

## **UC Irvine**

### **UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

#### **Title**

A World Apart: Apophasis and Avisuality in the American Avant-Garde

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72t1395g>

#### **Author**

Schweigert, Peter John

#### **Publication Date**

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

A World Apart: Apophasis and Avisuality in the American Avant-Garde

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Peter John Schweigert

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Felicidad “Bliss” Cua Lim, Chair  
Professor James D. Herbert  
Professor Edward Dimendberg

2016



# **DEDICATION**

To my family

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
CURRICULUM VITAE	viii
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	x
INTRODUCTION	1
From the Religious to the Sacred in Film	1
Apophasis and Avisibility	10
The Apophatic Legacy of the Avant-Garde	19
<i>I Was Possessed By God</i>	24
Engaging Absence: A Methodology	34
Chapter Summaries: Where is the Sacred?	42
Conclusion	45
CHAPTER ONE: Maya Deren’s Haitian Project: Iconoclasm and Apophasis	47
The Timeline	53
The Visionary Legacy	55
The Apophatic Legacy	57
Creative Film: Film as Hierophany	60
Analogues to the Sacred	63
Idol/Icon	68
Film and Reality: A Process of Discovery and Invention	70
The Haitian Project as Apophasis	72
Integrity of Dances	78
Integrity of Religious Metaphysics	81
Integrity of Culture	83
Conclusion	89
The Apophatic Legacy: Pointing the Way Forward	91
CHAPTER TWO: The Negations of Caveh Zahedi	95
Ceci n’est pas une pipe	95
The Avisual and the Apophatic: Beyond Representation in <i>Vegas</i>	105
From the Propositional to the Relational	111
The Cloud of Unknowing	116
The Documentary Mode	118
The Limits of Film in <i>Vegas</i>	120
Documentary-like Question of Reality	126
Ethics and the Relational	132
The Performance of Everyday Life	137

Spaces of the Sacred	142
CHAPTER THREE: Nathaniel Dorsky's Films and Paratexts: Engaging the World	149
Introduction: Nathaniel Dorsky	152
Avisuality and <i>Alaya</i>	155
Paratexts: Devotional Cinema	157
Paratexts: Film Experience	159
The Ideal Viewer	162
Dorsky and Canyon Cinema	165
<i>Hours for Jerome</i> : Sanctifying Time	176
<i>Variations</i> : Polyvalent Montage	184
<i>Compline</i> : Obfuscation and Discovery	196
Manifestations of the Apophatic	200
Conclusion: A Cinema of the Sacred	208
EPILOGUE	211
The Paradox of the Sacred	211
The Sacred and the Profane	213
Religion and Film: Existing Approaches	216
The Apophatic Approach: Parallels and Connections	221
The Avant-Garde and Beyond	223
<i>Into Great Silence</i>	225
Conclusion	229
REFERENCES	234
APPENDIX A: <i>I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore</i> Plot Segmentation	242
APPENDIX B: Nathaniel Dorsky's Oeuvre	245

## LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure 0.1	<i>The Dead Christ With Angels</i>	16
Figure 0.2	<i>I Was Possessed by God</i>	25
Figure 0.3	<i>I Was Possessed by God</i>	27
Figure 0.4	<i>I Was Possessed by God</i>	30
Figure 1.1	<i>Meshes of the Afternoon</i>	74
Figure 1.2	Haitian Footage	77
Figure 1.3	Haitian Footage	81
Figure 1.4	<i>Divine Horsemen</i>	85
Figure 1.5	<i>Trance and Dance in Bali / Haitian Footage</i>	88
Figure 2.1	<i>I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore</i>	99
Figure 2.2	<i>A Sign From God</i>	113
Figure 2.3	<i>A Sign From God</i>	115
Figure 2.4	<i>I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore</i>	122
Figure 2.5	<i>I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore</i>	123
Figure 2.6	<i>Waking Life</i>	127
Figure 2.7	<i>I Am a Sex Addict</i>	130
Figure 2.8	<i>A Sign From God / One Wonderful Sunday</i>	143
Figure 2.9	<i>Las Meninas</i>	146
Figure 3.1	<i>Alaya</i>	156
Figure 3.2	<i>The Return</i>	160
Figure 3.3	<i>All My Life</i>	173

Figure 3.4	<i>Hours for Jerome</i>	178
Figure 3.5	A Book of Hours	180
Figure 3.6	<i>Variations</i>	189
Figure 3.7	<i>Compline</i>	199
Figure 3.8	<i>Noli me Tangere</i>	207
Figure 4.1	<i>Into Great Silence</i>	226
Figure 4.2	<i>Into Great Silence</i>	228
Figure 4.3	<i>Into Great Silence</i>	229

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Academic work can be long and lonely, but it is never labored in isolation, and there are many whose mark can be felt on this dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Bliss Lim, my dissertation committee chair as well as my advisor, mentor, and friend. At a time in which I was floundering in the program she swept in and provided much needed inspiration, sage guidance, and critical rigor. I can say with all confidence that I would not have successfully finished this dissertation without her. Every day I am inspired by her scholarship, her intellectual rigor, her work ethic, and her commitment to her students. Through her example she inspires me to be a genuinely good, compassionate, and ethical scholar and person; we should all be so lucky to have a Bliss in our lives.

I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my dissertation committee. Jim Herbert was the reason I originally came to UCI. I have learned a tremendous amount from him, particularly in the possibilities of marrying rigorous formal and stylistic analysis with the abstract concepts that inform religious discourse. Ed Dimendberg joined my committee at a late stage, but despite that his influence can be felt throughout the dissertation, and I thank him for his generous commitment to me and to this project. It is better for having him involved. I would also like to thank professors Catherine Benamou and Bert Winther-Tamaki, both of whom gave me much valued advice and feedback in the early stages of the project.

The study of film is something I came to rather late in my academic career, and it was only really during my master's degree at Boston University that my interests in film and my approach to film were first formed. I acknowledge there both my teachers and my fellow students. At UCI I was fortunate enough to find another intellectual, spiritual, and emotional family, one that has shaped and expanded my thinking about media in a way that reflects our interdisciplinary makeup. In particular, I thank Eric Morrill, Laura Holzman, Ryan Gurney, and Jenna Weinman for their academic and social camaraderie.

In the course of my research I visited archives in the libraries of Stanford University and Boston University, as well as the Anthology Film Archive, each of which yielded important documents and insights. I thank the staff at each of them for their generosity, as well as UCI's School of Humanities for the travel and research grants that made that research possible. I also would like to thank Nathaniel Dorsky, Caveh Zahedi, and Greg Watkins for their films and their generosity in discussing their work.

Finally, and above all, I acknowledge my friend, partner, and spouse Gretchen Steen. None of this would have been possible or worth doing without her. It is to her and to our sons, Arlo and Brahm, that this is for.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

## Peter John Schweigert

- 2000 B.A. in English and Music, Calvin College
- 2003 Teaching Assistant, Department of Film and Television, Boston University
- 2004 Teaching Assistant, Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University
- 2004 M.F.A. in Film Studies, Boston University
- 2005 Instructor of Record, Department of English, Wheaton College
- 2006-08 Instructor of Record, Division of Cinema Studies and Film Production, Burlington College
- 2010-11 Curator, University of California, Irvine Summer Session Film Series
- 2010-11 Editor, *Octopus*, University of California, Irvine Department of Visual Studies Graduate Student Journal
- 2011 Instructor of Record, Department of Art History, University of California, Irvine
- 2013 Instructor of Record, Department of Film & Media Studies, University of California, Irvine
- 2012-14 Writing Lab Tutor, Laguna College of Art and Design MFA Program
- 2009-15 Teaching Assistant, Departments of Film & Media Studies and Art History, University of California, Irvine
- 2014-15 Instructor of Record, Department of Film Studies, Irvine Valley College
- 2016 Ph.D. in Visual Studies, University of California, Irvine

## PUBLICATIONS

“Nathaniel Dorsky’s Films and Paratexts, and the Metonymic Displacement of the Ineffable.”  
Conference paper published January 2015 at <http://www.alayafilm.com/metonymic-displacement/>

“Engaging the Invisible: An Introduction.” *Octopus Journal, Volume 5: Invisibility* (2011)

*Faith, Hope, and Love: Andrei Tarkovsky's The Sacrifice, Abbas Kiarostami's And Life Goes On and Taste of Cherry, and Krzysztof Kieslowski's Blue.* MFA Thesis on file at Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, 2004

## PRESENTATIONS

“The Flatness of Experience: Exploring the Limits of Representation in Caveh Zahedi’s *I Was Possessed by God*.” Conference presentation. “Surface Tension: Flatness and its Filmic Uses” panel, Society for Cinema & Media Studies conference, Atlanta, GA, March/April 2016

“Nathaniel Dorsky’s Films and Paratexts, and the Metonymic Displacement of the Ineffable.” Conference presentation. *Imaging the Ineffable: Representation and Reality in Religion and Film* Conference, Mahindra Humanities Center of Harvard University, March 2013

“The Avant-Garde Maya Deren.” Invited lecture. UC Irvine, Department of Art History, AH 134E Avant-Garde Women class, February 19, 2013

“Dada and Surrealist Cinema.” Invited lecture. UC Irvine, Department of Art History, AH 134E Dada and Surrealism class, November 28, 2012

Respondant to Catherine Liu’s UC Irvine Visual Studies Department Colloquium talk “The Window and the Alcove: Surveillant Realism,” May 2011

“Surveillance and *The Conversation*.” Invited lecture. UC Irvine, Department of Film and Media Studies, FMS 85C New Technologies class, May 18, 2011

“Watson and Webber’s *The Fall of the House of Usher: A Distinctly American Avant-Garde Film Aesthetic*.” Conference presentation. Southwest/Texas Popular and American Culture Association Conference, Silent Film Area, Albuquerque, NM, February 2009

“Faith and Film: an examination of the intersection of the biblical principal and the arts in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film, *The Sacrifice*.” Conference presentation. The Two Tasks Conference, Alexandria, VA, June 2006

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A World Apart: Apophasis and Avisuality in the American Avant-Garde

by

Peter John Schweigert

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Associate Professor Felicidad “Bliss” Cua Lim, Chair

Critical consensus on the avant-garde characterizes its prime creative and historiographical force as its ability to create images. In contrast, this dissertation presents an alternative to the scholarly emphasis on the avant-garde’s “visionary tradition” by focusing instead on American experimental films that engage the discourse of the sacred in an *avisual* mode. Given its separateness from the profane, material world, the sacred necessarily exists beyond representation; therefore, films that flirt with the representation of the sacred flirt with the limits of representational form. In case studies of films that deny the visionary power of the cinema, I chart the possibilities of an under-recognized alternative mode of modernist filmmaking, which I am calling the “*apophatic* tradition” of the avant-garde. Drawn from apophatic theology, apophatic refers to the failures or negations of signification that paradoxically point beyond themselves to the unsayable divine. Following this principle, this dissertation explores productive gestures of negation in postwar American avant-garde films that use the intersection of film and religious discourse to explore the limits of cinematic representation itself.

What does it mean for modernist cinema to engage the sacred? This dissertation begins by examining the production history of Maya Deren's 1947-50 unfinished Haitian project. Rather than a failure, I reframe the incompleteness of the project as an apophatic negation that has the potential to preserve the sacrality of the film and its subject matter of Haitian Vodou possession dances. Chapter Two offers an analysis of Caveh Zahedi's *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994), arguing that the film's self-referential failures of narrative and generic conventions cultivate an apophatic state of unknowing. The final chapter explores representational negations in Nathaniel Dorsky's *Hours for Jerome* (1982), *Variations* (1999), and *Compline* (2009), claiming the relationship between these films and their paratexts redirects the viewer's perspective on the world in a way that is ultimately reflective of the religious forms referenced in those paratexts. By focusing on the interactions created between these avant-garde films and their viewer, this dissertation argues that the experience of absence created by these negations paradoxically becomes itself the experience of that which is beyond representation.

## Introduction

### From the Religious to the Sacred in Film

Even the most cursory survey of art history will tell you that religion and art have a long and tangled relationship. Once inexorably linked, traces of the religious function of art can still be excavated, even as the ‘religious’ and the ‘artistic’ have long since parted ways in the western tradition. In his historical taxonomy of the relationship between religion and art in the western tradition, Hans Belting contrasts the modern artistic image with the pre-modern cult image. Analyzing the diverging paths of art and religion from the perspective of an object’s social uses and its reception, Belting attributes the shift from cult to artistic image to a changing understanding of the function of an image; in the era of art the viewer makes a connection with the artistic intent behind a work rather than the direct presence of a represented figure.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the cult image created a connection with the absent sacred by fostering a sense of immediacy and presence in that it was treated and understood as an actual person. Religious art of this kind functioned as a presentation, not a representation, understood as transmitting presence across history and connecting the present directly with an otherwise inaccessible past.

Despite the abandonment of such notions of the presence of the image, something of that power of the absent sacred attributed to the cult image—which we call presence or aura—remains in the artistic image, David Freedberg argues, more so than is generally acknowledged. We attribute a continued power to images, made evident in the way viewers respond to images as if they were real.<sup>2</sup> An image that contains within itself potentially contradictory understandings

---

<sup>1</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 472. Belting attributes this shift in western art to the Protestant Reformation, at which point art took on a decidedly didactic and propagandistic role.

<sup>2</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). In addition to the power attributed to religious images, Freedberg uses the example of sexually arousing images to prove his point, saying that when “we find ourselves responding to an image as if it

as a result of its presence can yield, unexpectedly, to different and unintended meanings. An image thus endowed with presence “liberates response from the exigencies of convention”<sup>3</sup> through such semiotically destabilizing devices as the collapse of the distance between sign and signifier, the reworking of codes of representation through obfuscation of meaning or polysemy, and the active negation of codes of representation.

In many ways, Freedberg’s insistence that presence continues to suffuse art reaches its apogee with the modern, mechanically reproducible arts of photography and cinema. The indexicality of these images, along with their largely automated capture of the likeness of the object in front of the lens, give photographic and cinematographic images an undeniable sense of presence. Freedberg ends his argument with a reflection on Roland Barthes, who associated the potential power of a photograph to touch the viewer with a sense of presence to its indexicality, “the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.”<sup>4</sup> The psychological power of a photograph, Barthes writes, is to declare that what one sees “has been here, and yet [it is] immediately separated.”<sup>5</sup> The time and historical distance between a photograph and its referent is somehow both collapsed and affirmed by its mechanical indexing of a moment long past, as a photograph both transmits presence but doesn’t ultimately contain that presence within itself.<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin as well locates the “ultimate

---

were real [as, for example, when we are aroused by it], it seems at that moment no more signifier but the living signified itself” (325).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76. Emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes discusses this paradoxical relationship he experiences with photography in terms of a specific photograph of his mother as a child, in which, after her death, he found “the truth of the face I had loved” (64). This convinces him that photographs have an “evidential force,” and that “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (87). When he tried to enlarge the photograph to better see it, “to understand it better, to know its truth” and to “finally reach my mother’s very being,” however, he predictably discovered that the only thing the image really contained was the grain of the paper, as close scrutiny of this kind undoes the very image. “What I posit,” he concludes, “is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it” (115). See *ibid.*

retrenchment” of cult value in mechanically reproducible art in the physiognomy of long dead photographed faces. Such photographic examples have no signposts to direct one as to the proper way to look; rather, they encourage “free-floating contemplation.”<sup>7</sup> Of such photographic portraits, he describes the “the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now” that the viewer feels looking at the image of that long past moment.<sup>8</sup>

This push and pull between presence and absence, the present and history, that occurs in mechanically reproduced art creates an even more layered relationship between image and viewer when the subject matter is religious. Kristin Schwain, writing about F. Holland Day’s turn of the century photographic series of passion play iconography, describes the way “Day sought to evoke the appearance and presence of the divine in everyday life”<sup>9</sup> by appealing to the scientific authority of photography to make the past present. In casting himself as the figure of Christ, however, Day undercut the potential religious impact of his work, Schwain writes. Displaying the photographs in a salon style with the artist present, the past that the scientific authority of the photographs made present was the past of Day’s own staging of the images, necessitating that their viewers suspend their disbelief as a necessary precondition to experiencing any religious power in the work. As with Belting’s analysis, the religious or cult value of mechanically reproduced art is tied to its ability to transmit a sense of presence, even as

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 226.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 276-277. The full quote elaborates on the ability of the photograph to both affirm and compress time and history. “The most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again possess for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared through the image-character of the photograph, to find the inconspicuous place where, within the suchness of that long-past minute, the future nests still today—and so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”

<sup>9</sup> Kristin Schwain, *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 86.

the presence generated is an ontologically and historically contingent one. Like photography, the cinematographic image as well has long been understood in terms of this power of presence.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, regardless of the actual (and constantly changing, in the digital age) ontology of the moving image, there is a psychological truth value almost automatically attributed to the photographic image, the sense that a film re-presents, repeats, and ultimately relives a durative moment from the past in the present, in the moment of replaying it cinematographically.<sup>11</sup> For these photographic-based media, absence is always a temporal absence, the distance between past and present.

This drive in art—and especially in mechanically reproduced art—to form a connection with the distant past, to touch a moment or a person previously lost to history, is reflective of

---

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, Roland Barthes never does extend his reflections on the engagement has with photography to film, declaring that while a photograph seems to transmit the presence of the thing photographed (“something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever”), a film image’s movement always relegates its presence to the past tense (“but in cinema, something *has passed* in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images”). See Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 78. In an earlier essay in which Barthes did discuss the power of the film image to signify emotionally, separate from the narration of a film (which Barthes names the obtuse meaning of a film), he limits himself to the analysis of single film frames, arguing that “the filmic, very paradoxically, cannot be grasped in the film ‘in situation,’ ‘in movement,’ ‘in its natural state,’ but only in that major artifact, the still.” See Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes On Some Eisenstein Stills,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 65.

<sup>11</sup> This is the basis of Andre Bazin’s theory of realism. He writes that rather than somehow embalming the object photographed (as in a mummy), the photographic arts embalm *time*, and so it is “the image of their duration” that the photograph and object share, a common temporal existence. See André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 15. “For Bazin,” Tom Gunning writes, “the photograph is not a sign of something but a presence of something, or perhaps we could say a means for putting us into the presence of something” (36). Earlier in the same essay, Gunning addressed the differences between photochemical and digital photography in terms of the indexical relation to reality of the different recording and projecting processes. Despite the difference of technology, there remains a continuity of indexicality between these photographic media, he argues. “The indexicality of a traditional photograph inheres in the effect of light on chemicals, not in the picture it produces. The rows of numerical data produced by a digital camera and the image of traditional chemical photography are both indexically determined by objects outside the camera. Both photographic chemicals and the digital data must be subjected to elaborate procedures before a picture will result” (25). See Tom Gunning, “What’s the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs,” in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). On the other hand, Mary Ann Doane locates the differences between digital and photochemical images in terms of the indexical connection to the history of the image’s own material base, a connection that is inscribed into the image by the photochemical process but absent in the digital image’s unrestricted replicability such that the very “idea of a medium seems to slip through our grasp.” See Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” *difference s: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 144.

religious discourse at the most basic level. Surveying the variety of religious beliefs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Emile Durkheim offered the broadest definition of religion as that which creates a connection to absences of an ontological nature. “All known religious beliefs,” he writes,

whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (*profane*, *sacré*). This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought...<sup>12</sup>

Sacred and profane, Durkheim explains, are characterized by their absolute heterogeneity, conceived by the mind as “two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common.”<sup>13</sup> The sacred is distinguished by its separateness from the profane, material world, and the qualities of being separated, cut off, standing at a distance, or existing in another order of being defines sacredness in the fields of twentieth century sociology and religious studies. The sacred, by virtue of this sacredness, defies presence or representation; to name something as sacred is to designate it as “the wholly other”<sup>14</sup> or as “undeniable alterity”<sup>15</sup> itself. In the context of this distinction between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim defines religion as the process of creating a connection with that distant sacred from the perspective of the profane, material world, “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.”<sup>16</sup>

While the study of religion and art (including film) has most often focused on the presence created by the image, there is a contemporary approach, one hinted at by David

---

<sup>12</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 47. Durkheim also adds to this definition “beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” in order to distinguish the collective nature of religion from the practice of magic.

Freedberg's argument that an image's power can be found in its semiotic instability, its obfuscation of meaning, or its active negation of codes of representation. This is the negative approach, a focus on the sacred: not on presence, but on absence; not on the connection an image creates but on the distance it emphasizes. This negative approach is made clear in the contemporary philosopher and Christian theologian Jean-Luc Marion's meditation on the differences between the visual figures of the idol and the icon. Marion describes the idol as an image of presence, akin to Belting's cult image. This presence is made possible because the divine is imagined and then imaged in accordance with the limits of human experience, as visible paint and a recognizably human visage on a touchable canvas, for example. Marion notes that by fixing the god in an image, the worshipper loses the alterity and irruption that defines divinity itself.<sup>17</sup> The way to preserve such alterity is through an image that indicates the unfathomable distance between the human and the divine: the icon,<sup>18</sup> whose negation is quite the opposite of the presence of the cult image. In the icon, Marion gives a visual model that resists affixed meaning, but rather points beyond itself; this visual model is compelling in the way it trades presence for the fluidity of relationality, as Marion defines the icon not by its presence but by its active "aim of an intention"<sup>19</sup> in the interaction with its viewer. By shifting focus from presence to the relational, this negative approach makes possible the discussion of religion and film in a way that accounts for and acknowledges the power of the image that Freedberg describes.

---

<sup>17</sup> Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> For Marion, it is the figure of Christ who is the ultimate icon. Citing Saint Paul's description of Christ as the "icon of the invisible God," Marion describes Christ as "the figure not of a God who in that figure would lose its invisibility in order to become known to us to the point of familiarity, but of a Father who radiates with a definitive and irreducible transcendence all the more insofar as he unreservedly gives that transcendence to be seen in his Son. The depth of the visible face of the Son delivers to the gaze the invisibility of the Father as such. The icon manifests neither the human face nor the divine nature that no one could envisage but, as the theologians of the icon said, the relation of the one to the other in the hypostasis, the person." See *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.

This is ultimately not a project about film and religion. Rather, it focuses on the intersection of film with the discourse of the sacred. The sacred here is not used to elucidate religion, but to work through questions of representation and cinematic experience. I am particularly interested in instances in which negations of the system of representation, understood broadly, reflect this negative style of religious discourse and even make possible a religious-like experience to all viewers of the film. My focus in what follows, therefore, is not primarily on what is shown. Instead, I look to production history, projection format, film format, and narrative construction in addition to visual content, all as they relate to the potential representation on the screen and play a part in the negation of what one would call ‘religious’ imagery—images of the divine, the transcendent, the holy, the sacred. I’ve taken ‘the sacred’ as my primary organizing term for the nuance and the inherent representational paradox implied by the proposition of giving visual form to that which cannot have form or presence. Thus, my focus on the sacred highlights questions of the limits of representation. As Stanley Cavell stated, “a ‘possibility’ of a medium can be made known only by successful works that define its media; in modernism, a medium is explored by discovering possibilities that declare its necessary conditions, its limits.”<sup>20</sup> What could it mean for a film to have the sacred as its focus? What kind of interaction would this require of the viewer with the film itself, and with its subject matter? And what does this reveal about the medium of cinema itself—its representational limits and possibilities, and more interestingly, its power in shaping the way in which we see?

I am particularly interested in the way the discourse of the sacred interacts with film in terms of the relationship established between film and viewer, and the implications of an experience that resists affixed meaning as a strategy of pointing beyond itself. By way of

---

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 146.

addressing this, I often frame my inquiry in terms of the location of the sacred in a film, asking *where* a film posits the place of signification of the “wholly other,” that which is separate from the visual (profane) system of signification. As Barthes discussed, that distant quality is not, and cannot, be contained in the image itself. Rather, I look for the sacred in the space between image and viewer, in the relationship created between viewer and viewed, present as a force or a relation rather than as an image.

My primary case studies come from the American avant-garde; they consist of the “mother of the underground film”<sup>21</sup> Maya Deren’s unfinished Haitian project (c. 1947-53), Caveh Zahedi’s experimental documentary *I Don’t Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994), and Nathaniel Dorsky’s 16mm films *Hours for Jerome* (1982), *Variations* (1999), and *Compline* (2009). My interest in these films is in the way they relate to—and dictate—ways of seeing, regimes of perception, and my focus on experimental cinema comes as a result of this focus on the language of film. One way of approaching the Sisyphean task of defining the aesthetics of avant-garde film is to focus on the “questions about seeing,” as William Wees does, in films that “confront the viewer with a more complex and dynamic experience of visual perception than is normally the case in film viewing.”<sup>22</sup> In each case study, my focus looks beyond storytelling to experiments with narrative, form, and format, as I elucidate a mode of the intersection of film and religion that takes the limits of visual representation as its primary focus. Like much of the cinematic avant-garde, these case studies present a compelling alternative to the forms and entertainment functions of commercial cinema. They are also compelling for the way in which their treatment of the sacred opens up to broader questions of the way films make meaning, as

---

<sup>21</sup> Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967), 32.

<sup>22</sup> William C. Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 4. Wees takes this phrase from Dudley Andrews’ *Concepts in Film Theory* as his book’s central theme, exploring the ways in which the avant-garde’s visual aesthetics are built around questions of vision, translating “the sense of sight into filmic art—not simply an art to be seen, but an art of seeing” (9).

the mechanically-reproduced diachronic moving image gestures toward that which is necessarily absent.

Drawing on recent work in Art History and Film Studies regarding strategies for visually addressing the invisible, I have taken ‘the apophatic’ and ‘the avisual’ as my primary theoretical lenses for addressing both the form and the affect created by my case studies’ engagement with the sacred. The apophatic comes from apophatic theology, also known as negative theology because it stresses the impossibility of signifying the divine by its negation of language through verbal paradox. In recent years, scholars in Art History have productively utilized its negative approach as a way of more deeply engaging with visual religious representation from a modern, secular perspective. Avisibility is a Derridean-inspired term introduced by Akira Lippit to describe a modern system of visibility that, through its own excess, “shows nothing,”<sup>23</sup> a model of absence in the face of excessive presence.

The project has, I believe, three historical and conceptual stakes. First, I am developing a new way to talk about film and religion that identifies and engages with the paradox raised by the idea of representing the sacred. Second, it proposes religious discourse as one underexplored site in which experimental cinema critically interrogates the representational possibilities of the moving image. Lastly, this approach to religion and film can open up new ways of looking at images themselves: ways in which the religious mingles with modernism; ways that cinematic images can signify un-spectacularly by reworking ancient ideas of the negation of representation; and ways that images engage with culture and society as much by what they don’t show as by what they do.

---

<sup>23</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 32.

## Apophasis and Avisuality

Although a very old approach to discourse concerning divinity, apophatic theology has proven in recent years to be a useful and malleable theoretical base by which to approach and critique representations that reference the sacred. As a theology, it performs its own knowledge of its limits through the promotion of paradox, breaking down its own linguistic system of signification in order to point to that which is beyond signification altogether. Starting from the premise that the transcendent divine is beyond the descriptive and conceptual powers of language, apophatic discourse proceeds negatively, naming only what the divine is not with the goal of creating aporias of meaning through compounding negations. The transcendent is “unsaid” or “said-away” (from the Greek *apo-phanai*) in a linguistic and conceptual performance that affirms the ineffability of the transcendent. In the Christian tradition, apophatic theology is traced back to an unknown 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century monk known today as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The basic function of negation in Pseudo-Dionysius’ writings, Charles Stang explains, is to break down the system of written communication itself. In the act of naming God, for example, Dionysius proscribes a contemplative cycle meditating on what he refers to as conceptual and sensory names for the divine. Conceptual names are taken from those qualities associated with God, including the word ‘God,’ whereas the sensory names evoke imagery that is most ‘unlike’ the divine.<sup>24</sup> As God is immanent in all things and also always beyond all things, neither conceptual nor sensory names are more or less accurately descriptive. Conceptual names

---

<sup>24</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius gives “good, existent, life, wisdom, power” as representative examples of conceptual names for God, whereas the sensory names come from “analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God.” See Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, “The Mystical Theology,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 139.

are dangerous, however, as they are more likely to be thought of as substitutes for God, and therefore, idols.

While both affirmations and negations run the risk of idolatry, the crassness of negative signs when applied to the divine (as in using ‘worm’ or ‘drunkard’ to name God) contain within themselves the seeds of their own denial; “In fact they hover between saying and unsaying, transcendence and immanence, and resemble, in this regard, the negation of negation.”<sup>25</sup> This compounding of negation reflects Dionysius’ proscription of his divine names exercise to affirm both the conceptual and sensory names, then deny them, and then further deny those denials. Within apophatic theology, the goal of such ever-mounting denials is the creation of a moment of unknowing, a hovering between transcendence and immanence in which there exists the hope for a union, however fleeting, with “the unknown God.”

This flagging of the potential of conceptual idols rightly recalls Jean-Luc Marion, who is one of a number of contemporary philosophers who have brought apophatic theology into dialogue with questions of visual representation. In his use of the idol and the icon, Marion uses apophatic theology to value absence as the (paradoxical) sign of presence, for it is only in the negating of presence that the icon preserves the alterity of the sacred. The failure of the envisioning of the divine is the very mark of its sacredness; this is the epistemological paradox that apophatic theology introduces, a paradox that proves pivotal in transferring this theological model to that of visual representation. Negations, apophatic discourse says, are productive gestures, as failures of signification point beyond themselves. Following this principle, I focus on this same sense of productivity of negation in the films of the avant-garde that take on the discourse of the sacred.

---

<sup>25</sup> Charles M. Stang, "Being Neither Oneself nor Someone Else': The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 65.

Apophatic theology has been used compellingly in the discipline of Art History, where its negative approach has manifested in a number of ways, demonstrating its broad critical potential. Negation can be thought of in the obvious sense of not showing a particular figure, but it becomes a much more compelling analytic frame when negation is considered in terms of existing representational conventions, particular signifying systems, social functions of the image, and the ways such images interact with viewers.<sup>26</sup>

Framing such negations in terms of ‘the apophatic’ recalls the fact that my focus is on religious discourse in film, but it also points to the way that the negative approach can use religion to talk about the possibilities and limits of cinematic representation itself in a way that is akin to cinematic modernism. In apophatic writing, Michael Sells explains, “the effort to affirm transcendence leads to a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful.”<sup>27</sup> Cinematically, I find examples of ‘unshowing,’ rather than unsaying, in the way in which the visual discourse is self-negating, breaking down the signs, syntax, and even physical production of the films. These breakdowns in visual language function, I argue, as examples of what P. Adams Sitney calls “the antinomy of vision” in modernist literary and cinematic texts that “stress vision as a privileged mode of perception, even of revelation, while at

---

<sup>26</sup> James Herbert’s *Out Distance from God* is a compelling example of the use of apophatic theology in Art History in this sense, for it demonstrates the variety of approaches that something as versatile as negation can be used. Framing the negative in terms of distance, Herbert presents a number of case studies in which distance refers alternatively to perspectival distance, physical distance positioning the viewer and work, semantic distance between sign and referent, social and ethical difference between universality and human-bound specificity, and ontological difference between spirit and matter, among others. In each case study Herbert focuses on those aspects of the works that hold in abeyance mutually contradictory qualities of distance, in whatever variety of form distance takes. See James D. Herbert, *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

the same time cultivating opacity and questioning the primacy of the visible world.”<sup>28</sup> Tellingly, Sitney brings together the modernist and the religious when he describes this promise and subsequent denial of visual epiphany as “one of modernism’s grand oxymorons: a secular theology.”<sup>29</sup>

The primary way in which apophatic and modernist visuality intersect is in the similar open mode of engagement created between the viewer and their fragmented, negated images. This parallel is not self-evident, for ‘the religious’ as a category of vision has long been characterized as the antithesis of the modern. Peter Wollen, for example, describes film of the “modern movement” as that which “provides the conditions for the production of meaning, within constraints which it sets itself. It is open rather than closed; multiple rather than single; productive rather than exhaustive.”<sup>30</sup> In each of these binaries it is “classical aesthetics” that serves as the foil to the modern, and Wollen often conflates the former with the religious and the spiritual as forces which close signification and constrain the possibility of unexpected meaning emerging from the interaction between a text and its viewer.

With the negative approach, however, modernism and the apophatic come together in terms of their shared active, relational mode of visuality and cinematic experience. The death of the author results in the birth of the reader, Barthes writes,<sup>31</sup> as semiologically self-reflexive cinema necessitates the active involvement of the reader in the text’s very production.<sup>32</sup> The fragmentary nature<sup>33</sup> of the modernist text, its open meanings that emerge only in a reader’s

---

<sup>28</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 163.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, 148.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Third ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 162-163.

<sup>33</sup> Sitney, *Modernist Montage*, 225.

active engagement<sup>34</sup> with its images of ambivalence, stitched together out of seemingly opposite impulses,<sup>35</sup> are qualities that are likewise created through the apophatic nature of the films. Treating the sacred *as* sacred introduces a modernistic disruptive force<sup>36</sup> into the moving image, disrupting the false coherency of cinematic forms such as narrative, perspective (by placing the viewer into relation with both the subject filmed and with the film itself), and the powers of illusion of the medium. In this way, the cinematic manifestation of the apophatic is decidedly modernist.

One important benefit of the apophatic approach is that it is one way to have a productive conversation about the historical intersection of the religious and the cinematic without being overwhelmed by questions of belief. The issue of religious belief, when it becomes the primary focus of an art object, often limits discourse. Foreclosing who can speak and what can be said, one gets the sense that what is fair game for scholarly and critical inquiry is limited. In the basic language of critical analysis,<sup>37</sup> belief often precludes the possibility of the scholar making an interpretive claim without first evaluating the belief that undergirds the object in question. This issue of belief becomes a problem when the scholarly goal is to critically examine how a film works—how it creates meaning for all its viewers, both through the way it functions formally and socially, as an object in the world. Accounting for and critically engaging with the experience that a film creates, especially a film undergirded by religious belief, is only possible from within the film’s circle of belief. Films of the American avant-garde that traffic in a

---

<sup>34</sup> Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image, Music, Text*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Georges Bataille builds off of Durkheim in his writings on the sacred and twentieth century culture. Complicating the sacred/profane binary, Bataille describes the sacred as, in at least one sense, an immanent force opposed to the transcendence of reason. He describes it as “simply reducible to the unleashing of passion,” a force that cannot be contained. It is from this point that the sacred becomes, for Bataille, a point of poetic critique of ordered modern society. See Michael Richardson, ed. *Georges Bataille—Essential Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis describes the difference between descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative claims in Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction* (London: Laurence King, 2005), 26-30.

religious function or in religious reference are particularly sensitive to this discursive-limiting effect. Due to their typically personal nature, the valorization of an individual's vision often mixes uncomfortably with the demands of belief, especially if that belief is religious in nature.

James Elkins praises the negative approach of apophatic theology for its ability to skirt around the demands of belief in his short book on religion and contemporary art,<sup>38</sup> for by holding questions of the actual existence of the divine at bay, the viewer—regardless of personal belief—can experience and describe the *divine-like* attributes of art that engages with religion. This has been one of the great benefits of the use of apophatic theology in the field of Art History, as the negative approach provides a path to critically engage with works of art with a religious component without disregarding or otherwise anthropologizing that belief away<sup>39</sup> as a curious cultural or historical phenomenon.

The potential that the apophatic approach represents to address religious power free from the necessity of belief is nicely demonstrated in Thierry de Duve's analysis of the Édouard Manet painting *The Dead Christ With Angels* (1864). This analysis is especially notable for the way de Duve focuses on the relationality established by the negations of the painting, a work that he argues is organized around absence itself.<sup>40</sup> The artwork, a post-crucifixion Christ and two angels in a tomb seemingly in the moments before Christ's resurrection, presents or declares

---

<sup>38</sup> James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 107.

<sup>39</sup> I came across this term by Dipesh Chakrabarty in Fatimah Tobing-Rony's article "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's "Trance and Dance in Bali""", *Discourse*, vol. 28, no. 1, Scenes Elsewhere (Winter 2006): 6. Chakrabarty uses it to describe the process by which events, believed to be religiously inspired by their participants, are incorporated into history. The historian's understanding, he writes, "becomes a combination of the anthropologist's politeness—"I respect your beliefs but they are not mine"—and a Marxist (or modern) tendency to see "religion" in modern public life as a form of alienated or displaced consciousness." See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 105.

<sup>40</sup> Even though "God is dead" de Duve writes, humankind still organizes itself around absence, and this can be seen in art's crisis of representation. "Manet was the first painter to have glimpsed the positive consequences of this, but for all time, even the time when the religious alibi was the common creed, the greatest artists knew that the function of art was to fit Absence with a void at the heart of the social and to display the void to those willing to look." Thierry de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art* (Ghent: Ludion, 2001), 51.

itself, de Duve argues in language that echoes Marion’s description of the icon. In painting a traditional religious scene but then filling it with negations of the traditional iconography and narrative,<sup>41</sup> Manet requires something of his viewers that the resurrection itself requires of a religious supplicant—faith. The painting “calls for something other than intellectual endeavor, questioning, and skepticism; much more to the point, it requires an open-mindedness that has as much to do with an openness of the body and the heart: letting oneself be touched emotionally and aesthetically by the painting and what it shows.”<sup>42</sup> Manet creates a parallel between religious faith and faith in the painter, de Duve argues, a shared experience regardless of belief.



Figure 0.1: The deviations from this scene’s traditional iconography and the uncertainty of the state of Jesus calls for a religious-like faith from the viewer of the painting, de Duve argues. Édouard Manet, *The Dead Christ With Angels*. 1864, Oil on canvas, 70 5/8 x 59 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org> (accessed January 29, 2016).

---

<sup>41</sup> In terms of the painting’s incongruities, de Duve describes the multiple narrative moments it portrays by including these three figures—both Christ and the angels shouldn’t be in the tomb at the same time according to the Gospel of John, which Manet references in the painting. Additionally, the spear wound is on the wrong side of Christ’s body, and there is a change in the traditional iconography in that Christ, and not an angel, is looking out at the viewer.

<sup>42</sup> Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, 16.

Avisuality is a term by Akira Lippit for a particularly modern mode of visibility that unites the atomic bomb, psychoanalysis, x-rays, and the cinema. Lippit's focus in his analysis of these 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup> phenomena is on the way each changed the structure of visual perception, the way their "excess visibility" defies the visual, which he names their avisuality. Avisuality is an especially compelling term because it is not simply a form of invisibility. Rather, it names a mode of visibility situated in between envisioning and invisibility. Lippit introduces the term by way of two modes of invisibility given by Jacques Derrida. The first is what Derrida designates with the hyphenated in-visible, that which belongs "to the order of the visible" but is hidden from view.<sup>44</sup> Absolute invisibility, on the other hand, is that which simply exists outside of vision, including sounds, smells, and sensations of touch.

In between these competing senses of invisibility, Lippit proposes avisuality as another category, a visibility in between envisioning and Derrida's two poles of the invisible:

Together, Derrida's excess visibilities might point to a category of complex visibility, a system of visibility that shows nothing, shows in the very place of the visible, something else: *avisuality*. Avisuality not as a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or negated visibility: not as the antithesis of the visible but as a specific mode of impossible, unimagined visibility. Presented to vision, there to be seen, the avisual image remains, in a profoundly irreducible manner, unseen. Or rather, it determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image. A visibility without images, an unimaginable visibility, and images without visibility, avisuality. All signs lead to a view, but at its destination, nothing is seen. What is seen is this absence, the materiality of an avisual form or body.<sup>45</sup>

Lippit discusses ways in which the in-betweenness of avisuality is manifested in psychoanalysis, x-rays, and the cinema as "complex signs of interiority that resemble anti-signs

---

<sup>43</sup> Psychoanalysis, the x-ray, and the cinema all have their roots in the year 1895. The atomic bomb, of course, came onto the scene 50 years later.

<sup>44</sup> Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 31. Derrida gives the examples of a bomb hidden in a cache or one's internal organs. Both are invisible in that they cannot be seen, but both could be exposed and brought into view.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Emphasis in the original.

or traces of signs that signal the view of an impossible interiority.”<sup>46</sup> However, it is with the overpowering brightness of the atomic blast in which “the catastrophic light of atoms suffuses all people in an overpowering light” that he attributes the fullest manifestation of this new visuality. The bomb, he writes, “inscribes an end of visuality, an aporia, a point after which visuality is seared by the forces of an insurmountable avisuality.”<sup>47</sup>

I am especially intrigued by the way Lippit’s language recalls Durkheim’s description of the sacred and the profane as two distinct worlds. The excess visuality of the atomic bomb threatened the distinction between human interiority and exteriority as atomic radiation “situated the body between not only two worlds, but two universes: two separate orders of all things, or even of the same things. Visibility and invisibility, exteriority and interiority, the living and the dead.”<sup>48</sup> In its excess of visuality, the avisual erases these distinctions; like apophatic theology, it breaks down the sacred/profane binary. In using the sacred as a way of designating absence in the midst of cinematic presence, I propose the apophatic image as another category of avisuality. And in following avisuality’s liminal focus on the process of visuality itself, I redirect my focus onto film itself. By tracing the influence of sacred separateness onto the signifying systems of my case studies, my focus will turn toward the immanent qualities of the films,<sup>49</sup> their groundedness in the world both in terms of their representational abilities and in terms of their own status as physical and social objects. As an example of avisuality, sacred discourse in film addresses itself to questions of representation. The avant-garde, with its promise of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>49</sup> Such a move is, in fact, the end result of apophatic discourse, in which “the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent.” In tracing out this feature of Western apophasis, Michael Sells describes the “radical dialectic of transcendence and immanence” that is at the heart of apophatic unsaying. “That which is utterly ‘beyond’ is revealed or reveals itself as most intimately ‘within’ . . . . When the transcendent realizes itself as the immanent, the subject of the act is neither divine nor human, neither self nor other. Conventional logical and semantic structures—the distinction between reflexive and nonreflexive action, the distinction between perfect and imperfect tense, the univocal antecedent of a pronoun—are broken down.” See Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 7.

experimentation of film form and the testing of the limits of representation, provides the ideal framework for an exploration of the intersection of the apophatic and the avisual in film. Both the avant-garde and the apophatic/avisual push the medium representationally until its signs and syntaxes break down, the antinomy of vision of modern cinema.

### **The Apophatic Legacy of the Avant-Garde**

There are many cinematic avant-gardes. From objects of personal lyric expression to self-reflexive attacks on bourgeois culture, politics, or aesthetics, experimentations with moving images have varied tremendously in their form, context and aims, and nomenclature.<sup>50</sup> One reason for this diversity is that, as a category of film, the avant-garde is often negatively construed, defined by what it is not. Its foil is typically understood to be industrially produced and distributed, studio funded, entertainment driven commercial cinema. As with the uses of apophatic theology in Art History, this negation that defines the avant-garde has allowed it to evolve into a broad and flexible category of cinema. The name ‘avant-garde’ etymologically references a military advance guard, the vanguard. In this way the name privileges films that experiment, pushing boundaries of various kinds. These could be boundaries established by entertainment conventions, boundaries established by cultural mores, or boundaries having to do with modes of visuality.

As with any fixed definition, definitively labeling the avant-garde has a danger of limiting the potential for avant-garde cinematic experimentation. Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom, writing in 1978 in response to the dominance of the auteur approach in the avant-garde and the subsequent canonization of a small number of New York City based filmmakers,

---

<sup>50</sup> Further, the cinematic avant-garde stands distinct (and generally much later historically) from the literary and artistic avant-garde of the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries that Peter Bürger defines sociologically in terms of its modernist “break with what is called art in bourgeois society.” See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), lii.

argued against the closing off of both the definition of the avant-garde and the approach by which one studies the field. They proposed a focus on the relationship between film and viewer as a way of acknowledging the way film shapes the way we see, so as to not take for granted “the illusion of perceptual mastery with the effect of the creation of a transcendental subject”<sup>51</sup> that is enacted by the films. In order to question how we see according to ideology, Penley and Bergstrom stress the importance of interrogating “the relationship of the spectator to the filmic discourse, how he or she is placed and thereby understands it.”<sup>52</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, as well, cautions against an approach that takes the author as the sole source of the meaning a film generates. Rather than one meaning, she calls for the critic “to find out how *meanings* are constructed among different groups and at different moments”<sup>53</sup> through intertextual analysis of the way films reconstruct cinematic language.

While much has changed since the late 1970’s, this focus on the perspectival interaction that takes place between film and viewer remains an important principle for approaching and analyzing experimental films today. My focus here is on the questions about seeing<sup>54</sup> posed by the films, the way in which the discourse of the sacred affects the vision and the visuality of the works, and the way in which that sacred discourse is transcribed onto the cinematic experience of the viewer. These are important questions for the apophatic and film, and seem to reflect more recent conceptions of the avant-garde. Akira Lippit, for example, develops a theory of the avant-garde as an “ex-cinema,” an exergue that is both outside of *and* a part of the cinema. A fundamental quality of the avant-garde, he argues, is its outside status, films that explore and

---

<sup>51</sup> Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom, "The Avant-Garde: History and Theories," in *Movies and Methods: Volume 2*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 292.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>53</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71*, Second ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 22. Emphasis in original.

<sup>54</sup> As mentioned, this is William Wees’ summation of the aesthetics of the avant-garde in his *Light Moving in Time*.

illuminate the outside of what cinema is, and thus make cinema itself visible. Medium specificity is no longer important; what is important is that such films “present the idea of cinema.” In doing so, “ex-cinemas form an alternative cinema that reaffirms and recites the life of cinema, a life whose bodies are visible even when the forms are diffuse, opaque, dispersed, and extended across a temporality not always recognizable as now. Ex-cinema is cinema, the thought and practice of a cinema outside.”<sup>55</sup> Using the apophatic to focus on strategies of cinematic representation (particularly on the limits and possibilities of film to say something true about the world) can add to our understanding of what film *is* and what it can *do*, including its ability to create a connection with the world, to affect and adjust our sense of perception, and therefore to shape our ways of seeing.

Scott MacDonald uses the term ‘critical cinema’ in his influential series of collected interviews with independent filmmakers, focusing on the potential of the cinematic avant-garde to critique conventional media and to educate viewers as to new possibilities of film form.<sup>56</sup> In his most recent volume of the series, MacDonald’s introduction brings up another quality of film in general and critical cinema in particular—its spiritual potential. Describing the many ways the traditional theatrical film experience reflects the traditional religious service,<sup>57</sup> MacDonald

---

<sup>55</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>56</sup> “My investment in the idea of critical cinema comes from being a teacher. Indeed, “critical cinema” is not meant as a descriptive term that distinguishes some intrinsic dimension of the particular films it is used in connection with; it’s a pragmatic term meant to suggest a way of using a broad spectrum of independent films that, in general, remain one of film history’s most underutilized educational resources. I cannot imagine teaching effectively without exposing students to an intertextual discourse of the broadest possible variety of film experiences, including those “avant-garde” or “experimental” films that provide the most extensive and deepest shocks to viewers whose definition of cinema is primarily a product of commercial entertainments in the theater and on television.” See Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>57</sup> The similarities include the ritualized, collective experience that takes place, usually on a weekend, the respective silence and attention focused forward, the predictable nature of the stories/services, and the consumption of food. “As regular moviegoers we understand that not every film experience will be entertaining, much less more than entertaining; but those of us who continue to frequent movie theaters, even in a television culture, do so with the expectation that, sooner or later, what we see and hear in the theater will be magical, miraculous, even

rethinks the historical development of American avant-garde film in terms of the creation of spiritual community, a midcentury movement driven by filmmakers disenchanted with the spiritual vacuity of the commercial cinema who were “committed to the potential of cinema to provide deeper, more fully spiritual experiences than were available commercially.”<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, MacDonald suggests that avant-garde films have the potential to offer a kind of spiritual engagement in the simple act of viewing, with “films that seemed to demand the kind of reverent attention that I had sensed around me during my early churchgoing experiences.”<sup>59</sup>

In addition to identifying the potential of the avant-garde as a spiritual practice in terms of the kind of visuality it generates, MacDonald also reminds us that the avant-garde is, finally, a history. In that history, it is often the power of the cinematic image to give visual form, its envisioning possibilities, that have been characterized as its prime creative and historiographical force. Although comprised of three extremely different movements in Europe in the 1920s, the first cinematic avant-gardes could be united under this interest in the possibilities to show new things using the power of the cinema. The French impressionists, enamored with the possibilities that film could “visually reveal to us beauties and dramas that our eye, a feeble lens, does not perceive”<sup>60</sup> declared *photogénie* as the ultimate achievement of cinema. A description

---

transformative in something like a moral sense.” See *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. MacDonald flags two surveys of the American avant-garde that acknowledge this spiritual potential. Interestingly, both are focused on the power of new forms of cinema to envision. Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* surveys works of the canonical avant-garde, computer-generated and video imagery, installations incorporating cinema, and “intermedia art” in which images and films are part of created environments to argue that such expanded cinema is part of an art and drug fueled expanded consciousness. The language of size is an important part of Youngblood’s lexicon: expanded cinema, “a conception of the nature of cinema so encompassing and pervasive that it promises to dominate all image-making” (76); oceanic and then cosmic consciousness. This is a celebration of the cinema as colossus, as overpowering—a cinema of the sublime. See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970). MacDonald also flags P. Adams Sitney’s *Visionary Film* for its focus on films that “cinematically generat[ed] new mythologies of the imagination for a spiritually destitute era.” See MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Germaine Dulac, “From ‘Visual and Anti-visual Films,’” in P. Adams Sitney, ed. *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 32.

of the enhancement to reality made possible by the camera, Jean Epstein described it in transcendental terms as “any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction.”<sup>61</sup> The radical *mise-en-scène* of the German expressionists served to exteriorize the inner psychology of their characters, and both the *kino-eye* of Dziga Vertov and the dialectics of Sergei Eisenstein celebrated in the Soviet filmmakers the ability of the camera to see and to express more than what can be seen or visually articulated without mechanical assistance.

The post-war American avant-garde largely followed this focus, especially as it was historicized by scholars, including P. Adams Sitney, whose hugely influential *Visionary Cinema* links many American filmmakers with their European predecessors to argue for an artistic continuity between the two. Sitney’s focus is on the way in which avant-garde films give visual form to consciousness, their mytho-poetic, visionary possibilities. In a compelling coincidence of language, Martin Jay uses the term “the visionary tradition” to designate “the power of the optical in religion.”<sup>62</sup> Just as apophatic theology creates an alternative to the visionary tradition in religious discourse, it is my claim that it likewise can be thought of as an alternative to the visionary tradition of the cinematic avant-garde. In my focus on the discourse of the sacred and the apophasis of imagery in the American avant-garde, I am attempting to develop a perspective of this alternative, another avant-garde. The scholarship that follows, then, begins to develop an *apophatic tradition*, a style of experimental film that engages in the discourse of the sacred in a way that is avisual. As MacDonald’s spiritual history of the avant-garde makes clear, there are many ways in which one could account for religious discourse in film, most of which are based

---

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12.

on models of cinematic presence. Even within instances of unsaying in the American avant-garde, however, the field is larger than my case studies. Rather than historically, stylistically, or geographically constituting a comprehensive survey of the apophatic legacy, what I offer here is an initial charting of the possibilities of this negative approach, an exploration of the potential diversity by which discourses of the sacred have intersected with and influenced the avant-garde.

### *I Was Possessed By God*

One representative example, and a fascinating iteration of this convergence of religious and cinematic negation, can be found in Caveh Zahedi's short film *I Was Possessed by God* (2000), which explores two representational impossibilities: that of representing God; and that of representing its character's subjective inner experience. On my secondhand VHS copy of the film (the format of the film's commercial release by World Artists), a sticker on the side of the case classifies the film as 'cult.' Of course, the designation of the film under the cult film genre means something entirely different to a video store than the sense of immediacy and presence Hans Belting attributes to the cult image. Typically, however, scholarship on religion and film is built on an understanding of the power and presence of the cinematic image akin to Belting's cult image. Positioned from either within a belief system looking to films<sup>63</sup> or from without looking for traces of religious culture in this prevalent popular culture form,<sup>64</sup> these approaches share an essential focus as they search for the cinematic manifestations (most often narrative) of religious themes, texts, personages, and stories. While the title of Zahedi's film seems to indicate it is ripe for such an approach, the film itself frustrates this search for religious presence. The unintended comparison with Belting's term is a fortuitous one, however, for *I Was Possessed* does give the viewer one kind of presence, while simultaneously teasing and denying another kind. The banal,

---

<sup>63</sup> As in Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> S. Brent Plate, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), is a good example of this approach.

the annoying, the amateur, and the homemade are present here while the titularly promised divine perspective, as well as a narratively promised psychotropic-induced perspective, are denied. While the film *could* give form to that which is invisible, through any number of special effects, giving that presence to absence would destroy its sacredness. To envision the sacred would be to destroy it, and *I Was Possessed* consistently denies that epiphanic drive. In this way the film serves as a good short example of Sitney's secular theology in its simultaneous emphasis on and denial of vision in an avant-garde work.



