back during class. And you know the **Haikus**, when they work, they’re the thing that inspired my filmmaking. So with the haiku, they establish

one image and then they establish a related image and then the third thing breaks that, but breaks it open into newness. I could feel that viscerally when the third thing happened, I would get a little you know, like stunned? Blink? Not blink, but you know. I remember looking around and watching the teacher teach and all the kids taking notes and I was in this kind of euphoria of newness, so that was the beginning of reading Buddhist things. And then when I went off to Antioch and read like Siddhartha. You know? Which I loved. Things like that. And you would try to read Buddhist texts, but at that time Buddhism transferred into Western culture in a way that wasn't always helpful. They hadn't figured out the language, there were so many words that caused complete confusion. Things like emptiness, nothingness or the destruction of ego. All these things they were very sloppy. You know they can cause you a lot of misunderstandings. There is a book I loved called *Supreme Identity*, I think you can still get it that became an important book. I met Jerry when I was twenty and we both read and loved that book and we read Alan Watts. Then Alan Watts used to have a radio show on WBAI in the morning and I used to listen to that with my father. So I had all that. And then I took acid for the first time before my dad died when I was making this film *Summer Wind* and my father had given me a copy of the *Tao Te Ching* the *Lao Tzu* and I loved that.

And at a certain point I went into a very bad depression, I don't know if you would call it a depression, it wasn't a thing where like I couldn't get out of bed, I just was very... Sad and I had lost connection or trust in the world and in my heart and part of that was what I found out later was a fear with being gay. When you admit that you can get totally paranoid. At that time it was still an illness and illegal. It was hard to negotiate that when you are fifteen or sixteen. It's hard to negotiate your heart, and you're also a faggot and all that. So it is very hard to be your heart, you sort of lose or create this other thing. It actually happened when Jerry and I moved in together to the house in the country in *Hours for Jerome*, it's when it got really really bad.

ZN: That was in Vermont?

ND: In New Jersey, but up in the corner near Pennsylvania and Port Jervis where it's quite rural, kind of really redneck. You know my family began to relate to me differently. My family found out, you know my mother's family with all her sisters found out and all these people that I had grown up with for thirty years, not thirty but you know twenty or so. You were just who you were, I was Nick, suddenly I remember I visited the family once for a family gathering and everyone was acting slightly strange to me. I was about 22 and everyone was acting strange and saying strange things to me and I didn't understand it and then I had a classic cousin with orange hair. You know? And he talked to me in a lisp and I went "ohhh, I get it." So I got very paranoid, I lost all my stable reference points, they sort of cracked apart. My friends were still my friends, but I was paranoid about it.

ZN: This was in your early twenties?

ND: Yes. So even though your friends were your friends, I lost trust in myself. I was no longer just me, I was this thing. It was a little horrifying. Every once in a while I give myself some sympathy. Even last night at one point I was thinking about what it was like to be fifteen. You never give yourself sympathy for being stuck in that kind of situation. I got very, I don't know if you would call it depression, but I was very fucked up for almost seven years. Fucked up in the sense that I couldn't think. Every sentence I said, I had to say artificially, to survive the next moment. So I don't know if that's depression, I don't know what it is, but I was not happy. In seven years twice I came out of it, I came into reality. Once was at that lake, where we were living. We would go jumping into the lake in the middle of the night. We used to take a row boat out in the middle of the night in the summer and it would be black and then we would jump into the lake. Cold, you know? Once I jumped into the water and all of a sudden I was laughing and I was back to who I always was and then all of a sudden it just came back like within about a minute. And the one other time was in San Francisco after we had just moved here, it wasn't a specific trigger, I was just getting on the trolley car and all of a sudden I was just on the trolley car like everybody else was, really it was terrible. That's the period that I started to collect the stuff for *Pneuma* because I was too disconnected from the world.

