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Émilie Vergé (ed.)

STAN BRAKHAGE: FILMS (1952-2003)

Catalogue raisonné

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‘Catalogue raisonné’? ‘Filmography’ is the usual word to connote a film-maker’s list of films with dates and collaborators. So, why apply the idea of the *catalogue raisonné*, normally used of painters, to the work of the film-maker Stan Brakhage? The answer is that Brakhage was such an unusual film-maker. When he died in 2003, at the age of 70, he had more than 350 films to his name, the longest 260 minutes, the shortest 8 seconds. Up to now it has not been easy to get to grips with the totality of his work, only a portion being available on DVD. Paris Expérimental is to be congratulated on this bi-lingual catalogue that at a stroke allows an overview of all five decades of Brakhage’s career. The idea of a catalogue is apt in another way too: Brakhage was a visual artist like a painter and not a film director who collaborated with others.

The book is particularly helpful for understanding the later period. Up till now a sense had been formed of his ‘psychodrama’ or ‘crisis lyric’ period in the 1950s and of his radical exploration of subjective visual consciousness from the late 1950s into the 1960s, a rollercoaster decade running from *Anticipation of the Night*, through the intimate films of his family, the achievement of the 74-minute *Dog Star Man*, and up to his startling series of thirty *Songs* made on 8mm. After 1969 when he became a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago while continuing to live in Colorado, he attained a measure of stability, and the films continued to flow, but seemed harder to categorise. Were they now less distinctive, more facile, repetitive even? As the 70s wore on he fell out of fashion somewhat, coming under attack from feminists, Lacanians and Marxists. However, in time tastes changed again and he came back into his own. If the 80s were a time of personal and psychological crises they also saw the start of his hand-painted film-making. While *Mothlight* (1963) can be thought of as a handmade film and he had already experimented with treating the emulsion on his photographed films in new ways, including allowing it to grow mould, and *Skein* of 1974 was a pure hand-painted film, *Aftermath* (1981) is “hand painting layered over and in contest with dramatic Hollywood movie scenes” and his next film *Nodes* picked up the trail left by *Skein*. Hand-painted films then came regularly, then much more regularly, and of varying length: *Hell Spit Flexion* (1983) lasts 35 seconds, *I . . .* (1995) 27 minutes. (I have not seen this latter film – somewhat testing,

I should imagine.) Because predecessors in the field of the hand-painted film were few (Len Lye and Harry Smith among them), these films echo the invention of abstract painting ("O brave new world that hath such pictures in it") but the criteria for judging them are unformulated and in the end risk boiling down to the personal, their beauty or otherwise being solely in the mind's eye of the beholder. *Aftermath* may give a partial clue to the motivation, since it came about as a way of contesting "dramatic Hollywood movie scenes" and is a film which he describes as his "strongest attack on pop culture, the movies, TV, etc." "What CAN be done with it?" he adds, and this leads him to the idea of using "moving-visual-thought-process" to transform what he calls "the unthinkable", an idea which prompts a felicitous moment in his prose-poetry, for the transformation leads to: "that second harvest of healthier gain . . . Retrieving patriotism, even, from blasphemous commerce." In other words, to articulate on film "the intrinsic grammar of the most inner (perhaps pre-natal) structure of thought itself" in order to rout the forces of commerce is an act of patriotism. To the viewer, these films feel like pure abstraction, although to Brakhage they contain their own narratives. The hand-painted *Dark Night of the Soul* (2002) makes this explicit, both in the title and in his description of it as an "envisionment of holy depression".

Not that the last two decades were short of films made with the camera. *Commingled Containers* (1996) marked a return to it after several years of only painting film and *The God of day had gone down upon him* (2000) is 48 minutes long. By now Brakhage's adherence to pre-video, pre-digital film felt contrarian, perhaps even antiquated, an exercise worthy of Don Quixote. But like the Don, his choices and his performance cast an askance look on contemporary practice. Émilie Vergé aptly remarks of this: "Film even became a rather noble medium, compared to the mass of digital images." There is a certain irony therefore in the fact that one means of rescuing Brakhage's reputation has been the distribution of his films on video and DVD. The VHS tapes from Re-Voir (1999 to 2003) were pioneering in this respect, and the DVDs from Criterion (2003 and 2010) have been produced with the blessing of Brakhage and his widow Marilyn. These, coupled with retrospectives and film shows (in museums rather than cinemas), began to reveal the flowering of his last two decades.

