

STAN BRAKHAGE AND THE MÉLIÈS WAY

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Right from cinema's year one, there was a divide between a cinema of observation and a cinema of manipulation. By a nice symmetry, within a year of the use of the camera by the Lumière Brothers to observe the world around them, Méliès the magician saw the camera as a means of cutting up and reassembling reality for magical effects.

Auguste and Louis Lumière saw the possibilities for mimicking real-time; Georges Méliès saw the possibilities for illusion, of showing that the impossible had occurred, in effect reinventing the way we see. In truth, the Lumières were fascinated by the camera as machine, Méliès by the film strip as a series of still frames which could be magicked into movement. In honour of their contemporary and fellow countryman, Marcel Proust, whose promenades along Swann's Way and the Guermantes' Way were used as metaphors for the course of his adult life, I can describe these two poles of film aesthetics as the Lumière Way and the Méliès Way.

When in the New-Frontier America of the early 1960s, a cult of the new and experimental found heroism in the creative individual, a different kind of film-making from that of Hollywood rose to the surface, one that strove to map quite different territory, both in subject matter and method. At the centre of this movement was Stan Brakhage, who although only 27 in 1960 had made several short films, the first in 1953 (when he was only 20), and in *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), a 40-minute work in which his preoccupation with light was beginning to counterbalance and overwhelm the 'psychodramas' he used as subject matter. Significantly, his work is the most significant expression of the Méliès Way since Méliès himself. A particular milestone in this development was *The Wonder Ring* (1955), in which he used documentary to transform mundane steel structures (the Third Avenue elevated railway in New York) into patterns of sunlight and shadow, in effect a celebration of light, to transform a banal reality into a place of wonder. The light flashing through the window frames shuttling through the station became a metaphor for the projector light flashing through the celluloid frames. The film also eliminated depth in the image or 'de-emphasized' perspective¹ and the use of this tactic began to mark Brakhage's retreat from Western perspective, which is another link with the Méliès Way, at least in Brakhage's eyes. In his lecture on Méliès from 1970 he claimed that Méliès "was obsessed to attack the whole of Western painterly trappings – Renaissance perspective in itself: he therefore began to conceive his movie scenes as a series of movable 'flats', offering a minimal 'vanishing point' and maximal relationship to the screen against which they would be

projected.”² *The Wonder Ring* creates a private experience seen through the mind’s eye, more open on the inside in a way than to the reality on the outside. This inner vision is characterized by a nervous intensity as images merge and jump into one another, assembling the hundreds of pieces of film into a visionary whole.

All this work from the 1950s has a radically experimental feel, as if Brakhage experienced no fears in trying to reveal what the camera was capable of, now that smaller and lighter models were on the market. By the end of the 1950s, he had achieved a technical mastery of the equipment needed to make films without sound, having discovered that sound was a dispensable element of film-making. Also, he had learnt to engage with the film in its most physical form: a strip of polyester with sprocket-holes at the side, and composed of individual frames. His most radical idea was to think not in terms of shots but of individual frames lasting 1/24th of a second, and to explore the minimal threshold at which images on the screen registered on the spectator’s consciousness. Brakhage’s head was stuffed with visual ideas and personal experiences which he wanted to realize on film, while both his employment in film laboratories and his private film-making saw him bent over the editing table, handling film, seeing frames in close up, feeling the emulsion on the strip of film. Film he concluded was physical matter, an idea very consonant with contemporary American painting, especially Jackson Pollock whose studio Brakhage visited as an awe-struck young man. He must have been impressed by the raw intensity of Pollock’s work when paint was dripped, dribbled and flung at the canvas. An interesting link can be made to the painter Francis Bacon who achieved a marvellous vitality in his handling of paint, and who contrasted texture in a photograph which “seems to go through an illustrational process” with that of a painting which “seems to come immediately onto the nervous system”.³ Brakhage’s empathy with Pollock’s surfaces ‘coming onto the nervous system’ is partly behind his wanting to transform observational cinema into something that would engage the optic nerve by reproducing the way his own nervous system reacted to what he saw.

