One of art’s greatest challenges has always been how to transmit the ineffable, all we cannot describe or apprehend through the language, all we cannot reach using words. Sometimes those words can be used as a springboard – as in Benjamin Péret’s question remembered by Buñuel in his memoirs:

«“Is it really not true that mortadella is made by the blind?” For me, this statement in the form of question, is as true as a truth from the Gospel. Of course, some might find the relationship between blindness and mortadella somewhat absurd, but for me is the magical example of a completely irrational sentence which gets sharply and mysteriously bathed under the glimmer of truth.» (BUÑUEL, 1982: 190)

His whole work seems to be contained in that landscape of relations – enlightened by a question without answer – which opens in front of each reader. Its force comes from the impossibility to explain or describe it. But you can also suppress any relation with language. The cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky will talk like that, with images and time, without language or sound, about ineffable truths to which nobody would have thought there was an access and, because of that, would have never been able to be shared. Near the beginning of Devotional Cinema, Dorsky tells an anecdote which could sound familiar and is quickly empowered by its conceptual bond with religiousness: upon exiting a screening of Viaggio in Italia (Roberto Rosellini, 1954) all the members of the audience left the room in total silence, and in the elevator which brought them to the street the awkwardness of sharing the space with strangers had disappeared completely. The film had acted as a kind of secular communion by showing that certain intimate and inexpressible truths had been seen and communicated, and finally shared, by a filmmaker.

In this way of explaining a spiritual connection through the behaviours seen in an elevator, and even in the book’s writing style, we also see how Dorsky is participating deeply in a purely American form of thought, perhaps started by R.W. Emerson in the mid-nineteenth century when he was a godfather to Transcendentalism, which focused in the familiar and simple matters. And just as Devotional Cinema’s prose does not hide at any moment its oral source (it is a revision of a John Sacret Young Lecture at Princeton University) and handles high concepts using that casual tone, its author considers that the search of a spiritual sensibility must always take place in the terms of the close and the common things. These elements cannot be just materials to build something – all the theoretic structure should be built to throw light upon, or protect, that matter.

In this way in his cinema everything he films becomes sacred. A shirt, a glass or a handful of sand, objects that may have lost their value, worn out by the social pressures about what must seem important to us. In another one of the most memorable passages of the book we are invited to look at our hands and think about the complexity and variety of the actions they can perform, in all the particularities of this versatile tool, in its aesthetic beauty too. The reader suddenly
reconfigures the relationship with the hands that held unconsciously the book a moment before, just as Dorsky is trying, through his cinema, to give back the real value to the things registered by his camera, obviating the exchange value which accompanies and adulterates them (in economic terms within a capitalist society, but also cinematographically when we are dealing with those objects placed in front of the camera without being really observed, merely as a background to a plausible narrative). What is sacred is always untouchable, immense for itself. The need to underline it, staining it with ideas, would be a violation. To turn it into a symbol of other thing would be to despise it; to use it as a material for an alien discourse, to impose an external sense would be to take advantage of it, reducing it to a poor position of contrivance for a greater end.

In the introduction of his excellent interview with Nathaniel Dorsky, Scott MacDonald reminds us of an interesting controversy:

«Several years ago, Stephen Holden claimed that for American Beauty (1999) Sam Mendes had borrowed “an image (and an entire aesthetic of beauty) from Nathaniel Dorsky’s Variations, in which the camera admired a plastic shopping bag being blown about by the wind” (New York Times, October 9, 1999). Dorsky remembers receiving a call from someone on the production of American Beauty, asking how Mendes might see the film, though he is not convinced that his shot was “borrowed.”» (MACDONALD, 2006:79-80)

Rather than having yet another discussion about commercial cinema’s debts towards the American avant-garde, it would perhaps be more interesting to focus in how this shot looks like in this new life. The scene quickly attracted a great deal of attention and became the most commented image of the film: the plastic bag shot (whose movements, of course, were much more distinct and spectacular than those of Dorsky’s bag: it goes up and down and turns somersaults) is introduced by a character with the question: “Do you want to see the most beautiful thing I’ve ever filmed?” and is accompanied by an evocative piano song by Thomas Newman. The character goes on, explaining what a special moment it was and specifying what it meant for him: “That’s the day I realized there was this entire life behind things…”

So in the surface it is the same shot, but only there, there is no more relation – perhaps that is why Dorsky quickly denied a direct filiation. Throughout his text, Dorsky keeps invoking other images which do share, in all the levels we have discussed, those same principles in the context of narrative cinema. The hat of an office worker filmed by Ozu, or the handkerchief of a wife filmed by Ford, are not sublimated nor they are the symbol of something that could transfigure them; those objects would be in any case the ones who are so powerful to be able to change something, to get to awaken emotions.

His ideas are so clear and firm that, just with a list of the films mentioned in his book, the reader could imagine both the ideas he defends and the kind of cinema he makes; perhaps with the same kind of unexplainable, slippery certitude that Buñuel did applaud. By putting together and associating these films, Dorsky shows the coordinates of a devotional cinema to which his films also belong. In the final step of editing, the sacred objects of his cinema are connected while preserving that mystery of an inexpressible relation (and perhaps, in order to be able to explicit his message, Mendes decided to leave alone that plastic bag shot), which however allows to feel its effect with the same power of the change of verse of a poem, or the brush-stroke and a certain colour in an abstract painting. Ozu films a mother embracing his song, then he cuts to a chimney expelling black smoke. We have understood.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