The catalogue makes clear how the idea of the series can be used to link works together throughout his career. This was done especially to give order to the camera-less, hand-painted films coming in the 1980s, or in the grouping of films, for example the four parts of *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967-70), the five parts of *Sincerity* (1973-80), the three parts of *Duplicity* (1978-80), the four parts of the Faust series (1987). But seeing all the films listed and described prompts other linkages. Brakhage himself hints at one, the idea that *Burial Path* is linked by its subject matter of corpses to *Sirius Remembered* and *The Dead*, to which he might have added *The Act of seeing with one's own*

eyes. Marilyn Brakhage has elsewhere suggested a 'city-film' theme: for example, *The Wonder Ring* (1955), *The Dead* (1960, Paris), *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966-7, Vienna), *Other* (1980, Amsterdam), *Unconscious London Strata* (1982, London), *City Streaming* (1990, Toronto).

One senses too from the catalogue a mellowing of character in the last 15 years of his life, the reasons for which must surely include his facing up to serious illness. While he had always honoured the role of his family, and especially that of his first wife Jane, in the creation of the films, and of the artists and thinkers he particularly valued (Stein, Olson, Turner, Pound, and many others), yet for much of his career he eschewed the provision of soundtracks created by others, relying only on the 'lightning' of the screen and the 'thunder' of the film reeling through the projector gate. And then between 1986 and 1992 he made a number of films with musical soundtracks composed by others. Furthermore, the catalogue shows that late in life he did collaborate on a handful of films, and also began carefully to acknowledge the contribution of individual technicians in film laboratories to the films' finished quality. Finally, this mellowness and acceptance of the role of others is accompanied by an urgency in his output of frame-by-frame hand-painted film. *Divertimento* (1997) must be the first film to have been made in a hospital bed.

Seeing the work as a whole only underscores Brakhage's passionate anti-realism. "Western compositional logic", as he called it, had grown out of the Renaissance discovery of perspective. The invention of the camera and of the moving camera, then 'objectively' realised the world, creating a common understanding that 'this is how the world looks for everyone'. It had led in his view to a sort of tyranny. He dramatized his revolt by throwing away his glasses at the age of 17. Myopia was not an impairment but the means to seeing the whole world differently, in blurs and flashes; the optic nerve-system enabled the visual world to be remade. Film-making was therefore a way of expressing a subjective vision, not like an *auteur* in the commercial cinema, but through a single person conceiving, filming, editing, and at the end painting the films themselves.

An overview also reinforces the idea of all the films as a diary or imagistic record, a biography of his perceptions or 'moving visual thinking'. Not life writing, but life filming. The story is ordinary but fascinating. There were bohemian friends in the 1950s, marriage and five children in the 60s and 70s (and grandchildren make an appearance in *Kindering* of 1987), domestic and personal crises in the 80s surfacing in his descriptions of some of the hand-painted films from that time, and it ends with a courageous handling of serious illness in the 1990s. By then he had married for a second time, to Marilyn Jull, who stipulated that there was to be no filming of her or of any children they might have. Although Brakhage got round this by filming places and things associated with her, it did mean that the viewing public, which was a small one but fiercely interested, were kept at arm's-length. The life shows how he was a child of post-war America (he was 12 in 1945), participating in the

confidence and fears of the time, and in the artistic ferment that led to the far-out libertarianism of the 1960s. Alongside intense embrace of the idea of the nuclear family came not just his extreme experimentalism but entry into unexplored or forbidden territory: birth films (of his own children), the corpse of his dog (*Sirius Remembered*), love-making, autopsies in the morgue (*The act of seeing with one's own eyes*), adolescent sexuality (*Christ Mass Sex Dance*), or even, "the sexual energy which charges the world of business" (*Sexual Meditation: Office Suite*).

