

CINEMATIC MEDITATIONS

by

Dakota Nanton

B.F.A., B.S., University of Colorado Boulder, 2014

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Date_____

David Gatten, Committee Chair

Melinda Barlow

Erin Espelie

Kelly Sears

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

ABSTRACT

Nanton, Dakota (M.F.A. Department of Art and Art History)

Cinematic Meditations, Thesis directed by Professor David Gatten

The cinematic experience is a sort of ritualistic ceremony between the audience and the projected image. Audiences come into the cinematic space with a set intention (often simply the desire to be entertained) but the filmic experience can also inadvertently and deliberately access and engage other states of being including the liminal, the unconscious, and the sublime. Through both research and my filmmaking practice I am exploring ways in which cinema can be used as a tool to create meditative and introspective experiences for the audience. In this written paper I discuss my own intentions as a filmmaker, previous works, and my thesis project *La Soga del Muerto*'s attempt to use the medium of film to recreate a metaphysical search for understanding and purpose. I also explore works by other directors who have been influential to my own filmmaking practice such as Nathaniel Dorsky, Jordan Belson, Jeremy Blake and Oskar Fischinger and how their creation of transcendent filmic spaces has influenced my own thinking and research.

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INTRODUCTION

“In representational films sometimes the image affirms its own presence as image, graphic entity, but most often it serves as vehicle to a photo-recorded event. Traditional and established avant-garde film teaches film to be an image, a representing. But film is a real thing and as a real thing it is not imitation. It does not reflect on life; it embodies the life of the mind. It is not a vehicle for ideas or portrayals of emotion outside of its own existence as emoted idea. Film is a variable intensity of light, an internal balance of time, a movement within a given space.”

-Ernie Gehr, *Artist Statement* (1971)¹

How can a film represent the unrepresentable? In a medium that many viewers and makers often belittle by viewing simply a means to tell stories, there is a history of powerful work which, often forgoing narrative completely, which touches deep and subconscious areas of our mind that can only be normally reached through dreaming, altered states, and meditative practices. The cinematic experience is in itself a sort of ritualistic ceremony between the audience and the projected image. Audiences come into the cinematic space with a set intention (often simply the desire to be entertained) but the filmic experience can also inadvertently and deliberately access and engage these other states of being including the liminal, the unconscious, and the sublime.

¹ Sitney, P. Adams. *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

The filmmaker Maya Deren once wrote, “The failure of film has been a failure of omission-a neglect of the many more potentials of the art instrument.”² Through both research and my filmmaking practice I am exploring ways in which cinema can be used as a tool to create a meditative and introspective experience for the audience. My goal as a filmmaker is to create a psychological space for the viewer to reflect on their own world. Inspired by the use of mandalas in Eastern meditative practices, I use color, pattern and motion as tools of focus and clarity to explore how the moving image can help process and elucidate internal thought. These works often blur the lines between painting, nonfiction writing, literature, printmaking, as well as traditional and digital animation. The films dissolve the barriers between viewer and work to create spaces of introspective reflection for the audience dealing with themes like interpersonal relationships, longing, loss, mortality and desire.

Over the course of this written paper I discuss my own intentions as a filmmaker, the explorations of form I have taken with my own body of work, and my thesis project *La Soga del Muerto*’s attempt to use the medium of film to recreate a metaphysical search for understanding. I also explore works by other directors who have been influential to my own filmmaking practice such as Nathaniel Dorsky, Jordan Belson, Jeremy Blake and Oskar Fischinger and discuss how their creation of transcendent filmic spaces has influenced my own thinking and research.

² Deren, Maya. *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*. Yonkers, NY: Alicat Book Shop Press, 1946.

Ch. 1 Abstraction and Visual Music

“Musical sound has direct access to the soul. It finds there an echo, for man ‘hath music in himself.’”

-Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912)³

In my own work, I explore the uses and possibilities of abstraction in the filmic medium. The term abstraction could be used to describe many different ways of working: from a pure abstraction lacking any grounding in representation or ‘explicable’ meaning, (as in the works of Jordan Belson) to the abstraction that occurs when the familiar collides with the unknown (such as the works of Nathaniel Dorsky). There are also different



Image 1 - Georgia O'Keeffe, *Blue and Green Music*, 1921, Oil on Canvas

approaches to what can be achieved through abstraction: from abstraction as a means to achieve something else (a mythical pathway to new consciousness for James Whitney) to abstraction as a form of working process (such as in structural films or the glitch videos of Takeshi Murata). My initial research into cinematic meditations came out of my own questions about the possibilities and means of abstraction as I

³ Kandinsky, Wassily, and Michael Sadleir. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. New York: Dover Publications, 1977.

explore my own place within this continuum of artists, exploring films that embody the non-representational and transcendent aspects of abstraction.

The art historian and curator John Hanhardt described abstract films in the following way: “these are not narratives which can be retold or images which can be easily reproduced. They are works which must be experienced, which engage the viewer in the fragility and temporality of the projected image and its instruments: camera, celluloid, projector, screen.”⁴ I wish to create with my own work films which in this way can only be experienced, by using the tools of the medium in unique and unexpected way to create novel experiences for my audience.

My early interest in cinematic abstraction came from a discovery of the body of films which have come to be known under the name of “visual music”. Visual Music is a subgenre of both abstract art and film, which retains all of the nonrepresentational aspects of music in visual art. The notes of a song can have no specific meaning and will create for each listener their own experience. The impulse to merge these abstract concepts to visual representation can be seen in the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, in early proto-cinematic concepts like the color organ performances, as well as the films and still works of animation pioneer Hans Richter, and continues onward in new forms and structures in contemporary art.

Abstract painters of the early twentieth-century like Paul Klee and Georgia O’Keeffe had begun to explore the visual representation of music in their works,

⁴ Jennings, Gabrielle. *Abstract Video: The Moving Image in Contemporary Art*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

however “as expressions of musical analogy, these painting fall short in one important respect. Music is, of course, a time-based medium. Musical compositions unfold through time: even the character of a single note is partly defined by duration.”⁵

Oskar Fischinger, an animation pioneer, was hugely influential in creating and defining Visual Music as a genre in film. His animation experiments were groundbreaking in their use of experimental materials, hand painting, and stop motion. Such experiments included filming melting wax, painting onto glass and

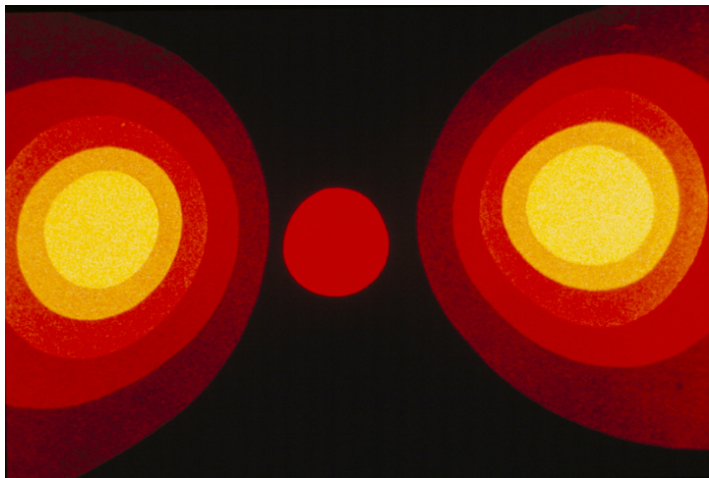


Image 2 - Oskar Fischinger, *Radio Dynamics*, 1942, 4:33, Silent

shooting frame-by-frame to create intricate moving paintings, as well as a time-lapse of a walking journey across Germany. While his early films were often accompanied and cued to music, by his 1942 film

Radio Dynamics he was creating intentionally silent compositions, meant to create their own soundtracks in the mind the viewer. The film is a moving painting, using both the background and foreground to create movement of color and shape across various planes, and it is not hard for the viewer to imagine specific sounds for the various shapes and textures.

