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Stan Brakhage and the Long Reach of Maya Deren's Poetics of Film

How you produce volume after volume the way you do is more than I can conceive, but you haven't to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts as I do. It is like walking through the densest brushwood.

—William James to Henry James,
letter dated March 10, 1887

The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have.

—Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (1951)

All writers who eschew story *altogether* are essentially aspiring to the philosophical

—Stan Brakhage,
“Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film” (1991)

From a range of possible filmmakers, Maya Deren is worth considering as Brakhage's most important immediate predecessor. This is not because her films are necessarily any more significant than those of Kenneth Anger, Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Marie Menken, or any other figures who may come to mind, but because, unlike them (and like Brakhage), she also produced in writing a significant theoretical position towards cinematic art, perhaps best encapsulated in two works, the chapbook, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (1946), and the essay, “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality” (1960). Both works present a compatible point of view and

both contain a trenchant, highly polemical critique of two poles of cinematic art, the documentary on the one hand and the animated, abstract film on the other. In Deren's conception, the standard documentary, in its slavish respect for a false objectivity by way of photographic transparency, is too imaginatively feeble to think and respond to the very subject matter it purports to encounter. Deren asserts that documentary needs a greater range of formal options, options which may compromise (correctly) the invisible presence of the filmmaker in order to respond to reality. The problem with the animated, abstract film is the reverse: although such works may be aesthetically powerful, they are animated paintings and not films *per se*, because the photographic reality of the world itself has been bypassed altogether. They make use of the filmstrip but should be categorized elsewhere because they have the aesthetic principles of another medium. In Deren's powerfully reductive scheme, the unique privilege of film lies precisely in its ability to present a series of images which depicts an argument and interplay between the imaginative and the real:

Nothing can be achieved in the art of film until its form is understood to be the product of a completely unique complex: the exercise of an instrument which can function, simultaneously, both in terms of discovery and invention.¹

This dialectical complex, in turn, provides the emotional tension which propels any given work. To lean too heavily to one side or the other of this polarity is to take an easy way out and risk aesthetic impoverishment. Rather, the contradictory nature of cinema should be wholly embraced. Out of greater difficulty comes a potential for greater reward:

This very profusion of potentialities seems to create confusion in the minds of most film-makers, a confusion which is diminished by eliminating a major portion of those potentialities in favor of one or two, upon which the film is subsequently structured. An

¹ Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (Yonkers: The Alicat Bookshop Press, 1946), p. 46. Reprinted as an appendix to Bill Nichols, ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant Garde* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002).

artist, however, should not seek security in a tidy mastery over the simplifications of deliberate poverty; he should instead have the creative courage to face the danger of being overwhelmed by fecundity in the effort to resolve it into simplicity and economy.²

Now the objections to Deren are rather obvious. For one thing, her thinking almost gets her into the contradictory position of considering a conventional photographic image more real than reality itself:

The most immediate distinction of film is the capacity of the camera to represent a given reality in its own terms to the extent that it is accepted as a substitute proper for that reality. A photograph will serve as proof of the "truth" of some phenomenon where either a painting or a verbal testimony would fail to carry weight. (*An Anagram*, 30.)

For another thing, it would be employing a Procrustean bed indeed if one refused to see Harry Smith, Peter Kubelka, Robert Breer, Larry Jordan, et al., as filmmakers of great consequence, despite the fact that all of them could be considered animators and/or creators of radically abstract works. But Deren's polemic is not so easily dismissed. It may be true that as soon as one begins to think at all about photography, one moves beyond the naïve point of view of the lover of snapshots who confuses the reality of an event with his cherished photographic record of it. But an aura of reality still lingers around our most sophisticated response to a photographic image. To photograph Arapahoe Peak (as Brakhage did for *Song* 27) we have to reside in or travel to Colorado. We can write a poem about it or paint it from memory. There is a strong aspect of photography which attests to a state of being-in-the-world, and Deren is one among many theorists who have raised this issue.