Reading this book through from beginning to end, which is not how it should be used although it produces its own insights, is a curious experience. The titles of his films could be poetic (*Scenes from Under Childhood*), intriguing (*The Peaceable Kingdom*) and irritating (*Thot Fal'N, ". . . "*). His descriptions are always interesting but because of his idiosyncratic prose are wearying *en masse*. His etymologies have often seemed to me specious. Under *Faust's Other: an idyll*, he links the Greek word 'idyll' with *idein* meaning 'to see', which is not false but is so remote as to shed no light on what idyll means; nor does much clarity come from his punning of 'idyll' with 'journey of the id'. Sometimes his descriptions can obfuscate before they can illuminate, as if they were better jettisoned than used to appreciate the film. The hand-painted, abstract *Rage Net* (1988) was made in a foul mood (or rather "arises from meditation upon, rather than being trapped psychologically by, rage") but knowing this does not aid the viewing of the film. On the other hand the book does have particular pleasures. The preface by Marilyn Brakhage indicates a practical and highly sympathetic approach to the preservation of Stan's legacy; there is an excellent introduction by Vergé to his place as a 'film artist'; and there is a masterly summary of Brakhage's film career by P. Adams Sitney. Between them, the book achieves a proper balance between 'splitting', that is, the atomistic scholarship that film deserves no less than the other arts, and 'lumping', which is the synthesising of that scholarship and close, repeated perception of the films themselves in order to produce a coherent overview of the whole corpus. No one has done this better than Sitney who has engaged with Brakhage's films all his life (he is in his 70s now), writing lucidly about them and mapping out how sense might be made of the influences, the milestone works, and the key developments, and all this despite a personal falling out with the film-maker somewhere along the way. It seems to me important that Brakhage is worshipped this side idolatry, and I personally feel there are a few clunkers among the films. Perhaps Sitney does too, but if so he is gracious enough to recognise that the right to identify them is only earned once the masterpieces are identified and appreciated. This book is a valuable aid to this end. My principal regret is that more has not been made of Brakhage's astonishing technical prowess, with the camera, at the editing table and in the film laboratory. Jean-Luc Godard is reputed to have said that the only way to make better films is to make more films. Although he proceeded to churn them out, he hardly matched what Brakhage achieved and learnt from the tools of his practice.

Brakhage was a verbose speaker and a stimulating writer on film, notably in his book 'Metaphors of Vision' of 1963 (which with Eisenstein's 'Film Form' and 'Film Sense' and Bresson's 'Notes sur le cinématographe' is one of the key aesthetic statements by film practitioners in the twentieth century), in which he stated that his subjects were "birth, sex, death and the search for God". He was unafraid to film the first three, but how successful was he with the last? Although as a boy he performed in church choirs, and although there are Christian references in some of his film titles and descriptions (and his funeral was an Episcopalian one), Brakhage was not a religious film-maker. Yet he was certainly a spiritual one. Several times in this book he refers to the films as "given to me to do" as if some Muse, some divine breath, was at work in him. His polemic against realism in part derives from his opting for the non-material, making the unimaginable visible as it were, and for the subjective, wondrous encounter with the created world – humans, animals, landscape, the elements, the solar system. In *Moilsome Toilsome* (1999) he even managed a whale-watching film. He had a mystical obsession with light, and liked to quote Pound quoting Erigena "All that is, is light"; he had a reverence for JMW Turner, another artist for whom light was a substance rather than an accident. The catalogue shows how he unified the micro with the macro. In *Song of the Mushroom* (2002) he used mushroom spores on film; *Dog Star Man* included footage of solar flares; and the hand-painted *Stellar* (1993) "is composed . . . to suggest galactic forms in a space of stars". The non-material is most emphatically explored in the 'closed-eye visions' he made from the 1960s – 'brain movies' as Michael McClure called them.

Was Brakhage's life, never mind the films, in itself mythopoeic, to use the word I first encountered in Sitney's introduction to 'Metaphors on Vision'? In her preface, Marilyn Brakhage comments, "The full and fascinating story of this biography is yet to be told." It would have two virtues, firstly the personal life that he lived through, a story full of dramas and intensities, and secondly his relationships with a host of luminaries of the avant-garde in America. No doubt it could point a moral, namely that the purity of artistic endeavour with all its self-honesty, imagination beyond the imaginable, and technical brilliance so profoundly in tune with American fascination with how machines work and how they could work differently, is a better way than the "molten horror" of TV with its "grotesque infusions of luminescent light". Only resist. His last film, *Chinese Series* (2003), made on his deathbed, consists of scratches made by his fingernail on black leader in homage to the calligraphy of Chinese ideograms, a fascination with which he had surely taken from reading Pound's "Cantos". As Emperor Tching Tang wrote on his bathtub in Canto 53 all his life Brakhage strove to "make it new". This book opens the aperture wide on his achievement.

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