Fischinger was hugely influential and well-respected during his time and has been cited as an influence for an immeasurable number of artists who proceeded him

⁵ Brougher, Kerry, and Olivia Mattis. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.

(such as Björk, Jeremy Blake and Jennifer West). However, in discussing why Fischinger's extremely successful abstract works have not resulted in more success for today's abstract films, Berlin-based artist Robert Seidel says, "At present one rarely encounters maturely formulated abstraction, in part because the advertising and event industries have appropriated abstract visual images and projection, misusing them as ornamental filler. These examples are often rendered with a high level of technical skill, but are nonetheless soulless, inconsiderate forms of perfection."⁶

Many of the amazing advances of abstract film's pioneers have been incorporated into our everyday, but simply for visual appeal without questioning the power and potential of these processes (such as the use of music visualizers or time-lapse modes on most cameras). It is my assertion that it is the onus of contemporary creators to continue to explore the power and possibilities of these tools by not simply allowing them to become tools of advertisements, wallpapers, and screen-savers but to continue to explore and push the potential energy of these processes.

One of my earliest films, *Nancy Lieder's Vision*, used abstraction as a means to recreate a vision of the end of the world. The film begins with a few lines of text, telling the true story of Nancy Lieder, an amateur astronomer who had a dream predicting the end of the world. She became so convinced that this dream was real that she started a cult and has spent the rest of her life trying to convince others of

⁶ Keefer, Cindy, and Jaap Guldmond. *Oskar Fischinger 1900-1967: Experiments in Cinematic Abstraction*. Amsterdam: EYE Filmmuseum, 2012.

the approaching peril. After this introduction, the remainder of the film consists of hand-painted 16mm film strips using color, shape, movement and texture to recreate the sensation of an apocalyptic vision. The lines

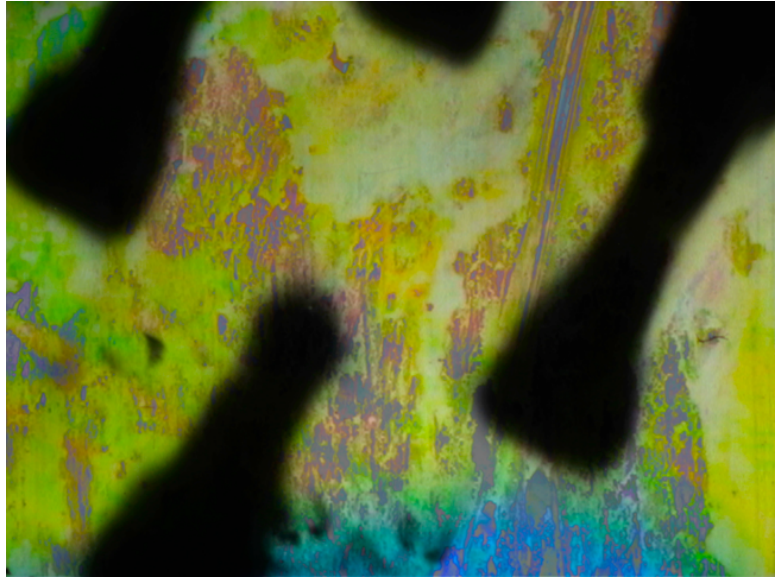


Image 3 - Dakota Nanton, *Nancy Lieder's Vision*, 2014-16, 6:40, Silent

of text which start the film are

meant to provide an entry point for the viewer, to use a concrete story to distract the viewer from focusing on interpreting the film, (as they would be prone to do if they saw the same film with no introduction) and instead to focus on the visceral experience of the work.

It was my assertion that telling the audience specifically what the abstract film they are about to watch is “about”, it helps remove them from this engrained need to interpret and allows them to be more susceptible to the patterns and rhythm of the film. As opposed to the earlier pure abstraction of films like *Radio Dynamics*, here we have abstraction representing a true story: blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction, representation and abstraction. How to handle the relationship between narrative and abstraction is one that I have continued to explore in different ways throughout my films.

Ch. 2 Meditation and a Search for Meaning

“The projector is an audio-visual pistol. The screen looks at the audience. The retinal screen is a target. Goal: the temporary assassination of the viewer’s normative consciousness.”

- Paul Sharits, *Note on Ray Gun Virus* (1966)⁷

Transcendence is a state of mind that comes when the mind goes beyond the limits of everyday, quotidian experience and is put into contact with something beyond description. Over the years artists have called this state many things including the unnamable, the ineffable, the sublime, and have sought to create works that create meaningful experiences for their viewers.

In the early nineteenth century, music was seen as the art form with the closest link to the sublime, in the fifties and sixties visual music filmmakers began to look beyond the transcendental properties of music towards “the use of the cinematic apparatus to evoke states of mind that lie beyond the boundaries of materialist and rationalist modes of thought.”⁸

Filmmakers like James Whitney and Jordan Belson are two creators who used “imagery derived from inner vision and from philosophical and religious traditions that use images to visualize-or help induce-deep states of meditation.”⁹ These films

⁷ Wees, William C. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-garde Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

function in similar ways for me to the use of mandalas in Hinduism and Buddhism. Mandalas are meditation tools that are used to focus the mind and create a sacred space for the practitioner.

One of the best examples of this type of making, and a work that has had an enormous influence on me as a filmmaker, is Whitney's film *Lapis*. The film is made up of thousands of tiny, moving dots that form and reform circular imagery. "With its continually quivering energy particles swimming in a cosmic void and magnetically attracted

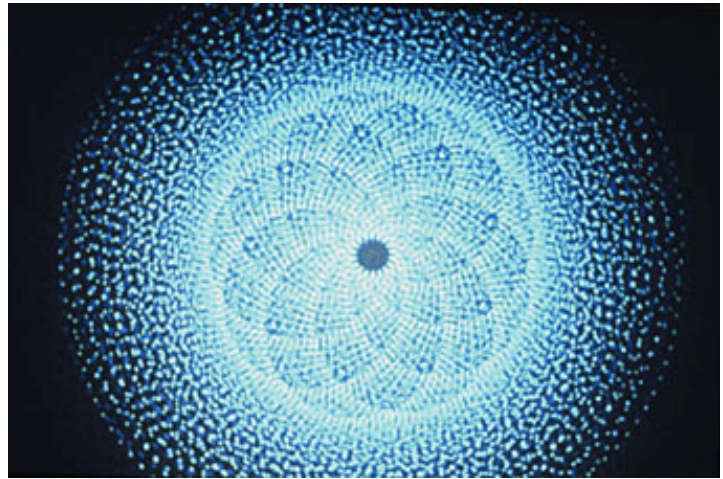


Image 4 - James Whitney, *Lapis*, 1963-66, 9:17

and repelled around a central mandala form, it seems to be on the brink of revealing some truth about the structure of the universe.”¹⁰ This film has no recognizable imagery, but instead exists as a constantly shifting collection of color, form and patterns. The result is an extremely contemplative and meditative quality to the film that is able to transport the viewer into an internal space.

