

Brakhage

Year | Country of Origin | Running Time

Credits

Director	Jim Shedden
Screenplay	Jim Shedden
Music	James Tenney
Photography	R. Bruce Elder, Richard Kerr, Kathryn MacKay, Gerald Packer, Robert Pytlyk, Alexa-Frances Shaw

In Brief

Throughout his entire career, Stan Brakhage struggled to remain true to his personal vision of filmmaking. Jim Shedden captures Brakhage's remarkable journey in this documentary, interweaving observations by film critics, film makers and film historians with recent and historical interviews with Brakhage and his family.

If Maya Deren invented the American avant-garde cinema, Stan Brakhage realized its potential. Unquestionably the most important living avant-garde filmmaker, Brakhage single-handedly transformed the schism separating the avant-garde from classical filmmaking into a chasm. And the ultimate consequences have yet to be resolved; his films appear nearly as radical today as the day he made them.

Brakhage was born in 1933, and made his first film, *Interim* (1952), at 19. Notably prolific, he has completed several films most years since. To date, his filmography lists over 300 titles, ranging in length from a few seconds to several hours.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, attended high school in Central City, Colorado. He briefly attended Dartmouth College then left for San Francisco, where he enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). He had hoped to study under Sidney Peterson, but unfortunately, Peterson had left the school and the film program was no more, so Brakhage moved on.

Like Deren, Brakhage came to understand film through poetry, and his earliest films do resemble those of Deren and her contemporaries. The early American avant-garde filmmakers tended to borrow liberally from the German Expressionists and Surrealists: mannered acting, symbolism/non sequitur, non-naturalistic lighting and psychosexual themes were common. Still fundamentally story-oriented, these films tend to use a loose, non-linear narrative and dramatic situations to establish metaphorical relationships between images. Deren's films are closest to those of the Surrealists: though she rejects their often cynical nihilism, her films are steeped in portentous Freudian symbolism.

Brakhage's early films are more primal. There is no evidence of the Expressionist-inspired preciousness of the pre-WWII American avant-garde filmmakers, and his invocation of Freudian ideas, while omnipresent, is much blunter than Deren's. For Deren's cerebral idealism, Brakhage substitutes a rawer, psychologized version of reality. Many of Brakhage's films from this period are very good, but they are overshadowed today by the films they begat.

While Brakhage's early films stress psychological themes—the conflict between wish-dream and reality, for example—and retain a strongly dramatic element, they provide frequent glimpses of the formal leap that soon followed.

Despite a rapidly deepening reservoir of ideas, avant-garde film retained a strong connection to the commercial cinema. European avant-garde filmmakers had long made liberal use of photographic effects and trick photography. But nothing they did formally was at all unfamiliar to the commercial cinema, which was quick to pick up on their ideas. But if strange photographic effects are one thing, turning celluloid into a plastic medium was something else altogether.

Brakhage was among the first filmmakers to physically alter the filmstrip itself for metaphorical effect. The most striking example of this technique in his early films occurs in *Reflections on Black* (1955), which imagines the dream-vision of a blind man as he walks through a city, climbs the stairs of his apartment building and arrives home. Brakhage signals the blindness of his protagonist by physically scratching out his eyes, and splices in bits of film negative to convey the sense of experience the world as a blind man might, not as something seen, but something pictured.

Shortly before making *Reflections of Black*, Brakhage moved to New York City. That same year, the film critic Parker Tyler introduced Brakhage to Joseph Cornell, who commissioned him to shoot a film of the soon to be dismantled Third Avenue El. Working for the first time without actors or plot, Brakhage began to focus on the expressive qualities of the medium itself. The film which resulted, *Wonder Ring* (1955), represents Brakhage's first step toward his radical reconception of the cinema. There is no story, no protagonist, no linear





narrative other than the train itself, traveling endlessly along its track. It is a perfect expression of the world defined by the train, and a peculiarly apposite metaphor for the bare logic of narrative itself.

Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, and eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'

With this opening paragraph to his seminal manifesto *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage called into being an entirely new kind of cinema, where none had existed previously. Suddenly, an epistemological question loomed where none had before: What is the nature of the

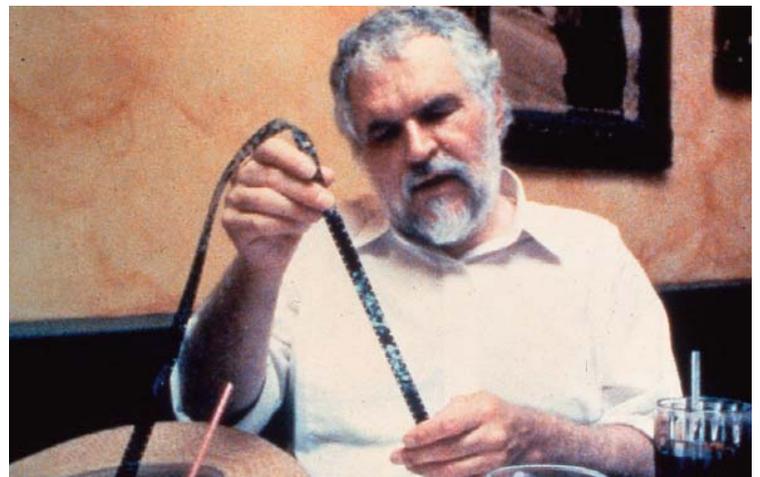
relationship between the moving image and the world, and how might it be represented? Brakhage intended to film not the world itself, but the act of seeing the world. The vast majority of Brakhage's films are entirely silent. When you watch his films, you are asked to look, and look closely. Where his predecessors used metaphor as a means of relating images to one another, Brakhage's films were themselves expressions of a single, great metaphor: visual perception.

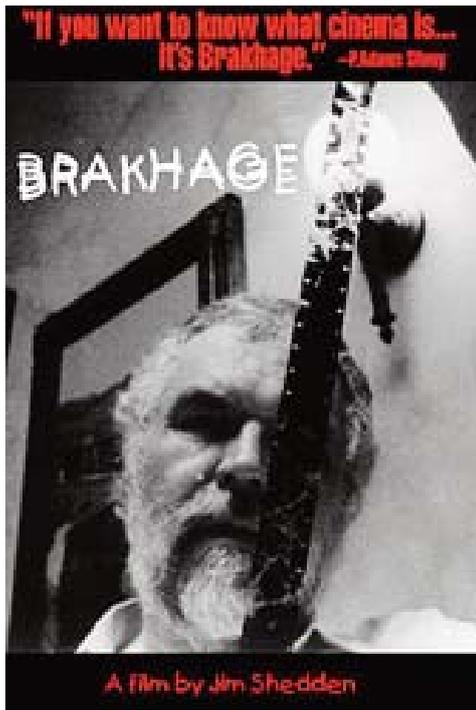
These questions were by no means unique to Brakhage—they were in fact the catalyst for modern art—but he was the first to realize their implications for the cinema in a body of truly great works of art. In *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), one sees Brakhage's first clearly articulated expression of his concept of the vision of the 'untutored eye.' While retaining the barest elements of narrative, in this work Brakhage entirely dispenses with the drama, in order to better capture raw experience. The 'shooting script' for the 40 minute film consists of a list of 16 concepts, rather than specific shots. Where his earlier films approximated dreams, *Anticipation of the Night* captures the dreamlike quality of raw experience, the world as it happens and is taken in and understood, willy-nilly.

While making *Anticipation of the Night*, Brakhage married Jane Collum, who was to become his muse, and the primary subject of his films for many years. Easily the best known of these is *Window, Water, Baby, Moving* (1959), a document of Jane's pregnancy and the birth of their first child. Family, and the rituals of family life, became the predominant themes of Brakhage's films for many years. Birth, sex, and death are the three touchstones of all of his films. In *Thigh, Line, Lyre, Triangular* (1961), Brakhage again documents the birth of one of his children, and their passage through infancy and childhood is a consistent theme. Several of Brakhage's films focus on sexual relations, not only between a man and wife, but among friends, and the proto-sexual aspects of childhood. In other films he examines the rituals surrounding death and the body which remains after the being has departed. *Sirius Remembered* (1959), which documents the gradual dissolution of the corpse of the family dog, and *The Dead* (1960), made in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, prefigure several later films which return to this same theme.