Also, moving to California was very disorienting, so that's when I began to collect the pure emulsion, that felt really healing, or that's where the healing had to take place. Because each film I make is a healing for the moment you're in, so each moment you need a different kind of healing. Sometimes this, sometimes that, you know hot, cold whatever. So at that time images didn't mean anything to me, but all that swirling grain, that was the level of my discontent. Then meeting Trungpa Rinpoche and doing the meditation, they had this thing called Shambhala Training. I slowly started to work my way out and I worked my way out enough to edit *Hours for Jerome*, which I had shot fifteen years earlier, but I had stopped working, I stopped putting out films for about fifteen years, I couldn't. I was shooting all that time I was shooting *Hours for Jerome*. Then I was shooting a lot of the footage that would eventually be in *Triste* and I was also shooting the sand and I was collecting the emulsion other things but I couldn't. Then I got out of myself enough to risk making *Hours for Jerome*. Because obviously when you haven't worked for 15 years you have a very ideal idea of what the quality of your work should be, but you haven't actually the merit of working to have gotten there. So you have this disparity between what you are capable of and what you really know you know. It wasn't until around *Variations* or something where all of a sudden I was in the present moment where I knew how I wanted to express myself, it was all starting to come together and then it exploded. I don't know how many films there are between *Triste* and... I'm having a conflict. Did I tell you about my new film? I don't know what to call my new film *Intimations*, it was either going to be *Emanations*, but everyone said no and I said it should be called *Interlude*. Is *Interlude* fruity? Is it very common? Too romantic?

ZN: Is there a Balanchine piece called *Interlude*?

ND: is there? There must be. There must be a ballet called Interlude. Well he has *Episodes*. No, there must be. How could there not? You think it's a little too common? Maybe we can look at the film and you can see. Then it just kind of burst and one just came out after the next. Tzokenyi Rinpoche uses the term mind stream a lot, to me the films are like mind streams this is the mind stream. These are the things I was drawn to, I like that, just trusting. First I thought I was just cheating because I was too lazy to think up a film, have you ever noticed when you think you are doing something out of weakness, but it's actually very perceptive, have you ever noticed that about yourself? You think, "why am I crazy? Why am I doing this now?" but then it's like "wait a minute, yes, this is what I should be doing now."

ZN: How do you know when you are done editing a film?

ND: Well I have one at home that we can look at. I mean there are a couple of things, one is you get to the point where you look at it and then everything you try beyond that doesn't work. That's where I was yesterday, I made four changes and none of them worked, just to test. Then at a certain point you just know "oh this is the film."

ZN: And after you splice it and you feel you have made a mistake what do you do?

ND: Well you have a work print. So right now with the color negative, you shoot negative then you make a print called the work print and you edit the work print, if you cut a shot too short, here's the piece you cut out, you put it back together. Then when you're done you send the work print and the negative to a negative cutter and it's usually female, negative cutters, she cuts the negative to match the work-print. Then you have the negative all cut and you make the print. So those places where you have put something back are just one sided, you put a slash when you prepare the work print for the negative cutter. You take a white grease pencil and you put a slash through a splice that's not a splice really, or shouldn't be.

ZN: How did you meet Jerome?

ND: He came to *Ingreen* actually with Gregory Markopoulos and this other very well known, well known in that small world, critic at that time named Ken Kelman. Then the next day I was at the filmmaker's coop submitting a film and he was there. He had been at the show, I think he came up to me at the show and said "that was a really beautiful." I would always tell students that the only reason I make experimental films is to meet someone and I did at my first premier film.

ZN: How did Jerome know Gregory Markopoulos?

ND: He was the assistant for Gregory for a year. Jerry was a painter, very poor living on the Lower East Side and he started to go to experimental film, we used to go to the same experimental film shows before we ever met.

ZN: Where were they being shown?

ND: We both remember being at the premiere opening night of *Scorpio Rising* at this theater, it might have been called the 23rd Street Theater. There were all these little venues, sometimes they had a projector in the room and sometimes they had a projection booth. But we were both at that before we knew each other. There were various screenings we can remember and talk about before we knew each other. I don't know I think you're a young person, I don't know who actually introduced him to Stan Brakhage but if you're young, it would be like kids with a music club. Someone knew Gregory and introduced Jerry to Gregory. Jerry had just had his apartment robbed by some junkies and they stole all his paints, Gregory said "you can live at my place," they weren't lovers, but "you can live at my place, help me with my film." I always thought Gregory paid his room and board.

ZN: Where was Jerry from?

ND: Jamaica, Queens. Yeah.

ZN: Where was the screening of *Ingreen*?