Another extremely influential filmmaker to my work has been Jordan Belson. Belson's work was influenced by his interest in Mahayana Buddhism and the concept of *samadhi*, meaning a union between the mind and the object of contemplation,

¹⁰ Brougher, Kerry, and Olivia Mattis. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.

achieved in advanced meditation.

For Belson, his film *Samadhi* was meant as a true documentary of a visual phenomenon experienced by the artist. The film is made up of a series of pulsing textures and colors that shape and reform on the film strip. There are no

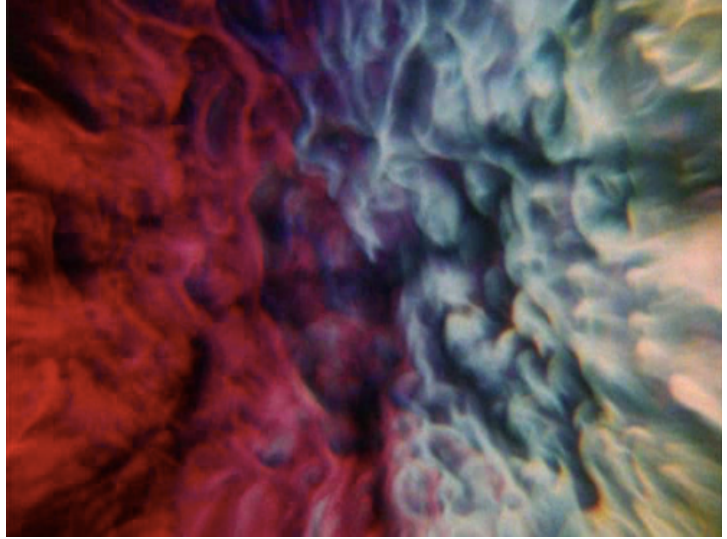


Image 5 - Jordan Belson, *Samadhi*, 1967, 5:10

recognizable forms but instead

only purely abstract imagery which creates a profound experience referencing both the exterior and internal world.

At the first screening of this film I attended the audience went completely silent and remained in a sort of altered state long after the last stretch of film had passed through the projector. This sort of communal experience is impossible to put into words but set a new goal for me as a filmmaker. How can I use my own films to create these sorts of experiences for an audience?

For me the answer lies in using the tools of filmmaking to communicate an incommunicable experience using the medium's aspects of visual perception, time and sound. My own films and the films which I am drawn to seek an increased inward sight, by abandoning 'looking' (or a passive watching) in favor of the more receptive 'seeing' (where the mind and body are engaged in the viewing process resulting in a much more rewarding experience).

Inspired by the works of these pioneers and others my own meditation practice and my filmmaking began to resemble each other more and more. My film *Meditations on Binary Vision*, seeks to engage a hypnagogic state in the viewer (the state of consciousness immediately before sleep) through a combination of structural principles and visual rules applied to abstraction. The film attempts to create a meaningful space through this abstraction for the viewer to enter and contemplate the nature of death and mortality.

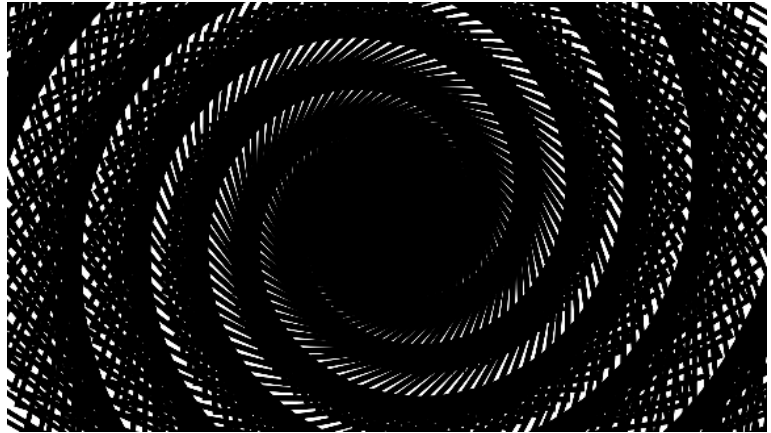


Image 6 - Dakota Nanton, *Meditations on Binary Vision*, 2016, 10 Minutes

In the film, flickers of light (which are themselves a series of black and white frames, a binary translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead with black representing 1s and white 0s) are used to invoke a state of meditation using the physiology of sight. Studies have shown that alternating patterns of light and dark can have powerful physiological and psychological effects.¹¹ The audio is made up binaural tones, frequencies of sound which have been shown to induce focus. In the film these are used to create a meditative space in which to contemplate and remember the dead. The goal of the film is to use internal physiology to create a film which allows the viewer to become aware of the functioning of their own nervous system.

¹¹ Wees, William C. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-garde Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Bookmarking this section is a recreation of a meditation practice I was doing at the time in which a simple geometric shape (such as a square, circle, triangle, or rectangle) is drawn upon itself over and over again until the shape is destroyed completely through its own creation. Through a simple bit of coding the computer recreates this meditative practice, creating complex and beautiful abstractions, and posing the question is it possible for a computer to meditate?

Although the film is made up only of pure white and pure black, with no midtones, viewers have reported seeing pulses of color within the film, proving the power of optical phenomena, and hinting at the tricks that can be played upon the senses by simply using the properties of moving images.

Ch. 3 Synesthesia and Haptics

“If synaesthesia represents the unity of the senses, the dream of synaesthesia is unification of the arts.”

-Jeremy Strick, *Visual Music* (2005)¹²

The physiological phenomena ‘synesthesia’ refers to a blending of the senses. “Sensory perception of one kind may manifest itself as a sensory experience of another... [resulting] from a heightened state of aesthetic awareness in the perceiving subject.”¹³ There are some who are born with innate synesthetic senses, (such as tasting color or touching sound) however artists have long sought to replicate these phenomena through the use of artwork (such as the works of

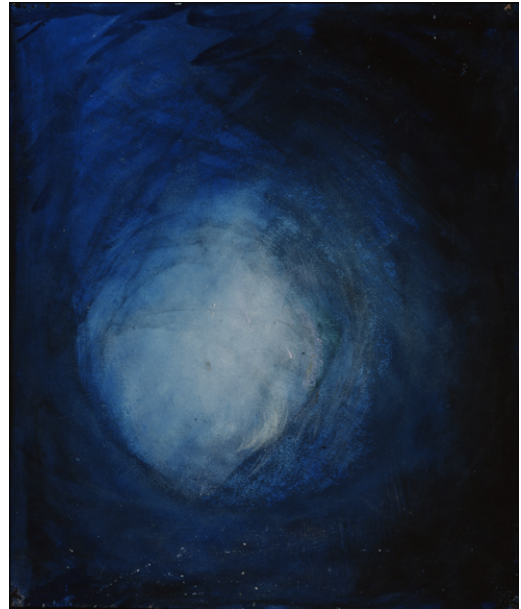


Image 7 - Mikalojus Konstantinus Čiurlionis, *Creation of the World II*, 1906, Tempera on Paper

Mikalojus Konstantinus Čiurlionis). Artists that harness synesthesia believe that color requires no interpretation or decoding, yet can act directly upon the emotions like a musical note.

¹² Brougher, Kerry, and Olivia Mattis. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.

¹³ Ibid.

One of the many forms that the synesthetic experience can take is that of haptic perception. Haptic visuality “is the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside of our bodies. In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch.”¹⁴ The viewer’s body becomes more involved in the process of seeing than in that of optical visuality.