To take a different tack, observe the career trajectory of the above list of abstract film artists. All of them brought their work to a point of radical abstraction or absolute formal control and then felt a kind

² Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality." Reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Avant-garde Film* (NY: NYUP, 1978), p. 62. Deren's essay first appeared in *Daedalus*, Winter, 1960.

of pull "back" to photographic or representational imagery. In at least two cases this move resulted (arguably) in an enrichment of their work. I am thinking of Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* (1966), made after *Arnulf Rainer* (1960); or Breer's *Fuji* (1973), made after *70* (1971). In the wake of "a tidy mastery," there was perhaps nowhere else to go, and one wouldn't want to call such a move "regressive." Deren's point of view has value not so much for its orthodox strictures (there will always be documentaries, there will always be animated films) but rather because she cogently and persuasively mapped out for avant-garde practitioners in the postwar era a manner of filmmaking in which the representational means themselves could become the basis of a highly complex intellectual drama. The implication of her viewpoint is that a meditative self-consciousness could not be achieved *on visual terms*, without maintaining the equilibrium of cinema's two-sided nature when it is conceived of as a photographic medium in the classic sense.

To see where Brakhage fits in here, one has to return to Sitney's historical observation in *Visionary Film*, in part based on Brakhage's own testimony, that by taking clues from the spontaneous, unconventional hand-held camerawork of Marie Menken, and the intrusive distortions of Sidney Peterson's anamorphic lens, Brakhage evolved his own immensely influential camera aesthetics of the "lyrical film," which were ultimately a rejection of Deren's insistence that filmmaking must begin with a respect for the conventional means of the photographic image. Thus, Deren's critique in 1960 of a tendency within the avant-garde could be read as a comment on precisely where Brakhage's poetics were taking it at that moment:

In such cases the camera itself has been conceived of as the artist, with distorting lenses, multiple superimpositions, etc., used to simulate the creative action of the eye, the memory, etc. Such well-intentioned efforts to use the medium creatively, by forcibly inserting the creative act in the position it traditionally occupies in the visual arts, accomplish, instead, the destruction of the photographic image as reality. This image, with its unique ability to engage us simultaneously on several levels—by the objective authority of reality, by the knowledges and values which we attach to that reality, by the direct address of its aspect, and by a manipulated

relationship between these—is the building block for the creative use of the medium. (“Cinematography,” 68)

In *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), Brakhage explicitly stated his war on the very conventions of the purported objectivity of the camera lens which Deren defends, by listing a number of possible creative strategies to undermine “19th-century Western compositional perspective”:

By deliberately spitting on the lens or wrecking its focal intention, one can achieve the early stages of impressionism. One can make this prima donna heavy in performance of image movement by speeding up the motor, or one can break up movement, in a way that approaches a more direct inspiration of contemporary human eye perceptibility of movement, by slowing the motion while recording the image. One may hand hold the camera and inherit worlds of space. One may over- and under-expose the film... (EB, 15-6)

R. Bruce Elder, in an impressive and exhaustive study of the roots of Brakhage’s aesthetics, follows his own citation of the same quote from Deren cited above with the following commentary, which, I think, places the two filmmakers in a form of opposition:

Brakhage’s adherence to the Romantic tradition involves a commitment to the idea that what happens on the “inside” is all of a piece with what occurs on “the outside”; furthermore, Brakhage’s transformations of the image have the end of revealing the operations of the imagination. It is the effect that the concrete particular has on consciousness, or, more accurately, the role that consciousness plays in bringing the concrete particular into existence, that is the focus of Brakhage’s interests.... Deren believed to the contrary that cinematography, as a photographically based medium, has a strong commitment to unmanipulated reality and that any distortion of reality through “optical” or photographic “tricks” is inconsistent with the nature of the medium; basically, she argues that the still or movie camera has a disposition towards “the outside”—towards, even, presenting “the outside” accurately.³

³ *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1998), p. 502. The quoted passage appears in a long footnote.

For my purposes, I would like to break down this opposition. For one thing, Deren's views, as one might expect in any theoretical position, ultimately contain contradictions. It is especially in *An Anagram*, where she shows a keen interest in scientific method, that she acknowledges the intrusive subjective mediation of even the most passive observation:

Even in science—or rather, above all in science, the pivotal characteristic of man's method is a violation of natural integrity. He has dedicated himself to the effort to intervene upon it, to dissemble the ostensibly inviolate whole, to emancipate the element from the context in which it “naturally” occurs, and to manipulate it in the creation of a new contextual whole—a new, original state of matter and reality—which is specifically the product of his intervention.

