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## Introduction

Stan Brakhage

### The Activity of His Nature

*Milton produced Paradise Lost for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature.*—KARL MARX

**W**ork on this collection of texts began some three years ago, when we hoped to publish it in 2003 to celebrate Stan Brakhage's seventieth birthday. Instead, belatedly, it mourns his death.

The baby who would become James Stanley Brakhage was born on 14 January 1933 in an orphanage in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>1</sup> He was adopted and named by a young couple, Ludwig, a college teacher of business, and his wife, Clara, who had herself been raised by a stepmother. The family moved from town to town in the Middle West and, sensitive to the stresses of his parents' unhappy marriage, Stanley was a sickly child, asthmatic and overweight. His mother took a lover, eventually leaving her husband, who subsequently came to terms with his homosexuality and also himself took a lover. In 1941, mother and son found themselves alone in Denver. Put in a boys' home, the child picked up the habits of a petty criminal, but before his delinquency became serious, he was placed with a stable, middle-class family in which he began to discover his gifts. He excelled in writing and dramatics and in singing, becoming one of the leading voices in the choir of the Cathedral of St. John's in Denver. Retrieving her now-teenaged son, his mother tried to make a musician of him, but Stanley resisted his tutors, even attempting to strangle his voice teacher.

In high school, he devoted himself to writing, winning many prizes and deciding that he wanted to become a dramatist or a poet. With a group of school friends, including Larry Jordan, who later became an important filmmaker, and the musicians Morton Subotnick and James Tenney, he formed a dramatic group, the Gadflies. For Stan's sixteenth birthday, the Gadflies gave him a copy of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as a joke, but he treasured the work all his life. After graduation, he was awarded a fine arts scholarship to Dartmouth College, but his difficulties with the academic program and especially with what he felt to be an overall hostility to the arts among his fellow students precipitated a breakdown, and he quit. Visiting his father in Chicago on the way home, he returned to Denver to work as a press operator. He attempted to write a novel and renewed his friendship with the Gadflies, attending movies with them and beginning to read some of the classics of film theory. Especially taken with Cocteau's *Orpheus* and *Beauty and the Beast*, he and two other Gadflies decided to make a film themselves. Directed by Brakhage, *Interim* (1951), a short depicting a brief romantic encounter, was his first work; he found making it so rewarding that he decided to study filmmaking at the California School of Fine Arts (renamed the San Francisco School of the Arts in 1961).

This college proved less traumatic but hardly more satisfying than the previous one, and he left without completing a degree. But Brakhage did make contact with the San Francisco poets, first Kenneth Rexroth, then Robert Duncan. He re-visited Colorado in 1952 to shoot his second film, *Unglazed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection*, also an erotic melodrama, but then returned to San Francisco, living in a room in Duncan's basement formerly occupied by the poet and filmmaker James Broughton. In Duncan's circle, Brakhage found the community of artists he had long sought, and during his two years there, he met the most important poets, painters, and musicians of the time and young filmmakers, including Kenneth Anger and Bruce Conner. As his own filmmaking matured, he decided to investigate Hollywood. While working as a projectionist for Raymond Rohauer at the Coronet Theater in Los Angeles in 1955, he renewed his acquaintance with Kenneth Anger, who encouraged him to send his films to Amos Vogel, an independent programmer and distributor in New York.

Moving to New York, Brakhage found a warm welcome among the growing community of experimental filmmakers there, especially Marie Menken and Willard Maas, but also Maya Deren, Ian Hugo, Hillary Harris, Jonas

and Adolfas Mekas, and Joseph Cornell. Deren, Menken, and Cornell were especially influential, and Brakhage lived in Deren's apartment for a time. Though he continued to make films, the eight months he spent in the city were also a period of crisis for him; attempting to survive on the proceeds of screenings of his work, he lived in great poverty and was seriously malnourished. He left and returned to Los Angeles, but decided not to accept the offer of an apprenticeship at MCA and instead worked at occasional film jobs. After again spending the winter in New York, where he visited Tenney and his wife, Carolee Schneemann, he returned to Denver, meeting a young woman, whom he intended to marry. The wedding was called off, and distraught with the apparent failure of both his artistic and romantic endeavors, he planned to commit suicide and to use his death as the termination of the long film he was then working on, *Anticipation of the Night*. But around that time, he met Mary Jane Collom, and the two were married on 28 December 1957. Brakhage shot the film without killing himself and completed the editing soon after.

By this time, Brakhage's reputation was growing, and a selection of his films was shown at the Second International Film Competition held in conjunction with the Brussels World's Fair, though *Anticipation* was greeted with derision. Still impoverished, the couple attempted to live in the East while he worked for a professional film company in New Jersey, but in 1959 they moved to the mountains in Colorado, finally settling in 1964 in a log cabin in Lump Gulch, a largely abandoned mining area above Boulder. There they raised five children, and Brakhage's films became largely preoccupied with the dailiness of his family life in the wilderness and the more general human concerns they reflected, "Birth, death, sex and the search for God," as he summarized in his first long statement of his aesthetics, the monograph, *Metaphors on Vision*, that he had begun writing around the time of *Anticipation of the Night* and his marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Living with his family very simply and often in financial privation, Brakhage nevertheless developed rapidly as a filmmaker, consolidating the principles and practice that together constituted the most radical intervention by a single individual in the medium's history. His vision of an uncompromised *art* of film understood art in a Romantic idealized form. It was supposed to proceed from a source that was simultaneously somatic and divine that he named, "the muse"; it entailed the complete primacy and autonomy of the visual sense and the re-creation in film of seeing in all its

physiological and psychological forms, from the impulses of the brain cells to the sightings of cosmic events. It equally entailed the rejection of the narrative forms of the industrial feature film and indeed of all visualizations apart from the most assertively first person and instead proposed the sufficiency of a fundamentally domestic cinema, an art version of home movies in which family life and the filmmaking it engendered were lived as an aesthetic process. His concomitant rejection of the capitalist film industry and his commitment to the institutions of an alternative to it crystallized as the strongest and most coherent instance of the great countercultural cinematic initiatives of the 1960s.