By 1960 Brakhage was ready to pour his learning into a big work of art, one that stepped away from his private world onto a cosmic stage. Sitney used the neologism ‘mythopoeia’ to describe its ambitions: the making of myth in order to make the world anew. *Prelude: Dog Star Man* is in five parts. A long opening, called the Prelude (25 minutes) is a film about creation, of the world and of consciousness. Part 1 (30 minutes) is of a man struggling up a slope with an axe; Parts 2, 3 and 4 (5, 7 and 6 minutes each) complete the narrative; respectively, they feature a birth, a ‘sexual daydream’ and the woodman chopping at a dead tree. The man struggling up the hill is

mythic in recalling Sisyphus, as his efforts seem fruitless and endless, but the film does in fact reach a climax, as he wrestles with the tree. That the man is played by Brakhage himself is an important index of his Romanticism, in which the artist is at the centre of the world, and creation is a heroic and subjective process which would not allow anyone else to play the central role. He is an artist in the mould of the Nietzschean superman, like Pollock and Bacon, whose visionary gift takes him outside conventional society and mainstream art, challenging that mainstream to follow.

The film is elemental, with the primary element being light. It is light shining through the transparent celluloid that creates the images, their forms and colours. Brakhage's gift to us is in recapturing that primal quality of the first appearance of the world, in swirls of colour, in half-envisioned shapes and pictures, in the rearing-up majesty of the Colorado landscape (where Brakhage was living). The seminal image is of solar flares, footage which he obtained from Boulder Observatory, the rim of the sun seen during a solar eclipse showing great globules of fire hurled into the atmosphere and falling back again.

The film is therefore of public visible creation, and like the Book of Genesis, Brakhage couples this with individual private creation. It is therefore a hymn to the nuclear family – to Brakhage himself and his wife Jane and a new-born baby – the entry into consciousness of new human life, to match the creation of the world. To see this film for the first time is to experience an epic of revelation of a created universe extending from the macrocosm to the microcosm.

At the same time as Brakhage's whole-hearted journey down the Méliès Way is a journey in counterpoint, the rediscovery of the virtues of early observant cinema – the Lumière Way – by Andy Warhol, only a year or two older than Brakhage, who came to film via Pop Art. Warhol had already come to notice by the time he took up film-making, having had his first one-man show in 1962. From the beginning, like Brakhage he wanted to make cinema anew, in a way that could be described in direct opposition to Brakhage's aspirations. By running the camera uninterrupted and immobile, pointed at individuals who barely seemed to move, Warhol threw down a crude challenge to the spectator. Many hours of film were shot in this way and seen as a whole, some development of technique is discernible, as if he were reinventing the history of the cinema. This history may be summed up in the distance travelled from his first phase such as *Sleep* (1963), which uses a fixed camera and “shows a man sleeping for six hours. (It is actually three hours of ten-minute segments that were shot over a six-week period. Each segment is shown twice.)”⁴ In the next phase, Warhol added sound to the fixed camera in order to film scenarios written by Ronald Tavel

(for example, *Harlot* (1964)), although because the sound was optically recorded directly on film during shooting, the words are inexactly audible. The third phase used scenarios and were co-directed by Chuck Wein, culminating in the radical complexity of *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), a series of half-hour takes of individual portraits and conversations shot at the Chelsea Hotel in New York and made up into a 3 ½ hour film, making extensive use of the zoom lens and much of which is split-screen, i.e. showing two takes side by side, a combination of the compelling as we catch some of what is said, and frustrating because of the poor sound quality, and the impossibility of taking in two screens simultaneously. A fourth phase saw Warhol moving to a more commercial cinema by the use of colour and clear soundtracks. The complete trajectory is a version in miniature of cinema's development: fixed images/black-and-white/no sound through to camera movement/edited images/colour/sound.

Both Brakhage's and Warhol's films contain the possibilities of a different kind of cinema from the commercial narrative film. Although this led to a reaction from other experimental film-makers against the unbounded quality of the films in order to reassert a classical rigour in the way their own films were structured and assembled, it is hard to imagine Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1972) without them. In their own way they synthesized the 'spiritual' or metaphysical impulse implicit in Brakhage's films and the cool fascination with humanity in Warhol's world.

