ON STAN BRAKHAGE AND VISUAL MUSIC

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Through centuries of both scientific research and creative production, the pursuit of "visual music," or a "music for the eyes," has essentially followed two major lines of development. One has closely tied the rhythms of visually perceived movements and shifts of color to sonic parallels, effectively illustrating these patterns of sounds and their emotional effects, while the other approach has sought to free visual experience from the dictates of sound and, in the process, to create newly envisioned equivalents of inner rhythms.

In the early twentieth century, with the advent of motion picture film, this historical desire to structure light and visible movement into a form comparable to music would align itself with modernist theories of art that called for the revelation of the essence of each medium, for a purity of form free of referentiality, in autonomous works of art to be appreciated as objects of perception in their own right. Preeminent in this approach to the new medium of film and its fundamental characteristics of light and time were the 1920's Graphic filmmakers Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Walther Ruttman, and soon after, the abstract animator Oskar Fischinger. Eggeling's seminal work, *Symphonie Diagonale*, for example, is an early experiment in this genre, with geometric shapes that flow and evolve across the screen as light-shapes emerging from and disappearing into the dark. However, even these 'abstract' shapes are, in appearance, somewhat reminiscent of keyboards and other musical instruments, and their movements within the frame seem to be primarily descriptive of space — as much as they experiment with the visual structuring of time. Oscar Fischinger's early black and white *Studies* present an increasing visual complexity of movement, but rather than allowing them to stand on their own, Fischinger synchronized these visions to sound tracks of familiar orchestral music – which, ultimately, largely determine the viewer's interpretation. And his later color piece, the meticulously crafted *Motion Painting No. One*, when viewed silently, can clearly be seen as more painterly and visually descriptive than musical, remaining heavily dependent on the aural accompaniment to create its musical effects.

Ironically, it might be argued that because film is essentially musical to begin with, insofar as it is based on a rhythmic progression through time (the underlying 'beat' of the mechanical projection), the early avant-garde filmmakers of the silent era who included photographic representation in addition to varying degrees of abstraction, and primarily experimented with editing structures that would create energy between cuts and give overall shape to their visions, were creating a visual music as rich or richer than those who attempted to do so by tying pure visual abstractions to musical scores. Looking at the works of contemporaries, such as Man Ray's *L'Etoile de Mer*, Rene Clair's *Entr'acte*, or even earlier Melies films, it is interesting to turn off the usual sound accompaniments and allow for the full, unadulterated effects of the visions that dance across the screen as they are choreographed within the duration of each film – the flutter of a garment in the light, the flicker of a flame, or the ripples of water transitioning to dancer's hands appealing to the viewer with direct, sensual effect.

Moving Visual Thinking

As a filmmaker in the modernist tradition, Stan Brakhage also sought to discover those characteristics necessary and inherent to his chosen medium, and in his particular variation on this theme came to understand film as peculiarly and uniquely suited to exteriorizing human thought process. What we perceive as the light of the mind, the images generated therein and the rhythms with which they shift and change within our conscious awareness; images received through the eyes, with the eyes, or generated by the imagination; dreams, memories, anticipatory imaginings; sudden visions, whether direct or peripheral; or hypnagogic sparks and flashes of color: these were the elements of an interior life that film could re-present for us. For the first time in

human history, it seemed possible to make manifest and share with each other what Brakhage came to refer to as “moving visual thinking.”

Still in his twenties, and after only a few short years as a filmmaker, Brakhage made the major shift away from the directing of actors, in his early psychodramas, to the development of what P. Adams Sitney referred to as the first-person, lyrical film. In his classic text, Visionary Film, Sitney describes this new form as one in which “there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a person looking.”1 Sitney goes on to note that the perspectival form of the earlier films is replaced here with “the flattened space of Abstract Expressionist painting,” writing that “the film-maker working in the lyrical mode affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting for the most part its traditional use as a window into illusion.”2

From this time, beginning in the late 1950’s, Brakhage became increasingly concerned with the nature of vision. Struggling as he did with his own weak eyesight, he became unusually sensitive to and conscious of “the act of seeing.” The processes of sight, how the human eye and the human mind form images, became an integral consideration in his construction of a film. As early as 1961, for example, the film *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* presented superimposed photographic images of exotic animals as well as layers of color that were directly hand painted over images of the birth of his daughter (Neowyn) in a documentation not only of that external event (including those sights not photographically reproducible), but also of the inner, experiential event of the filmmaker’s subjective thought processes and emotional responses – layers of superimposition thus being added to the gestural techniques of the hand-held camera to create a filmic equivalent of inner vision.

Pursuing a first-person phenomenology of cinema was not without its perils. A practice of immersion into one’s own interior processes and experience always holds the potential for loss of relevance or meaningful connection with those outside that immediate reality. Taken to its extreme, it threatens madness. However, Brakhage films never present a purely subjective reality that simply ignores the existence of a generally recognized and objectively testable one. He often went to great lengths, in fact, to determine which visual effects were those of his own optical system and which were perceived occurrences within the larger, natural world. And he often referred to his films as “documents,” taking it as his life’s work, in part, to engage in and to encourage a richer, fuller, more complex experience of seeing.