Figure 0.2: The identified psychedelic mushrooms in *I Was Possessed by God*.

The film documents Zahedi's psychedelic trip after taking a large dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Even this most basic narrative thread remains unclear, however, at least for the non-psychonaut;<sup>65</sup> no expository information is given preceding the film's central action, and the mushrooms only make a cursory appearance as unidentifiable debris in a teacup, already blended with water. For the whole of its 27 minutes, the two-character film operates in a largely self-

---

<sup>65</sup> The popular term for those who, most often via hallucinogenic drugs, explore altered states of consciousness, or in a direct etymological translation, those who sail the soul.

reflexive and observational mode as Caveh<sup>66</sup> acts while the cameraman, Thomas, occasionally interacts with his friend. The opening shot begins with Caveh making a phone call to (one assumes) his neighbor, letting her know that he will be filming later that day and warning that she may hear some screaming. As he drinks something from a teapot—“reliquifying” its contents at one point—Caveh gags and retches in a stomach-turning display of disgust, to the point that Thomas becomes concerned for him. While the contents of Caveh’s cup are not readily apparent, his experience of drinking it easily evokes the empathy of the film’s viewer.<sup>67</sup>

The film then cuts to Caveh in a bed, the location it remains for the remainder of the film. Caveh hums, talks to Thomas and to unseen listeners, makes faces, shouts, and plays with the camera equipment. In general, he reacts to an experience that is completely internal and therefore invisible to the camera. In its documentary role, the camera simply observes. It is edited around Caveh’s outbursts, but pointedly eschews filmic techniques—such as diegetic music or subjective point of view cinematography and editing—that are typically used to give the impression of an inner experience.<sup>68</sup> In characterizing the cinema as one of the new

---

<sup>66</sup> For the sake of clarity, as Caveh Zahedi is both filmmaker and subject of the film, I follow the lead of the film itself in referring here to the subject of the film as ‘Caveh,’ and the filmmaker as ‘Zahedi.’

<sup>67</sup> In the way in which this aspect of the film provokes visceral sensation, it functions as a body genre, as Linda Williams describes them. In sharing this sensation of disgust, the film makes it present, in a sense; the presence of disgust is accessible and available to the viewer thanks to the visceral connection established. See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in Barry Keith Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader 2* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 140-158.

<sup>68</sup> In contrast to conventional techniques of religious envisionment, we could identify the absence of both visual and aural devices in Zahedi’s film by which we might reasonably expect Zahedi to give form to his hidden inner experience. These include metadiegetic music, a term used by Mladen Milicevic to describe an aspect of sound design, encompasses all those devices used to create an oneiric mood and subjective aural point of view such as the elimination of ambient sound, emphasis on particular sounds that are the focus of a character’s concentration, and use of non-diegetic music, all often accompanied by slow motion. See Mladen Milicevic, “Film Sound Beyond Reality: Subjective Sound in Narrative Cinema,” Available at [filmsound.org/articles/beyond.htm](http://filmsound.org/articles/beyond.htm), accessed 8/25/2015. Point of view shots as well as minds-eye imagery sutures the viewer into a film via the visual identification with a particular character’s gaze, a potent tool well analyzed in the context of psychoanalysis and the cinema. Pier Paolo Pasolini describes a different subjective shot in his semiotically influenced theory of film poetry in the free-indirect point of view shot. Accounting for the differences by which different viewers will understand a point of view shot depending on their cultural and class background, Pasolini calls for a *stylistically* subjective point of view shot, internalizing not only the content but also the “inner system of allusions” (*Heretical Empiricism*, 177) of a character’s gaze.

technologies that “introduced new signifiers of interiority,”<sup>69</sup> Akira Lippit references the possibilities promoted by the French Impressionists of the first avant-garde, the potential of *photogénie* to show an inner emotional life and thereby enhance reality. In this film, however, that dream of the cinema as a technology of interiority meets its match, for it is the exteriority of the camera perspective that is insistent. The images accumulate, excessively even, but in that excess no images of the inner experience are to be found. This is *I Was Possessed*'s avisuality, its mark of the apophatic. Divine possession, it turns out, is pretty dull for those on the outside.



Figure 0.3: *I Was Possessed*'s documentation of a historical moment seen in the date/time stamp.

Both in its narrative and in a more structural, reflexive way, this is a film largely about the limits of cinematic representation with a number of shifting perspectives implicitly promised,

---

Zahedi's film also stands in the history of the proliferation of the cinematic recreation of psychedelic experiences in the 1960-70's in films such as *The Trip* (Corman, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), which employed many special and practical effects to give subjective drug experiences visual form. These included: psychedelic lighting and paint in the mise-en-scène; envisioned fantasy sequences; kaleidoscopic graphics; use of a subjective point-of-view hand-held camera; wide-angle lenses distorting the image; rapid non-linear editing with frequent non-diegetic inserts; jump cuts; zooms; extreme angles; and iris mattes. Given the history of the cinema in creating such a proliferation of ways of expressing a character's inner experience, it is notable—even glaring—an absence in *I Was Possessed by God*. Rather than diving into Caveh's subjective point of view, we the viewers are left pointedly on the surface, experiencing everything from the outside only as Zahedi contests the preexisting approaches to giving visual form to subjective experience.

<sup>69</sup> Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 58.

granted, and denied. We are given the surface perspective, the historical document<sup>70</sup> of the actions of two men, one day in April, 1998. We are also given some interior perspective in the shared sense of taste and revulsion between the viewer and Caveh as he drinks his mycologic cocktail. As an experience marked on and shared in the human body, Caveh's experience of disgust is readily spread to the viewer as he makes gagging sounds (and later in the film burps repeatedly into the microphone). Such an easily shared sensation is contrasted to Caveh's private experience of his drug trip, a perspective that is emphatically not given. This is emphasized at one point when the camera tilts up to see what (or who) Caveh is reaching his hand toward. He sees and hears something awe inspiring, we can read on his face, but we only see the wooden slats of the bottom of a bunk bed above his head.

Analogous to its subject's inner experience is the film's inner structure, its basic narrative which, like inner experience, also functions here as something hidden. In their shared conspicuous inaccessibility, this element of cinematic construction is conflated with the previously established avisuality of inner experience. Opening in medias res, without explanation or background information, there remains an unresolved ambiguity to basic narrative questions here. Why does he tell his neighbor he will be screaming? What is he drinking? What is going on? Unlike the more universally accessible sensations of revulsion and disgust, the circle of the initiated is limited here to those who will recognize this as an experiment in taking a "heroic dose"<sup>71</sup> of psilocybin mushrooms with the goal of dissolving the user's ego and sense of self. Zahedi's film synopsis fills that information in. Not included within the actual text of the film, it reads:

---

<sup>70</sup> The documenting role of the film is emphasized by its medium of video, made clear by both the low quality of the image (clearly produced on amateur quality equipment) as well as a time/date stamp that appears in the bottom right corner of the screen at one point in the footage. Not only did this really happen, but it happened on April 29, 1998.

<sup>71</sup> This is the term the countercultural writer, philosopher, and advocate of psychedelics Terence McKenna coined for a 5 gram dose of mushrooms.

On February 14th (Valentine's Day), 1993, Caveh Zahedi, being without a date, decided to ingest 5 grams<sup>72</sup> of hallucinogenic mushrooms. For the first time in his mushroom-taking experience, he had an experience of "divine possession," in which he felt that a divine being took possession of his body and spoke through him, in a voice that was not his and with knowledge that he himself did not possess. He afterwards tried several times to repeat the experience. *I Was Possessed By God* is the documentary record of one such experience.<sup>73</sup>

This desire and attempt to recreate a drug-induced experience of the divine, while the very *raison d'être* of the film, is hidden in the film's fragmentary narrative structure, a narrative ambiguity that necessitates a certain amount of work on the part of the viewer to resolve.

In addition to its conflation of a drug-induced perspective and narrative form, there is one more perspectival comparison made in the question of divine perspective raised by the film's title but similarly absent from its imagery. Not only is the potential ecstasy of religious vision never manifest, but the film is even ultimately ambiguous as to the nature of Caveh's recorded experience. *I was possessed*, the title declares in the past tense, and the synopsis on the back of the VHS original release of the film tellingly changes the last world of the film summary above, so that it reads "*I Was Possessed by God* is the documentary record of one such *attempt*" (emphasis mine) to repeat the experience of divine possession, rather than one such experience of possession. This kind of temporal chasm between event recorded in the past and relived with each screening is just the kind of historical distance that film *can* bridge, but the film's synopsis tells us that this titular possession is something that happened in the past, and the current film is only one of many attempts to recreate that experience. Was it a successful attempt? The question ultimately goes unanswered. In doing so, the film negates its own status as a document, as the question of what it is even purporting to show remains unclear.

---

<sup>72</sup> "A very large dose," some versions of the synopsis, including the text on the back of the cover of the film's 2000 World Artists Home Video VHS release, helpfully offer in a parenthetical here.

<sup>73</sup> Synopsis from Caveh Zahedi's website: <http://www.cavehzahedi.com/#!i-was-possessed-by-god/c16b6>, accessed 08/13/2015.

The negation of a divine perspective is complicated in the film, and the ambiguity of its religious discourse is heightened, by the way in which the sacred and the cinematic are elided as the avisuality of its divine perspective leads to questions of film form, not religious transcendence. Is there any real difference, to the camera, between a drug trip and a religious experience? The film suggests there is not. Both are interior experiences that are unable to be recorded and transmitted via the film, a point humorously made during one sequence in which Thomas mistakenly assumes Caveh's address to the divine is directed toward him. "Are you going away," Caveh asks near the end of the film. "No," Thomas replies in a reassuring tone. "...God," Caveh adds, finishing his question to the divine, and then responds to Thomas' apology with an elfin "That's ok." As this exchange highlights, there is not a clear distinction in Caveh's address when talking to an invisible divine or physically present human companion, not a difference that Thomas (and by proxy, the viewer) can discern, at any rate, within Caveh's oscillating modes of address.



Figure 0.4: The mixing of cinematic and sacred discourse as Caveh grabs the camera light in *Possessed*.

Elsewhere in the film, Caveh talks about (and talks to?) Jesus, God, the filmmakers Pier Paolo Passolini and Jean-Luc Godard, and makes vague pronouncements on the importance of

love. He performs, at one point deciding to cry on camera, and at another directly addressing his future audience (and neither Thomas nor the divine) when he turns to the camera and asks “What do you guys think?” In one telling moment of this interplay between the cinematic and the sacred pretensions of the film, Caveh grabs the boom microphone and light, and while bathing himself in the camera light declares, “I am God and I exist in the light of...Yes!” This potentially uncomfortable mixing of religious discourse with the elements of cinematic form that *I Was Possessed by God* continually asserts is a mixing to the extent that is only possible when framed in terms of the negative. As the visualization of the divine experience is equated with the visualization of the drug experience,<sup>74</sup> plenty of room is left for the questioning of even the possibility of divine experience itself. In this way the religious—properly identified as the sacred, for it is set apart—is subject to apophasis here, negations upon negations. Despite these negations, Zahedi’s religious references remain in multiple locations within the film: in its title; in the stated conceit of the narrative; and in Caveh’s outbursts.

Zahedi has built his career on a cinematic persona defined by an ethos of fundamental honesty and openness. In largely self-reflexive works he confronts the camera, unrelentingly laying bare his personal quirks and flaws in a continuing attempt to capture authenticity, as ugly as that may be. His films are marked by his open, unguarded performances that often freely mix documentary and fiction. In doing so, Zahedi is a filmmaker “in whose films the relationship of the authoring filmmaker to both the text and the authoring structure within the text is one not of

---

<sup>74</sup> In many ways, *I Was Possessed* recalls the Boston University Marsh Chapel experiment of 1962, which (under the guidance of Timothy Leary’s Harvard Psilocybin Project) established the connections between psilocybin, the psychedelic compound in hallucinogenic mushrooms, and mystical religious experience.

direct parentage but of convoluted performance.”<sup>75</sup> What is interesting here is that Zahedi performs negations of both the cinematic and the religious type.

Like Zahedi’s curious syntax (*I was possessed*), much of what the film promises is elapsed, removed, or hidden. What is actually left onscreen is strikingly unremarkable, home-movie quality footage of a wiry man twitching and yelling. It is precisely in its mundane unremarkability and hiddenness that I locate *I Was Possessed by God*’s avisuality. Here is one manifestation of the focus in this project on the limits of the sacred’s connection to the visual realm and to the form of the moving image. The unremarkability of the film is one way in which it disrupts conventions, realizing the potential visualization of a drug trip/divine experience in an almost painfully banal form. This aesthetic of failure<sup>76</sup>—or, perhaps, an aesthetic of limits—arises from the conflation of a sacred and a drug-induced experience. In Zahedi’s film, intertwining these two modes has the effect of confusing categories, arresting the viewer’s judgment, and ultimately emphasizing the commonality between a drug experience and a sacred experience in terms of cinematic representation—the fundamental otherness and inaccessibility of the experience to the spectator.

In insisting on these limits, the film raises the possibility (but far from the certainty) of traversing them by locating the sacred somewhere other than within the representational schema of the film. While such a possibility is not necessarily present here, I will explore this in further depth in Chapter Two when looking at Zahedi’s feature length experimental documentary *I*

---

<sup>75</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>76</sup> In Zahedi’s frequent collaborator Greg Walkins’ film *A Sign From God* (2000), Zahedi plays a fictionalized version of himself. During a meeting with film producers in which he is asked to pitch ideas for future films they could finance, he proposes “a documentary about myself.” It would be a parody of the “great filmmaker genre,” he says. “It would be a film about failure, really.”

*Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994), which expands on many of the themes nascently explored in this short film.

Finally, there is something else that emerges while watching the video, especially given the fact that nothing spectacular happens; there is an emphasis on the time spent in the viewing. In this experience of time, the film's avisuality once again directs the viewer to film form itself, to the process by which the images have been created rather than transporting the viewer to a fantastical experience. Although cut to 27 minutes from footage of a three hour psychedelic experiment, the essential mundaneness of the film (for everything exciting or stimulating seems to be happening in the inaccessible depths of Caveh's experience) emphasizes the time spent waiting, the limits of representation, and the mundane—and this is precisely where apophatic discourse leads. In the unsaying of the transcendent, “that which is utterly ‘beyond’ is revealed or reveals itself as most intimately ‘within.’” In apophatic discourse, as logic and semantics break down, “the extraordinary, the transcendent, the unimaginable, reveals itself as the common.”<sup>77</sup>

One value of this foregrounding of limits comes in the exposure of the illusion that is an integral part of most films. There are and always have been limits, it insists, a fact that the narrative, industrial, illusory mode of cinema hides. But pull away the illusion in favor of a document, and one is left with a kind of realism that in its partiality and self-reflexivity points to the duration and the surface of things—an experience of the present and of being present on the surface of the film.

---

<sup>77</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 7.

## Engaging Absence: A Methodology

Much of the driving force of *I Was Possessed by God* comes from the way it negotiates this relationship in which the film connects to the world being filmed as well as the world of the viewer. This raises the question—what is the nature of one’s engagement with films in the apophatic tradition? *I Was Possessed* certainly demands a form of engagement as it works with and against its viewer’s expectations and desires. What the film actually shows, while a potentially interesting performance of a drug trip/possession, is a step removed from an experience accessible and knowable to its viewers. Where it does directly engage the viewer is in the tension it generates between the presence of the image and the absence of its sacred referents, between envisioning and invisibility, its avisibility. Through this, it encourages us to direct our focus onto the process of signification, examining *how* the film interacts with the world being filmed and with the world of the viewer.

Theories of cinematic realism provide a useful framework to address this question of engagement, which becomes a particularly salient area of inquiry given the relationality that is the result of apophatic discourse. When the sacred is not simply missing but is unsaid, apophatic discourse intends to open up a potential space to encounter the sacred. Jean-Luc Marion, for example, proposes negating the fixed and static quality of 'being' in the divine by conceiving of a “god without being.” In place of ‘being’ he proposes ‘the good’ or ‘love,’ which unlike the fixed quality of being only have meaning in action. This allows him to frame the icon in terms of its engagement with its viewer; it looks back and transforms the viewer in a constant state of (conceptual) movement.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Marion, *God without Being*, 22.

One way in which theories of cinematic realism provide a basis by which to discuss the relationality of the apophatic image can be found in Miriam Hansen's description of Siegfried Kracauer's realism. As presented in his *Theory of Film*, she writes, it is "not a theory of film in general but a theory of a particular type of film experience,"<sup>79</sup> an experience based on the indeterminacies of film. As one of the two foundational theorists of cinematic realism, Kracauer focuses on films that record and reveal "physical reality,"<sup>80</sup> arguing that the intermediacies one finds in such films are constructed in such a way as to foster multiple meanings in the mind of the viewer, setting off an unending flight of associations.

Andre Bazin, the most influential theorist of realism in film, has a similar focus on the indeterminacies introduced to the image as a result of its privileged relationship to the material world. Bazin singles out duration (the non-abstracting of time) as cinema's reality.<sup>81</sup> Through duration, he argues, ambiguity is reintroduced into the image, necessitating an active engagement on the part of the spectator. For both Bazin and Kracauer, duration introduces ambiguities and indeterminacies, giving the viewer choice among many possible meanings, which establishes the necessity of active viewing and the possibility of the creation of a relationship between viewer, film, and material world.

Theories of realism in film scholarship have often been used as a model of presence, to claim that the material world is recreated or reproduced in a film. This is the focus of Michael Bird's compelling 1982 essay "Film as Hierophany," which utilizes a popular understanding of Bazin's theories to propose the potential of the power of the cinematographic image to establish a bond with the world through its power of presence. Borrowing his titular term from Mircea

---

<sup>79</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Introduction," in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), x.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 1, 34.

Eliade, who offers it “to designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred” within the profane world,<sup>82</sup> Bird ties the possibility of film operating as such a conduit to the sacred to theories of cinematic realism. Insofar as film can offer a window onto a culture and that culture functions as a hierophany, cinema “is invested with the power for the disclosure of that continual striving within culture toward the holy, by bringing us into the presence of the real as it ‘calls up’ meaning from its inner depths.”<sup>83</sup> Dudley Andrew challenges this popular understanding of Bazin’s theories as a model of cinematic presence, however, arguing instead that, for Bazin, “the reality attained by a film is what precisely is not visible in its images.”<sup>84</sup> Following critic and theorist Serge Daney, Andrew describes Bazin as, at least in part, a theorist of absence<sup>85</sup> whose interest in the cinema charts a middle ground between presence and absence.

Theories of realism, with a focus on indeterminacies, absence, and engagement, relate to *I Was Possessed by God* in two main ways. In the first, the quality of the film as a document is important, as it establishes an authentic, ethical connection between the film and the event it documents. This really happened, its documentary mode suggests, implying that, as a document, the film will provide a stable perspective on the events (which, with its ambiguities of language and its lack of narrative clarity, it does not). I will develop this tension between the documentary and the apophatic modes of Zahedi’s films in Chapter Two’s analysis of *I Don’t Hate Las Vegas Anymore* in which the ethical questions raised by the events of the film emerge as an important

---

<sup>82</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 11. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Bird, "Film as Hierophany" in John R. May and Michael S. Bird, eds., *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 21.

<sup>84</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 8.

<sup>85</sup> The connection between realism and absence in Bazin’s thought can be seen clearly in his essay on Robert Bresson’s film *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951). The final shot of the film, which Bazin describes as “the disappearance of the image” as well as “a sublime achievement of pure cinema,” is a kind of negative image, the shadow of a cross on a white screen following the death of the titular character. This non-image, Bazin declares, “is the triumph of cinematographic realism,” for it is a sign, a trace, that points to a reality beyond itself. See Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 1, 140-141.

aspect of its structure. This sense of the importance of a film taking part in the world also applies to the circulation of a work post-production, and in Chapters One and Three I will focus in part on questions of distribution and screenings.

*I Was Possessed* also engages with Bazin and Kracauer's ideas of realism in the way the film and viewer interact and in the way the film shapes vision. Certainly, *I Was Possessed* is marked by ambiguities and indeterminacies. The actual events are largely unclear at first, if more or less resolvable to the researching viewer. The nature of the experience documented, however, remains ambiguous to the end; not only because of the semantic ambiguity of the film's title, but also as a result of Caveh's performativity. He talks to the film viewers, performing for us. Is he playing up his experience, performing a more dramatic drug trip? Is his ego dissolved by his 'heroic dose' of mushrooms? These ambiguities ultimately shape the viewer's experience as conventions and expectations of the film are established and subverted, reflexively confronting the viewer with the illusion of cinema.

One way to contextualize the nature of the viewer's engagement with a film such as *I Was Possessed* is as a process of meaning creation that is mutually shared by the film and viewer alike. In the act of viewing an apophatic film, we make the film as it also makes us. Stanley Cavell called this reciprocity the 'cinematic circle,' which acknowledges that

giving significance to and placing significance in specific possibilities and necessities (or call them elements; I sometimes still call them automatisms) of the physical medium of film are the fundamental acts of, respectively, the director of a film and the critic (or audience) of film; together with the idea that what constitutes an "element" of the medium of film is not knowable prior to these discoveries of direction and of criticism. This reciprocity between element and significance I would like to call the cinematic circle. Exploring this circle is something that can be thought of as exploring the medium of film.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xiii-xiv.

The significance of a film in the apophatic tradition does not, and can not, lie in what it shows. Rather, the significance of its elements only develop in an engaged critical perspective such as the one Cavell describes.

One recent model for such an active mode of critical engagement is that of the haptic,<sup>87</sup> a phenomenological touch-based theory of film signification and criticism.<sup>88</sup> In its focus on sensation that is not visual, Akira Lippit flags haptic perception as one site of avisuality.<sup>89</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy has been among the most perceptive theorists and philosophers of the mixing of a haptic mode of avisuality and the sacred. “The image is always sacred,” he says.

The sacred, for its part, signifies the separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off. In one sense, then, religion and the sacred are opposed, as the bond is opposed to the cut. In another sense, religion can no doubt be represented as securing a bond with the separated sacred. But in yet another sense, the sacred is what it is only through its separation, and there is no bond with it. There is then, strictly speaking, no religion of the sacred. The sacred is what, of itself, remains set apart, at a distance, and with which one forms no bond (or only a very paradoxical one). It is what one cannot touch (or only by a touch without contact).<sup>90</sup>

For Nancy, the sacred is no longer a description of a mode of experience of being in the world; instead he describes a mode of artistic experience. The distinct (the replacement term Nancy proposes for the sacred) is not part of the world of representation. Instead it is a force, an

---

<sup>87</sup> A description of engagement as well as a critical practice first proposed by Alois Riegl in his comparative studies of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art, brought back into art historical discourse by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and developed in terms of the cinema most fully by Laura U. Marks, haptic visuality recalls Nancy’s quote above which describes the sacred in art as that which one can only touch in a “touch without contact.” “In haptic visuality,” describes Marks, “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch...Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space...Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.” See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.

<sup>88</sup> Marion has drawn out many of the similarities between phenomenology and apophatic theology, both of which, he writes, are two sides of the same coin that developed after metaphysics and Nietzsche’s “death of God.” Under phenomenology, the fact (or question) of a phenomenon’s *being* is not addressed. Instead a phenomenon is first experienced as it is given, a process named a donation; a similar move takes place in apophatic theology, in that God is unknown and unknowable, and only experienced by what God gives of himself. See Jean-Luc Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (1994).

<sup>89</sup> “A mode of visuality that displaces opticality, rending the visible avisual.” See Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 62.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 1.

“energy, pressure, or intensity...the very force of its distinction.”<sup>91</sup> Giving the example of a portrait that conveys a deeper quality, a force of the person represented, Nancy describes the way in which a viewer interacts with such a force, alluded to by his reference to a paradoxical bond and a touch without contact in the quote above. The image does not bind the sacred to its representation, transporting it to the viewer. Instead of actually making what it represents present, the image puts the viewer into relation with that absent thing through “less a transport than a *rapport*, or relation.”<sup>92</sup> It is only through this relation that the distinct becomes visible, says Nancy. “It does not belong to the domain of objects, their perceptions and their use, but to that of faces, their affections and transmissions. The image is the obviousness of the invisible. It does not render it visible as an object: it accedes to a knowledge of it.” In this way, the image “delivers a totality of sense or a truth.”<sup>93</sup>

What is the touch without contact in *I Was Possessed by God*? Does it deliver a totality of sense, or a truth? In its banality and in certain qualities I’ve highlighted (such as Caveh’s performativity, its narrative ambiguities, and its surface-bound perspective), the film seems to overtly defy a viewer’s ability to touch the divine<sup>94</sup> through the experience it provides. Through its negations, however, it does put the viewer into relation with a cinematic truth, the truth of representation that is the film’s focus. *I Was Possessed*, I would argue, does put its viewer into contact with *an* invisible—not the invisible divine, but the invisible structures of cinematic expectations.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>94</sup> As one character in Greg Watkins’ *A Sign from God* (2000) hilariously says after seeing a clip of *I Was Possessed by God*, “If that’s what god is like I don’t want anything to do with him.”

Finally, *I Was Possessed* explicitly and self-referentially calls for a modernist mode of engagement with Caveh's invocation of Jean-Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>95</sup> in the midst of his mushroom-induced trip. It is an interesting pairing of European auteurs; films by both these filmmakers often exemplify the fragmented, modernist mode of Zahedi's film as well as the Deleuzian poetics that such a fragmented mode engenders.

Godard is the quintessential modernist in Peter Wollen's description of the style, with his fragmented and Brechtian films. "A Godard film," Gilberto Perez writes, "gives the impression not of the complete but of the ongoing, a world in the process of taking place, 'a film in the process of being made' (as his 1966 *Masculine Feminine* declares itself)."<sup>96</sup> The poetic theory of Pier Paolo Pasolini, himself a modernist filmmaker, semiotician, poet, and theorist, helps to unpack the film form—the language—of such fragmented works. Pasolini's poetics are largely built around the double nature of contamination,<sup>97</sup> in which the mixing of the high and low stylistically evokes previously inexpressible difference, which Pasolini identifies as a film's poetic power.

With the term contamination, Pasolini is not simply describing an intermingling of high and low culture within a film, nor is he naming a new hybridized film form. Rather, Pasolini uses the term to describe an *action* in which the mixing of the culturally and stylistically high

---

<sup>95</sup> Interestingly enough, both Pasolini and Godard made rather interesting examples of the intersection of religion with European auteur narrative cinema with Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) and Godard's *Hail Mary* (1985). Further, both of these films take on a veristic quality, telling a contemporary reimagining (Godard) and an historical reenactment of gospel stories in straight-forward, documentary-like ways (Pasolini goes so far as to take all his dialogue directly from the biblical source text).

<sup>96</sup> Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 337.

<sup>97</sup> In Ben Lawton's introduction to *Heretical Empiricism*, he quotes from *The New Zingarelli: Dictionary of the Italian Language of Nicola Zingarelli* the linguistic definition that Pasolini references in his use of the word *contaminazione*, "the action of one element on another with which it finds itself associated" (*Heretical Empiricism*, xxxii). In addition Pasolini expands the sense of contamination beyond the linguistic, in his description of the double nature of the screenplay which is a sign that alludes "to meaning through two different paths, which are simultaneous and converging" (188). This "dynamic structure" he describes necessitates a focus on *process* rather than *structure*, a poetic power that emerges from its double nature.

and low within a work revitalize each other and the work as a whole. Thus, a contaminated form is one with life and poetic power. Pasolini signals out Godard as a noteworthy practitioner of contamination, in that no matter what the content of his films, the contamination of Godard's own perspective can always be seen in "the pure pleasure of restoring a reality fragmented by technique" lurking beneath his narratives.<sup>98</sup> Gilles Deleuze draws on Pasolini in his description of the "crystalline regime" (his term for the multifaceted, heterogeneous, composite film image, constructed of potentially disparate meanings and subjectivities); the crystalline narrative (Deleuze's focus here is on narrative structure) is comprised of an image in which "objective and subjective images lose their distinction, but also their identification, in favour of a new circuit where they are wholly replaced, or contaminate each other, or are decomposed and recomposed."<sup>99</sup>

Noa Steimatsky highlights an example of contamination in Pasolini's use of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* over a fight scene between pimps in Pasolini's first film *Accattone* (1961). The combining of the high and low is especially clear here as high religious music provides the score for the low scrabbling of criminals.

Where a truly secular artist might have located here a debunking of theological dogma and myth or, conversely, a rationale for ignoring altogether the traces of the past, Pasolini embraces both the humble material concreteness of such traces and the grand resonance of the myth. Their mutual contamination forms, rather, the basis of an adaptation in which the landscape of poverty and allusions to the gorgeous riches of Christian art, the contemporary and the archaic, the actual and the phantasmic, intersect rather than negate each other.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Louise K. Barnett and Ben Lawton, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), 181-182.

<sup>99</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 149.

<sup>100</sup> Noa Steimatsky, "Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*: Towards a Theology of Film," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 248.

The sense of recomposition that Deleuze and Steimatsky describe is the real payoff for Pasolini's contamination, which makes Zahedi's invocation of Pasolini intriguing. Granted, the highs and lows in *I Was Possessed* are not as explicit as Steimatsky finds in *Accattone*. Nevertheless, the contamination between the high—in the titular promise of divine presence—and the low—in the mundane visual manifestation of the drug trip—is hard to miss. Likewise, it is only in the mixing of invisibility and visibility (their avisuality) that the sacred and the cinematic mix in films in the apophatic tradition. The high and the low don't completely meld in *I Was Possessed*, but they aren't completely separate either.

Pasolini claimed that the instability and excess of a contaminated cinema's double articulation between the high and the low creates a dynamism and tension that “can empirically reanimate the passage.”<sup>101</sup> In a similar way, I would argue, the avisuality of the films studied here ultimately opens up a potential space for the power of the sacred. The sacred is not simply negated; in engaging the viewer it (potentially) revivifies as well. As *I Was Possessed by God* embraces ambiguities and indeterminacies, there is the possibility that it points beyond itself. It is more than what it appears to be, in large part because of the paucity of what is seen.

### **Chapter Summaries: Where is the Sacred?**

In the following case studies, I present an initial perspective of the possibilities of apophatism in American avant-garde film. In questioning how we engage with the films, and what the effects are of their apophasis and avisuality, I develop a narrative charting a movement of the sacred—the location of the signification of the wholly other—through these disparate examples. The sacred, in these examples, is pushed outside the form of the films to a signification that only exists in the interaction between film and viewer.

---

<sup>101</sup> Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 195.

I start with Maya Deren, focusing on an unfinished film that Deren planned to make incorporating footage of Haitian Voudoun possession dances (filmed from 1947-50), a project that “defeated” her as an artist. Rather than as a failure, I read Deren’s decision to abandon the film as an apophatic gesture, a self-negation that acknowledges and negotiates the limits of cinematic representation of the sacred. In Chapter Two I consider Caveh Zahedi’s experimental documentary *I Don’t Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994). Whereas the negation of Deren’s Haitian project was one of production, Zahedi structures his film in such a way that the potentially represented sacred—and therefore, the film’s negation—is shifted from the images themselves to the viewer’s subjective reading of those images. Chapter Three continues exploring this shift of the sacred in Nathaniel Dorsky’s short, silent, poetic films, with primary attention given to *Hours For Jerome* (1982), *Variations* (1999), and *Compline* (2009). In Dorsky’s work, explicit reference to the sacred is entirely absent from the visual register, but does exist in the films’ paratexts and in the viewing experience created by their analogue-only 16mm celluloid existence. I make the case that this is a metonymic displacement, one that allows his films, in the experience of viewing them, to convey some sense of the sacred—precisely because they avoid an attempt at visual representation. In all these cases, I look to various manifestations of ambivalence and openness as the way the films negatively approach the sacred in cinematic form.

In Chapter One, I begin by considering Maya Deren’s visionary legacy and her status as one of the formative artists to develop the American post-war tradition of personal, poetic, 16mm experimental film. I characterize Deren’s theory and practice as a cinematic hierophany, as Deren’s focus was on the power of film to give visual form to the invisible and ephemeral, and as she drew many analogues in her film theory between the religiously and the cinematically

sacred. There is a shift that occurs in both Deren's theory and praxis, however, with the Haitian project. I characterize the Haitian project's incompleteness as an iconoclastic gesture, and I consider the productivity of this act by way of three categories of otherness that it preserves: that of dance; of religious metaphysics; and of Haitian culture. This iconoclasm points to an alternative to Deren's visionary legacy, I argue, as I position her at the head of an apophatic legacy of the American avant-garde. I characterize this as a legacy of unsaying regarding sacred referents, a strategy that can be seen in the work of Deren both in the Haitian project and in her later plans for a haiku-based film that would open up its system of signification to require the active participation of the viewer in its meaning-making.

In Chapter Two I characterize Caveh Zahedi's *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* and, to a lesser extent, Greg Watkins' *A Sign from God* (2000) as films that challenge the limits of cinematic representational form while operating completely within the cinematic system of representation. Through the indeterminacies of their narratives and a focus on their negation of the visionary legacy and of narrative and generic conventions, the films offer a way to cinematically approach the sacred without negating their own cinematic images. I characterize the effect of these negations and indeterminacies as a shift from a propositional mode—in which films create meaning by proposing and demonstrating a truth about the world—to a relational mode of cinematic signification. In this relational mode the viewer is explicitly, reflexively asked to complete the signifying goal of the film, which in both instances is the cinematic capture of traces of the divine. In the process of this shift from propositional to relational modes, the location of the potentially represented sacred shifts. Whereas Deren sought to inscribe the sacred on film by giving it visual form, here the sacred is positioned in the *process* of representation, a process that occurs in the rapport between the film and its viewer in its

relational mode. This creates, I claim, an apophatically religious-like structure of (cinematic) knowledge, one that breaks down at least some differences between the sacred and the profane.

Chapter Three focuses on the relationship between the films of Nathaniel Dorsky and their paratexts, particularly the references to devotional cinema, the sacred, and rituals of prayer found in Dorsky's writing and his films' titles. I tie these paratextual religious references to the experience of watching a Dorsky film as well as the ideal of film as an art that engages its viewer and the world, which I relate to Dorsky's association with Canyon Cinema. With their focus on the act of looking and the ground of the cinematic image, as well as their polyvalent editing structures that are designed to avoid grounding the films in an overly conceptual system of signification, I argue that Dorsky's films function as cinematic analogues to their paratextually referenced religious counterparts. Due to their negation of visual religious references as well as their attempts to break down (cinematic) language, I position Dorsky's films within the apophatic tradition, and I propose theories of the haptic as a useful approach for understanding the experience they create. Ultimately, as their religious references remain both absent (visually) and present (paratextually), I call attention to the tension that is cultivated and maintained in the films between the religious and the cinematic. This tension, I argue, creates a religious-like relationship between the films, their viewers, and the world, one that refocuses the viewer toward both the immanent and the ineffable.

### **Conclusion**

Anne Friedberg often<sup>102</sup> framed her scholarship on windows and screens in terms of geographical displacement, inspired by her move from New York to Los Angeles and a car accident during the time of her move that literally sent her through her car's windshield. The

---

<sup>102</sup> I first read a truncated version of the story in the preface to Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, and later heard her husband, Howard Rodman, recount the story in whole.

constantly mobilizing frames of the car window are never far away in California, especially with a long daily commute. Like Friedberg, I also moved from the northeast to southern California, but my experience nearly directly inversely mirrored hers, insofar as perspective is concerned. Anticipating the ideal weather and the sense of adventure, I learned to ride a motorcycle just before making the trip across the country, and now I look *over* a windscreen when traveling on California's motorways. I plummet through the air, feel the resistance to my body's motion, smell the natural (and unnatural) odors, all with a nearly unrestricted view through my helmet's visor. In short, my experience of California has been a full-sensorium and immersive one, of which vision is only a part. It would not be unfair to attribute some of my interests presented here to this experience, as I think of film and video more and more in terms of the ways they move through and operate within the world. In the form of the sacred I have sought out elements of the film experience that resist being framed and that exist only on the experiential edges of cinematic representation.

In the case studies explored here, such a sacredness of vision helps to explain some of the profound appeal of the films and videos, and of the moving image form itself. In the paradoxical limiting of presence *and* making present, of showing *and* hiding, there is a richness to these texts that is quite compelling. Ultimately, though, my focus in the following chapters comes back to the question of how we see, what forms of vision the films encourage when, in their fragmentary nature reflecting the discourse of the sacred, they embrace ambiguity and mystery.

## Chapter One

### Maya Deren's Haitian Project: Iconoclasm and Apophasis

Although the history of avant-garde film in the United States dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the post-WWII era saw a significant profusion of experimental filmmaking, viewing, and theorizing on the poetic and expressive capabilities of the medium. Due to a number of historical, cultural, and technological factors, this was the era of the “professionalization of avant-garde filmmaking.”<sup>1</sup> At the vanguard of these developments was Maya Deren, one of the few universally canonized figures of the American avant-garde.

That Maya Deren's influence was formative in the shaping of the mytho-poetic visionary tradition of the American avant-garde is widely documented. P. Adams Sitney devotes the first two chapters of his seminal history of the American avant-garde, *Visionary Film*, to Deren and her work, contextualizing her in the same way she presented herself—as someone who gives visual form to the invisible by poetically restructuring reality into new, creative forms.<sup>2</sup> As one of the most well known and thoroughly scrutinized figures in the visionary tradition of experimental cinema, Lucy Fisher notes, it is increasingly difficult to find a fresh perspective on Deren and her work.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I am attempting to do just that by claiming an alternative legacy for Deren. In addition to her visionary legacy, Maya Deren stands at the head of another path, an equally important but less-recognized tradition of the American avant-garde that is marked by the unrepresentability of the sacred and an apophasis of the cinematic image.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, "The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>2</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Fisher, "Afterlife and Afterimage: Maya Deren in “Transfigured Time”," *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 3 84 (2013).

Deren's position as a formative practitioner and thinker of the limits of the representational capabilities of the cinema finds its most direct crystallization in what is known as her Haitian project. Often characterized as Deren's great, unfinished labor,<sup>4</sup> the Haitian project began in 1946 as a planned film that would consist, in part, of recordings of Voudoun possession dances. Despite filming plenty of footage—indeed, unprecedented footage as she was accepted into religious services and allowed to film authentic possession dances, a rare occurrence according to Deren's own accounts—Deren abandoned the film by 1949. There are many ways to contextualize this historical fact. Deren herself described it in the language of control, a defeat “caused by my inability to master the material in the image of my own intention.”<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have followed Deren's own lead and similarly accounted for the project as a failure of Deren's effort to apply her existing aesthetics to the subject matter. More recently, Sarah Keller has proposed seeing the Haitian project as the most prominent example of a historical and thematic theme of incompleteness found throughout Deren's oeuvre.<sup>6</sup> I follow Keller's lead in thinking of the negation of the planned film as itself productive, but I do so by focusing on the implications of this iconoclastic gesture and the way it reveals Deren's deep engagement with the necessarily distant, and therefore sacred, aspect she had planned to embody in her film. In short, I do so by considering the Haitian project as a *religious* text, reading its incompleteness not as a symptom of failure but as a mark of the apophatic.

A critical analysis along the lines of religion is not unjustified. Voudoun is Haiti's native syncretic religion, after all, a decentralized system of belief and practice that Deren found

---

<sup>4</sup> In his unpublished biography of Maya Deren, Robert Steele, who interviewed Deren several times for this purpose, describes the film as “the largest cancer of Maya's film experiments,” and suggests that she could have died happy had she been able to “solve this problem” presented by the project. Robert Steele, “The Haitian Footage,” n.d., Box 18, Folder 1, The Maya Deren Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA (hereafter referred to as MDC).

<sup>5</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1983), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

shunned by the upper and ruling classes in favor of Christianity but very much alive in Haiti's peasant class. Voudoun formed as several African religions brought to Haiti by enslaved Africans combined with the Christianity of the European colonialists and with the religious beliefs of the Caribbean natives. Deren's interest in the religion extended beyond the unique forms of Voudoun possession dance to the metaphysical and cultural contexts of the religion itself. She was initiated into Voudoun while in Haiti, and the rituals and pantheon of divinities of the religion served as the subject of the book project that replaced Deren's initial cinematic plans. Further, by the time she began the Haitian project, Deren had established a film theoretical context that proposed artistic film as religious-like in its ability to give form and presence to that which is invisible and immaterial, a cinematic/religious convergence that was only strengthened by the parallels Deren later drew between her visual theory and the metaphysical and ritual structures of Voudoun.

When viewed through this religious lens, the unfinished and (largely) unseen nature of the Haitian project becomes its most salient quality as a text in the apophatic tradition. In the negation of its own visibility, Deren's project—as abandoned, unfinished, and fragmentary as it is—fits within this ancient model of religious discourse that consists of language that negates itself, “attenuates and takes back or cancels itself out” by “stumbling, stuttering, and becoming dumb.”<sup>7</sup> The act of not finishing can be understood as Deren's own apophysis of her imagery, a literal ‘taking back’ of her Haitian footage that she performed in two distinct steps. In the first, she negated her images conceptually by removing them from her self-created realm of artistic film. “I went as an artist—a creative artist—primary values originality, inventiveness,” she wrote in her journal preparing notes for lectures on Haiti. But I “was defeated as an artist...[and]

---

<sup>7</sup> William Franke, "Preface: Apophasis as a Genre of Discourse," in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. William Franke (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1.

I return as a reporter,”<sup>8</sup> a role she pursued both in her lectures on Haiti and in her revised (but unfulfilled) plans for the Haitian footage to make short explanatory, ethnographically minded films for an academic, anthropological audience. But then, in the second step, she negated her imagery in actuality by taking the footage out of the world of circulating and regularly seen films altogether,<sup>9</sup> setting her unedited film aside “in a fireproof box in the closet”<sup>10</sup> where it more or less remained until her death.

There is an iconoclastic element to Deren’s treatment (conceptually and in actuality) of her footage. Defined as the attacking, defacing, and destruction of religious images, the iconoclastic act has always revealed an ambivalence concerning the power of images. On the one hand, the iconoclast attacks images as a statement that religious imagery is not infused with the presence of the divine, for otherwise how could it be destroyed? On the other hand, the need to break an image is itself proof of the belief that the image does have power, for otherwise why would one bother to destroy it? Maya Deren’s negation of her Haitian footage reveals a similar belief in the power of the image. By silencing her own images, Deren reacts against their power to eliminate various aspects of alterity and otherness. In other words, her iconoclasm preserves sacredness, and functions as an apophatic ‘unsaying.’

The negations that are characteristic of religious apophatic discourse reflect the belief that the divine is so far beyond human language that “only the *unsaying* of language can ‘say’ what cannot be said.”<sup>11</sup> One crucial question that emerges in the unsaying of the Haitian project has to do with the interaction of religion and film; where is the sacred? Within the art of the moving image, where can one locate the fundamental otherness that is the object of apophatic unsaying?

---

<sup>8</sup> Maya Deren, “Notes for lectures on Haiti,” n.d., Box 2, Folder 33, MDC.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, as I will discuss later, some of Deren’s images were posthumously thrust back into this world in the form of the 1985 documentary *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*.

<sup>10</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Franke, “Preface: Apophasis as a Genre of Discourse,” 2.

What emerges when studying Deren's career and her exploration of this question is a shifting understanding of the location of the sacred. Deren's starting point, early in her career and in many ways the basis of her visionary legacy, is one that celebrates the ability of the image to embody everything by the sheer formal power of the artist's creative manipulation of the medium's raw material. In contrast, she ends her career embodying a tension between her theory and her praxis, a tension I will draw out here. This tension is primarily found in the open and ambiguous, less certain perspective that can be read into Deren's history with the Haitian project, a perspective in which everything is *not* contained in the image because the sacred itself is not containable. The unsaying of the Haitian project and its representational lacuna of the sacred relocates the sacred outside of the form of the film and places it within the interaction between film, subject, and viewer, a space that is dependent on the belief as well as the cultural and historical knowledge of the parties involved, in direct contrast to her early ideals of self-sufficient creative film form. This is the beginning of Deren's apophatic legacy, one that approaches the paradox of religious representation by the path of negation and is revealed by analyzing the Haitian project as a religious text.

In this chapter I begin by describing the context within which the Haitian project was planned at its inception in 1946. Deren's films, her film theory, and her proselytization for film as an artistic medium on par with painting or poetry provide the framework for a proposed project that incorporated a long-held interest in Haitian possession dances and which pushed the limits of what she saw as the capacity for film to make visible and make present that which is invisible and absent. I then read Deren's decision to abandon the cinematic component of her Haitian project as a direct reflection of her deep engagement with the religious context of possession dances and the fundamental incompatibility she finds between the alterity of the

sacred with its corresponding “ulterior reference”<sup>12</sup> and her previously established cinematic aesthetics. By actively avoiding envisioning the religious subject matter, Deren’s negation of her original plan for the film preserves the physical, metaphysical, and cultural aspects of Voudoun possession dance that Deren believed would have been otherwise destroyed by the project.

The primary object in this case study is not a single object at all. Rather, my focus here is on a film that Deren did *not* make and the *process* of that unsaying. Understanding the unsaying of the Haitian project as a performative,<sup>13</sup> which exists as a process in the act of negation, I take as my ‘object’ all those elements of the performance of unsaying. This includes Deren’s published and unpublished writings, her made and aborted plans, and her actions, in addition to her film footage. Likewise, my methodological approach is one that tries to read both the explicit and implicit implications of Deren’s iconoclastic unsaying. Deren’s own accounting of her decision to abandon the planned film offers a good starting point for connecting the historical facts with the necessary limits of representing the sacred, as do her actions following that decision. I also analyze some of the raw footage Deren shot as well as films that she could have made (but chose not to) with that footage; in this category I account for Teiji and Cherel Ito’s 1985 version of the project, a posthumously produced, rather straightforward documentary that uses Deren’s original footage to show and describe some of the different forms of Haitian possession dances. I then end by reading Deren’s later work and theory, including her book *Divine Horsemen* and a proposed film adapting the structure of the haiku, as representing an initial step forward in Deren’s apophatic legacy, a mode of negation and unshowing that is not

---

<sup>12</sup> This is the term Deren uses in her book *Divine Horsemen* to describe the ultimate focus of art in a sacred context, an ulterior and metaphysical address to the invisible and absent divine. See Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 227.

<sup>13</sup> This is a term coined by J. L. Austin. He writes: “The name is derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action:’ it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.” See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

quite as extreme as the auto-iconoclasm of the Haitian project. As the sacred is pushed outside of the sphere of representation into the interaction between film and viewer, Deren's initial drive to give form to the invisible leads to a model of film that does not envision, but unsays.

### **The Timeline**

As I am placing the Haitian project in its context within the development of Deren's theory and filmmaking, a timeline of her writing and filmmaking activities with a focus on the Haitian project will help to provide a base from which to understand that development. The specific details of Deren's biography have been exhaustively covered elsewhere, thanks to the extensive collection of her papers archived at Boston University.<sup>14</sup>

Maya Deren was born in Russia in 1917 and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1922. A gifted student, she earned a BA in journalism and political science and an MA in English literature in 1939. With aspirations to become a professional writer and an amateur interest in dance, Deren then secured a nine-month position as secretary and editorial assistant with the dance company of dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham. Dunham had herself completed an MA in anthropology in 1939, writing her thesis on Haitian dances. From Dunham, Deren developed an interest in Haitian possession dances, writing and publishing a series of articles on the subject in 1942. Titled "Religious Possession in Dancing," these articles survey the anthropological literature on Voudoun possession and contextualize it as a form of religious mysticism. Deren describes the social function of possession and its psychology in her search for "some reason for the intensity and vitality of such dancing which might conceivably be duplicated, with similar effects, in the dancing of our culture." Deren's interest in the possibility of transmitting an invisible, intangible quality in the "vitality" of the dances shows her early

---

<sup>14</sup> Many of these documents are also organized and made available in the *Legend of Maya Deren* book project, an ambitious planned three volume tome published by Anthology Film Archives that ultimately only produced the first volume, published in two parts in 1984 and 1988, respectively.

focus on the sacred in Voudoun. Such a possibility, she lamentably concludes, seems limited, “for it became increasingly obvious that in Haiti...the vitality derived from the contributions of the community and its culture.”<sup>15</sup>

Traveling with Dunham brought Deren to Los Angeles where, with Alexander Hammid, she made her seminal first film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Deren followed that with a move to New York and the completion of two additional films, *At Land* (1944) and *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), while also writing articles, publishing photos, giving lectures,<sup>16</sup> and self-distributing her work. In 1946, Deren was the recipient of the first Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Work in the Field of Motion Pictures, in support of a proposed film that would compare and contrast, via montage, Haitian possession dances, Balinese rituals, and New York City children’s games. She used part of the awarded money to finish her fourth film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) and wrote a chapbook, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946), which remains her longest sustained piece on film theory and form. She then traveled to Haiti for the purpose of filming possession dances, eventually making three such trips between 1947-1950 during which she filmed several hours of footage, recorded many more hours of audio, took over 1000 photographs, and was initiated into Voudoun. By her second trip to Haiti in 1949, Deren had abandoned her plans for the initial film and instead turned her focus toward an anthropological book project contracted by Joseph Campbell. That work, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), describes the belief systems of Voudoun, its ritual forms, and its historical and religious lineage, as well as Deren’s own experience of initiation and possession.

---

<sup>15</sup> Veve A. Clark et al., *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984), 496.

<sup>16</sup> Her lecture topic, she described in her Guggenheim application, was “Film as an Art Form.” Maya Deren, “Summary of Activities Since Fellowship Award in 1946,” January 1953, Box 2, Folder 31, MDC, 1.

Despite reports that she always intended to revisit the footage,<sup>17</sup> Deren only got as far as editing her Haitian footage rudimentarily, organizing it according to the different ceremonies filmed. She continued to work on films, support other filmmakers, give lectures on film as well as Voudoun, teach workshops, and generally live the quintessential bohemian life of a Greenwich Village artist. She died in 1961 at the age of 44 from a brain hemorrhage, due in no small part to her regular regimen of Dr. Max Jacobson's<sup>18</sup> (aka "Dr. Feelgood") regularly prescribed amphetamine-laced 'vitamin shots.' Deren's Haitian footage was posthumously edited into a documentary on Haitian possession dance in 1985 by her late husband Teiji Ito and his wife Cherel, accompanied by an explanatory voice-over largely adapted from her book *Divine Horsemen*, with which the documentary film shares its title.

### **The Visionary Legacy**

There are a number of ways in which Deren's influence in terms of bringing images into the world and making them visible—in short, her visionary legacy—has been understood, to the extent that, only six years after her death, she was being described as “the Mother of the Underground Film.”<sup>19</sup> Although her extant oeuvre consists of just six short poetic films, they have proven to be hugely influential, as countless filmmakers have described seeing her films as early formative experiences. P. Adams Sitney situates her first film *Meshes of the Afternoon* and her third film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* as each, in turn, establishing new cinematic forms subsequently taken up en masse by the burgeoning avant-garde film movement.<sup>20</sup> David James articulates the critical consensus when he describes *Meshes of the Afternoon* as “the single

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Steele's manuscripts for an unpublished biography of Maya Deren describes how she continued to talk about editing the film to Steele up to their last meeting in 1960, one year before her death. Robert Steele, “The Haitian Footage,” n.d., Box 18, Folder 1, MDC.

<sup>18</sup> To whom the book *Divine Horsemen* was dedicated.