While the conventional description of *Wavelength*, that it is a zoom from one end of a room to another, makes it sound as if nothing happens, in fact it is constantly giving us new information. Things do happen. Most obviously, there are four incidents in the film: first of all, two people move a bookcase into the room; secondly, two women enter, and while one sits on the prominent yellow chair at the end of the room, the other stands by the window and plays the Beatles song 'Strawberry Fields' when the first woman then leaves, and at the end of the song, the other one leaves; thirdly, in one of the night periods, a man staggers into the room at the bottom of the frame (the zoom is now closing in on the window), and falls to the floor; fourthly, again at night, a woman enters and uses the phone to tell someone that there is someone lying on the floor; "What shall I do?" she says and then leaves. This elliptical and unexplained narrative might be thought to be the content of the film, but it is overwhelmed by the 'narrative' of the zoom in space. The room itself is sparsely furnished, and uncarpeted. The film starts in daylight, then the day becomes night, and then it is daylight again, but only as long as the windows are visible in the frame, for when they pass out of our visibility, the film's timeframe begins to vanish completely.

The soundtrack is very important in cementing the film into a whole. For the first fifth of the film, we hear traffic outside the window. It is then taken over by an electronic sine wave which starts at 50 cycles and increases to 12,000 cycles over the bulk of the film. Right at the end it disintegrates into a rising and falling sound. It is the sound that provides the film's real minimalism. It also gives tension, for you think it is building to a climax, that it cannot get any higher or harsher, but then it does and you never get to a sound climax. This tension helps to build the film to a close. Compared to the sound, the image is very impure. Not only does the film have the series of incidents described, but it changes colour and flickers, and every now and then images appear in superimposition, as a result of the readjustment of the camera as new spools of film are loaded: every now and then, the camera has in effect taken a small step backwards and that bit of the zoom has to be repeated.

If the sound does not in the end obtain closure, the image does. At the beginning of the film we remark (if we have seen the film before) on the pictures pinned to the wall between the windows, and that we cannot decipher them, i.e. they are out of our mental focus. Tension is given at the end by the way the camera moves closer to them so that we can start to decipher them. One image eludes decipherment, a second is of Michael Snow's walking woman silhouette (a signature image from his work as a sculptor), the third is the image that might give meaning to the whole as it is the one on which the camera finally rests: it shows a surface, possibly of water, possibly of a desert, possibly of the moon. We assume it is probably water (hence the film's title) and in the closing minute or two, the showing of this picture, bleeding off the frame, as a still photograph, takes over from the zoom. It has its own emptiness, but also its own mystery.

Like *The Wonder Ring*, Snow starts with something documentary – a room, especially the yellow chair, and the traffic audible through the windows; we can even make out the store signs above the shops over the road – but then moves to reflect on the photographic process in its clever use of the negative and positive: in the daylight scenes, the windows are light, while the room is comparatively dark; but at night, the room is light, while the windows are dark.

Ultimately, the film is a metaphysical experience. It is a film about perception, and demands a different kind of perception from what we are used to. It takes the long-attention span cinema of Warhol, and gives it a philosophical dimension. We are not just witnessing every day reality but scrutinising it, interrogating it. It is appropriate that the film concludes with the image on the wall. This has its own air of intrigue (like the narrative incidents) but this part of the process is also a metaphor for

perception. When we emerge from Plato's cave, can we interpret the images before us? Is there a reality beyond the reality we are used to? Is there another existence more eternal than the mere human life-span?

Wavelength takes the Lumière Way to new extremes, spilling the act of observation into the area of forced attention that metamorphoses into undisturbed contemplation. Hollis Frampton who was a film-maker himself when he played a small part in *Wavelength*, was stimulated by the film, and, as we shall see, the works of Brakhage as well, to create his own major statement a year or two later in *Zorns Lemma*, which poses the same questions about how the mind engages with what it sees on the screen in front of it. This is a 60-minute film in three parts. The first, quite short, consists of a black screen while on the soundtrack a woman recites from an alphabetical primer, as if reading to a child. It puts us on our mettle for part 2, which requires immense concentration: Frampton strings together shots of words captured in the everyday world in alphabetical order of their initial letter, and runs through that alphabet again and again, while finding new words drawn from the signs around him in the street, the alphabet of the Bay State Primer used in part 1 made demotic image in part 2. The game then truly begins because the spectator quickly realizes that words beginning with particular letters are being replaced by images.