Nonetheless, it is certainly true that to some degree Brakhage did perceive inner and outer realities as enmeshed – as epitomized, perhaps, by frequent representations within his work of the interplay of incoming, and inner, light. In Brakhage’s universe, we are each an intimate part of the external realities of the world. One doesn’t simply walk through that world, but is immersed in it. One doesn’t simply see it, but creates optical responses and interpretations of it, with eyes and mind and the entire electrically charged nervous system that is the “I” of which we speak. And that “I” is full of spaces and intermittencies, being held together — insofar as it can be said to be an entity at all — by rhythm.

Put another way, Brakhage experienced the physical world, the physical self – and film – as ‘fleeting,’ ‘ephemeral,’ as in a constant state of flux. He referred to film as “a weave of light that’s forever dissolving.”3 His accepted tenet that “all that is is light” included the cathecting sparks of thought of our own nervous systems. And with the film medium he found the means of creating a formal balance that would be responsive to that interplay of inner experience and movement through the world. For, film does lend itself well to analogies of perception. The 24 frames per second succession of film imagery with the felt, if not consciously perceived, spaces of black between them; the horizontal progression through time in combination with the vertical layering of images that can throw into question the temporal linearity of experience; the textures and graininess of the vision; the bounced light; the collisions or plasticity of the cuts, uniting with or undermining

the rhythms of projection: together, these elements could create the closest equivalent of human perceptual experience yet realized.

Filmically presenting sights both ordinary and extraordinary, in celebration and "song" of the terrible and terrifying beauty of life-on-earth, Brakhage attempted, further, to make visual equivalents of those inner workings of the mind through which these outer realities might be reconstructed and perceived. And ultimately, he would even search within himself for the shapes and movements, the very sparking energy impulses, of what he referred to as "the intrinsic grammar of the most inner (perhaps pre-natal) structure of thought itself."4

At its most fundamental level, this would translate onto film as surges, pulses, flickerings, flashes and streamings of rhythmically structured charges of light and color. Bruce Elder states, for example, that "Brakhage's hand-painted films are attempts to convey the surging electrical energies within the body – the exchanges of excitement at our nerve endings, which cause our experience,"5 noting that 'moving visual thinking' seems "to have to do with a transitional form of awareness that exists only fleetingly, and mostly without our being consciously aware of its contents."6 Yet Brakhage did work unceasingly to make the subconscious conscious – to bring into our conscious awareness those forms of seeing and thinking that do not ordinarily receive our attention, but which underlie or comprise all of our complex layers of perception and understanding. And while he did refer to 'moving visual thinking' as "that pre-language, pre-'picture' realm of the mind which provides the physical grounds for image making (imagination),"7 he would also use the term more broadly at times, referring to a variety of manifestations or 'realms' of visual thought. These concepts of moving visual thinking would be constantly elaborated upon through decades of his growing oeuvre.

From *Dog Star Man* to the *Arabics*

It was during the creation of his epic film *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), that Brakhage concurrently produced his seminal work of theoretical writing, "Metaphors On Vision." With *Dog Star Man*, he was striving to create a new creation myth for modern times through a transformation of the old symbolic systems that had come to seem so rigid and unchanging. The Tree of Life of the ancient myths, now seen as dead, was thus to be cut down and turned into firewood for the struggling young man's family. With multiple superimpositions, rapidly repeated zooms, negative to positive imagery, prism effects, flash frames, edge flares, cut outs, scratching and painting on the film itself, time lapses and anamorphic twists, he created a tapestry of constantly moving imagery within a phenomenological space. Images of clouds and mist, ice and snow, the sun and the moon; red flames, blue ice, and flaring film edges; man, woman and child; a beating heart and circling blood cells; the chopping of the tree and the movements of the stars: all were woven together with rapid camera movement and rapid cutting into the streaming and beating rhythms that create an overall metaphor for Life itself.

It was coincident with this making, then, that he would write:

Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an 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."8

Throughout the following two decades, much of Brakhage's work, though ostensibly eschewing drama in favor of visionary experience of ordinary dailiness, continued, in fact, to exhibit clear dramatic elements. However, beginning in the early 70's another major shift becomes evident, as "vision" seems to have been increasingly defined as "thought process" – as the interior light of the mind and the feedback of the nervous system in response to the incoming light being "spanked" in upon it (as he would say) were given equal weight to any exterior sights.

Some significant early examples of the thought-process films include *The Process*(1972) and *Thot Fal'n* (1978). With *The Process*, Brakhage was clearly addressing the interaction of internal and external sources of imagery — in this case, as the sole 'subject' of the film (though the actual location and event of the shooting was of people passing in and out of a small, local bar in the Colorado mountains). In this short, nine-minute work, by superimposing negative and positive images and inter-cutting these with full fields of pulsating color, he suggests a simultaneous awareness of different aspects of the perceptive, contemplative and recollecting mind. Edited as a careful orchestration of shifting shapes and colors, images appear to gently reverberate within the containment of the frame. Slightly displaced positive and negative versions of the same image add to the feeling of insubstantiality. And movements, such as a door being opened or closed, seem to slide across the plane of the screen, defying our normal sense of perspective and evoking, instead, brushes of light across a visual field of mind.

In *Thot Fal'n* (which he paired with another film of the same year, *Burial Path*), Brakhage specifically claimed to be "graphing the process of forgetfulness."9 By compressing space with a telephoto lens and using slow motion effects, as well as images of water or rippled glass that are frequently suggestive of dissolution, he creates a dream-like effect, as familiar people and objects come in and out of focus, or may be seen only briefly, drift out of sight, be momentarily retrieved in another shot, and then vanish again. These images not only appear at times to 'float' off-screen, but also undergo constant metamorphoses, through a filmic equivalent of associative thinking, as intricate passages of visual rhymes and plastic cutting, superimpositions and fades, reveal multitudinous shapes and colors that foreshadow, suggest, fade in and out, or at times cut directly from one image to the next.