Brakhage's most ambitious projects of the early '60s were *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and *The Art of Vision* (1961-64), essentially one film articulated two different ways. *Dog Star Man* definitively marks the transition from a lyrical style, centered on individual experience, to a more epic style, with a focus on broad metaphysical themes. Roughly speaking, the film expresses a mythic conception of the struggle and fall of Man. Made in four parts, with a prelude, *Dog Star Man* incorporates many layers of superimposition and a dense, rapid editing pattern. *The Art of Vision* consists of exactly the same material as *Dog Star Man*, but separates the superimposed reels of film in various combinations. As the elements of the film gradually build and cascade into one another, one begins to see the connections between the elements more and more clearly, how and why certain themes are repeated, and the simultaneously epic and analytic quality of the film itself.

Since completing *The Art of Vision*, Brakhage's films have become consistently more metaphysical. Even his celebrated Pittsburgh trilogy, completed in 1971, which purported to document three city institutions, at its core deals with metaphysical questions of Being. The three films: *Eyes*, *Deus Ex*, and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, document the police, a hospital and a morgue, respectively. All focus on the mechanics of the body: how it is ordered in life, how it is repaired when broken, and what remains when the person who animates it has perished. The key image of *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* is quite likely the bluntest statement on the human condition ever filmed. In the course of an autopsy, the skin around the scalp is slit with a scalpel, and in





preparation for exposing and examining the brain, the face of each cadaver is literally peeled off, like a mask, revealing the raw meat beneath. That image, once seen, will never leave you.

The feature-length *The Text of Light* (1974) consists entirely of abstracted patterns of light photographed through a thick, deep-green ashtray. Anticipating his non-photographic abstract films of the '80s and '90s, it reduces photography to its ratio ultima, the influence of light on photographic emulsion.

... in photographing this ashtray for instance, I'm sitting for hours to get 30 seconds of film. I'm sitting watching what's happening and clicking a frame, and sitting and watching, and further than that, I had shot several hundred feet and they seemed dead. They didn't reflect at all my excitement and emotion and feeling. They had no anima in them, except for two or three shots where the lens which was on a tripod, pressed against the desk, had jerked. Those were just random, but what gave me the clue. What I began doing was always holding the camera in hand. For hours. Clicking. Waiting. Seeing what the sun did to the scene. As I saw what was happening in the frame to these little particles of light, changing, I would shoot the camera very slightly.

In recent years, Brakhage has focused largely on painting, scratching and drawing directly on the surface of the film strip itself. In eschewing photography altogether he focuses more directly on the bare act of perception. These films recall the paintings of abstract expressionists like Pollock, Klein, Motherwell and Rothko, and pack the same visceral punch. If you've ever stood in front of a great Rothko, and felt yourself falling

in, the experience of watching the best of Brakhage's hand-painted films is very similar.

I now no longer photograph, but rather paint upon clear strips of film – essentially freeing myself from the dilemmas of re-presentation. I aspire to a visual music, a 'music' for the eyes (as my films are entirely without sound-tracks these days). Just as a composer can be said to work primarily with 'musical ideas,' I can be said to work with the ideas intrinsic to film, which is the only medium capable of making paradigmatic 'closure' apropos *Primal Sight*. A composer most usually creates parallels to the surroundings of the inner ear – the primary thoughts of sounds. I, similarly, now work with the electric synapses of thought to achieve overall cathexis paradigms separate from but 'at one' with the inner lights, the Light, at source, of being human.

Stan Brakhage died of cancer on March 8, 2003, in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is in the process of preserving all of his films. His last finished film, *Stan's Window*, is a photographed self-portrait. Brakhage left behind the beginning of another film, *The Chinese Series*, composed of 35mm black leader he had scratched with his fingernails. The film was to end wherever he stopped scratching.

Brian L. Frye, (www.sightandsound.com)

This documentary will be followed a week later by

By Brakhage

Stan Brakhage | USA | Various | 120 minutes

A selection of Brakhage shorts, comprising *Desistfilm*, *Wedlock House: An Intercourse*, the five *Dog Star Man* films and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*.

Note that this programme contains images that some viewers may find disturbing, *Wedlock House* including an explicit sex scene and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* footage of an autopsy.

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