



Scott MacDonald

A Critical Cinema 5

Interviews with Independent Filmmakers

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*For Amos Vogel and Frank Stauffacher, Jonas Mekas,
Karen Cooper, Howard Guttenplan, Robert Haller,
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Introduction

1

In the introductions to earlier volumes of the Critical Cinema project, I have focused on the “critical” function of the films that instigate my interviewing: their creation of an evolving critique of conventional media and the audience that has developed for it, their potentially “critical” educational function in expanding the awareness of teachers and students about the pedagogical opportunities of cinema. And I have discussed the extensive, varied history of critical cinema as a valuable aesthetic tradition in its own right, now endangered by modern technological developments (see especially the introduction to *A Critical Cinema 4* [2004]). In none of the previous general introductions, however, do I focus on what I have come to believe is a crucial element in virtually all the films and videos I discuss with filmmakers: their attempt to mechanically/chemically/electronically incarnate the spiritual. Indeed, in the general theoretical and critical literature about cinema there is remarkably little attention to the spiritual (I use “spiritual” here in the most conventional sense, to refer to that mysterious dimension of experience beyond the material, or incarnated within the material, that is exhausted by neither the senses nor the intellect and is generally perceived as the foundation for moral reflection and action). This paucity of comment seems increasingly strange to me, since I have come to think of the modern history of cinema, and the considerable history of critical cinema in particular, as an echo of, or at least a parallel to, the way in which the spiritual has been historically understood and how it has evolved within human culture.

There are, of course, good and obvious reasons for cineastes to be suspicious of the spiritual: cinema came of age during a remarkably violent century, and in many instances this violence was overtly or implicitly justified, even instigated, by organized religion—a pattern, of course, that has continued into the new millennium. On a more microcosmic level, my own childhood and adolescence (I was born in 1942) were informed by the frequent use of “God” and “Christianity” as a support for racial, gender, and sexual bigotry—again a tendency that remains powerful. But if the reader can forgive a New Age mantra, “spiritual” and “religious” are two different things: religion is the institutionalization of the spiritual, and the effects of any institution can be either positive or negative and are usually a complicated amalgam of both. In fact, it is often the very complexities of institutionalizing the spiritual that periodically instigate new moves away from the encumbrances of the social surround of religion and back toward a purer sense of spirit. Of course, the personal quest for a tenable relationship with the spiritual, whatever one wants to call it, has informed much of what we have considered the greatest literature and art, and it is, I believe, a formative and pervasive dimension of cinema.

I have read many attempts to understand how it happened that the particular form of the motion picture we call cinema arrived in the world at the conclusion of the nineteenth century. My own conjecture (and I recognize that this is hardly a new idea) is that cinema evolved as a way of replacing, or at least redirecting, certain dimensions of spiritual life that, in earlier eras, had been an automatic part of popular religion. In his short story “Absolution” (1924), F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts a young Roman Catholic boy in the rural Midwest who turns away from the Catholic Church because religion has come to seem drab and depressing. The implication of the story is that in earlier eras religion had power because it was the site of what was most gorgeous in human experience; now that the church can no longer provide the boy with this, his quest to find a place where “things go glimmering” is inevitable—and in fact the best evidence of the vitality of the boy’s spirit. Of course, for Fitzgerald’s generation the cinema was such a place, and to some degree it has remained so for us.

The film experience, at least the traditional theatrical film experience, shares a number of elements with many traditional forms of worship. We arrive at the theater, most often on a weekend—and with special frequency during holiday periods—where we sit in the semidarkness with others, all of us attracted to what will be revealed by a light from high above us. It is understood—at least in most theaters—that we will maintain a respectful silence during the “service,” except in those instances where the text of the presentation specifically calls for our response. In a majority of cases, at least in the popular cinema, the particular text we experience is highly ritualized:

we can predict many dimensions of the stories enacted on the screen; nevertheless, we enjoy experiencing the predictable with fellow devotees. Presumably because of the physical demands of looking at reflected light in a darkened space, we often avail ourselves of particular kinds of food traditionally identified with the ceremony of attending a theatrical film. In fact, in recent years we have come to recognize that in an economic sense our participation in theater concessions is all that keeps the theatrical film experience alive: that is, eating popcorn or Dots or Milk Duds is the cinematic sacrament that maintains our access to the light-from-on-high. 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 transformative in something like a moral sense.