Drawing on the aesthetics of both *The Process* and *The Text of Light (1974)* – with its reflections and refractions through a glass ashtray creating abstracted light-likenesses of landscapes, seascapes and cosmic intimation – the thought-process films of 1978 can be seen as a bridge between those earlier works and the so-called "Imagnostic Films" of the Roman Numeral and then Arabic Numeral Series. For, it was in these series of photographic abstractions from the early 80's that Brakhage was to take his next leap into the orchestration of pure light and refracted colors – drawing on the perceived inner movements of the human brain, the qualities of music, and the inherent nature of film, to present us with a vision of what he believed to be the inner "grammar" that formed the structural basis of all thought.

"of rhythm is image/ of image is knowing/ of knowing there is/ a construct" (Charles Olson)

From a very early age, Brakhage had wanted to be a poet, then as a young man imagined himself a 'poet with a camera,' before gradually coming to more deeply realize the unique possibilities of his own medium. However, these ties to poetry, and also to his studies of music, continued to permeate his entire life's work. And at the foundation of all three of these arts – music, poetry and cinema – Brakhage identified the shared principle of rhythm, it being biological and perceptual rhythms, he would argue, from which arise all of our possibilities of knowing.

Quoting Charles Olson, he would frequently cite, "of rhythm is image/ of image is knowing/ of knowing there is/ a construct."10 In many public lectures as well as in his essay, "About Time," Brakhage illuminated the

aesthetic sensibility and creative process that this implies. “Of rhythm is image,” evokes the biological sources of our always moving, transformational imagery. (From the rhythm of a heartbeat, the rhythms of breath, even the firing of neurons, come the rhythms of sound, the rhythms of language — and at a primary level, the rhythms of image.) Of that imaging, then, is all of our knowing – not “knowledge,” but a process of “knowing,” a process that is also in movement, in continual transformation, being constantly reflective of the sensed world as we are sensing it. And from this process of knowing there arises, then, a con-struct — which word Brakhage emphasized as being essentially verb-like as well, as “an ‘end tempo’ in [the] rhythm pattern – and one with metaphorical bounce . . . “11 As he explains,

. . . the rhythm of “construct” (as Olson has it) reverses Time (in the poem’s process) so that an end (or “full Stop”) can be thought of as that which causes the reader to imagine Time moving backwards to an end which is a beginning which never was nor ever could be – or some full-circle of ever rhythming thinking centered on “construct.”

In film terminology one would say that there is a splice between “con” and “struct” so powerful it achieves the fullest possible effect of Eisensteinianmontage.12
Brakhage’s sense of a parallel filmic construct also drew inspiration for its formal organization from Gertrude Stein’s conviction that there is no such thing as repetition: apparent repetitions, then, always being experienced as a beginning-again, with each recurring presentation of a word (in her case) or an image (in Brakhage’s) creating its own multiplicity of reverberations, breathing life into works that aspire to the experience of a “continuous present.” (In an analogous way, a musical aesthetic in which each note is given a life of its own — is given equal weight or import within the musical structure — might allow for the organization of those notes to disrupt the sense of movement and create for the listener a perception of space, carved from the aesthetics of time.)

Brakhage had had musical training as a child, singing both in church choirs and as a boy soprano soloist. And while poetry continued to be his first love — and while his work was also richly informed by the history of the visual arts — he ultimately felt that of all the arts film was closest to music. In his filmmaking practice, he frequently drew inspiration from a variety of musical forms and pieces.

Mothlight, his 1963 collage of moth wings and plant life, was organized according to the principles of a baroque fugue. But “the most modern baroqueists in music,” he wrote, “were, of course, the twelve-tonists,” stating that his earlier film, *Anticipation of the Night* (1957-58), was “specifically inspired by the relationships I heard between the music of J.S. Bach and Anton Webern.”13 Of the four part *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-70), he wrote in the same letter that it was “to some extent inspired by the music of Olivier Messiaen and, to some lesser extent, Jean Barraque, Pierre Boulez, Henri Pousseur, and Karlheinz Stockhausen . . .”14 And a later film, Unconscious London Strata (1982), he would describe as a “reconstruction of the mind’s eye at the borders of the unconscious,” writing, in his description of the piece, that “some visual song of all of England’s history began to move through this material,” creating, then, a metaphor of mind through analogy to a musical form, as memory manifested on film as “rounds . . . within rounds.”15

Messiaen, Kandinsky, and silent film

In 1966, Brakhage had claimed an “integral involvement with musical notation as a key to film editing aesthetics,” stating that it was, in part, his growing understanding of the aesthetics of sound that led him to an increasing conviction that no sound accompaniment was needed for his visuals – continuing to make, with a few noteworthy exceptions, mostly silent films for the remainder of his career. He had written at that time that, “I now see/feel no more absolute necessity for a sound track than a painter feels the need to exhibit a painting with a recorded musical background. Ironically, the more silently-oriented my creative philosophies have

become, the more inspired-by-music have my photographic aesthetics and my actual editing orders become, both engendering a coming-into-being of the physiological relationship between seeing and hearing in the making of a work of art in film."16

That "physiological relationship between seeing and hearing" – in fact, the more general physiological cross-over of sensory memory known as synaesthesia that results, for examples, in a smell prompting a remembered sight, or a sound seeming to have a certain taste or tactility – is widely accepted as necessary ground for aesthetic experience. A particular arrangement of colors, lines, shapes or sounds can thus create not just a balanced form of pleasing proportions, but one that weaves a complexity of sensory truths to which we respond with our whole nervous system and deeply known physicality of being, as the sources of that knowing interact as felt response within the intricacies of mind.