<sup>19</sup> Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*.

most consequential film in the American avant-garde and hence one of the pivotal achievements in the history of cinema,” and her oeuvre as one that “proved so rich that for the next forty years the avant-garde would mine and elaborate on them.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to her influence in giving birth to new and varied films, Deren’s efforts in developing both the audience and the economy for poetic film proved vital to the increasing post-war visibility of the American avant-garde. Theorizing and filmmaking in postwar America, a country with a strong commercial film industry but without a strong alternative film tradition, Deren worked hard to provide both a form and a moral imperative for non-commercial, artisanal cinema. As a writer she did this with her ongoing drive to educate the public in order to carve out an alternative market to Hollywood features, accomplished by her arguments for the legitimization of film as an art form and for a mode of personal, poetic 16mm cinema that envisions both ideas and inner, invisible states, and creates unique experiences for the viewer. As a filmmaker, Deren defined the life and economy of the post-war cinematic artist by working largely without financial support, making films for “what Hollywood spends on lipstick”<sup>22</sup> and supporting herself through the growing network of magazines and museum, university, and film society venues that were interested in experimental films.<sup>23</sup> As one of the first post-war filmmakers to carve out this vocation, Deren more or less invented, conceptually and practically, the career of American avant-garde artistic filmmaker. Looking back on her influence in this historical moment, Paul Arthur attributes just as much importance to Deren’s “efforts ‘off the screen,’ in terms of securing opportunities for screening, delivering lectures, writing articles, and

---

<sup>21</sup> David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde : History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 170, 176.

<sup>22</sup> "The Film That Dreams Are Made On," *Esquire* Dec. 1946, 187.

<sup>23</sup> This network notably included the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), whose involvement with film had just begun in 1935.

engendering alternative channels of distribution” as to “the radiant images she conjured on screen.”<sup>24</sup>

This influence has been explored in as wide-ranging and interdisciplinary a scope as were Deren’s own interests, but always with an eye to the ways in which Deren helped to make cinematic images possible. Her work and presence in the experimental art scene of New York City cultivated the film culture of that city and of experimental filmmaking nationwide.<sup>25</sup> As Lucy Fisher notes, the existing scholarship has analyzed Deren’s work in relation to modernism and the early cinema, as well as a shaping force in the fields of avant-garde filmmaking, amateur filmmaking, dance, anthropology, and others.<sup>26</sup> Finally, historians of the avant-garde and of feminism have called for the acknowledgment of Deren’s role as an early visionary feminist filmmaker, citing Deren’s “powerful autobiographical intervention in the cinematic representation of sexual difference.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Apophatic Legacy**

This visionary legacy is marked by both its propagation of personal, poetic cinematic imagery as well as by its critical and theoretical focus on the representational possibilities of the cinematic medium itself. In embodying this post-war visionary legacy, Deren had a substantial background in theory and practice behind her as she unsuccessfully set about applying herself to the envisioning of the sacred in the Haitian project. Her efforts focused on an attempt to visually discover and recreate the experience of the necessarily distant but yet paradoxically present

---

<sup>24</sup> Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xv.

<sup>25</sup> Amos Vogel cites Deren as a direct inspiration for his forming the influential Cinema 16 in the film *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (Kudláček, 2002), and Deren’s own Creative Film Foundation was an important publicity generator—and less significant financial benefactor—of experimental filmmakers in the 1950s. See Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71*, Second ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 82-83.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, "Afterlife and Afterimage: Maya Deren in “Transfigured Time”.”

<sup>27</sup> Theresa L. Geller, "The Personal Cinema of Maya Deren: *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Its Critical Reception in the History of the Avant-Garde," *Biography* 29, no. 1 (2006): 156.

divinities possessing the supplicants of the religion, the dancing Voudoun serviteurs.<sup>28</sup> By the time Deren undertook this project she was an accomplished and savvy filmmaker, and it was clearly not a technical limitation that led to her endless deferral of the film. Rather, I will argue that precisely because Deren was such an important theorist and practitioner of film signification, the unsaying that is her abandoning the production of the planned film can and should be read as more than a failure or a consequence of the financial, health, and social pressures that no doubt also contributed to the final outcome. Occurring in the early years of the post-war avant-garde by one of the foremost thinkers and practitioners of film as a poetic, personally expressive art form, the Haitian project can be read as charting the possibilities and limits of film form.

Further, if the Haitian project is understood as a religious text, its very failure of production can be seen in a productive light. As Deren's unseen but much discussed failure and the subject of debate, rumor, and speculation, the Haitian footage has acquired the status of legend. It is a film object that, in its unfinished and unreleased status, has a life not fully contained in its images. In this way, I will argue, the footage retains something of the sacredness Deren originally hoped to capture due to the way its apophatic nature confounds visibility. It is from this perspective—of the impossibility of representing the sacred and the productivity of her negations of visual representation—that one can trace an apophatic legacy as an undercurrent of avisibility that runs through Deren's work and into the history of personal, artistic avant-garde cinema as a whole.

One consequence of reading Deren's auto-iconoclasm of the planned Haitian film as a productive religious gesture is the expanded sense of the sacred that this reading necessitates. Once the connection is made, analogues to the sacred can be found throughout Deren's film

---

<sup>28</sup> Deren's term here reflects the French-based Creole that is the primary language of Voudoun.

theory. Despite the fact that the sacred is often used to simply mean “the completely good,” Rudolf Otto makes the case that the proper religious understanding of the term should be much different. He defines it as “the ‘wholly other’ . . . , that which is quite beyond the sphere of the visual, the intelligible, and the familiar.”<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade builds on Otto’s focus in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* by situating the sacred as the opposite of the “natural” reality of the observable, describable profane world. The sacred is that which is set apart from the material realm, and religion tries to paradoxically connect with it (or allow it to connect with us) through ritual.<sup>30</sup>

Maya Deren’s domain was visual representation, not religion. Within that context, however, there are many invisible things with which her work tries to make a visual connection. In short, Deren’s visual and poetic theory contains several reflections of the religious structure of the sacred and the profane, and in order to understand the ramifications of the Haitian project, it is useful to identify them. A work of art, Deren was fond of saying, is the skin of an idea as the artist creates a visible manifestation of an invisible concept. Creative film, she proscribed, can (and should) embody immaterial archetypal principles and interior, invisible states. Poetic structures can explore and express the ephemeral force or experience of a moment, or convey an otherwise foreign and unknown cultural memory. Indeed, for Deren, reality itself can be seen in the light of the sacred when she describes the power of Voudoun that frustrated her attempts to incorporate footage of its dances into her film as its “reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity and to abandon my manipulations.”<sup>31</sup> In this description, the reality of Voudoun is

---

<sup>29</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 26. In the original German Otto uses the term *heilig*, which can be translated as both holy (as in the book’s English title) or sacred.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 6.

sacred-like in the way she positions it as something necessarily outside of her system of representation. From this perspective, many aspects of Deren's theory and practice gain sacredness, a connection that is strengthened as she herself drew out the equivalencies between her cinematic theory and the religious forms of Voudoun's metaphysics. The ramifications of this cinematic/religious convergence is profound, as it allows us to see the ways in which Deren's experience with the Haitian project complicates and in many ways contradicts the visionary legacy she established with her theory and practice of creative film.

### **Creative Film: Film as Hierophany**

A work of art is an emotional and intellectual complex whose logic is its whole form.<sup>32</sup>

Deren experimented over her career with different names by which to call her short, poetic, experimental films, but her favored term for artistically significant work was simply 'creative film.' Marked by a commitment to medium specificity, to formal rigor, and to a view of the artist as creative genius, Deren's ideas fit well within the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic modernism. Her initial formulation of creative film can be traced to her MA studies of imagist poetry; following the example of Ezra Pound, among others, Deren developed a theory of cinematic art that personifies and embodies an idea or a concept.<sup>33</sup>

Annette Michelson has described Deren's theory of creative film as her onto-esthetic,<sup>34</sup> a theoretical ideal that a film could contain within its own component parts everything needed to convey its meaning. It is an aesthetic of complete self-sufficiency, a theory of film signification that is not dependent on context, or the viewer, or the intention or subconscious state of the artist, to create meaning. As the epigraph above describes, it is a model of film form in which the

---

<sup>32</sup> "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>33</sup> Renata Jackson, "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren," *ibid.*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Annette Michelson, "Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*," *ibid.*, 40.

internal logic of its form is a complete, whole system. In her aesthetic theory, Deren is writing as a critic firmly within her historical moment as she develops a cinematic version of the “New Critical position that the poem is an autonomous verbal structure which has its end in itself, which has no purpose beyond its own existence as an aesthetic object.”<sup>35</sup>

Deren first developed her theories of creative film in order to define personal, artisanal cinema as distinct from studio produced entertainment or social documentaries. Whereas popular commercial cinema and documentaries are concerned with capturing reality (documentaries capture and transmit a social reality, and fictional narrative films capture the reality of *mise-en-scène* in service of their story, she explains), Deren defines cinematic art as that which creates and constitutes an experience on its own. “When we agree that a work of art is first of all, creative, we actually mean that it creates a reality and itself constitutes an experience,”<sup>36</sup> Deren writes in her earliest call for cinematic art. Deren’s idealized spectator is able to come to and experience the reality of a film with a completely innocent, prejudice-free perspective, while the artist is one gifted with the power of transmitting meaning through form:

The energies of the artist are devoted to so mating his psychic images with the art instrument that the resultant product is imbued with vitality independent of its source. Thus it is conceived, shaped, fed and formed towards the day of its emergence from the parent body as an independent, organized form. As such, *its reality and meaning are contained within itself and in the dynamics of the inter-relationships of its component parts*; even though the nature of that reality and dynamic is determined by the conceptual sources from which it derives.<sup>37</sup>

Consistently, throughout her career, Deren adhered to a definition that never strayed far from this early call. A work of art should be formally rigorous, a construction that communicates solely as a result of its structure, independent of outside or contextual information or reference. It must

---

<sup>35</sup> M. A. R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 623.

<sup>36</sup> Maya Deren, "Cinema as an Art Form," in *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 2005), 22.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, emphasis in original.

have meaning apart from history or culture, an emotional and intellectual perspective that is entirely self-contained and is fully communicated through the work's form. Indeed, the aspects contained within creative film, for Deren, included not only narrative, emotional, or cultural meaning, but all manner of embodiments of those things separate from the visual realm.

This model of creative film reflects one form of religious discourse in Deren's aesthetics, but it also became a source of tension between her theory and practice, a tension that can be seen in the way she adhered to this definition of the art of film throughout her life. Six months before her death, Deren elaborated on this self-contained ideal of film at a 1961 film symposium at Smith College when asked "Do you deal in symbol?" "No," she replied, "I deal in images.

A symbol is a something instead of. Now, an idea is intangible, inaudible, invisible, and so on. This is the nature of an idea. So that the nature of the artist is to make it manifest, in some real sensory terms...Now, a work of art is skin for an idea. It makes something which is invisible, or inaudible, or whatever it is, accessible to the senses. In this sense, it is a communication. You can't communicate invisibles, inaudibles, and intangibles. You can only communicate via something that is accessible to the senses of another person...

This is not the same thing as a symbol in the sense that you use one thing instead of another...The point of departure is not a real object. The point of departure is an abstraction, which must be given a real existence in the art. So that it isn't one reality substituting for another, it isn't a symbol in that sense; it is a projection or a manifestation into some reality, whether it be sculpture reality, or colour as in painting, or, you know, one of the arts, which are all accessible to the senses. It is a manifestation in sensory terms of a concept which has no such expression. That is the whole labour of artists; to create a skin that is accurate and worthy, that really makes the thing exist in sensory terms.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, she doesn't deal in symbols, but she does deal in hierophanies. This is a term Mircea Eliade proposes as a way of describing the process of the paradoxical interaction of the sacred and the profane, a term to describe "the act of manifestation of the sacred" in the

---

<sup>38</sup> Maya Deren, "Maya Deren Lecture at Vanderbilt Film Symposium, Smith College," April 11, 1961, Box 13, Folder 1, MDC, transcription of reel 2, pp. 25-26.

material world.<sup>39</sup> Deren's description of creative film, the skin of an idea, describes a secular, scopical hierophany. The film, for Deren, is the manifestation, is the object. It doesn't point toward an idea or a concept; the film *is* the thing, the self-contained experience, the visual embodiment of an abstract concept. And the ideal viewer, as Deren images her, is one attentive to the surface form of the film and sensitive to the meaning and experience contained therein, as long as this viewer comes to the film unprejudiced. Indeed, one of the biggest hurdles Deren identified to viewers experiencing film in this haptic ideal is the popular assumption that film recreates lived experience. Unaccustomed to "the idea of the objective form of art," such an audience does not accept the film's created experience. "They take issue with any experience which does not conform with their own, and characterize it as a personalized distortion. On the other hand, they may, coincidentally, concur with that observation, in which case it is not a distortion, but an 'acute insight into reality.'"<sup>40</sup> Mentioning "sur-realism" and "Freudianism" as functioning according to such expectations, that in their spontaneity anyone can read his or her own personal meaning, Deren calls for both forms and viewing attitudes that take the artistic film as a comprehensive, formally rigorous, creative whole, and in the ways that Deren's theory is concerned with giving visual form to that which is beyond the realm of vision, her aesthetics can be seen as an aesthetics of hierophany. As she moves toward a more explicit mapping of her aesthetics and religious structures, an incompatibility between her aesthetics of hierophany and the sacred emerges, an incompatibility that leads Deren to her apophatic path.

### **Analogues to the Sacred**

It is with the Haitian project that the visual hierophanies Deren strives for in her films acquire a religious tone. Based on her later writings, Voudoun seems like the perfect fit for

---

<sup>39</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 24.

Deren's creative film aesthetic, a religion of hierophanies for her aesthetic of hierophany. As she describes its dualistic system of metaphysics in *Divine Horsemen*, Voudoun is marked by a basic distinction between invisible and visible matter. The invisible spirits and gods (*les Invisibles*) that Deren is interested in, however, interact frequently with the visible world, both in their origins as the continued souls of once living persons and in their return to the visible world through possession. In Haitian myth, she writes, "all that which characterizes divinity—intelligence, power, energy, authority, wisdom—evolves out of the flesh itself. Instead of being eternally separated, the substance and the spirit of a man are eternally and mutually committed: the flesh to the divinity within it and the divinity to the flesh of its origin."<sup>41</sup>

Describing the 'mutual commitment' of divinity and flesh in the metaphysics of Voudoun in this way, it is clear that Deren sees it as a religious discourse in which the physical forms are a direct reflection of the distant sacred, analogous to creative film that visually embodies the scopically sacred. In this quality, I agree with Renata Jackson that Deren's

descriptions of Voudoun make this religion sound like a four-dimensional working model of her aesthetics: the Haitian supplicant is akin to the artist implementing his or her memory, intelligence, and imagination; the rituals are depersonalized forms whose implicit meaning is absorbed intuitively by the participant/viewer, who then learns and grows from the experience; the embodied gods provide "skin for an idea," as do works of art; the whole of Voudoun's socio-spiritual system is a Gestalt, greater than the sum of its individual components.<sup>42</sup>

As she describes it, Voudoun is a religion marked by visual, visible hierophanies in the process of possession. In Deren's description of the Voudoun ceremonies of dance and possession it is the body of the half-possessed dancer that is such a point of contact between the physical and spiritual realms. At this moment of contact Deren describes the way the priest

---

<sup>41</sup> *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Renata Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, (1917-1961)* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 158.

shakes his sacred rattle and yells, “completely concentrated upon projecting those sacred sounds through the person into the void,”<sup>43</sup> to speak with the spirits of the invisible realm there.

These connections between invisible forces and the sacred in Deren’s film theory can be seen in the development of one piece of her theory, a spatial metaphor of the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ modes of signification that she developed and reworked over the course of her career. The contrasting vertical and horizontal drives in film designate “an approach to experience”<sup>44</sup> when discussing poetic forms, and the way in which Deren’s thought about film becomes intertwined with her understanding of Voudoun points to the ways she understood artistically valuable film as a hierophany. She first writes about the horizontal and the vertical in terms of the competing forces of memory and experience in her chapbook *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946). In this first iteration of the idea, vertical is used to describe “complex instinctual patterns which substitute, or rather, antecede, memory in animals.” Humans, by contrast, learn by a horizontal process of memory, “by imitation, observation, experimentation, reflection.”<sup>45</sup> Applied to memory and experience in this way, horizontal describes the breadth of one’s experience while vertical indicates depth, an intuitive immediacy removed from history.<sup>46</sup> It is the role of the artist to combine these horizontal and vertical modes of experience to achieve “that triumphant moment—when the elements of a man’s experience suddenly fuse into a homogenous whole which transcends and so transfigures them.”<sup>47</sup>

From her correspondence in 1946, it is clear that Deren was invested in this spatial model as she began planning the Haitian project. In a letter to Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist

---

<sup>43</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 243.

<sup>44</sup> Maya Deren et al., "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 173.

<sup>45</sup> Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 11.

<sup>46</sup> The clear echoes of Henri Bergson’s description of intuition in *Creative Evolution* can most likely be traced, according to Renata Jackson, to Deren’s earlier schoolwork and an encounter there with T.E. Hulme’s commentary on Bergson. See Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, (1917-1961)*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 13.

whose film footage of Balinese ritual was going to be incorporated into the Haitian project, Deren discusses the relationship between the horizontal pattern of social development in Balinese culture as it developed over time and the “vertical integrities” of its continued cultural traditions.<sup>48</sup> Here, Deren has applied the categories that originally referred to individual experience to the historical development and memory of a culture as a whole; slow social changes and developments are ascribed to the horizontal axis while cultural traditions that pass unchanged through history are ascribed to the vertical.

The terms horizontal and vertical come up again in *Divine Horsemen*, in which Deren finds an equivalence to her spatial metaphor in the metaphysics of Voudoun. In her chapter laying out the basics of the religion’s system of belief, Deren describes the symbol of the crossroads as the place of connection between the physical world and its mirror inverse, the metaphysical world of the spirits. “For the Haitian this figure is not only symbolic of the totality of the earth’s surface as comprehended in the extension of the cardinal points on a horizontal plane. It is, above all, a figure for the intersection of the horizontal plane, which is this mortal world, by the vertical plane, the metaphysical axis, which plunges into the mirror.”<sup>49</sup> The interweaving of theory and theology here is compelling and gives us an insight into the equivalency Deren saw between Voudoun and poetic film, both of which plunge into the depths of the invisible in an otherwise visible system of representation.

Deren’s fullest expression of horizontal and vertical as a form of poetics came in the form of comments made at a 1953 Cinema 16 symposium on poetry and film, at which Deren was a participant along with Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, and Parker Tyler. At that symposium,

---

<sup>48</sup> Maya Deren and Gregory Bateson, "An Exchange of Letters between Maya Deren and Gregory Bateson," *October* 14 (Autumn, 1980): 16.

<sup>49</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 35.

Deren characterized the same horizontal and vertical imagery in terms of narrative drive and poetic attack.

The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by “a poetic structure”), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means. A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms for something that is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I would call the “vertical” attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the “horizontal” attack of drama, which is concerned with the development, let’s say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling.<sup>50</sup>

The poetry of film, which could exist in a moment that stands apart from the horizontal narrative drive of a feature length film or could exist in a non-narrative short lyric film, comes from images that “are held together by either an emotion or a meaning that they have in common, rather than by the logical action.”<sup>51</sup>

In this spatial metaphor of horizontal and vertical drives and modes of experience, it is the vertical attack, the poetry of film, which functions as the hierophany. In the development of this theory over her career, Deren brings together a variety of ‘invisibles’ that the hierophany of the vertical drive could manifest, including intuition, cultural memory, literal spirits, and the feeling or emotion of a moment. In Deren’s context, these are ‘the sacred,’ and in many ways these are all aspects that the original Haitian project was intended to make manifest in the visual realm.

This connection between Deren’s cinematic aesthetics and religion reaches its zenith precisely when she begins the Haitian project with her proposal for a new term by which to classify her films, a term with explicitly religious connotations. In her chapbook *Anagram* in the

---

<sup>50</sup> Deren et al., "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium," 174.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

same year she was formalizing her plans for the Haitian film, Deren contrasts naturalism, which reflects the perspective of the artist, with films in which the form is “an integrated whole” defined “by its own immediate context.”<sup>52</sup> Deren proposes naming such films by the term ‘ritualistic.’ Such ritualistic form, she describes, proceeds with “the conviction that such ideas are best advanced when they are abstracted from the immediate conditions of reality and incorporated into a contrived, created whole, stylized in terms of the utmost effectiveness.”<sup>53</sup> In such formally rigorous art, Deren argues, “it is through form that the qualities of two and two may be so related in inspired equation as to create, by their dynamic inter-action, much more than four.”<sup>54</sup> In their formal and stylized separation from specific times, places, or cultures, Deren sees the great power of ritualistic art as its validity in any time and place, for any viewer of the art object.

### **Idol/Icon**

The contemporary philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion has been at the forefront of efforts to put apophatic theology into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and aesthetics. His introduction and use of the conceptual pair idol and icon<sup>55</sup> provides a useful framework for understanding the implications of the religious perspective that Deren’s Haitian project (and its negation) introduces into her cinematic theory.

Marion is careful to deploy these terms without judgment. The idol, which can be either physical or conceptual, is often necessary in a religious context, as “the idol must fix the distant

---

<sup>52</sup> Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 27.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>54</sup> Maya Deren, “Notes on *Ritual in Transfigured Time*”, n.d., Box 2, Folder 13, MDC, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Marion introduces this conceptual pair to claim that the God Nietzsche declared dead must be an idol, because it is a concept of God. In the same way that he applies these religious representational categories to philosophical debates surrounding Nietzschean nihilism in Paris in the late 1970s, I apply them to Deren’s changing relation to the Haitian project.

and diffuse divinity and assure us of its presence, of its power, of its availability.”<sup>56</sup> The power of the idol is not a function of trickery on the part of religious leaders or the result of the stupidity of the crowd, he describes. Rather, an idol “is characterized solely by the subjection of the divine to the human conditions for experience of the divine.”<sup>57</sup> As a result of its power in making the divine present, however, the idol eliminates “the lofty irruption and the undeniable alterity that properly attest the divine.”<sup>58</sup> The icon, in contrast, is an apophatic image or concept that highlights the distance between the divine and its manifestation. The icon “conceals and reveals that upon which it rests: the separation in it between the divine and its face.” This separation itself “finally constitutes the ground of the icon.”<sup>59</sup> One key point on which Marion’s contrast turns is the orientation of the supplicant to the idol/icon, and the differing experiences each creates. In shaping the divine according to the limits of human experience, the idol promotes an encounter, one experienced in the familiar mode of presence. The idol brings the divine close, eliminating the distance between the sacred and the profane. The icon, by contrast, emphasizes the distance between the human and the divine through its negation, creating an experience of distance and alterity.

Voudoun, as Deren describes it in *Divine Horsemen*, is a religion of hierophanies, of the presence of the sacred. Likewise, Deren’s theory of creative and ritualistic film in which an image can be the skin of an idea or the manifestation of an archetypal principle is a theory of presence, one that speaks to the orientation of the viewer to the filmed subject by subjecting the sacred to the human conditions of experience, to paraphrase Marion. One factor to which Deren attributes this power of film in creating a sense of presence is its photographic lineage. Unlike

---

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

other man-made images which only have meaning if we look at and respond to them, the photograph has “an independent presence,” and “our personal detachment does not in any way diminish the verity of the photographic image.”<sup>60</sup> This recalls Hans Belting’s description of the cult image; as discussed in the Introduction, the cult image was understood to directly present an unmediated presence. Like that historically distant mode of engaging with an image, Deren ascribes a sense of immediacy and presence to the photographic and cinematographic image.

Marion describes the difference between the idol and icon as one largely dependent on the orientation of the worshipper to the object in question. For Deren, this question of the possibility and impossibility of manifesting a visual presence in her films is one wrapped up in her view of the film’s orientation to reality. It was, after all, in the ‘reality’ of Voudoun that she locates the resistance to her artistic manipulations. One key factor to Deren’s shifting of her own orientation of the Haitian project from a planned idol to an apophatic icon lies in her views on realism and film, and the differing orientations created between the viewer and the cinematic material. The reality of what is filmed, when captured via photography and incorporated into a creative film, “confers its truth upon the events we cause to transpire beneath it.”<sup>61</sup> A creative film creates its own realism, she described, because it partakes of the realism of the world for its building blocks, a view of and an orientation to reality that becomes dramatically reshaped by her Haitian experience.

### **Film and Reality: A Process of Discovery and Invention**

Deren first develops her thoughts of the intersection of creative film and reality in depth in her chapbook *Anagram*. Strongly situated in its 1946 post-war context in which 16mm film equipment was readily available for the amateur and professional filmmaker alike after having

---

<sup>60</sup> Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," 117.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

been used to great effect in the production of war documentary newsreels, the text is largely organized as an argument against naturalism in art. Working with the same gauge of film that had been so strongly associated with war newsreels, Deren makes the case for the artistic use of 16mm film largely by framing these different approaches in terms of their competing relationships with reality. Classifying the newsreel as a “naturalistic mode” of filmmaking, Deren is reacting against a trend in declaring it an art form and/or “the supreme achievement of film.”<sup>62</sup> All art, her well-established principle states, “is primarily concerned with the effective creation of an idea...and involves a conscious manipulation of its material from an intensely motivated point of view.”<sup>63</sup> In manipulating and recreating material, the artist doesn’t just recreate or describe her experience of reality, but instead extends imaginatively the known reality of the culture. Just as the methodology of science breaks down the ‘natural’ integrity of something only to create it anew, art must do likewise. For this reason, Deren stresses the importance of formal rigor—to value spontaneity over a mastery of craft implies that the filmmaker believes that nature has an intrinsic value and integrity. In these cases, “it is not the context of the work which endows the element with value, but its associational process by which the audience refers that element to its own experience of reality. To rely upon such reference is to limit communicability to an audience which shares, with the artist, a common ground of experience.”<sup>64</sup> The naturalistic mode precisely is lacking in that it doesn’t remake reality according to the ability of the modern instrument. Creative art, by contrast, is made when the artist first experiences reality but then manipulates that experience into an “art reality.” In doing so, Deren theorized, creative art gained a near universal ability to communicate, regardless of the ‘ground of experience’ of artist or viewer.

---

<sup>62</sup> "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 37.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 33, emphasis in original.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 23.

Such an art reality is one that takes full advantage of its medium's unique capabilities, and so the unique possibilities of the film camera in recording, replaying, and recombining images is key to its creative potential. "Nothing can be achieved in the art of film until its form is understood to be the product of a completely unique complex: the exercise of an instrument which can function, simultaneously, both in terms of discovery and of invention."<sup>65</sup> Deren's own analogy between the artistic and the scientific process highlights the nature of her experimentation. Artistic film ought to invent new forms and in so doing discover new facets of the reality of our culture and world. As we will see, the nature of this discovery and invention and the process by which Deren saw film's relationship with the viewer and reality is challenged and, to an extent, reshaped by her Haitian experience.

### **The Haitian Project as Apophasis**

Deren's process of unsaying—planning, repurposing, and ultimately abandoning—the Haitian project was a protracted one. Her initial plans for a comparative film of Balinese rituals, children's games, and Voudoun possession dance gave way to the *Divine Horsemen* book project, published in 1953. That same year Elektra Records released an LP of music Deren recorded in Haiti titled *Voices of Haiti*. Also in 1953, in an unsuccessful application for a renewal of her Guggenheim fellowship, Deren proposed refashioning her existing footage into four separate films showing the form of the various ceremonies and dances she was able to film. She never did make these films, but the application shows her evolving plans for the footage, plans that, like her initial ones, were never completed.

The reasons Deren gives for abandoning her initial plans in the preface of *Divine Horsemen* and the proposal for repurposing the footage in the 1953 renewal application both

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 46. This is also the position of critics and theorists André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, with whom Deren shared many ideas about a film's interaction with the physical world.

suggest her changing views of the possibility of film representing the religiously sacred as a result of her Haitian experience. The preface of *Divine Horsemen* ties the abandonment of the initial project to the relationship between religion, cinema, and reality. The displacement of her visual materials by the book project, she writes,

is, to me, the most eloquent tribute to the irrefutable reality and impact of Voudoun mythology. I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.<sup>66</sup>

This is Deren's first order of apophasis, conceptually removing this project from the realm of art. Her iconoclastic act, as she presents it here, was done in order to preserve the realism of the subject matter, in direct contrast to her theories about the creative manipulation of reality in artistic film.

While Deren's original plans involved shaping the reality of the subject matter to her artistic vision, she characterizes the book project as a reversal, in which it is the 'reality' of Voudoun to which her perspective needed to be brought in line. And in her Guggenheim renewal application, Deren continues along this path of orienting herself, and her future audience, to the reality of the filmed subject matter as she revisits her prior non-historical, non-contextual stance.

As I have said, the dances and the ritual itself—that which is visible—has meaning only within the context of the metaphysics—which is invisible. These dances are not performed for an audience of men or in order to convince them. They take place among men already convinced, and they are addressed to divinity. Moreover, a great deal of their intelligence depends upon participation. To an uninformed, non-participating audience, the purely visual will carry the wrong meanings...My intention, then, is to use the soundtrack of the film to provide the knowledges [sic] of the invisible which will, in turn, not only inform the audience as to what and why they are seeing, but will actually make them see it with the proper emotional coloring. The commentary has not only to inform the

---

<sup>66</sup> *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 6.

mind as to data, but also to ‘prejudice’ the eye so that the audience here will have a true, empathetic grasp of the emotional and psychological meanings which these rites have for the Haitian serviteur.<sup>67</sup>

Deren described the hierophanies of her pre-Haitian films in terms of their ‘inevitabilities,’ abstract driving forces that give the films their vitality. *Meshes of the Afternoon* has an inevitability that “is the function of the underlying drama” as the film visualizes a dream experience, while in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, “the inevitability is entirely visual” as it creates an entirely non-narrative and uniquely cinematic dance performance through formal devices such as matches on action, overlapping editing, and camera movement.



Figure 1.1: Giving the invisible visual form in *Meshes of the Afternoon*: visualizing the beginning of a dream by pulling the camera back through a tunnel.

The key point is that Deren describes these early films as making “visibly manifest the laws of invisible powers”<sup>68</sup> solely through their dramatic or visual form. In the quote from her Guggenheim renewal application above, there is an implied shift in Deren’s understanding of the ‘vitality’ of the work. The essence of the work is no longer an inevitability created through the form of the film. Indeed, in a direct contrast to her description of her earlier films, now “the purely visual will carry the wrong meanings.” The essence or vitality of the film is now outside

---

<sup>67</sup> Maya Deren, “Application for the Renewal of a Fellowship in Motion Pictures,” January 1953, Box 2, Folder 31, MDC, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Maya Deren, “Maya must brood upon this,” circa 1945-46, Box 2, Folder 13, MDC.

of the form of the film; it is sacred, set apart from the scopic field. Deren's aesthetic of hierophany has broken down in order to preserve sacredness.

Once again, Marion's description of the idol and icon is useful here, as Deren's second apophysis—the ultimate incompleteness of the film—is reflected in Marion's description of the shift from idol to icon. Using a favorite motif of Deren's, the metaphor of a mirror, Marion characterizes the shift from idol to icon in terms of an opening or a profusion of meaning conveyed by the object. “The topology of the mirror, where the idol reflected back to us the authentic but closed image of *our* experience of the divine, is replaced by the typology of the prism: a multiplicity of colors breaks down, or rather orchestrates, that which a prism multiplies according to our power to see.”<sup>69</sup> Meaning in the icon is not, and can not, be contained in a single, closed image, but rather suggests even more facets than are able to be seen. In describing the inadequacy of the “purely visual” and then abandoning the project, we see a reflection of this move from a closed image to one in which the signification is open, preserving all manner of potential alterity of its sacred subject matter.

Deren herself framed this shift as a move from functioning as an artist to a reporter, and in doing so presents her actions as preserving the wholeness and otherness of the culture rather than reshaping it according to her artistic perspective. What she found, in her initial plan to remove the filmed dances out of their historical and cultural context (as Deren's description of ritualistic films proposed) was that she subsequently removed the rituals from that context that provided them with meaning. The flaw in her thinking, Renata Jackson concludes, is that “neither filmic forms (say, cutting to continuity or jump-cutting) nor ritual objects or movements (or the representations thereof) *mean* in themselves, because they are abstractions that can only

---

<sup>69</sup> Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, 8. Emphasis in original.

take on meaning within a cultural, aesthetic, or philosophical context that may or may not be understood by the spectator.”<sup>70</sup> Coming as a result of her respect for the history and culture of Haiti, Deren’s apophasis also functions as a kind of ethical stance, a commitment to honoring the Haitian culture into which her filmmaking activities took her.

Much was made of the importance of Deren’s artistic temperament for her ability to intuit the meaning of Voudoun’s metaphysics and its cultural context based solely on the physical manifestations of the religion’s rituals. Deren attributes her sensitivity to form and the “subjective communication” in her art practice to her ability to understand the dances on an experiential level, to the point that “the Haitians began to believe that I had gone through varying degrees of initiation.”<sup>71</sup> It is just this sort of experimental, contextual meaning that she found to be beyond the abilities of a film to recreate.

In *Anagram*, Deren declared the film camera to be an instrument of both discovery and invention. The sacred (and its many analogues in Deren’s theory and praxis), that which by its very definition is set apart, can’t be discovered and can’t be invented. This is why we can read a preservation of the sacred into the non-visual manifestations of the Haitian project. The sacred here is understood as that which cannot be encompassed by the film image, that elusive quality that Deren identifies variously as culture, history, spirit, or vitality. It is precisely those elusive qualities that Deren tries to communicate through her anthropologically-minded efforts.

Rather than asking *why* Deren didn’t finish the Haitian project, I ask what is the significance of this fact? What is preserved in Deren’s apophasis of the Haitian project? And in what way might we—like Deren—understand the sacred, defined by its alterity, in this context? To develop an answer, I begin looking at Deren’s writing on the Haitian project and at the

---

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, (1917-1961)*, 182.

<sup>71</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 9.

original footage in the two primary states in which it exists. The unedited footage, as Maya Deren left it, is housed at the Anthology Film Archive.<sup>72</sup> Filmed in black and white 16mm with a frequently hand-held camera, the raw footage is quite repetitive as it explores the ritual forms and spaces of Voudoun ceremonies as well as the secular Mardi Gras festival. The takes are relatively long, and all editing in the raw footage has been done in camera. Particular attention, often filmed in slow motion, is given to dancers and the forms of their movements. At the same time, however, Deren's own body moving through and within the rituals is frequently felt as the camera moves and swirls within the spaces of the ceremonies; the observed subjects are frequently filmed in medium shots and close-ups and move in and out of the camera's mobile frame.



Figure 1.2: The camera moves through and within the filmed rituals in the Haitian footage, both recording *and* participating in them. Stills taken from *Divine Horsemen* (1985).

Approximately a quarter of this footage can also be seen in the 50-minute documentary *Divine Horsemen* (1985).<sup>73</sup> For the purposes of thinking about the Haitian footage, the documentary is useful, as it makes images from the footage widely available. As an edited work (by Chere Ito), however, it is also a prime example of a film that Deren herself chose not to make.

---

<sup>72</sup> While the footage is occasionally screened, albeit very infrequently, Anthology Film Archive is protective of their rare and delicate celluloid prints. When I visited I was not given access to the complete raw footage, but instead was shown a 1999 DVD transfer of approximately one hour of the raw footage that had been DigiBeta scanned.

<sup>73</sup> Hereafter referred to as “the Ito documentary” to avoid confusion with Deren’s book of the same name.

I suggest that three distinct categories of otherness are preserved by Deren's unsaying. The first is the integrity of the dances themselves, in terms of the movements depicted and the references those movements make. Also preserved is the integrity of the religious metaphysics of Voudoun. Finally, Deren presents the apophysis of the Haitian project as preserving the integrity of Haitian culture. In particular, abandoning the visual aspect of the project and focusing on a mode of participatory anthropology can be seen as one way Deren tries to avoid the dangers of exploiting the culture in a sensationalistic, colonialist manner. Ultimately, as Deren reworks her ideas of realism, the sacred, and film, the Haitian project, as an apophatic religious text, points forward to new possibilities of cinematic forms akin to Marion's icon.

### **Integrity of Dances**

Dance was a lifelong interest of Deren's and she often incorporated dance forms into her work. In every other film that included dance, the movements of the dancer are only one part of the final form as Deren used camera movement and editing to modify and augment the dancer's movements, creating forms and rhythms of movement that only could exist on film. As her initial outline for the Haitian film makes clear, it was her plan to take the Haitian dance forms out of their context and combine them contrapuntally with similar movements in Balinese rituals and in children's games. One section of the outline proposes examples of potential visual equivalencies that could be used as "choreographic transitions" in the film. "Equivalent posture movements, such as the outstretched arm (catching a ball, receiving a gift, etc.), the emphatic stamp, as well as all the degrees of elevation from squatting to stretching to jumping"<sup>74</sup> are such potential equivalencies, she wrote. As she had done in her previous films, Deren's plan was to combine the forms of the Haitian dance with other ritual forms to make entirely new movements

---

<sup>74</sup> Maya Deren, "Application for the Renewal of a Fellow Ship for Creative Work in the Field of Motion-Pictures", circa 1947, Box 2, Folder 31, MDC, 15.

and rhythms. What she found, Deren described in an article published in *Dance* magazine, was that the Haitian dances, dependent as they are on culture and context, could not be isolated in this way:

I was sure that, in the 5400 feet of 16 mm film which I had photographed, I would find countless moments which would make the kind of photograph which would convey the real beauty of that dance. I went through this film carefully, once, twice, three times. But whenever I tried to “stop” a moment, to isolate it from its context, it projected an impression which was not at all what the Haitians meant. In fact, it often did not even look like dance—at least dance in the sense in which we think of it.<sup>75</sup>

Such contextual necessity is even more critical when the dance is a religious form, conveying a particular meaning within its context. As soon as Deren became committed to conveying not an abstract idea but a specific, culturally dependent one (i.e., “what the Haitians meant”), the visual realm was no longer a sufficient signifier of meaning.

*Divine Horsemen* frames this issue in terms of the underlying mythology of the culture, an interest of Deren’s that is reflective of the milieu of the post-war intelligentsia.

Understanding this mythology was Deren’s great skill, Joseph Campbell writes in his 1970 forward to the book, “the ability to recognize ‘facts of the mind’ when presented through the ‘fictions’ of a mythology.”<sup>76</sup> Deren herself defines myth in the book in these very terms in her exploration of the universal aspects of experience. To use Deren’s own vertical/horizontal metaphor, she claims a privileged viewpoint in sensing the vertical plunge of history and culture in this aesthetic form. “It was this order of awareness,” she explains, “which made it impossible for me to execute the art work I had intended. It became clear to me that Haitian dancing was not, in itself, a dance-form, but part of a larger form, the mythological ritual.”<sup>77</sup> As she intuited

---

<sup>75</sup> Maya Deren, “Social and Ritual Dances of Haiti,” *Dance* (June 1949). Archived in Box 2, Folder 1, MDC.

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Campbell, “Editor’s Foreword,” in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1983), xiv.

<sup>77</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 10.

the myth within the dance, she likewise understood that to take the dance out of the myth would destroy the very vitality of the dance itself. As Annette Michelson sums it up, “it was the full recognition and acknowledgment of the culture's integrity and of the complex historical processes inscribed within it that seems to have precipitated her acknowledgment of defeat and the eventual abandonment of the project.”<sup>78</sup>

The evidence of the importance of the cultural and mythic context to Deren can be seen in the focus of the primary project she did complete based on her Haitian experience, the book *Divine Horsemen*. It is her self-avowed anthropological approach to the material which sent her on two additional trips to Haiti to learn the historical details missed by her initial artistic approach. In shifting her methodology in this way, Deren knowingly and explicitly operates not as an artist but as a reporter.<sup>79</sup> Further evidence of her new role can be seen in the rather evangelical zeal with which she worked to dispel popular myths about Voudoun in the United States. *Divine Horsemen* contextualizes the religion, stressing both its syncretic qualities and its value to the serviteur, including the way it functions as a conduit to the accumulated historical wisdom of the Haitian culture. Deren also often spoke about Voudoun; a representative example is a 1957 interview she gave to Mike Wallace for his news program *Night-Beat*, during which she took the opportunity to connect Voudoun and its system of metaphysics to relatable subjects to make it sympathetic. If they are uneasy with the idea, she told Wallace, his viewers should relate possession to “those moment when they forgot themselves and when everything was clear by a certain logic that was larger than themselves...I think artistic inspiration is in that direction. I think love is in that direction.”<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Michelson, "Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*," 40.

<sup>79</sup> Maya Deren, "Notes for Lectures on Haiti," n.d., Box 3, Folder 15, MDC, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Maya Deren and Mike Wallace, *Night-Beat*, May 30, 1957, Box 3, Folder 28, MDC, transcript page 9.

## Integrity of Religious Metaphysics

The critique Jean-Luc Marion levels at the form of the idol, as necessary as it might be, is that it presents a limited, human-sized version of the divine. It is possible to read a similar, religiously motivated critique as influencing Deren's apophysis, as this action helps to preserve the religious power of the unrepresented possession dances. When watching Deren's raw footage, it becomes clear that there are two levels of information that the images are trying to convey, that which is happening (crowds gathering, animals slaughtered, dancing, etc.) and that which is being experienced.



Figure 1.3: Trying to communicate both what is happening and what is being experienced in the Haitian footage. Here, priests shake their sacred rattles to call forth the gods from the land of the invisible, an elaborate ritual meaning that is not well communicated by the purely visual. Still taken from *Divine Horsemen* (1985).

The clear communication of the actual events seen is largely better conveyed by a written text like *Divine Horsemen*, with the exception of documenting the aesthetic forms of the dance. Despite Deren's earlier focus in manipulating cinematic form to manifest and create experience, in the Haitian footage the conveying of experience is much more difficult, for what we are seeing is, by and large, possession. As we saw with Caveh Zahedi's *I Was Possessed by God* (2000) in the Introduction, the very nature of possession is that it is directed inward, a perspective that leaves the film camera and viewer on the surface while plunging into inaccessible depths of experience. Catherine Russell, writing about the Haitian project in the context of ethnographic

representations of possession, makes just this point, noting the potential allure of possession as well. "Possession is itself a form of representation to which the realist filmmaker might aspire, but it is also a mise-en-abyme of representation, with its final signified content always beyond reach."<sup>81</sup>

By all accounts, Deren was a believer of Voudoun. "This I esteem to be a religion of major stature, rare poetic vision and artistic expression,"<sup>82</sup> she wrote in a 1955 article, and she was well known as a Voudoun priestess in New York artistic circles in the 1950s.<sup>83</sup> From that position she had an investment in the footage beyond an interest in its outer form. There was more to convey, something metaphysical to try and make known through the footage so that it made religious sense to the viewer, and there is more than just culture to lose should the footage be incorporated into her ritualistic form. "When removed from their meaningful context, the sacred dances lose not only their spiritual impact but both the dancer and the dance, as such are seriously diminished,"<sup>84</sup> she lamented.

It is in this context, of preserving the alterity of experience through the apophatic of its representation, that I read Deren's apophatic language in *Divine Horsemen* when she describes her own experience of possession in its final chapter. "The White Darkness" is that chapter's title, a title that unsays itself in its paradoxical construction.<sup>85</sup> Deren's description of possession

---

<sup>81</sup> Catherine Russell, "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 274.

<sup>82</sup> Maya Deren, "Haitian Dance Sacred or Stage," *Haiti Sun* (February 6, 1955). Archived in Box 19, Folder 1, MDC.

<sup>83</sup> The materials Robert Steele collected for his ultimately unpublished biography of Deren include a letter from Stan Brakhage and an interview with Teiji Ito describing this. Box 18, Folder 14, MDC.

<sup>84</sup> Deren, "Haitian Dance Sacred or Stage."

<sup>85</sup> This paradoxical construction combining light-related adjectives to modify 'darkness' is a common one in apophatic writing. As an example, Pseudo-Dionysius, the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century unknown founder of the tradition of apophatic theology, opens his essay "The Mystical Theology" with a poem that describes the place in which the mysteries of God's Word lies as "the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence." See Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aeropagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 135.

itself is also framed in terms of the unsayable; it is invisible for the traveler, a “threshold to the unknown”<sup>86</sup> that cannot be described, but only experienced, an experience that she then describes in contradictory language—“I am sucked down and exploded upward at once.”<sup>87</sup> As with other instances of apophatic language, these descriptions serve the function of describing without affixing meaning, of destabilizing language to point to that which is beyond the province of language. And when she emerges from the trance, Deren writes at the end of the chapter, all that is left in her memory is a void. Both for Deren’s mental memory and for her camera memory,<sup>88</sup> the religious experience of Voudoun is marked as a beyond—linguistically, experientially, physically, and visually.

### **Integrity of Culture**

Finally, Deren’s negation of her imagery preserves the Haitian culture depicted, and so her abandoning of the film shows her investment in the cultures of Haiti and Voudoun. As much as any other invisibility, culture stands as a pivotal component that Deren first planned to convey through the form of the film (via its poetic, vertical drive), and then preserved, avoiding the inevitable loss of cultural specificity, by abandoning the film.

In an application for the renewal of her Guggenheim fellowship written before her first trip to Haiti in 1947, Deren details her initial plans for the Haitian film. As she presents it to the committee, the genesis of the idea came from children’s games, which she saw as ritual activities *par excellence*. A child’s walking without stepping on a sidewalk’s cracks, for example, doesn’t have a function outside of its own rules, its own form—“the form itself is its own authority. This

---

<sup>86</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 247.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>88</sup> This is how she described the film strip, as a strip of memory forming “the invisible underlayer of an implicit double exposure.” “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality,” 116.

is the first, essential characteristic of such ritualistic behavior.”<sup>89</sup> Her plan<sup>90</sup> was to construct a film of equivalencies of ritual behaviors, combining the following through montage: children’s games, Balinese rituals previously filmed by the anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead and given to Deren for this purpose, and Haitian rituals, which Deren would film herself. She hoped, by combining children’s games with the culturally specific rituals of Bali and Haiti, “to create a ritual point of view towards the games” by maintaining the cultural integrity of the rituals. She imagined establishing an equivalence of form between games and these cultural and religious rituals through “contrapuntal distinctions.” “It is upon these three ritualistic forms— children’s games, Balinese and Haitian ritual that I wish to build the film—using the variations between them to contrapuntally create the harmony, the basic equivalence of the idea of form, common to them all.”<sup>91</sup>

While she doesn’t use the terms horizontal and vertical in this renewal application, Deren does cite Bateson’s 1946 review of a “South Seas exhibit” at the Museum of Modern Art as one model for the form of her film. She had earlier exchanged letters with Bateson about the exhibit and his review of it, in which she attributes a “transcendent horizontal” quality to his description of the exhibit as a whole and a “vertical integrity” to each piece of the exhibit which expressed its own unique culture. “Mr. Bateson praises the exhibit precisely for the fact that each grouping of materials was true to the individual culture which it represented, at the same time that these groupings were so arranged in reference to each other as to create a “sensible” pattern which

---

<sup>89</sup> Maya Deren, “Application for the Renewal of a Fellow Ship for Creative Work in the Field of Motion-Pictures”, circa 1947, Box 2, Folder 31, MDC, 5, emphasis in original.

<sup>90</sup> As Deren was quick to point out, this outline was not, technically, a plan for the film. “The statement which follows, then, is in no sense a description of the film itself, but is, at most, a statement of the ideological and formal premise for action or experience, rather than a principle for which an illustrative action is evolved.” *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 8, 10.

transcended them all and even strengthened them, each in their individual terms as well.”<sup>92</sup> In this plan, then, the cultural specificity and integrity of the ritual forms would be encompassed and transmitted in those filmed ritual forms themselves, while the visual similarities would create a horizontal formal equivalency between them. The poetic conveyance of a culture presumably unknown to her intended audience of avant-garde films was one of the primary goals of Deren’s contrapuntal plan.

In addition to filming Voudoun ceremonies in Haiti, Deren recorded six reels worth<sup>93</sup> of Mardi Gras performances and parades. Some of this footage makes it into the Ito documentary, and the way it is presented at once seems to exemplify Deren’s original plan emphasizing visual similarities across different contexts as well as makes clear the limits Deren found in such a structure actually conveying elements of culture. As edited in the documentary, from a possession dance exemplifying the erotic nature of some Voudoun dances, as the voice-over frames it, there is a dissolve from a shot of a possessed woman provocatively dancing in the direction of the camera to a graphic match of two figures in a seemingly identical dance.



Figure 1.4: Subsequent shots in *Divine Horsemen* (1985) illustrates the visual sameness as a film image remains on the outside of the figures, obscuring the internal differences between possession and a paid performance.

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>93</sup> Linda Patton, “Maya Deren/Haiti Films,” Anthology Film Archive description of footage, February 7, 1972, Box 19, Folder 35, MDC.

This initial shot of the new scene is tightly framed, and so it is only after the camera tilts up that we see this is now two men wearing intricate costumes while dancing with whistles in their mouths.<sup>94</sup> The visual connection is obvious and strongly made, and with the exception of the dissolve follows the editing conventions of the rest of the documentary—similar movements, edited together, are understood to be part of the same ceremony. Only after 30 seconds does the narrator tell us that we are now watching talented performers, not people possessed by divine spirits. Visually, it is the sameness that is emphasized by the editing, a sameness that seems to follow from the nature of film itself, which can, of course, only see the surface of its subject. The differences between a possessed serviteur and talented performers from one shot to the next are interior differences. These differences cannot be seen and, Deren came to believe, cannot be given a skin and conveyed visually.

We can see Deren's awareness of the limits of film conveying culture in the preface to *Divine Horsemen* and in her 1953 Guggenheim renewal application. This inability of the footage to convey cultural and historical meaning is precisely the reason Deren foregrounds in *Divine Horsemen* for her abandoning of the initial Haitian project; she was defeated as an artist, unable to master the footage. She had earlier declared the importance of removing footage from its context, or risk limiting "communicability to an audience which shares, with the artist, a common ground of experience."<sup>95</sup> What she found was that the reality of Voudoun had an integrity that did not allow it to be removed from its context, but *required* that shared ground of experience to be understood.

There was an ethico-political danger inherent in Deren's project, the possibility that, in wiping away the nuances of black Haitian culture and refashioning it according to the

---

<sup>94</sup> The footage is silent, and so it is only on the visual register that the imagery communicates.

<sup>95</sup> Deren, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," 23.

perspective of a Jewish Caucasian American and her vision, the film could function from a colonialist perspective. Deren certainly demonstrates an awareness of this and worked to avoid such violence by claiming a measure of solidarity with the Haitians. She situates the development of Voudoun in its colonial context when writing about it in *Divine Horsemen*. She also makes the case in *Divine Horsemen* that her anthropological approach, precisely because she began the project as an artist, was one uniquely suited to avoid “effronteries toward the Haitian peasants.” She attributed “her strong distaste for aggressive inquiry, staring or prying” to a kinship she experienced with the Haitians, for

in a modern industrial culture, the artists constitute, in fact, an “ethnic group,” subject to the full “native” treatment. We too are exhibited as touristic curiosities on Monday, extolled as culture on Tuesday, denounced as immoral and unsanitary on Wednesday, reinstated for scientific study Thursday, feasted for some obscurely stylish reason Friday, forgotten Saturday, revisited as picturesque Sunday. We too are misrepresented by professional appreciators and subjected to spiritual imperialism, our most sacred efforts are plagiarized for yard goods, our histories are traced, our psyches analyzed, and when everyone has taken his pleasure of us in his own fashion, we are driven from our native haunts, our modest dwellings are condemned and replaced by a chromium skyscraper. Of all persons from a modern culture, it is the artist who, looking at a native looking at a “white” man—whether tourist, industrialist or anthropologist—would mutter the heart-felt phrase: “Brother, I sure know what you’re thinking and you can think that thought again!”<sup>96</sup>

While one result of Deren’s iconoclastic gesture was to affirm the alterity and cultural specificity of Voudoun rather than eliding and eliminating it, we can still see in her raw footage an approach that similarly reflected the participatory, non-aggressive approach by which she describes her anthropology. In particular, it is illuminating to contrast Deren’s filming approach with that of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead’s in their footage of Balinese ritual, a portion of which was originally going to be incorporated into the Haitian project. Edited in 1950 from footage filmed by Mead and Bateson in 1936-39, *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952) stands in

---

<sup>96</sup> *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 7-8.

contrast to Deren's Haitian footage most explicitly in the relation it establishes between filmmaker/camera and the recorded rituals, particularly in the way in which Mead and Bateson did precisely what Deren avoided—removed and refashioned elements of the culture according to their own western, scientific perspective. Fatimah Tobing Rony notes the way that the “medical anthropologizing camera gaze” pathologized rather than respected the Balinese culture, creating distance between the filmmakers and their subjects.<sup>97</sup> This can be seen visually in the prevalence of long shots, which carefully frame the entire dancing body of the Balinese performers. In contrast, Deren's camera plunges into the crowds, handheld rather than supported by a tripod. As part of the “scientific” positioning of the Mead/Bateson film to the Balinese culture, the dances seen were commissioned, performed for the camera rather than for a sacred audience. One mark of this, Rony notes, is the seeming invisibility of the camera. In the Balinese footage, “the look back at the camera proves inauthenticity.”<sup>98</sup>



Figure 1.5: The “scientific” long shots of Mead and Bateson's *Trance and Dance* are contrasted with Deren's handheld, participatory close-ups. Haitian footage still taken from *Divine Horsemen* (1985).