Once a natural integrity has been so violated, the selection of elements from the original context, all subsequent integrations are no longer natural or inevitable. The task of creating forms as dynamic as the relationships in natural phenomena, is the central problem of both the scientist and the artist. (*An Anagram*, 12)

It is that last sentence in particular which seems to contain something of *Metaphors on Vision* in embryonic form. Yet, one also has to acknowledge the inescapable and perhaps necessary divergence of theory from practice in an artist's work. A poetic film wholly consistent with its purported theoretical underpinnings, as brilliant and complex as they might be, would be dull indeed. The first shot of Deren's *Mesher of the Afternoon*, while photographed in a classic, professional way (presumably via the aid of her then husband, Alexander Hammid, an already experienced filmmaker), shows a wholly “staged” image which immediately propels the film into the realm of the imagination: an artificial arm reaches down into the frame from directly overhead (i.e. seemingly with no body attached) to grab an artificial flower. Deren's “orthodox” photographic means are just that: a means towards a representational tension, arising from her insight that an intentionally realistic continuity of photographic images is perforce more dreamlike than reality, and any corresponding dreamlike sequence has more of reality in it than any dream.

And then there is Brakhage's side of the opposition. In a nutshell,

one could view Brakhage's break with the so-called psychodrama, as developed by Deren in the mid-1940s, as consisting of two significant, though related gestures: (1) he took the camera off the tripod and gave it freedom of movement as it begins to explore the world with a wide variety of unorthodox means, like those cited above: out-of-focus shots, under and over-exposing, scratchings on the film surface, use of camera flares, colored leader, etc; and (2) at the same time, he dispensed with the pre-camera, stylized events staged before the camera (script and actors). Drama had been left behind. As in Sitney's compact, memorable formulation:

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.⁴

From Deren's ostensible point of view, Brakhage's radical subjectivity had forced his filmmaking out of the domain of film altogether and into that of painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, where the image's "umbilical cord" connection to exterior reality was broken, where an image of a given object, if an object makes an appearance at all, would merely be the image of the idea of that object. And the aggressive flow of rapidly changing images was not exterior drama but a stream of these same interior ideas, feelings, and memories as they emerged, developed, and perhaps dissolved only to give way to other ideas. It was almost as if Brakhage were literally writing with the camera, in pursuit of Charles Olson's famous dictum for projective verse, "...in any given poem always, always one perception must MOVE INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"⁵ In short, armed with the literary and painterly strategies of his contemporaries or near contemporaries, Brakhage was abandoning (in Deren's critical scheme) the cinematic. Thus, it is possible that Brakhage's intellectual and aesthetic sophistication inadvertently underscored a sense of a break with Deren, for his innovations were so extraordinary, one needed the aid

⁴ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (NY: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 180.

⁵ "Projective Verse," in *Human Universe and Other Essays* (NY: Grove Press, 1967), p. 53.

of extra-cinematic sources, like Gertrude Stein, John Cage, and Ezra Pound to explain and defend them.

But one can defend Brakhage's innovations on cinematic grounds, too, perhaps most effectively with a position articulated by a one-time champion of the younger artist, Deren herself, whose memory in the forty years since her untimely death Brakhage has always respected, despite the admitted difficulties in their relationship to each other as artists. Rather than see an opposition or break, there is an advantage to the perspective that Brakhage was taking Deren's poetics of cinema in the direction they wanted to go but which for some reason or other she herself couldn't take them. I would even go so far as to say, counter to Brakhage's own comments, that this was in part done in the name of "drama" rather than eschewing it.

If one reduces Deren's theory to a view that cinema ideally should exploit a contradiction within its own apparatus—that between the passively photographic (in the name of realistic presence) and the imaginatively formalistic (editing, camera manipulation)—then Brakhage's "break" can be seen as a logical extension or intensification of both counterpoised tendencies; for, at the very moment he dispenses with pre-staged events and begins shooting on a daily basis without a script (using his immediate environment and growing family in a more direct engagement with the real), he also opens up the options available to him as a formalist. We could say that the intensity of Deren's dialectic is raised considerably by widening the gulf between its two antipodes. Brakhage's films are more subjective in approach just as their content is more documentary.