Certainly, synaesthesia at source is frequently cited in descriptions of the creative process. Brakhage quotes Olivier Messiaen as saying that, "When I listen to music, and even when I read it, I have an inward vision of marvelous colours – colours which blend like combinations of notes, and which shift and revolve with the sound."17 Brakhage wrote, "I seek to hear color just as Messiaen seeks to see sound."18 And abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky was amongst those who have experienced something similar, claiming to "hear" very specific sounds at the sight of certain specific hues. For his part, Brakhage recalls "first hearing shifting chords of sound that corresponded in meaningful interplay with what I was seeing when I was a child in a Kansas cornfield at mid-night. That was the first time I was in an environment silent enough to permit me to hear 'the music of the spheres,' as it's called, and visually specific enough for me to be aware of the eye's pulse of receiving image."19

Drawing on these "ties" or "sense impulses of the nervous system,"20 Brakhage increasingly edited his films with an explicit awareness of the common experiential ground underlying how our nervous systems respond to different orders of stimuli, and came to fully understand the basis of this experience as being one of rhythm. Through intensive studies of subtle movements of the mind (that is to say, of his own mind), Brakhage perceived those movements as being in interplay with both visually and sonically received and experienced rhythms – and believed that the aesthetic creation of visually-ordered rhythms or sonically–ordered rhythms might equally present meaningful equivalents of those inner movements.

How these movements of the mind encompass the experience of color is further explicated in Brakhage's essay, "Painting Film" (1995). There he describes how he might approach a painted equivalent (on film) of a plate of salad seen on the table before him:

The table is in the range of nomenclature "yellow brown"; but the eye's retention of yellow is blue, and the afterimage of brown is often something I call "red-black" – a very muted red, to be sure . . . more in the range of purple, say – actually un-nameable. The shifts of tone, as the mind absorbs, is understandably variable along a strip of film, but a tune undergoing melodic variations. These variations are subject to interruptions by absorption of all other tones (and shape shifts) of the surrounding room (for shape does surely affect reception of tone . . . and tone of tone in color-chordal variance).21

Continuing this description, he emphasizes, once again, the time-based and rhythmic nature of the experience of seeing, and of its translation onto film:

The truth of the "plate" is that it affects visual absorption of the lettuce very much like a break in the sight-lines, distraction from forms, rhythmically castanet-like, because otherwise its paradigm on film, its variable oval, would act as container – a word appropriate to its service vis-à-vis lettuce (appropriate surely in language

and perhaps to description of snap-shot) but absolute non-sense in respect to moving visual thought process. Such containment would preclude the peripherally perceived effects of the room, the inpouring light of the world beyond, the process of memory and expectation, and, thus, would obliterate Time.22

Historical precedents to visual music

The approach to visual music outlined above, with its reliance on inner correspondences, I would argue as fundamentally different from an approach employing techniques of direct outer correspondences — or simply matching what we see with what we hear. For example, while Kandinsky and others had also written of deeply felt, subjective, musical responses to colors and their combinations — and theorized on the applications of this to painting – others have tried to precisely codify such connections into systematic relationships of color to musical pitch. In the 17th Century, Isaac Newton, who was said to have been seeking to uncover a "secret, divine order" to the nature of all things, drew such an analogy between color and music when he divided up the visible spectrum — identifying seven colors of the rainbow to correspond with the notes of a musical scale.23 One might well protest, along with John Keats, against this 'unweaving of the rainbow'24 – or, indeed, with Stan Brakhage, who asked us to "Imagine a world alive with . . . an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color." Nonetheless, the analogies have stayed with us, with Newton's legacy of color to music correspondence living on in a variety of forms.

In William Moritz's historical survey of the possibilities of color music, he details the invention of the so-called "Ocular Harpsichord" of the 18th Century that linked "each key on the musical instrument with a flash of a certain colored light . . . believed to be an exact equivalent of each musical tone,"25 and then proceeds on to a discussion of the various 'color organs' of the 19th and 20th centuries that continued in this tradition. (Though it is interesting to note that in Niels Hutchison's analysis of the same developments, he also quotes Francis Bacon [1561-1626] as having stated – prior to Newton – that "the pleasing of color symbolizeth with the pleasing of any single tone to the ear. . . . And both these pleasures, that of the eye, and that of the ear, are but the effects of equality, good proportion, and correspondence"26 – a partial statement, but one that does suggest deeper considerations of how these varieties of stimuli might be internally processed and perceived.)