These fairly obvious parallels between the theatrical cinema and traditional religious services have a considerable prehistory in the West. The decoration of medieval churches with events from the lives of Christ and the saints; the “illumination” of the medieval Books of Hours with imagery (not simply images we would recognize as sacred, but often with horrific and/or sensual imagery clearly meant as entertainment for those using those prayer books); the elaborate stained-glass windows of Gothic cathedrals, which, before the modern tendency to create a uniform lighting inside and outside, would gradually change as the sun moved across the sky; the great religious paintings of the Renaissance, many of them equally visual and narrative, that decorated cathedrals and churches and the homes of the wealthy; the Hudson River school of American landscape painting and its quest to reveal the divine within our natural surround, often using elaborate, sometimes theatrical presentational strategies—all these are proto-cinematic or precinematic.

In earlier eras when communities were comparatively homogeneous, where virtually all members of a community shared a particular set of beliefs and a particular form of worship, there was no need, or no possibility, of a sacramental gathering outside the auspices of the local cathedral/temple/mosque. But in more recent centuries, as diverse societies were increasingly exposed to one another, and became increasingly diversified as a result of the emigration of individuals and groups from society to society, what had been the comparatively common ground of religion was increasingly shattered into particular, separate religious communities (and/or, especially during recent centuries, as a result of the Enlightenment and the rise of science, into various religious communities and nonreligious groups). These developments culminated during the last century and a half. There are few, and fewer and fewer, places anywhere in the world where virtually

all members of particular societies or even local communities share organized spiritual experiences of a single type. Yet, if we can agree that a spiritual community is one of the crucial elements of human experience—and the amazing pervasiveness of religious worship across the globe and throughout history certainly suggests that this *is* a fundamental element of human culture—the maintenance of traditional religions and sects in an increasingly diverse world in effect creates a loss of some of the very things that a spiritual community has traditionally provided: in fact, the continuity of each distinct religious community now creates as much separation and distinction as it does connection within the larger society.

Is it any wonder, then, that cinema evolved into a major entertainment form, at least in this country, at exactly the moment when new waves of immigrants were transforming an already diverse nation? As they made their way into American society, the new immigrants were hoping not simply to maintain their heritage but to be integral components of their new society. They could honor their heritage in their local churches, temples, synagogues, mosques; but they could *also* feel a part of the larger community by participating in that other “spiritual” gathering, together with hundreds of their fellow citizens, in the local movie houses or, on special occasions, in the increasingly grand motion picture cathedrals in city centers (they came to be called “movie palaces,” but architecturally they always had more in common with cathedrals and grand churches). Here, in a public yet special space removed from direct church control, they could participate in the formation of a distinct American piety and values.

As the Hollywood film industry expanded during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and into the 1950s, it came to regard itself—and most Americans came to regard it—as the only truly significant producer of cinema and, implicitly, the only major source of this particular aspect of spiritual community. The advent of television during the 1950s and 1960s created a crisis in the industry, from which it gradually recovered; but while television did siphon off a substantial percentage of the film industry’s day-to-day business, going to the movies eventually regained its status as a special occasion, a crucial element of weekends and holiday periods, and a continuing focus of modern culture. As of the new millennium the Disney World/Universal Studios complex in Florida and smaller installations in California and elsewhere are primary pilgrimage sites in American culture, at least for families, and a considerable television audience forms every year for the annual rite of the Academy Awards: as a public television ritual, only the Superbowl surpasses the awards show, at least in this country.