Which film is more "dramatic" then—*Meshes of the Afternoon* or *Anticipation of the Night*? Implying no criticism of Deren (Brakhage himself labels her films "cool"⁶), I would say that the dramatic energy of *Anticipation of the Night*, its relentless kinetic thrust of liberating "flight" coupled with a frustrated quest ending in failure, provides rather an unparalleled experience of antagonistic conflict. But the sort of conflict I am talking about is more akin to the observation (by Donald Francis Tovey, I believe) that critics were mistaken when they asserted that Beethoven had a too inadequate sense of drama to pro-

⁶ *Film at Wit's End* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1989), p. 109.

duce a successful stagework. Rather, the dramatic tension inherent in many of his symphonic movements was actually too high-pitched for the relatively ritualistic pace of an operatic setting.

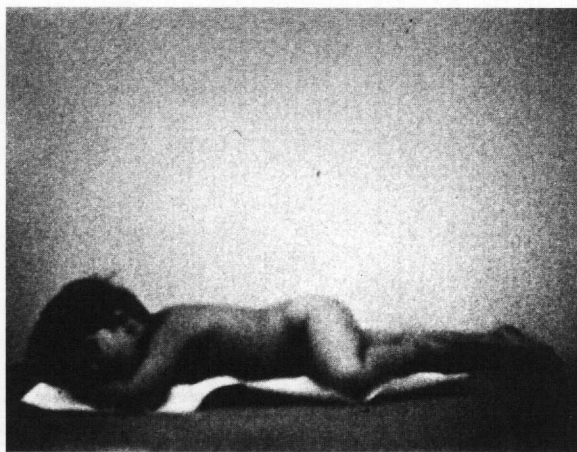
Contrary to Brakhage's avowed quest for "an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic" (*EB*, 12), one wonders if that same compositional logic at times stands him in good stead when the dramatic purpose suits him—in a manner quite compatible with Deren's strategies. For example, there is the celebrated climax to the first part of *Dog Star Man*, in which the man (Brakhage) slips for the umpteenth time as he climbs the mountain, the forced ninety degree camera angle underscoring the intrusive presence of the camera in the relatively orthodox (at least for Brakhage) narrative shots. Then there is a cut to one of the "scientific" shots, a microscopic image of the start-stop action of blood in a capillary. In a piece of classic montage, the viewer instantly recognizes a metaphoric assertion—that the "two steps forward and one step backwards" struggle of the man up the mountain has a parallel physical reality within the discontinuous movement of the blood's circulatory system. Yet Brakhage holds the shot longer than it would take for the image to make its symbolic point, so that its texture as a document also takes hold and we as viewers marvel at the power of the camera to see into the landscape of the body's interior in all its detail. As the impact of the cut fades over time, the figurative sense of the image dissipates into the mere physical presence, as it were, of a single shot with no symbolic pretence. This impressive moment, almost one of epiphanic recognition on the part of a first-time viewer, feels very much like a classic dramatic finish. The film has given us time to intuit a metaphoric expression which develops the drama of the man's struggle up the mountain, while at the same time we get an insight into the method that allows us to make an imaginative connection across two, in point of fact, wholly unrelated shots. And we also see that same mental construct dissolve in the face of the powerful anti-metaphoric thrust of a photograph's rich detail. What does the camera know about metaphors and symbols, even when blessed with compositional logic? In Brakhage's visionary mode, he relies on his great innovative technique and architectonic brilliance, but he also must depend on the instrument of the camera itself, whose own mechanistic terms dictate (Deren's point)

that every possible series of photographic images is simply in actuality, a feeble, metonymic catalogue of unrelated details "stolen" from the outside world.

Deren's view that photographic imagery is unavoidably linked to reality helps us gain insight, in part, into another significant expressive aspect of some of Brakhage's films—namely the emotional cost exacted on him as an artist for being present as a cinematographer when directly confronting a subject. There are certain obvious choices, here, like the films in the so-called "Pittsburgh Trilogy" where Brakhage quite clearly chose to film monolithic institutions (a hospital, a police force, a morgue) precisely because their presence as exterior, social authorities was a particular challenge to his individualistic, imaginative vision. Brakhage's virtuosic camera and editing manipulations aside, these films nevertheless began with a documentary premise and they are primarily about the attempt to bring under control subjects which are particularly difficult to face squarely, even without a camera. Less obvious, and perhaps more successful because the challenge was chosen less arbitrarily, is the long *Sincerity/Duplicity* series of the 1970s, in which the title itself raises a question of photographic or cinematic truth. A professed autobiography presupposes an adherence to experience lived apart from its filmic depiction. Certainly taking on the subject matter of one's mother, wife, and children in the cinematic continuity, must serve as a critical undermining of the confidence of one's own subjective vision. The other people an artist has lived with inhabit a stubborn, factual space whose close proximity is a constant, nagging reminder of contrary points of view which can neither be controlled or ignored.