ND: Oh it was at this gallery called the Washington Square Gallery on this street called West Broadway that was renamed, it was a cobblestone street and it was near where all those NYU apartments are below Washington Square. When I was making *Catch a Tiger* the film about my mother's nursery school when I was nineteen, I was living in New York and I used to go to a lab in Times Square called Lab TV, near forty seventh street, upstairs. It was a good lab. I got on the IRT and I had about ten rolls of sixteen mm film and I got on at West 4th street and this fellow got on at 14th st. and sat opposite me. He had about twelve rolls of 16mm films, wearing this old olive corduroy jacket and we smiled at each other and we got off at the same stop and we walked, we weren't talking, up to the same lab. And then he was ahead of me with the clerk and I saw on the boxes that it said Jonas Mekas and I said "oh I love your column and..." Then a year later I made *Ingreen* and I was staying in a house, a house that was going to be sold in Manhattan, we were all squatting. It was one of those things where we all had mattresses on the floor and rewinds, all these young film kids. I made this film *Ingreen* and I asked Jonas if he would come and see it. He came over and he liked it and he said he wanted to show it at the gallery. Then he showed it and wrote about it in the column in the Voice. Just a few columns. but I was... I had entered the world (laughs). so.

ZN: And you said you invited Brakhage to your apartment to see the film?

ND: Yeah, I wrote him a letter. I had a semi girlfriend at the time named Lucinda. I was living in Berkeley, and she and I, well... I found a letter, one days a few years ago. She had sent me all these letters I had written her. So there was this letter where I wrote to

her about Brakhage coming over. I'm a strange mixture of being very insecure, very unsure of myself, feeling very not up to snuff, at the same time there's a certain kind of...?

ZN: Chutzpah?

ND: Yeah, chutzpah. When I read these letters to this girlfriend it sounds like this person is very confident. It's strange how you manifest and how you feel inside, it can be so different.

ZN: What was your relationship with Brakhage like over the next several years?

ND: When he saw the film he asked me why I used sound. And I said I thought it would make the film more powerful. So then he says, "well then you should go to Hollywood." (laugh) I mean, you know. Though he liked the film a lot, I know it effected him. Then over the years we would write and anytime he came to New York, you know before the Tibetans came he was like one of the... You would hear "Brakhage is coming" and you would go and hear him speak and you would be very interested in what he was thinking about or discovering. It was an important thing. That went on his whole life. Then we became more and more friendly. And my films became better and he could appreciate them.

ZN: What would you write to each other about?

ND: I don't know, I don't have any of my letters to him, I should have made copies. I have all his letters. I have to look at them. We would always be talking about film and things or poetry.

ZN: Did you have a religious practice as a child?

ND: Well I was Barmitzvad. I did Hebrew school three days a week. It didn't quite take hold.

ZN: Did you observe Shabbat?

ND: No, you know what? My grandmother, when my mother's mother was living with us she would light candles on Friday nights and so forth. And then I lost all touch with Judaism. And then there was this temple not very far from me. There's this great teacher actually from the Boston area and his name was Larry Kushner. Like I said he's mostly a scholar of Hasidic Judaism and he's like a Rabbi emeritus, that's what it's called, he doesn't have to raise money for the temple, all he has to do is come and teach. He's a fantastic teacher. Someone told me about him and it's free and I love this temple. It's really a wealthy temple, big dome. I'm really poor so I like that stuff. So I went (and this is going to sound so funny) and I said "I have a perfect right to be here, I'm a seventy

year old Jewish man who's interested in..." It was funny because all of sudden I just felt completely at home. Most situations I feel like I am a little on the margin and I realized that I had the perfect right to be here. And of course they love new blood, you know? So I started to go to his classes and he taught every Shabbat in the morning from 9:30-11 and he would go over a section of the Torah and then the Hasidic interpretation of that. And the really good book we were using was by Arthur Green he teaches at Brandeis and I found out, do you know who Bernie Glassman is?

ZN: Yes, the Zen Peacemakers.