<sup>97</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's "Trance and Dance in Bali", " *Discourse* 28, no. 1, Scenes Elsewhere (Winter 2006): 14. Rony describes the way the trance depicted was approached as a pathology to be objectively understood by Mead and Bateson, from their funding by the Committee for Dementia Praecox (schizophrenia) to the excessive power attributed to the possibilities of documentation by Mead.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

In Deren's raw footage, one finds quite the opposite as she works to transmit the experience of the rituals. The camera is often handheld and often quite close to its dancing subjects, within the larger group taking part in the ceremony. Dancers swing by the camera, just a blur, while the camera moves organically, anticipating and following the movement of the serviteurs. The positioning of Deren's camera within and part of the ceremony is conveyed through her searching and mobile camera, as in a sequence of a goat sacrifice in the raw footage. Without providing an establishing shot, the camera instead scans the space, slowly discovering various components of the ritual—a table with refreshments, the drummers, a small shrine with a cross, and finally a goat tied to a post. In accordance with the position Deren takes as a participant in the ceremonies she films, the direct address of serviteurs to the camera in this footage serves as a mark of authenticity, a slightly unnerving encounter that authenticates the experience. In the same goat sacrifice scene, after discovering the goat the camera circulates amongst the dancing crowd. During a pan over the gathered serviteurs, most of whom ignore the camera, a possessed man angrily staring directly at the camera is brought into the frame. Possession is encountered, directly, by Deren in this way. Ultimately, though, it is in the apophysis of the footage that Deren strives to avoid a colonizing, pathologizing perspective on Voudoun possession.

### **Conclusion**

It is difficult indeed to find a suitable substitute for the sacred.<sup>99</sup>

Despite the efforts that can be seen in Deren's unedited Haitian footage to avoid the pitfalls of the objectifying, ethnographic film gaze, it is ultimately her decision to abandon the film that fully allows the possibility of a decentered, open perspective of Voudoun possession.

---

<sup>99</sup> Deren, "Haitian Dance Sacred or Stage."

The fixed perspective of the camera cannot display the inward perspective of the serviteur just as it cannot recreate the religious experience of the filmmaker. For art in a sacred context, Deren wrote, “the quality resides in a sense of ulterior reference...Yet an ulterior reference might characterize the symbolic movement in a secular context. In the sacred movement, the reference is not only ulterior but metaphysical. Moreover, it is a statement addressed not to men but to divinity.”<sup>100</sup> In the epigraph above, the last sentence of a 1955 article, Deren identifies that intangible, unrepresentable quality that gives Voudoun dances their meaning as the sacred. As she concludes an essay lamenting the difficulties of conveying the full power and experience of these dances to a wider audience, she seems to desire a symbol that will stand in place of the sacred. It can’t be given a skin, and therefore what option is there but to find a substitute?

There is another option, one demonstrated by her actions—a substitute for the sacred is not necessary if one proceeds negatively. The path Deren takes is not to envision the sacred differently, with just the right form or just the right symbol. Rather, she avoids this problem entirely through her apophatic approach, via the iconoclasm of the Haitian footage. In 2002, as part of an exhibition on iconoclasm, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel coined the term “iconoclash” to describe the ambivalence of iconoclastic gestures which break and remake images.<sup>101</sup> Maya Deren was a lover of images, but she does unmake or break them in the Haitian project. Despite this, there is a potential productivity in that gesture, an iconoclash. Through her iconoclasm, the sacred that Deren identifies is not destroyed, is not replaced by a symbol, and is not set at odds to her aesthetics. By proceeding negatively, the sacred is, in fact, preserved, the

---

<sup>100</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 227.

<sup>101</sup> In the way Latour and Weibel deploy their term, “break” and “remake” should be understood in as wide a sense as possible. For example, they use it to encompass everything from the literal breaking of images—the smashing of religious statues—to the elevation of color rather than form as an absolute in modern art, to the development of non-representational painting as a kind of “image-breaking.” Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

productivity of Deren's apophysis. Whether or not one believes that the original footage did represent the sacred, Deren's unsaying removes the necessity and the importance of that belief. In abandoning her planned films, Deren creates a cinematic icon, a model of the intersection of religion and film that highlights the distance between the cinematic and the sacred.

### **The Apophatic Legacy: Pointing the Way Forward**

For Deren, as well as those who came after her, the question becomes one of trying to create an experience even as the visual realm is revealed as inadequate. How does one proceed when representation of the sacred is an impossibility? One answer is hinted at in *Divine Horsemen* when Deren makes a comparison between the gods of Voudoun (the *loa*) and an abstract concept. "The *loa* are supernatural in the same sense that a principle is super-natural or abstract,"<sup>102</sup> she says by way of contextualizing Voudoun metaphysics. In equating the abstract and the spiritual, Deren indicates an evolving understanding of film form. The *loa*, her apophysis of the Haitian film indicates, cannot be manifested in film. Rather, that meaning in a sacred context is pushed outside of the realm of representation to an "ulterior reference."<sup>103</sup> At the time she writes this, it seems as though Deren is considering a similar shift in the process and location of signification for abstract principles and concepts, once firmly ensconced in Deren's theory within the form of a film. This shift, which can only be read as a subtext in Deren's writing in *Divine Horsemen*, is from film as a closed, formally rigorous system to one that is open in terms of its signification, a model of film that embraces ambivalence and uncertainty. The way in which the Haitian project causes Deren to rethink and reimagine the orientation of the film to its viewer in this way can be further seen in her final planned film which was to cinematically adopt the structure of a haiku.

---

<sup>102</sup> Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 88.

<sup>103</sup> This is precisely what we find in the films of Nathaniel Dorsky, who I focus on in Chapter Three.

The proposed film, initially planned during a 1959 workshop but never made, was to be called *Season of Strangers*. The haiku form especially interested Deren for its “quality of distilled essence”<sup>104</sup> which doesn’t convey the full meaning of the poetic form. The haiku used to have five lines, including a two line final couplet, she recounted during a 1961 lecture, but the last two lines were dropped so that the reader forms those lines in her mind. She dreamed of translating this poetic structure into a film form. “And just as the three lines of a haiku do not contain the conclusion but act as a trigger for the mind of the reader—the bow which sends the arrow of the mind towards the target—this dynamic thrust could be rendered in film, by a long fade, a long visual pause after each film haiku, in which the reader’s mind would travel towards and reach the target.”<sup>105</sup>

Rather than a model of creative film that discovers and invents its own reality for the viewer, in these plans for a filmic haiku Deren demonstrates a potential rethinking of cinematic art. In this new model, the viewer becomes an active participant in the process of reading the meaning the film conveys, and indeed in the process of creating that meaning. It is an open, ambivalent, decentered model of film, a model that has the potential of preserving alterity and difference, and it is such an engaging, participatory model of film form that I explore in the following chapters. This model of artistic film is also significant for Deren’s theory and her apophatic legacy in the way it points to a changed understanding in Deren’s mind of the relationship between film and reality.

Ideas of realism, in Deren’s work, prove to be a significant component in her wrestling with the limits of representation in the Haitian project. The differing orientations between film and viewer that different theories of realism presume are reflected in a tension between Deren’s

---

<sup>104</sup> Maya Deren, “Season of Strangers,” Description of Planned Film, n.d., Box 2, Folder 13, MDC.

<sup>105</sup> Deren, “Season of Strangers.”

theory and her praxis. This tension between the inward orientation of creative film and the outward orientation implied by the haiku project reflects the difference between Marion's idol and icon, and therefore is directly reflective of the influence of apophatism on Deren's aesthetics. Deren attributed great importance to reality in the creative filmmaking process, describing it as a basic building block of cinema thanks to the mechanical nature of the recording process of the camera, a fact that gives the film "an authority comparable in weight only to the authority of reality itself."<sup>106</sup> Like her contemporary theorist of realism Andre Bazin, Deren thought of the indexical qualities of the film image as imparting a sense of reality to film, which impacts the experience of film in terms of its incorporation of time. In her written theory, Deren then identifies the temporal relationship between images as that by which the artist can most effectively shape the reality of the photographic image into "archetypal images" by giving form to ideas out of the building blocks of reality. Film is therefore, she declares, "primarily a time form,"<sup>107</sup> as time is the element films can most effectively manipulate.

In Deren's practice, however, informed as it is by the apophatism of the Haitian project, one can see a different view of reality at work, one that is reflective of Bazin's theories of the ambivalence introduced into the cinematic image by its engagement with reality. For Bazin, the reality shared between object and film is the reality of duration as the photographic process "embalms time."<sup>108</sup> Rather than clearly communicating meaning, making duration an integral part of a work<sup>109</sup> transfers the indeterminacies of reality into the film. Such a film only has a *posteriori* meaning, "to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to another,

---

<sup>106</sup> Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," 117.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 115, 124.

<sup>108</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

<sup>109</sup> This is the language Bazin uses in his review of the film *The Picasso Mystery* (1956). See *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 212.

from one fragment of reality to the next,”<sup>110</sup> in contrast with the *a priori* meaning of an ideologically driven work. The incomplete and fragmentary nature of the haiku project privileges just such an *a posteriori* meaning, an orientation of film to viewer that can also be seen in the Haitian project. Any possible engagement with the Haitian footage is a profoundly ambivalent one, viewed through the layers of unmade and remade work. In the negation of any possible affixed meaning, which would have happened had Deren proceeded according to her original intentions, the project, as profoundly avisual as it is, may still hold on to the alterity and ambivalence of its original intention.

In her critique of Deren’s Haitian project, Catherine Russell emphasizes the limits of the visual medium in expressing such a fundamentally inward experience as possession. The barrier of the frame is absolute; “one can watch other spectators become affected by the contagion of possession, but it does not spread beyond the frame.”<sup>111</sup> I agree, and would extrapolate Russell’s point further to include anything we could categorize as the sacred, not just possession; any attempt at representation of that which is by definition separate from the physical world falls into a *mise-en-abyme* of signification. In this chapter, however, I hope to have reclaimed the potential power of the Haitian project—not because the truth or reality of possession is somehow communicated beyond the film frame, but because Deren *didn’t* complete the film and, as a result, it has no frame. The unmade film, the victim of auto-iconoclasm, is an apophatic image *par excellence*. In its legendary, largely unseen status, the religious and cultural alterity that couldn’t be captured in a film image is, potentially, preserved.

---

<sup>110</sup> *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), 99. Bazin is talking here about Italian neorealist film.

<sup>111</sup> Russell, "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals," 284.

## Chapter Two The Negations of Caveh Zahedi

### Ceci n'est pas une pipe

When an image is semantically unstable due to its textual negations, a shift occurs in the way a viewer interacts with that image, a refocusing from the object signified to the process of signification itself. This is one of Michel Foucault's arguments in an essay on the surrealist painter Rene Magritte's famous *The Treachery of Images* (1929).<sup>1</sup> Under a realistically rendered smoking pipe, on a flat, monochromatic background, are painted the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," this is not a pipe. Foucault's analysis emphasizes the indeterminacies Magritte's composition creates between the image and text, and the way in which those indeterminacies lead to a convoluted process of reading and engaging with the work. As a result of these indeterminacies, Foucault sees in Magritte's work an image that has the potential to refer to that which is beyond the context of visual representation itself. Without using the language of religion, Foucault describes the way the painting negates itself, performing an apophasis of its own status as a painting.

The work Foucault references is simple enough, a formal austerity that belies the complexity of the discursive interaction with its viewer created by the relation of words to image. Is the painted pipe the object of the sentence, an illustration of the word 'pipe'? Or is it the subject, the 'this' referenced and negated? Or a third option, is the subject of the statement a reflexive reference to the entire work, image and text together? There is no clear answer, and the result of this indeterminate relationship of image and text is nothing other than the breakdown of the traditional system of representation, Foucault claims.

---

<sup>1</sup> Foucault references a 1926 version, titled simply *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe*, from a private collection that is seemingly identical to the well-known 1929 version owned and displayed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

That system of representation, identified by Foucault as “Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century,”<sup>2</sup> has two primary characteristics that Magritte’s painting negates. The first is the presumed hierarchical relationship between image and text, and the second is the principle that images resemble. “Resemblance,” he writes, “has a ‘model,’ an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes...Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it.”<sup>3</sup> While no one would actually confuse a painted pipe with the real thing, language is less clear about those distinctions, a linguistic convention that the reflexivity of *The Treachery of Images* highlights; in common language usage, a representation of something is often simply identified as the thing itself. In this case, the indeterminate relationship of the image and text highlights this fact that in the conventions of representation a drawing of a pipe “does not ‘aim’ like an arrow or a pointer toward a particular pipe in the distance or elsewhere. It is a pipe.”<sup>4</sup>

This system of representation contains a paradox within itself that *The Treachery of Images* exposes, as a painted object is seen both as the thing represented and also as not that thing, but just a resemblance of it. The painted object has both resemblance and similitude in that it presupposes a model but also shares the quality of physical similarity with that model. In the indeterminacy created between image and text in the painting, Magritte breaks down this system, separating resemblance from similitude, and Foucault describes the relationship between the image and the text as one of negation:

In vain the now solitary drawing imitates as closely as possible the shape ordinarily designated by the word *pipe*; in vain the text unfurls below the drawing with all the attentive fidelity of a label in a scholarly book. No longer can

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis in original.

anything pass between them save the decree of divorce, the statement at once contesting the name of the drawing and the reference of the text.<sup>5</sup>

In Foucault's analysis, the effect of this negation is a new openness of visual language created by Magritte's images which are visually similar to real objects while actively negating their own connection to the world outside of representation. "Whether conflicting or just juxtaposed, [the drawing and the text] annul the intrinsic resemblance they seem to bear within themselves, and gradually sketch an open network of similitudes."<sup>6</sup> By foregrounding similitude while negating the painted object's visual similarity to something outside of the canvas, Magritte interrogates the process of representation while remaining within that same system of representation. In surrealist images such as Magritte's, writes Martin Jay, "representation was resurrected only to call it into question, thus exposing the arbitrary nature of the visual sign."<sup>7</sup> Magritte's painting is indeterminate in terms of what it says about the pipe and its (non) pipe-ness due to its reflexivity and negation. As a result of this indeterminacy, which James Harkness calls Magritte's participation in "the antilinguistic program of modernism,"<sup>8</sup> *The Treachery of Images* reveals that which is typically beyond the limits of representation, namely similitude itself, Foucault concludes.

I find Foucault's argument particularly compelling for the possibilities it presents in thinking through the ways the unrepresentable sacred may be approached within a system of representation, and it is my claim that Caveh Zahedi's film *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994) provides an opportunity to do just that. Although working within a different representational system, its reflexive interrogation and negation of conventions fosters narrative

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29. Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 246.

<sup>8</sup> James Harkness, "Translator's Introduction," in Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 8-9.

indeterminacies which engage the viewer with the work as it critiques its own system of representation from within. To this Magritte-esque template *Vegas* adds religious discourse, explicitly establishing the beyond that it points to as not only the invisible ground of representation but also the beyond of the sacred. With a point of focus thus on the sacred, I characterize *Vegas* as a film within the apophatic tradition. Whereas Maya Deren's theoretical base led her to propose the film image itself as the place of the embodiment of the sacred, which in turn led to her negation of the Haitian project's very images by way of its incompleteness, *Vegas* relocates the sacred from a potential subject of representation to a product of the rapport the film establishes between itself and its viewer.

As a filmmaker working within the experimental, documentary, and independent film traditions, Caveh Zahedi's oeuvre is one in which the moving image serves as the point of intersection of art and life. He is a frequent, insistent documentarist of the self, and his confessional films self-reflexively explore both the life and ego of their creator as well as their own status as constructed works. Zahedi's *Vegas* is his second feature-length film, an experiment in non-fictional form which documents a three day Christmas road trip in 1992 from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. On this trip is Zahedi, his father George, and half-brother Amin, and they are accompanied by a three person film crew consisting of cinematographer Greg Watkins, sound recorder D Montgomery, and assistant cameraman Steve Ausbury. The film begins with a monologue given by Caveh<sup>9</sup> on Christmas Eve before the road trip begins. He and the crew are about to leave his apartment to pick up George and Amin, and he wants to explain the nature of this experiment. The film will prove that God exists, he explains, because it is being made without a script and it will consist solely of material filmed over the course of the trip. The film

---

<sup>9</sup> Reflecting the fact that he is called by his first name in the film, I will use "Caveh" to refer to the on-screen character, and "Zahedi" or "Caveh Zahedi" to refer to the filmmaker of *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*.

arose from the conflict between Caveh's fear of losing control (of any number of things in his life, including the films he makes) and his contrasting belief that "everything has a reason why it happens." By making the film without a plan and accepting whatever happens as the material of the film, Caveh explains, he is putting his belief that everything has meaning to the test. He is giving up control and is "going to see what happens and try to interpret it as signs from God." If interesting things happen, that will be evidence that God has intervened. I've experienced this before, he concludes, "and you'll see at the end of the film that it is true."

Having established the principle that a compelling, real<sup>10</sup> narrative serves as proof of the existence of the divine, the film begins. As it progresses, frequent title cards provide timestamps as well as occasional commentary. The film documents the crew picking up George and Amin, the drive to Las Vegas, Christmas Day in their hotel suite, and the trip home. In addition to the dynamics of the Zahedi family trip, the film reflexively focuses on the process of making the film; the crew is in most of the shots, they freely interact with George and Amin, and a fair amount of screen time is given to the crew's own conversations about the film's progress.



Figure 2.1: The crew stops to discuss the film in progress on the way to Las Vegas in Vegas.

---

<sup>10</sup> I am using 'real' here as opposed to a fictional or otherwise constructed narrative, for one of Caveh's filmmaking principles for this project is that of directorial non-intervention.

Over the course of the trip, some interesting things happen as a result of Caveh's interventions and some interesting things happen in spite of him, some are captured on camera and some are missed. Throughout it all, there are a number of negations: of cinematic conventions; of the camera's ability to record the events unfolding in front of it; of the clear denouement of narrative and ethical threads; of the character of Caveh and as a result of Zahedi's own ego; and of the parameters of non-intervention that Caveh presented in his opening monologue.

In wrestling with the limits of what a film can and cannot envision, Maya Deren's early film theory and then the unsaying of her planned film version of the Haitian project shows an active engagement with the possibility and the limits of film functioning as a hierophany, a vessel for the visual manifestation of the invisible sacred. In *Vegas'* opening monologue, we find a twist on this exploration of the hierophanic possibilities of film. Unlike Maya Deren's theory that film could give visual manifestation to the sacred, Zahedi proposes a different kind of hierophany. This film will prove the existence of God, he declares, not because God will be given form but because the effects of God's intervention will be captured on film. Rather than the film itself functioning as a hierophany, Zahedi's proposal is that his film will be a hierophany one step removed, a visual manifestation not of the sacred but of a trace of the sacred. Then, at the end of the film, Caveh abdicates responsibility for judging the success or failure of the experiment. In a closing monologue in the same location as the opening address, Caveh recaps some of the events of the previous two days. Ultimately, he declares, the film is what it is, and it is up to the viewers to judge for themselves whether or not this experiment in capturing the hierophanic trace of the divine on film has been successful.

While my focus in this chapter is primarily on *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*, I will also consider another film in the following analysis. Greg Watkins' *A Sign from God* (2000)

both helps to elucidate some of the issues I discuss in *Vegas*, and is itself a compellingly related yet distinct manifestation of the apophatic tradition that, like *Vegas*, focuses on the negations of narrative and narration. The two films are intimately related; friends and frequent collaborators, Watkins is the cinematographer for *Vegas*, one of the on-screen three person film crew, and Zahedi acts as the main character in *Sign* playing a version of himself, and was the editor of that film. Further, *Sign* picks up many of the thematic concerns of the earlier *Vegas*, albeit in a fictional context, with its titular focus on interpreting uncontrolled events as signs (or traces) from the divine.

Caveh Zahedi and Greg Watkins met at UCLA, where they both enrolled in the filmmaking MFA program in 1986. Inspired by the recent examples of Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch, Zahedi and Watkins bucked tradition and departmental guidelines and co-made a feature-length film as students. That film, *A Little Stiff* (1991), retells the recent events of Caveh's unrequited crush on a fellow student. In a series of vignettes that open with Caveh and Greg, playing themselves, discussing Caveh's problems getting to know girls (Greg describes his approach as "kamikaze," far too aggressive), the film reenacts Caveh's meeting and unsuccessful aggressive pursuit of an art student named Erin, who also plays herself. Only a few months removed from the actual events the film recreates in the spaces in which they actually happened, *A Little Stiff* closely intertwines art and life as it interrogates Caveh as a multifaceted, interesting, and flawed individual. The film was accepted to and screened at the Sundance Film Festival, had a very limited theatrical distribution, and received a number of prominent and laudatory reviews from nationally renowned critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum and Janet Maslin.

*A Sign from God* is, in many ways, a film made in the spirit of *A Little Stiff*. Unexpectedly securing funding to make a film while a Ph.D. student in the Religious Studies

department at Stanford University, after leaving the film industry to pursue a career in academia, Watkins brought Zahedi in to again play himself and to edit the film. Unlike *A Little Stiff*, however, the film does not track nearly as closely to actual events. Caveh plays a version of himself that he has called “Greg’s take on me”<sup>11</sup> and, while a few other people also play versions of themselves, unlike *A Little Stiff* many parts are played by actors and the main narrative events depicted are fictional. This layer of fiction contrasts with the documentary style of *Vegas*, in which the crew films an experience as it unfolds.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative of *Sign* plays as a disaster comedy as it follows Caveh and his girlfriend Laura over the course of one epically terrible day. Throughout the course of the day: Caveh and Laura are evicted from their apartment; they get in a car accident ruining their car and causing Caveh to lose a potential “real job;” Caveh unsuccessfully tries to raise money for his film projects and loses an investor for his in-progress film; Caveh fails to find a location to shoot a key scene in that film thereby failing to borrow the money needed to keep their apartment; Caveh and Laura break up despite the fact that Laura has newly discovered she is pregnant; the bike Caveh borrowed to replace his car for the day is stolen; and the car Laura borrowed to replace their car for the day is towed away. Throughout the film, Caveh’s character establishes the titular theme, repeating his belief at each bad turn that “everything happens for a reason” and therefore that everything must be a sign from God.

---

<sup>11</sup> Caveh Zahedi, Telephone Interview with the Author, September 9, 2015. Unless otherwise specified, all Caveh Zahedi quotes are from the same.

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, *Vegas* does claim a measure of distance between the film and the events it documents. In his opening monologue, Caveh informs us that two years ago he made a similar trip to Las Vegas with George and Amin, sans film crew. On that trip he recorded all their dialogue and wrote a script based on those recordings, titled *I Don’t Hate Las Vegas Anymore*. While he never was able to raise financing for that film, this current film is something of a recreation of that earlier trip (which was, in its own way, a recreation of trips to Las Vegas he regularly made with his family as a child). In the way the film is an experience that references and attempts to recreate a past experience, it is very similar to *I Was Possessed by God* (2000). The film may be a document of this current trip to Las Vegas, but it still retains a connection to past experience.

I characterize the character of Caveh in both *Sign* and *Vegas*—and through the character, the narratives of the films—as operating propositionally; he proposes particular truths about the divine and cinematic representation. Within the films, however, Caveh’s propositions are constantly negated in terms of narrative and genre conventions. My argument is that the avisuality of the films, particularly in the way they establish various categories of unrepresentability within their systems of representation, negates this propositional mode and leads to a relational model of cinematic knowledge. As questions of the manifestation of the sacred are explicitly, reflexively raised and the avisuality of the films negate their propositional mode, any potential presumption that the films make the sacred present or give it visual manifestation is likewise negated. Instead, as they cultivate narrative indeterminacies, both films explicitly locate questions of divine representation within those indeterminacies, creating what I will characterize as an apophatically religious-like relationship between viewer and film text. Working entirely within established systems of cinematic representation, the films—and *Vegas* in particular—position the sacred in an avisual space outside of representation, the space between the film and its viewer. In the place of such a negated hierophany, the relational mode relocates the potential trace of the sacred to the subjective field between the films and their viewers. In this way, unlike Deren’s Haitian project, *Vegas* and *Sign* do not negate their own status as creative films. Rather, the films highlight the limits of representation itself and the necessary avisuality of the sacred.

I begin by exploring the ways both *Vegas* and Zahedi’s larger oeuvre takes the limits of representation as a main theme; through their self-reflexive negations the films call into question the conventions of representation and gesture toward that which is beyond cinematic representation. In this latter category Zahedi combines both the religious and the cinematic

beyond, which come together in the convergence of apophatic practice and modernist reflexivity. I then present the ways in which Caveh's propositional mode of cinematic knowledge is established, and show that the narrative of *Sign* negates Caveh's propositions. In particular, the film's indeterminate final shots recall *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval treatise of apophatic practice, and I make the argument that the film enacts a cinematic version of this practice of unknowing. Whereas *Sign*'s negations of the propositional mode are almost entirely located in the narrative, *Vegas* negates both the narrative and the generic conventions of its documentary mode as it fails to demonstrate its stated truths about the world. Consistently and reflexively shown to lie just beyond the possibility of cinematic representation in the film, reality is equated with the divine through their shared avisuality, visible only as a trace in the context of cinematic representation. These negations are used to implicate and involve the viewer as they create two types of indeterminacies. In the first, *Vegas* raises ethical questions that it presents to its viewer, but frames those questions ambivalently, frustrating an easy judgment. In the second, the character of Caveh throughout Zahedi's oeuvre is likewise presented ambivalently, as both likable and unlikable. The effect of both of these, I argue, is that the viewer becomes involved in the films in a way that negates their original propositional mode in favor of a relational model of cinematic knowledge. In this relational mode, the viewer must participate in the films' own making of meaning. Also in their relational mode, the sacred in the films is referenced by its absence; instead of the divine presence promised in the films' propositions, negations and absence are what is made manifest. By privileging negation, I conclude, *Vegas* creates a space of heterotopia by entering into its own cinematic cloud of unknowing. In this impossible, avisual, contradictory space, the viewer is put in place of the divine in the relational structure the film has created.

## The Avisual and the Apophatic: Beyond Representation in *Vegas*

Talk of God as one finds in *Sign* and *Vegas* is not an unusual thing in the films of Caveh Zahedi, such as when he introduces *Vegas* as a test of his faith because “I believe in God.”<sup>13</sup> Occasionally, references to the divine are used aggressively by Caveh, either to manipulate fellow characters<sup>14</sup> or in order to try and unsettle the viewer. Other times, as in *Vegas*’ opening monologue, Caveh’s talk of God feels confessional, a baring of his self and deepest beliefs that is a reflection of his artistic ethos of ‘total honesty.’<sup>15</sup> While talk of God like this is common enough in Zahedi’s oeuvre, *Vegas*, like *I Was Possessed by God* (2000) discussed in the Introduction, moves from God talk to an engagement with the discourse of the sacred. The film’s engagement with the sacred can be seen not only in terms of what Caveh says, but also reflected in the film’s very structure and construction. Particularly interesting in *Vegas* are the indeterminacies found in the film’s narrative and in its narrative form. In his opening monologue, Caveh ties the manifested presence of the divine to the film’s narrative, and it is precisely at the level of narrative that the film’s self-reflexive negations are concentrated.

---

<sup>13</sup> The word “God” is in many ways a cipher, filled with different means by different users of the term. Zahedi uses this potential ambiguity to his advantage, keeping an open and therefore more broadly meaningful sense of God as he discusses the divine in the film. In *Vegas*, belief in God is equated with a belief that everything always works out for the best, and that everything happens for a reason, and Zahedi’s sense of faith is the trusting that “everything is going to be ok.” Elsewhere, Zahedi uses references to Daoism, gnostic and orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, and Hindu terms and concepts in discussing the divine. The aspect of his conception of God that most interests me is the inherently non-visual nature of divinity. Zahedi has described his personal belief as originating primarily from hallucinogenic drug experiences, and largely “Hinduish” (the world is an illusion, God is the underlying reality we are, we are here to learn forgiveness, etc). God and divine reality exists beyond the visual, and therefore the discourse of the divine is manifested apophatically in Zahedi’s system of cinematic representation.

<sup>14</sup> A prime example of this use of God can be seen in *Tripping With Caveh* (2003), a short film he made in which he takes hallucinogenic mushrooms with the musician Will Oldham. At one point, after multiple unsuccessful attempts to goad Oldham into taking the rest of his allotted two ounces of mushrooms, Caveh’s last resort is an appeal to the divine. “I think God would rather you took that mushroom, and I’m trying to help God have his way.” Naturally, no one buys it.

<sup>15</sup> Cartoonist Bill Brown’s short piece in the box set describes the first time he met Caveh, who promptly informed him that “I believe in total honesty.” See Bill Brown, “Total Honesty” in Caveh Zahedi, *Digging My Own Grave: The Films of Caveh Zahedi* (Brooklyn, NY: Factory 25, 2015), 12-13.

A notable aspect of Zahedi's non-fictional oeuvre is the prevalence of reenacted events used, entirely self-consciously,<sup>16</sup> in order to tell the stories of the films. The filmmaking process itself is almost never invisible in Zahedi's reflexive style, but in reenacting events the films do claim at least a measure of power to transcend space-time in the service of their narratives. Early on in *Vegas*, the filmmakers similarly try to reenact an event when the camera misses capturing a particular tense moment during the drive to Las Vegas. As soon as they try, however, it quickly becomes apparent that Zahedi's father and brother are not up for the acting challenge, and the strategy of filling in the narrative with reenacted events is abandoned for the rest of the film. "All the good stuff is happening off camera," Caveh complains at one point, and it is precisely at this narrative point that Caveh positioned God in his opening address. In *Vegas*, the events that can be shown are limited, and the film doesn't possess the power to capture everything. In this context, "the good stuff" exists in a place that can be outside of representation. This is a compelling manifestation of the apophatic tradition as the referenced but distant and invisible divine—i.e., the sacred—becomes intertwined with film form, particularly the formal element of narration;<sup>17</sup> with the constraints the filmmakers put on themselves (making the film without a script, only filming over the course of the trip, with one camera and limited film stock), some narratively compelling events are avisual—in the context, an impossible visuality. They exist outside of *Vegas*' representational capabilities, as the limits of representation are stressed.

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, Zahedi will often use animation to give visual form to an unfilmed event, a technique used with frequency in his most recent feature-length film *The Sheik and I* (2012). At other times, the reenactments are directly flagged as just that, as when Zahedi sprays an artificial hair-thickener on his head to hide his bald patch in *I am a Sex Addict* (2005) for the purposes of reenacting events that took place many years before.

<sup>17</sup> Narration is the process (including order and amount of information) by which the represented events are conveyed to the viewer: "The process through which the *plot* conveys or withholds *story* information. The narration can be more or less restricted to character knowledge and more or less deep in presenting characters' mental perceptions and thoughts." See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 493. To facilitate the analysis of the film's narration, I have included a detailed plot segmentation as Appendix A.

As Akira Lippit notes, this focus on that which is beyond representation is a common characteristic of Zahedi's films:

As an oeuvre, Zahedi's films and videos frequently offer images of the unimaginable, imaginary stagings and restagings of precisely those things—love, desire, interiority, God, and catastrophe, for example—that resist representation. The acts and events that constitute Zahedi's work are in a fundamental way, unimaginable. They take place at the limits and ends of rhetoric, in the interstice between the image and the unimaginable, the material and immaterial dimensions of the image.<sup>18</sup>

Like Magritte's painting, *Vegas*' path to "the limits and ends of rhetoric" is forged by way of a self-reflexive strategy of the negation of the conventions of representation from within a system of representation itself. In juxtaposing his image of a pipe with 'this is not a pipe,' Magritte calls attention to the expected conventions of the symbolic function of art. Soliciting the active involvement of the viewer, according to Foucault's reading of the painting, this reflexive move calls attention to the process of representation rather than a symbolically represented object. For Zahedi as well, reflexivity calls for an active spectator as the film stresses its own perspectival limitations.

Francesco Casetti describes film that expresses the limits of perspective while gesturing toward a wider, decentralized, unseen perspective as 'Jamesian,' referencing Henry James' metaphor of the "house of fiction" in his 1908 preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*.<sup>19</sup> In James'

---

<sup>18</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 84.

<sup>19</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8. James develops his metaphor over an entire paragraph, quoted here in full. "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open;

aesthetic the narration, written from the point of view of characters within a story's diegetic world, is necessarily limited in perspective. Casetti identifies this denial of an omniscient point of view as one of the defining characteristics of the modern gaze, and therefore modernist cinema. "The result," he writes of the perspective found in modernist cinema, "is an undeniably personal vision: perception of the world belongs to the individual—it is not a divine, omniscient gaze." Rather, the primary characteristic of the modern gaze is "precisely that of being a 'worldly' gaze, inescapably embodied and positioned."<sup>20</sup> The reflexive negations of *Vegas* work in just this way, acknowledging the limits of the film's own perspective as but one possible and extremely limited viewpoint onto the world. In acknowledging its own limits, it is that broader, unrepresentable world—reality—that most interests Zahedi in his framing of the film.

"It would be a mistake to regard reflexivity and realism as necessarily antithetical terms"<sup>21</sup> Robert Stam writes in his study on reflexivity in modern literature and film. Looking at the rupture one finds in reflexive narratives, Stam positions reflexivity in art opposite illusionism. Unlike art designed to fool the eye or to present its perspective on the world as the natural perspective, reflexive art often functions politically, as reflexive works "constitute attacks...on the mystifications and idealizations of" the bourgeois class.<sup>22</sup> Zahedi's attacks are not obviously class based, but they do represent an attack on the mystifications and idealizations, not to mention the conventions of illusionism and narrative, of popular cinema. Throughout

---

'fortunately' by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject;' the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form;' but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral' reference."

<sup>20</sup> Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

*Vegas*, reflexive devices are put to the service of demystifying the visionary power of cinema, particularly its power to demonstrate, capture, show, or illustrate an event.

Such interruptions become increasingly important in modernist art, Stam explains. Indeed, one of his representative examples of such a modernist elevation of interruption itself are the surrealists such as Magritte, who “allow the discontinuities of the psyche...to disrupt and fecundate art” to the extent that this interruption “*becomes* the spectacle.”<sup>23</sup> There are also some telling similarities between the work of Caveh Zahedi and that of Magritte and the surrealists. Both are focused on uncovering reality, the search for “a kind of absolute reality”<sup>24</sup> that exists beyond the typically viewed daily life, and like the surrealists, Zahedi’s search for reality takes him on a journey of the self. Indeed, in his ethos of ‘total honesty’ Zahedi references the kind of socially “forbidden territory” that Andre Breton describes as the very idea of surrealism itself, which “aims quite simply at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory.”<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that Zahedi is a surrealist, for his films are lacking in the kind of envisionment of dream-like imagery that so often marks surrealist art, especially film. Whereas a film like *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) sought to inscribe on film the libidinal excess of the unconscious,<sup>26</sup> in Zahedi’s films this drive toward the cinematic envisionment of the inner self is always negated, one or two steps removed from direct representation.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8. Emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-37.

<sup>26</sup> As Martin Jay puts it, “the Surrealists claimed that the onrush of oneiric images evinced a kind of causality of desire that overwhelmed the conscious will.” See Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 241.

In *Vegas*, these reflexive interruptions never quite rise to the level of spectacle themselves because they are always in service of a higher goal—honesty. “I think the films do something unique, but it’s just me trying to be honest,” Zahedi describes the process by which the films interact with their viewers. Rather than envisioning dream-like imagery, the negations of the film cause its viewer’s engagement with the *process* of representation to be a surrealist-like “dizzying descent,” as the film questions both the conventions of representation and the ego of the filmmaker. Zahedi’s (and *Vegas*’) descent into the self is not done in the hopes of onanistic self-fulfillment, but rather with the goal of moving beyond the self and overcoming ego. Indeed, a major theme in *Vegas* is that of letting go of control,<sup>27</sup> and a constant refrain in Zahedi’s addresses to the camera is the difficulty of doing just that.

In the spiritual practice proscribed by apophatic theology, negations of “everything perceptible and understandable” are meant to create a space of unknowing in which, it is hoped, union with the divine will be achieved through an action of God. “By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is,”<sup>28</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius writes. Jean-Luc Marion reflects this process in his description of the icon. It is only in the icon, which cannot be apprehended, that the infinite “pours itself out or *gives itself* throughout the infinite depth of the icon.”<sup>29</sup> In negating the conventions of narrative<sup>30</sup> while at the same time evoking

---

<sup>27</sup> As he says in his opening monologue, the film is a reflection of Caveh’s life at that moment and emerges, he explains, from the fact that he currently experiences a lot of fear and anger due to his desire to control things. He is engaging in this experiment to address this fear by giving up as much control as possible in the filmmaking process, thereby trusting in his belief that uncontrolled events have meaning.

<sup>28</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 135.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 20. Emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> The conventions he negates are the presumptions of narrative and documentary film: that the film is able to make its subject visible and present through its power of envisionment; that the film has a privileged viewpoint from which to shed light on the documented world; and that the film is able to tell its story.

the idea of the divine, Zahedi establishes a similar apophatic move within the tradition of narrative representation. He negates narrative conventions but then leaves the resolution of the narrative—indeed, the very possibility of narrative itself—in the viewer’s hands. This, I argue, creates a cinematic space of unknowing, an open, indeterminate form of cinematic representation. Therefore, in *Vegas* we find an interesting and unexpected convergence of the sacred with a strategy of self-reflexivity. It is through its qualities of negation—its apophysis, its avisuality—that we find discourses of the sacred and of reflexivity in dialogue here.

### **From the Propositional to the Relational**

The character of Caveh Zahedi in both *Sign* and *Vegas* is what I describe as propositional, a character who proposes that the truths he holds will be positively demonstrated by the film. *Vegas* in particular is set up initially with the precision of a mathematical formula. I believe in God and “I believe everything has a reason why it happens,” Caveh establishes the truth he is proposing in his opening monologue. The way in which Caveh frames this proposal presumes that the viewer does not share his belief, and so he offers the film as proof of this claim. He believes that if they begin making the film without a script, “God will send miracles” in the form of dramatically compelling material. Caveh’s proposition is clearly stated; “you’ll see at the end of the film that it is true.” Like a theorem inevitably reaching its given conclusion, this film will serve as the proof of Caveh’s proposition.

Even though *Sign* lacks the direct address of the self-reflexive *Vegas*, the character of Caveh embodies a similar propositional viewpoint on a similar belief about the divine. “Let’s just center for a minute and we’ll have a great day,” he says to Laura at the beginning of the film in order to convince her to spend a quiet moment with him. “If we’re centered, everything will take care of itself. God will help us.” This belief in divine providence, however, is belied at

every turn by the narrative of the film and questioned by the other characters. Laura, upset by the discovery of her pregnancy which is still unknown to Caveh, is not in the mood for a centering moment. She begins checking her watch and asking dismissively “are you done?” after a few moments, and Caveh’s belief seems to be immediately put to the test when there is a knock on the door and they are handed an eviction notice—not exactly the promise of “a great day.” Caveh clings to his belief in divine providence throughout the film in the face of everything that happens.

Much like his character’s proposition in *Vegas*, Caveh of *Sign* believes in God as a benevolent, order-giving force that will resolve all of one’s problems if the believer simply has faith that it will happen, and throughout the film Caveh proposes to other characters that such truths about the divine are demonstrated by the events of the film. In one very funny and reflexively critical scene, Caveh, in an attempt to raise some desperately needed rent money, shows his producer Henry two scenes from the at-the-time unreleased *I Was Possessed by God*. “Henry, I really think we’ve captured God on film,” he exclaims before showing a scene, using the film to demonstrate this proposal. Tellingly, the scene he shows is one in which Caveh, deep into a trip on a very large dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, equates the divine with the basic formal aspects of filmmaking by grabbing the camera light, shining it on his face, and yelling “I am God and I exist in the light of...Yes!” As I discussed in the Introduction, eliding cinematic and sacred discourse in this way serves to accentuate the ambiguity of the film’s already uncertain religious discourse, not to support Caveh’s claim in *Sign* that the scene proves his proposition that God was captured on film. As one might expect, Henry is not convinced by Caveh’s visual evidence, and in response to another sequence from *I Was Possessed*, an assistant

in Henry's office is similarly skeptical of the proof Caveh proffers. "I don't know that I believe in God," she says, "but if this is what he has to say, I don't think I want to hear it."

This theme of the difficulty of demonstrating the presence of the divine (or even a sign of that presence) is then reflexively turned to the viewer in *Sign's* final scene. After a desperate bid to find any sign from God, Caveh takes an off-handed comment by a passing fan for divine guidance that he and Laura should go to the top of a nearby hill. "Either everything means something or nothing does," he pleads with Laura and, it seems, the viewer, not unsympathetically. Despite having broken up with him, Laura agrees to accompany Caveh one last time. As they climb the hill, Caveh is constantly on the lookout for a sign. "Hey Laura, look!" he says in the penultimate line of dialogue, the focus on the revelatory power of vision reflecting his proposal in *Vegas* that the viewer "will see." The exhortation to "look" is seemingly directed at the viewer as well, as though here we will finally receive some validation of Caveh's insistence that everything means something.



Figure 2.2: The vision-obscuring fog at the end of *Sign*, negating Caveh's exhortation to "look."

Despite this promise of the revelatory power of vision, as the couple reaches the top of the hill, the San Francisco fog rolls in, obscuring vision. With this turn of events, *Sign's* narrative creates a modernist "antinomy of vision," as P. Adams Sitney identifies this tendency

to “stress vision as a privileged mode of perception, even of revelation, while at the same time cultivating opacity and questioning the primacy of the visible world.”<sup>31</sup> In the obscurity of fog, vision is negated by an object that itself can only be seen to the extent by which it blocks the view of the San Francisco cityscape; if there is a sign in the film’s closing shots, it is not one that falls within the realm of representation. In contrast to Caveh’s insistence on reading direct, positive meanings in narrative events, these final shots give us a sign of the limits of vision, an avisual sign of non-vision. Culminating in the fog-enshrouded final shots, the narrative of *Sign* revels in its indeterminacies. Not only is the state of the relationship between Caveh and Laura unresolved (for they give each other a little smile as the fog comes in), but the insistence of Caveh that “everything has a meaning” remains an open question. Does everything have a meaning? At least, in this particular context, does everything in a film have meaning? The openness created by the narrative indeterminacies, and especially by the visual fog-induced indeterminacy, ultimately leaves these questions unresolved by the film, to be answered only by the viewer.

It is just such an effect of narrative ambiguity, disrupting “the normal and naturalized habits of the typical viewer,”<sup>32</sup> that Watkins points to in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice* (1986) in an essay on religion and film. Critiquing the approach to the study of religion and film that does not critically engage with a film’s form, Watkins begins with Stanly Cavell’s attribution of the fact that in a film one can see without being seen as the key expression of modern vision:

By naturalizing almost mechanically the particularly modern forms of alienation, i.e., by making the distance between the viewer (self) and the world viewed (film) an apparently unquestionable ‘matter-of-fact,’ the viewer is relieved of the burden of that distance. On the other hand, I am coming to the conviction that many of

---

<sup>31</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Greg Watkins, "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 3, no. 2 (October 1999).

the great ‘auteurs’ of film making are precisely interested in unsettling that relationship once again, and, in the space of renewed dis-ease in the viewer, find other ways of addressing the modern human condition.<sup>33</sup>

Tarkovsky does this, he suggests, through his film’s unresolved narrative ambiguities. I would argue that the narrative ambiguities in *Sign* similarly disrupt convention, particularly the convention of the propositional mode that Caveh establishes within the film. In so disrupting this convention, *Sign* hopes to unsettle its viewer by bringing her into an active relationship with the film through an engagement with the questions of divine guidance it proposes.

Caveh’s exhortation to “look” in the final sequence explicitly calls attention to something the form of *Sign* has been doing the entire film. Much like *A Little Stiff*, *Sign* is shot predominantly in long shots, with the figures nearly always situated within their contexts. Often, especially in the outdoor shots on city plazas and sidewalks, the urban landscape dominates the figures. Part of the process of engaging the film involves the active visual engagement with the film’s images; there is something to visually understand as one constantly situates figures within landscapes. This holds true throughout the film, until the final shots. After Caveh and Laura reach the top of the hill, an unusual low angle and the incoming fog suddenly pulls the figures out of any context. For the final few seconds of the film, Caveh and Laura are visually ungrounded as all that can be seen is the figures against an indeterminate background of foggy sky, and in the final shot, fog and clouds only.



Figure 2.3: The typical shot grounding the characters within their San Francisco context in *Sign* gives way to the ungrounded low angle in the final scene.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

## The Cloud of Unknowing

This is a final moment of visual unknowing that reflects the unknowing caused by the film's narrative ambiguity. The use of fog—quite literally, being enveloped in a cloud which obscures and denies visual epiphany—recalls an extremely popular metaphor in apophatic theology, that of a cloud of unknowing. This is the title of an anonymously written 14<sup>th</sup> century treatise on apophatic practice. Influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and his approach to God as “that which is known by not-knowing,” *The Cloud of Unknowing* explicitly declares this debt near the end of the book: “Anyone who reads Denis’ [aka, Pseudo-Dionysius’] book will find confirmed there all that I have been trying to teach in this book from start to finish.”<sup>34</sup> The author uses the metaphor of a cloud of unknowing to describe “a kind of darkness about your mind” in which “you will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing.”<sup>35</sup> The treatise teaches contemplative practice designed to cultivate this cloud of unknowing:

For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud. But if you strive to fix your love on him forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation I have urged you to begin, I am confident that God in his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself.<sup>36</sup>

One of the goals of apophatic discourse and practice is the disruption of the positive religious approach that declares, propositionally, that “God is X.” The negations of apophatic discourse and the subsequent cloud of unknowing is designed to disrupt such a model of propositional truth in the goal of approaching that which cannot be propositionally stated, the sacred. In place of a propositional model, apophatic discourse proscribes a relational model in which, in a state of

---

<sup>34</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Image Books, 2014), 127.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

unknowing, God will bring the supplicant into an experiential (but not conceptual) relation with the divine.

*A Sign from God* enacts a cinematic version of this apophatic practice recalled by the diegetic fog, in which the conceptual negations and subsequent cloud of unknowing of the religious supplicant takes place within the film's formal elements as its propositional narrative conventions are negated and the film settles into a state of narrative ambiguity. In the fictional context of the world of the film, does it side with Caveh or his detractors? Does the film itself believe its narrative events have been signs from God? The question remains unresolved, ambiguous and indeterminate. Ultimately, the truth of Caveh's propositions that everything means something, and his final, definitive sign from God, are a visual—modes of obscured visuality, indeterminate and unknown. Instead of a propositional truth, though, the apophatic suggests that the object of the film's propositional truth—the sacred—can only be found relationally. This use of negation in the film's narrative form represents a compelling version of the apophatic tradition. *Vegas* develops even further the ambiguity that *Sign* narratively creates surrounding the idea of divinely given meaning in everyday events and actions. Rather than the primarily narrative indeterminacies found in *Sign*, the Magritte-like unresolved tensions of *Vegas* are more deeply embedded in the film's structure, making it a film that is more radical in its experimentations of the apophatic mode. The shift in the film from a mode of propositional truth proposed by Zahedi in the opening monologue to one of relational truth at the end of the film comes about as a result of more than negations within the film's narrative. Instead, the primary negations we find in *Vegas* are of its documentary mode and its corresponding presumed access to reality.

## **The Documentary Mode**

There are two separate times in *Vegas* that Caveh references the documentary genre, and both times it is to disparage documentary form and to distinguish *Vegas* from that genre of film. The first comes in an early, pivotal scene when the crew gathers, midway through the drive to Las Vegas, to discuss their failures thus far in capturing the interesting events on camera. “All the good stuff is happening off camera,” Caveh laments. In his opening monologue a few minutes earlier, Caveh had proposed that a “successful” final film product would serve as evidence of the existence of God, uniting the invisible divine and film form. Specifically, Caveh proposes narrative as the place one can see a sign of God, for the judgment of success he gives is the presence or absence of interesting events captured by the camera. As Caveh describes it in the monologue, a film that is boring and in which nothing of interest happens would be a failure.

In this scene Steve offers the suggestions that Caveh get some “good stuff” on camera by interviewing George and Amin informally, asking them questions about faith. “That seems to me like a documentary. I don’t like that,” Caveh responds, rejecting the idea. “I hate documentaries.” The second reference to documentaries comes in a similar scene in which the crew meets to discuss the film in progress once they reach their destination of a Las Vegas hotel room. As with the earlier scene, the conversation revolves around an inherent tension in the status of the cinematic image that can be found throughout Zahedi’s oeuvre, its simultaneous constructed nature and its presumed privileged access to reality. In particular, Caveh wrestles throughout *Vegas* with the principle of non-intervention he establishes in the opening monologue as part of the film’s experiment. He is not going to control what happens, he says, but instead simply let reality present itself and film what he finds. Throughout the film, however, Caveh violates this principle, and in this scene he references the difficulty of letting go of control.

Steve brings up his earlier comment, connecting Caveh's fear of letting go of control with the documentary form. "Why don't you want it to be a documentary?" Steve asks. "I guess I have this fear that reality isn't enough," Caveh responds. Throughout *Vegas* the filmmaker is striving for a synthesis between the real and constructed natures of the film image, and here he associates documentary form with the unsuccessful outcome of his film experiment, that is, a boring film.

At the same time that he explicitly disavows documentary form, the film's beginning propositional mode fits neatly into standard documentary theory, which takes as a foundational principle the ability of film to propose and demonstrate a truth about the world. Building off of John Grierson's famous dictum that documentary is "the creative treatment of actuality," Bill Nichols takes the relationship to actuality as the primary characteristic of documentary form. "Documentaries address *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker,"<sup>37</sup> he says. As a result of this shared orientation between a documentary and its viewer to the same world, "documentary film and video stimulates epistophilia (a desire to know) in its audience. It conveys an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, or a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness."<sup>38</sup> In fact, as he discusses the origins of documentary film, Nichols relates its propositional mode to the visionary tradition of early avant-garde cinema, from which he attributes the power of the form. Establishing the base from which the "documentary voice" moved beyond the principle of merely showing, Nichols describes the first cinematic avant-gardes of Europe and Russia as "ways of overcoming the mechanical reproduction of reality in favor of the construction of something new in ways only cinema could accomplish."<sup>39</sup> Stressing the importance of the visionary legacy of the 1920's

---

<sup>37</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), xi. Emphasis in original.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

avant-garde to the documentary form, Nichols emphasizes the way in which its influence resides in the mode by which the documentary voice speaks to its viewers: “This space beyond mainstream cinema became the proving ground for voices that spoke to viewers in languages distinct from feature fiction.”<sup>40</sup> The great power of the documentary form, like the visionary cinematic tradition, is the power of film to envision, to give form to a particular perspective, and to speak “in a voice...about a world we all share.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Limits of Film in *Vegas***

While Zahedi initially proposes that *Vegas* could and would operate according to the documentary tradition in terms of this propositional mode, it is precisely the ability of the film to speak about the world by recording and representing events that is reflexively negated as the film consistently stresses its own representational limits. At the most basic level, Nichols makes an indexical argument that the image “is a document of what once stood before the camera” to account for the rhetorical power of the documentary image.<sup>42</sup> In *Vegas*, by contrast, there is a near continual reference to what has *not* been captured on film, events that the camera failed to see and record. The presence of the documentary photographic index gives way to the absence of that which, in the context of this experiment at least, has proven to be unfilmable. “This film is a hunt,” Greg describes during a crew meeting. The filmmakers are venturing into the world in the hopes of catching narratively compelling material even though, as Caveh complains, they keep missing their prey. One reason they keep missing “all the good stuff” is the limitations of the tools with which they are hunting. *Vegas* is filmed on 16mm celluloid film, the sound and the image are recorded separately, and the crew has a limited amount of film stock. Filming on celluloid, the material cost alone limits the crew’s ability to film everything, and so often “the

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 36.

good stuff” is missed simply because the camera happened to be turned off. This is the context in which Greg describes the film as a hunt, which is his way of arguing against Caveh’s plan to try and recreate those narratively compelling events they missed. What is important, Greg argues, is the process of the film’s production as it wrestles with reality, not any particular captured moments.