The significance of Brakhage's work was quickly recognized, and in 1962 *Film Culture* awarded him its Fourth Independent Film Award for *The Dead and Prelude*. In the award statement, Jonas Mekas noted not only his innovation of "a style and a filmic language which is able to express with utmost subtlety the unpredictable movements of his inner eye," but also the social significance of his work: He has given "to cinema an intelligence and subtlety that is usually the province of the older arts. And he has done this with a fanatical consistency, upholding—and setting an example for others—the absolute independence of the film artist."<sup>3</sup> During this period, he also contributed, often loudly and angrily, to the debates of the vital film culture of the period, corresponding voluminously and making and losing many friends. He assisted with the formation of the Film-Makers' Co-operative in New York in 1963 and sat on its board for many years and for a time was a member of the selection committee of Anthology Film Archives before it opened in 1970. He also regularly returned to New York and other cities to screen his new films.

It was on the occasion of such a visit to New York in 1964 that his 16 mm editing equipment was stolen. Unable to afford to replace it, he instead purchased an 8 mm camera and with that began to make a series of short films he called *Songs*; as well as reducing expenses, the move to the essentially amateur medium also held the promise of his films being domestically screened and indeed collected in the manner of books or records. One of the songs, the hour-and-a-half *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966), dealt with his feelings about the U.S. invasion of Viet Nam, which the introduction of a television into his home made inescapable for him. With *Dog Star Man* and then the *Songs*, the fundamental terms of his aesthetic were in place, though he continued to pioneer further innovations for the remainder of the century.

Though he continued to shoot in 8 mm, a Rockefeller Grant in 1967 allowed him to return to 16 mm for his third extended cycle, the four-part *Scenes From Under Childhood*, in which he confronted the possibility of simulating the vision of infants. By the end of the 1960s, Brakhage's reputation was international. Retrospectives of his work and invitations to lecture became frequent, and he received many awards (including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1978), and in 1969 he began teaching one semester a year at the Art Institute of Chicago, commuting there from his home. He continued to publish his ideas in the early 1970s, initially small chapbooks to guide young filmmakers (*A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book* and *The Seen*) and then essays on the classic filmmakers derived from his lectures: *The Brakhage Lectures: Georges Méliès, David Wark Griffith, Carl Theodore Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein*, and a *Scrapbook* collecting his most important theoretical writing, much of it culled from letters.<sup>4</sup>

In 1981, he resigned from the Art Institute to take up a position at the University of Colorado at Boulder, only twenty-five miles from his home. At his own request, he taught film history not filmmaking, offering both the university's silent and sound cinema surveys and courses of his own design, including one on the relation of painting and film, a comparison of the films and plays of Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, and one called "Sex, Death and Cinema." He did however begin to work informally with young filmmakers, collaborating with some them, and with a teacher of filmmaking at the university, Phil Solomon.

This new stability in his life was interrupted by an unexpected trauma, the collapse of the marriage he had shared with Jane for more than thirty years. They separated, and divorced in 1987, both of them leaving their cabin. Jane moved higher into the mountains and began to write, publishing among other works an account of the early settlers in Lump Gulch.<sup>5</sup> Brakhage moved to an apartment near the university, where he continued to work, beginning a series of Sunday evening salons at which he would present and discuss his own and others' films in a public forum. He became close to Marilyn Jull, a young Canadian woman who had studied visual arts at York University in Toronto, and two years later they were married. She, however, refused to allow him to photograph her or the two sons they eventually had; the prohibition, which Brakhage often described as a great relief, nevertheless terminated the domestic home movies that had been the most significant component of his oeuvre. Though he continued to work photographically

and in the 1990s completed two major photographed film series, *Visions in Meditation* and the four “Vancouver Island” films, for the next decade he created mostly by painting and scratching on the film strip, returning to a process he had begun with *Dog Star Man*, and working much of the time in cafes in Boulder.<sup>6</sup> More of his writings were published: *Film at Wit’s End*, a collection of essays on his fellow filmmakers, and eventually two more collections of critical writings.<sup>7</sup>

Brakhage was diagnosed with cancer in 1996, his doctors telling him that it might well have been caused by the coal tar dyes he had been using to paint on film. But, with treatment the cancer went into remission, and Brakhage worked as prolifically as ever. He continued to be extremely supportive of young filmmakers and of the community of avant-garde film, and new generations of young women filmmakers found his work especially revelatory. In 1994, he was made a Distinguished Professor by the university, and in May of the same year, he received an honorary doctorate from California Institute of the Arts.