There are a number of ways that filmmakers can utilize haptics in their filmmaking, most of which emerge from the use of texture. Art historian Laura Marks explains “the video works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what it is she is beholding. Haptic video resolves into figuration only gradually, if at all, inviting instead the caressing look.”¹⁵ According to Marks, the haptic sensation is engaged when an audience is provided with an unfamiliar or abstract image, even if that image eventually resolves itself into the familiar.

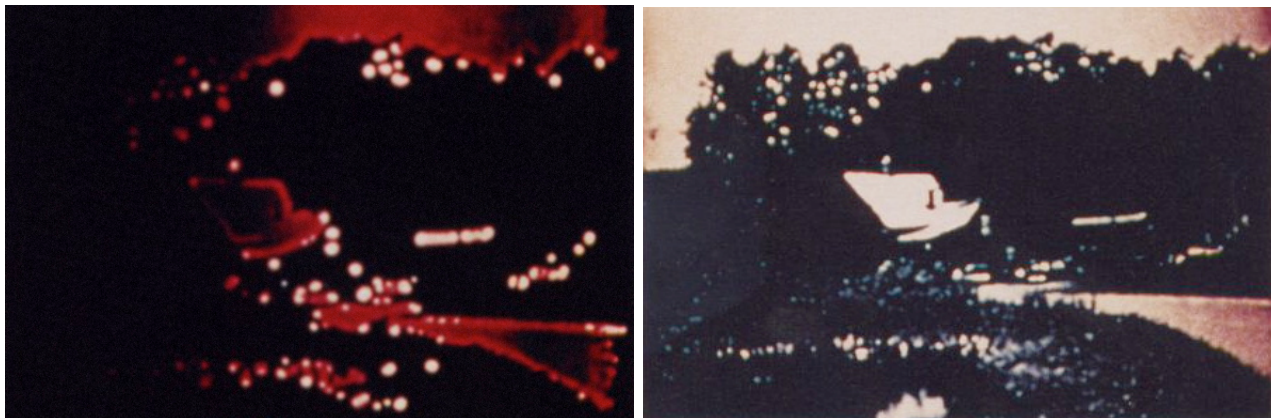


Image 8 - JJ Murphy, *Print Generation A/B*, 1974, 16mm Film, 50 Minutes

¹⁴ Marks, Laura U. “*Video haptics and erotics*.” Screen 39, no. 4 (1998): 331-348.

¹⁵ Ibid.

These haptic phenomena can be achieved in a number of ways, from extreme close-ups, to electronic effects that render the object indistinct, drawing attention to the perception of texture (such as the PixelVision used by Sadie Benning). Haptic perception can be seen in JJ Murphy's *Print Generation A/B*, where representational images are first shown to the viewer as abstract textures of light and color, allowing the haptic properties of film grain and exposure to imprint themselves upon the viewer's eye long before they have any idea what it is they are looking at. The one-minute loop which has been processed and re-processed fifty times is first shown in reverse; over the course of twenty-five minutes the textures and colors slowly reveal themselves as representative images. In the film's second half the images slowly degrade, and the viewer's experience of the abstract images is completely changed by the knowledge of what those images once were.

Marks' writing on Haptics as well as Murphy's film both informed my film *Seduction of the Innocent*. The film is based on the writings of a psychologist, Dr. Fredric Wertham, who believed that comic books were full of subliminal messages that were corrupting our youth, turning readers into juvenile delinquents, violent sociopaths and homosexuals. The film consists of these images blown up to absurd proportions until all that is left is the ben-day dot patterns that form them. These remnants of commercial printing are then hand printed onto celluloid film strips. The images are then mirrored to create a series of constantly-shifting patterns recalling a Rorschach test. The movement of the textures creates a psychological state for the viewers, in which they are an active participant attempting to make meaning from

the abstract, hand-made texture. Only in the final thirty seconds of the film do we move further away from the dot-pattern revealing that the viewer has been looking at details of panels from comic books all along.

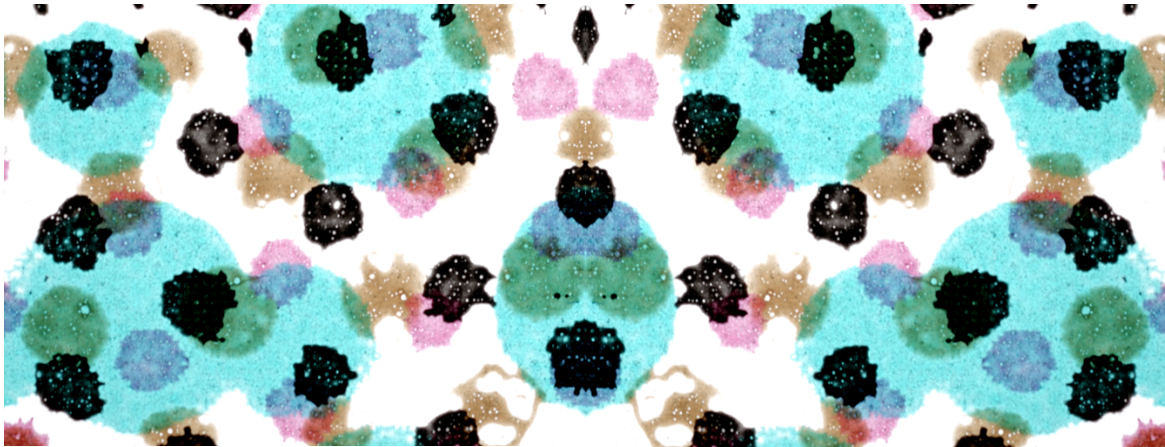


Image 9 - Dakota Nanton, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 2016, 12 Minutes

Haptic works acknowledge the limits of visibility and seek to appeal to the viewer's body as a whole, engaging “a longing for a multisensory experience that pushes beyond the audiovisual properties of the medium.”¹⁶ In haptic response, the spectacle of the screen gives way to a bodily response. My use of animation has been heavily influenced by my research into synesthesia and haptic phenomena. When the body becomes involved in the viewing process, the mind is also engaged, allowing powerful possibilities for the viewer.

¹⁶ Marks, Laura U. “Video haptics and erotics.” *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998): 331-348.

Ch. 4 Metabolism and Montage

“What is required is a theater without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs. The spectator must be roused from the stupefaction of spectators enthralled by appearances and won over by the empathy that makes them identify with the characters on the stage. He will be shown a strange, unusual spectacle, a mystery whose meaning he must seek out. He will thus be compelled to exchange the position of passive spectatorship for that of a scientific investigator or experimenter, who observes phenomena and searches for their causes.”

-Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009)¹⁷

Hopefully the previous examples have begun to illustrate cinema’s ability to invoke altered states of mind for their viewer. However, the reception of abstraction on the part of the audience involves a certain willingness to open oneself up to a new, and often unexpected experience.

“Usually the still frames that constitute a moving image are moving so fast we can’t see them individually... video then is not about a bodily relationship with a thing, but instead about the speed of thinking.”¹⁸ Instead of a still image the audience is engaging with a constantly changing image, there is no single image to parse but

¹⁷ Rancière, Jacques, and Gregory Elliott. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009.

¹⁸ Jennings, Gabrielle. *Abstract Video: The Moving Image in Contemporary Art*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

instead a series of images that each share their own relationships with the images that come before and follow them.