Wanda Bershen in 'Artforum'⁵ describes this section as follows: "Section II (47 minutes, 9 seconds) begins with a silent run through a 24-letter Roman alphabet (no J or V) composed of large silver letters in relief on a black field. A word beginning with letter 'A' (in this case the word is 'a') appears, and is followed by a word beginning with 'B', and so on through the alphabet at a speed of one second per letter-word. The words all occur in the urban environment, on store fronts and other kinds of signs and notices. Each run through the alphabet preserves the same rhythm while the words and their contexts vary: on the 5th round the letter 'X' is replaced by a shot of a bonfire at night. On the 7th round 'Z' is replaced by an ocean wave advancing and receding down the beach, and on the 12th round a horizontally trucking [sic] shot of sea grasses blowing in the wind replaces the letter 'Y'. The film proceeds with the gradual replacement of each alphabet-word by an image until at the end of the section the final run-through is composed entirely of these replacement images."

The concentration comes not just from following where Frampton is so playfully leading us, but also from the fact that each image lasts one second – so in this 47-minute /9-second section of the film there are 60 images in each minute, making a total of some 2,900 images. While these 2,900 images are separate, there are multiple repetitions allowing us to cling onto how the formula is working itself out, like some

mathematical theorem. Herein lies its sophistication, as it offers us the opportunity to participate in the structure of the film, to follow the argument, to recognize what is happening in advance of it happening: to realize that ultimately all the words will be replaced by images, and that as we watch we can learn to memorize the sequence of images, as if we were learning a melody, and learn to anticipate how the film might change as if we were taken up in a game.

The third part, 11 minutes long, shows a couple walking away from the camera across a snowy field, into the woods at the other side and out of sight. It is a literal let-down, letting our eyes down to rest after the relentless sequence of part 2, and an anti-climax too: after the triumphant climax of all the filmed words in part 2 being replaced by images signifying reality in a quite different way from words, we are faced with a virtually static image of virtually no meaning. The soundtrack comes back into play as it did in part 1. Six voices recite a text about light written in the thirteenth century by Bishop Grosseteste, but the atomizing of the text into its separate words prevents us from recognizing the shape of sentences and paragraphs through the intonations and inflections of a single voice. We are in effect denied the chance to participate in assembling the text's meaning in our own minds, just opposite to the way part 2 encouraged us to participate. The film therefore trickles away, as if the excitement of the central section must be followed by stasis, an intellectual exercise without meaning, an emptiness that constitutes an apology for what has gone before. For what has gone before is a description in its way of the whole world, or at least the world Frampton sees around him, as if he were making an autobiography.

Initially, Frampton was fascinated by poetry, but a polymathic streak in him led him via sculpture to photography and film, the realm of images, and only with films did he find the voice he was looking for, that gave adequate scope to his interest in words and in pictures, and to his erudition. An essay of his on the photographs of Paul Strand⁶ ends with a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges: "Through the years, a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face." At first sight, Borges is the perfect writer for Frampton: his elegant description of the infinite library as the labyrinth in which humans find themselves⁷ finds its echo in *Zorns Lemma*. But there is also in Frampton a humorous overtone: as he put it, "*Zorns Lemma* . . . is an optimistic work, it skips happily up the street, reciting the alphabet and counting."⁸ More than that, he asks the spectator to join in, to participate in discovering a trajectory. To quote from his Strand essay again: "The ambition of this activity can

amount to nothing less than the systematic recording of the whole visible world, with a view to its entire comprehension.” This optimism, if it can be called that, finds its echo less in Borges than in J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations, a piece which works the bass harmonies of a sarabande in 30 variations, marked by increasing elaboration, nine canons with the musical interval in each one taken from unison to ‘alla ottava’ exactly spaced through the work, creating an encyclopaedic effect and demanding no less concentration than *Zorns Lemma* in order to comprehend its structure.

The idea of the series appealed deeply to Frampton. Hence too his admiration for Eadward Muybridge whose heroic and obsessive venture in ‘Animals in Motion’ to use the camera to record movement – by animals and by humans – has exercised such fascination in the 20th century. This demystification has revealed how inventive the eye linked to the brain is, the brain elaborating the data that sight gives us (as Paul Valéry commented on what the photographs proved⁹). From a scientific point-of-view Muybridge’s fame relates to the fact that his photographs settled the question of whether a horse in motion ever had all its hooves off the ground, but from an artistic point of view his multiple series not only shed light on all manner of movement but opened up new ways of seeing movement. And there is a larger impact, which the photograph in general makes, especially the photography of the first hundred years, that seems particularly to have engaged Frampton, in that the still camera produces statements of what the world looks like.