There are a number of other ways in which the theme of the limits of the film’s representational capabilities is developed as the film emphasizes mechanical, material, and human failings. By including these failures in the final edit, Zahedi negates, over and over again, the documentary-esque propositional mode with which the film began. The technical and financial challenges of shooting on film are never far from consciousness with Caveh’s frequent references to their limited budget and limited film stock. There are also a number of limits of the image related to the mechanical recording process itself. On more than one occasion, a shot is recorded as the roll of film runs out, leaving just the white leader on the screen, and in one instance a mechanical problem with the camera (as a title card points out to us) causes the image to skip and fail when the party first enters the Vegas hotel-casino. A superimposed (and vertically inverted) double exposed roll seems to visually capture something of the drug experience of the characters it is recording, but was created, a title card tells us, when Steve accidentally loaded an already exposed roll of film back into the camera.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> The other scene superimposed on the roll is from an early morning address by Caveh the next day. In this scene, the same hallucinatory superimposition works surprisingly well to convey something of the presumed hangover of the previous night’s activities.



Figure 2.4: The mechanical limits of the image in *Vegas* as emphasized by a malfunction of the camera and the human failings of the filmmakers.

There is also a recurring motif of accidental silence in the film in which the sound recorder, separate from the camera, fails to capture the auditory half of the film image. In *Vegas*' documentary aesthetic, in which the camera is recording the actuality of the world shared with the viewer, a successful cinematic 'image' is one that has both image and sound; an image without sound is just as much a missed opportunity to capture "the good stuff" as is sound without an image. In one instance the lack of sound serves as an indication of the absence of D, who is in charge of the sound recording for the production. In another, Greg purposefully does not turn the sound recorder on during his 'confessional' scene. Just before they leave Las Vegas, each character is set up, alone in the hotel room, in front of the recording camera and encouraged to say whatever is on their minds. Greg makes sure the sound is not recording and lays down on the couch, an act that was motivated, at least in part, by the attractive idea of adding a measure of silence to counterbalance Caveh's loquacious persona.<sup>44</sup> Finally, a title card tells us that all the sound recordings from the drive back from Las Vegas to Los Angeles were lost at some point post-production, effectively eliminating that entire trip from the film's realm of representation. In the hunt that was the film, all these events (and the time stamps tell up that 8 ½ hours passed for a 4-5 hour trip) were missed.

---

<sup>44</sup> Greg Watkins, Email Correspondence with Author, February 16, 2016.



Figure 2.5: Images of silence in *Vegas*: a scene in which D is missing and therefore fails to turn on the sound recorder; Greg's purposefully silent confessional scene; and the drive home from Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

There are also limits shown to Caveh's proposed plan in the opening monologue that he would just film the trip as it happens, giving up control over events. For one, the camera itself is often seen affecting the scenes it films. In a particularly dramatic sequence during the initial drive to Las Vegas, Caveh, while driving, tells George and Amin that he can't really see. "I'm nervous as hell," George mutters, to which Caveh replies, "I'm nervous as hell too." The issue is that the car's interior light is on, making it very hard to see out the windshield at night. The only reason the light is on is because Greg is filming the scene from the back seat, and without the light we wouldn't be able to see Caveh, George, and Amin. If nothing can be filmed without the camera affecting the scene, a point self-reflexively made several times, the whole premise of the experiment of non-intervention seems to fall outside of the limits of cinematic representation. An additional limit to the parameters of the experiment comes as a result of Caveh's continuous attempts to manipulate events to make them more dramatic and therefore cinematically interesting. It is not entirely clear exactly how genuine Caveh is when he tells George and Amin that he can't see or, earlier in the drive, when he stresses the dangers of driving his car. The brakes are shot, it needs new tires, and they didn't bring a spare, he almost gleefully says as George drives. With each of these revelations, it is unclear if Caveh is being truthful or if he is just trying to make George and Amin nervous, and therefore produce some tension and drama for the camera.

Caveh's biggest dramatic intervention is revealed the next day. It is Christmas, and in the hotel suite before George and Amin arrive from their room, Caveh reveals that he is giving them each a hit of the drug Ecstasy for their Christmas presents, with the hopes that the three of them will all take it together later that day. Once everyone arrives, Caveh distributes the presents, and in a lengthy sequence explains his plan for the Ecstasy while George and Amin repeatedly insist that they don't want to take it. Their primary reasoning, beyond a shared aversion to drugs, is a concern for George's heart, which "is not as strong as it used to be." Caveh continues to push George and Amin to take the drug with him, downplaying the risks to George's heart while doing his best to manipulate them into following his plan. Eventually Caveh takes the Ecstasy alone and Amin and George step out for a few minutes of gambling. When they leave, Caveh chides the crew for not backing him up. "I didn't believe in what you were saying," says Steve, and Greg and D agree. "I was worried about his heart too, actually. That's why I relented" Caveh responds, rather implausibly given his earlier insistence. Later, under the influence of the drug, he admits that his attempt to guilt George into taking the pill "was bullshit. I was just trying to get him on Ecstasy on film," he admits.

The film is also shown through its narrative structure to be limited in terms of its ability to capture and reveal the truth about the spaces and times in which it is recording. After resisting Caveh's insistence that they all take Ecstasy together and then leaving to gamble, Amin and George come back and say they've decided to take the Ecstasy with him after all. Amin seems to take the pill and George takes it during a film roll change; Caveh doesn't see it, and neither does the camera. Under the influence the three Zahedis talk about how they feel, declare their love for each other, and Caveh talks about God and his belief that the divine will take care of everything and everyone. The next morning, though, Steve introduces a narrative wrinkle in his

confessional sequence. He found one Ecstasy pill in the garbage that morning, he tells us, and is unsure if he should tell Caveh that it appears as though George and Amin didn't actually take the drug with him the previous night. Steve's reveal accomplishes a number of different things. It establishes a disparity of knowledge, a narrational device in which we are given more information about the narrative events than Caveh, but it also reveals a different disparity of knowledge; George and Amin knew more than both Caveh and the viewer during the Ecstasy scene, and they fooled both of us. As this reveal makes clear, we can't know if what the film shows us is an accurate truth about the world it films. If George and Amin were acting, what other experiences included in the film could be inauthentic? But neither is the narrative definitely cleared up at this point, for Steve stresses that he only found one pill. Did George or Amin take the other pill, or did they just dispose of it in a stealthier manner than the bathroom trashcan? Was the Ecstasy experience for both George and Amin inauthentic, or not? This narrative mystery is never resolved. It is presented as a truth that lies beyond the limits of the film's representational capacities. Instead of the certainty of the documentary's "information and knowledge, insight and awareness,"<sup>45</sup> *Vegas* stresses its own limits to know and make known as it cultivates narrative doubt and ambiguity.

Zahedi often frames his work in terms of failure. By this he typically refers to commercial failure, failure as a filmmaker by the standards of the marketplace. During a scene in *A Sign from God* in which Caveh unsuccessfully pitches different ideas for films to a production company's executives, he proposes they finance a film that he describes as a satire of the "great artist genre." This will be a film about him as an unsuccessful filmmaker—"It would be a film about failure, really." The essay Zahedi wrote for the 2015 box set of his oeuvre, titled

---

<sup>45</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 40.

“A Portrait of the Artist as a Complete Failure,” adopts this same idea<sup>46</sup> as it narrativizes Zahedi’s career with an eye toward commercial and critical failures. This focus on failure is a long-standing one for Zahedi, which Greg Watkins describes as both true (Zahedi has not been successful by Hollywood standards) and also an inside joke, an acknowledgment that experience, as an invisible thing, can be very hard to communicate as the artist attempts to convey an interior experience to a viewer who remains outside that experience.<sup>47</sup> “I think failures are a really interesting thing, a spiritualizing thing,”<sup>48</sup> Zahedi explains.

In addition to commercial failure, the idea of failure permeates the structure, themes, and form of Zahedi’s films in the indeterminacies and negations built into the narratives, the images, and the characters. The failures of *Vegas* can be found in the various limitations of the film image as well as in its focus on “the good stuff” that always seems to be just out of reach. As a result of this failure of cinematic vision, the film points to that which is beyond the representative reach of the image itself. Combined with its documentary-like propositional mode, *Vegas* establishes a visuality that is embodied in the world it films, but at the same time is on the hunt for the invisible, a visuality that downplays the visible and proposes itself as a trace of the (sacred) invisible.

### **Documentary-Like Question of Reality**

“I am the angel of reality, / Seen for the moment standing in the door...A figure  
half seen, or seen for a moment, a man / Of the mind, an apparition appeared in /  
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn / Of my shoulder and quickly, too  
quickly, I am gone?”

—From “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” Wallace Stevens

---

<sup>46</sup> This focus on failure can also be found elsewhere, as in his European Graduate School faculty profile, which similarly adopts a tongue-in-cheek focus on Zahedi’s personal and commercial failures. See <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/caveh-zahedi>, accessed 11/18/2015.

<sup>47</sup> Greg Watkins, Interview with Author, September 20, 2015, Los Angeles, CA. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes by Greg Watkins are from the same.

<sup>48</sup> Caveh Zahedi’s “Letters to Matthew: July 22, 2001.” This is a video letter to Matthew L. Weiss that documents, in part, Zahedi’s participation in an artists’ retreat program. In that presentation, he identifies a sense of failure as the most important thing in his life at the time.

Of all his creative work, Caveh Zahedi is best known<sup>49</sup> for a scene he scripted and performed in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) in which Zahedi describes his idea of a "holy moment" captured on film in the context of André Bazin's theories of realism.



Figure 2.6: Caveh Zahedi as an animated rotoscoped figure in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*.

As Zahedi explains it, Bazin believed that film reproduces reality, and as a Christian Bazin believed that God and reality are the same, "so film is actually like a record of God, or of the face of God, or of the ever-changing face of God." Zahedi calls this the cinema's ability to frame off a bit of reality and thereby make "holy moments" visible. Dudley Andrew critiques this as a shallow reading of Bazin, a "simplified 'Bazinism,'" and points out the way in which *Waking Life* undercuts Caveh's ideas about the revelatory power of the real in cinema through its animated form, positioning itself as a film that is decidedly not a reproduction, at least visually, of reality.<sup>50</sup> For Bazin, Andrew explains, the reality of a film is what is not visible in its images; rather than a reproduction, Bazin conceived of film as a photographic negative of reality. When Bazin puts his faith in directors who "side with reality" in his canonical essay "The Evolution of

---

<sup>49</sup> Caveh Zahedi, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Complete Failure," in Zahedi, *Digging My Own Grave: The Films of Caveh Zahedi*, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 6.

the Language of the Cinema,” “he demonstrates that the reality attained by a film is what precisely is not visible in its images.”<sup>51</sup> In that essay Bazin’s focus is on a style of film that he claims best reflects the characteristics of reality, including its ambiguity and the duration of its actions, so as to bring “the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality.”<sup>52</sup> Doing so, Bazin describes, “would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them;”<sup>53</sup> reality is manipulated and modified in a film’s images, but it is neither contained nor created in them.

If there is a principle from Zahedi’s *Waking Life* scene that is applicable to his filmmaking practice in *Vegas*, it is the idea that God and reality are the same, for both are characterized as beyond the representational capabilities of the film. Zahedi’s scene in *Waking Life* notwithstanding, however, *Vegas* is invested in an understanding of realism that turns away from a valorization of the image as the possessor of reproductive power. Throughout the film, there is very little concern with the actual form of the image. The entire production has a rough, amateur-like aesthetic and Greg Watkins, although the cinematographer, is often in the frame as the camera is frequently left, unmanned, on a tripod. In its self-reflexive mode the process of the filmmaking, rather than the final result, is what is emphasized. Unlike Andrew’s interpretation of the “holy moment” sequence, *Vegas* does not claim a revelatory power for its images as the actual images produced by the film are constantly de-emphasized. Instead, the film is much more in line with Bazin as Andrew describes him, with its focus on reality as an undercurrent. Reality is what the film is hunting for, but it consistently remains just out of reach, only to be occasionally glimpsed by the camera. Reality’s relationship to the cinema as presented in *Vegas* is sacred, and can be thought of as akin to the relationship Jean-Luc Marion sketches between the

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>52</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 35.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 38.

divine and the icon when he describes Christ, the ultimate icon, as “indicat[ing] not his own face but the *trace* of God.”<sup>54</sup>

The idea of reality as a trace was an important one in Bazin’s thought, Malin Wahlberg explains, as “Bazin was primarily interested in the experience behind the image, duration and change (the unfolding and becoming of events on the screen), and the material and existential aspects of the image-imprint.”<sup>55</sup> The trace, Wahlberg describes, is more interested in the created aura of an image and less in its historical indexical connection to material reality; “the trace has less to do with the materiality of the vestige, than with its uncanny presence of absence.”<sup>56</sup> In his opening monologue, Zahedi literally suggests that *Vegas* will record a trace of the divine, and that the narrative form will serve as just such an “uncanny presence of absence.” This striving in the film toward that which is absent, the sacred, is particularly seen in the way in which the visual qualities of *Vegas*’ cinematic images are deemphasized as the film instead devotes itself to the presentation of experience, itself an invisible thing.

One of the most touching and affective moments in all of Zahedi’s oeuvre comes at the end of his *I Am a Sex Addict* (2005). Throughout the film, Caveh has been narrating the autobiographical story of his struggle with sex addiction. Staging reenactments of his past, Caveh tells his story in the past tense until the final scene where, we find out, he has been narrating these events from the foyer of the church where his upcoming wedding is currently taking place.<sup>57</sup> Caveh finishes his story, turns around, and walks into the sanctuary as the camera

---

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 62. Emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> As his wife Mandy writes in her essay for the box set, she and the guests were waiting for Caveh to get his take just right so that the ceremony could commence, and they “got married with three cameras rolling.” See Amanda Field, “He Was an ‘I Am A Sex Addict’ Addict,” in Zahedi, *Digging My Own Grave: The Films of Caveh Zahedi*, 82.

follows him into the wedding. The recreations and the carefully sculpted narrative that has been one step removed in the past suddenly becomes footage of Zahedi's wedding as it happens. The real breaks through the mediated narration as the film moves from recreating to directly participating in experience.



Figure 2.7: Caveh's past-tense narration in *Sex Addict* gives way to his wedding as it happens.

All of Zahedi's films share a similar connection to reality—a step or two removed from actuality but close enough that the potential for the seemingly unmediated presentation of the world always feels possible. *Vegas*, in particular, with its reflexivity and its partial, incomplete aesthetic, makes use of the tension between the real and the constructed nature of film, often placing 'reality' just beyond the possibilities of the cinematic image. A prime example of this can be seen in the film's ending. After the drive home, the entirety of which is excised from the film because, a title card tells us, "all of the soundtapes for the return trip mysteriously disappeared," the film ends up back where it started, with Caveh giving a confessional monologue in the same spot he gave his opening monologue. On the trip back from Las Vegas, he describes, many things happened, events that he characterizes as "this reality thing." Unbeknownst to Caveh at the time, but already known to the viewer, is that "this reality thing" was not captured on camera, because the sound was lost. In the hunt that the film took part in,

all those events were missed. In the way that “this reality thing” is flagged as beyond representation, it is firmly placed in the realm of the avisual.

In *Vegas*, this focus on the trace can be seen in the genuine, unplanned, ‘real’ narrative arc involving D that seems to organically develop in the film. In the epigraph above, a Wallace Stevens poem Zahedi referenced to describe to me the relationship he sees between his films and reality, the “angel of reality” cannot be seen in full. It can only be glimpsed, in a flash, out of the corner of one’s eye, already gone by the time one’s attention is directed toward it. Zahedi sees his films’ relationship with reality in a similar way; perhaps they glimpse this process of time, change, and conflict, but they never possess it as a static thing, as reality captured on film. Similarly glimpsed throughout *Vegas* is a partially hidden story as D experiences a personal crisis of some sort. Always on the periphery, captured accidentally and partially as the camera attends to the main narrative events Caveh has set up with his Ecstasy plan, the mystery of D may be an example of the kind of proof Caveh references in his opening proposition, a bit of the narratively compelling real that is glimpsed here and there.

The mystery first develops in the midst of small talk on Christmas before the presents are distributed and opened; D is missing, a fact emphasized when both George and then later Steve ask where she is. “I don’t know,” Caveh responds both times. Later, after Caveh takes the Ecstasy but before George and Amin return and agree to take it with him, there are two short sequences without sound, until, as the intertitle tells us, D arrives and turns the sound back on some 30 minutes later. “Some good stuff just happened” in the soundless scene, Caveh says, and D, speaking to him, talks vaguely about “getting back to love and being at peace with yourself,” which she apparently has been doing during her 30 minute disappearance. She is, as Caveh later says, “in her own world,” and it is clear to the viewer that something significant is going on. As

Caveh and Greg talk after D turns on the sound, she can then be heard on the phone in the background. While almost nothing that she says is intelligible, for the microphone is focused on the ‘main story’ of Greg and Caveh, her tone is clearly distressed and at one point she can be heard saying “I wish I was there.” As before, the main focus of the scene is on something else, and this developing drama with D is caught in glimpses by the microphone. Later on, seemingly unheard by the other characters, D talks over another conversation and mentions that she has had eight drinks that night. She then disappears again (once again, someone asks where she is and Caveh responds “I don’t know”), and when she comes back responds to Caveh’s questions if she’s drunk by saying “I wish I were drunk” and that it has been “a taxing day.” In the morning, Caveh finally fills us in, explaining that D got really drunk and disappeared in the middle of the night, well after they finished filming for the evening. “She has a drinking problem,” he tells us, and before the shoot she had assured Caveh she wouldn’t get drunk. For the rest of the film D is very hung over, and then she is given the last two lines of dialogue in the film, clearly flagging this trace of a glimpsed narrative as an important—perhaps the most important—thing that the hunt of the film has captured. “I’m a little ragged around the edges. But it was a very interesting trip.” And after the first credits, “I don’t know what to say.”

### **Ethics and the Relational**

When we believe that what we see bears witness to the way the world is, it can form the basis for our orientation to or action within the world.<sup>58</sup>

—Bill Nichols

When a film has a presumed access to social reality, Bill Nichols tells us in the quote above, part of its power comes from the way it affects the relationship of the viewer to that reality. One of the ways in which *Vegas* follows this documentary convention is through the

---

<sup>58</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, xiii.

ethical issues it raises and presents to the viewer. Caveh explicitly brings up the idea of ethics and of the viewer making ethical judgments about the actions that are being filmed when he first explains his plan to give George and Amin Ecstasy for their Christmas presents. “I’m not sure about the ethics of it all,” he admits, clearly flagging the first ethical judgment the film places in the viewer’s hands. This focus on ethics and on complex, ethically-dubious actions is a theme that runs throughout Zahedi’s oeuvre. Therefore, in its foregrounding of ethical questions presented to the viewer, the work of Zahedi fits within the documentary tradition Nichols references. His films have an ethical stake built in to them because they are related to the world shared by the viewer.

At the same time that the films actively solicit the active involvement of the viewer in the ethical questions they pose, Zahedi works very hard to present ethically problematic issues in an ambivalent way by always presenting multiple sides of any ethical argument. One way his films do this is through what Greg Watkins describes as disrupting “the ‘naturalized’ viewing habits” of a viewer. Such disruptions “transform the once safely distanced world viewed [as described by Cavell] into one that returns the viewer’s gaze and places ethical demands on the viewer.”<sup>59</sup> Zahedi’s most recent feature length film, *The Sheik and I* (2012), was especially focused on placing ethical demands on its viewer. *The Sheik and I* is “all about ethics,” Zahedi explains, “and is pretty blatantly unethical in about a zillion ways—but also highly ethical in this other way. You can’t really pick a side...the film is constructed to make that difficult.” The way in which *The Sheik and I* is unethical is the same way in which *Vegas* is unethical—according to the professional standards of documentary film. In documentary theory, the ethical burden centers around two main questions: is what the film depicts truthful; and how does the

---

<sup>59</sup> Watkins, "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film."

filmmaking process itself affect the film's subjects, their lives in the world outside the film?<sup>60</sup>

*The Sheik and I* was widely criticized at the time of its release, most prominently by the influential documentary film curator Thom Powers, for the apparent disregard it had for the financial and social well being of some of its subjects.<sup>61</sup> In violating those ethical principles, Zahedi negated his film's own status within the world of documentary<sup>62</sup> in an attempt, as he said, to complicate and problematize the relationship between the viewer and the film.

In addition to the fact that Caveh is "not sure about the ethics" of his Ecstasy plan, *Vegas* explicitly asks the viewer to make an ethical judgment about a series of events at the end of the D narrative arc. Here, the seeming authenticity of the D mystery, especially in the way it lacks the directorial-administered narrative catalyst of the Ecstasy narrative, gives it a political stake. "Realism" in self-reflexive film, Dana Polan argues, "is a form of knowledge, a picturing of reality"<sup>63</sup> and therefore has political agency in terms of the picture of reality a film chooses to present; the denouement of the D narrative provides two pictures of reality that it presents to the viewer, two possible ways of viewing the depicted events. The film works hard to make both ways of judging the events reasonable conclusions, so as to not predetermine the viewer's choice. This invited ethical judgment comes when, after dropping George and Amin off at their

---

<sup>60</sup> These principles are the starting point for most serious critical writing on documentary and ethics. For examples, see: Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000). Linda Williams, "The Ethics of Intervention: Dennis O'rourke's *the Good Woman of Bangkok*," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2006). Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, as credits added after the initial criticism revealed, the film was *not* as cavalierly unethical as it initially appeared to be. By initially withholding a key piece of information, Zahedi made the film seem much more unethical than it was, purposefully accentuating this quality.

<sup>62</sup> In what turned into a minor scandal, Thom Powers privately contacted a number of film reviewers and programmers about the film, encouraging them to consider the breach of documentary ethics when reviewing the film, or to cancel its screenings. See Eric Kohn, "Was Caveh Zahedi "Blacklisted" by Thom Powers? It's More Complicated Than That," *Indiewire* December 7, 2012. Available at <http://www.indiewire.com/article/critics-notebook-was-caveh-zahedi-blacklisted-by-thom-powers-why-its-more-complicated-than-that>, accessed 1/6/2016.

<sup>63</sup> Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film," in *Movies and Methods: Volume 2*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 669.

home, George gives Steve and Greg each a beer for the road. D, still quite hung over, declines his offer, but as they leave George runs out and gives her a “nice bottle of scotch.” Later, in his closing monologue, Caveh tells us that George had earlier chided him about being mad at D for getting drunk, and Caveh gives us two possible ways of viewing George’s gift to D. The first is the selfish position; when George first gave D the bottle, Caveh tells us, he was angry, thinking “it’s the last thing I need or want right now.” The alternative is the forgiving and accepting perspective, which Caveh claims as his own. The act of a gift of scotch was also “a beautiful thing,” a “loving, kind, generous, accepting act” that told D “I accept you” and “I don’t want you to feel guilty.”

Naturally, these are not the only two possible perspectives one could adopt on George’s act. Most glaringly missing is the documentarily ethical perspective, the one that acknowledges the likely harm the film and this gift of alcohol are doing to D by enabling and exacerbating her drinking problem. But from the limited perspective of the film, these two choices represent the breadth of possible ethical judgments—and the film does explicitly ask the viewer to make a judgment. “If you’re watching this...you’re getting from it what you’re getting from it,” Caveh declares at the end. You might judge the characters, and you might experience love and compassion; either is a legitimate reaction.

In addition to passing the onus of judgment to the viewer regarding the D narrative, Caveh also places in the viewer’s hands the final judgment about the success or failure of the film, its original experiment. “I apologize to those who haven’t found this interesting,” he says. “I thought it was an interesting and deep thing, but that’s not for me to judge.” As the ending of the film makes clear, there are two ways in which the film invites the judgment of the viewer. The first is a judgment of the narrative, in which it is up to the viewer to determine if the film

was narratively interesting or not, thereby declaring the success or failure of this experiment in proving the existence of God. While the film could legitimately be dismissed as boring, elements such as its manipulation of a disparity of knowledge between Caveh and the viewer creates some dramatically compelling material, from the standards of commercial fictional narrative form.<sup>64</sup> The second way the film invites the judgment of the viewer is in the ethical questions it establishes but refuses to answer. From the ethics of giving George and Amin Ecstasy as a Christmas present, to Caveh pushing them to take it, relenting, and then happily accepting their willingness to partake of the drug, to the nature of George's act of giving D a bottle of alcohol at the end, the film creates ethically problematic scenarios without passing judgment on them. In the case of George's gift to D, this unwillingness to declare the rightness or wrongness of an event is pushed even further as the act is presented as both laudable *and* condemnable, both an enabling act bound to hurt D and a gesture of love and acceptance. The ambiguity and openness of an unresolved ethical question is here transformed into a genuine ambivalence, in which two conflicting meanings are held together.

By shifting the judgments of the film to the viewer in this direct and self-reflexive way, *Vegas* completes its turn from its initial propositional mode (which it had negated throughout) to a model of relational truth. Foucault describes the way Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* negates the seemingly self-evident symbolic truth painting was presumed to have in that

---

<sup>64</sup> In particular, the narration in these areas closely hews to Alfred Hitchcock's formula for creating mystery, suspense, and surprise. As Edward Branigan describes it, the disparity of knowledge between a character and viewer could create each of these dramatically compelling effects, depending on the way in which it is deployed. When the character and the viewer both have a limited knowledge of narrative events, a sense of mystery is created. When the viewer knows more than the character, suspense. And when the viewer knows less about the narrative than the character, the film creates a sense of surprise. Despite its unplanned conceit, *Vegas* deploys disparities of knowledge in just these configurations, creating Hitchcockian effects: mystery, regarding the D plot; suspense, when we know more than Caveh about what has happened with the found Ecstasy pill; and surprise, when we find out what George and/or Amin already knew, that they didn't actually take the pill. See Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), 75.

context.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, *Vegas* negates the documentary-based principle that it will *show*, that it will envision a bit of the real world thereby shedding light onto it. Instead, we find the narrative form of *Vegas* works hard to create open, indeterminate meanings by way of frequent visual and narrative negations. One way it does this is through its use of the narrative trace. The trace is avisual, Lippit writes, for its “irreducible exteriority,”<sup>66</sup> its constant reference to that which is invisible. Also a compelling example of avisuality is the shift from presentational truth to relational truth. The promise of vision, the “you will see” in the opening monologue, gives way to the absence of the image of “this reality thing” by the end and the subsequent charge that the viewer decide for him or herself. The meaning of the film, even the success or failure of the film, only exists within the active viewer’s judgmental interaction with the text.

### **The Performance of Everyday Life**

His body of work at the end of the day will be like a lengthy Walt Whitman poem.  
It will be a ‘Song of Myself.’ It will be one of the greatest poems ever written,  
because it applies to everybody.

—Richard Linklater<sup>67</sup>

The ambivalence we see in the presentation of the narrative and the ethical dilemmas in *Vegas* is also reflected within the character of Caveh Zahedi. There is not much difference, if any, between the Caveh on screen and the Caveh of real life, both Zahedi and Watkins assure me. Other than the accentuation of preexisting personality traits for the purpose of a more compelling or more funny character on film, Zahedi describes his role in his films as a “performance of everyday life.” In many ways, the person of Caveh Zahedi is the foundation

---

<sup>65</sup> These were the presumptions that an image represents a primary reference, and that a text label clearly identifies its object.

<sup>66</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 59.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Mike Boehm, “The Unvarnished Stories of His Life,” *Los Angeles Times* February 4, 2002. Available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/feb/24/entertainment/ca-boehm24>, accessed 11/10/2015.

upon which *Vegas* is built. As he described his filmmaking process at a 2001 artists' retreat,<sup>68</sup> Zahedi begins each film project by looking inward and building the film around whatever issue is most important in his life at the moment. In *Vegas* itself he references this connection of the film's theme of fear of losing control to his own fears and sense of self. "I have this fear that reality isn't enough," he says during one of the crew meetings, "and that I'm not enough is really what it's about. It's just projection."

Throughout his films, the character of Caveh is presented ambivalently; "the character is likable but he's unlikable at the same time," a construction designed so that you never "have a place to stand with the question," Zahedi explains. "A signature scene in virtually every Zahedi film," writes Jason McBride, "features the filmmaker pleading with or attempting to convince someone to do something against their will...Zahedi's persistence is generally amusing, but it occasionally morphs into a less-savoury imperiousness that undermines the charismatic, touchy-feely attitude he normally maintains."<sup>69</sup> This imperiousness is crystalized especially well in a scene in Zahedi's diary film *In the Bathtub of the World* (2001). "You're being a jerk!" his then-girlfriend Mandy complains to Caveh when he refuses to stop filming her during an argument. "I'm being jerky for art," he replies; whatever his motivations, the scene is hard to watch as Caveh wields the power of the camera in such a self-admittedly "jerky" manner. Is he making art? Is that a legitimate excuse for his actions? Janet Maslin described the Caveh character in her New York Times review of *A Little Stiff* as a "creep, the campus nuisance, the guy

---

<sup>68</sup> As recorded in Caveh Zahedi's "Letters to Matthew: July 22, 2001."

<sup>69</sup> Jason McBride, "Song of Myself: Caveh Zahedi's Cinema of Self-Exposure," *Cinema Scope* Spring, no. 26 (2006).

guaranteed to prompt elaborate shows of indifference every time he enters a room” and yet also “weirdly appealing.”<sup>70</sup> The character holds the tension of these diverging truths together.

*Vegas*, the most self-critical of Zahedi’s films, actively cultivates a Caveh persona that is often unlikable and is the frequent object of critique. On the one hand, Caveh is the director who directly acknowledges and talks to the viewer, and the entire project of the film is centered around his feelings of anger and fear. Given as well his disarming honesty and openness, there is a lot of sympathy for Caveh built in to the film. On the other hand, however, are sequences that show Caveh in a pretty damning light. He is very self-centered, as can be seen in his final commentary on the D narrative arc. There is also his self-admittedly ethically dubious plan to give George and Amin Ecstasy for their gifts. Most off-putting, however, is Caveh’s treatment of his father, George. Despite George’s fear for his heart, Caveh pushes him to take the Ecstasy over and over, arguing that the drug is innocuous and, in a last ditch effort, that it may actually be *good* for his bad heart. Then, after George and Amin take the drug, spend some time with Caveh, and then leave him to gamble again, Caveh tells us that he fully knows that “they do say that if you have a heart problem it’s not good to take Ecstasy.” Caveh justifies this disregard for George’s health with an appeal to God. He was worried about George’s heart, he explains, and so he prayed to God that George would be ok. Because of his belief, he “doesn’t think about those things too much”—things like taxing his father’s heart with a psychoactive drug.

This critical focus on the self is an important part of the process, for Zahedi, by which a film can engage with the discourse of the sacred. In a 2002 film festival catalogue essay on art and spirituality, Zahedi focuses on the ego of the artist and the way in which he sees aggrandizement of the ego as an impediment to the production of art. The reason is that he

---

<sup>70</sup> Janet Maslin, "The Awkward Appeal of a Young Man's Chase," *New York Times* March 16, 1991. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D0CE6D91139F935A25750C0A967958260>, accessed 11/10/2015.

believes all art is “channeled” from God, and “the problem with the ego in art is that it destroys this connection to the source by positing itself as the source.” Inspired by the struggles of Rimbaud, Kafka, and Blanchot to create art “not inextricably bound up with ego,” Zahedi meditates on the possibilities of overcoming ego in the cinematic arts. “All of my films have been an attempt to bring God back into the picture, so as to take my own ego out of the center of the frame.” In a telling paragraph he contextualizes both *Vegas* and *Possessed* in terms of the ego:

In *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*, I dispensed with the script entirely and trusted to chance (a.k.a. God) to provide the narrative of the film. I also enacted the dialectical struggle between ego and non-ego (between will and the surrender of will) by being both actor and director. These two roles were usually in conflict, but the embodying of that conflict was the true subject of the film. The result is a film directed by God, in which the ego self is not denied, but in which it doesn't have the upper hand either. It is an instance of God being trickier than the ego. In *I Was Possessed By God*, the strategy was more direct and almost scientific. I ingested 5 grams (an extremely large dose) of hallucinogenic mushrooms during the making of the film. This obliterated my ego, at least ostensibly and for a few hours, and allowed God to ‘speak directly’ through me. The ego is still there I believe, but it has been put in its place and, at least for a while, is no longer running the show.<sup>71</sup>

Zahedi has also discussed his focus on failure in terms of ego and spirituality, in that failure can be a tool to tame his ego as a filmmaker. He is both attempting to aggrandize himself *and* “always looking for ways to deflate my ego, or the viewer’s ego. I’m all about ego deflation, I guess, and to me it’s a spiritual path.”

“There is only one command—love yourself,” Caveh shouts at one point during his trip in *I Was Possessed by God*, a gnostic twist on Jesus’ identification of the greatest commandments to love God, neighbor, and self in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Caveh’s focus on only the third object of Jesus’ command directs his focus inward, toward the self, but

---

<sup>71</sup> Caveh Zahedi, “Je Est Un Autre,” in *Infinity Film Festival Catalogue* (Italy: 2002). Available at <http://www.cavehzahedi.com/#!je-est-un-autre/cnhi>, accessed 10/2/2015.

this move inward is ultimately done in order to move past the self. Through the cinematic interrogation of himself via the exposure and critique of the character of Caveh, Zahedi strives to create a universalizing experience. Akira Lippit describes this move from the personal to the universal in Zahedi's films, which

turn the camera outward and inward at once, effecting the portrait of an individual in the world and the world within a person until the lines between the two, the borders between one and the other, begin to blur. The savage and excessive honesty that characterizes Zahedi's work turn into an uncomfortable form of *extrospection* at once narcissistic and *excentric*.<sup>72</sup>

Alison Bechdel also develops this idea in a comic in which she describes encountering Zahedi's films for the first time and how she "was transfixed by the spectacle of someone apparently even more self-absorbed than I was." "Was this generic self-indulgence," she asks herself, "or a sublime feat of self-examination and transcendence?" Her conclusion is that Zahedi, through his ego deflation, is doing the same thing as Bechdel's own self-reflexive cartoons—revealing his own flaws "for *all* of us."<sup>73</sup>

Zahedi's focus on ego deflation and his subsequent insistent and critical interrogation of the self ultimately reflects apophatic practice. It recalls, as did *A Sign from God*, the proscriptions found in Pseudo-Dionysius and *The Cloud of Unknowing* in which spiritual practice is meant to foster an "absolute abandonment of yourself"<sup>74</sup> and a sense of unknowing. Restated in terms of ego, one might say that apophatic discourse tames the ego by negating one's presumed conceptual mastery of the divine. As Jason McBride succinctly summarizes, self and the image are intimately wrapped up, in Zahedi's films, with the discourse of the sacred; "his

---

<sup>72</sup> Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*, 73. Lippit's italicized use of 'extrospection' and 'excentric' here reflects his book's central thesis that experimental film and video can be characterized by its outside status as it illuminates the outside of what cinema itself is. One way in which Zahedi's films accomplish this, he argues, is through their focus on Zahedi himself.

<sup>73</sup> Alison Bechdel, "Is Caveh Zahedi God?," in Zahedi, *Digging My Own Grave: The Films of Caveh Zahedi*, 111. Emphasis in original.

<sup>74</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Mystical Theology," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 135.

faith in God is no more and no less sturdy than his faith in the verisimilitude of an image—or in himself.”<sup>75</sup> To the extent that Zahedi’s art is so closely, intimately associated with his self and that sense of self is deflated by way of various critical negations in *Vegas*, the emptying of the self that Zahedi discusses in terms of his art can just as well be applied to his film text. The ‘self’ that is emptied is not just the self of the filmmaker or character, but the self of his cinematic creation as well. Vivian Sobchack, writing about the phenomenology of film experience, describes the ‘body’ of a film as “the film’s means of perceptually engaging and expressing a world.”<sup>76</sup> The body of a film is that which is indicated by its mode of visuality, and in *Vegas* the mode of visuality—the self or body of the film—is apophatically emptied. In its negations and indeterminacies, the film itself unknows, an unknowing of its initial propositional mode.

### **Spaces of the Sacred**

Given the ambivalence and indeterminacy in the narratives, narrative forms, and characters in *Vegas* and *Sign*, an important question is raised. In films in the apophatic tradition such as these, whose avisuality primarily rests in their narrative construction, where is the sacred located? In their shift from propositional to relational modes with a subsequent de-emphasis on the primacy of visual evidence given their new mode of avisuality, I propose that there is a corresponding shift in the potential place of signification of the distant divine. Rather than the realm of representation (“you will see”), we find in the films a renewed focus on the fluid, shifting, subjective, relational space that exists between the films and their viewers in the interaction that the films actively solicit through their indeterminate forms.

---

<sup>75</sup> McBride, "Song of Myself: Caveh Zahedi's Cinema of Self-Exposure."

<sup>76</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 168.

Even though *Sign* is much different in format from the explicitly indeterminate, self-reflexive *Vegas*, it does share with that film a short moment of direct address. At the end of the film, as Laura finally breaks up with Caveh and he is trying unsuccessfully to get her to accompany him to a nearby hill, she finally yells “leave me alone!” The couple has been arguing in profile on a sidewalk in a long shot, with the camera positioned on the opposite side of the street. Suddenly, Caveh turns and walks across the street, directly to the camera. In an extremely unusual medium close-up, Caveh addresses the camera, speaking to Laura. She runs over to the camera, glances at it, and asks “what’s this?” as he continues to try and explain his feelings to her. “I think God has something to say to us that we’re going to understand up there,” and “either everything means something or nothing does,” he says.

The inspiration for this unusual and brief breaking of the fourth wall came, according to Watkins, from an early Akira Kurosawa film, *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947), which has a similar moment of direct address at the end of an otherwise traditionally constructed fictional film. The difference in the nature of the direct address between the two films is telling, however, especially for the way it elucidates *Sign*’s marshaling of apophatic discourse and the unique way the apophatic tradition involves the viewer through negation.



Figure 2.8: The unusual moment of direct address in *Sign*, inspired by Akira Kurosawa’s *One Wonderful Sunday*.

*Sunday* has a social realist style, reflecting its post-war Japanese milieu, with aesthetics comparable to the films of the contemporaneous Italian Neo-Realists and themes exploring the

existential limitations encountered by young people at that time. The film follows the young engaged couple Yuzo and Masako who, due to their lack of money, end up at an empty amphitheater at the end of their day together. Despite their hardships, the couple struggles to hold on to the hope to imagine a better, more beautiful world; Masako carries around a knitting project, indicating a hope for children, and at the amphitheater, undeterred by their inability to afford tickets to the actual symphony, Yuzo jumps on the stage to pretend to conduct the symphony. "You can create worlds in your dreams, right?" he asks. As he begins conducting, a great wind comes up, breaking Yuzo's imaginative spell. This happens three times, and he eventually gives up and sits down, despondent. Masako won't have any of it, however. She applauds, assures Yuzo that she did hear the symphony, and encourages him to try again. Then she turns to the camera and in direct address, asks the viewers to applaud. By clapping for young lovers such as them, you the viewer can "help us dream beautiful dreams," she pleads. After a moment, Yuzo gets up, smiles and bows to the camera, and conducts again, this time using one of the knitting needles for a baton. This time, both Masako *and* the viewer hears the imaginary symphony, for there is music on the soundtrack! The viewer's connection with and involvement in the film creates a bit of movie magic, remythicizing<sup>77</sup> the world of the film and by extension (thanks to its social-realist style), the world itself. Movie magic has infused the world of the film and, through the connection with the viewer created by the direct address, our world as well.

The contrast in the use of direct address between *Sign* and *Sunday* is as striking as the similarities. Unlike *Sunday*, which adds something to the world (music), *Sign*'s moment of direct address leads to the taking of something away with the vision-obliterating fog and the

---

<sup>77</sup> Jane Feuer uses this term in the context of the Hollywood backstage musical which demystifies performance via its backstage aesthetic but then remythicizes the "real" world of the film when effortless performances erupt off of the diegetic performance stage. See Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Film Genre Reader 2*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

contextually ungrounding low angle after Caveh and Laura climb the hill. Has magic—or evidence of the divine, perhaps the same thing—been imbued into the world of the film? Into our world? Rather than a joyous remythicization, *Sign* negates the visionary power of film, leaving the question of signs from God open and unresolved. This apophysis of the narrative creates an experience, but unlike *Sunday*'s musical experience this is a negative experience, a cloud of unknowing.

With *Vegas*, we have a version of apophatic narration that moves from the ambiguity of *Sign* to a genuine ambivalence. This ambivalence can be seen in the coexisting, conflicting understandings of the narrative actions that Caveh invites us to consider in the film's final relational mode. The events we see are both ethical and unethical. The film is both a success and a failure, as the film contains within itself its own contradictions. It does not just contain apophatic discourse—rather, in its self-negating and contradictory form, *Vegas* takes on the very structure of apophatic discourse.

The space that *Vegas* creates is similarly conflicting and indeterminate in the way the film collapses the space between the viewer and the divine as a result of its relational mode. In this collapse between the sacred and the profane, *Vegas*' space of the sacred can be best categorized in the same way James Harkness describes Rene Magritte's visual/syntactical space—as that of heterotopia.<sup>78</sup> Heterotopia is Michel Foucault's term for spaces that are set apart or combine various, competing functions; "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible."<sup>79</sup> In his *The Order of Things*, Foucault also locates heterotopias in the spaces of discourse surrounding art, as heterotopias undermine language, destroying "syntax which causes words and things...to 'hold

---

<sup>78</sup> James Harkness, "Translator's Introduction," in Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 25.

together.”<sup>80</sup> Foucault’s prime example of a representational heterotopia is Diego Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas* (1656); like Zahedi’s *Vegas*, the syntax here that is impossibly combined but not ‘properly’ held together is the syntax of the space between object and viewer.



Figure 2.9: Creating a heterotopic space in *Las Meninas* as the space of the viewer, painter, and true subject of the painting are conflated in the space outside of the canvas itself. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas, or the Family of Philip IV*, 1656, Oil on Canvas, 276 x 318 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed February 20, 2016).

In the Velázquez painting, all the represented figures look out to a space somewhere in front of the painting itself. These figures include: the self-reflexively rendered Velázquez, looking out from behind a canvas on which he is painting; the entourage gathered in the center of the painting, and especially the focus of the entourage, the Spanish princess; a figure who appears to have just emerged from a door in the background of the represented space; and a mirror mounted on the back wall of the represented room. Therefore, Foucault writes, the “true center” of the painting exists outside of the space of the composition, a space approximately

---

<sup>80</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xviii.

where a viewer of *Las Meninas* would stand. Within this true center, various incompatible spaces are nevertheless combined, making it a space of heterotopia. Even as this heterotopic, non-represented space is collapsed by way of these pictorial devices as well as the reflexivity of Velázquez painting himself into the scene, the mirror on the back wall provides a glimpse of the space outside the painting. In the mirror can be seen the Spanish king and queen, ostensibly posing for their portrait in front of the canvas. This glimpsed view offers a trace of the space of heterotopia, for the king and queen are positioned in the same place as the viewer of the painting as well as the place the real Velázquez took up when originally painting *Las Meninas*. “That space where the king and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator: in the depths of the mirror there could also appear—there ought to appear—the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez.”<sup>81</sup> The result of such a combination of impossible spaces, according to Foucault, is a space that only exists in terms of the relationship between painting and viewer: “in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange.”<sup>82</sup>

*Vegas* creates a similarly indeterminate and liminal space through the negations of the film and the relational mode of cinematic knowledge that those negations create. The film is a successful film only if I, the viewer, decide that it is. I give judgment to the film, and it is only in rapport with its viewer that the film completes or fails in its representational goals of expressing a truth about the world, the nature of reality, and the divine. The film’s negations push the real object of its hunt outside the realm of the cinematic image. Instead, it is within this heterotopic, avisual space that the indeterminacy and relationality of *Vegas* positions its evidence of the divine, its trace of the sacred.

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

By negating its own mode of representation and then soliciting the viewer's active involvement in its process of signification, the film text acts like the religious supplicant of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in that it enters a darkness of knowing nothing. This is, after all, Zahedi's (albeit, negated) conceit the whole time—that the film is being made *without* a plan or even forethought. In the darkness of a cloud of unknowing, the believer gives up all control and agency and hopes for an intervention from the divine to transform his unknowing into an (impossible) experiential knowledge of the divine. Likewise, *Vegas* attempts to give up its agency, and with it the responsibility to provide its promised manifestation of the trace of the sacred, when it asks the viewer to give of himself. If the film achieves a state of unknowing, it follows that I, the viewer, am put in the place of the divine. The divine “pours itself out or gives itself”<sup>83</sup> in the visual apophatic model of the icon, Marion writes. In *Vegas* it is the viewer who is asked to give of himself to imbue the film with its very status as film as I decide if it has been a successful experiment or not. In this rapport, the distinction between the sacred and the profane—as the space of the divine and the viewer—is broken down and combined in the non-represented space between the film and the viewer. This is a shared space of the sacred and the profane, a heterotopia that *Vegas* creates, and it is within this heterotopia, and the interaction between film and viewer that takes place there, that Zahedi has located his proof of the existence of God. This relational mode of religious discourse is ultimately *Vegas*' contribution to the apophatic tradition, as it creates the potential for a divine-like experience, but puts the viewer in the omnipotent driver's seat.

---

<sup>83</sup> Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, 20.

### Chapter Three

## Nathaniel Dorsky's Film and Paratexts: Engaging the World

The films of Nathaniel Dorsky, a contemporary filmmaker working within the avant-garde tradition of personal and poetic cinema, are marked by a profound avisuality and represent one of the fullest and most compelling manifestations of the apophatic tradition of the American avant-garde. To speak about negation and absence in these films may, initially, seem unfounded. Dorsky's films are exquisitely beautiful, evincing an intense materiality and a dedication to the craft of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing, all of which give them a weighty sense of texture and presence when projected. Absent from these projected images, however, is any imagery associated with the religious references that abound in the films' paratexts. Paratexts, a term from literary theorist Gerard Genette,<sup>1</sup> refers to every context that affects one's reading of a primary text. In Dorsky's oeuvre, references to religion and to the sacred are found in his films' titles, written work, interviews and screening introductions, as well as, I will argue, in the screening contexts of his films. The unsaying of Dorsky's films hinges on the balance between their visual manifestation and these paratexts.

As a result of this unsaying, the location of the potentially represented sacred shifts from the realm of the religiously metaphysical to that of the cinematically invisible. I find the nature of the relationship between the alterity of the sacred and the cinematically invisible in Dorsky's films especially compelling. Rather than an allegorical relationship in which one thing is substituted for another,<sup>2</sup> I characterize this as an example of metonymy, a substitution contingent

---

<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). I am indebted to James Herbert's "The Eucharist in and Beyond Messiaen's *Book of the Holy Sacrament*" in *The Journal of Religion* 88, no. 3 (2008) for the model of using paratextual analysis to begin unpacking the religious context of a work without an obvious textual connection to its religious referent.

<sup>2</sup> "In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another," Angus Fletcher writes. It is a mode that is often associated with religious symbolic discourse, in that it says "one thing in order to mean something beyond that

on the associative connection between the sacred and the cinematic. In the argument presented here, the connection Dorsky makes between sacred and cinematic discourse is in the nature of the experience created, a shared experience that focuses on the invisible, absent, and unseen. Reflecting the discourses of the sacred present in their paratexts, Dorsky's films are perspectively oriented to the invisible, but with a metonymic shift toward uniquely *cinematic* invisibilities. In particular, this metonymic shift—and therefore the presence of negated paratextual religious references—exists in the films' dual focus on the ground of the cinematic image and on the act and process of looking itself.

In the tradition of apophatic discourse, this metonymic text/paratext connection gives a quasi-religious power to the films of Nathaniel Dorsky as they create a religious-like experience open and accessible to any viewer regardless of his or her beliefs. This is especially evident in the ideal one sees in the films and their paratexts of art that takes on an ethical and social role, reshaping vision and therefore reshaping the relationship between viewer, film, and world. Standing against the distracted mode of visibility that permeates culture in commercial cinema, in which a film transports its viewer away from the space and time of its projection, Dorsky's art presents an attentive, devotional alternative.

This reshaping of their viewer's perceptual orientation toward the world comes as a result of the avisuality of the films. Akira Lippit defines avisuality in liminal terms, a mode of visibility in between the visible and the invisible that breaks down the very signs and syntaxes of visual language. In Dorsky's films there are many different manifestations of avisual liminality, including in his film language, form, production, representational focus, and projection format,

---

one thing." See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 2, 4.

all of which I will discuss. Together, these create a mode of vision that is marked by an avidual liminality, rejecting semiotic and experiential solidity in favor of difference, change, and flux.

This mode of vision emanates from the destabilizing effects of apophatic discourse. Denys Turner describes the compounding of negation in apophatic theology, in which all things must be first affirmed and then denied to be of God, following which the contradiction between the two must also be negated. By way of example, Turner explains that “we must say affirmatively that God is ‘light’, and then say, denying this, that God is ‘darkness’; and finally, we must ‘negate the negation’ between darkness and light, which we do by saying: ‘God is a brilliant darkness’.”<sup>3</sup> The synthesis of this process of negation, as in naming the divine a brilliant darkness, is one in which language is destabilized as it collapses into contradiction and paradox. In Dorsky’s visual and cinematic language there is a similar apophatic process at play. The first level of negation can be found in terms of the conventions of film, in that Dorsky’s work negates the popular absorptive model of film language and structure in favor of a relational one that puts the viewer into a more intimate contact with the film images. He describes this as direct experience, in which the films reveal the depth of reality.

The second level of negation occurs when all potential religious content is negated after referencing the religious in his paratexts. And yet, while conspicuously absent from the films’ imagery, this negation is itself negated as the suggestion of the religious remains in those paratexts all the same. As with apophatic discourse, the films hold this contradiction in tension, unresolved, cultivating a sense of religious mystery and preserving the possibility of these films functioning as a modern form of sacred art, especially in their drive to reshape the viewer’s perceptual relationship with the phenomenal world.

---

<sup>3</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.

I begin, following a short introduction to Dorsky, with an analysis of his film *Alaya* (1987) that highlights an important aspect of avisuality in its focus on the act of vision itself and on the ground of the cinematic image. Drawing out the religious references of his paratexts, I then also consider the liminality of the experience they create. The social and ethical function of the films I relate to Dorsky's long-time association with Canyon Cinema and its ethos, instilled by Bruce Baillie, for film that serves a religious-like function in society through its ability to shape vision. I then develop my primary thesis that the location of the sacred in Dorsky's films is metonymically shifted to the realm of visual representation through the close analysis of three films and their paratexts: *Hours for Jerome* (1982); *Variations* (1998); and *Compline* (2009). In analyzing the way the religious paratextual references interact with their film texts and with Dorsky's unique cinematic language, I explore the way the form of his films transforms the viewer's perception, focusing on the revelation of that which is hidden. In particular, I find that this revelatory religious-like focus is shaped by the avisuality of Dorsky's aesthetic of polyvalent montage, especially as it was influenced by the poet John Ashbery and the filmmaker Stan Brakhage. I associate Dorsky's cinematic language, which avoids fixed conceptual groundings, with the discourse of the sacred with which his films paratextually engage, and suggest that theories of the haptic offer a productive model to engage the films. In these ways, I reaffirm the religious-like power of the films as powerful examples of films in the apophatic tradition.