A grant from the Donner Foundation assisted the library of the University of Colorado at Boulder in purchasing new prints of all his films, the collection of films by other people he had amassed over his life, and all his collected papers, including his correspondence and financial records—some eighty boxes, each containing approximately 2,000 items. The university is presently processing these materials, with a view to making them publicly available in the Stan Brakhage Experimental Film Center. As his seventieth birthday approached, the unique accomplishment of his work was recognized by retrospectives at the Venice, London, and Rotterdam film festivals and similarly by retrospectives in the next years as far away as Brazil, Korea, and Japan, as well as by equivalent programs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and other sites in the United States.

In December 2002, he retired from his university post as a Distinguished Professor of Film Studies and left Colorado for his wife’s native land, moving to Victoria, British Columbia. But, cancer had again been diagnosed that February, and most of his last months were spent in great pain. On 9 March 2003, after fifty years of filmmaking and almost 400 films, he died.

His funeral was small, mostly family, but including some representatives from the world of film. One of them, Phil Solomon, his friend, colleague at the university, and a fellow filmmaker, wrote a very moving account of it, e-mailing it around the world to those who loved him. It concluded:

All convened at the Brakhages' house, to talk and be with him and each other. You should know that he loved this house, and the bedroom that he was eventually confined to, with its beautiful window (Stan's Window) and peaceful street outside (Milton Street), with his books of Victor Hugo's poetry and Tom Thompson's paintings nearby his bed. He had no regrets about leaving Boulder at the time he did. I think he sensed an urgency. He came down from the mountains, to an island, in another country, at sea level. He wanted to make sure that his family was rooted, and would be safe and secure, so he returned Marilyn and the boys back to the island of her source, where her Garden is . . . he made it, across the Serious Sea, and did have, I believe, some peace of mind that he had taken care of business, that his films and legacy were in safe hands, that his family would be . . . alright . . . in due time, and that he had, finally, as he used to say, "done his bit."<sup>8</sup>

As indicated, this collection of essays was originally planned to mark Brakhage's seventieth birthday; had it been successful in doing so, it would have also marked the anniversary of an earlier and partially analogous critical project, a special "Eisenstein/Brakhage" issue of the journal *Artforum*, edited by Annette Michelson, simultaneously to celebrate Brakhage's fortieth birthday and the seventy-fifth anniversary of his predecessor's birth.<sup>9</sup> Containing several essays on each filmmaker separately, the journal was introduced by Michelson's own essay on both of them, "Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura," that proposed a dialectical reading of their joint significance. Noting the several parallels between the main terms of their achievements—their invention of essentially new forms of filmic expression, their eminence as both filmmakers and theorists, their common wariness of sound, and so on—Michelson attributed to the two "masters" a supremacy in the culture of their respective times so singular that it became perforce the measure of their contemporaries and commandeered the particular attention of all responsible film criticism: "I am saying, then, that filmmaking and the theory and criticism of film must, in their most intensive and significant instances, ultimately situate themselves in relation to the work and thinking of these two artists."<sup>10</sup>

Michelson's claim was hyperbolic, perhaps deliberately so, but not without justification in the film culture of the time. Since the late 1940s, the U.S. avant-garde had constructed its own formal alterity to the commercial narrative feature on Eisensteinian montage, as well as regularly invoking

Vertov and other early Soviet directors; in this, it anticipated the return to the revolutionary Soviet cinemas upon which French film theory staged the ideological critique of the entertainment film industry in the wake of the 1968 political insurrections. Indeed, though it was never acknowledged in that theory or in the translations of it that inaugurated British and American academic film theory, Brakhage's own work had anticipated "apparatus theory" and other aspects of this critical revolution, albeit from different principles. A decade before the English translations of Jean-Louis Baudry's critiques of the ideological effects of the standard cinematic apparatus, for example, Brakhage had addressed the relationship between bourgeois ideology and "the camera eye, its lenses ground to achieve 19th century compositional perspective," and even the "phallic nature" of bourgeois culture, as well as practically developing an unprecedented repertoire of techniques to subvert both the internal structure of the framed film image and the repression of difference between frames during projection.<sup>11</sup> And when French theory declared that such modernist subversion of rationalized vision was a prerequisite for radical political change, the U. S. avant-garde cinema had long been fired by a variety of conceptions of the imbrication of filmic experimentation in the social and cultural upheavals of the period, imagining cinema "as an emblem, harbinger, and social vehicle of the transfiguration of time."<sup>12</sup> But, though some seven years earlier, Michelson had envisioned such a revolutionary component in Brakhage and the avant-garde,<sup>13</sup> by this point she had re-assessed his social significance.

Instead of facilitating, or participating in, or even analogizing a political transformation in the manner of Eisenstein, Brakhage was now seen to exemplify the impossibility of a role for a filmmaker in such collective undertakings in the United States: Rather, he represented his culture by virtue of "his social function as defensive in the Self's last-ditch stand against the mass, against the claims of any possible class, political process, or structure, assuming its inevitable assault on the sovereignty of the Self, positing the imaginative consciousness as inherently apolitical."<sup>14</sup> In her emphasis on the individual imagination, as well as the assertion of other cognate axioms, especially the correspondences between his formal innovations and the processes of vision and even consciousness itself, Michelson was both drawing on and attempting in some degree to reframe the understanding of Brakhage's significance that had developed during the previous decade, most authoritatively in the work of P. Adams Sitney, Brakhage's principal exegete.