Hutchison goes on to relate how, in the mid-19th Century, Hermann von Helmholtz, author of "On the Sensation of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music" (1863), had, like Newton, pursued studies in optics and acoustics, and had developed a color-music scale. Yet he quotes Helmholtz as acknowledging," . . . it is clear that in the so-called color harmony no such absolute definite relations are to be expected as are characteristic of the musical intervals."27 And he also quotes early 20th Century abstract painter Franz Kupka as stating, similarly, that ". . . the chromatism of music and the musicality of colors have only metaphorical validity." "A pity," Kupka added, " – one more illusion vanishes in smoke."28 Still, it was not long before that Alexander Scriabin had also worked out a system of corresponding colors to musical pitch, designed a color keyboard, and incorporated instructions for the projection of light into some of his musical scores. In the tradition of the Wagnerian concept of the "total work of art" Scriabin had further envisioned a grand, religious experience of aesthetic unity that would bring together orchestra, choir, dance, drama and visual effects in his conceived, yet never realized work, Mysterium.

A different version of this drive toward the 'ultimate work of art' could be said to persist today in some forms of immersive post-modernism. And ironically, it can even be seen to have had a certain influence upon the so-called "pure film" of the early to mid 20th Century. For, following the abstract painters in their freedom from the need to represent in painting, these pioneer abstract filmmakers did, then, seek to unite a purity of visual form and color with the aesthetics of time, and in so doing, they drew upon a musical paradigm – in most cases, using actual music soundtracks as a supporting element. Viking Eggeling, Walther Ruttman, Oscar Fischinger, Len Lye – and a little later, the Americans Jordan Belson, James and John Whitney, and Harry Smith, for examples – would produce a significant body of work in this genre.

A thorough analysis of the contributions of each of these artists is beyond the scope of this essay, though all have added to the expanding possibilities of filmic form and, in particular, to exploring the realms of visual music. One of the most "inner" oriented of these filmmakers was Jordan Belson, whose glorious visions suggest physiologically based visual effects that are constantly transforming themselves into more symbolic representations of mind. However, these are the visions of a focused, meditative state, finally – as William C. Wees has written, "more psychological than physiological."29 And ultimately, Belson seeks a transcendence of self, a transcendence that manifests on film as visions of the cosmos. To accompany these visions, he also created or commissioned sound compositions, hoping for a synthesis in which "you don't know if you're seeing it or hearing it."30 However, while Belson's films are not currently available in their original format, the music selections that accompany the later video releases of these works unfortunately serve as little more than mood enhancers – at times gently supportive of the visions, but at other times simply an annoying distraction.

It should not be assumed, of course, that visual music would necessarily be limited to works consisting of non-representational imagery. Avant-garde filmmakers in general have worked on the assumption of film as a visual art, "shaping light and shaping time" (as Michael Snow has described it),31 and the musical qualities of much of that work would present a vast and complex field of study. However, in reference to how the term 'visual music' is commonly used (usually in reference to relative degrees of abstraction in compositions of moving light and color), I have tried to suggest that a significant portion of this work has relied chiefly on outer correspondences between vision and sound. Due to this external, sensory emphasis — due, that is, to the view that we might see or hear a parallel between vision and music external to and preceding our inner experience of it – most of the films concerned have remained tied to music in what is largely an accompaniment mode. Often, they incorporate sound tracks that the visuals appear to echo, or illustrate, creating, in effect, a unity of form with visual and aural aspects.

While clearly owing a debt to many earlier filmmakers (and quite notably to the later hand-scratched and hand-painted "direct films" of Len Lye), Brakhage nonetheless sought to break the ties of this formal, visual-aural unity. Few, if any, have explored the deeper physiology of mind, the constant movements of eye-mind interplay, as Stan Brakhage has – making "equivalents of what he sees, as he actually sees it,"32 and editing these visions in consideration of the internal rhythms that stir the synaesthetic responses or "sense impulses of the nervous system." It was his particular contribution in this regard to fully recognize that it is due only to deep biological rhythms – and only through these synaesthetic responses of the 'inner eye' to the 'inner ear' – that we might in some sense be able to "see sound" (or, rather, have a true visual equivalence of musical experience), referring, as he did, to "the sphere of 'music of the spheres' being now consciously the human head."33

The late, great films of Stan Brakhage

In his essay, "Brakhage's Faustian Psychodrama," P. Adams Sitney has traced the filmmaker's return to his aesthetic roots in the late 1980's, describing a re-investment in psychodramatic themes (in FaustFilm: An Opera, Faust's Other: An Idyll, Faust 3: Candida Albacore, and Faust 4) that mirrors his early development as an artist — from his first film, Interim (1952), through the ground-breaking*Anticipation of the Night* (1958) — as he struggled to resolve the major crises of his personal life with attendant aesthetic soul-searching. Discussing the Faust series as "keys to the major achievements of the filmmaker's mature career,"34 Sitney describes Brakhage's extrication from this psychodrama through an engagement with landscape, in Faust 4, which "rekindled his confidence in the eloquence of the embodied moving camera."35 The series of films that immediately followed was the four-part Visions in Meditation (1989-90), evidencing, in Sitney's words, "a depth of wonder and visual intelligence unsurpassed in all of Brakhage's cinema."36

Inspired by Gertrude Stein's "Stanzas in Meditation," Brakhage's stated goal with*Visions in Meditation* was to present a "democratic landscape," one in which images of earth, water, sky, structures of human creation, and human and animal life might co-exist in a non-hierarchical equality of presence – a weave of light experienced as rhythms of mind, poised in the balance of thought, envisioned "as in a dream."37