ND: Yes, so I have friends who I stay with in Paris and she's a Zen Roshi. Bernie was staying there this last November when I was there also and I was telling her about Kushner and Arthur Greene. And he said "oh you know Arthur Green's fabulous, he's a big into Buddhism" He re-instilled..., I had lost complete contact, I even took Hebrew last summer. I went to Hebrew school again to learn. I was curious to see if I could relearn it, but it was much better, because now at least in class, even though I don't have the vocabulary, at least phonetically I knew the reading and that was gratifying. Kushner would say, "you have to somehow make something of Shabbat, if you don't make something of Shabbat you know..." There was another young girl in the class named Sarah, of course. She was studying to be a Rabbi and she said "oh there's this great thing down in the mission on Friday nights called the mission minion where they do..." So I went with her. It's in this thing called The Women's Building on 18th street. That was amazing because I had lost all contact with Judaism. I was like totally Tibetan Buddhist and all of a sudden there were all these people and for an hour and a half I was with all these people singing and praying, banging their foot with drums, very joyful, and it was very very nice. They were very nice. They would say, "if you don't have anywhere to go for Shabbat dinner just raise your hand" and everyone was invited to someone else's dinner. I never had the nerve. But then they were also saying that around Passover, "if you need a Seder to go to..." and this woman came up to me, my age, everyone else is younger, and she said "would you like to come to my seder?" I said to myself as a dare "yes," so I went. She was in a very nice booshy neighborhood with her own house, you know? I knew I was going to ring the doorbell and it was going to start and it was really nice. I was the stranger. She had two sons, one was a writer who lived in Paris. It was all very... I don't know if it was growing up in the fifties when there was so much hostility, I don't know what it was. I was always ready for the shit to the fan, and all of sudden these people were so nice. I had somehow forgotten. Does it sound strange? When you go into these Jewish things, they're all like nice to you. And that isn't like Buddhism where people can be a little competitive, like who's more enlightened or realized. So I went every Saturday to his class for two years and then I read Martin Buber. There's a great Martin Buber book on Hasidism called Hasidism and the Modern Man, so then I took a Martin Buber class, I took Baal Shem Tov class. I was taking like three classes. They were free, they had food, this wealthy temple.

ZN: Do you feel like reconnecting with Judaism has changed your approach to your filmmaking at all?

ND: No, I think it strengthened me. There was this part of me that was kind of a shadow and all of a sudden, it was like this shadow thing that didn't really go. I mean you're proud to be Jewish and all that, but the religion seemed like a shadow thing. It just seemed unsuccessful and not for me and then he taught me how it was for me. It was this kind of like this part that was me became realized and a lot of it. The third or fourth time I came to class, I was out at the fruit and cookie table, and he said "what's your religious training? He said to me." I told him I got involved with Tibetan Buddhism, so he looked at me and says "Is this real or is this a dream?" I said "really?" and he said "yes, tell me, is this real or is this a dream? You've got to make up your mind. Cause he said for Judaism this is real. You know?" But at a certain point I realized that with a Hasidic Jew, that it's very Buddhistic, that God is nothing. Or that the Hasidic basic view is that this is God, the main duty of a Jew is to make God happy. How can you make God most happy? Well you can do mitzvahs, or even great mitzvahs, but the way to really make God happy is to be in union with God, which means being in union with this. And then you understand from Hasidic Judaism that this is the creation, creation didn't happen, but each moment... So I said to the rabbi "what it does, emptiness becomes God, so Hasidism instills emptiness with a kind of strength, no? You know?" So I found that really good for me. He was a wonderful teacher.

ZN: Even if the world is empty, it's as real as anything gets.

ND: Yes. He on the other hand is very parochial. It's a little dramatic but he says "that the second holocaust" (he's my age exactly) "was losing our generation to Eastern religion."

ZN: That's a little...

ND: I know. He says, because the mysticism and the assimilation to Europeans Jews threw out everything that was Eastern and mystical. So I said to him that I would ask my rabbi when I was twelve, "what is eternal life?" And the rabbi would say, "oh people remember you after you die." You were twelve and I thought that didn't do it. And he said that that was a typical answer then. He said that when he went to rabbinical school for six years, the Zohar wasn't mentioned once. So he feels Judaism lost out, but on the other hand he's a little too..., well he's a rabbi and the rabbi's job is to make the tribe you know. So he has a slightly derogatory views about Buddhism. He thinks that calling this a dream is not... I said to him that the trouble is you have taken the best of Judaism, the very very best and compared it to mediocre Buddhism. If you took the best of Buddhism and compared it to mediocre Judaism, you can do the same thing. But he's really... His daughter is a rabbi, her husband's a rabbi. They are there. He wants me to go to his daughter's service which is also in the mission. But this mission minion was fun, I was touched that there are all these people who can sing all these Hebrew prayers for an hour

and a half and know everything. I was really touched, that everyone could read Hebrew, I liked it a lot.