Sitney's interest in Brakhage was long-standing, his commentary on him having begun at least as early as 1962 when *Filmwise*, the journal of the New Haven Film Society that he edited, devoted its inaugural issue to him. As well as an extended selection from Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* (which would be published complete in *Film Culture* a year later) and other texts by the filmmaker himself, this issue contained an overview of the press criticism Brakhage had received up to that point,<sup>15</sup> and statements by several other writers and filmmakers, including Charles Boultenhouse, George Landow, Gregory Markopoulos, Willard Maas, Jonas Mekas, Parker Tyler, and Sitney himself. Most of the brief essays were celebratory, affirming that the abstraction of Brakhage's recent work, especially the rapid editing and moving camera of *Anticipation of the Night*, instanced a remarkable and unprecedented assertion of an individual sensibility in film. The only dissenter was Parker Tyler, then the senior critic associated with the avant-garde, who had written the first substantial biographical and critical account of Brakhage's work.<sup>16</sup> Departing from his earlier approval of Brakhage's first films, Tyler criticized the phenomena that the others lauded, finding what he called Brakhage's "mobility-mania—the rapid transit of images too fleeting for even their most public associations to get across properly" to be "bad and perilous," "sacrificing style and form itself to the novelty invited by extreme mobility of vision."<sup>17</sup> Sitney's own "An Introduction to Stan Brakhage" was the summary evaluation of Brakhage's career to date, emphasizing the categorical division between his work and the commercial cinema, its greater resemblance to poetry (especially Gertrude Stein) and music (especially Bach) than to the industrial cinema, the break in his work from the "psychological-sexual dramas of adolescent frustrations" derived from the work of Maya Deren and her immediate followers, and the concomitant emergence of first-person lyric vision that had become fully articulate in *Anticipation of the Night*.

As Brakhage's work developed through the epic undertaking of *Prelude*, then *Dog Star Man* and other films of the 1960s, Sitney refined, elaborated, and extended the parameters of his reading of Brakhage's aesthetic and his knowledge of his peers and his significant predecessors in cinema, as well as himself making immense contributions to the critical and other institutions through which the American avant-garde realized itself as a significant social phenomenon. His complete account of what had by then established itself as one of the most innovative epochs in the history of

cinema appeared in 1974: *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*.<sup>18</sup> With this work, he fulfilled Michelson's mandate, presenting an account of the most radical cinema of the postwar period in which even the greatest of its other avatars were situated in relation to Brakhage.

Explicitly invoking the heritage of the English Romantic poets and the then-current Yale school of literary criticism about them, *Visionary Film* contained close readings and extended accounts of many other artists in the canon (which it simultaneously and definitively established), including especially persuasive and influential accounts of the work of Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger, Harry Smith, Peter Kubelka, and Jonas Mekas. The book's backbone was an analytic narrative of "the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film,"<sup>19</sup> constructed on a historical morphology of its major structural modes, primarily the sequence, trance film, lyric film, film mythopoeia, and structural film; its heart was two long chapters devoted primarily to Brakhage.

The first of Sitney's modes, the trance film, he argued, was created by Maya Deren out of the heritage of the classic French avant-garde of the 1920s, particularly Surrealism. This provided the model for Brakhage's early works, the acted melodramas, and from it he made the break into the lyrical, first-person vision, first fully mobilized in *Anticipation of the Night*: "The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision."<sup>20</sup> Sitney recognized the influence of Marie Menken on the rhythm of the moving camera, the dynamics of its relation to the edge of the screen, the rapid montage, and other formal tropes of lyric film vision. Nevertheless, even though a decade later it had become all but ubiquitous in underground film, Brakhage's forging of the lyrical film was seen as fundamentally an individual achievement, unlike previous developments in the avant-garde, which had been collective.

In the chapter on the lyrical film, Sitney gave detailed formal descriptions of *Anticipation of the Night* and the series of short films that followed through the mid-1960s, many of them concerned with the dynamics of his relation with his young wife and their growing family, ending with a discussion of the similar work of Bruce Baillie. The next chapter, "Major Mythopoeia," approached the long, some of them serial, films that Brakhage had been working on during the same period, but that instanced a categorical formal

development into the next mode, mythopoeia. Thus, the first of them, *Dog Star Man*, “elaborates in mythic, almost systematic terms, the world-view of the lyrical films. . . . it stations itself within the rhetoric of Romanticism, describing the birth of consciousness, the cycles of the seasons, man’s struggle with nature, and sexual balance in the visual evocation of a fallen titan.”<sup>21</sup> Again, the critical methodology for the reading of *Dog Star Man* and the *Songs*, the cycle that followed it, entailed detailed description of the films’ formal and structural qualities. Informed by Brakhage’s own account of his work (though also sometimes disputing it), Sitney framed Brakhage’s achievement in both the dialectics of British and American Romantic poetry and contemporary developments in painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, whose directives Brakhage had synthesized more comprehensively than any of his peers.

In Sitney’s account, with the *Art of Vision* and the *Songs* Brakhage had achieved the epic film, the equivalent of the Romantic epic poem and resembling it in being centered on the reflexive investigation of the artist’s own consciousness and its relation to nature. In this sense, the *Songs* constituted “an ultimate work,”<sup>22</sup> even though when he finished them in 1969, Brakhage was only in his mid-thirties and showing no signs of having exhausted his energies or completed his oeuvre. But the avant-garde’s next phase, structural film, radically diverged from Brakhage’s direction, and the new filmmakers of the late 1960s reflected, Sitney proposed, not Abstract Expressionism, but rather the reactions of pop, minimal and conceptual art against it.