Frampton carried that preoccupation into his films. For example, *Lemon* (1969) shows a lemon in close-up with a light slowly moving over it for the length of the film (7½ minutes). As we gaze at it, we may “stay the eye” on it as a lemon, or “through it pass”¹⁰ and see the moon in its phases: we elaborate the data that sight gives us. Part 2 of *Zorns Lemma* then can be interpreted as a much more elaborate exercise in how a series of sense data can be perceived merely as such or, to make them much more interesting, interpreted as they are perceived in order to create our own encyclopaedia. To spice it up, Frampton chooses not to make each image last say five seconds, making this 45-minute section 5 times as long, but by confining the images to one second each to put the spectator to work, barraged by this relentless succession, the turbulence of which turns out to be illusory because while virtually none of the images is completely still (it is true that a static tree in a snowy landscape does get included), we perceive them like frozen photographs to which the motion-picture camera/projector has given the illusion of movement. For some of his films Frampton looked in the direction of the Lumières – for example, in *Lemon*, and in his later *Magellan: Drafts and Fragments*, which has been described as remaking “the

cinema of the Lumières in 51 1-minute films”¹¹. But in the second part of *Zorns Lemma*, he works firmly in Méliès territory, assembling the observed but dismembered images into some magical construction. It is striking how this endeavour harmonises, mysteriously in its way, with what Brakhage was doing in his films. Frampton’s films may feel different: cool, rigorous, methodical, at root classical, against the warm, free-flowing romanticism of Brakhage, but the record of a conversation between them¹² shows a remarkable meeting of the minds.

While Frampton’s autobiography has to be excavated from *Zorns Lemma*, in Brakhage’s films, it is right on the surface: Stan and Jane’s children, Stan and Jane making love, the death of their dog, Jane giving birth, all very private subjects, and then more private still, Brakhage pouring his ‘closed-eye visions’ onto film, about which he continued to speak throughout his life in an autobiographical fashion. Take *Rage Net*, a short film of 52 seconds made in 1988, one of the many hand-painted films he made. The images are pure abstraction, using the strong light from the projector to intensify the colours on the screen. The patterns are smears, jagged marks, blotches etc. made stained-glass vivid by their colour, by the vigour of the mark-making, and above all by the fact that they are made frame by frame so that this tiny film contains over 1200 images in all (52 seconds, 24 frames a second). This is sufficient in itself, but Brakhage, when asked, spoke of the film as a result of the divorce he was going through at the time, a meditation upon rage “rather than being trapped psychologically by rage”. None of this seems relevant to an appreciation of the film, although these extraneous facts and comments help in stringing together a narrative for the huge corpus of films Brakhage left behind, almost 400 in total by the time he died in 2003. While some of these are very short (the shortest is 9 seconds long), their closely edited texture and the large amount of handmade film indicate a truly heroic level of effort. They seem to be all inspiration, but are also in large measure the result of perspiration.

And yet inspiration is a key factor in Brakhage’s oeuvre, with its explicit origin in the Latin for ‘to breathe’ (‘spirare’) – making films gave Brakhage oxygen – but implicitly too, for his films celebrate the ‘breath of life’, and suggest some supernatural ‘spirit’ as his creative source. Thus, in describing one of his most famous films, *Mothlight*, Brakhage spoke in a letter to Robert Kelly how it came into being as “the film’s simple passage through me”¹³. He liked also to refer to the Muses, which I suspect he did in no casual sense, but as a proper way of speaking of himself, or more exactly his eye collaborating with the mind as creator: “I became instrument for the passage of inner vision, thru all my sensibilities, into its external form.”¹⁴ As Socrates puts it in Plato’s ‘Ion’: “In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and

from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. . . . For the poet is a light and a winged and holy thing, and there is no intervention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him.”¹⁵