ZN: There's a lot in *Devotional Cinema* that seems very Buddhist. It seems like there are a lot of terms that you use in *Devotional Cinema* that could easily be translated to very specific Buddhist terms. For example "intermittence" and *sunyata* or this idea of health vs. ill health and *kusala* or *akusala*, and what you were describing before with *bodhicitta* and what you were describing before with a state of vulnerability or the state of devotion. I was wondering if there was a reason you didn't cast the book in explicitly Buddhist terms?

ND: Yeah, well it's what they call a skillful means. (laughs) What are those two things *prajna* and...?

ZN: *Upaya*?

ND: Yes, *upaya*. *Prajna* and *upaya*. I had a number of agendas that no one has ever mentioned. My big agenda with *Devotional Cinema* was to show that there was a synchronicity between the Western tradition of "genius" and Vajrayana Buddhism. That was my idea. Because if you think about it, every reference is to something in Western civilization, but the spirit is completely Buddhist, right? So that's the secret part of that book. The thing is, do you know how many people love that book? I get letters from all around the world. People love that book. But it gives them the freedom, it gives you complete freedom...

ZN: To engage with it without getting caught up in identity issues?

ND: Yes. Also, it's a filmmaker's book. It's also a pothead's book. (laughs) No, no. I guess it's gay marriage that's legal now, not pot. (laughs) Do you know the term *terma* in Tibetan Buddhism? Padmasambhava has all these texts either in real places or in space and a *terton* is someone who receives *terma*, who receives a pure teaching from Padma. It is somehow hidden and it appears. They are often like Chogyam Trungpa who was a *terton* who received five or six major texts, the Shambhala texts. All these texts all of a sudden came down through him. Like once he was playing poker with some friends and he said "please write this down." All of a sudden they stopped playing and wrote out this whole text for a few hours. They are often alcoholic, die young, fringe. Have you ever seen any footage of the Tibetan oracle? The official oracle? It's fringe, right? Which I understand.

So a friend of mine, a woman, she said that she thought that *Devotional Cinema* was like my *terma*, because that book arrived. I was going to teach a semester at Berkeley in 1990 and I never taught a semester and so I spent the summer preparing. What was I going to teach?! So I walked around with my notebook, I had some good smoke, right? And that went on. And then slowly the whole structure came out of nowhere. I mean it came out

of old experience of everything I've talked about, but it came to me, all those things, you know? These specific things that could be sourced to different things, you know my father's teacher and everything just came. Then I gave the talk in Princeton and then the Museum of Modern Art gave us a thousand dollars because they were putting out a book called the *Hidden God*. I split the money with my friend Ed Kopp who worked on the book and it was a wonderful time because we worked two days a week from 1-5. Four hours. Then I took him to Chinatown for dinner, because he lived in Chinatown. It never became a burden and there was a lot of clarity.

When I was writing that book it became very magical. I would get up in the middle of the night and write four sentences right there. I would write them down in the dark because I was scared that if turned on the light I would forget them. I would bring my notes to Nick the next day and they would be like written over themselves? There was one paragraph that came that was untouched. And various flashes. But you are asking about *Devotional Cinema*. So the *Devotional Cinema*, my *prajna* or *upaya*. Whatever it is, I wanted to say these things as though they are primordially true, they don't belong to any... they're just true. I thought if I said anything about any religion... I can imagine that if I were a Jesus freak and I started to mention Jesus, anyway people don't want to hear it and it is very distracting. So the real secret or the secret thing is that thing that I really wanted to bring into union, you know Mr. B and Mr. B (Balanchine and the Buddha) (laughs) I'm not talking about self realization, I'm talking about form, artistic form, the book is about artistic form.

ZN: Would you say the book is about formalism?