In his last chapter Sitney attempted to theorize the formal appearance of the new films (“the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified”) jointly with the teleology derived from his understanding of the history of the avant-garde thus far within the dialectics of Romanticism. Its dominant aspiration was “the cinematic reproduction of the human mind,” and in this respect “the structural film approaches the condition of meditation and evokes states of consciousness without mediation; that is, with the sole mediation of the camera.”<sup>23</sup> Though the self-conscious materiality of much of Brakhage’s work allowed other commentators to propose some degree of continuity between it and the new mode, in Sitney’s reading, structural film’s fundamental project as well as its characteristic techniques involved rejection of the defining mode of Brakhage’s lyricism and its mythopoeic extrapolations in an attempt to divorce metaphors for consciousness from the eyes and the camera somatically attuned to them; and

so, the “major precursor of structural film” was not Brakhage, but Andy Warhol.<sup>24</sup>

Sitney’s historical morphology was challenged for being procrustean and leading to the omission of significant artists, but his history of the American avant-garde until the early 1970s and of Brakhage’s centrality in it was instantly definitive and displaced previous writing. Snipings, caveats, attempted reframings of course followed, but there has not since been a work of equivalent analytic force or with as detailed and sensitive knowledge of the canon or overall erudition.<sup>25</sup> But, though *Visionary Film* remains pre-eminent, not so the reputation of its privileged agonist, for Sitney’s and Michelson’s canonization of Brakhage was hardly in place before a tectonic shift in the ground of noncommodity cinema caused the filmmaker’s reputation and the sense of his historical significance they had asserted to begin a drastic decline. The films, both those he had already made and the many more he was to make in the next quarter century, continued to be appreciated by groups of people worldwide, but instead of preoccupying the vanguard of progressive cinema as they had in the previous decade, they sank below the common culture’s radar screen.

The exile of Brakhage and the aesthetic values he embodied reflected the diametric reversal of cultural priorities that we can now summarize, at least partially, as the shift from modernism to postmodernism in U.S. culture. Political developments were fundamental, especially the New Right offensive against the utopian cultural and social movements of the 1960s and the latter’s resultant decline and eventual extirpation. Even as the inevitability of the failure of the U. S. invasion of Viet Nam was becoming plain, the corporate state rapidly proved victorious in its domestic war against the Black Panther Party, the student movement, and other forms of domestic social resistance, allowing the Reagan presidency to begin an attack on the working class and working-class organization of a ferocity not seen since the early Depression.

The cultural reverberations of these developments produced a more complex amalgam of resistance to the right-wing offensives and of assimilation to them. Though by the late 1970s the project of a universal emancipation that had fueled the global coalitions against American imperialism retained little domestic credibility, the New Social Movements that had emerged in the late 1960s were flourishing, if primarily in their bourgeois components. On the one hand, as what soon became known as “identity

politics,” the women’s and the gay and lesbian movements and the parallel struggles for civil rights by ethnic groups were reconstructing the integrated cultural and political offensives that had been pioneered in the previous decade, and in doing so they generated new vanguardist cinemas, some of great power and theoretical sophistication. The most successful of them, the feminist cinemas, transformed avant-garde film and academic film theory alike.

On the other hand, as these identity cinemas developed, their initially artisanal, low-budget forms of filmmaking gradually were assimilated to larger, better-funded projects, eventually to industrial feature films designed for commercial distribution. As they did so, during the 1980s they met equivalent initiatives from the industry itself, which had recognized the various identities as potentially lucrative niche markets and so had recruited minorities to work on projects designed for specific minority constituencies. The rapprochement between corporate culture and movements originally opposed to it itself reflected the escalation of the culture industry’s colonization of the public sphere and the corresponding precariousness of any substantial and socially viable alternative to it.

In all these developments, the specific constituents of Brakhage’s aesthetics that had made him prototypical of the great flowering of non-commodity filmmaking in the 1960s made him apparently irrelevant for the 1980s. The values and aesthetics he stood for continued to command the allegiance of a small phylum of filmmakers and critics, and his films, both the classics of the 1960s and the late, purely abstract work, maintained very strong rentals from the two main distribution agencies of independent film—Film Makers’ Cooperative in New York and Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. At least some recognition of him became unavoidable in college textbooks and anthologies of film theory,<sup>26</sup> and wherever the idea of an alternative film culture still had credibility, his achievement had to be acknowledged. But, overall Brakhage was negatively positioned in respect to developments in the moving-image culture of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The first cracks in his reputation have been noted in Sitney’s account of the emergence of structural film and its rejection of the immanentist principles of Brakhage’s romantic personal expressivity. Always a vociferous defendant of his own reputation, Brakhage himself recognized the challenge and spoke out against the movement, even against some filmmakers he had previously espoused and befriended. That battle quickly ended, for by the

end of the 1970s, structural film had hardly more credibility than Brakhage himself. But, as a middle-aged white patriarch he remained the spoken or unspoken other to the cinematic initiatives that displaced it: those based on identity politics and then the affirmative cultural studies that followed them. Indeed, major components of his aesthetic had been previously created in specific opposition to the positions they mobilized.