This was the start of an amazingly rich and varied period of film production that extended from 1989 until his death in 2003. It included an incredible 143 titles, ranging from the two to twenty-minute hand-scratched and hand-painted studies on a wide variety of subjects (experientially, hypnagogically-informed responses, religious meditations, and series of films exploring the glyphs of thought process reflective of different world cultures), to the fifty minute hand-painted Trilogy (I Take These Truths, We Hold These, and I . . .), through the grand meditations on childhood, adolescence, middle age and imaginings of heaven that comprise the largely photographic *Vancouver Island Quartet*, and a variety of shorter works that include dance films, portraits, landscapes and cityscapes — as well as the ecstatic *Passage Through: A Ritual*, with its sparsely placed glimpses of exquisite (photographic) imagery within long spaces of black, edited in response to Philip Corner's *Through The Mysterious Barricade, Lumen 1* (after F. Couperin). This same period also included several examples of a particular strand in Brakhage's work in which he would combine photographic and painted imagery, assuredly weaving together the shimmering fragility of worldly phenomena and visual experience with multiple layers of both concrete and metaphorical representations of an interior life. The delicately described interplay of inner and outer experience, with the painted material often suggestive of both inner biology and emotional responses to the hard-won beauty of "the seen," results in deeply felt meditations on mortality and the ephemerality of earthly existence, as epitomized in works such as *Boulder Blues* and *Pearls And* (1992), or (in what he referred to as his "mature *Dog Star Man*") *Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* (1997).

Through more than forty years of filmmaking Stan Brakhage had largely continued his pursuit of an intentionally silent cinema – a 'music for the eyes' free of any accompanying aural music (which he felt would inevitably tend to dominate over the more subtle visual rhythms). In these later years, however, he did occasionally return to the sound film, combining his 'moving visual thinking' with aural tracks. But in these rare cases, he was consciously carving out a new aesthetic, frame by individual frame — an aesthetic that would give equal weight to each element, the primary principle in this form of construction being one of non-synchronization, of breaking any direct connection between picture and sound so as to allow each to develop independently in polyphonic form. Inspired by the music compositions of Philip Corner and James Tenney, Brakhage would create two of his greatest masterworks in this form with *Passage Through: A Ritual* (1991) and *Ellipsis No. 5* (1998).

The fifth and final part of the *Ellipses* was the only sound film in that series, and was edited to Tenney's previously recorded Flocking. Madison Brookshire has recently described this work as "one of the rare instances in any film/music pairing where the one does not make it harder to engage with the other. The score and the film seem to run in parallel, sometimes reflecting on one another, just as often existing separately, yet always sharing a space."38 It is a profoundly moving work of acceptance and generosity in which each aspect – the (hand-painted) visual and the aural – is fully alive in the presence of the other in a remarkable evocation of space, time and aesthetic correspondence.

Through sensitivity to the inner movements of the human nervous system, to the correspondences of eye and mind, to the subtle complexities, rhythms and multitudinous manifestations of constructive imagination – and through an equal sensitivity to the possibilities of creating, and experiencing, filmic parallels — Brakhage hoped that the film medium might finally come into its own, that the potential and full 'magic' of the cinema might finally be realized. Going to the biological, rhythmical sources of experience — always returning to biological 'ground' — while continuously and complexly re-envisioning and re-presenting those inner movements, Brakhage worked for fifty years towards the creation of a new, visual form that would not only

make manifest our interior lives, but that would give to the eyes something analogous to what music gives to us through hearing – writing, as he did (in 1991), with unwavering conviction, that "Film is . . . at one with the synapting Human nervous system in evolution."39

Notes to: On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music

Posted on January 17, 2008 | Leave a comment

NOTES

1. P. Adams Sitney, Visionary Film: The American Avant Garde, 1943-2000, 3rd Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160.

2. Ibid., 160.

3. Stan Brakhage, "Another way of looking at the universe," (a transcription of Stan Brakhage and Ronald Johnson conversing, 1997), Chicago Review, 47:4/48:1 (Winter, 2001/Spring, 2002), 34.

4. Stan Brakhage, "Arabic Numeral Series," on-line catalogue of Canyon Cinema (www.canyoncinema.com).

5. Bruce Elder, "On Brakhage," Stan Brakhage: A Retrospective, 1977-1995 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), n.p..

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9. Brakhage, "Thot Fal'n," on-line catalogue of Canyon Cinema.

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11. Stan Brakhage, "About Time," Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker, Bruce McPherson, ed. (Kingston, NY: Documentext, McPherson and Company, 2003), 10.

12. Ibid., 12.

13. Stan Brakhage, "Film and Music," Brakhage Scrapbook, Robert A. Haller, ed. (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1982), 50.

14. Ibid.,49.

15. Brakhage, “Unconscious London Strata,” on-line catalogue of Canyon Cinema.

16. Stan Brakhage, “Film and Music,” Brakhage Scrapbook, Robert A Haller, ed. (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1982), 49.

17. Olivier Messiaen, notes for the recording of Chronochromie, as cited in Brakhage Scrapbook, 51.

18. Stan Brakhage, “Film and Music,” Brakhage Scrapbook, 51.

19. Stan Brakhage, “Film and Music,” Brakhage Scrapbook, 51.

20. Ibid., 51.

21. Stan Brakhage, “Painting Film,” Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker, Bruce R. McPherson, ed. (Kingston, NY: McPherson and Company, 2003), 79.