Perhaps no filmmaker better encapsulates both the ineffable power of cinema and the power of series of images than Nathaniel Dorsky, who calls his work 'devotional cinema'. "That



Image 10 - Nathaniel Dorsky, *Hours for Jerome: Part One*, 1966/70-82, 21 Minutes, Silent

the ineffable quality of vision can be expressed by projected light within darkness gives film great power. When a film is fully manifest it may serve as a mirror that realigns our psyches and opens us up to appreciation and humility... the more we are open to ourselves and are willing to touch the depths of our own being, the more we are participating in devotion.”¹⁹

Dorsky's own films contain an unnamable power that has been described as a realigning of the viewer's metabolism, creating an inexplicable feeling of serenity for his audience, similar to states achieved by deep meditation. His films are projected silently, accompanied only by the whirl of the slowed-down projector, allowing for a deeper contemplation, and are often made up of sequences of representative images. Dorsky is dealing with abstraction much less than other filmmakers I mention here, however in his usage of the representational image he is able to create abstraction through the complicated relationships of editing and juxtaposition.

¹⁹ Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005.

In his films, often one object is seen through, or screened by, another object making a recognizable object unfamiliar and forcing the viewer to pay attention to texture, shadow, and color. As such his films retain an extremely haptic quality. Stephen Holden wrote in the *New York Times*, “The silent films of the experimental San Francisco filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky are about as close as movies can come to evoking the experience of lying on your back in the grass on a summer day, gazing through leaves at the clouds and letting your mind drift into the cosmos.”²⁰

The works of Nathaniel Dorsky were extremely influential to me as he makes films which are intended to be seen in a cinema space, in a group of people. These are the sort of spaces in which my own work flourishes, as my works embrace the ceremony of cinema and are created with the intention of being watched by an audience in a dark theater.

In Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*²¹ he compared the medium of painting where free-floating contemplation is encouraged, to photography which requires captions to describe the content of the photograph and those captions become “even more explicit and imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding ones.” This may be true for

²⁰ Holden, Stephen. “Speaking to the Heart Without a Single Word.” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2000.

²¹ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968.

many narrative films, but the structure of Dorsky's films seem to be a direct rebuke of this belittling of film. The relationship between shots is never obvious in Dorsky's film but requires the audience's contemplation to be fully understood. Of his methods Dorsky writes, "if a film fills in too much, it violates our experience."²² One example in *Triste* is a shot of a coiled garden hose. The scene seems to exist initially only for its aesthetic beauty, but later in the film if the audience is paying attention, they will notice the remarkable similarity in the shape of a coiled snake springing into action. The potential energy of the initial shot becomes the kinetic energy of the latter shot. The audience's patience and attention are rewarded tenfold. His work relies on a process he calls *polyvalent montage* where instead of reacting with the images or cuts directly before or after, the meaning and feeling behind images can be changed completely by the images that came long before it, or don't appear until long after it leaves the screen.

Although he is working with very different imagery from me, Dorsky's writings and films have been a huge influence on my own works. His writings on the



Image 11 - Dakota Nanton, *Intermission*, 2016, 27 Minutes

potential of cinema have inspired my own thoughts about the meaning of being a maker, and his theory of polyvalent montage was highly influential in the creation of

²² Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005.

my film *Intermission*, in which four discreet sections could easily be screened as standalone films with their own meaning, for example one section uses archival footage to engage in a dialogue about homosexuality and cultural normativity while another section uses both hand-drawn and digital animation to address a suicide. While each section can exist separately, when screened together the viewer must think about how these various sections relate to each other (the relationships between the sections are not immediately obvious) and the meaning of each section is changed drastically by the sections that precede and follow each.

Dorsky's work highlights to me the potential use of editing and juxtaposition as tool of abstraction in order to create a meaningful experience for the audience. This is another way I view using the unique qualities of the filmic medium to create a space for contemplation, a universal space closer to a cathedral than to the megaplex. This is a place where the audience is given space to meditate on their own thoughts, to contemplate their existence, to come together to celebrate the medium of film in its most powerful and true form.

Ch. 5 Narrative Abstractions

“There are three kinds of prajna [best knowledge]: hearing about the truth, contemplating the truth, then meditating and becoming familiar with the truth directly in our immediate experience”

- Sakyong Miphan, *Ruling Your World*, 2005²³

In Susan Sontag’s essay, *Against Interpretation*, Sontag argues that “Interpretation takes the sensory experience of a work for granted.”²⁴ She traces the origins of the need for interpretation to Aristotle’s arguments that all art is mimesis, or an imitation of reality. This way of approaching art naturally contributes to the mode of thinking that art must somehow justify itself. Aristotle’s thoughts on mimesis assumed that art was necessarily figurative, but his assertions can be applied to all manner of art including the abstract experience.

Sontag asserts that modern viewers and consumers of art place an overemphasis on idea and content, and approach works of arts in order to interpret them. “By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames a work of art.”²⁵ Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable and in doing so it ignores and rejects all of the visceral, immediate and unnamable effects of

²³ Mipham, Sakyong. *Ruling Your World: Ancient Strategies For Modern Life*. New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006.

²⁴ Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. New York: Dell Pub., 1966.

²⁵ Ibid.

art. Even Aristotle, at his most critical, recognized a transcendent, or therapeutic value of art, beyond interpretation, “Art is useful, after all, Aristotle counters, medicinally useful in that it arouses and counters dangerous emotions.”²⁶

As a maker who values the experience of my work over any specific interpretation of the content, it becomes my duty to create a space where the audience is invited to lose themselves in the work. All the while, being aware that the urge to create meaning will always exist for the audience. While exploring this delicate balance narrative began to enter my films more and more.

The first such example of this in my work was in *Oh Ophelia*, whose Spanish voiceover consists of a translation of *Hamlet*’s ‘To Be or Not to Be’ soliloquy, the subtitles are not a transcription of this text but rather excerpts from my dream journal. The two texts interact and reference each other, but only for viewers who speak Spanish. These sort of hidden references and narratives continue throughout my work, including the translated code in *Meditations on Binary Vision*.

In *Oh, Ophelia* different media are juxtaposed with each other, such as Super 8mm footage, hand-painted animation and digital



Image 12 - Dakota Nanton, *Oh, Ophelia*, 2016, 3:40

²⁶ Ibid.

animation. The rapid shifts between these different media create the impression for the viewer of falling between different states of liminal consciousness. This is an intentional choice to disorient the viewer and it parallels the inability of the protagonist within the narrative to tell the difference between their waking and dream life.

My film *Odysseus and the Oceanic Feeling*, is a queer, contemporary retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus attempts to return home to a lost lover after many years abroad. The film does have a narrative, which is informed by the events of Homer's epic poem, but depending on the viewer's relationship and knowledge of the source material that narrative is extremely loose. My explorations of narrative abstraction play out through the structure of the film as well. The sections of the film are told out of order, and depending on how the viewer rearranges the sequences in their head there are many ambiguous interpretations of the ending: perhaps Odysseus really did return to his lover, perhaps Odysseus himself has died and is reunited after death, or perhaps his lover has died and they are only reunited in a dream.

The first shot of the film is a long, almost silent shot of a swimming pool and in fact there are long periods throughout the film where very little happens, allowing those shots room to breathe, and the audience time for their own thoughts to intrude into the film before bringing them back into the narrative.

Almost all of my films have some element of personal biography and the film becomes a balancing act between the personal, the audience experience, the source



Image 13 - Dakota Nanton, *Odysseus and the Oceanic Feeling*, 2019, 26 Minutes

texts, and a narrative trajectory which is exemplified by the penultimate chapter of the film, in which the film is halted completely for a section of experimental abstract animation which advances the story and creates a subconscious journey for the viewer. There is no warning or parallel for this section within the film and because of this, much like many of the other sections of the film, the viewer is allowed to interpret for themselves what this means within the larger narrative and no clear or easy answer is given. At this point in the film the viewer is trusted to fend completely for themselves and given permission to interpret the ending of the film however they will.