The intellectual and social environment in which Brakhage had worked was all but entirely white. In the late 1950s and early days when beat aesthetics had exerted considerable leverage on underground film, African Americans had held a privileged, sometimes fetishized, imaginary position, and African American music was the referential art form par excellence. Though some ethnic filmmakers later found inspiration in his work,<sup>27</sup> Brakhage himself had been less than enthusiastic about beat culture and had largely skirted it in the formulation of his aesthetic; he nowhere credits jazz among his musical influences, and nowhere in his work does a person of color prominently appear.<sup>28</sup> But, if Brakhage's disinterest in the black component of American culture may be charitably construed as the reflection of the relative ethnic homogeneity of the region where he spent most of his life and of the sufficient, indeed all-embracing, power of cultural traditions that were more immediate to him, his position in postmodern sexual politics is inescapably contentious.

An assertive and unqualified heterosexuality lay at the core of Brakhage's cinema. The first community of successful artists to welcome him, the group around Robert Duncan, was largely gay, the homosexual component of underground film was enormous, and Brakhage was personally close to James Broughton, Willard Maas, Kenneth Anger, and other gay filmmakers and artists. But, by his own testimony, he constructed his life and his aesthetic enterprise in a deliberate rejection of homosexuality: "Many of my friends who had been waiting for me to transform into a homosexual were bitterly disappointed, frustrated," he recalled, "A married artist was an incomprehensible thing to many friends, artists working in film and other mediums."<sup>29</sup> The influence of his adoptive father's homosexuality on the formation of Brakhage's sexual identity can only be conjectural, but at all events, once made, Brakhage's decision to be a heterosexual was lived unambiguously. He eventually fathered seven children in two successive nuclear families and of course made his first marriage the single most important topic of his films of the 1960s and 1970s, even attributing their origin to the

family unit.<sup>30</sup> At exactly the time when the search for nonpatriarchal sex and family roles had greatest cultural urgency, Brakhage, interchangeably “bring[ing] forth films and children”<sup>31</sup> in the Colorado wilderness, appeared to embody not the solution, but the problem itself. Particularly contentious were the films in which his domestic aesthetic had been crucially pivoted, those of the birth of his children; in these his camera work, often understood as invasive and aggressive, appeared to feminist film theorists to epitomize the phallogocentric gaze and the cultural order constructed on it. And, as feminist theory entered its next phase and sought to understand the production of filmic meaning and pleasure via Lacanian psychoanalysis, Brakhage’s axiomatic and absolutely fundamental commitment to the investigation of pre- or nonlinguistic vision was again categorically counter to the times. But, worse was still to come.

When the moment of high Lacanian theory vaporized out of film studies, it was replaced, not by a return to a concept of art such as Brakhage espoused his whole life, but to its exact opposite: U.S. cultural studies’ affirmation of corporate industrial cinema and television. Brakhage always enjoyed going to the movies, sometimes explaining the recreation as a means of staying in touch with the culture at large, but he never thought of the commercial cinema as in any way related to his own enterprise. Passionately devoted to the totality of the Western aesthetic tradition and especially to poetry and serious music—the very forms of the “dead white males” that cultural studies abominated as “high art”—and the embodiment of the most resolutely uncompromising alternative to the film industry, he epitomized a film style and a social location that were alike anathematized. His rejection of the form of the industrial feature, of narrative as a principle of composition, and of Hollywood as a manufacturing system (with the break from all of them summarily located in *Anticipation of the Night*, the film he was editing on his wedding night!) ensured his virtual disappearance from academic film studies.

Even Brakhage’s shift of the main focus of his work from the photography of the family drama to the abstract, hand-painted films of the late 1980s and 1990s brought no relief. On the one hand, resistance to verbal language in the films reappears as resistance to verbal language about them, for Brakhage’s interest in prelinguistic vision produced works that defy verbal summary and make critical commentary extremely difficult. On the other, these abstract films perforce came to being in the midst of a corporate-controlled

culture that, centered in television and with advertisements and music video its essential products, was putatively a visual culture but one that had no use for sensuous seeing. If in the early 1970s Brakhage's oeuvre could be celebrated as the last (or perhaps the first) full flowering of modernism in film, by the late 1970s the "Warholization" of postmodern culture relegated him to irrelevance, his preeminence preempted by his similarly totalized other.

For whether or not Warhol had been the "major precursor of structural film," he was indisputably the major precursor of almost everything that came after it. Queer, fascinated with publicity and the psychic, material and social apparatuses of the mass-media, and especially with advertising, he epitomized the convergence of identity politics and the priorities of affirmative cultural studies in a cultural front administered jointly by the academy and entertainment industry cartels. Where Brakhage had fought to liberate film from Hollywood, Warhol's desire to find his own place in it provided the measure of the new times, and over the last quarter of the twentieth century, his rise matched Brakhage's decline in a cultural zero-sum game. The two main features of Brakhage's work that the period thrust into high relief—his negative positioning in identity politics and the categorical incompatibility of his work with the aesthetics, mode of production, and the industrial insertion of corporate capitalist culture—excluded him from virtually all the developments in public taste and in academic film theory between the early 1970s and the end of the century, in the thirty years between Annette Michelson's *Artforum* essay and the present project.

This collection of texts has been organized with an eye to the historical trajectory of Brakhage's standing in American culture sketched above. It begins with some of the early commentary that marked the emergence and establishment of his reputation and that now, as historical documents in their own right, indicate the terms by which his achievement was initially measured. Thereafter, it presents recent scholarly essays, mostly on films made after the mid-1970s, that is, after the publication of the first edition of *Visionary Film*, and so produced in the period when his work, new and old, received little critical attention. Alternating with these are more personal estimations of the general significance of Brakhage's contribution to the art of film made by other artists who came to know him and his works at various points throughout his life.