The excitement of the process of making *Mothlight* gives his description of it an unusual tension, of how in a situation of economic desperation for him personally, the sight of a kamikaze moth meeting its end in the candle flame gave the idea of sticking moth's wings, body fragments, leaves, grasses and petals in between strips of transparent film and then running them through the printer, creating a film in the cheapest possible manner, cruellest necessity mothering profoundest inspiration. Technical problems then became an obstacle, because these strips were destabilising the printer, until Brakhage had the idea of interspersing them with plain leader which allowed the printer to adjust periodically in the film's rollercoaster passage through the printing gate. The resultant material could then be edited to make a 3¼-minute masterpiece, a hymn to the microcosm of nature: “What is the moth that thou art mindful of him?” Now that the film is on DVD¹⁶, it can be watched slowed down, in order to admire the detail, just as the film strip when reproduced in photographs gives some idea of the marvellous intricacies of the image. Yet - like *Zorns Lemma* - it needs to be watched at 24 frames per second, so that the images tear through the brain and explode against each other. This freneticism re-creates out of tranquillity the purest participation in the wonders of the film.

For Brakhage, the imagination is an internal realm of the mind, not an externality, and his life was spent in celebrating this fact. In recognition that an extraordinary body of work was being created in the cinema, in 1963 the magazine *Film Culture* published an interview with Brakhage and an assemblage of his writings, statements and letters in ‘Metaphors on Vision’, in which he expounded his call for a new visionary cinema. The opening paragraphs, written on the threshold of his creative maturity, bring to mind the impassioned prose of Thomas Traherne in their extolling of the virtue of vision before the advent of the Word. ‘Silence’ is a vital part of appreciating the films (not that all his films are silent but the majority are), best appreciated accompanied by the sound of the projector in the room providing a rolling thunder, an elemental background to the act of visual perception.

It was an accident of birth that seems to have given him a different eyesight from the rest of humanity. In an interview published in 1973, he spoke of his childhood as a time when “I'm not sharing the world of vision that I'm supposed to in

order to exist in the general air with all the people around me”¹⁷ and in an interview towards the end of his life Brakhage continued to maintain it as a crucial fact about him when he refers to the way the physiological weakness of his eyes led to developing vision¹⁸. This awareness led not to ‘correcting’ spectacles but to transferring this myopia from himself to others, a feeling that he was “seeing all kinds of things that other people don’t see or don’t admit they see”¹⁹. If Frampton’s interest in series and arithmetics links him to J. S. Bach, the condition of Brakhage’s eyes link him to Beethoven. The composer’s increasing deafness as he grew older could have led to silence or madness, but as it was, it created the conditions for his most original compositions, allowing him to live as he did in a musical sound world of his own imagining, undistracted by extraneous music. Something similarly single-minded seems to have occurred with Brakhage, since he became alert to how he saw things, with eyes open or eyes closed, in a manner different from the rest of humanity, but transferring that private, subjective vision to the public medium of film.

There may also be a narrative of Brakhage being motivated to become an artist because of the isolation caused by the nature of his eyesight, and because of an urge to find a way of expressing himself. In his writing, he evinces a quirky liking for words, their rhythm, their origins, and their capacity for double meaning, expressed through distracting, even irritating puns. He might therefore have become a writer but it is film that seduces Brakhage, film that gives body to his dreams, night-dreams or day-dreams, and to visions. He and Frampton shared an awareness of the glass lens being invented at the time the Renaissance was formulating the laws of perspective and discovering how to render chiaroscuro and light on surfaces. For Frampton this was an intellectual point, while for Brakhage it was a polemical one, providing further grounds for arguing that there was another way of seeing, different from that of the Renaissance. In ‘Metaphors on Vision’ he catalogues how this ‘objective’ vision may be subverted: by spitting on the lens, by speeding up the motor for slow motion, by holding the camera in the hand rather than mounting it on a tripod (and thus “inherit worlds of space”), by over- or under-exposing the film, by using the “filters of the world” such as fog and downpours, or glass that was never designed for the camera²⁰. Thus *Text of Light* (1974), a 71-minute film made by photographing glass objects in a sun-drenched office on a macro lens, in order to fragment the light and images of his surroundings²¹.