### **Introduction: Nathaniel Dorsky**

With a career that spans 50 years and shows no sign of slowing down, Nathaniel Dorsky serves as a transitional figure in the history of the American avant-garde and its relationship to the sacred. A San Francisco-based artist long associated with Canyon Cinema and the larger Bay Area experimental film community, Dorsky is today one of the most prominent contemporary

filmmakers of personal, poetic 16mm cinema. Born in 1943 and raised in New Jersey, Dorsky first encountered experimental film in New York in the early 1960s, and is a member of the filmmaking generation that came of age after Maya Deren's death. Influenced by the ideas and films of Stan Brakhage, Dorsky made three short films in the early 1960s that received a fair amount of recognition. Dorsky's first film, *Ingreen* (1964), for example, was one of the films that Gregory Markopoulos identified by name as being wrongly eliminated from the awards competition at the 1965 Ann Arbor Film Festival in his widely circulated and now famous letter of that same year.<sup>4</sup> In that letter, Markopoulos described Dorsky's early film as one of the experimental films screened which did not rely on an understanding of film as painting, literature, or psychology, but explored the meaning of cinema itself, one of the new films trying to forge a new film language. Despite being eliminated from competition, Markopoulos reported that *Ingreen* was well received by the student audience and received an honorable mention. In addition, in screenings around New York, Dorsky's early films attracted favorable attention from Stan Brakhage and John Ashbery, among others.

Following 1965's *Summerwind*, Dorsky did not finish and release a film of his own for nearly twenty years. As has been noted by Dorsky as well as others,<sup>5</sup> there was something fortuitous in hindsight about this cinematic absence, as Dorsky largely skipped the structuralist debates and ensuing political and theoretical disputes that took place amongst avant-garde

---

<sup>4</sup> First published in the *Village Voice*, March 25, 1965, Markopoulos' original letter condemning the festival for censorship by eliminating difficult and controversial films from competition and a reply from the festival flatly denying Markopoulos' accusations were printed in the *Canyon Cinema News*, June/July 1965. At this time the topic of film festivals was a popular one amongst filmmakers, as can be seen in the Canyon Cinema newsletter of this period. There, festival reports were common, as were complaints about judging criteria, care of the handling of film prints, and exhortations for filmmakers to avoid festivals that were not perceived as sufficiently respectful of the artist (most often in terms of financial remuneration) or the films (in terms of their physical care), both of which were vitally important to artists trying to make careers as experimental filmmakers. See Box 1, Folder 16A, Canyon Cinema Records, circa 1961-2009, M1681. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA (hereafter referred to as CCR).

<sup>5</sup> P. Adams Sitney, "Tone Poems," *Artforum International* 46, no. 3 (2007): 189.

filmmakers, theorists, and programmers in that period. After moving to San Francisco in 1971 and establishing himself as a sought after editor of commercial film projects, Dorsky returned to experimental filmmaking with *Hours for Jerome*, released in two parts in 1982 from footage filmed in the years 1966-70. From 1996 to the present Dorsky has remained steadily prolific, releasing, on average, nearly one new film every year.<sup>6</sup>

Although Dorsky historically made films for an audience often limited to personal acquaintances, more recently he has been the recipient of much interest, recognition, and honor within the film community. Rentals for his films have been increasingly in demand at Canyon Cinema, the Bay Area distributor that manages his 16mm film prints.<sup>7</sup> In addition to being voted the top director in Film Comment's 2010 "Best of the Decade: Avant-Garde" poll,<sup>8</sup> Dorsky's *Hours for Jerome* (1982) was selected in 2012 for preservation by the National Film Registry, and he has recently been the subject of retrospectives at the New York Film Festival (2015), the Pacific Film Archive (2012), and the Rotterdam Film Festival (2011). His short book *Devotional Cinema* has been translated into French and Spanish amidst a growing European interest in his films, and his films are regularly screened at the New York Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival, among others. As P. Adams Sitney declared in a 2007 *Art Forum* article, Nathaniel Dorsky is now "at the pinnacle of his powers and reputation as a filmmaker."<sup>9</sup> Seven years before that, at the beginning of his current productive phase, Sarah Markgraf and Gregg Biermann in *Millennium Film Journal* suggested that Dorsky and his films show a way forward for the avant-garde. Within the avant-garde, they write, "many of these films gleefully destroy works from the dominant cinema in irony-laden techniques that are often described as

---

<sup>6</sup> A full list of Dorsky's films is included as Appendix B.

<sup>7</sup> As described in conversation to me by Dominic Angerame, director of Canyon Cinema from 1985-2012.

<sup>8</sup> The full results of the poll can be found at <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/best-of-the-decade-avant-garde>, accessed 8/29/2015.

<sup>9</sup> Sitney, "Tone Poems," 187.

either nihilistic or nostalgic. In contrast, in *Variations* Dorsky conveys the feeling that he does not need to be ‘reactive to parental forces,’ or, in other vocabulary, to be caught in an Oedipal struggle with Hollywood.” Dorsky’s films, they propose, are neither reactionary nor rebellious, and do not belong to a hegemonic sub-culture any more than a hegemonic dominant culture. Rather, they are an example of “avant-garde cinema in its maturity...[which] shows other filmmakers a way for the avant-garde cinema—a relatively young artistic project, yet one that seems to have aged all-too-rapidly—to be viable in the next century.”<sup>10</sup> Fulfilling the promise Markopoulos identified in 1965, Dorsky has developed a film language that is a genuine alternative, neither dependent on, nor reactive to, popular film.

### **Avisuality and *Alaya***

Dorsky’s film *Alaya* (1987), though somewhat atypical in its visual content, serves as a useful introduction to Dorsky’s film style and avisuality. *Alaya* consists entirely of sand blowing in the wind shot at varying distances, from microscopically close-up shots of individual grains to extreme long shots of endless dunes. Typically, Dorsky’s films are comprised of images he encounters in his daily life,<sup>11</sup> with the content drawn from nature, the city, and depersonalized people;<sup>12</sup> often, two or more of these elements are combined in a single shot. Despite its limited subject matter, *Alaya*’s content neatly encapsulates Dorsky’s dual concern with the world and the physical materials of filmmaking, particularly his interest in the idiosyncratic qualities of different film emulsions. Like the celluloid itself, sand is not typically something one looks at, but it can be made the subject of a shot through cinematic framing. As a largely homogenous surface, however, sand typically provides the ground on which other things can be distinguished

---

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Markgraf and Gregg Biermann, "Nathaniel Dorsky's *Variations* and Theme," *Millennium Film Journal* 35/36 (2000).

<sup>11</sup> The one other exception to this is *Pneuma* (1983), the content of which consists entirely of film grain.

<sup>12</sup> Dorsky rarely shows faces or whole bodies in his films. Occasionally his films are populated by people recognizable to the initiated, as in *Hours for Jerome* (1982) and *August and After* (2012).

and seen; like the celluloid strip it is often the condition for seeing rather than the object of vision. In *Alaya*, this comparison between sand and celluloid is made in a number of ways. One is the comparison between sand grain and film grain in a series of recurring shots interspersed throughout the film in which celluloid graininess is accentuated in a medium-close shot of blowing sand. As the film grain and recorded sand grains are about the same size, they are impossible to distinguish from each other.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 3.1: The intermixed sand and film grain of *Alaya*. Image courtesy of Nathaniel Dorsky.

Another comparison between sand and film occurs in the first two shots of the film, in which sand, although present, is not the subject of the shots. Rather, in these shots sand, like the film strip itself, is the condition for seeing something else. The first is a medium close-up,<sup>14</sup> in which the visual ground of fine sand makes ripples and gusts of wind visible. Following it, a medium shot of rapidly blowing sand serves as an abstract surface on which leaves and twigs are made visible. In the third shot of the film, however, the sand itself becomes the object of vision as an extreme close-up makes individual sand grains visible. In this way, these first three shots

---

<sup>13</sup> According to Dorsky, the composition of these shots is approximately 60% sand and 40% film grain.

<sup>14</sup> The context of this first shot is very hard to discern, which further stresses the act of viewing over the represented material. Until corrected by Dorsky, I had assumed that this medium close-up of ripples in the sand was, in fact, an extreme long shot of wind and dunes in a desert landscape.

establish sand's quality as both the ground of the film image—the surface that provides the context on which something else can be seen—as well as an object of vision.

By making visible the mechanics of the process of vision itself, *Alaya* develops a visuality that is focused in between the object of vision and the ground of that image itself. This interstitial mode of visuality is its avisuality, which Dorsky uses to great, vertiginous effect when, in a shot halfway through the film, the sand begins crumbling away in a miniature landslide. Given the visual treatment of sand throughout the film, it does not feel as though it is just the content of the shot that is slowly slipping off screen, but the film's stable viewing surface itself. In this way, *Alaya* explores and then tests the limits of cinematic vision itself, and neatly encapsulates Dorsky's ongoing interest in the language of vision in his films; as can be seen in *Alaya*, this interest includes the process of making visible on the part of the film and the process of perception on the part of the viewer.

### **Paratexts: Devotional Cinema**

Dorsky's 2003 book *Devotional Cinema* was adapted from the keynote speech he gave at Princeton University's 2001 Conference on Religion and Cinema; it also builds on ideas he has been developing his entire career, and serves as his primary paratextual reference to religion. "The relationship between religion and cinema is something that I have spent my life thinking about" he declares at the beginning of the book, "not where religion is necessarily the subject of a film, but where film itself is the spirit or experience of religion."<sup>15</sup> In *Devotional Cinema* and in the numerous interviews Dorsky generously grants, paratextual references to religion abound. The title as well as the content and the structure of Dorsky's film *Hours for Jerome* (1982) references the Book of Hours, a genre of prayer book in 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and the

---

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, Second ed. (Berkeley, California: Tuumba Press, 2005), 17.

references to the song forms of the troubadour in other film titles—*Sarabande* (2008), *Pastourelle* (2010), and *Aubade* (2010)—also recall medieval Christian Europe. *Compline* (2009) is the name of one of the canonical hours, a system of liturgically dividing and marking the time of the day with prayers. The canonical hours were strictly followed in monasteries, and widely followed, as schedules permitted, by the larger medieval European Christian population—with the aid of their Books of Hours. *Avraham* (2014) is the Hebrew name for the legendary patriarch of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. The title of *The Visitation* (2002) quotes the traditional title of paintings of the Virgin Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth following her conception by the Holy Spirit, a popular biblical subject of medieval painting. Additionally, as he groups films for screenings Dorsky has named *The Visitation* and *Threnody* (2004) “Two Devotional Songs,” describing devotion as “the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation. When film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world. It is alive as a devotional form.”<sup>16</sup>

Dorsky’s definition of devotional cinema focuses on the transformational power of film to reshape its viewer’s relationship to the phenomena of the world. Dorsky begins the book describing a film experience he had as a child, after which “everything that had been familiar to me in my hometown...became eerie and questionable.”<sup>17</sup> It is this power of film to transform perception that interests him, and in his description of devotional art, Dorsky focuses on the nature of the relationship between an artwork and its viewer over any necessary content. Devotional art, he writes, “doesn’t require the embodiment of religious form.” Rather, Dorsky’s

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.

focus is on artwork that “subverts temporal compulsion...It breaks the absorption in the relative allowing the mind of devotion to selflessly rest on phenomena.”<sup>18</sup> Devotional art, then, is that which refocuses the perception of its viewer relative to the world outside and separate from him/herself.

### **Paratexts: Film Experience**

Standing in relief to these overt paratextual connections to religion are the film images themselves, which are entirely lacking in religious content. Recorded or recreated religious rituals are nowhere to be found, nor are those religious symbols regularly encountered in the public sphere.<sup>19</sup> Dorsky’s films do not contain religious stories, myths, or parables, nor are there any references to the divine.

In fact, there are not stories of any kind, religious or otherwise, in his films; nor is there talk or, for that matter, any sound at all, with the exception of the first three films. The films of Nathaniel Dorsky are silent, without narrative or characters. They are short and rhythmic montage films, typically around twenty minutes in length, full of carefully composed and layered imagery.<sup>20</sup> His average shot length is quite short, and his use of a wind-up Bolex camera limits the shots to a maximum take of approximately 30 seconds. Dorsky exclusively uses 16mm celluloid film, and the sensitivity of the different film emulsions to different qualities of light and color help to direct film content.

The word most often used to describe Dorsky’s imagery is, simply and unabashedly, beautiful. While his images are occasionally abstract, and this quality varies depending on the

---

<sup>18</sup> Mary Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Poetry Project Newsletter* 183, no. February/March (2001): 18.

<sup>19</sup> As his content is largely filmed in public spaces, one might expect to see crosses, churches, Buddhas, etc., but such symbols are largely absent from Dorsky’s imagery.

<sup>20</sup> In Dorsky’s oeuvre these layered images exist both as mechanical creations formed by the use of superimposition, and as found images, accentuated through camera positioning and focus. One interesting development in his films lies in the shift one finds in the historical development of Dorsky’s films from predominantly superimposed layered images in his earlier work to mostly found layered images in his more recent films.

film, most often they are characterized by a sense of discovery as the viewer initially encounters a disorienting shot and eventually identifies its content, initially obscured by focus, framing, or a lack of contextual information. With their rich textures and vibrant colors, Dorsky's films have a powerful materiality. Despite this, one never gets the impression that reality is simply



Figure 3.2: The rich textures and vibrant colors of Dorsky's images, seen in a still from *The Return* (2011). Image courtesy of Nathaniel Dorsky.

indexically reproduced. Rather, and this of course is true of every film even if it is often hidden from the viewer, these films give the impression that the world, the film strip, the camera, and the filmmaker have all collaborated to create an object separate from each of these elements, and yet still bearing their traces.

There are many paratexts that help to shape the experience of watching a Dorsky film. The most important is the fact that, in addition to filming in 16mm, Dorsky has not allowed his films to be digitized. There are many consequences to the viewing experience created by the fact

that the films only exist as celluloid prints and require a film projector to view. For one, this format makes it possible to extend the liminal nature of the films to the very projected image itself with Dorsky's screening instructions to project his films at 18 frames per second (fps) rather than the typical 24 fps. Because of this, Dorsky's images hover on the edge of solidity, in between visual stability and dissolution. Projecting at what is known as silent speed, which Dorsky has called "sacred speed," slows down the movement<sup>21</sup> and gives the images a bit of flicker, keeping them "closer to the threshold of intermittence."<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Dorsky's films only exist on celluloid also denies the viewer the conveniences and the control of the currently ubiquitous digital format: they must be traveled to and watched in a theater—the viewer travels to the film rather than the other way around, creating the necessity of a pilgrimage, especially given the films' limited screenings; they must be seen in a group setting, as a communal act; they cannot be stopped, started, rewound or fast-forwarded—there is a set period of time in which they occur, to which the viewer must adapt him/herself; and they always retain something of the power of cinema as larger than life, projected on a big screen. Chris Marker described this last quality of cinema in a critique of the process of watching films on television, saying "Cinema is that which is bigger than us—you have to lift your eyes up to it...[On] TV, you can see the shadow of a film, the trace of a film, the nostalgia, the echo of a film—but never a film."<sup>23</sup>

The most significant impact of this paratext is that each screening experience of a Dorsky film is contingent on the unique temporal interaction of viewer and screen at the time and place of its occurrence. In a screening introduction in which he described the qualities of different

---

<sup>21</sup> This slowing of the speed of the image is most noticeable when there is a human moving in a shot, a slight making strange of his films' content.

<sup>22</sup> Scott MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2001): 10.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 28.

projectors in different theaters, Dorsky compared screenings to live music performance. “I’ve gotten to accept different projections as various interpretations of the same piece. And so I’ve gotten to a point now where I enjoy each projection as a particular interpretation, just as if you went to a symphony and a different conductor conducted a piece of music in a different tempo.”<sup>24</sup> When kept exclusively as celluloid, these films only exist as they are projected, different in each iteration—unique and ephemeral moments in time. Because of their celluloid materiality, an encounter with Dorsky’s films is necessarily an encounter with the world of its screening and is necessarily an experience contingent on that world. In a very real sense, there is no definitive version of any of his films. They only exist as they are projected, in the process of their own becoming. Many aspects of Dorsky’s form work to create the indeterminacy and openness of his cinematic language, but the fundamental connection between the films and the world lies in their celluloid format.

### **The Ideal Viewer**

Because they only exist on celluloid, practically every viewer at a screening of Nathaniel Dorsky’s films has been through a rigorous process of self-selection in seeking out a screening of avant-garde, silent films at a film archive, festival, or otherwise non-commercial venue. In *Devotional Cinema*, Dorsky paints a picture of his ideal viewer as someone who carefully engages with the rhythms and content of a film and the effects of the film’s perceptual construction—someone who, in other words, views films in the same way that he does. The book builds on his experiences with films, and the ways he experiences their devotional qualities. He begins by describing his early experience with avant-garde films which “were discovering a language unique to film...I began to notice that moments of revelation or aliveness came to me

---

<sup>24</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, Screening Introduction, June 10, 2012, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA.

from the way a filmmaker used film itself.”<sup>25</sup> For Dorsky, the act of viewing a film is thus intimately related to the act of engaging with the phenomenal world, and even holds the transformative potential to cultivate ‘aliveness.’ This transformative potential, as detailed in *Devotional Cinema*, is contingent on qualities of formal balance in a film. For the idealized viewer, intermittence in both the quality of light and the nature of montage activates that viewer’s mind, causing him to feel alive and stimulated, ultimately bringing “the viewer into the present moment.”<sup>26</sup>

Dorsky proposes that a sensitive balance in a film’s point of view (between internalized subjectivity and externalized objectivity), in its hierarchy of vision, language, and concept, in its deployment of relative and absolute time, and in its shots and cuts can cause a film to operate devotionally. Such a balanced film can serve “as a corrective mirror that realigns our psyches and opens us to appreciation and humility,”<sup>27</sup> revealing a hidden world of poetic resonance. While not every viewer is ideal in this mode of active engagement, we can examine the ways the films are constructed *as if* for such a viewer. This approach sets aside the question of whether or not the films actually (empirically, objectively) create the experience of that which is hidden, for such revelatory potential is contingent on each viewer’s individual experience.

While the theatrical experience does create a certain standardization of viewing experience, Dorsky’s films are elemental and open in a way that leaves plenty of room for the ideal viewer to actively participate in the meaning-making of the films. This is one way in which his work fits into the legacy of film as a personal medium of poetic expression, a genuine alternative to narrative commercial cinema. This alternative can also be seen in Dorsky’s mode

---

<sup>25</sup> Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

of production, shooting and editing his films by hand and by himself.<sup>28</sup> In addition to (and partially as a result of) Dorsky's anti-industrial mode of production, his films create a poetic and engaging viewing experience, which contrasts with the classical realist style of commercial cinema. In representational terms, the classical film style constructs space and time in a largely invisible and coherent way, as the screen offers a window onto the world of the film. In Dorsky's films the screen functions less like a window and more like a surface on which the viewer and the film's imagery interact. This alternative mode of spectatorship is notably distinct from the classical absorptive model, in which the viewer assumes the point of view of the camera (or a character) in the world of the film and is subsequently invited to lose himself in that fictional world.

As a result of their open nature, the individual viewer plays an integral role in fashioning the "meaning" of Dorsky's films. "Most films absorb you in a narrative and take you on a trip away from yourself," Dorsky said in a post-screening conversation. "The thing I like about [poetry is that it] awakens yourself rather than takes you away from yourself. So, these films come from a spirit of allowing you to become yourself," and the viewer is, in a sense, "the star of the film."<sup>29</sup> This open style subsequently requires the active, perceptual engagement of the viewer. "Because my films don't have characters," Dorsky said at another screening, "and because the screen isn't a stage and my films are not in the third person where people have problems that they resolve or not, the screen itself is the character. In a sense, my films are really for the audience. You're the center of the film. You've probably noticed that? The films

---

<sup>28</sup> Dorsky films everything himself, with a handheld 16mm camera. It is his practice to carry the camera with him wherever he goes, film what strikes him, and then to select and edit the footage according to no other standard than what he feels 'works.'

<sup>29</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky and Mark McElhatten, Post-screening Discussion, June 10, 2012, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA.

are for you. They're about you. Therefore, you have to become fully present.”<sup>30</sup> These qualities encouraging an active, personal engagement from the viewer can be confirmed by typical post-screening audience comments, which attribute the viewing experience to taking them back to a child-like way of looking, raising feelings of nostalgia, or creating “a place at which one encounters oneself.”<sup>31</sup> Framed by the paratexts and by close analysis, I claim that this personal encounter with the ephemeral film experience is reflective of a religious-like drive as Dorsky’s films both presuppose and subtly rework their viewers’ acts of perception.

One way Nathaniel Dorsky has described the silence in his films is in terms of a gift, providing (through negation) the viewer with a few moments of quiet contemplation in the midst of the chaos of our media-saturated world. Indeed, there is a profoundly ethical sense to his alternative to commercial film and to modern forms of media consumption, especially in his poetic style that strives to reconnect the viewer to the phenomenal world and to the experience of life. “Deep in my heart I feel like I have something to offer,” he has said, “a new sense of truth of what cinema could be.”<sup>32</sup> In this drive toward a new sense of cinema, one that gives something to the world, Dorsky fits within to the history and culture of Canyon Cinema in a fundamental way.

### **Dorsky and Canyon Cinema**

*Wanted: Mistress to active filmmaker. No restrictions of any sort. LA 8-5273.*  
— Advertisement in the back of *Canyon Cinema News*, August 23, 1962<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Michael Guillen, "Nathaniel Dorsky On..." <http://theeveningclass.blogspot.com/2009/08/nathaniel-dorsky-on.html>. Accessed 8/29/15.

<sup>31</sup> Audience Post-screening Comments, June 10 and 17, 2012, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA, and comments following my March 31, 2013 paper “Nathaniel Dorsky’s Films and Paratexts, and the Metonymic Displacement of the Ineffable” at the *Imaging the Ineffable: Representation and Reality in Religion and Film* conference, Harvard University, March 29-31, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Powers, "A Film Is Like a Panther: Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Release Print* October (1996): 28.

<sup>33</sup> Box 1, Folder 1, CCR.

Canyon Cinema is today one of the few cooperative distributorships for avant-garde film, and the second oldest behind the New York Film-Maker's Cooperative. Originally located in and named for the small town of Canyon, California, Canyon Cinema has long been at the center of the Bay Area's avant-garde film scene. Eventually splitting into what is today the San Francisco Cinematheque and the Canyon Cinema distributorship, Canyon Cinema first began in the summer of 1960<sup>34</sup> as a sporadic film screening in the director Bruce Baillie's back yard. In its early years it was marked by a joyous and utopic anarchy, a place of 'no restrictions' as the epigraph above reflects. The Bay Area, notes Steve Anker, has long been one of the major centers for avant-garde film in this country, and the particular avant-garde that it has cultivated has historically been associated with the poetic craft of cinema. In comparison to other avant-gardes in other urban centers, it "remains unsurpassed as a place where artists using film and video for personal expression choose to live."<sup>35</sup>

As one of those artists, Dorsky has a long association with Canyon Cinema, not only in the roles of filmmaker and distributor but also as a member of its board of directors and various other leadership positions beginning in 1978. The culture and values of Canyon before that point were strongly influenced by Bruce Baillie,<sup>36</sup> and there is an indirect connection to be made between Baillie and Dorsky through their shared association with Canyon Cinema. Both Baillie and Dorsky are known for the beauty of their imagery—something often seen as suspect in the

---

<sup>34</sup> Or 1961, reports and memories vary.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Anker, "Introduction: A Haven for Radical Art and Experimental Film and Video," in Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds., *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 8. In stressing this focus on poetics, Anker defines the Canyon Cinema (and the larger Bay Area film culture) iteration of the wider 1950's-60's historical trend that saw the proliferation of organizations devoted to avant-garde film due, in no small part, to the earlier efforts of figures such as Maya Deren.

<sup>36</sup> Although he left the Bay Area and his leadership position in Canyon Cinema in the mid-60s, Baillie is still alive, living on Camino Island in northern Washington. His work has long been limited by age and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, but he has always kept in close contact with Canyon Cinema, frequently signing postcards sent to Canyon as 'Dad.'

avant-garde—and both have been dubbed “saints” of the avant-garde for their religious/spiritual concerns and generosity. In the early ethos of Canyon Cinema we find an anarchistic culture that provided room for the intersection of film and religion as well as an ideal of poetic cinema that contributes something to society. In many ways, Dorsky has continued and developed this ideal, established by Baillie, for film that functions religiously in society by engaging and reshaping its culture’s visuality.

Canyon Cinema started as a venue for new filmmakers to present their films in an environment that was directly opposed to that of the commercial film industry; “Bruce Baillie...decided that if there were to be new films made, there must be a theater to show them and possibly help finance them,” the Canyon Cinema publication *Cinemanews*<sup>37</sup> declared in May, 1963, historicizing its own origin just a couple of years before. It started as a raucous, no restrictions type of affair. Entrance was free if you brought “a quantity” of popcorn, with beer and sandwiches for sale, regularly held raffles for a pie, and a time reserved at the end of every screening for anyone to present their own work for the audience’s consideration.<sup>38</sup> These early screenings were marked by a genuinely catholic range of films, everything from new “personal film,” selections from various national film boards, and typically one chapter of a pop serial film.<sup>39</sup> The profits—meager as they were—from this venture went toward the acquisition of production equipment, which was used by aspiring filmmakers associated with the screenings<sup>40</sup> to learn to make their own films. These new works were then typically shown during one of the

---

<sup>37</sup> I am following Scott MacDonald’s convention here from *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). In order to distinguish Canyon’s newsletter (called both the *Cinemanews* and the *Canyon Cinema News* over its history) from Canyon’s earlier weekly screening program (also called *Canyon Cinema News*), MacDonald exclusively uses ‘*Cinemanews*’ to refer to the newsletter.

<sup>38</sup> This was a practice long continued. Records show that from 1968-73, the “customary open screening” typically showed 4-6 films for each open screening. Box 36, Folder 18, CCR.

<sup>39</sup> For example, the August 23, 1962 program announces that they are looking for a print of a Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon film to screen serially. Box 1, Folder 1, CCR.

<sup>40</sup> At this early point there was no real membership.

open screening periods. In this way, Canyon Cinema cultivated the sense that it was a training ground for personal filmmaking, an alternative to the free market Hollywood model; in fact, the September 1962 *News* warned viewers that “some of the films will be bad” and encouraged them to boo bad work in order to help the new filmmakers hone their craft.

Throughout Canyon’s early years its tone and ethos reflected Bruce Baillie and his “diffident yet avuncular guidance. He is a constitutional anarchist, and Canyon in those days had no officers, no by-laws, no office, and no official membership,” Ernest Callenbach recalled.<sup>41</sup> Scott MacDonald describes Baillie’s vision of Canyon in these early years as “an essentially spiritual gathering that could bring diverse people together,” which Baillie guided with an instinct that “seems always to have been collaborative and communal.”<sup>42</sup> This was further reflected by the *Cinemanews*, begun in December 1962 by Callenbach, a \$2/year newsletter originally designed to be a social forum for filmmakers who were encouraged to send news in on 3x5 inch cards for printing. This drive to create community was an integral part of Canyon Cinema, as the *Cinemanews* sought to quickly disseminate the “fugitive information about movies” that had been typically limited to word-of-mouth distribution.<sup>43</sup>

In this culture, there was room for all kinds of films and all kinds of cinematic philosophies, including those that dealt with religion. The early programs screened the meditative abstract films of Jordan Belson, films made for the Quakers organization, and Bruce Baillie’s films such as *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1964) which incorporates aspects of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Bruce Baillie*, *Filmmakers Filming* (St. Paul, MN: Film In The Cities/Walker Art Center, 1979), 6.

<sup>42</sup> MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, 9-10.

<sup>43</sup> Typical information included things like festival guides, descriptions of new films to rent, announcements of film catalogs or scholarships, recipes for rum pie, accounts of a filmmaker’s travels and work, etc. “Announcement,” *Cinemanews*, December 1962, Box 1, Folder 3, CCR.

Catholic Mass into the film structure.<sup>44</sup> A workshop entitled “Cinema and Religion” at Tufts University is advertised in the May 1967 *Cinemanews*, and one of the earliest catalogs of film rentals Canyon put out after forming its distribution cooperative in 1966 contains a section grouping films thematically,<sup>45</sup> with “Religion” meriting its own list. There is not a lot of content dealing with religion in Canyon’s archives, but there was a place for it, all the same.

“What *is* Canyon Cinema???” a 1963 *Cinemanews* declaration begins. “A vicious nihilist threat to the Established Order?”<sup>46</sup> In a 1975 interview, Bruce Baillie framed the early Canyon Cinema years as a do-it-yourself alternative operation: “We undercut [the commercial system and didn’t] give any regard for the whole system of distribution, film stocks, sales of equipment... We just cut right underneath, picked up a few cameras somehow, made our own distribution, made our own films, invented our own language as the films would have us.”<sup>47</sup> This idea of establishing an alternative to the popular film industry is one that has reverberated throughout Canyon Cinema’s history. Evidence of the often uncomfortable position of the avant-garde in relation to the commercial industry is nicely illustrated in an exchange between Bruce Conner and the *Cinemanews*, documented in the July and August, 1968 issues. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, a short paragraph in the July issue announces that Canyon is giving the July “Canyon Cinema Achievement Award” to Stanley Kubrick for his *2001*, released

---

<sup>44</sup> The program notes written by Earl Bodien for the Milwaukee Art Center’s screening of Bruce Baillie’s films does a good job capturing the sense of the religious drive in Baillie’s films in the sense I’ve discussed Dorsky’s basic structural religiosity earlier in this chapter. He writes: “The films of Bruce Baillie are primarily religious; they are concerned with man’s relationship (as is all significant art) with the divine and his struggle toward divinity. This religious quality, then, is not institutional and dead, but, like that of the American Indians and the Greeks, all-encompassing and vibrant.” And of Baillie’s films *Mass* (1964) and *Quixote* (1965), he writes, “It appears that this religion is a synthesis of Eastern and Western attitudes. The myth and the quest being Western; the unspecific object of the search being Eastern.” Earl Bodien, Program Notes, Milwaukee Art Center Program of Experimental Films, November 21, 1964. Box 8, Folder 5, CCR.

<sup>45</sup> This practice was seen by many members as a way of favoring some films over others and therefore anathema to the whole Canyon Cinema ethos. It was discontinued in future versions of the catalogue.

<sup>46</sup> *Cinemanews*, May 1963, p. 5, Box 1, Folder 7, CCR.

<sup>47</sup> Clifford J. Green, “An Interview with Bruce Baillie, Dec. 5-7, 1975: Is it really true?” Folder ‘1970s,’ File ‘Baillie, Bruce Interviews 1970-1979,’ Bruce Baillie File, Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY.

three months earlier. In the film, the announcement reads, “Stan Kubrick managed to grind up all films in his big machine,” completely justifying “the work of every independent film-maker, because without these to work from, and \$10 million, *2001* could never have been made.”<sup>48</sup>

Conner replied with a letter railing against this announcement. “Shame on Canyon Cinema,” it begins. “MGM produced the film as they produce every other film: it is a company made movie and is not “independent” in any sense of economics and *is* under the control of the bankers of MGM. It is the most corporate movie production that has been presented as any I have seen,”<sup>49</sup> notwithstanding the fact that the film does use techniques developed in the field of the avant-garde. This exchange is telling for the way it exposes the twin pull of what it meant for Canyon Cinema and its artists to be “independent” (or “undependent” as the *Cinemanews* puts it), incorporating both an aesthetic/formal and an economic/political sense. *2001* is praised by Canyon for the former, and critiqued by Conner for the latter.

Canyon’s alternative model to the commercial film industry encompassed both these senses of independence, even as the organization has been on shaky financial footing from the beginning. Even today, although Scott MacDonald ends his history of Canyon Cinema describing it as a well-run small business in its current (2008) incarnation,<sup>50</sup> its primary business of 16mm film print rentals puts it in an increasingly archaic corner of material culture. In its early years Canyon was deliberately established against free market capitalist principles, writing into its bylaws that it would support its artists over any financial concern. In the midst of one financial crisis, filmmaker Leonard Lipton responded to a recent suggestion by the board of

---

<sup>48</sup> *Cinemanews*, July 1968, Box 1, Folder 42, CCR.

<sup>49</sup> *Cinemanews*, August 1968, Box 1, Folder 43, CCR.

<sup>50</sup> Since the publication of MacDonald’s book, however, another round of near financial disasters prompted Canyon to become a non-profit entity, the Canyon Cinema Foundation, in 2013.

directors that Canyon return films that are never rented to their filmmakers in order to relieve Canyon of the storage costs. Money is not the issue, he said:

Spiritual-ideological [sic] aspects of Coop are far more important. The Coop must continue to run for the filmmaker...

No! I do not believe we should send back the deadwood—there is no spiritual basis for our returning prints which do not rent—although try to run like a business, we are not a business—decisions must be based *remembering* who and what we are—the Coops were formed as a safe harbor for films—especially those deemed to have no value by others—although it might profit us in one way limiting films in our catalogue will be a terrible burden. The Coop *must* accept all films sent to it.<sup>51</sup>

Many of these qualities of Canyon Cinema—its dedication to community, its rejection of a market mentality, its openness to any films and filmmakers, and its passion for the spiritual value of art—are reflective of the long-lasting influence of Bruce Baillie who, even though he handed the reigns of Canyon Cinema to others in the mid-60s, had a strong influence on this continuing Canyon Cinema culture. Suspicious of the demands of consumer culture, Baillie embraced the freedom of poverty, describing it as “the mother or the sister of our craft and of our lives” and the source of his (and the Canyon Cinema) aesthetic.<sup>52</sup> He saw in film something vitally important, something that filled a spiritual and social necessity. Baillie described his impetus for filmmaking as coming from seeing a relief sculpture in Yugoslavia that was part of a traditional well, “where people came for water and to meet each other and gossip. I thought, ‘The relief is at the source; it’s an essential part of everyday life.’ I liked that, and decided I wanted to do something similar with film.”<sup>53</sup>

Throughout Baillie’s work there is a sense of the films and filmmaker engaging with the world. “It is the quality of his seeing,” writes Callenbach,

---

<sup>51</sup> *Cinemanews*, 71-1, Box 2, Folder 12, CCR.

<sup>52</sup> Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

which above all distinguishes Baillie from other avant-garde or experimental filmmakers. He is not intellectual and interested in setting us puzzles, like the structuralists. He doesn't grapple with his own soul in public like the romantics. He doesn't satirize evil like the radicals. Nor does he abstract the world totally, like his fellow Bay Area filmmaker Jordan Belson... [Instead,] we have often a feeling of a soft, even swooning through time; the camera and what it is seeing/presenting execute a stately dance together.<sup>54</sup>

In the dance between the camera and the world, Baillie both engages with the world and then transforms that world, and transforms it with a visuality that is infused by a sacred-like ethos.

There are occasional direct connections to religion in Baillie's *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1964), *Quick Billy* (1970), and *Pieta* (1998). He makes use of the social and political history of the Catholic Mass in the former, describing the way it appropriates the mythic form of ritual sacrifice while "the irony of the film is that the religious culture of the Indians was destroyed by the people who evolved the mass."<sup>55</sup> *Quick Billy* also takes its structural cues from religion, as it very loosely adapts the Tibetan Book of the Dead and records Baillie's impressions of a near death experience. Most recently, the short *Pieta*, which is a short fragment from a longer work in progress, shows a kind of divinity in the world with an ending shot of Baillie's wife nursing their child in front of the setting sun. More pervasive throughout his work, however, is the apophatic analogue Baillie sees between religion and art, in that both try "to go on, into the Unknown."<sup>56</sup>

The quality of Baillie's filmmaking that is most enlightening to this contextualization of Dorsky's cinematic alternative lies in the intersection, for Baillie, of art and life. After leaving the Bay Area, Baillie lived a largely peripatetic life. His films of the late 60s and 70s are

---

<sup>54</sup> Callenbach, *Bruce Baillie*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Scott Nygren, Program Notes for "Bruce Baillie: A Retrospective Festival," October 26-28, 1973 at the Smithsonian, Washington, DC. Folder '1970s,' File 'Bruce Baillie, Program Notes/Screening Announcements, 1970-1979,' Bruce Baillie File, Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY.

<sup>56</sup> Stan Brakhage, "Brakhage to Baillie: Correspondence from a Late 60's Exchange of Thought and Film," *Southwest Media Review*, no. Spring 1981 (1981): 9.

intimately tied to these travels, taking for their subjects and titles whatever location Baillie found himself in. His letters back to *Cinemanews* during this period detailed his travels, his hardships, and the people he met along the way. MacDonald notes that in the letters from filmmakers printed in the newsletter, “Baillie and the others compiling the newsletter seem to have assumed that part of their function was to model new ways for a film artist to function in the world;”<sup>57</sup> the new way that Baillie modeled was one in which art, like life, was a process of engaging with the world.



Figure 3.3: The muted vegetation at the beginning of *All My Life*, one of the rose bushes that the slow pan to the left reveals, and the ungrounded sky at the end of the shot following a final tilt up.

This fusion of art and life in which art’s focus on “the Unknown” leads to an engagement with the world and a reshaping of one’s perception of that world can be clearly seen in Baillie’s *All My Life* (1966), a deceptively simple looking haiku-like film. In its form and in its production history, this focus on being present and engaged with the world but also the desire to move beyond its physical context is evident. The film consists entirely of a 2’42’’ shot that pans left to right along a wooden fence with roses growing on it before tilting up and ending with a view of pure blue sky, the length of the shot perfectly timed to match a scratchy recording of Ella Fitzgerald’s “All My Life” on the soundtrack. The pan is steady as it begins with a largely muted color palate of brown and yellow vegetation. The bright red and deep green of the first rose bush pops when it enters the frame one minute into the film, and as if in response to this

---

<sup>57</sup> MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, 42.

discovery, the camera tilts up ever so slightly, accommodating the massive plant in a gesture of discovery. In the final tilt up into the expanse of the sky the camera repeats this sense of the discovery of beauty, giving the screen over completely to the ungrounded homogenous blue empyreal field. Like Dorsky's use of sand in *Alaya*, the sky in *All My Life* is itself, as an object of vision, nothing but an empty visual field. But as the ground of vision, the backdrop that allows other things to be seen, it is the invisible basis of vision itself.

Baillie attributes the film's genesis to the unexpectedly beautiful light at the cabin of a friend where he happened to be staying. Compelled to not "turn his back" on that unique moment, he shot the film capturing his impression of that place; for, as he describes, the recording that gives the film its title, length, and soundtrack was one always playing in that friend's cabin.<sup>58</sup> In an essay on film signification, Roland Barthes describes three potential levels of meaning in a film. The informational level is simply that which you see, so on this level *All My Life* communicates roses, fence, field, and sky. The second level of meaning he names the symbolic or the obvious meaning; it is the meaning the author intended to communicate. The third level he names the obtuse meaning, an ambiguous emotional connection that is unrelated to the narrative, an impression one gets from an image that may very well subvert its intended meaning.<sup>59</sup> In its simplicity and its lack of a clearly intended meaning, *All My Life* functions, as most of Dorsky's films do, in a way that denies a symbolic meaning. There is no clear meaning Baillie intended to communicate, and as a result the film encourages a sensitive, emotional connection to its content. Like a cinematic haiku,<sup>60</sup> *All My Life* privileges the possibility of an

---

<sup>58</sup> MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Barthes flags the haiku as a poetic form that does a particularly good job creating an obtuse meaning.

obtuse meaning as it redirects its viewer's focus onto its specific time and place, as well as the act of viewing itself.

For Bruce Baillie there is an ethical component in his cinematic engagement with the world and in his attempts to forge an alternative to consumer culture. The formation of Canyon Cinema largely reflects this drive; it was an attempt to “do something for humankind,” while his films take on a similar ethically-driven task. “Gentle and unprogrammatically though they may seem, [they] have always been attempts to help us to see better the cycles of life that lie beneath the visible surface, to understand what is real.”<sup>61</sup>

While there are certainly differences in the way Dorsky and Baillie explore the intersection of film and religion, there are many ways in which Dorsky is continuing in the tradition of Baillie's hope in the power of film art and its place in society. This can be seen in Dorsky's sense of art as something rarified, with a religious-like function, reclaiming a medieval sense of the importance of art in its power to redeem and reshape its viewers. Dorsky also shares in Baillie's dream of a mode of filmmaking as an alternative to consumer culture, and in the privileging of the obtuse over symbolic meanings in his films.

Like Baillie, Dorsky is gentle in his personality and in his films, on account of which he stands out from a great number of people in the avant-garde. Because of his unassuming nature and his tendency towards diplomacy and away from polemics, to say nothing of his films' contents, Dorsky's work could be taken to be completely apolitical. Such a view is mistaken, for while they are not revolutionary in terms of attacking extant power structures, his films are quietly revolutionary in terms of showing an alternative way to visually engage the world; for Dorsky, this means films as devotion, in the spirit of the religious arts. Dorsky sees a great

---

<sup>61</sup> Callenbach, *Bruce Baillie*, 6.

possibility in the power of the moving image to open a viewer to the fullness of experience in engaging the world. In this way there is an ethical aspect in Dorsky's quiet revolution of perception, a sense of giving to society much like Baillie's "doing something for humankind."

In the service of these goals, Dorsky harnesses the power of religion in his paratexts and in the revelatory qualities of his films. Dorsky is not interested in revealing the divine, or supernatural processes, nor in making an argument about religious persons, gods, or ideals one way or the other, for there are apophatic limits to the language of film. The following analyses explore the way in which Dorsky's films attempt to paradoxically reveal what is hidden by opening the viewer to experience that cannot be captured or recreated by the camera and the film strip. This is the religiosity of the films, their movement toward that which is hidden, and their reflection of the discourse of the sacred.

### ***Hours for Jerome: Sanctifying Time***

Within Dorsky's seminal *Hours for Jerome* we can see an early example of his melding of a religious and a secular sensibility through the film's paratexts, as well as the nascent qualities of his mature film style. That film, "as in a Book of Hours" as Dorsky parenthetically qualifies the title in his description in the Canyon Cinema catalog, was shot between 1966 and 1971, during the period that Dorsky and his long-time partner, Jerome Hiler, lived in Lake Owassa, New Jersey. Combining footage shot in Lake Owassa and in Manhattan, Dorsky revisited the footage many years later and completed editing the film in 1982. It was, in many ways, the beginning of a mode of film that Dorsky is still working within today; it is the first silent film he made, the first film following a long hiatus, and the first film experimenting with open forms of editing that Dorsky further developed into what has been described as polyvalent

montage.<sup>62</sup> The film's titular namesake is a genre of medieval European illuminated manuscript, a prayer book adapted from the Breviary but made for the layman rather than exclusively for the clergy.<sup>63</sup> Books of Hours were the most popular book in Europe from the mid 13<sup>th</sup> to mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. *Hours for Jerome* lacks the religious content of the typical Book of Hours, which were illuminated with images of biblical stories, saints, and religious rituals. Despite this iconographic negation, I argue that *Hours for Jerome* reflects many aspects of the historical *function* of a Book of Hours in its personal and handcrafted nature, its engagement with the world, and its perceptual realignment provided to the ideal viewer.

Structured around the passing of the seasons much like a Book of Hours' calendar section, *Hours for Jerome* encompasses one yearly cycle. Technically split into two parts, Part One begins in the spring, with some of the first shots of the film slowly opening onto trees, flowers, and woods as the light falls on them, followed by shots of buds, new growth, and signs of life. As the film progresses the images of nature transition to summer with a shot of blooming forsythia, trees fully in bloom, to green-leafed trees blowing in the wind, to Jerome—and, one has the sense, Dorsky behind the camera—jumping into a mountain lake. Part Two follows this progression with a scene of apple picking within the first few shots of the film, followed by the

---

<sup>62</sup> Noël Carroll first brought this scientific term to cinema studies to describe the editing of Warren Sonbert and Dziga Vertov. "In this mode of editing, it is particularly important that each shot is polyvalent in the sense that it can be combined with surrounding shots along potentially many dimensions. That is, this style begins in the realization that a shot may either match or contrast with adjacently preceding or succeeding shots in virtue of color, subject, shape, shade, texture, the screen orientation of objects, the direction of camera or object movement, or even the stasis thereof." See Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 177.

<sup>63</sup> While the content of Books of Hours varied due to the tradition of each patron personalizing their own volume with prayers and devotions suited to their social position and spiritual needs, they typically consisted of eight illuminated parts, according to Roger Wieck: "1) a Calendar; 2) the four Gospel Lessons; 3) the Hours of the Virgin; 4) the Hours of the Cross and Hours of the Holy Spirit; 5) two prayers to the Virgin known as the "obsecro te" and the "O intemerata"; 6) the Penitential Psalms and Litany; 7) the Office of the Dead; and 8) numerous Suffrages." Roger S. Wieck, "Introduction" in Roger S. Wieck et al., *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York, NY: George Braziller, in association with the Walters Art Gallery, 1988), 27-28.

dead stalks of a harvested corn field, the forest in full autumnal color, to shots looking down into a frozen lake, Christmas lights, snow, ice skating, and icicles.

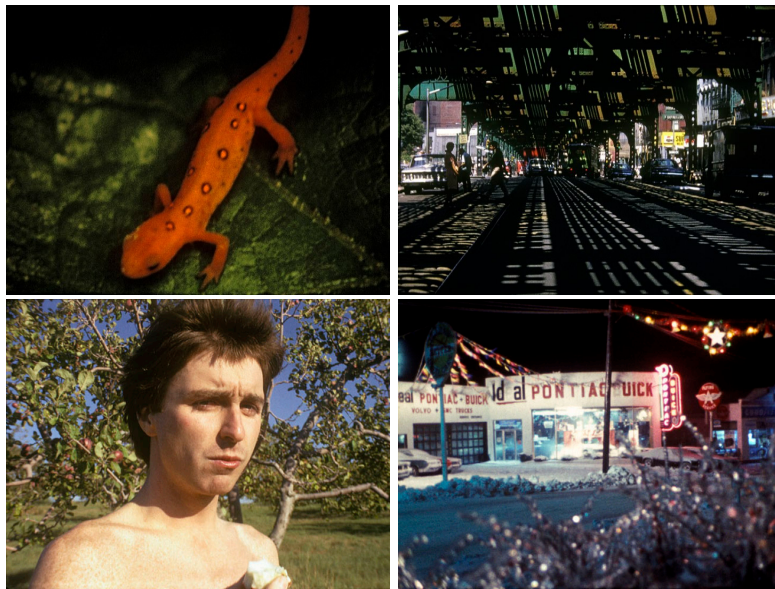


Figure 3.4: The progression of a yearly cycle in *Hours for Jerome*, split between nature, city, and domesticity. Images courtesy of Nathaniel Dorsky.

Interspersed throughout these scenes that temporally ground us in the progression of a year in rural New Jersey are shots of travel (trains, ferries, and shots of or from traveling cars), of New York City (both buildings and people in the city), and of domestic life (cats, dogs, sleeping, making tea, watching television, etc.). There is one recurring character, Jerome Hiler, although he is never identified beyond the title and his prominent, recurring role. In the film's titular dedication to Dorsky's partner as well as in its documenting a yearly cycle and domestic life, it occasionally takes on the qualities of a home movie as in a shot near the end of Part One when a piece of birthday cake is offered to the cameraman.

The film is edited in such a way that one gets the sense of being in places and at times of the year without narrative causality. Nature, city, domesticity—these are the spaces navigated by the film. *Hours* opens, following the title, with slowly brightening shots of trees, flowers, and springtime buds, mixing slow and contemplative sequences with a series of jump cuts across a group of flowering bushes. There is a sense of discovery inherent in the film, seen in a shot

whose content recurs throughout the two parts of the film, an abstract image that looks variously like clouds, sine waves, and television or video static. It is not until the latter half of Part Two, when a long shot shows this mysterious abstract image in context, that it becomes clear that all along this has been television static, a recurring sign of domestic life interspersed throughout the film. A car's windows are then washed, Jerome reads the paper in the woods, and a cut brings us into shots of the city from a slowly moving boat. The film continues in this vein, intercutting natural, urban, and domestic sequences.

In these sequences, however, the camera does not simply observe. Rather, it takes an active role; fades, superimpositions, and camera movements, including occasionally aggressive zooms, pans, and other hand-held movements, are abundant, bringing the camera and the filmmaking process into view as the film reshapes its content through formal manipulation. The content of the shots occasionally breaks down into barely identifiable impressions of the subject filmed, as in the second city sequence which, as a result of a sped up image and blur from focus and movement, dissolves into a phantasmagoria of moving light. Occasionally the line between camera effect and subject filmed becomes uncertain, as in the shot of blooming forsythia which flickers as it brightens and darkens. In shots such as this it is unclear whether the camera recorded a change in the natural light as clouds passed in front of the sun or Dorsky achieved this effect mechanically, or a combination of the two. In this way, one gets the sense in *Hours* that the camera is actively engaging with the natural, phenomenal world. "The idea," Dorsky described of his filming philosophy, "is not to take pictures of something, but to allow the camera to become of the world and have the screen simultaneously become of the world and become a world."<sup>64</sup> In shots such as this in *Hours* we can see the beginnings of the dance, a *pas*

---

<sup>64</sup> Michelle Silva, Nathaniel Dorsky, and Johnny Ray Huston, "To Sing Like a Mockingbird: A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, December 6 2006, np.

*de deux*, that takes place between Dorsky's films and the world, with the screen the place on which this dance occurs. This focus on the screen, the space in between the viewer and world, is the primary manifestation of avisuality in *Hours for Jerome*.

As a prayer book, the Book of Hours was designed for private devotion. Taking its name from the requisite inclusion of a set of prayers to the Virgin Mary established on the canonical hours and small enough to be carried throughout the day, the popularity of Books of Hours



Figure 3.5: Books of Hours were designed to be carried throughout the day.

represents the beginnings of a shift toward the personalization and internalization of religious experience in European Christian society. Through included prayers such as the “Obsecro te” (“I beseech thee”), the devout made a direct appeal to the Virgin for aid. In prayers such as these which directly address the absent holy figure, “the devotee tries to create an intimate relationship with the supernatural person being addressed, in this case Mary as mother.”<sup>65</sup> Such intimate relationships were further encouraged by the personalization of the illuminations that regularly accompanied such prayers; in books of those wealthy enough to afford it, a custom illumination

---

<sup>65</sup> Virginia Reinburg, "Prayer and the Book of Hours" in Wieck et al., *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, 42-43.

of the book's patron engaged in acts of piety are often found. In a culture that circumscribed and controlled access to the divine through official structures, Books of Hours provided an access point to the kind of personal experience previously reserved for the clergy.<sup>66</sup>

Rising in popularity amidst a changing society in 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Books of Hours were among the first books collected by the newly wealthy merchant class. Although the Book of Hours was a luxury and restricted to the most privileged classes for its first 150 years, its period of literary dominance spans the development of the printing press, and its great historic popularity was due to the fact that mass-produced Books of Hours were acquired in great numbers by the growing middle class in the late 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>67</sup> As with custom-made versions, the mass-produced Book of Hours was typically personalized, as "owners signed their names, inked in coats-of-arms, indicated how the book came into their hands, added favorite prayers—in short, [did] whatever necessary to make the book their own."<sup>68</sup>

Like its illuminated forbearer, Dorsky's *Hours for Jerome* sits in the intersection of mass-produced media and personalized, handcrafted objects. In the film's content, of course, we see such personalization within the artistic form that is the exemplar of contemporary mass culture. In addition, the rarified, exclusively 16mm existence of Dorsky's film, with its limited screenings and experience contingent on the screening context, creates a personalized, unique encounter that reflects the typical use of Books of Hours. *Hours for Jerome* also recalls the Book of Hours in its charting of a calendar year and combination of city and country, and in its

---

<sup>66</sup> Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: George Braziller, in association with the Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997), 14.