22. Ibid., 80.

23. Niels Hutchison, “Colour Music,” (home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic/), n.p.
24. John Keats, from Lamia (1819), cited in Hutchison:
Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
Unweave a rainbow . . .

25 William Moritz, “Musique de la Couleur – Cinema Integral (Color Music – Integral Cinema),” Poetique de la Couleur (Paris: Musee du Louvre, 1995), as re-printed by the Center for Visual Music (www.centerforvisualmusic.org), 2.
26. Niels Hutchison, “Colour Music,” (home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic/), n.p.
27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. William C. Wees, Light Moving in Time (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992), 135.

30. Jordon Belson, cited in P. Adams Sitney, Visionary Film, 2nd ed. (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), 267.

31. Michael Snow, as cited in Wees, Light Moving in Time, 12.

32. Wees, Light Moving in Time, 79.

33. Stan Brakhage, Brakhage Scrapbook, 50.

34. P. Adams Sitney, “Brakhage’s Faustian Psychodrama,” Stan Brakhage Filmmaker, David E. James, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 154.

35 Ibid., 167.

36. Ibid.,167.

37. These quotations describing Stan Brakhage’s intentions for the Visions in Meditation are taken from a grant application he wrote in 1988.

38. Madison Brookshire, in a letter to Marilyn Brakhage, dated October 26, 2006.

39. Stan Brakhage, “Manifesto,” Essential Brakhage, Bruce R. McPherson, ed. (Kingston, NY: McPherson and Company, 2001), 205.

Interview: On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music – Rick Raxlen in conversation with Marilyn Brakhage

Posted on January 8, 2008 | 1 Comment

In the following interview, Rick Raxlen talks with Marilyn Brakhage about her article, On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music.

Rick Raxlen: First off, you mentioned when we last spoke that Criterion is bringing a second volume of Stan’s films. Will any of the later films be on it–the ones he made from 1989 to his death in 2003?
You say he made 143 films in this last period…

Marilyn Brakhage: Yes. Criterion doesn’t want me to announce titles yet — but without giving any specifics, I can say that this project will have a greater diversity of work, and some real surprises, I think. The first set combined a few formative, aesthetically groundbreaking early pieces (some of Stan’s most famous titles from the late 50’s and early 60’s) with a number of beautiful short works from his later periods. This time around, I’m trying to present a more balanced collection of significant films that will touch on all the different periods of his career and many of his different aesthetic concerns. There will be films from the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and 90’s.

R.R.: You also mention Stan’s poor eyesight as a contributing factor in his interest in “closed-eye” vision. Can you elaborate? How bad was it?

M.B.: He apparently wore thick glasses as a child — and then "threw them away" for a time, as a young man. He had a 'wandering eye' and was very shortsighted, I think . . . said he would recognize people on the street by the way they moved. He claimed to be 'constructing' sights with rapid eye movements. This conscious awareness of struggling to see may have heightened his visual sensitivities — as he would often say (quoting Gertrude Stein, I think) that at the centre of your greatest strength you will find your greatest weakness. In later years, when he had cataracts removed and a lens implant, his sight was much improved for a time.

R.R: Do you think it possible for someone who we might term an outsider artist/filmmaker to make a piece of " visual music" by accident–by that I mean, without consciously setting out to make a work that was in that mode?

M.B.: Yes, I suppose it happens all the time — depending, of course, on how one chooses to define "visual music." In the sense that Stan used the term, the visual rhythms of the work would elicit inner responses akin to those we experience when listening to aural music. He often used this term to describe works by others who didn't necessarily use the term themselves. . . On the other hand, there are groups of people — for example those at the Center for Visual Music in LA — who seem to have a more restricted definition of what falls under this rubric, referring, I think, to something that often has more to do with visual 'illustrations' of, or accompaniments to, music (at least from my perspective).

R.R.: You use the word "synaesthetic" in your writing. Can you give some rough boundaries to that word? (I don't mean a dictionary definition here)

M.B.: Well, scientists seem to talk of synaesthesia as something abnormal, or as a special 'gift,' whereas I think it is something we all have, at least to some degree. I use the term to refer to the crossover of sensory experience. The most common example, perhaps, is when a smell stimulates a 'taste.' For me, subtle scents often evoke distant memories of place — mostly visual. But if you consider our language — a "loud" color, a "blue" mood, a "dark" passage of music, and so on — I think these metaphors are actually based in physical reality. Our sensory experiences and memories overlap internally. . . For some people it can apparently get very detailed and specific, and they claim to 'see' specific hues that correspond to specific tones of sound, in precise gradations. In reference to film, I was referring to how the rhythms of the visual movements within shots, and of the cuts between shots, might stir some deep biological response, that "physiological relationship between seeing and hearing" that Stan spoke of. For him, it was deeply a matter of rhythm — bodily felt and mentally perceived rhythms . . . writing also of seeking to "hear color," and of how shape affects reception of tone, and tone of tone, as the mind absorbs these shifts and variations in the progressions of time/film.

R.R.: I think to have a true piece of "visual music" work on the eye and ear in synaesthetic response, one would have to forego a musical and audio track to accompany the visuals on the screen. Do you agree?
It seems it would be cheating in a way to provide external audio clues, if one were striving for maximum individual nervous system response.