The power and influence of Hollywood on American culture during the twentieth century were so pervasive that by midcentury it had begun to instigate various forms of rebellion among a good many filmmakers and

would-be filmmakers and in some portions of the moviegoing audience, who had become disenchanted with the general decadence, conservatism, and repressiveness of the commercial cinema—and with its spiritual vacuity. The result was a cinematic reformation that took a variety of forms. Beginning in the mid-1940s the film society movement, which had swept across Europe during the 1920s, finally arrived in the United States. Frank Stauffacher at Art in Cinema in San Francisco and Berkeley and Amos Vogel at Cinema 16 in New York City led the way. Programming types of film that had no chance of being seen on commercial screens (or in some cases had been successful but were now ignored), especially those forms of film we call “avant-garde” “experimental,” or “critical,” Stauffacher and Vogel became models for a nationwide network of film societies dedicated to the idea that moviegoing could offer more than entertaining communal escapes from reality. As the audiences for alternatives to Hollywood grew, so did the energy of filmmakers committed to the potential of cinema to provide deeper, more fully spiritual experiences than were available commercially. By the 1960s it was not at all uncommon for filmmakers to image themselves as apostles of new spiritual orders, and taken as a group—and a very diverse group they were: among critical filmmakers there have always been many sects—they can be understood as an ongoing protest against the catholic power of the entertainment industry. By the mid-1960s a new cinematic protestantism seemed (at least in the minds of some) poised to challenge the overwhelming domination of the industry.

This cinematic revival drew inspiration from several spiritual traditions. In *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), Jonas Mekas returns to his native land for the first time in twenty-eight years, only to realize that during the intervening quarter century he has found a new home within the community of artists, and especially film artists. During the final section of *Reminiscences*, Mekas visits Peter Kubelka and Hermann Nitsch, along with Ken and Flo Jacobs and Annette Michelson, and together this extended artistic family tours an ancient monastery. It is clear—from Mekas’s comments, from the Gregorian chants on the sound track—that Mekas sees himself and his colleagues as monks of a new aesthetic order, the Order of Cinema. Much the same idea is suggested during the final reel of Mekas’s *Lost Lost* (1976), when he and Ken and Flo Jacobs attempt to invade the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar to screen Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Ken Jacobs’s *Blonde Cobra* (1963). Rejected by the seminar, Mekas and his colleagues sleep in their truck. When they awake in the cold Vermont morning, they wrap themselves in blankets so that they look like monks—and, again, to the accompaniment of Gregorian chant—do some ritual filming. For Mekas especially, but also for any number of those who saw themselves as part of the New American Cinema, monasticism was an

appropriate and valuable metaphor and inspiration for avant-garde filmmaking, which Mekas envisioned as a brotherhood (or brotherhood/sisterhood) dedicated not to material advancement or technological progress but to the search for a more devout way to live in the world.

Equally important for the American cinematic reformation were the spiritual influences arriving from the East—especially from India and Japan—during the 1960s. Many West Coast critical filmmakers saw their work as a way of carrying on one or another Eastern spiritual tradition. Jordan Belson's filmmaking career was devoted to the production of cinematic mandalas, a way of exploring and expressing something of the inner world his study of Buddhism and his practice of hatha yoga had opened to him: "I am essentially an artist of the inner image. . . . I'm involved with the kind of imagery that has been dealt with in Tibetan art and in some Christian art of the Middle Ages . . . [forms of imagery] that have always been associated with the quest for spirituality" (Belson, in *A Critical Cinema 3* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998], 86). Bruce Baillie frequently depicted himself as a wandering mendicant, a cinematic monk something like the Japanese haiku master Matsuo Bashō in the travel sketches now known as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1680s); and his spiritual inclinations were reflected not only in his filmmaking but in Canyon Cinema, the informal community organization he created in the early 1960s that evolved into this nation's most dependable distributor of critical cinema (the announcement of the founding of Canyon Cinema distribution identified the founders as "devotees" of the "magic lantern muse"). Robert Nelson, a very different kind of filmmaker from Baillie (and another of the spiritual fathers of Canyon Cinema) for years has identified himself as a Taoist, and a Taoist sensibility informs much of his work.