In my film *Ideas for Films*, a series of hypothetical films are presented which exist only in the viewer's imagination. Each film is presented only as a text over scratched black leader.

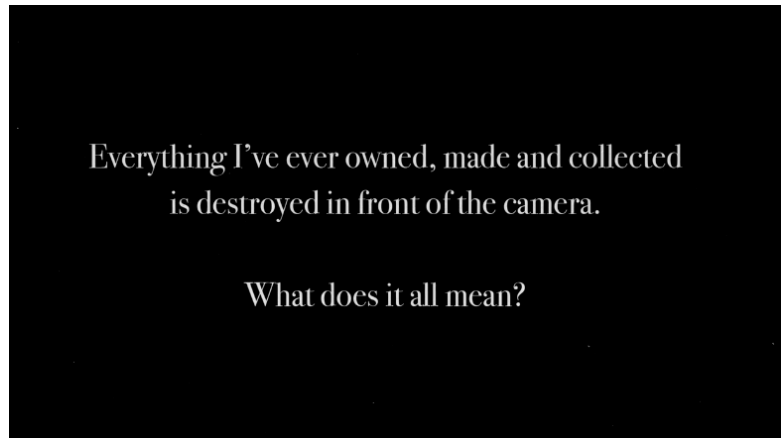


Image 14 - Dakota Nanton, *Ideas for Films*, 2018, 5:00

The inspiration for this project came from the Fluxus movement of the 1960's and 70's which was filled with ideas for hypothetical pieces that could be recreated by anyone. This early conceptual art movement created works which did not have to exist as physical objects but instead could merely exist as ideas, proposals or thought experiments. The viewer is invited to either recreate the piece or to imagine the completed piece regardless of whether or not the piece ever exists or is ever performed.

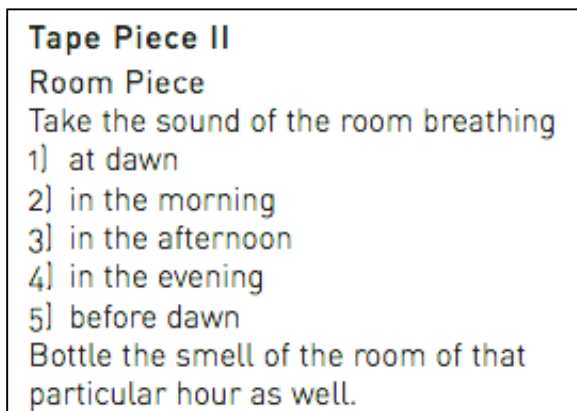


Image 15 - Yoko Ono, *Tape Piece II*, 1963, Fluxus Performance Workbook

This invitation of the imagination into the work is to me, a certain type of abstraction. Different to that the physical and visual abstractions of other works of mine, but serving a similar purpose, where the viewer is allowed a space to create their

own relationship to the work. (In this case, by imagining films that don't exist). The

films envisioned by each viewer will be very different from each other and also from the films imagined by me as the filmmaker.

Each of these works use source texts, personal history and abstraction in very different ways but like my other works they are ultimately concerned with creating a transcendent experience through abstraction, in which narrative comes second to internal experience.

Ch. 6 Digital Abstractions

“The kind of expectation aroused by a message with an open structure is less a prediction of the expected than an expectation of the unpredictable.”

-Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1962)²⁷

Painter Robert Motherwell described the arrival of abstraction as such: “Nothing as drastic as abstract art could have come into existence save as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need. The need is felt for experience-intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.”²⁸ This speaks to an innate desire for a transcendental experience, which for me is a driving reason behind my compulsion to make art.

The works I have highlighted here seek to eliminate the difference between the space of the work and the space of the viewer. This is achieved through different strategies: from synesthetic strategies, which engage the audience’s senses to envelop them in the work, to the use of the mystery and intrigue of the image to involve the viewer by posing a question to them.

Laura Marks wrote of the audience, “If one understands film viewing as an exchange between two bodies – one of the viewer and that of the film – then the

²⁷ Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

²⁸ Motherwell, Robert, Symposium on Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), 1951

characterization of the film viewer as passive, vicarious or projective must be replaced with a model of a viewer who participates in the production of the cinematic experience.”²⁹ The belief here being that when the audience is presented with a mysterious or abstract image they are more likely to engage with that image, and to think critically about what they are viewing.

For Marks video had a particular power because of its ability to abstract representational imagery, “When vision yields to the diminished capacity of video, it gives up some mastery; our vision dissolves in the unfulfilling or unsatisfactory space of video... The viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves. By interacting up close with an image, close enough that the figure and ground commingle, the viewer gives up her own sense of separateness from the image.”³⁰

The ideal relationship between viewer and image becomes one of mutuality, in which the viewers are more likely to lose themselves to the image, to lose their sense of proportion. Making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing and allows the audience to become enveloped completely in the work.

My own work has moved further and further into using digital technology as a means of abstraction from the computer meditations of *Meditations on Binary Vision*,

²⁹ Marks, Laura U. “Video Haptics and Erotics.” *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998): 331-348.

³⁰ Ibid.

to the computer animations of *Oh, Ophelia* and *Odysseus and the Oceanic Feeling*. This digital abstraction represents for the imagery another layer of separation from the ‘real’, or representational, and the inauthenticity of the digital imagery creates a space for the viewer removed from the familiar.

This type of thinking about film, is exemplified in the works of Jeremy Blake who used sensual textures to draw the viewer in to colorful projected works he called

“time-based paintings”. In his film *Winchester* representational images morph into moving inkblots and back again, recreating for the viewer an



experience of the madness **Image 16 - Jeremy Blake, *Winchester*, 2002, 21 Minute Loop**

of Sarah Winchester, a widow who built a mansion to protect herself from the ghosts that haunted her. The mystery of the abstract image intrigues the viewer and encourages them to become an active participant in the work, spending time with and attempting to parse the images, rather than the passive viewing that would be encouraged by purely representational forms.

In my own film *Fear of Drowning*, a school of fish is digitally manipulated to become a sort of kaleidoscope, engulfing and overwhelming the viewer. The natural world is digitally altered to represent not a physical space, but an emotional space.

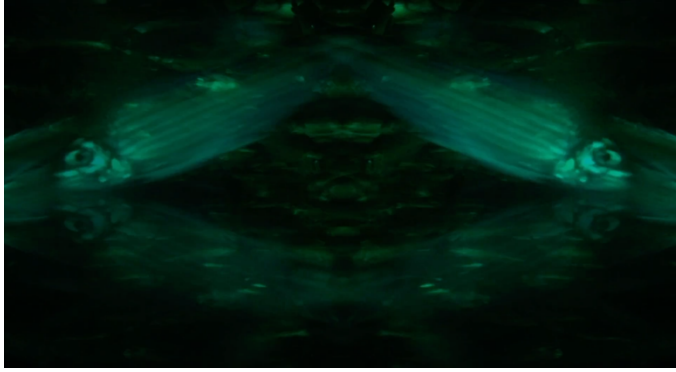


Image 17 - Dakota Nanton, *Fear of Drowning*, 2018, 9:00

The film is made up of three distinct sections each tied together by the motif of water, which together form a sort of emotional tone poem dealing with fear.