## NOTES

1. In the absence of a reliable biography of Brakhage, information about his life has been drawn from Gerald R. Barrett and Wendy Brabner, *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1983), Fred Camper's "A Short Biography" and the obituaries and other texts collected by him on his Web site, [www.fredcamper.com](http://www.fredcamper.com), as well as from conversations and correspondence with P. Adams Sitney, Paul Arthur, Don Yannacito, and others. The Camper Web site is presently the most comprehensive guide to Brakhage material of all kinds. *Stan Brakhage* largely repeats Brakhage's own accounts of his parents, childhood, and adolescence, which reproduced the mythopoeic inventiveness of his biographies of other filmmakers. The need for independent biographical research remains.
2. *Metaphors on Vision* was first published complete in 1963 as a special issue, number 30, of the journal *Film Culture*. The issue was not paginated.
3. "Fourth Independent Film Award," *Film Culture*, 24 (Spring 1962), 5. Brakhage's early work also met with a good deal of hostile and uncomprehending criticism from, among others, Ernest Callenbach ("The structure is that he throws in first one shot and then another and some others") and Pauline Kael ("the subtle manipulation of nothing"). For these and a review of early commentary on Brakhage, see Eric Arthur Gordon, "Stan Brakhage's Critics," *Filmwise*, 1 (1962), 16–18.
4. *A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book* (West Newbury, MA: Frontier Press, 1971); *The Seen* (San Francisco: Zephyrus Image, 1975); *The Brakhage Lectures: Georges Méliès, David Wark Griffith, Carl Theodore Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein* (Chicago: The Good Lion, 1972), expanded version, *Film Biographies* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1977); *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964–1980*, ed. Robert A. Haller (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982).
5. Jane Wodening, *The Lump Gulch Tales* (Nederland, CO: Grackle Books, 1993).
6. In early 1993, when he turned sixty, Brakhage was interviewed, "Brakhage at Sixty" (<http://www.smoc.net/mymindseye/naples/brakhage.html>). Containing his detailed account of the process of painting on film, the interview is one of the most summary and profound of the many he gave.
7. Respectively, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1989), *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 2001), *Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2003).
8. The complete text together with Phil Solomon's eulogy may be found at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/Funeral.html>.
9. *Artforum*, 11, 5 (January 1973). In fact another publishing undertaking, roughly cognate with the present one, more closely coincided with Brakhage's seventieth birthday, *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences*, a special edition of the *Chicago Review* edited by Eirik Steinhoff (47, 4/48, 1 [Winter 2001, Spring 2002]). As well as a selection of writings by Brakhage, it also contained essays by both scholars and poets.
10. "Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura," 31. The essay is reprinted below.
11. Brakhage quotes are from *Metaphors on Vision*, (unpaginated). Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinema Apparatus" appeared in French in *Cinéthique* in 1970, and in English in *Film Quarterly* 28 (2) (Winter 1974–75), 39–47. Usually thought to manifest a putatively reactionary Romanticism, Brakhage's films and theory were anathema in the period when apparatus theory and then Lacanian psychoanalysis dominated U.S. and

- British academic film studies; even as comprehensive a retrospective anthology as Philip Rosen's *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) made no reference to him.
12. Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," in *A Line of Sight* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005), 1.
  13. See her "Film and the Radical Aspiration," *Film Culture*, 42 (Fall 1966), 34–43.
  14. *Ibid.*, 31.
  15. Gordon, "Stan Brakhage's Critics."
  16. "Stan Brakhage," *Film Culture*, 18 (April 1958), 23–25, reprinted below.
  17. "An Open Letter to Stan Brakhage From Parker Tyler," *Filmwise*, 1 (1962), 18–19. Tyler continued to express reservations about this aspect of Brakhage's style; as late as 1969, for example, he complained that Brakhage's "breath-taking (and break-neck)" method of composition "simply pushes to the extreme and beyond the viewer's tolerance for repetition of quality and extension of effect"; *Underground Film: A Critical History* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 170.
  18. New York: Oxford University Press, with subsequent enlarged editions in 1979 and 2002.
  19. *Visionary Film*, x (all references to *Visionary Film* are to the first, 1974, edition).
  20. *Ibid.*, 180.
  21. *Ibid.*, 211.
  22. *Ibid.*, 258.
  23. *Ibid.*, 407–8.
  24. *Ibid.*, 409.
  25. *Visionary Film* was not unchallenged. Amos Vogel, for example, denounced what he saw as "the enforced revelation of non-existing patterns based on preconceived ideas" as an act of "supreme desperate, ludicrous audacity" ("A Reader's Digest of the Avant-Garde," *Film Comment* [July–August 1976], 36); William Moritz found "its primary value . . . lies in the degree to which its false assumptions are challenged" ("Beyond 'Abstract' Criticism," *Film Quarterly* 31, 3 [Spring 1978], 29); and Constance Penley and Janet Bergstrom harped on Sitney's putative "phenomenological approach" that eliminated "consideration of the spectator's unconscious relation to the film, the screen, the entire viewing situation, an aspect that has received much attention in French and English film theory" ("The Avant-Garde: Histories and Theories," *Screen*, 19, 3 [Autumn 1978], 118); Sitney replied in "Letters from . . . P. Adams Sitney," *Screen*, 20, 3–4 (Winter 1979–80), 151–6. But, none of these offered an alternative historiographical model of comparable extensiveness and persuasiveness, and the dialectics of Romanticism established by Sitney framed subsequent commentary. In *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1986), Marjorie Keller explored Brakhage's use of children, especially his own, as the vehicle of his investigation of filmic vision. In *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), David E. James again situated Brakhage in relation to the British Romantic poets, but proposed a counterreading emphasizing the position of the avant-garde cinemas of the 1960s in respect to contemporaneous political and social movements and to industrial culture. Somewhat later, William Wees approached the specifically visual aspects of Brakhage and one phylum of independent filmmaking in *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California