ND: I think the book is about the ability of film to express genius. So genius of what? That film can be in a state of genius and if it's in a state of genius it will be... in Tzochen they use the term Rigpa. Rigpa has to do with clear seeing, so the rigpa, clarity. I think I felt that film could be an act of genius in some sense and that genius was also selfless and that genius had the attributes of enlightenment. No one's ever mentioned that and in a way I'm happy, it's kind of a secret about the book, but I'm surprised that no one's ever... it seems to obvious, it's very Buddhist, it's all about Western culture. Does it mention anything Asian? No, right?

ZN: Well, Ozu.

ND: Yes, Ozu who was a Western, he loved Western... I mean he's like a Buddha. Ozu never mentioned Buddha, occasionally there's a Buddhist ceremony as in a funeral because that's when you would go to a temple when someone died. But I don't think anyone's ever mentioned... Certainly not about the Buddha or...

ZN: well so much of Zen is in secular Japanese culture, it's there

ND: yeah, it's there

ZN: People write about the *zazen* of the seating and the camera height...

ND: yeah, the camera and all. And there's certainly the sense of impermanence and what he does with his montage and the screen as I tried to explain in the book. Oh, there's a new edition, I should give it to you. I think that Ozu had the same instinct-- that to drag that in is to taint the thing.

ZN: it makes it too solid?

ND: Yeah, it takes you away from reality in a certain way.

ZN: You talk a lot about polyvalent montage, I was wondering if you could explain where that term comes from and what you mean when you use it?

ND: Yeah, well actually I think it's a term from biology, I think, and I wasn't the first one to use it in regards to montage by any means. I think the main thing I meant by polyvalent is literally... Valent is what? Balance? And poly is multiple. So multiple balance. To me what it meant was that you could make a film that was in itself an organism that it wasn't representing anything outside of itself, so for me I came to it

(two middle aged men from the next table in the Chinese restaurant come over to talk to ND)

ND: Well hello.

Man 1: Hi

ND: Hello.

Man 2: Hi. We were just getting a... You look like a famous statistician I might know but you're not he. Are you on TV?

ND: No, if I wish I were, I could take you out to lunch.

Man 2: Do you know Leo Goodman? He did log linear analysis. That's why I was thinking, "is that Leo?"

ND: I understand. I'm a type, I know.

Man 2: What do you do?

Dorsky: I'm a filmmaker.

Man 2: Oh, what kind of films do you make?

Dorsky: Eh, kind of like poems. Do you live in the city?

Man 2: yes I do.

ND: I'm going to have four shows at the Yerba Buena Center

Man 2: What's your name?

ND: Nathaniel Dorsky. It's in November.

Man 2: What are the films about? I'm a big film goer.

ND: They're silent, they have no characters, no actors, no story.

Man 2: Umm, okay.

ND: Yeah, life changing. (laughs) They're in November.

Man 2: Well good luck with that. With the shows I mean, I may show up.

ND: Yes, well they're silent. Do you like poetry at all?

Man 2: Yes, in fact I may write my next book about a friend of mine who committed suicide, so I am going to be reading the *Divina Comedia* in 14th century Italian.

ND: Uh huh. Well the films are in the spirit of poetry. They're not a third person story. There are no characters who have problems. They are just about existence.

Man 2: Sounds interesting. Who is this charming young woman?

ZN: (cringe) Err, I'm interviewing him

ND: She's doing her PhD on my films' relationship to Buddhism

Man 2: Which films are those?

ND: My films.

Man 2: What's your most famous film?

ND: I don't have any famous films.

Man 2: (talking to ZN) I'll ask you, what's his most famous film?

ZN: Well he's pretty prolific, but none of them are particularly...

ND: None of them are famous.

Man 2: Well which are you most proud of?

Dorsky: It's like, I once asked a birder, a friend of mine's a big birder, I once asked him what's your favorite bird? "Oh" he said

Man 2: (cuts ND off, directs question to ZN) well what's your favorite film?

ZN: Probably a film called *Alaya*.

Man 2: *Alaya*, okay I'll look it up. Is it available on Netflix?

ZN: haha, no.

ND: You can only see it in the theater on film.

Man 2: Umm okay, is it in the Berkeley Archives?

ND: Well actually the Pacific Film Archive owns a lot of prints.

Man 2: oh, okay. Dersky you said?

ND: Dorsky, think of a door and then the sky.

Man 2: Well I can think of something easier. Maybe a pneumonic device.

ND: Yes, well...

Man 2: Okay, well nice talking to you.