Digital abstraction can be used not only to create emotional landscapes or to represent other states of consciousness, but can also be a subversive process. In the film *Alternative Facts*, representational images are digitally manipulated in a number of ways to discuss the queer experience. The film begins with a Christian television show from the 1980's which has been re-edited to become a text about a pansexual Jesus Christ. The second act presents a data-moshed (a video file of which the code has been intentionally manipulated and glitched) of an Esther Williams synchronized swimming number. The image becomes so distorted that at times the bodies are no longer recognizable as human bodies, a digital abstraction representing gender dysphoria, or what it feels like to live in a body that does not represent you. The film ends with a sonic soundscape and a series of images refracted into the RGB color



Image 18 - Dakota Nanton, *Alternative Facts*, 2019, 14 Minutes

swimming number. The image becomes so distorted that at times the bodies are no longer recognizable as human bodies, a digital abstraction representing gender dysphoria, or what it feels like to live in a body that does not represent you. The film ends with a sonic soundscape and a series of images refracted into the RGB color

spectrum of the projector, creating both a meditative space for the viewer and reminding them of the cinematic apparatus itself. In all of these gestures I am exploring what it means to be making digital films, and how digital abstraction of images can pose greater questions of identity and self.

Ch. 7 Shamanistic Cinema

“I’m no Curandero, I’m lost myself.”

- Letter from Allen Ginsberg to William Burroughs (1960)³¹

Last summer, a film treatment I wrote brought me to the Amazon Rainforest to make a project about the endangered Amazon River Dolphin. Through a series of fortunate miscalculations, I did not end up seeing a single dolphin, but instead met Carlos Prado, the director of the Bolivian Museum of Natural Medicine. He invited me to witness and participate in a number of traditional Quechua healing rituals led by himself. I also had the opportunity through this connection to visit the homes of some of the last practicing Shamans of the Beni River Valley (a tributary of the Amazon River that demarcates the border between Brazil and Bolivia). Over my weeks in Bolivia I had the opportunity to both witness and participate in a number of ceremonies, including a number involving traditional plant medicine such as ayahuasca, a vine known also alternately by the names of “Vine of the Soul” and “the Rope of Death”.

As Prado describes in his book on native plant medicine (*translated from Spanish*), “The end result of consuming entheogenic plants or their respective alkaloids is to achieve a determined alteration of consciousness. This experience of

³¹ Burroughs, William S., and Allen Ginsberg. *The Yage Letters Redux*. Edited by Oliver Harris. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006.



Image 19 - 'El Curandero' Carlos Prado in the Aconcagua Nature Reserve, 2018. Photograph by Dakota Nanton

expanded consciousness implies a series of perspective modifications to all levels of being. This occurs not only at the physical level but also on energetic, emotional, mental and spiritual levels depending on the context in which they are ingested, the quantity consumed as well as the

ceremonial control exercised by the healer, shaman, or priest.”³²

These experiences with shamans practicing tradition medicine led me to rethink my idea of what it means to be a filmmaker. It is a shaman’s job to create a safe, cleansing experience for their patient, to hold space for them, and to provide them with the tools needed to recover from whatever physical or psychological trauma their patient is seeking to cure. This is not at all dissimilar to how I was thinking of my films. When I made *Meditations on Binary Vision*, it was my goal to make a film that could help the viewer cope with death. In *Fear of Drowning* I placed my own thoughts and anxieties on the screen in a visual form as a sort of catharsis for the audience and for myself.

I began to think of my filmmaking as a sort of ceremonial practice, thinking of the tools that I used and their potential effects of good or harm. As Catherine

³² Prado, Carlos. *"Mancharisqa" NO Es Depresión: Aporte Etnomédico Quechua Para La Salud Mental Intercultural*. Cochabamba, Bolivia, 2016.

Rountree writes, “The practices of shamanism and filmmaking require a high level of sensitivity to maintain contact with the spirit or invisible world—the world of inner vision. Both filmmakers and shamans need a heightened accessibility and responsiveness to the inner landscape of the self as well as to the physical and emotional cartography that surrounds them... Shamanism does not rely on a belief or adherence to any doctrine. In the hands of creative and technically skilled filmmakers, the value of shamanism can become an entry point into and a means of affirming other realities. When using the medium of film to shift attention from a consensus reality, directors as shamans expand their consciousness and the consciousness of their community by offering blueprints for spiritual development.”³³

These experiences carried with them a renewed importance for me of the work that myself and other filmmakers were doing, as well as a profound responsibility. I set out to make a film about my experiences in the Amazon Rainforest. The resulting film *La Soga Del Muerto (the Rope of Death)* is structured as a cleansing ceremony, with directions on how to participate given directly to the audience over black leader by the shaman (Prado).

In ayahuasca ceremonies, the plant itself is not a curative agent, instead the plant enables the patient to identify the nature of the illness or grievance that they are suffering from. This is the way in which I imagined the film working, and to facilitate this within the film a series of questions are proposed directly by the

³³ Rountree, Cathleen. “Auteur Film Directors as Contemporary Shamans.” *Jung Journal* 2, no. 2 (2008): 123-34. doi:10.1525/jung.2008.2.2.123.

shaman to the audience (making them an active participant in the film). This introspective journey is meant to initiate sort of self-discovery on the part of the audience member led by the shaman.

As this is not my culture or heritage, it was extremely important to me to be very deliberate and respectful in my handling of the material. It was not my goal to make an authoritative documentary about these practices, but instead to make a film which simply represented my own experiences in the



Amazon rainforest. For **Image 20** – Dakota Nanton, *La Soga Del Muerto*, 2019, 32 Minutes

this reason I made sure that I never directly showed any of the traditional indigenous ceremonies. The beginning of the film sets up both the location and the labor involved with collecting and preparing materials for an ayahuasca ceremony but the ceremonies themselves are replaced by images representing my own, personal experience of the ceremony. These final scenes recreate my own emotional and mental state as opposed to any direct representation of these sacred ceremonies. For example, a fire representing *la purga* (the purging), a dark walk through an unlit forest, and then finally the apotheosis appears in the form of a vision of the cosmos, representing an expanded knowledge and understanding of the universe and self.

The viewer is guided through this journey by the filmmaker, and hopefully the film creates a sort of cleansing space through deliberate use of the materials, in which they can have their own personal cleansing. The development of the project came through careful planning and consideration with all involved parties including the three shamans shown in the film who were sent in-progress cuts of the film throughout the creative process.

This film represents the most literal version of my goals of expanded consciousness through cinema, and in a way serves as a sort of manifesto for my belief in the transcendent power of cinema.

Ch. 8 *Our Few and Evil Dayes* and Future Projects

“To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetfull of evils past, is a mercifull provision in nature, whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil dayes, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetitions.”

- Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn-Burial* (1658)³⁴

The final project of my thesis semester is the installation *Our Few and Evil Dayes*. This installation comprises of a looped film which responds to the British polymath Sir Thomas Browne’s text, *Hydriotaphia*. The influential text ends with an extended contemplation of humanity’s struggle with mortality.

Through an abstraction of text, image, and animation, the film invites the viewer to enter a state of meditative introspection.