With this "family drama" in mind, the trilogy of films Brakhage calls *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970), makes for an interesting case in point since Brakhage's own notes on the film mention an editing strategy which conformed to the spirit of a series of dreams he had, but they don't at all mention that a significant part of the subject matter of the film follows his young son through a period of illness and recovery, one of those accidental experiences of harsh reality which pose a particular challenge and thus must carry great emotional risks when turning it into even a highly imaginative cinematic series. A novelist can disguise his "from life" sources far more easily. Photographing

someone while they are ill and under emotional duress (as Brakhage's son clearly is in a couple of shots), ironically bursts any dreamlike mode one might wish to sustain and brings upon the viewer a sense of photographic reality which has an almost voyeuristic intensity. In short, the central subject of *The Weir Falcon*



Saga has a double-charged emotional quality of "outsideness" for its maker. There is the individual and separate being of his own son, and the spectre of illness itself, an experience which falls upon us accidentally and catches us unawares. Significantly, the middle part of the trilogy, *The Machine of*

Eden, seems to seize a theme of "out-sideness" quite directly by way of a classic landscape mode. It is largely dominated by vast mountain shots of a luminous earth and sky—images of a daemonic beauty which, in the context of the trilogy, could be perhaps feverish visions or, since a fabric loom appears near the end of the film, they could be the signs of some vast inhuman process, the "machine" of nature, which dispenses illness and health alike.

It is worth noting how often we are brought face to face with wide vistas in the more celebrated of Brakhage's many films—perhaps not at all a surprising component of a filmmaker from the mid-west who has long lived in Colorado. There are the twilight shots of high prairie presumably taken from a traveling car in *Anticipation of the Night*, the many mountainscapes in *Dog Star Man*, the central landscape texture of *The Machine of Eden* cited above, the dominance of a rather barren Alaskan landscape in *Creation*, and so forth. I find there is a spatial theme in the *Sincerity* series as well, which early on contains a running motif of traveling shots of wide open plains and develops into the prevalence of rather ominous winter

mountainscapes towards the end. Certainly these “long shot” landscapes inevitably carry with them an underscoring of external presence, a photographic recognition of the “real” out there in deep perspective just as close-ups inevitably carry with them a sense of mental attention.

This admittedly simple observation gains in significance when one considers Brakhage’s film work in the last decade or so, one in which he has devoted more and more time to hand-painted and hand-scratched films and far less to “photographic” works. In part, there is an economic issue involved here, since presumably short hand-painted films are less expensive to make. Nevertheless, when one looks at the two major “photographic” series of the 1990s, *Visions in Meditation I-IV* (1989-90) and the so-called “Vancouver Island films” (1991-2000), one has to concede that these are stunning works—among Brakhage’s most memorable and moving—and in them a sense of wide open, even empty landscape prevails in which, if human figures are seen at all, they are often either de-emphasized or rather diminutive in the frame. The films also demonstrate a general tendency towards a greater subtlety of visual expression, one that employs less aggressive cross-cutting and camera manipulation. The imaginative transformation of his material, after years of practice, can now arise more gracefully (and I might add hauntingly) from the environments themselves in which he was filming.

Certainly Brakhage practices cinematic form in his own characteristic manner, yet this greater emphasis on “outsideness” and photographic space points to the fact that certain unique aspects of the photographic medium, as Deren understood them, have a kind of gravitational pull over time. One could say that his career has taken an odd circular route. The *Visions in Meditation* series is a particular case in point, since it came on the heels of a rare return on Brakhage’s part to collaborative dramatic work in the series of *Faust* films (1987-89). This series was preceded by the surprising elements of psychodrama in *Sincerity IV* (1980) and *Confession* (1986). It is as if in making *Visions in Meditation*, Brakhage were recapitulating some thirty years later his exit from psychodrama—in this case a shift from the hermetically sealed world of a medieval legend, as it were, back out into the world at large. Taken as a whole, the four films in the *Visions*

series express a vivid sense of traveling across the wide expanse of the North American Continent by car. In fact, in three of the four films, Brakhage has particularly cited the specific geographical location in his written notes: New England and Eastern Canada for the first part; Mesa Verde for the second; and D. H. Lawrence's abode in Taos for the last. The third part, subtitled, "Plato's Cave" has a location, too—but obviously a mythological or figurative one; as I hope to show, it's a telling exception. At any rate, I would argue that Brakhage has recapitulated Deren's cinematic, dialectical tensions into a "meditative series of landscapes and human symbolism."⁷