ND: Okay, see you at the show.

Man 2: Thank you Bye.

ND: So... well I forgot what we were talking about.

ZN: Polyvalent montage.

ND: Right, for me what happened was, you can read all these things from Scott. I was about twenty-two or twenty-three, I had lot's of friends who were poets and I had this new book by John Ashbury that had come out called *Rivers and Mountains* and I went over to a friend's house. It was a friend I liked to smoke hashish with and I had really good hash at that time, and so I remember picking up the book and starting to read it, one of his poems, and because I was so stoned, reading it very slowly. When I'm in public I don't talk like this, in Colorado or Washington you can talk like this, I realized that each word was sort of like a note on a piano and I slowly read each word, and Michael said well you know "John doesn't read them that slowly." Actually he reads terribly his own poetry. I said to Michael at the time, "do you think you could make a film where every cut was just to a new thing based on the poetic transition of that cut. It had no other, you know?" And I remember even mentioning it to Jerry and Jerry wasn't sure if you could do it, and that's why it took me five years eventually to cut *Triste* because you realized that it had to open up that way, but if it didn't echo back in some way, you could go maybe four or five shots, but then it would just collapse, just because of variety. But then I slowly realized that you had to make each cut from the haiku. It all came together. In the haiku each cut had to have that (taps sternum), so if you kept hitting this, than the whole thing wouldn't fall apart. So you were trying to do two things at once: open up in terms of the film's own needs, the film being its own place, and not about another; but at the same time each time it opened it up, it also hit your heart, your heart center, in some tender way. So then I slowly got better at shooting, starting with *Variations* I began to shoot footage which I learned from *Triste*, which was made of just scraps from the six films that I never finished, all different kinds of projects. I learned how to start shooting in a way that would be more appropriate for that kind of montage, to the point now where the last few years the films have this complete integral quality of... That's why I'm happy about one of those shows in New York because I want to show *Variations* in the same show as *Intimations* and *Interlude*, just because I thought it would be fun to see some of the beginning of it. Because *Variations* is kind of humorous. I was in a very bad auto accident and I had a very bad concussion so there were about three years where I couldn't enjoy conversation at all.

ZN: When was this?

ND: I don't know, I guess I had just finished *Triste* and I had this head on collision, and then I couldn't enjoy conversation. I went to the best neurologist, they said "oh you just have to wait five years for it to heal." Even the neurologist said "have some coffee and aspirin and you won't feel it." So I found out that just smoking a little bit of weed really made my brain feel good. Instead of being a complete depressive and spaced out, I started going out with my camera. The concussion made me feel like a three or four-year-old, you have limited abilities, so if anything is too fast or complicated...

I would try to take shots that would be appropriate for an avant-garde film like *Triste* had. What's the protocol for an avant-garde film? Slightly alien, negative view of the world. And I tried to do that and it made me feel literally sick. On the concussion you couldn't

do that, you couldn't like make an attitude it was too complicated. So I said to myself, "why did I start making films when I was ten?" "Oh," I said, "because I loved things and I wanted to take pictures of them and show them to people." So I just started to shoot things like a swan on a lake. I mean the shots that are in *Variations*, that are of ducks swimming, like in the park. And then *Variations* bloomed and then all my filmmaking bloomed once I gave up the idea of being an avant-garde filmmaker and just became more this songs of innocence. But it all happened, it wasn't contrived, all of it really happened. So I always thought polyvalence, the potential of it was so interesting and then the idea that you could unite that with *dharma*, not only could you be polyvalent, but be expressing mind stream or impermanence and luminosity. Which of course comes from the haiku. So I think that's my whole story.

ZN: Last question, do you think of your films as documentaries?

ND: No, I think of them as poems or songs. Sometimes I take a very good shot, which smells a little like a documentary to me, especially shots of people. Like I had this film *Intimations* where there's a lot of people in it, in this café. I shot it for quite a while, but the only shots I could use, are not shots where it felt like someone is like observing, to have any of that smell of journalism or document. It has to be a shot where the entire manifestation of light and shadow, face, psyche is all... you know.