- Press, 1992), and James Peterson explored the institutional situation of the avant-garde and the implicit viewing procedures it supplied in *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994). Still later, R. Bruce Elder in *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998) comprehensively situated Brakhage's films and theoretical writing in the context of American poetics, not only of the poets listed in the book's title, but also of Michael McClure and others of the Beat generation, and in the traditions of Western philosophy from Schopenhauer to Merleau-Ponty.
26. Brakhage received appreciative consideration in the two standard American college film histories, Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kavin, *A Short History of the Movies*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000) and Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003); excerpts from *Metaphors on Vision* appeared in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
  27. See, for example, the essay by Willie Varela in this book.
  28. The only attempt I know of to suggest a jazz influence on Brakhage is Michael McClure's observation that "[Robert] Creely has followed jazz, and through Creely, Stan is inheriting a sense of jazz improvisation which neatly accompanies his sense of Pollock-like inspiration"; "Realm Buster: Stan Brakhage," *Chicago Review*, 47.4 and 48.1 (Winter 2001, Spring 2002), 173. I find this unpersuasive.
  29. P. Adams Sitney, "Interview With Stan Brakhage," *Metaphors on Vision*, unpaginated.
  30. Thus, in 1963: "'By Brakhage' [the signature on the films of the 1960s] should be understood to mean 'by way of Stan and Jane Brakhage,' as it does in all my films since marriage. It is coming to mean: 'by way of Stan and Jane and all the children Brakhage'"; *Metaphors on Vision*, unpaginated.
  31. *Metaphors on Vision*, unpaginated.

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## Contributors

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**Bruce Baillie** describes his relationship to Stan Brakhage as that of “friend and comrade in and out of Purgatory.”

Filmmaker and writer **Abigail Child** has made more than thirty films and published four books of poetry. She has two projects forthcoming: *Cake and Steak*, an experimental sound film on suburbia, gender, and assimilation; and *This is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film* from University of Alabama Press, in their Modern and Contemporary Poetics series.

**Craig Dworkin** is author of *Reading the Illegible* (Northwestern University Press, 2003) and the editor of the collected poems of Vito Acconci (M.I.T. Press, 2005); he curates the digital archive Eclipse ([www.princeton.edu/eclipse](http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse)).

**R. Bruce Elder** is a filmmaker whose work has been the subject of numerous retrospectives in Canada, the United States, and Europe. He is the author of (among other books) *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson*

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**Jonas Mekas** is a poet and filmmaker and the artistic director of Anthology Film Archives.

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**Carolee Schneemann** is a multidisciplinary artist who has transformed the very definition of art, especially regarding discourse on perception, the body, and sexuality. Her video and installation works have been widely shown in the United States and Europe. *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Work and Selected Writing* was published by McPherson and Company in 1979 and reprinted in 1997; in 2002, the MIT Press published *Imaging Her Erotics—Essays, Interviews, Projects*.

**P. Adams Sitney** is Professor of Visual Art in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University. He is the author of *Visionary Film, Modernist Montage*, and *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*, and the editor of Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision, The Film Culture Reader, The Avant-Garde Film, The Essential Cinema*, and Maurice Blanchot's *The Gaze of Orpheus*.

**Phil Solomon** is a filmmaker and a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he has been teaching filmmaking and critical studies since 1991. He collaborated with colleague and friend, Stan Brakhage, on *Elementary Phrases* (1994), *Concrescence* (1996), and *Seasons* (2002). Phil Solomon is currently finishing two works-in-progress that were started with Brakhage entitled *Congenial Meninges (Fred and Ginger)* and *Alternating Currents*. He is also working on a book of edited

transcriptions of Brakhage's weekly salons entitled *A Snail's Trail in the Moonlight: Conversations with Brakhage*. Phil Solomon delivered a eulogy for his friend in Victoria, British Columbia, on 14 March 2003 (<http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/Funeral.html>).

**Chick Strand** is a filmmaker.

**James Tenney** is a composer, pianist, conductor, and theorist, currently teaching at the California Institute of the Arts, where he holds the Roy E. Disney Family Chair in Musical Composition. A long-time friend of and collaborator with Stan Brakhage, who made two films based on preexisting pieces of Tenney's music, *Christ Mass Sex Dance* and (...) or *ellipses*. Tenney also composed the music for Jim Shedden's documentary film, *Brakhage* (1998).

**Willie Varela** is a moving image artist, photographer, programmer, and installation artist. For the past thirty-two years, Varela has worked in film and video and has exhibited nationally, including two Whitney Biennials and a midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the spring of 1994. Varela currently is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies in the Department of Theatre Arts and Film at the University of Texas at El Paso.