<sup>67</sup> Lawrence R. Poos, "Social History and the Book of Hours" in Wieck et al., *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> Reinburg, "Prayer and the Book of Hours" in *ibid.*, 40.

attention to daily, calendar-specific activities, all of which are seen typically in the calendar section of the book.<sup>69</sup>

The most significant analogue between *Hours for Jerome* and the Book of Hours lies in the book's function for its devout patron, for whom it served as a conduit connecting the sacred and the profane. In sanctifying the time, the days, and the lives of their patrons, Books of Hours functioned, as Roger Wieck puts it, as "a 'Notre Dame' that can be held in the hands. Like a cathedral it was expensive to produce, but was a source of pride and pleasure, as well as a means of obtaining salvation."<sup>70</sup> Like the Book of Hours, the Gothic cathedral—of which Notre Dame is the prime example—was associated with the cult of the Virgin, and in its medieval context, the height and light of Gothic architecture created a quasi-heavenly space, a liminal zone to encourage spiritual experience as the luminescent walls dissolved the physical solidity of the space. Abbot Suger, the first patron of the Gothic style, described his experience of the first Gothic style cathedral of St. Denis in just such liminal terms:

When—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven...<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> The prevalence of death in medieval society was acknowledged with a set of prayers and illuminations typically included called the Office of the Dead. And the calendar scenes provided illustrations of the typical rhythms of the farming year, from the aristocratic point of view. Such idealizations presented peasant life as bucolic and peaceful amidst depictions of such leisure class activities as hawking, may-ing, etc. As Lawrence Poos points out, the bustle, tumult, and industry of medieval city life—that is, the working experience of city craftsmen and artisans—is conspicuously absent in illustrations of the joyfully worked fields with cities majestically present, and sanitized through their distance, in the background. "As in other periods of European history, it was the lordly, aristocratic way of life to which the middle classes of the towns aspired, and which they preferred for illustration in their books." Poos, "Social History and the Book of Hours" in *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Roger S. Wieck, "Introduction" in Wieck et al., *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Erwin Panofsky, ed. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 63, 65.

Directing the supplicant's perspective to a region in between heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane, the Gothic cathedral was designed to reshape one's mode of vision to that beyond the visible and material realm.

Likewise, Books of Hours tried to bridge the insurmountable distance between heaven and earth by reshaping their patrons' perspectives. Dorsky uses the experience of standing in a Gothic cathedral to make the same point in *Devotional Cinema*, comparing devotional cinema to changing conceptions of vision in the early modern period in western culture. The Gothic cathedral epitomizes the medieval mode of vision, he argues, evoking a sensation of pure oneness as its vast spaces and stained glass windows create the sense that its space is set apart, that "there was no external world as such." He then contrasts this internalized mode of vision to the perspectival, scientifically minded vision of the Renaissance, in which "we began to understand the seen world as an objectively observed world, a total world." Film can combine these internalized and externalized modes of seeing, and if film does exist in this liminal scopic space, "viewing a film has tremendous mystical implications; it can be, at its best, a way of approaching and manifesting the ineffable."<sup>72</sup>

When I asked Dorsky about the significance of the medieval Book of Hours to his *Hours for Jerome*, he brought up the idea of the visual language of cinema by answering the question with a description of his theory of haiku and film editing.<sup>73</sup> In this comparison, Dorsky described the three-stanza haiku form in apophatic language; it first sets up two related images and then uses a third image to break open the meaning or the conceptual structure that the poem had built up. Dorsky tries to do the same in his films, breaking this structure not ironically but in a way that "breaks open holiness." In a moment of self-critique, Dorsky identified his earlier films as

---

<sup>72</sup> Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 26-27.

<sup>73</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, Post-screening Discussion, March 13, 2011, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA.

trying to do this aggressively at times, while his more mature films<sup>74</sup> function in an understated fashion with more subtle montage techniques. *Hours for Jerome* does show a nascent version of Dorsky's film language alternative, with its flow of imagery fashioned apart from narrative causality and its combination and juxtaposition of scenes. But if it is an analogue to a Book of Hours in terms of visual language, what is the ineffable toward which the film redirects its viewer's perspective? To answer this we will take a closer look at Dorsky's film language in its first full manifestation in *Variations* (1998).

### ***Variations: Polyvalent Montage***

Trying to avoid / Ideas, as in this poem?

—John Ashbery, from "What is Poetry?"<sup>75</sup>

The razor's edge of this kind of language that I'm interested in is to continue to open up mystery. Between verbal closure and "this and that" meaninglessness there is a revolutionary film language which is completely open, anarchistic, sort of a utopian montage, in that there is no axe to grind except the human heart of mystery.

—Nathaniel Dorsky<sup>76</sup>

Dorsky has often spoken about the influence of the poet John Ashbery on his montage aesthetic and on his ideas of film language associated with his editing, speaking approvingly of the progression of Ashbery's poetry moving from word to word while playing with the conventions of the creation of meaning expected from written language. He describes Ashbery's poems as having an evaporative quality in that "there's a momentary congealing of meaning and then the poem evaporates. It evaporates completely or gets torqued immediately into another sense of continued meaning. A gap or open synapse exists within the logical momentum of materials."<sup>77</sup> Ashbery's "What is Poetry," after proposing the possibility of writing without ideas

---

<sup>74</sup> Dorsky and others date the maturity of his filmmaking style from *Variations* (1998).

<sup>75</sup> John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York, NY: Viking, 1985), 236.

<sup>76</sup> Powers, "A Film Is Like a Panther: Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," 27.

<sup>77</sup> Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," 7.

in the epigraph above, follows with “But we / Go back to them as to a wife, leaving / The mistress we desire?” It is precisely in this push and pull between a conceptual grounding and the impulse to leave behind ideas that Ashbery’s influence is most strongly felt in Dorsky’s films, as he charts a path “between verbal closure and ‘this and that’ meaninglessness,” per the quote above. Elsewhere, Dorsky critiques ‘meaningless’ films for their nihilism, as anathema to him as films that are overly conceptual:

If the shots don’t connect at all, then it’s nihilism. It’s easy to do nihilism in film, you just put things together that are very different, so that the imagery is not solidifying around meaning. At a certain point that kind of filmmaking wears you out.

I want successive images to be disparate *and* connected, *and* I want each shot to link back to earlier shots...I want each shot to continue to play a role, after the next shot, and the next, has passed...Each shot must break the film open and at the same time resonate with previous material. The connection can be as simple as the return of a certain red or a particular pattern. Sometimes it’s the iconography. There are various levels where your mind can make connections.<sup>78</sup>

The apophasis and the avisuality of Dorsky’s film language can be felt in the ideal he charts here for a film language in between verbal closure and nihilism, an ideal that stresses the relationality of his cinematic language. Dorsky’s method for achieving this open, anarchistic, utopian balance is through what has been called polyvalent montage, a form of editing that marks his mature phase. “By polyvalent editing,” P. Adams Sitney writes, “Dorsky means organizing the shots and rhythms of a film so that associations will ‘resonate’ (his word) several shots later,”<sup>79</sup> a method of organizing a film’s images in a way that is both disparate and connected as Dorsky describes in the quotation above. The release of *Variations*, Dorsky’s first full manifestation of polyvalent montage, was also the occasion for Sarah Markgraf and Gregg Biermann’s review in *Millennium Film Journal* praising Dorsky’s vision of avant-garde cinema in its maturity, as well as the point of increasing attention by the wider film community.

---

<sup>78</sup> MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," 9.

<sup>79</sup> Sitney, "Tone Poems," 4.

*Variations* was also quite possibly Dorsky's biggest influence on popular culture, as its shot of a Safeway bag blowing in the wind could have been a direct influence on the Oscar winner *American Beauty*'s (1999) famous scene of "the most beautiful thing ever filmed," a plastic bag dancing in the wind.<sup>80</sup> Regardless of the genesis of either sequence, the differences between them are telling. In *American Beauty*, the shots of the bag<sup>81</sup> are constantly framed and set apart—first by a TV set within the larger shot, and then with pixilation as the digital video image takes up the entire film frame. In addition, the shot is narrated as one character explains it to another. In the classic backstage aesthetic, what is filmed within the narrative is set apart, legitimizing the fictional world of the film. In *Variations*, this shot is also quite beautiful and mysterious. But it is filmed in gorgeous Kodachrome, as is the rest of the film. The experience (*American Beauty* names it the experience of beauty and a benevolent presence in the world) is neither analyzed nor named in *Variations*—that structuring framework is not given. Instead, the shot is simply *presented*, rather than represented, and the experience takes place with the audience, unfiltered and uncontrolled, rather than through a set of characters to whom we could relate or who we could analyze.

Such a direct presentation of experience is a primary reason that Dorsky's films are so intimately dependent on the viewer's participation and on the exhibition space. In fact, Dorsky typically describes his open editing style in terms of space—both represented space and the space of the representation. In his films, the rapid projection of still images onto a screen does not function as a window onto a represented place, either fictional or real. Instead, "the *place* is

---

<sup>80</sup> While it is impossible to know for certain, *Variations* was rented by the producers during *American Beauty*'s production. See Ed Halter, Stan Brakhage, and Nathaniel Dorsky, "Interview: True Independents; Brakhage and Dorsky Hash out the Realities of Poetic Cinema," *indieWIRE.com* (April 30, 2001). Full interview available at [http://web.archive.org/web/20020602074443/http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int\\_Brakhage\\_Dorsky\\_010430.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20020602074443/http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int_Brakhage_Dorsky_010430.html), accessed 1/28/16.

<sup>81</sup> Filmed with a camcorder by one of the film's characters, the image appears in the film when that character shows his recording to a friend.

the *film*.”<sup>82</sup> The ‘meaning’ of his films is not set, and cannot even be read solely from the images themselves, but is contingent on the space of the screening. The editing of the film takes on a self-sufficiency so that the motivation behind its organization is neither narrative nor representative, but formal, in that the film progresses according to and in response to what is seen on the space of the film screen. It is partially in service of this awareness of the screen and the diachronic viewing experience that Dorsky has adopted silence in his films. Synchronized sound, he has stated, grounds a shot in its represented space, whereas the distance afforded by silence encourages an active engagement with the image as itself and the space of the screen, independent of the location in which it was filmed.<sup>83</sup>

By this description, polyvalent montage sounds like a formal exercise, denying content in any kind of contextual sense. In looking at the films, however, it is clear that this is not at all the case. Another name Dorsky has offered for his open montage style is “autogenous montage,” emphasizing its self-generating characteristics. This term is especially appropriate if one keeps in mind that the ‘self’ of the montage’s autogeny is comprised of more than its visual formal elements. In Dorsky’s work, a film’s essential qualities also include its interaction with the world, as film functions as an act of perception by taking as its ‘meaning’ the process of looking itself. The opening shot of *Love’s Refrain* (2001) nicely demonstrates this dynamic. After the title and a few seconds of black, the film opens onto a brightly lit yellow rope over a dark background bisecting the screen from the lower left to upper right. As the camera slowly pans up the rope, shimmers and reflections in the background reveal it to be water; as the pan continues the bow of a small wooden boat attached to the end of the rope is revealed. The vivid red hull, deep blue deck, white trim, and yellow rope turn slowly in the water and into the light

---

<sup>82</sup> MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," 6.

<sup>83</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, Post-screening Discussion, March 30, 2013, Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, MA.

as the brilliant colors pop against the once-again black background for the remainder of the shot, a few seconds at most. The boat never returns in the film; this is not a boat-movie, nor a meditation on water, transport, or any other associations one might readily make with a boat. And yet the shot is breathtaking and full of drama, an adventure in the act of perception. In the beauty and revelatory qualities of images such as this one, Dorsky's films cultivate a sense of wonder and mystery about the act of perception. In reading John Ashbery's poetry, according to Dorsky, "each word is a resonant stepping stone across a stream. There is an openness to it, but there is definitely an underworld of mood and atmosphere indicative of human effort, usually humorously so."<sup>84</sup> In Dorsky's films, there is a similar undercurrent related to the act of looking and the sense of mystery opened up by that act that provides the connecting thread unifying his shots.

An analysis of the opening shots of *Variations* demonstrates the nature of Dorsky's polyvalent montage and the methods by which his films are unified in a way that avoids what he calls verbal closure in the epigraph above. For one, the shots are often related by their textural qualities, such as vegetal shadows over both the third shot (of colored foliage, relating in the color red to the first shot of the film) and the fourth (an open book, shadows on unidentifiable text), or the related layering of images in shots five (moon or sun behind clouds), six (city block as reflected in a car's windows on a slow left to right tracking shot), seven (unidentifiable content but clearly a semi-transparent layer moving over an opaque layer), eight (shadows, also recalling the third and fourth shots, over a man's shirt and hands), to nine (diaphanous cloth in the foreground, tree foliage in the background). Other connections come in the form of the rhyming movements of tracks and pans from left to right, and the shimmering qualities of the

---

<sup>84</sup> Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," 8.

light that relate shots ten and eleven back to shot two. This last visual connection is telling in that shots two and ten (light on water and light in clouds) shimmer as a result of the reflective qualities of the shots' contents (aided by a slight over exposure of the film), whereas the shimmering of shot eleven (foliage) seems to be primarily created as a result of the camera's settings. In other words, these shots all recall each other by virtue of their shimmering-ness, with no distinction made between what may have been a natural phenomenon and what was a camera-created one—it is the image on the screen, and not its referent, that is ultimately what is important.



Figure 3.6: Shimmering-ness in a still from *Variations*. Image courtesy of Nathaniel Dorsky.

The textures and movement that stitch the shots of the film together<sup>85</sup> are among the basic visual components of the cinema, which bestows a surprising power on the connections they make between the shots. In this mode of film construction, Dorsky frustrates the expected framework of the cinematic medium. In addition to a lack of characters and narrative, the basic

---

<sup>85</sup> These include recurring instances of shadow on a subject, layered imagery, reflective images, colors, particular movements, or even content (as in the recurring shots of hands throughout the film).

assumption his work contests is that a film represents something, that its parts will combine prismatically to provide a narrative, a coherent space, or a symbolic meaning. In place of these modes of cinematic representation, *Variations* offers moments of luminous contemplation as the engaged viewer negotiates these most basic of perceptual elements—shimmering-ness replaces symbolic meaning. As another example, a pair of shots near the end of the film negotiates the process of viewing in depth. The first is a typically layered shot of a spider on its web in which the focus and interest is on the arachnid in the foreground of an unfocused vegetal field. This cuts to a similarly layered shot, but one in which the background is in focus, a baseball catcher behind a web-like chain-link fence. With the cut and change in focus our attention is drawn through the first web-like layer to the action in the background, a shift along the z-axis of the pictorial composition.

Dorsky's camera is typically unnoticed, and *Variations* is no exception; people, nature, and cityscapes go about their business, apparently unaware they are being filmed. Generally, this strengthens the sense of his films as exercises in perception. In *Variations*, however, there are a number of moments of direct address that break this sense in the manner of a haiku breaking open its established structure, expanding, in a surprising way, the voyeuristic nature of cinematic perception into one in which the viewer is suddenly implicated. The first comes in a brief shot just a bit more than halfway through the film, as a dog in close-up swings its head to look into the camera. Reflecting that gesture a few minutes later, a young man sitting outside in a medium close-up looking off-screen glances up and at the camera, holding the direct address for a number of seconds until the shot ends. In calling attention to the voyeuristic conventions of cinematic perception through these moments of direct address, *Variations* foregrounds the act and the conventions of viewing as one of its primary concerns.

In addition to Ashbery, Dorsky was influenced at the beginning of his career by the idea of film without concepts, in the use of silence in film, and by the idea that the primary power of film lies in its ability to see differently—film as an act of perception—by the filmmaker Stan Brakhage. In this period, Brakhage was transitioning from his earlier lyrical film style into an avant-garde mythopoeia with *Dog Star Man* (1961-64). As P. Adams Sitney points out, however, the mythic qualities of *Dog Star Man* are not typically clear. What is clear is the film’s concern with perception, as the perceptive acts of the camera and the represented perceptive acts of the films’ characters immediately come to the foreground. “As more and more impressionistic camera work is used, Brakhage achieves a uniquely cinematic tension. There is a dual realization that a particular shot is meant to suggest the Dog Star Man’s state of mind or what he is seeing, and that the same shot is a camera trick.”<sup>86</sup>

At the same time as Brakhage was making *Dog Star Man* and Dorsky was first developing his theories of film language, Brakhage wrote his aesthetic manifesto *Metaphors on Vision*, printed in 1963. Its oft-quoted opening paragraph reads:

Imagine an eye unrul’d 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. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green”? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the “beginning was the word.”<sup>87</sup>

Brakhage does not just celebrate the “untutored eye” of the crawling baby, an ideal of vision that is not constrained by any kind of conceptual or compositional logic; he also tries to embody such a purely perceptual and completely open way of looking in his films, framing his aesthetic goal

---

<sup>86</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 197.

<sup>87</sup> Stan Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 2001), 12.

as a quest to achieve untutored vision. Marjorie Keller explores this theme of child-like, pre-conceptual vision in Brakhage's aesthetics through the themes of childhood that run through his films. An example appears in Part II of *Dog Star Man*, which is populated by shots of a baby's face (eyes first closed, then blinking open in an unfocused manner) intercut amongst many other things, giving the impression that this sequence of the film is creating a minds-eye perspective of the infant. As Keller explains, Brakhage equates this pre-linguistic vision of the child with that of the filmmaker. "When Brakhage proposes the 'adventure of perception,' he is simultaneously describing the infant and his own filmmaking to come, the nonnarrative, silent, rendering of 'each object encountered in life.' Simply put, the infant is a metaphor for the filmmaker at his best moments."<sup>88</sup>

R. Bruce Elder situates this drive of Brakhage's to create film without concept within the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetics. Brakhage's drive to use film to "revivify this primordial, corporeal awareness" arises from the Romantic philosophical and poetic tradition that values mystery and a form of experience that "cannot be translated into the language of positivist reason."<sup>89</sup> Elder connects this drive to Henri Bergson's philosophy, and his ideas of the possibility of intuition allowing one access to the *élan vital*, the essence of life. Elder then traces Brakhage's interest in non-conceptual experience to the interest in Bergsonian flux in 20<sup>th</sup> century poetics, as Brakhage considers his films "works that impart to the viewers the energies of the events that occur in the manifold of his vision."<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Marjorie Keller, *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 186.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 14, 2.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

There are many ways in which Dorsky's films are distinct from Brakhage's, even as they share this concept of film as an act of perception.<sup>91</sup> One notable way is in the purposeful and deliberate nature of the cuts within the polyvalent montage of *Variations*. With only a few exceptions, each of the cuts in *Variations* constitutes a hard break from the content of the previous shot.<sup>92</sup> There is almost no cutting within a scene or according to a theme. Instead, each shot is one disparate snippet of the world. P. Adams Sitney describes this as the 'monadic' quality of Dorsky's mature cinema to distinguish it from the 'atomic' qualities of a single shot of Stan Brakhage's own polyvalent editing, which Dorsky readily acknowledges as an influence.<sup>93</sup>

Without a narrative drive or even a unifying scene or space linking the shots of *Variations*, we are left with the singular, monadic experience and poetic resonance of each filmed moment. Further, the fact that each shot is a disparate, uncut scene in itself gives each shot a sense of verisimilitude. For an unbroken moment, however brief that shot is, the film shares in the duration of the filmed world, creating the impression that such views of the world, with their surprisingly beautiful colors or qualities of light, could be ours to discover outside of the cinema with the properly sensitive disposition.

*Variations'* unbroken takes and subsequent sense of the film sharing in the duration of the world brings questions of cinematic realism into play in a rather unorthodox manner. While the theories of Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, the two foundational classical theorists of cinematic realism, have often been understood to hinge on particular stylistic attributes or particular beliefs in the ontology of the film image, far more important is their sense of duration

---

<sup>91</sup> The differences between Brakhage's films and Dorsky's include Brakhage's envisionment of subjectivity and the mythic underpinning of his work, neither of which are qualities in Dorsky's films.

<sup>92</sup> In this we can see a development from *Hours for Jerome*, which juxtaposed different scenes, but did not work in this way on the level of the individual shot.

<sup>93</sup> In Brakhage's polyvalent editing, very short shots are combined into larger units "so that the autonomy of individual shots disappears." Sitney, "Tone Poems," 193.

in a film. As with Brakhage, Bazin and Kracauer were interested in the way film can share in the Bergsonian vital impetus. Undergirding Bergson's philosophical system is the belief that everything is in motion and in a continual state of change, to the point that Bergson defines "life in general" as "mobility itself." Living things appear relatively stable, but this immobility is "counterfeit," a trick so well carried out "that we treat each of them as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*, forgetting that the very permanence of their form is only the outline of a movement."<sup>94</sup> Unable to perceive the "radical becoming" that is the actual state of things, Bergson compared human perception to the cinematograph. "Of becoming we perceive only states, of duration only instants, and even when we speak of duration and of becoming, it is of another thing that we are thinking."<sup>95</sup> As a film cuts up every second of time into 24 snapshots in order to store it, Bergson theorized that the human intellect divides knowledge into snapshots, which the mind reassembles in an imitative recreation of the real. An interest in Bergson's philosophy and his analogue between the cinema and human perception led to Bazin and Kracauer to develop theories of the possibility of cinema accessing reality as much as any human mind could.

To the extent that a film can produce the experience of the "continuum of life or the 'flow of life'"<sup>96</sup> for Kracauer or "transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality"<sup>97</sup> for Bazin, its qualities of that duration introduces ambiguities and indeterminacies as they exist in reality, giving the viewer choice among many possible meanings. The reception engendered by certain 'open' styles of film ultimately teaches us "to have a regard for reality."<sup>98</sup> As Daniel Morgan concludes his analysis of Bazin's film realism, "we can think of Bazin as committed to a specific

---

<sup>94</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 85.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>96</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>97</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 37. Emphasis in original.

<sup>98</sup> *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 101.

movement from image to reality. What we learn by watching and responding to films—films that are realist in the appropriate way—can be transferred to the way we engage reality.”<sup>99</sup> In its celluloid format, existing only in the process of its projection, *Variations*—like all of Dorsky’s films—reflects a Bergsonian focus on the “radical becoming” of life itself. Further, in its form, particularly in its monadic, unbroken shots with a relatively longer take, *Variations* creates the sense of touching on the duration it shares with its filmed subjects. Like the stepping stones across a stream that Dorsky used to describe the process of reading Ashbery’s poetry, the individual shots of *Variations* provide moments of solidity while another layer of duration, that of the film as a whole, gives the viewer another reality with which to engage—the reality of the communal experience of light on a screen. Dudley Andrew uses the same metaphor to describe Bazin’s ideal of cinematic realism; attributing the stones to different parts of the story being told, Bazin praised those films that did not fit their stones together so closely as to create a continuous bridge (which Andrew identifies as the over-determinative Hollywood model). In this model of Bazin’s ideal, “every piece is important in its own way, yet points beyond itself.”<sup>100</sup> The cinematic realism of *Variations* emerges in the way in which its open style points beyond itself and reshapes its viewer’s engagement with the world.

For the ideal viewer, film of this sort can be devotional, reworking that viewer’s relationship to the phenomenal world by cultivating mindful awareness. Not only do the films look carefully, they teach the viewer to look carefully as well, a sentiment often reflected in viewers’ descriptions of their viewing experience. Max Goldberg’s reaction in this regard is typical: “But if you let them work, Dorsky’s films are experiences in vulnerability. They

---

<sup>99</sup> Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006): 481.

<sup>100</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 43.

cultivate outstretched feeling states, a poignant relationship to time, and the recognition that our perceptual processes run a few paces ahead of our language.”<sup>101</sup>

### ***Compline: Obfuscation and Discovery***

The title of *Compline* (2009) echoes 1982’s *Hours for Jerome* in that *Compline* is one of those canonical hours encapsulated in the earlier film’s titular reference. A practice carried over from Jewish tradition, the canonical hours are a set of eight prayers first standardized by the Christian Benedictine monastic order in the sixth century. A practice developed to encourage pious and continual focus on the divine throughout the day and night, the canonical hours were originally spaced throughout the natural division of the day; *matin* at midnight, *lauds* at dawn, *prime* at the beginning of the day, *terce* at midmorning, *sext* at noon, *none* in the afternoon, *vespers* at sunset, and *compline* at the end of the day.<sup>102</sup> As a means of sanctifying time, the canonical hours developed as a way for monastic communities to set themselves apart from the world, and as such have been seen as the first steps toward a modern sense of time—as an abstract division of the day, made possible by the development of the mechanical clock and largely driven by the merchant class as a way of making a measurable commodity of the time of labor in the early industrial period of the 1600s.

Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, in his *History of the Hour*, presents and then challenges this view, noting that the actual time of the medieval canonical hours varied by region, by season, and was elastic within any given day.<sup>103</sup> Yes, the Benedictines renounced personal control of their time, which was rationed and rationalized, but it was still set in nature and in relation to the natural world. “In medieval understanding, too, the division of time, and especially of the day,

---

<sup>101</sup> Max Goldberg, "The Inmost Leaf: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Cinema Scope* 46 (2011): np.

<sup>102</sup> David M. Robb, *The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript* (South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes, 1973), 331.

<sup>103</sup> Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37.

was not simply a given fact, beyond doubt and unchangeable. Instead, it was seen as determined in part by natural rhythms, in part by social conventions or “political” decisions, and as subject to historical change.”<sup>104</sup> Ultimately, monastic time discipline<sup>105</sup> (and the myriad of other disciplines thus controlled) was meant to help prepare its adherents for the afterlife. Thus, the title of *Compline* references a transitional conception of time in the development of modern, industrial society, simultaneously abstracted from *and* still in relation to the natural world.

Like *Hours for Jerome*, *Compline* paratextually ties Dorsky’s films to a medieval devotional form. In this film we see Dorsky’s religious interests remade within the context of the film, a metonymic shift from the canonical hours encouraging focus on the distant divine to Dorsky’s canonical hour focusing on that which is hidden within the province of cinema. The film opens like most of Dorsky’s films, with a title in white text that fades in, is seen for several seconds, and fades out against a black background. As the film progresses, however, it becomes evident that other than the title, there is no readily identifiable religious imagery. In fact, in *Compline*, much of the imagery is not readily identifiable as to its content at all, religious or not; but while not *readily* identifiable, the contents of the shots do—typically—become identifiable all the same in a recurring process of obfuscation and discovery.

This process of obfuscation and discovery can be the result of manipulations of an image’s focus, as in an early shot in which an unidentifiable yet vaguely vegetal form at the beginning of the shot slowly racks focus until a tree branch becomes clearly recognizable in the foreground. A few shots later the effect is reversed, as a shift in focus causes lens flares of pure color. In this case it is the color, rather than the branch, that the film slowly allows the viewer to

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>105</sup> E.P. Thompson’s term describes the practices of measuring and controlling the time of labor in the era of disciplined industrial capitalism, made possible as time became abstracted from nature and labor abstracted from task-consciousness. See E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Essays in Social History*, ed. M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

discover through its change of focus. In other instances in the film, it is the unexpected lighting and framing that initially obfuscates the shot's content, as in a shot that cuts to what is at first only identifiable as a pulsating red light, but after a few moments becomes identifiable as the tail lights of cars on the highway at night. This also occurs in a shot near the end of the film, a few moments after seeing the blue sky behind a cluster of flowers, of what can only be identified as a blue splotch of color behind a yellow rose. Unlike the kind of blue color field that a painter could create by squeezing a tube of paint onto a canvas, however, this blue is definitely the blue of something in the world. The sky, perhaps, given the previous shot? Then, after a beat, the whole shot lasting just a moment, there is *movement*, that quality that defines the moving image, and the as of yet unidentified color field's anonymity is given away. This has been a swatch of blue jeans, worn by an unidentified and, beyond an enclothed torso, otherwise unseen person. And as soon as the subject of the shot becomes identifiable, there is a cut, and we move on.

This process of discovery is one that is often repeated throughout Dorsky's films, and as paratextually framed in *Compline*, it emerges as one way in which the films appropriate the religious drive of attempting to discover that which is hidden. The discovery is not always one of the identification of a shot's subject. It can be the discovery of the beauty and inherent interest one finds in a mundane object typically ignored. Or it could be the discovery of the effects of a particular angle or reflective quality of light on a subject, or of the slower motion that comes from the 18 fps projection speed on a moving human subject, or simply the discovery of a carefully composed, focused image interspersed amidst more abstracted imagery. In *Compline*, however, there is a prevalence of this sort of discovery focused around color fields, as in the examples cited above.



Figure 3.7: The discovery of color in *Compline*. Image courtesy of Nathaniel Dorsky.

Other shots in the film emphasize this focus on color when the mystery of object identification is never solved, as in a brilliant emerald green object that stubbornly remains out of focus in the foreground of a shot early on in the film. This prevalence of color—never pure color fields but nevertheless unidentifiable as anything else—in *Compline* points to a necessarily invisible, and therefore within the representational system of the moving image, sacred, object of its representational focus; the literal ground of the film image, the celluloid film stock on which these images are chemically recorded and from which these colors are projected onto the screen.

One thing that immediately becomes clear upon hearing Dorsky introduce his films or reading interviews he has given, reading the descriptions of the films he produces for the Canyon Cinema catalog, or reading his writings on film, is the artist's deep and intimate connection with the particular qualities of different film stocks. In particular, Dorsky was especially fond of Kodachrome, the first commercially produced color emulsion, introduced in 1935 and discontinued in 2009. Known particularly for its richness and depth of color, Dorsky has described Kodachrome as a "noble emulsion." *Compline*, made at the end of the Kodachrome

era, was Dorsky's last Kodachrome film. Aware that this would be his final opportunity to film with Kodachrome, Dorsky "luxuriated in it as much as I could,"<sup>106</sup> and this focus on the emulsion comes through in the prevalence of color fields in the film. Additionally, the title referencing the last canonical hour of the day refers, in part, to the twilight of Kodachrome itself.

Herein lies a fundamental connection between the religious and the film-making process and materials in Dorsky's films, a connection that reaches its fruition in the ideal viewer's encounter with the work. The canonical hours are a way of temporally organizing the day in a way that redirects one's attention away from the world and toward the divine. *Compline* is clearly neither a medieval nor a religious product. It was not made to be a tool to be used by the devout to daily redirect their focus away from the temptations of the world and onto the Christian God. So what does it mean that the film was given the name of one of the canonical hours? Dorsky references and harnesses the sense of separation in the canonical hours within the film by re-focusing the viewer's attention onto hidden details of individual shots (and revelations that can be made by the juxtaposition of images) as well as the invisible ground of the film itself. This is a metonymic shift, in that there is a rhyming in their shared perspectival orientation toward the invisible. Like the canonical hours and the Book of Hours, Dorsky's films redirect their viewer's perspective in a religious-*like* gesture toward the cinematically invisible. In this way Dorsky's films function as analogues of sacred art, redirecting their viewer toward new ways of seeing and engaging with the world.

### **Manifestations of the Apophatic**

Even as the orientation of Dorsky's films in relation to the ideal viewer parallels a religious perspective, those references to religion are not sublimated to film form but remain

---

<sup>106</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, Screening Introduction, June 17, 2012, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA.

curiously absent. As a result of this negation, Dorsky neither makes ‘religious films,’ films about religion, nor has he established a religion *of* film. His dual concerns with religion and film are both present in his texts and paratexts, and yet neither religion nor film explains, comprises, or substitutes for the other. Even still, they coexist, somehow related. This is reflective of the apophatic qualities one finds in Dorsky’s films, by which their religious paratexts coexist in the created film experience.

One such place that this coexistence can be found is in the haptic nature of Dorsky’s films. *Compline*’s use of color fields, for example, recalls Gilles Deleuze’s description of tonal color fields in the paintings of Francis Bacon,<sup>107</sup> which take on a haptic function. Deleuze takes this idea from Alois Riegl, who proposed the idea of tactile visuality in his comparative study of ancient Egyptian and Greek art. Egyptian art, he asserted, required a close-view sensibility, a focus on the surface texture akin to touching, whereas Greek art is an art of perspective, to be looked at in its entirety from a distance. Describing the art of the Greek sculptor Lysippus as the turning point in his tactile/optical split, Riegl elaborates on the subjective and objective perceptual implications of haptic versus optical art. Pliny the Elder, he notes, described earlier artists as presenting human figures as they *are*, while “Lysippus formed them as they *appear*, and they are perceived.” Pre-Lysippic art, writes Riegl, represented the figure as an “objective, autonomous being, the ‘thing in itself,’” whereas post-Lysippic, optical art “signifies the thing as

---

<sup>107</sup> In his study of the paintings of Francis Bacon, Deleuze describes a use of color, analogous to Dorsky’s use in *Compline*, that functions in a haptic manner, and the engaged, attentive mode of haptic visuality as described by its theorists is exactly the kind of active relationship between viewer and artwork that is a requirement of the apophatic in art. Color, Deleuze describes, can be defined by its relations of value through the contrasts of black and white and the uses of color to delimit and depict forms. Or, it can be marked by relations of tonality, in which colors exist as pure color rather than as tools of representation in a painting. It is in this tonal color relationship that Deleuze makes the connection between color and the haptic. “When relations of tonality tend to eliminate relations of value, as in Turner, Monet, or Cézanne, we will speak of a haptic space and a haptic function of the eye, in which the planar character of the surface creates volumes only through the different colors that are arranged on it.” In this, Deleuze makes a connection between formal elements of a painting and the way in which it is approached and encountered by its viewer. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 107.

perceived by the human faculties.”<sup>108</sup> More recently, the idea of haptic has been brought to bear on the cinema thanks largely to the efforts of Laura U. Marks, who has focused on the political implications of haptic visuality. “The ideal relationship between viewers and image in optical visuality tends to be one of mastery,” she writes, “in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between the viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion.”<sup>109</sup> This model of haptic visuality has important implications for Dorsky’s films, which similarly deny the viewer the mastery of fully knowing and possessing the viewed object.

As such, there are many haptic ways in which *Compline* encourages a close, intimate participation with the ‘thing in itself,’ the image projected on the screen. In addition to the prevalence of color fields, texture and the surface qualities of the images are emphasized while narrative, the creation via editing of a coherent spatial world of the film, and any other element that would absorb the viewer into the world of the film, are entirely absent. Existing only as 16mm celluloid film, the glowing, pulsating screen at the time of projection becomes the surface of haptic engagement. The close-view perspective engendered by the haptic qualities of *Compline* paradoxically serves to retain the sense of distance in terms of the referents of the film image. The things and places filmed are shown and are identifiable—and therefore relatable—but they remain distant as the material barriers between the world filmed and the viewer are emphasized. In between the viewer and the world Dorsky filmed lies, insistently and emphatically, the film stock and the projection screen. The engagement with the world that

---

<sup>108</sup> Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 425-426.

<sup>109</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 184.

Dorsky's films create is one of mutuality, in which to see is to experience without visual mastery.

This haptic perspective can be seen in Dorsky's affinity to the interstitial perspectival zone between the medieval and the modern, recalled by *Compline's* titular reference to the emergence of time discipline, as well as other places. For example, Stan Brakhage described *Triste* (1996) as a film without any vanishing points.<sup>110</sup> Affirming this observation, Dorsky contextualizes it in terms of the affinity he feels for European painters in the early 1400s,<sup>111</sup> those who painted just before perspectival representation rose to dominance. When looking at the imagery of Dorsky's films, Brakhage's comment is confusing; of course each shot has a vanishing point, by virtue of being filmed by a camera lens. What *Triste* and Dorsky's other films don't do, however, is to present a narrative or a coherently constructed space that can be conceptually grasped in the mode of optical visibility. "My cutting," as Dorsky described it in relation to Brakhage's comment, "is an attempt to create resonance without solidifying concept, so that I don't produce mental linkages that can be reduced to language."<sup>112</sup> Like the differences between optical and haptic visibility, Dorsky's films invite the ideal viewer to actively engage with the imagery on the screen, a mode of engagement marked by its lack of comprehensive, commanding knowledge. Simply put, Dorsky's films frustrate any attempt to conceptually delimit them in the manner of "X film means Y" or "shows Y" or "is about Y." Instead, they foster a sense of mindfulness, of taking the film for what it simply is, a flow of imagery over time. "If you try to interpret them or read them the way one traditionally looks at images," Dorsky says during most of his introductions, "you'll be very unhappy. They won't make any

---

<sup>110</sup> Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," 15. This story is also told in MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky."

<sup>111</sup> Dorsky specifically mentions Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Hans Memling, and Roger van der Weyden.

<sup>112</sup> MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," 7.

sense and you'll feel frustrated." Rather, he instructs his audience that the films are made to be seen and felt, not interpreted or conceptualized.<sup>113</sup>

In addition to their perspectival qualities, Dorsky's films are particularly medieval in the apophatic nature of their haptic visuality, as the paratexts reframe these haptic qualities in terms of the religious. Pseudo-Dionysius, the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century monk who was the founder of the Christian tradition of apophatic theology, called for the experiencing of God through the paradox of negation of knowledge: "If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge."<sup>114</sup> It is through the negation of all concepts and sense of the self that one could plunge "into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing...Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."<sup>115</sup>

Apophatic theology's sense of the negating of conceptual, linguistic knowledge echoes Tibetan Buddhism's description of enlightenment, suggesting that it is a theological system in which east and west meets. In *The Precious Treasury of the Way of Abiding*, a 14<sup>th</sup> century text written by Longchen Rabjam which Dorsky has described as an influence on his filmmaking,<sup>116</sup> Rabjam defines enlightenment as the abiding in intrinsic awareness of the ineffable nature of all things. As a master in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, this text concerns Dzogchen, the highest of spiritual practices in the Nyingma school. Achieving enlightenment by way of Dzogchen is achieved through the realizing and abiding in its four "disciplineless disciplines,"

---

<sup>113</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, Screening Introduction, June 17, 2012, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>114</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, "The Mystical Theology," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 138.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>116</sup> Cameron McLain, "Empty Vessels: A Lineage of Buddhist American Artists" (Bachelor of Arts Thesis, Princeton University, 2010). Available at <http://nathanieldorsky.net/post/44296648000/empty-vessels-a-lineage-of-buddhist-american>, accessed 8/29/2015.

reaching an awareness of the 1) ineffability, 2) openness, 3) spontaneous presence, and 4) oneness of all phenomena. The essence of this awareness is that it is open, “free of conceptual or verbal elaboration, it cannot be understood through theories of language or knowledge.”<sup>117</sup> In terms of visual manifestation, there are similarities between these two religious perspectives. For both Pseudo-Dionysius and Rabjam a religious perspective is a non-conceptual apophatic experience of the world; in Dorsky’s films it is precisely in the mutuality and partiality of their haptic visuality that such an apophatic is manifest.

Despite this religious focus on concept-free knowledge, to call the films non-conceptual overlooks the continual negations of apophatic discourse. As a result of their haptic visuality, the films do negate the mastery of a conceptually grounded understanding of their texts (as in the ability to say “*Compline* is a film about prayer,” for example). This negation is itself negated, however, in the paratextual and formal framework that Dorsky provides (as in the prevalence of color fields). As he described polyvalent montage, the films strike a balance, striving to be neither overly conceptual nor nihilistic. In apophatic discourse, this uncertain middle ground is the goal, and in Dorsky’s films it establishes a powerful and religious-like relationship between the films, their viewers, and the world.

This relationship between image, viewer, and world is the focus of Jean-Luc Nancy when he describes the image as that which is always sacred, for there is something in the image that remains necessarily distinct: “The sacred is what, of itself, remains set apart, at a distance, and with which one forms no bond (or only a very paradoxical one). It is what one cannot touch (or only by a touch without contact).”<sup>118</sup> For Nancy, this sacred aspect of the image does not reside in the world of representation. Instead it is a force, an “energy, pressure, or intensity...the very

---

<sup>117</sup> Longchen Rabjam, *The Precious Treasury of the Way of Abiding*, trans. Richard Barron (Junction City, CA: Padma Publishing, 1998), 148.

<sup>118</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 1.

force of its distinction,”<sup>119</sup> something akin to Bergson’s *élan vital*. Giving the example of a portrait that conveys a deeper quality, a force of the person represented, Nancy describes the way in which a viewer interacts with such a force, alluded to by his reference to a paradoxical bond and a touch without contact in the quote above. The image does not transport its viewer, nor does it bind the sacred to the representation in an act of envisionment. Instead of actually making what it represents present, the image puts the viewer into relation with that absent thing in “less a transport than a *rapport*, or relation.”<sup>120</sup>

The nature of this relation, created by art like Dorsky’s that engages in apophatic discourse, is the focus of George Didi-Huberman’s analysis of the paintings of Fra Angelico.<sup>121</sup> In Fra Angelico’s work, Didi-Huberman reads the rends of imitative iconography<sup>122</sup> as symptoms, existing in between imitation and abstraction. Using the example of polyvalent splotches of paint, Didi-Huberman shows how the paintings of Fra Angelico create a sense of religious mystery in their dissemblance, as Angelico’s polyvalent techniques frustrate their expected imitative function.

---

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>121</sup> Fra Angelico, a Florentine artist and Dominican friar, is one of the artists of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that Dorsky has expressed a strong affinity towards.

<sup>122</sup> Symbolically understandable iconography is fully expected in Italian art of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and so its negation in the work of Fra Angelico calls attention to itself for its opacity of meaning.

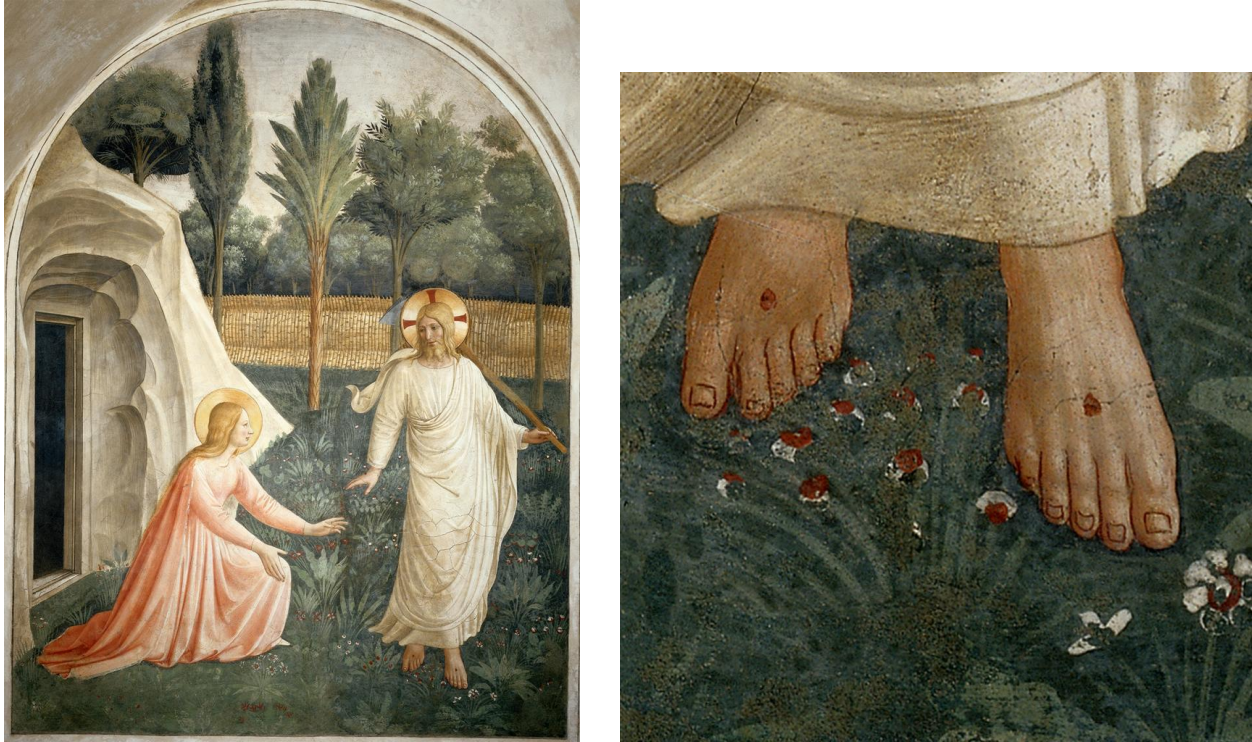


Figure 3.8: As the flowers on the ground and the stigmata on Christ's feet are identical in this fresco, Didi-Huberman characterizes them as polyvalent splotches of paint that rend the tradition of imitative iconography. Fra Angelico, *Convent of San Marco: Noli me Tangere Cell I*. 1438-45, Fresco, 166 x 125 cm. Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed July 8, 2011).

There is a commonality between the gaze of the ideal viewer of Fra Angelico's dissemblant figures and the gaze that is engaged with the icon in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. The invisible concern of Fra Angelico's paintings, Didi-Huberman describes, requires a gaze that consists "of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus letting go of one's knowledge about it."<sup>123</sup> There is a certain agency given to the image in terms of the positioning of the viewer to the painting with regard to power, including the power to know, to possess, and to contain. The dissemblant image is one that possesses agency in terms of the knowledge and experience of looking. Marion describes the apophatic gaze in much the same way, defining the idol and the icon by the ways in which they interact with their viewer. The possibility of an idol being an idol is dependent on the viewer, not the actual object; provided the

<sup>123</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 16.

viewer's attitude is religious, the object that is the idol for that viewer dazzles and fills the gaze, an act that Marion describes as greatly reduced in modern society. The icon, however, points away from itself, to that which cannot be apprehended. Its power and function as icon, then, does not start with the viewer, but with the positioning of the divine. The effect of this, Marion explains, is that in contemplating the icon our gaze finds itself "more radically looked at."<sup>124</sup> In visual terms, the distance and unknowability of the divine is transformed into the infinite openness and resistance to definition of the dissemblant image. Didi-Huberman describes a similar gaze called for by Fra Angelico's paintings:

Our hypothesis is therefore that the multicolored zones of Fra Angelico's paintings function less as iconic signs than as the operators of a conversion of the gaze: confronted with these colored zones, we do not discern a great deal; if there is meaning, it is veiled, plurivocal, and not to be found in any manual of iconography. These zones are acts of negation of the common notion of figure; they introduce the mystery, 'the unfigurable in the figure.' They are at once patches of colored matter projected onto a wall, and patches of negative theology."<sup>125</sup>

Dorsky's apophysis similarly lies in his positioning of the viewer, allowing "us to experience what is hidden," opening "us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world,"<sup>126</sup> and above all, cultivating a sense of mystery.

### **Conclusion: A Cinema of the Sacred**

In many ways Dorsky talks about the cinema as a religious object, something like the Book of Hours through which "we suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us."<sup>127</sup> By metonymically shifting the religious sacred onto the language of cinema, the tricky question of belief has been sidestepped—quite brilliantly, in my mind. The

---

<sup>124</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>125</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 56.

<sup>126</sup> Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

balance between sacred and profane is transformed into balance between basic aspects of cinematic language. The history of religious forms is sublimated into the history of film style and convention. And the potentiality of religion to make known that which is hidden is also the promise of the films, but with a shift of the sacred object, of ‘that which is hidden,’ from the ineffable to the material realm. Maya Deren located the sacred in a ritual’s social context, impossible to convey in her poetic style. Caveh Zahedi shifted the evidence of the divine onto a context the viewer is sure to share, the context of film. Dorsky’s work reflects a further shift along this continuum, locating the sacred not in the film itself but in the liminal experiential zone of the film screen. He negotiates the impossibility of envisioning the sacred by displacing it onto an engagement with his films.

As noted, beyond their titles, religious content is conspicuously lacking in Dorsky’s films. After the negation of cinematic conventions, this negation of religious content is the second apophatic move of his films. And yet, in true apophatic fashion, this negation is itself negated, for the paratexts, signifying a connection to the religious, stubbornly hang on, declaring this to be devotional cinema. The religious is negated, but in so doing Dorsky acknowledges and preserves the sacred qualities of his films. While he readily answers the question of what is beyond in cinematic terms—the ground of the image, vision itself, direct experience of the phenomena of the world—this negation of the religious holds at bay the necessity of addressing the religious beyond. Due to their apophasis, the films neither fix nor limit their religious potential. By precisely not imaging the ineffable, that religious drive is displaced onto questions of the representational possibilities and limits of film form, which in turn gains a quasi-religious force in its revelatory potential within the immanent world.

This focus on the immanent is in line with apophatic discourse. Denys Turner, historicizing the Christian mystic tradition, critiques modern incarnations for their focus on inner, personal experience:

The apophatic is not to be described as the ‘consciousness of the absence of God’, not, at any rate, as if such a consciousness were an awareness of *what* is absent. For if we do not know what God is, and if we cannot be conscious of God’s presence then we do not know, and cannot be conscious of, what it is that is absent; *eadem est scientia oppositorum*. Is it not better to say, as expressive of the apophatic, simply that God is what is on the other side of anything at all we can be conscious of, whether of its presence or of its absence?<sup>128</sup>

In the medieval tradition, it is on the immanence of the world (or, on the “other side” of that immanence) that apophatic experience focuses. This is where Dorsky leads us, exploring vision and our perceptual relation to the world with a cinema operating in the spirit of and harnessing the power of the sacred.

---

<sup>128</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, 264.

## Epilogue

### The Paradox of the Sacred

Whatever is sacred cannot be represented, for visual form gives place and presence to that thing, thus destroying the qualities that made it sacred in the first place. The sacred, therefore, must exist beyond representation, and films that flirt with the representation of the sacred flirt with their own limits of representational form. This paradox has been at the core of my case studies. In Chapter One I situated this paradox in terms of Maya Deren's film theory and the production history of her Haitian project. Deren's autoiconoclastic act, I suggested, reflects the effect she anticipated that the envisionment of Haitian possession dances would have on culture, religion, and dance. In a direct contrast to the principles of her theory of creative film, Deren's negation of the Haitian project reflected a negation of the visionary power of cinema, an explicit charting of the limits of representation in the early post-war avant-garde. Within Deren's theory of cinematic representation, therefore, the negated and unseen quality of her project can be seen as its very mark of sacrality.

Instead of an orientation outward to a foreign culture and religion, Caveh Zahedi's *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* is in many ways a turn inward. With its focus on Zahedi's fears and relationship with his family, and its organization around a family trip, the world and the culture with which the film engages is much more circumscribed than Deren's international, intercultural, and interreligious project. In the context of Haitian possession dances, the religious ritual is created by the physical participation of its supplicants, and Deren found the process of translating that participation into a representation to be insufficient for conveying its meaning. In contrast, the participation that Zahedi proposes is a participation with the process of representation as the viewer is asked to participate in the work of the film in making its meaning.

Contained within its system of cinematic representation, the negations of Zahedi's film reflecting the paradox of representation and the sacred are negations of narration and of generic conventions. Given its failures in the very representational forms that Zahedi initially declared would serve as proof of the existence of the divine, the film solicits the judgmental participation of the viewer to replace its initially proposed envisionment of the sacred, a rapport with absence instead of a given presence.

In Chapter Three I located the paradox of sacred representation in terms of the created film experience. Within the current digital age, Nathaniel Dorsky exercises a considerable measure of control over the film experience through his control of the format of his films, for their exclusively 16mm format gives them a rarified presence, contingent on their projection and on the location in which they are shown. In doing so, and in their drive to reshape their viewer's scopopic participation with the world, Dorsky's films take on the characteristics of religious objects, an association further developed by their titles and other paratexts. By negating both those paratextual references as well as aspects of their cinematic language, Dorsky gives his films a sacred-like character as he invites the viewer to interact haptically with the film image itself. Unlike Zahedi's film, this is a model of embodied participation, one contingent on the physical presence of the viewer as the screen functions as a meeting place between the viewer and the world. In a way, Dorsky offers a solution to Deren's impasse regarding her Haitian project with his model of film that visualizes sacredly without visualizing the sacred. As with Deren's plans for the Haitian project, Dorsky's films involve a dance, but unlike her documentation of possession dances, his is not a dance recorded by the camera. Rather, the dance of Dorsky's films takes place in the interaction between viewer and film, and the religious

forms of his films are likewise not represented but instead are shaped in that and through that rapport, through that interactive dance.