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Nathaniel Dorsky Filmography

- Ingreen*. 1964, 16mm, color, silent, 12 min.
- A Fall Trip Home*. 1964, 16mm, color, silent, 11 min.
- Summerwind*. 1965, 16mm, color, silent, 14 min.
- Two Personal Gifts a.k.a. Fool's Spring*. Dir. Jerome Hiler & Nathaniel Dorsky, 1966-1967, 16mm, color, silent, 7 min.
- Hours For Jerome Part 1*. 1966/70-82, 16mm, color, silent, 21 min.
- Hours For Jerome Part 2*. 1966/70-82, 16mm, color, silent, 24 min.
- Pneuma*. 1977-83, 16mm, color, silent, 28 min.
- Ariel*. 1983, 16mm, color, silent, 16 min.
- Alaya*. 1976-87, 16mm, color, silent, 28 min.
- 17 Reasons Why*. 1985-87, 16mm, color, silent, 19 min.
- Triste*. 1974-96, 16mm, color, silent, 18.5 min.
- Variations*. 1992-98, 16mm, color, silent, 24 min.
- Arbor Vitae*. 1999-00, 16mm, color, silent, 28 min.
- Love's Refrain*. 2000-01, 16mm, color, silent, 22.5 min.
- The Visitation*. 2002, 16mm, color, silent, 18 min.
- Threnody*. 2004, 16mm, color, silent, 25 min.
- Song and Solitude*. 2005-06, 16mm, color, silent, 21 min.
- Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude*. (Reel 1) 2005-2006, 16mm, color, silent, 40 min.
- Kodachrome Dailies from the Time of Song and Solitude*. (Reel 2) 2005-2006, 16mm, color, silent, 40 min.
- Winter*. 2007, 16mm, color, silent, 21.5 min.

Sarabande. 2008, 16mm, color, silent, 15 min.

Compline. 2009, 16mm, color, silent, 18.5 min.

Aubade. 2010, 16mm, color, silent, 11.5 min.

Pastourelle. 2010, 16mm, color, silent, 16 min.

The Return. 2011, 16mm, color, silent, 27 min.

August and After. 2012, 16mm, color, silent, 18.5 min.

April. 2012, 16mm, color, silent, 26 min.

Song. 2013, 16mm, color, silent, 18.5 min.

Spring. 2013, 16mm, color, silent, 23 min.

Summer. 2013, 16mm, color, silent, 22.5 min.

December. 2014, 16mm, color, silent, 14.5 min.

February. 2014, 16mm, color, silent, 16.5 min.

Avraham. 2014, 16mm, color, silent, 20 min.

Intimations. 2015, 16mm, color, silent, 18 min.

Prelude. 2015, 16mm, color, silent, 20 min.

Autumn. 2016, 16mm, color, silent, 26 min.

The Dreamer. 2016, 16mm, color, silent, 19 min.

Lux Perpetua I. 2000-2002/2016, 16mm, color, silent, 23 min.

Lux Perpetua II. 1999-2002/2016, 16mm, color, silent, 31 min.

Other Archer. 2003/2016, 16mm, color, silent, 9 min.

Elohim. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 31 min.

Abaton. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 19 min.

Coda. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 16 min.

Ode. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 20 min.

September. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 20 min.

Monody. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 16 min.

Epilogue. 2017, 16mm, color, silent, 15 min.

Stan Brakhage Filmography (for this project)

Window Water Baby Moving. 1959, 16mm, 12 mi.

Thigh Line Lyre Triangle. 1961, 16mm, 6 min.

Dog Star Man: Parts 1-4. 1962-1963, 16mm.

Mothlight. 1963, 16mm, 3 min.

23rd Psalm Branch. 1966-67, 8mm, 69 min.

The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes. 1971, 16mm, 32 min.

The Text of Light. 1974, 16mm, 71 min.

Additional Filmography

The Cup. Dir. Khyentse Norbu. 1999.

Five Dedicated to Ozu. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. 2003.

Flight of the Red Balloon. Dir. Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Late Spring. Dir. Yasujiro Ozu. 1949.

Maboroshi No Hikari. Dir. Hirokazu Koreeda. 1997.

Old Dog. Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2011

Spring Summer Autumn Winter And-- Spring. Dir. Kim Ki-Duk. 2004.

Tokyo-ga. Dir. Wim Wenders. Doc. About Yasujiro Ozu. 1985.

Why has Bodhidharma Left for the East. Dir. Bae Yong-Kyun. 1989