If Brakhage’s work is described as ‘documentary’ this is not true in its commonest sense of filming the world in order to inform, but only true as documenting his surroundings and his concerns. He is closest to being a documentary film-maker in

the conventional sense in his three Pittsburgh films (1971), *eyes* chronicling the work of the police, *Deus Ex* showing a doctor performing heart surgery, and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* filmed in a mortuary and showing the autopsies being carried out on dead bodies. All three could be described as extreme subjects, in particular the last which is so extreme as to be taboo. But Brakhage still makes it highly personal, preoccupied as he was with "birth, sex, death and the search for God"²². Birth and sex had been explored 10 years earlier in *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* and *Window Water Baby Moving* (both 1959) and in *Dog Star Man* (1961-64). *The Act of Seeing with Ones Own Eyes* is the arena of death: to see a mortuary worker make an incision along the top of the head of a corpse, loosen the flesh from the skull, fold it back over the face covering the nose, and then carefully cut the skull away to reveal the brain, is to come face to face with our own raw, lifeless carnality, all soul and spirit removed, to confront the factual brutality of fleshly existence. The 'brutality of fact' was an expression coined by Francis Bacon, one of whose earliest paintings, 'Crucifixion' of 1933, has been linked both to Rembrandt's painting 'Slaughtered Ox' of 1655, showing a raw carcass mounted on a frame, and two photographs by Eli Lotar of the slaughterhouses at La Villette in Paris²³. Georges Franju had made a notable documentary in 1949 on the Paris slaughterhouses (La Villette again and Vaugirard), *Le Sang des Betes*, and with *The Act of Seeing*, Brakhage without any known reference to Lotar, Bacon or Franju is making his own exploration of a human activity which, until the arrival of the camera, still and film, remained quite beyond the bounds of ordinary experience. The most obvious way is just to observe, but while Brakhage's film is superficially observational, he eschews a voice-over describing what is happening and musing on the scene before us, for his deeper purpose is to engage us directly with understanding his subject through the way we perceive it, a mental process purified by the silence of the images.

Brakhage was very taken with the etymology of the word autopsy from the Greek *αυτο-* or 'one's own' and the stem word *οπ-* at the root of the Greek verb for seeing, a word which before it came to mean dissection of a dead body, especially to ascertain the cause of death, meant 'seeing with one's own eyes'. The film therefore allows us to see what death means for ourselves, but the phrase has a much larger resonance in Brakhage's own work because he spoke frequently of his experience of 'closed-eye vision', or the abstract patterns that could be seen when the eyelids were closed and rubbed with the fingers, a literal interpretation of seeing with one's own eyes. This preoccupation was the clearest expression of a desire to create another kind of vision at a distance from Renaissance and Rationalist modes of thought, one that

synthesised the operations of mind and body. It led him especially to the hand-painted film, where the film strip was worked on directly without the mediation of a camera, for which there were precedents (in the films of Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Harry Smith), but Brakhage took it to quite different levels, non-narrative, and dense with pattern. Right from the beginning of his film-making, he had scratched his name on black leader as an initial title to the film, “eye-sharpeners” as he called it²⁴, and it was with *Mothlight* of 1963 that Brakhage discovers most truly how he can realise an obsession: “Imagine an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective”.²⁵ Other films followed but it seems that it was in the last 20 years of his film-making – the 1980s and 1990s – that he used this technique most persistently and most creatively, e.g. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981), *The Dante Quartet* (1987), *Rage Net* (1988), *Untitled (for Marilyn)* (1992), *Three Homerics* (1993), *The Dark Tower* (1999), *Love Song* (2001). Often, as has been said, he superimposed his own autobiographical dimension, either in the titles or in his comments on the film, that without these explanations will elude the viewer. Not, in the long run, that this will matter, for Brakhage’s genius will be recognised firstly in his taking of film-making into a wholly new area, and secondly in his superb technique, equivalent to the way the great painters enhance their greatness by the way they handle paint.