Instances of critical filmmakers influenced by medieval Christian worship and monasticism and by Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Taoism can be found throughout this history, and some filmmakers have written essays explaining the importance of these influences on their work and lives. James Broughton's *Making Light of It* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1977), for example, explores connections between Zen and cinema: "Zen is an art of seeing. It does not follow a script. It is not founded on written words but on direct experience. It is outside the established teachings. Hence Zen is truly avant-garde cinema. . . . Zen is poetry in action. It is the reality one creates out of what already exists. Its big movie is made out of innumerable haiku moments frame by frame" (53). More recently, Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema* (San Francisco: Tuumba Press, 2003; a version of this essay is also available in Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda, eds., *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003]) takes as its subject the relation of religion and cinema—"not where religion

is the subject of a film, but where the film is the spirit or experience of religion.” Dorsky explains, “The word ‘devotion,’ as I am using it, need not refer to the embodiment of a specific religious form. Rather, it is the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation. When a film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depth of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and the world. It is alive as a devotional form” (15, 16).

There have been two breakthrough surveys/histories of films resonant with spiritual aspiration: Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970) and P. Adams Sitney’s *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974; a revised edition was published in 2003). *Expanded Cinema* is fueled by Youngblood’s fascination with the ways in which, during the sixties, an evolution of consciousness was being expressed and instigated by filmmakers, video artists, and the creators of other forms of mixed media. His chapters on Jordan Belson, James and John Whitney, and other “spiritual animators” (not Youngblood’s term, but often used for these filmmakers) demonstrate the many connections between this work and Eastern religious teachings. While Youngblood’s focus is on conceptually synthesizing the many ways in which mediamakers exemplify “man’s ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes” (41) and move humanity toward a new, more open, more spiritual way of being in the world, Sitney’s focus is on a set of filmmakers—especially Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Baillie, Stan Brakhage, James Broughton, Gregory Markopoulos, and Harry Smith—engaged in a lifelong process of cinematically generating new mythologies of the imagination for a spiritually destitute era. Sitney is committed to exegesis; *Visionary Film* demonstrates that the films he analyzes are, like biblical texts and other great literature, informed by complex spiritual visions that analysis can assist us in understanding.

While I admire both Youngblood’s passionate faith in the transformational possibilities of media and Sitney’s textual explorations and discoveries, my primary fascination has been with the simple *act of viewing* as a form of spiritual engagement. In fact, it was not until I discovered films that seemed to demand the kind of reverent attention that I had sensed around me during my early churchgoing experiences that I was drawn to what was then called “avant-garde” and “experimental” film and, in time, to the idea that my “mission” might be to serve this work. My first interviewee was Larry Gottheim, whose *Fog Line* (1971)—an eleven-minute single-shot film of fog gradually clearing over a green pasture in central New York State—was the pivotal moment in my becoming seriously engaged with the history of critical film; the quiet serenity of Gottheim’s lovely cinematic haiku has, as fully

as any film experience I have ever had, continued to inform my exploration of this field.

One of the most obvious dimensions of all the spiritual practices that have influenced critical filmmakers, and of the cine-spiritual practices of the filmmakers, is an explicit or implicit vow of poverty. Devotees of the spirit, especially those emulated by critical filmmakers, have traditionally accepted a vow of poverty as an essential ingredient of their spiritual questing. For filmmakers working in the shadow of a wealthy and decadent industry, with generally only the most limited financial resources and little desire to pursue material wealth, the idea that less not only can be more but can be transcendently more, has been, and has remained, a potent motivation. Indeed, what nearly all avant-garde practices have in common is the desire to accept, and transcend, material limitation and personal poverty.