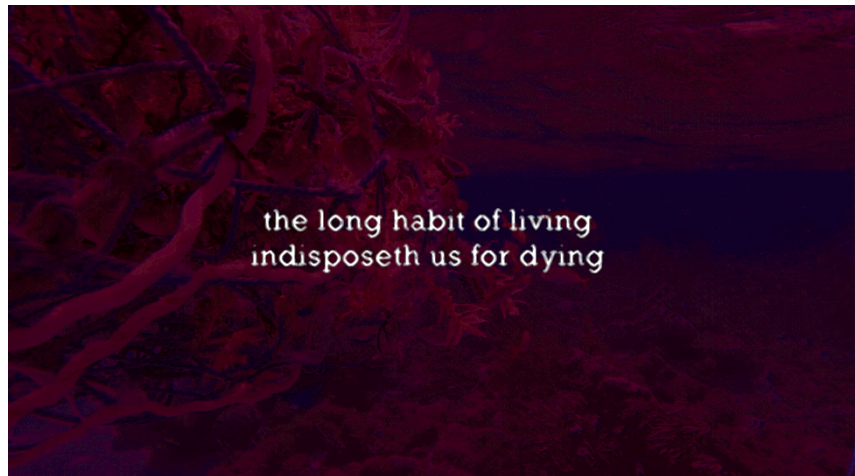


Image 21 - Dakota Nanton, *Our Few and Evil Dayes*, 2019, 10 Minutes

Images are repeated and

distorted until ultimately only fragments remain, speaking to the futility and

³⁴ Browne, Thomas. *Hydriotaphia Or, A Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk. Together with the Garden of Cyrus, or The Quincunciall Lozenge, or Net-work Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered; with Sundry Observations*. London: Printed for Hen. Brome at the Signe of the Gun in Ivy-lane., 1658.

imperfection of memory. The work becomes a tender meditation on life, death, fear of the unknown, and a personal struggle to come to terms with one's own mortality.

The film attempts to address these questions of mortality and of fear of the unknown which have been addressed in previous works like *Meditations on Binary Vision* and *Fear of Drowning*. This time the questions are addressed through the direct presentation of text on abstracted image.

This piece was created specifically for the space of the CU Art Museum, and

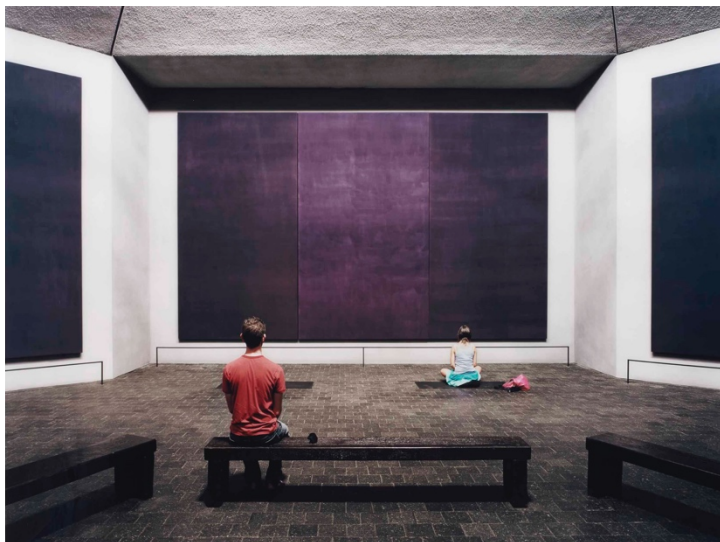


Image 22 - Mark Rothko and Philip Johnson, et al. *The Rothko Chapel*, Completed 1971. Photograph by Thomas Struth

represents my first attempt to distill all of the ideas of meditative cinema I have discussed here into a site-specific installation. The scale of the projection was extremely important as I wanted to create a filmic space that the viewer felt engulfed in, inspired by the

Rothko Chapel, a meditative space built to house the paintings of Mark Rothko. The idea of the chapel was to through art create “a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none”. The images are large enough that the viewer loses their sense of proportion in a small space, reminding them of their physical presence but alienating them at the same time.

This work, in combination with *La Soga Del Muerto* and *Alternative Facts* (completed simultaneously) represent in a way a culmination of all of the various threads of research and the preceding films that I created during my graduate career. I am excited to see where my work takes me in the future, and I have a number of in progress films which continue to elaborate on these ideas in new and exciting ways:

I originally went to the Amazon Rainforest with the intention of creating a film about ‘El Boto’ a mythical pink dolphin which turns into a man at night dressed in a white suit and white fedora.



Image 23 - Dakota Nanton, *La Vid Del Alma*, Work in Progress

Unused footage from the Amazon, animation and personal documentary (inspired by Agnes Varda’s insertion of self into *The Gleaners and I*) will combine into a film which I am tentatively titling *La Vid Del Alma* (The Vine of the Soul). Originally this material was meant to be a part of *La Soga Del Muerto* but I slowly removed it as it distracted from my objectives for that film. By dividing the film into two halves I have been freed to take many creative liberties with this sister project.

The work *Last Days in Berlin*, consists of both a narrated history of Berlin and a personal travelogue dealing with returning to the sites of trauma and genocide as a queer, mixed-race, Jew. What does it mean to revisit places of atrocity and how do



Image 24 - Dakota Nanton, *Last Days in Berlin*, Work in Progress

we memorialize and come to terms with the past? Much of the footage for this film has been shot but there are many scenes involving rotoscoping which remain to be completed.

The final film, *Mineola* also deals with family history and trauma.

It is an experimental-documentary about a lost history of vaudeville roller skating in Long Island, New York. It tells the story of my great-grandparents who battled polio to become world-renowned performers in the 1940's. I have been collecting footage and archival materials for the past two years and have begun the process of assembling the materials into a larger project.



Image 25 - Dakota Nanton, *Mineola*, Work in Progress

I am usually working on multiple films at once, having completed four films in the first months of 2019 alone, this has been an especially productive and rewarding time for me. I am very excited about the work I have been creating making its way in the world, and in using this future work to continue to explore new directions and possibilities in my cinematic practice. As the director Andrey Tarkovsky wrote, “Art addresses everybody, in the hope of making an impression, above all of being felt, of

being the cause of an emotional trauma and being accepted, of winning people not by incontrovertible rational argument but through the spiritual energy with which the artist has charged the work.”³⁵

³⁵ Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014.

CONCLUSION

“We all want expanded consciousness and bliss. It's a natural, human desire. And a lot of people look for it in drugs. But the problem is that the body, the physiology, takes a hard hit on drugs. Drugs injure the nervous system, so they just make it harder to get those experiences on your own... Besides, far more profound experiences are available naturally. When your consciousness starts expanding, those experiences are there. All those things can be seen. It's just a matter of expanding that ball of consciousness. And the ball of consciousness can expand to be infinite and unbounded. It's totality. You can have totality. So all those experiences are there for you, without the side effects of drugs.”

- David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish* (2016)³⁶

In these writings, I have touched on only a few of the many strategies that can and have been employed by myself and other filmmakers to use abstraction as a means to create meaning in work: From the filmmakers of Visual Music, who use image as a means to bring film closer to the pure abstraction of music, to artists who use abstraction as a means to bring the artist closer to a meditative state, there is a tacit acknowledgement of the power of non-representational imagery. This power can be harnessed using haptic and synesthetic methods that blur the lines between various senses, or by using editing as a means to create meaning from abstraction. The maker must also always consider the audience experience and address an inherent need for interpretation in abstract works.

³⁶ Lynch, David. *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*. NY, NY: Tarcher, 2016.

Abstraction is often thought of as a lack of representational imagery, but in the works addressed and highlighted here, abstraction becomes a means to touch upon much greater issues, to create a meaningful experience for the viewer and to tap into the synesthetic and metaphysical aspects of film.

I plan on continuing to continue researching and creating work exploring these themes. I have highlighted here artists whose work is in dialogue with my own through explorations of theme and possibility, but there are many more artists who could be included in this conversation, as well as many more artists working in this realm that I have yet to discover. There is always more to discover, more work to be made. It is my job as an artist to create spaces that facilitate exploration and discovery.

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