### **The Sacred and the Profane**

Throughout these case studies I have focused on negations of various kinds, and in my apophatic approach those negations themselves become the way by which the films reflect the discourse of the sacred. In the preceding chapters, I have incorporated many different perspectives on the sacred: Emile Durkheim established the principle of the sacred as separate from the profane; Rudolph Otto stressed the power of the “wholly other,” which he named the numinous; Mircea Eliade’s focus was on the interaction between the sacred and the profane in hierophanies; Jean-Luc Marion characterized the sacred quality of the divine as “alterity itself;” and Jean-Luc Nancy renamed it “the distinct” and attributed this sacred distinctiveness to the represented image. For each of these writers the quality of being beyond the physical, profane world is a critical quality of the sacred, but this separateness is never absolute. Rather, the thing that makes the sacred so compelling is its dialectical relationship with the profane, and any language that engages with the idea of the sacred is a mode of discourse that ultimately wrestles with the profane.

To my mind, no one stressed this relationship between the sacred and the profane more strongly than Georges Bataille. Building off of Durkheim and Otto, Bataille’s use of the sacred serves as his point of engaging with the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sacred is completely other, he writes:

But it is essentially *communion*, communication of dangerous, *contagious* forces set loose, against which it is necessary to protect the world of useful and reasonable mechanisms of life. It is to the extent that we are normally drowned in this world of mechanisms that a *sacred* element is *completely other* for us. It is true that *life* itself is *sacred*, in containing something that is irreducible to the *things* of the *profane* world. This is not life reduced to effective activity,

subservient to results, but its play and release in the same moment, having meaning only in relation to itself—thus no longer having meaning, deliriously awake.<sup>1</sup>

For a time,<sup>2</sup> Bataille named his philosophy his ‘atheology,’ “that is, a thinking fed by the experience of God—even if it becomes exclusively the experience of God’s absence.”<sup>3</sup> As Laurens ten Kate notes, the modern sacrality that emerges from Bataille's atheology is one “where we meet the absent God” in the extremes, in “war, poetry, laughter, wasted gifts, or eroticism.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout Bataille’s work, ten Kate explains, “the sacral does not indicate an area, sphere, or universe but a rapport: the rapport with the ‘exterior.’”<sup>5</sup>

For the most part, this exterior in Bataille’s writing on the sacred is conceived in much broader terms than my relatively circumscribed arena of representation, as his philosophy attempts a rapport with no less than the exterior of culture and history itself. In discussing the sacred in the more relatively limited realm of discourse, however, Bataille brings this focus on the dynamic relationship between the sacred and the profane to questions of signification in a number of essays on ‘un-knowing.’ In them, he identifies the paradox of the sacred emphasized above:

We can say of the sacred that it is sacred, but at that moment language must at least submit to a pause. It is in fact the leitmotiv of this exposition that such operations are ill-conducted, debatable. It is all beside the point. And for a very simple reason: the only way of expressing myself would be for me to be silent; thence the flaw of which I have spoken.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Richardson, ed. *Georges Bataille — Essential Writings* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 40. Emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> William Franke, ed. *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 2: Modern and Contemporary Transformations (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 363.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Laurens ten Kate, "The Gift of Loss: A Study of the Fugitive God in Bataille's Atheology, with References to Jean-Luc Nancy," in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 264.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Un-Knowing and Its Consequences," *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 83.

But while language cannot present a presupposition about un-knowing, Bataille does focus on ruptures of language, such as one finds in laughter, as moments which create the possibility for making the experience of un-knowing known:

Laughter, when considered as I have done, initiates a sort of general experience which is, in my view, comparable to what the theologians call ‘mystical theology’ or ‘negative theology.’...To this experience and to its accompanying reflection, I would want to give the name of ‘atheology,’ composed of the privative prefix *a* and of the word *theology*. It is an atheology whose fundamental consideration, let us say, is present in the following proposition: God is an effect of un-knowing. He can nevertheless be known as an effect of un-knowing—like laughter, like the sacred.<sup>7</sup>

Bataille thus characterizes the sacred, in both the context of culture/history and of discourse, as engaging with the excess of the profane world.<sup>8</sup> It is at this point that Bataille’s atheology most strongly correlates with apophatic theology. Apophatic discourse, as William Franke notes, is intimately associated with the kind of experience Bataille describes, as its struggle with language “demonstrably engenders the experience in question.”<sup>9</sup> By privileging experience in this way, Franke describes the way “the apophatic allows for belief before any determinate belief.” Instead of a preconstituted concept about the divine, “this entails a sort of belief in, or an openness to, something—that is, to something *or other* that is surely no *thing*—that cannot be said and that refuses itself to every desire for expression. There is not even any ‘what’ to believe in, but there is passion—for nothing, perhaps, certainly for nothing that can be said: and yet that passion itself is not just nothing.”<sup>10</sup> In the case studies here, the apophatic has provided a way of discussing films and the experience of their negations as reflective of their

---

<sup>7</sup> “Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears,” *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 99. Emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Laurens ten Kate also develops this with an analysis of Bataille’s use of the very word ‘God’ in his *Inner Experience*: “Bataille’s speaking about God...intends to leave the word ‘God’ without meaning. It cannot even be the name of someone or something unknown, but functions simply as an *unknown name*: a name that no one ‘bears,’ and that is met in the excess.” See Kate, “The Gift of Loss: A Study of the Fugitive God in Bataille’s Atheology, with References to Jean-Luc Nancy,” 289.

<sup>9</sup> Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

orientation to the beyond (which I've characterized as their engagement with the discourse of the sacred) without affirming *or* denying the status of that beyond. As I discussed in the Introduction, this is one of the benefits of an apophatic approach, as it opens films with clear religious references up to critical discussion regardless of one's personal belief or lack thereof regarding those references. In my apophatic approach, I have characterized negations themselves as reflective of this discourse of the sacred in the way those negations create a rapport or a communion between the film, the viewer, and the profane world. Through this focus on negation and its resulting cinematic engagement, I have approached the subject of religion and film from a different direction than the vast majority of its current scholarship.

### **Religion and Film: Existing Approaches**

Bataille talks about the power of the sacred in terms of its power to generate experience, even if that only means a negative experience of God's absence. One question raised here by Bataille's focus on experience is whether or not film can create a divine experience? This question, and an answer in the affirmative, guides one popular approach in the field of religion and film as most fully developed by Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*. In that work, Schrader makes the claim that film can (and does) evoke the experience of the sacred through a particular style he names the transcendental style. By using "precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing—for predetermined transcendental ends,"<sup>11</sup> Schrader makes the claim that the films of Yasuhiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Theodor Dreyer express the Transcendent (the sacred). Personally, I find Schrader's analysis of the films of these auteurs to be both compelling and convincing. In the approach here, however, I have tried to avoid Schrader's tendency to proscriptively claim that a film-based religious experience necessarily

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 3-4.

emanates from particular formal devices and structural choices. The fact is that religious experience is a deeply personal and highly idiosyncratic phenomenon, and when religious devotion can be generated from water stains on a wall or burnt toast, I find any claim to the universality of religious experience problematic.

Related to Schrader in terms of this positive, propositional approach is the majority of what I characterize as the religious studies approach to film.<sup>12</sup> As a popular cultural form, film naturally reflects elements, including religious elements, of its culture, and this approach identifies religious symbols or themes found in that popular cultural form. Within this approach, religious aspects are identified in a number of different ways: as the religious themes explored in the plot of films; as the explicit presentation of elements of a religious tradition in characters, plots, or mise-en-scène; as the evangelistic drive in films made by religious-minded organizations; and as the unintended percolation of culturally dominant religious beliefs or stories within popular film. These are all legitimate approaches, and the scholarly work done to understand and explain these differing ways film and religion relate is important work—but it has not been my approach. In particular, I find that the religious studies approach is often silent on two areas that are of particular interest to me as a Film Studies scholar, the specificities of film as a medium and the possibilities of religious-like power that film could possess. These lacunae are made evident by the fact that such narrative-heavy analyses are typically written either from within one religious tradition to readers also within that tradition, or are framed in

---

<sup>12</sup> Representative examples of the religious studies approach include: Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). Melanie J Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007). S. Brent Plate, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Also reflective of this approach is the most prominent journal in the field, the *Journal of Religion and Film* (<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/>), which is notably lacking even one Film Studies scholar on its editorial board.

terms of the dispassionate sociological analysis of culture.<sup>13</sup> As Greg Watkins notes, it is also hard to limit what qualifies as being expressive of religiosity in the religious studies approach, especially when the ‘religious’ themes identified are sometimes as broad as the question “how should we live?”<sup>14</sup> Unchecked, I dare say that a focus on negations could even more quickly become a catch-all, in which any negation in any context is claimed as related to the sacred.<sup>15</sup> In order to avoid this, I have been careful to select films that justify this apophatic approach through their explicit, if occasionally indirect or negated, references to specific religious forms.

Combining this justification with a focus not on the envisionment of religious themes or stories but on the discourse of the sacred, I have attempted to account for the effects of religious discourse on visual representation in a way that is unique from the religious studies approach.

Nevertheless, my approach focusing on negations as instances of unshowing and unsaying does share an affinity with some scholarship in the field, particularly that which focuses on themes of unrepresentability. Paul Coates, for example, recognizes the paradox of representation discussed earlier, and devotes a chapter in his book on religion and film to the limits of representation:

---

<sup>13</sup> One of the most popular films for the religious studies approach in recent years has certainly been Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Jolyon Mitchell and L. Brent Plate describe the “ever-expanding collection of written material about the movie” and the themes found therein, emphasizing the film event as a significant socio-cultural moment in terms of religion. In noting an area they determine to be a lacuna in this voluminous literature on the sociology of religion, Mitchell and Plate argue for the importance of an analysis of the reactions of people to the film. “Many of the authors of these scholarly accounts describe how they sat in the theater and were surrounded by distraught, disturbed, crying people. Powerful experiences were described but rarely considered in detail.” See Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, “Viewing and Writing on *the Passion of the Christ*,” in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York: Routledge, 2007), 346-47. What I find most interesting in this overview is Mitchell and Plate’s total acceptance of the importance of the viewer’s pre-existing belief as a contingent factor on their having a religious experience (and not a pornographic one, Mitchell and Plate note) during the film.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory J. Watkins, “Introduction: Teaching Religion and Film” in Gregory J. Watkins, ed. *Teaching Religion and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12. See also Greg Watkins, “Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 3, no. 2 (October 1999).

<sup>15</sup> This is one way in which Amédée Ayfre claims a religiosity in film broadly. “But first if one were to reflect on a certain absence, or similarly on a certain repression, one might say that the sacred is able to be diagnosed in a great many of the films of yesterday and today.” Amédée Ayfre and René Prédal, *Un Cinéma Spiritualiste* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2004), 100-101. Author’s translation.

This incapacity of human language adequately to render divine reality may be said to extend to a general aporia of representation, which is inherently metaphorical. The map is not the world: the medium of representation will appear to be poorer than what it represents. This requires the development of sign-systems with a dialectical relationship with their referents, allowing both approximation of the object and simultaneous recognition of its fundamental difference.<sup>16</sup>

In developing this idea, primarily with analyses of the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Krzysztof Kieślowski, Coates even briefly mentions negative theology, although he oversimplifies it by characterizing negative theology only as the negation of the divine. Coates' focus, however, remains on themes of negation in films<sup>17</sup> rather than the negation *of* themes and of other aspects of cinematic representation as has been my concern.

Similarly developing the theme of the limits of representation of the divine was the 2003-2004 MoMA Film and the Gramercy Theatre program *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* and its accompanying publication of 50 mostly short essays of the same name.<sup>18</sup> While the approaches vary across the breadth of the *Hidden God* project, the focus primarily remains on films that allude, directly or indirectly, to the religious, and on the ways in which the divine remains a thematically hidden or distant force in the narratives it considers. This focus on themes of the positive representation of symbols or analogues of religiously-inspired representational limits can also be seen in André Bazin's analysis of the final image of Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951). Bazin characterizes the final image of the film, of a black shadow of a

---

<sup>16</sup> Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2003), 46.

<sup>17</sup> With Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1986), for example, Coates notes the way that the film uses distinct color palates to indicate the representation of two different worlds, one from the inner perspective of the main character Alexander, and one more objective. In showing an inner perspective in this way, Coates claims that Tarkovsky is showing a hidden, and therefore sacred, world on film. "The alternation [between color palates] may also be read as marking a passage back and forth between 'outer' and 'inner' reality: the inner reality, unseen by us, can be evoked by monochrome, which also presents the world in a way unlike our usual view of it; it can thus suggest spiritual reality, and is used by Tarkovsky to do so." *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda, eds., *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

cross on a blank white wall seen as the off-screen death of the titular character is narrated, as the image disappearing, nothing but the obvious “light on a blank screen.”

But here we are experimenting with an irrefutable aesthetic, with a sublime achievement of pure cinema. Just as the blank page of Mallarmé and the silence of Rimbaud is language at the highest state, the screen, free of images and handed back to literature, is the triumph of cinematographic realism. The black cross on the white screen, as awkwardly drawn as on the average memorial card, the only trace left by the ‘assumption’ of the image, is a witness to something the reality of which is itself but a sign.<sup>19</sup>

My approach relates to these thematic explorations of negation and representation, but tries to strike a new path with my apophatic and avisual inspired focus on the negation of representation itself.

For Georges Bataille, the sacred is separate but can be made known in (and as) the ruptures and transgressions of culture and history. While transposing ‘the sacred’ and ‘rupture’ to the more limited frame of cinematic representation, I’ve made a similar argument in the preceding chapters. Understanding rupture and transgression in terms of cinematic conventions, of expectations of visualization explicitly or implicitly established by a film, or in terms of a film’s representational context, I have focused on failures and negations and the limits of representation in these case studies as themselves the paradoxical elements of sacrality of the films. The way in which I have characterized my case studies as engaging with the discourse of the sacred, therefore, has not been in terms of their visual content. In this apophatic approach the sacred is not found, and cannot be found, in what a film shows. Michael Sells defines apophatic discourse as “those writings in which unnameability is not only asserted but performed,”<sup>20</sup> and I have focused on the *process* of negation as a way of focusing on that performativity. In my

---

<sup>19</sup> André Bazin, "Le Journal D'un Curé De Campagne," in *The Films of Robert Bresson*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Praeger, 1969), 65.

<sup>20</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

analysis, this process takes place in the interaction between films and viewer, a rapport that I have characterized as the films' relationality.

### **The Apophatic Approach: Parallels and Connections**

Although I have tried to find a new way to analyze the intersection of religion and film, I do not make a claim that this is in any way a comprehensive account of the possibilities of an apophatic approach. Indeed, an exciting aspect of this project has been the echoes I have found with other currents in Film Studies that likewise explore the limits of the power of vision as related to the interaction created between films and viewer. While none of these have a necessary connection to religion, I find their parallel concerns compelling, and anticipate that their similarities to the apophatic approach would be fecund areas for further research.

The idea of the unshowable as a political, if not ontological, limit is one that has been discussed in terms of war and images of national trauma, as in Hannah Feldman's analysis of Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005).<sup>21</sup> The film is one of the most recent depictions of the October 17, 1961 march in Paris by French Muslims from Algeria protesting a curfew that had been imposed on them with the design of keeping that population away from the capital and out of sight during the French-Algerian war. The march itself was brutally and violently suppressed, and from 1961 until the present day, Feldman describes the primary mode of representation of the massacre as one of erasure. *Caché* illustrates the way the march has been historically represented by the absence of images, for although the march occupies a central place in the narrative of the film, it remains off-screen; such depictions indicate the political unrepresentability of the event and its resulting erasure, as the visibility and invisibility of certain bodies in the public sphere serves as the means of achieving and denying political agency.

---

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Feldman, "Pictures of Politics and the Politics of Pictures: Shooting Protest During the French-Algerian War," (Lecture, UC Irvine, Irvine, CA January 22, 2009). Feldman expands on her analysis in *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

Michel Foucault ends his essay on Rene Magritte, which I discussed in Chapter Two, with an allusion to Andy Warhol,<sup>22</sup> making the suggestion that Warhol's art is the culmination of the privileging of similitude over representation that Foucault finds in Magritte's paintings. We also find in the films of Warhol an exploration of unrepresentability as tied to political visibility and sexuality. Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964) is an especially interesting point of comparison here. The 36 minute film is made up of predominantly long takes roughly edited together in Warhol's particular editing aesthetic, all of which are framed in the same way—as a close-up of a man's head in front of a brick wall. For the whole of the film the man looks around and throws his head forward and back, and at the end smokes a cigarette, possibly in response to receiving fellatio, the only clear indication of which is in the film's title. As we only see the man's head, and his facial expressions remain ultimately ambiguous as to anything that may or may not be happening off-screen, the central action of the film remains undefined. Roy Grundmann describes the way the uncertainty of the titular sex act within the shots of the film destabilizes the spectator's experience and enables a range of potentially diverse readings. The “dynamics of partiality”<sup>23</sup> of *Blow Job* open the film's discourses onto broader issues of homosexuality as its tension between documentary, realist truth-telling, and its ultimately ambiguous framing implicate the viewer's own “deductive, analytical activities...[with] the film's conceptual success as a tease.”<sup>24</sup> In thus engaging the viewer through its “dynamics of partiality,” the film addresses that which is socially (if not ontologically) invisible and taboo.

---

<sup>22</sup> The last lines of the essay read: “A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell.” Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 54.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Grundmann, *Andy Warhol's Blow Job* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. One interesting example of a broader discourse that *Blow Job*'s dynamics of partiality enables, Grundmann notes, is a connection to religious imagery. Grundmann explores the Christ-like imagery of some of the figure's poses in *Blow Job*, situating the film within a trend of utilizing transgressive representations of Jesus in American underground cinema.

As previously discussed, another point of intersection between my use of apophatic theology and existing threads in Film Studies is in the broader connections between apophatic discourse and the limits/suspensions of vision in modernity. P. Adams Sitney has been at the forefront of this scholarship as it relates to the cinema with his work reading the allegories of the antinomy of vision in modernist cinematic works.<sup>25</sup> In more general terms, the emphasis away from the visual as a site of meaning in apophatic visual discourse parallels the broader antivisual discourse that “is a pervasive but generally ignored phenomenon of twentieth-century Western thought,”<sup>26</sup> which Martin Jay explores in his tour de force *Downcast Eyes*. Finally, my approach which takes the film texts to be bodies of their own, circulating through the world and interacting with both the world and the viewer, draws on recent theories of embodied spectatorship, which considers the three-way interaction of “on-screen bodies (human or otherwise), filmgoers, and films themselves.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Avant-Garde and Beyond**

The different approaches to film and religion tend to have their favored genres and directors. The approach that focuses on themes of the negation of the divine typically coalesces

---

<sup>25</sup> One representative example of such an allegory Sitney analyzes is in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Ordet* (1955). A film with an explicitly religious setting, characters, and themes, *Ordet* is audacious enough to end with a scene of miraculous resurrection presented in such a way that “we are encouraged to view things ‘realistically’” (68). Sitney analyzes the film in comparison to its theatrical source material to claim that the film presents “visionary experiences we cannot share, even though they are dramatized before our eyes” (54). As a result, Sitney claims, the final scene of resurrection is “a parable of cinematic perception” (70) that, in fact, ‘resurrects’ the power of the cinematic close-up:

While representing with consummate mastery the miracle of the Munk play, Dreyer has engineered a cinematic miracle of his own: he has succeeded, in 1955, in making the most elementary of cinematic tropes, the closeup, have the overwhelming emotional force it is said to have had in the work of D. W. Griffith, one of Dreyer’s first masters. In a way, he somehow managed to ‘resurrect’ it, and shot-countershot montage as well, long after it had lost its vitality (71).

See P. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4. Laura U. Marks, whose model of haptic visuality is discussed in Chapter Three, has been a leader in this field, as has Vivian Sobchack.

around the work of individual art-house directors who have religious proclivities or who tend to engage with religious or existential questions and themes, including directors such as Carl Theodor Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Yasuhiro Ozu, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Terrence Malick, and Ingmar Bergman, among others. The religious studies approach, by contrast, most often looks to the culturally dominant cinema, as measured by the box office, for its analysis of religion in popular culture. This leads to a focus on Hollywood films, with an eye toward entertainment-centered blockbusters. “For those whose interest is in using religion to explore movies,” William Blizek and Michele Desmarais declare, “the kind of movie that best serves this purpose is a typical Hollywood film.”<sup>28</sup> My approach has been distinct from both of these with my selection of films that experiment with form and with cinematic language. This places me, I believe, at the edge of the field of religion and film as presently constituted, a perspective from which film, not culturally dominant religious expression, is my focus. By exploring what films can and do make visible, I have used the framework of religious aesthetics to chart some of the limits and the possibilities of cinematic expression and experience. Deploying the sacred in this way, religion, which is so often ignored in the field of Film Studies, can provide a compelling framework from which to see the outer edges of the cinema itself.

It has been my conclusion that films which experiment with and shape their viewer’s perception are particularly interesting in this context, but this apophatic approach is not only applicable to films in the avant-garde. Narrative films such as Watkins’ *A Sign from God* (2000), discussed in Chapter Two, can express religiosity through negations. Images of negation or negated imagery within a film such as is often analyzed in the themes of negation approach

---

<sup>28</sup> William L. Blizek and Michele Desmarais, “What Are We Teaching When We Teach ‘Religion and Film’?”, in Watkins, *Teaching Religion and Film*, 18.

likewise reflect at least a small measure of apophatic unshowing.<sup>29</sup> The recent documentary *Into Great Silence* (2005) is also an interesting example of a non-experimental film that engages with the discourse of the sacred through cinematic unshowing as it intersects with many of the themes explored in the preceding chapters.

### *Into Great Silence*

Like Deren's Haitian project, *Into Great Silence* was made by a filmmaker who entered a religious space set apart from the modern world, integrating himself into and filming the rituals practiced therein. In *Into Great Silence*, this space is the Grande Chartreuse monastery, located in the French Alps, which the German filmmaker Philip Gröning visited and filmed for a six month period from 2002-2003. Although a different context geographically and religiously than Deren's Haitian Voudoun ceremonies, there are some striking similarities between these two projects, including the relatively unseen nature of both ritual contexts and the rarity of a filmmaker gaining permission to film those rituals.<sup>30</sup> The biggest difference between the two, however, is the hierophany, or act of manifestation of the sacred, in each religious context. Whereas dancing is the expression of the presence of the *loa* in Voudoun, the outward sign of the divine for the Carthusian monks of the Grande Chartreuse is a negation, the discipline of silence they follow amongst various other ascetic practices.

As expressed in one of the few scenes with any speaking in the film, the purpose of the disciplines of monastic life is to aid in the development of inner holiness, where God "will reveal his existence to you and let you commune with Him." The manifested, filmable expressions of

---

<sup>29</sup> As in, for example, the final image of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* mentioned above. Another prominent example of a positively construed negative symbol within a film (that is, the film itself is not negated, but within its fully present and successfully constituted imagery is a negative symbol of the divine) can be found in Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), in which the schizophrenic character Karin describes her vision of God as a spider with a "terrible, stony face."

<sup>30</sup> Gröning was the first filmmaker to be given access to the monastery and, as a final title card informs us, waited 16 years between his request to film and the permission given.

this inner focus are primarily negations as the monks rigorously follow the prayer discipline of the canonical hours<sup>31</sup> and refrain from speech. As with *I Was Possessed by God* (2000), the tension created by the disparity between inner experience and outer expression is a driving force in the film. While Gröning occasionally manipulates a shot visually or aurally for impressionistic effect, such manipulations are not typical. More often the limits of the power of vision are stressed, especially in the frequent sequences of monks praying. The film opens, for example, with a scene of a monk praying in the early morning darkness. Due to the lack of light the image is barely visible<sup>32</sup> as the lack of contrast and prevalence of digital artifacts attest to the



Figure 4.1: The limits of cinematographic vision in capturing both the object of prayer *and* the pre-dawn image of prayer in *Into Great Silence*.

---

<sup>31</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three, the canonical hours (also known as the Liturgy of the Hours) is a set of eight prayers spread throughout the day and night first standardized in the sixth century. This practice is marked by the ringing of the bells at the Grande Chartreuse, which become a constant aural refrain in the film. This relates to Dorsky's films in that the monks practice the time discipline Dorsky references with the titles of *Hours for Jerome* (1982) and *Compline* (2009).

<sup>32</sup> The same effect is seen during several scenes of the midnight prayers as well.

difficult filming conditions. As with *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (1994), this breakdown of the image serves as evidence of the veracity of this documentary film and the events it is capturing. At the same time, though, the dissolving of the image reflects the limits of the camera's ability to capture the inner experience of prayer.

In the face of those limits, the film turns its focus onto the physical world and the rhythms of daily life in the monastery. The film is broadly organized around the cycle of the seasons,<sup>33</sup> moving from winter to winter over the course of its nearly three hour running time. Largely observational, the film primarily consists of scenes watching the monks in their daily activities and tasks. Very little is explained<sup>34</sup> as we watch different monks pray, read, cut cloth, chop vegetables, feed animals, shovel snow, process paperwork, saw wood, etc. With an unhurried editing style, the film spends ample time observing these activities; one watches, slowly (or quickly) figures out what is going on, and then spends time with the subject(s) of a scene in that space. As a result of the monks' silence, which the film reflects with a complete lack of non-diegetic sound, the ambient noises of the different locations gain prominence as the viewer's aural attention is redirected toward sounds of creaks and work inside and of birds, wind, rain, and snow outside. Visually, as well, Gröning refocuses the viewer's attention to often overlooked qualities of light and shadow or dust dancing in the air as his camera's attention often wanders. As with Dorsky's films, the observational focus on the immanent physical world in *Into Great Silence* has the potential to reshape its viewer's perspective to an engaged scopic and aural relationship with the world as a result of its negations of explanation, action, and speech.

---

<sup>33</sup> Like *Hours for Jerome*, the film reflects the structure of a Book of Hours in this sense.

<sup>34</sup> 25 minutes into the film we get the first dialogue in a ceremony in which two new monks join the monastery explaining the purpose of the lifestyle we've been seeing. It is not until the end, with a title card just before the credits, that we learn where the film has taken place and what the conditions were of Gröning filming the community.



Figure 4.2: While a monk silently studies at his desk, the camera's gaze wanders and is captured by this play of light on the floor in *Into Great Silence*.

The negations of *Into Great Silence* also extend to the conventions of documentary form, as did the negations of *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*. This can most prominently be seen in the 'talking heads' sequences of the film, a series of close-ups of the monks themselves as if being interviewed. Each monk gets his own short one-shot close-up of 10-20 seconds of dedicated time with the camera in some of the only shots in the film in which the camera is acknowledged by those being filmed. Unlike the documentary convention, and a direct effect of their practice of silence, these talking heads do not say anything, an effect further emphasized by the almost complete lack of ambient noise during these shots. Split up into groups of three shots and often preceded by a title card with a scriptural or otherwise religiously-minded phrase, these 'interviews' are interspersed throughout the film. Particularly compelling for me is one that comes a little more than a third of the way through the film. "Behold the silence: Allow the Lord

to speak one work in us...that HE is,” the title card reads, followed by three close-ups of 20 seconds, 20 seconds, and 10 seconds in length, of three silent monks.



Figure 4.3: Negating the talking-head convention: evidence of the divine as a negation in the form of silence in *Into Great Silence*.

The title card reflects the propositional mode of Zahedi’s film. The primary exception is that the proof offered here is a negation, the silence of the monks. Unlike the positive manifestation of dance in Deren’s footage, silence as the negation of the aural is offered as something the film *can* make fully present. This sense of the presence of an absence that is found in the tension between this title card and the silent monks is the most prominent example of the unsaying of the film, an apophasis in the non-experimental *Into Great Silence*.

### Conclusion

The opposite of the apophatic is cataphatic theology, the tradition of affirmative discourse of the divine that is the more prevalent inverse to apophatic theology’s unsaying.

Whereas apophatism is the failure of speech, the cataphatic is “the verbose element in theology,” the use of language “in the effort to express something about God.”<sup>35</sup> As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, such affirmative discourse is never far from the apophatic path of negation, for the process of unsaying must necessarily incorporate cataphatic saying. When Denys Turner describes the apophatic process as the affirming of a statement about the divine, the negation of that statement, and then the negation of that negation,<sup>36</sup> the double negative has already incorporated and returned to the initial positive cataphatic statement.<sup>37</sup> This combination of apophatic and cataphatic discourse is a key element of Pseudo-Dionysius’ theology, as he “intertwines negative with affirmative theology and braids them into a mystical theology that suspends and surpasses the negative-positive polarity in the experience of a ‘luminous darkness.’”<sup>38</sup> This incorporation of the negative and the positive in its path to unknowing is the dialectic of apophatic theology. It distinguishes apophatic discourse from nihilism, and is what makes it both interesting and useful in considering visual representation. The negative path is not purely negative and the experience it creates—not the experience of the sacred, but the experience of negation—is nonetheless understood as in itself the mark of the sacred.

In *visual* apophatic discourse as explored here, the negations are likewise never absolute. As apophatic discourse incorporates both saying and unsaying, the negations of these case studies have hovered between showing and unshowing. Dorsky’s film language is not simply, nor completely, without concept, nor is there a complete absence of his religious references in

---

<sup>35</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Later, Turner develops this line of argument that negative utterances are also cataphatic which in turn (if those cataphatic statements proliferate and contradict each other) breaks down language itself, leading back to apophatic unsaying and unknowing. “The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language. It is not done, and cannot be done, by means of negative utterances alone which are no less bits of ordinarily intelligible human discourse than are affirmations.” See *ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>38</sup> Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 29.

his films given their paratexts. There is not a complete negation of documentary presence and indexical truth in Zahedi's film, as its uncertain narration could be affirmed by the judgment of the viewer. There is not even a complete negation of Deren's Haitian images, which live on in both their legendary status and in fragments within the posthumously edited and released documentary film. In the way the case studies hover in between showing and unshowing, between the manifestation and the negation of their religious discourses or referents, they can be productively described as forms of cinematic apophatic discourse.

Mark C. Taylor has named this kind of apophatic visual discourse 'a/theoesthetics.' In contrast to theoesthetics,<sup>39</sup> which posits the co-identification of art and religion, a/theoesthetics affirms the unknowability and alterity of the divine. Taylor associates a/theoesthetics with the philosophy and theology of Søren Kierkegaard, who characterizes the divine as an unthinkable other, the absolute difference approachable only through discourses of unsaying:

By pushing understanding to its limit, Kierkegaard glimpses an unnameable limit that he names 'the absolute difference.' This extraordinary heterogeneity exceeds the economy of theoesthetics. Indeed, theoesthetics is constructed *not* to think this unthinkable difference. By trying to think the unthinkable, Kierkegaard refuses the refusal of theoesthetics. In fashioning his aesthetic education, he attempts to figure an Other he himself does not comprehend.<sup>40</sup>

Taylor's a/theoesthetics focuses on what he calls 'disfiguring' which, in its most apophatic manifestation, "is an unfiguring that (impossibly) 'figures' the unfigurable."<sup>41</sup> Taylor's thesis is

---

<sup>39</sup> Taylor attributes the beginning of theoesthetics to the German thinkers in the town of Jena in the 1790s who developed a vision of the creative and religious power of nature and reread "religious faith in terms of artistic awareness" (21), thinkers such as "Herder, Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Tieck, Fichte, Schiller, Hölderlin, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel" (20). He traces its influence through modernism and "modernist postmodernism," both of which hold on to the belief that union with the Real is possible aesthetically. "The goal of modernist postmodern disfiguring is union with the logo that is identified with the Real. Whether regarded as immediate or mediated, modernists and their postmodern followers believe this reunion with the Real is realizable. The purpose of aesthetic education is to make this faith a reality" (313). See Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. One representative example Taylor gives of such a disfiguring is the earthwork art of Michael Heizer. In particular, he discusses Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969-70), a massive work that consists of two 50 x 20 ft trenches,

that through disfiguring, alterity can be approached in visual art as it nears “the margin of representation... At the limit, something other approaches. Though not precisely unnameable, this other cannot be properly named; though almost unfigurable, this other can be figured only by a certain disfiguring.”<sup>42</sup> Through its ability to “create an atmosphere of uncertainty and undecidability,”<sup>43</sup> Taylor attributes religious-like power to disfiguring, “untapped resources for religious reflection.”<sup>44</sup>

Taylor’s model is not of art as reflective of or creative of religious experience or meaning. Rather, his a/theoesthetics describes art as a way of approaching and expressing alterity which is, ultimately, a kind (for Kierkegaard, the only possible kind) of religiosity. My focus in this dissertation has been on the way my films reflect an orientation to alterity, framed as their relationship to the discourse of the sacred. In particular, I have explored the way in which that perspective illuminates the language and the history and the seen and unseen status of the films themselves. In the end, though, I also do believe that the films of my case studies are powerful, even religiously so, akin to Taylor’s a/theoesthetics. Panofsky and Crary have shown that visuality is both an effect of and an affective agent of the way one knows the world; as Panofsky puts it, a mode of vision is reflective of the “spiritual meaning” of its historical-cultural

---

totaling 1500 ft in length, that are cut into the cliffs on opposite sides of a corner of Mormon Mesa in Nevada such that the two cuts, as if in a straight line, are broken by the void of empty space as the mesa drops off between them. The work, Taylor stresses, is a disfiguring because it is made by removing earth, and as such there is no ‘figure’ that has been added. And yet, because of this removal, something is there, the cut and the void. Taylor describes this as a disfiguring which, nevertheless, still figures by negating the distinction between figure and ground:

The *Negative* is first and foremost a cut or two cuts, tears, rifts, fissures, faults. Its construction is, in a certain sense, a deconstruction. The absence of ground is figured by the removal of earth. As ground withdraws or is withdrawn, figure appears. The shape of the work is formed by subtraction instead of addition. In this incalculable zero-sum game, figure figures the absence of ground, and the ground that grounds figure is groundless. The absence of ground is not, however, a simple absence. The groundless ground that releases figure is, in Blanchot’s terms, a ‘nonabsent absent absence’ that nonetheless is not a presence (276).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 291. This is the effect on the viewer Taylor claims for the work of Anselm Kiefer, one of his primary examples of artists working in the a/theoesthetic vein. The disfiguring of Kiefer’s paintings occur by “bringing together opposites that are not reconciled,” thus creating a religious-like atmosphere of uncertainty.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 5.

context.<sup>45</sup> Whether reflecting the power to shape the production history of Deren's Haitian project, reflexively and intellectually engaging the viewer in Zahedi's work, or affectively reshaping one's scopic relationship with the world in Dorsky's films, I believe these films demonstrate a compelling religiosity. From this perspective, the negations of these apophatic films are their source of religious-like power. Through their mystery, ambivalence, and denial of the power of vision, they demonstrate the intellectual and aesthetic possibilities of the *via negativa*, and stand as examples of the possibilities of cinematic unshowing.

---

<sup>45</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 41. See also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990).

## REFERENCES

- Abel, Richard. *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Andrew, Dudley. *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Anker, Steve, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds. *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Arthur, Paul. *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Ashbery, John. *Selected Poems*. New York, NY: Viking, 1985.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Second ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Ayfre, Amédée, and René Prédal. *Un Cinéma Spiritualiste*. Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2004.
- Bandy, Mary Lea, and Antonio Monda, eds. *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003.
- Barker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- . *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bataille, Georges, and Annette Michelson. "Un-Knowing and Its Consequences." *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 80-85.
- . "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears." *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 89-102.
- Bazin, André. *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*. Translated by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo. edited by Bert Cardullo. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- . "Le Journal D'un Curé De Campagne." In *The Films of Robert Bresson*, edited by Ian Cameron. New York: Praeger, 1969.
- . *What Is Cinema?* Translated by Hugh Gray. Vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- . *What Is Cinema?* Translated by Hugh Gray. Vol. 2, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Translated by Harry Zohn. In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005.
- Boehm, Mike. "The Unvarnished Stories of His Life." *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2002.
- Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 9th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.
- Brakhage, Stan. "Brakhage to Baillie: Correspondence from a Late 60's Exchange of Thought and Film." *Southwest Media Review*, no. Spring 1981 (1981): 9-11, 43.

- — —. *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*. Kingston, NY: McPherson, 2001.
- Branigan, Edward. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Breton, André. *Manifestos of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969.
- Bruce Baillie File, Anthology Film Archive, New York, NY.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Callenbach, Ernest. *Bruce Baillie*. Filmmakers Filming. St. Paul, MN: Film In The Cities/Walker Art Center, 1979.
- Campbell, Joseph. "Editor's Foreword." In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1983.
- Canyon Cinema Records, circa 1961-2009, M1681. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Casetti, Francesco. *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Enlarged ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Clark, Veve A., Maya Deren, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman. *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*. New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984.
- The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*. Translated by William Johnston. New York: Image Books, 2014.
- Coates, Paul. *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2003.
- Cooper, Sarah. *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary*. London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2006.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- — —. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Deren, Maya. "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film." In *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- — —. "Cinema as an Art Form." In *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, edited by Bruce R. McPherson. Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 2005.
- — —. "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality." In *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, edited by Bruce R. McPherson. Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 2005.
- — —. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1983.

- Deren, Maya, and Gregory Bateson. "An Exchange of Letters between Maya Deren and Gregory Bateson." *October* 14 (Autumn, 1980): 16-20.
- Deren, Maya Collection. Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.
- Deren, Maya, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Willard Maas, and Amos Vogel. "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium." In *Film Culture Reader*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, 171-186. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. Translated by John Goodman. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.
- . *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity." *d i f f e r e n c e s : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007).
- Dohrn-van Rossum, Gerhard. *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. Second ed. Berkeley, California: Tuumba Press, 2005.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. London: Allen & Unwin, 1915.
- Duve, Thierry de. *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*. Ghent: Ludion, 2001.
- Elder, Bruce. *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1987. 1957.
- Elkins, James. *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Feldman, Hannah. *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- . "Pictures of Politics and the Politics of Pictures: Shooting Protest During the French-Algerian War." Lecture, UC Irvine, Irvine, CA, January 22, 2009.
- Feuer, Jane. "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment." In *Film Genre Reader 2*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.
- "The Film That Dreams Are Made On." *Esquire*, Dec. 1946, 187.
- Fisher, Lucy. "Afterlife and Afterimage: Maya Deren in "Transfigured Time"." *Camera Obscura* 28, no. 3 84 (2013): 1-31.
- Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- . *This Is Not a Pipe*. Translated by James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-27.
- Franke, William, ed. *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. Vol. 2: Modern and Contemporary Transformations. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

- Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Geller, Theresa L. "The Personal Cinema of Maya Deren: *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Its Critical Reception in the History of the Avant-Garde." *Biography* 29, no. 1 (2006): 140-158.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Goldberg, Max. "The Inmost Leaf: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky." *Cinema Scope* 46 (2011).
- Grant, Barry Keith, ed. *Film Genre Reader 2*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.
- Grundmann, Roy. *Andy Warhol's Blow Job*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.
- Guillen, Michael. "Nathaniel Dorsky On..."  
<http://theeveningclass.blogspot.com/2009/08/nathaniel-dorsky-on.html>.
- Gunning, Tom. "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs." In *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, edited by Karen Beckman and Jean Ma. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Habib, M. A. R. *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Halter, Ed, Stan Brakhage, and Nathaniel Dorsky. "Interview: True Independents; Brakhage and Dorsky Hash out the Realities of Poetic Cinema." *indieWIRE.com* (April 30, 2001).
- Herbert, James D. "The Eucharist in and Beyond Messiaens Book of the Holy Sacrament." *The Journal of Religion* 88, no. 3 (2008): 331-364.
- — —. *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher. "The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945." In *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, edited by Jan-Christopher Horak. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.
- Jackson, Renata. *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, (1917-1961)*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.
- — —. "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren." In *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- James, David E. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kate, Laurens ten. "The Gift of Loss: A Study of the Fugitive God in Bataille's Atheology, with References to Jean-Luc Nancy." In *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.
- Keller, Marjorie. *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage*. Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986.
- Keller, Sarah. *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Kite, Mary. "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky." *Poetry Project Newsletter* 183, no. February/March (2001): 7-9, 15, 18.

- Kohn, Eric. "Was Caveh Zahedi "Blacklisted" by Thom Powers? It's More Complicated Than That." *Indiewire* December 7, 2012.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Latour, Bruno, and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- . *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- MacDonald, Scott. *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- . *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- . *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- . "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky." *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2001): 2-11.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Crossing of the Visible*. Translated by James K. A. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- . *God without Being: Hors-Texte*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- . *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001. 1977.
- . "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology." *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (1994): 572-591.
- Markgraf, Sarah, and Gregg Biermann. "Nathaniel Dorsky's *Variations* and Theme." *Millennium Film Journal* 35/36 (2000): 108-113.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Maslin, Janet. "The Awkward Appeal of a Young Man's Chase." *New York Times*, March 16, 1991.
- May, John R., and Michael S. Bird, eds. *Religion in Film*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- McBride, Jason. "Song of Myself: Caveh Zahedi's Cinema of Self-Exposure." *Cinema Scope* Spring, no. 26 (2006).
- McLain, Cameron. "Empty Vessels: A Lineage of Buddhist American Artists." Bachelor of Arts Thesis, Princeton University, 2010.
- Michelson, Annette. "Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*." In *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Milicevic, Mladen. "Film Sound Beyond Reality: Subjective Sound in Narrative Cinema." Available at [filmsound.org/articles/beyond.htm](http://filmsound.org/articles/beyond.htm), accessed 8/25/2015.
- Mitchell, Jolyon P., and S. Brent Plate, eds. *The Religion and Film Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

- Mitchell, Jolyon, and S. Brent Plate. "Viewing and Writing on *the Passion of the Christ*." In *The Religion and Film Reader*, edited by Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Morgan, Daniel. "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006): 443-481.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press, 1958. 1917.
- Panofsky, Erwin, ed. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946.
- — —. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Translated by Christopher S. Wood. New York: Zone Books, 1997.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Heretical Empiricism*. Translated by Louise K. Barnett and Ben Lawton. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005.
- Penley, Constance, and Janet Bergstrom. "The Avant-Garde: History and Theories." In *Movies and Methods: Volume 2*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Perez, Gilberto. *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Plate, S. Brent, ed. *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Polan, Dana. "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film." In *Movies and Methods: Volume 2*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Powers, Thomas. "A Film Is Like a Panther: Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky." *Release Print* October (1996): 3.
- Pramaggiore, Maria, and Tom Wallis. *Film: A Critical Introduction*. London: Laurence King, 2005.
- Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aeropagite. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71*. Second ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Rabjam, Longchen. *The Precious Treasury of the Way of Abiding*. Translated by Richard Barron. Junction City, CA: Padma Publishing, 1998.
- Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York: Dutton, 1967.
- Richardson, Michael, ed. *Georges Bataille — Essential Writings*. London: SAGE Publications, 1998.
- Riegl, Alois. *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*. Translated by Jacqueline E. Jung. New York: Zone Books, 2004.
- Robb, David M. *The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript*. South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes, 1973.

- Rony, Fatimah Tobing. "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's "Trance and Dance in Bali"." *Discourse* 28, no. 1, Scenes Elsewhere (Winter 2006): 5-27.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan, and Adrian Martin. *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*. London: British Film Institute, 2003.
- Russell, Catherine. "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals." In *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, edited by Ivone Margulies. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Schwain, Kristin. *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Sells, Michael A. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Silva, Michelle, Nathaniel Dorsky, and Johnny Ray Huston. "To Sing Like a Mockingbird: A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, December 6 2006.
- Sitney, P. Adams, ed. *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. New York: New York University Press, 1978.
- — —. *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- — —. "Tone Poems." *Artforum International* 46, no. 3 (2007): 1-8.
- — —. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985.
- Stang, Charles M. "Being Neither Oneself nor Someone Else': The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite." In *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, edited by Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, 59-75. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Steimatsky, Noa. "Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*: Towards a Theology of Film." In *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, edited by Ivone Margulies. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Stone, Bryan P. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000.
- Taylor, Mark C. *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Thompson, E. P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." In *Essays in Social History*, edited by M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Wahlberg, Malin. *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Watkins, Greg. "Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film." *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 3, no. 2 (October 1999).

- Watkins, Gregory J., ed. *Teaching Religion and Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Wees, William C. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Wieck, Roger S. *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*. New York: George Braziller, in association with the Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997.
- Wieck, Roger S., Lawrence Poos, Virginia Reinburg, and John Plummer. *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*. New York, NY: George Braziller, in association with the Walters Art Gallery, 1988.
- Williams, Linda. "The Ethics of Intervention: Dennis O'rourke's *the Good Woman of Bangkok*." In *Collecting Visible Evidence*, edited by Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Winston, Brian. *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries*. London: BFI Publishing, 2000.
- Wollen, Peter. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Third ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Wright, Melanie J. *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970.
- Zahedi, Caveh. *Digging My Own Grave: The Films of Caveh Zahedi*. Brooklyn, NY: Factory 25, 2015.
- . "'Je Est Un Autre'." In *Infinity Film Festival Catalogue*. Italy, 2002.

## APPENDIX A

### *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* Plot Segmentation

- The on-screen text of the title cards is given in brackets [].
1. Opening credits over sounds of filmmaking.
    - a. [December 24, 1992. 10:05 am] Caveh's opening monologue, in direct address.
    - b. History of Zahedi family Las Vegas trips.
    - c. Fear of losing control contrasted with belief that everything has meaning.
    - d. Film is an experiment.
  2. [12:21 pm] Picking George and Amin up at their house.
    - a. Amin is uncooperative. They discuss the financing of the film. Caveh doesn't like that events of the trip already seem out of his control.
    - b. Amin refuses to drive, as previously planned.
  3. On the road.
    - a. [2:21 pm. George is talked into driving] Caveh gleefully describes all the car's problems.
    - b. [2:43 pm. George pays Amin \$50 to drive]
    - c. [2:53 pm], [2:57 pm], [3:05 pm] Sound only, George is worried about Amin's driving, and the camera missed the drama.
  4. [3:22 pm] Break on the side of the road where the film crew discusses the film.
    - a. Discuss fact that "all the good stuff is happening off camera." Caveh decides to try and reenact events.
  5. On the road.
    - a. Caveh directs George to recreate the earlier scene, and all agree it doesn't work.
    - b. [4:57 pm] George and Amin refuse to drive after sunset. Caveh takes the wheel. While driving, he tells them he forgot his glasses and can't see very well.
    - c. [6:01 pm] George, Amin, and Caveh can't see because of the light on in the car.
  6. [10:05 pm] Break at a gas station outside of Las Vegas. Caveh addresses the camera privately.
    - a. He is ashamed of George and of himself. He hopes the film helps him work through these issues. He wants to accept George as he is.
  7. [10:37 pm] On the road. Drive in to Las Vegas.
  8. Arriving at the hotel.
    - a. [11:15 pm. A technical error occurs] Film skips out of sprocket as they walk into the casino.
    - b. In the room, the crew discusses the film. Caveh is wrestling with his desire to control the film, and decides that the lesson is "to surrender."
  9. In hotel suite.
    - a. [December 25. 11:07 am] George and Amin have not yet arrived. Caveh tells the camera about his plans to give them gifts of Ecstasy.
    - b. [2:20 pm] George and Amin are present, but D is missing.
    - c. [3:00 pm] Everyone is present, and gifts are exchanged.
      - i. Caveh explains Ecstasy plan to George and Amin, who resist his request that they take it with him due to George's bad heart. Roll of film eventually runs out.

- d. [4:13 pm] Caveh is still trying to convince George and Amin. George tells Caveh to ask him anything, and he promises to be open and honest without the drug.
  - e. [4:29 pm]
    - i. Caveh takes the Ecstasy alone. He tells George that Ecstasy might be good for his heart. George is “scared” to take it.
    - ii. Amin claims he has never taken drugs. Caveh tells him that as an 8 year old, Amin once took a hit off of Caveh’s bong.
  - f. [4:50 pm] Amin and George leave to gamble, but promise to return in 40 minutes when Caveh’s Ecstasy should begin to take effect.
  - g. [4:57 pm] Caveh and the crew discuss the ethics of pressuring George to take Ecstasy.
  - h. [5:31 pm. The Ecstasy hits], [5:33 pm] Caveh and Greg sit and talk at the table, but there is no sound.
  - i. [5:52 pm. D arrives and turns the sound on]
    - i. D was missing and now seems like she’s in her own world.
    - ii. As Caveh and Greg talk, D can be heard on the phone in the background.
    - iii. George and Amin return, announce they will take the Ecstasy.
    - iv. D mentions she has been drinking.
    - v. Amin seems to take the pill.
  - j. [6:22 pm] Waiting an hour for the drug to take effect.
  - k. [6:35 pm] D is missing. She got a little drunk, Caveh says.
  - l. [6:47 pm] Caveh and George: “Daddy, all my life I’ve been waiting for this.”
  - m. [7:08 pm] D says she wishes she were drunk, and that it has been a taxing day.
    - i. Caveh can’t find the third Ecstasy pill. George says he took it “just seconds ago,” but not on camera.
  - n. [8:12 pm] George describes a bump in his chest as the Ecstasy hits.
  - o. [9:18 pm] George wants to tell Caveh the whole story of his life. As he begins, the film roll runs out.
  - p. [9:32 pm. Steve accidentally loads the same already-exposed roll of film into the camera]
    - i. Superimposed image.
    - ii. George leaves to lie down for a bit, and Caveh and Amin join him.
10. [9:49 pm] In hotel bedroom
- a. George and Caveh discuss belief in God and money. Eventually, George and Amin leave again to gamble.
  - b. Alone in the room, Caveh confesses that he really was worried about George’s heart, so he prayed that George would be ok.
11. [December 26. 7:59 am. The Ecstasy wears off] In Caveh’s bedroom.
- a. Caveh is angry (again), because D got drunk and disappeared in the middle of the night, and she is still missing.
  - b. Caveh doesn’t know if they will be able to record sound today without her.
12. [12:14 pm] Confessional scenes, each person alone with a running camera.
- a. Steve: found an Ecstasy pill, doesn’t know if he should tell Caveh.
  - b. Greg: no sound.
  - c. D: looks very drunk, talks vaguely about hurting.
  - d. George: it has been a pleasure, he says, and he hopes this film will be successful.

- e. Amin: warns everyone against ever making a film with his brother.
13. [1:32 pm] On the way out of the hotel, Amin suddenly refuses to leave. He agrees to go if the camera is turned off.
  14. [All of the soundtapes for the return trip mysteriously disappeared] Quick silent shot of George and Amin in the car.
  15. [10:05 pm. They arrive back in LA] George and Amin's house.
    - a. Saying goodbye. George gives beer to Steve and Greg, and "a nice bottle of scotch" to D.
  16. [11:58 pm] Caveh's apartment.
    - a. Crew steps outside for a few minutes for Caveh's confessional scene in the same location as his opening monologue.
    - b. "This reality thing" happened on the way home. He is trying to accept it.
    - c. Describes interaction with George regarding D. Caveh is impressed by George and thinks he can learn something from his father, which is hard for him because "ego problems."
    - d. You the viewer need to decide what you think about the events of the trip.
    - e. Crew comes back in and says goodbye.
  17. [December 27, 1:30 am. After the last roll of film has been shot, Steve informs Caveh that he found a hit of Ecstasy in the wastebasket of George and Amin's hotel room.]

## APPENDIX B

### Nathaniel Dorsky's Oeuvre

*Prelude* (2015)  
*Intimations* (2015)  
*Avraham* (2014)  
*February* (2014)  
*December* (2014)  
*Summer* (2013)  
*Spring* (2013)  
*Song* (2013)  
*April* (2012)  
*August and After* (2012)  
*The Return* (2011)  
*Aubade* (2010)  
*Pastourelle* (2010)  
*Compline* (2009)  
*Sarabande* (2008)  
*Winter* (2008)  
*Song and Solitude* (2006)  
*Threnody* (2004)  
*The Visitation* (2002)  
*Love's Refrain* (2001)  
*Arbor Vitae* (2000)  
*Variations* (1998)  
*Triste* (1996)  
*17 Reasons Why* (1987)  
*Alaya* (1987)  
*Ariel* (1983)  
*Pneuma* (1983)  
*Hours for Jerome* (1982)  
*Summerwind* (1965)  
*A Fall Trip Home* (1964)  
*Ingreen* (1964)