M.B.: I agree there can be a diminishment of visual potential if it is combined with "external audio clues." We know this, for example, by the simple experiences we have of closing our eyes to 'hear better,' or asking someone to be quiet because we're trying to see something. One form of sensory input can distract from or dominate over another. And usually, sound will dominate over vision. For example, as we sit in a car listening to the radio, people walking by appear to walk in time to the music. Our vision, then, is seemingly being directed or interpreted by the sounds. Filmmakers can obviously use this phenomenon to direct viewers' interpretation of what is seen. But often that ends up, in my view, as work that is visually lazy — or, at least, unremarkable. On the other hand, if a filmmaker is constructing subtle and complex visual rhythms, those could very easily become confused or overwhelmed by the addition of sound. Stan was often working with

‘micro-rhythms’ of vision, and felt that a sound track would inevitably dominate over those. So he made mostly silent films. On the other hand, he also made silent films because he didn’t feel that his abilities with sound were advancing to the same levels as his abilities with vision. But then, on occasion, when he came across a particular piece of music that inspired him, he would make another sound film. In those cases, the challenge was always to allow each aesthetic — the aural and the visual — to exist independently, and to ‘speak’ to one another, without one directing or limiting the other. I think he succeeded with this aesthetic, but he did so through very precise frame-by-frame editing, sometimes incorporating spaces of black and spaces of silence. In that way, the films became more like visual-aural ‘conversations,’ and in cases such as these, then, there might be a complex, multi-layered, synaesthetic crossover happening in a viewer’s responses. But in general, I certainly think you’re right, that it’s not true (or pure) “visual music” if the experience is being cued by the sound.

R.R.: You quote William C Wees describing Jordan Belson’s work as producing a state “more psychological than physiological”
Can you attribute clear boundaries between these states–I mean, what would one feel differently in a film that triggered psychological states as opposed to films that triggered physiological responses?

M.B.: There are no clear boundaries of course — between thinking and feeling, or between the physiological and the psychological. But I think in the case of Belson’s films, he was often presenting filmic equivalents of mental imagery achieved through meditation — cosmic projections . . . which is to say, that we are being presented with his own interpretations of some previous “psychological” event or events. Perhaps in this sense it just feels a little less ‘immediate,’ or at a somewhat greater remove, seeming to play less on sensory experience and more on concept or symbolism. My own experience is that if a work is felt in a more visceral way (which, arguably, his could be also), eliciting sensory memory and synaesthetic cross-over within the viewer, that serves as a ground for whatever levels of thought and ideas might evolve from it. I don’t know if you really can “trigger physiological states” without triggering psychological ones, or vice versa. But in my essay on Visual Music I was mainly trying to draw a distinction between that which arises from visual rhythms that stir biological responses at source, and that which illustrates an idea and depends more upon musical accompaniment to be seen or felt rhythmically.

R.R.: You were very intent on getting some of Stan’s hand-drawn frames displayed, probably for the first time. Did you have any luck when you approached the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria?
Did they commit to putting up a show around his hand painted frames of 35mm?

M.B.: Yes, they are interested in doing that. They spoke of late 2008.

R.R.: In your added question you referred to Milton saying “. . . night brings back my day; I am not blind in my dreams.” Milton, of course, was not always blind, but I’ve often wondered what dreaming would be like for someone who had never “seen” (in the ways that we ordinarily do). Then I recently saw a (TV) show about a blind painter who did these incredible landscapes, with perspective — apparently all based upon his tactile experiences of three-dimensional objects and his movements through space. (Not sure how he managed the colours though.) But the human mind is a great mystery. . . Why was Stan so deeply involved in subverting the most common uses of the cine camera?

M.B.: I think Stan was deeply immersed in modernist aesthetics, first of all, and when he began to identify himself as a filmmaker, found it necessary to discover what was most essential to film, what were its strengths and limitations that could be worked with. He certainly would have been influenced by his early musical training, and by his involvement with poetry. So, although he loved and appreciated the art of acting, and went to all kinds of movies (and the theatre), he felt that using film to essentially record dramas was an extreme

limitation of its possibilities. Drawing on analogies to poetry and music, then, he began to develop ideas of film as an exteriorizing of internal experience, and eventually, of what he called “moving visual thinking.” He realized that “vision” was more than just pictures of the external world; that it included dreams, memories, hallucinations, peripheral vision, optic feedback, and so on. He thought the full range of human visual experience could and should be explored through film — that more than sharing pictures, we could share our inner lives, our actual thought processes, and bring into conscious awareness many levels of perception that influence us deeply but often go unrecognized. His films often included more standard, ‘recognizable’ imagery of course — but were never limited to that. And when he was unable to use the photographic apparatus to achieve the visions he wanted, he would scratch, paint, collage or whatever he could to create equivalents of a full range of visual experience.

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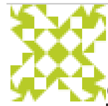
ONE RESPONSE TO “INTERVIEW: ON STAN BRAKHAGE AND VISUAL MUSIC – RICK RAXLEN IN CONVERSATION WITH MARILYN BRAKHAGE”

1. **CVM** | December 31, 2010 at 9:30 am | Reply

   We have no idea why Marilyn thinks Center for Visual Music has this “restricted” definition of visual music, nor has she discussed this with any of us. Numerous definitions and theories of visual music are presented on our website, from historical to contempoary; we do not use the limited definition she’s given above.

   CVM tried to include a Brakhage film in the 2005 Visual Music exhibition at MOCA LA/Hirshhorn along with all the other films we provided for the show, but they were not available digitally thus it was not possible at that time.