Of course, in the case of cinema, this hunger for transcendence over the material is deeply paradoxical. Not only do filmmaking and film viewing of all kinds require a complex material apparatus, but film history is the painstaking creation of material objects that are, slowly (and sometimes not all that slowly), but relentlessly destroyed by the mechanical process for which they are produced: the light that projects imagery onto the screen automatically causes the imagery to fade; the friction between filmstrip and projector inevitably creates damage. At best, in other words, even when they are successful, the filmmakers' efforts at embodying the spirit cannot *overcome* the material; they can only honor those brief, transcendent moments when spirit is incarnated within the material so that it can be enjoyed by the senses. I am reminded of Whitman's lines:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.
(“Song of Myself,” no. 3)

Critical filmmakers have struggled to honor the potential of cinema to unite the spiritual and the material so that *both* can be deeply appreciated, each through the context of the other.

The desire for a sense of transcendence has taken various forms in the hands of particular filmmakers, some of them consciously working to participate in a more spiritual life, others with no conscious interest in the spiritual at all. Jordan Belson's cinematic mandalas are produced on homemade equipment in his San Francisco apartment on tiny budgets, but they are at least as interesting and look as high-tech as any industry-produced special effect. Jack Smith and his flaming creatures worked with stolen, outdated film stock, aspiring to the angelic from what appear to have been the depths

of poverty. When Tony Conrad made his remarkably powerful *The Flicker* (1966)—more than any other critical film of which I am aware, *The Flicker* evokes charismatic Christian worship—the only film equipment he owned was a two-dollar, 8mm splicer, a role of splicing tape, and a take-up reel. Peggy Ahwesh chose Pixilvision, a cheap child's video camera with crude black-and-white resolution, for *Strange Weather* (1993), her film about drug addicts during a Miami hurricane; and in *Martina's Playhouse* (1989), she transformed the tradition of making inexpensive Super-8mm home movies of children's antics into a sophisticated theoretical enterprise. In *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, Ernie Gehr uses the simplest cinematic means, and his remarkable visual imagination, to create a panorama of San Francisco that turns our usual sense of the film frame on its head. Phil Solomon, Matthias Müller, and Jennifer Reeves have worked like cinematic alchemists to transform personal trauma and the material detritus of modern commercial culture into spiritual gold. Leighton Pierce focuses his films and videos on the mundane particulars of his domestic surround, transforming the simplest everyday moments into mysterious, evocative visual adventures. In *The Same River Twice* (2003), Robb Moss uses relatively inexpensive digital video to explore the adult, domestic lives of the men and women whose Edenic rafting voyage down the Colorado through the Grand Canyon he recorded in 16mm twenty years earlier.

Also related is the formal simplicity of the rigorously framed, long single takes used in neostructuralist work such as Sharon Lockhart's *Goshogaoka* (1997), *Teatro Amazonas* (1999), and *NŌ* (2003); James Benning's California Trilogy: *El Valley Centro* (1999), *Los* (2000), *Sogobi* (2001), and *13 Lakes* (2004); and Shiho Kano's films and videos. For Sitney the emergence of what he named "structural film" posed something of a problem: as undeniably arresting as many of the early structural films seemed, they did not lend themselves to interpretation in the same sense that Markopoulos's or Anger's or even Brakhage's films did. For me, however, the *experiences* of many of the landmark "structural films," and especially those that use what would normally be considered minimal means—Tony Conrad's *The Flicker*, Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), Yoko Ono's *Film No. 5 (Smile)* (1968), Taka Iimura's *1 to 60 Seconds* (1973), Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), J. J. Murphy's *Print Generation* (1974), James Benning's *11 × 14* (1976)—were the cinematic equivalents of forms of worship characterized by a commitment to rigorous simplicity and plainness (I am thinking of the Shakers, the Quakers, the Amish) and/or of rigorous yoga or Zen practices. However one interprets these film experiences once they are over, they offer the opportunity for extended moments of silent meditation and communion—moments that can provide invigorating reprieves within the day-to-day frenzy and hysterical consumption of mod-