After ‘birth’, ‘sex’ and ‘death’ Brakhage’s other preoccupation was with the ‘search for God’. Among the short hand-made films made in his 60s is *Chartres Series* of 1994, which came out of a visit to Chartres Cathedral “which surely transformed my aesthetics more than any other single experience”²⁶ and out also of the news of the death of his wife’s sister, an aesthetic experience and an emotional experience, ones that open up transcendence. There had been plenty of indications earlier, wonder at the sacrament of birth (*Window Water Baby Moving*), at creation (*Dog Star Man*) and at the glories of the microcosm (*Mothlight*). There was too the feeling of a ‘muse’, or something divine, however it may be described, making passage through him. *Chartres Series* connects his vision with a religious space, appropriately through the Cathedral’s stained glass, pre-Renaissance, dense, intensely coloured and demanding on the eyes – all qualities of Brakhage’s film-making.

For all his career as a film-maker, Brakhage was charting new frontiers, either discovering them, as with *Anticipation of the Night* or *Mothlight*, or, subsequent to their discovery, pushing them into further territory. This career extended over 50 years, during which time the technology of cinema changed as much as it had between Méliès’ day and when Brakhage first started filming. Most significant has been the switch from celluloid to video as the basis for filming, a change largely driven by the

observational Lumière aesthetic, of making pointing the camera and shooting easier to do. It has not been sympathetic to a film-maker working with very short segments of film, with the frame even, or who is excited by the chemistry of taking two physical pieces of film and putting them together. I doubt if it was true in any way that Brakhage's huge output was motivated by a desire to use the technology available to him as a young film-maker before new inventions made it obsolete, since his motivation was derived from an inner self. And it is not the case that his films look or feel dated; only a small proportion of the whole is available us (and that which is, thanks to DVD technology), but it is likely that as other films are released, Brakhage's originality will be recognized all the more. We are only just beginning to appreciate his achievement, and to move him from the periphery to the centre.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. As Paul Arthur puts it in 'Stan Brakhage: Four Films', *Artforum*, January 1973, p.43.
2. Stan Brakhage, *The Brakhage Lectures* (Chicago: The Goodlion Press, 1972), p.22.
3. *Francis Bacon interviewed by David Sylvester* (London: Thames and Hudson / New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.58.
4. Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Films and Paintings* (London: Studio Vista / New York: Dutton, 1971), p.84.
5. September 1971, pp. 42-3.
6. 'Meditations around Paul Strand', *Artforum*, February 1972, p.57.
7. 'The Library of Babel' in *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1970).
8. In an interview with Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury in *Afterimage*, Autumn 1972, p.72.
9. Quoted by Frampton in 'Eadward Muybridge: Fragments of a Tesseract', *Artforum*, March 1973, p.51.
10. Phrases taken from George Herbert's poem, 'The Elixir':

"A man that looks on glasse,

On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.”

11. From entry for Hollis Frampton in Wikipedia,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollis_Frampton [June 2007].
12. ‘Stan and Jane Brakhage, Talking’ [to Hollis Frampton], *Artforum*, January 1973.
13. In a letter to Robert Kelly, 22 August 1963, printed in *Metaphors on Vision*, published in *Film Culture* no. 30, Fall 1963 [pages unnumbered]. Hereafter referred to as *Metaphors*.
14. In a letter to P. Adams Sitney, 19 June 1963, in *Metaphors*.
15. Plato, *Ion* 533d-534b, trs B. Jowett (see <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/ion.1b.txt> [12 May 2007]).
16. Included in *By Brakhage: an anthology* in The Criterion Collection (USA) 2003.
17. ‘Stan and Jane Brakhage, Talking’, *Artforum*, January 1973, p.74. At the beginning of the interview Brakhage talks about his childhood, “when the glasses . . . were a solid manifestation of my own removal from everything around me” (p. 73). Release from this isolation came with throwing away his glasses.
18. From ‘Encounter with Stan Brakhage’ on the first DVD in *By Brakhage: an anthology*.
19. ‘Stan and Jane Brakhage, Talking’, p.78.
20. In the statement ‘Camera Eye’ in *Metaphors*.
21. The film started out as a portrait of a friend in business, and became an examination of light under a microscope, as it were. The making is described in *Seen* (San Francisco: Pasteurize Press 1975) from remarks by Brakhage following a screening of the film.
22. Last sentence of opening statement in *Metaphors*.

23. Martin Harrison, *In Camera: Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson 2005), p.21.
24. In a letter to a friend, 1959, in *Metaphors*.
25. As the opening of *Metaphors* has it.
26. From Brakhage's notes to the film for Re:Voir Video editions 1995.