Throughout the series of four films, the camera emphasizes the



great emptiness of continental space with only a faint and fleeting sense of human presence within it, which is, as I suggested earlier, seen in flashes of cross-cutting. This ultimately unifying visual motif hints that the title of the series plays on the notion of mystical visions in a desert or wilderness (the series opens

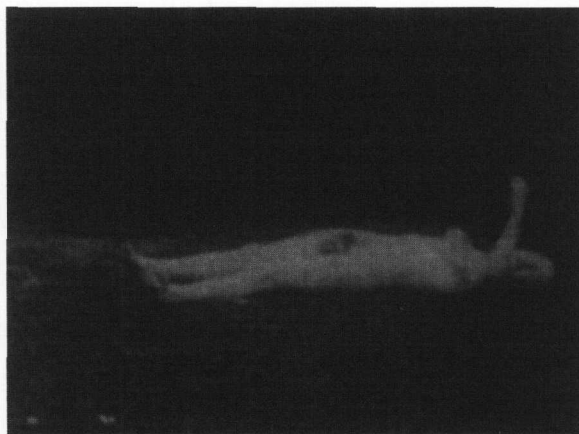
with a shot of a church facade). In fact, with the exception of the first film, the entire series is set in an actual desert. Architectural structures bear the largest burden of standing for human signs, and they are treated like static, abstract, ultimately fragile, even tawdry, forms set up as a kind of defense against the wide, unstable, seemingly barren void which surrounds them. There is a kind of touching joke about the warmth and light of a cheap motel room—a brief way station of consolation on the long open road as it were.

The merely temporary existence of these structures as viable human shelters is especially emphasized in the "Mesa Verde" film, mostly

⁷ Brakhage's note to *Visions in Meditation #1* (CCC).

shot at a spectacular site in Southern Colorado, of cliff dwellings abandoned for an unknown reason by their Native American inhabitants some 800 years ago. In some respects, Brakhage's camera approaches this place in the mode of a true tourist making a pilgrimage and recording his visit. A virtuosic series of cross-panning superimpositions of the ancient, empty dwellings along with cross-cutting to land and sky-scapes (see plate 1), yields a curious repetitive, ultimately static pattern of frustration. Brakhage really can't make the mystery of this place speak to him. He's stuck in a photographic world, as it were, making (relative to his other films) a simple-minded landscape film. His notes tell us that he was "compelled to introduce im-

ages which corroborate what the rocks said" (CCC). These images are extremely brief, black and white, insertions into the color texture. They are "found material": silent, medical footage of epileptics made at the turn of the century and preserved by the Library of Con-



gress. The shots are eerily superimposed like flickering ghost images and they express a disturbing quality suggestive of one of the prevailing and controversial theories of the Mesa Verde ruins. One school of anthropologists believes the site to be the vestiges of a failed civilization, one which had succumbed to a reign of cannibalistic terror by a ruling class which, in turn, precipitated a flight of its people south into Arizona and New Mexico. Brakhage says that the rocks "spoke to him," but my sense is that the film admirably expresses a double failure: his camera, by itself, as it obsessively scans the ruins again and again, even resorting to superimposition, cannot get that external presence to speak to him. Therefore he is compelled to edit in alien material, to impose expressive "symbols" onto mere photographic presence in

a way which makes the artificial gesture obvious despite its impressive technical prowess. In short, in a stroke of self-irony, Brakhage's own symbolic gestures, despite their "necessity," are shown to have the same fleeting "tawdriness" of other, generally architectural symbols he has shot in the previous part of the series. Interestingly enough, by traveling south to New Mexico, in the fourth and last film, subtitled "D. H. Lawrence," Brakhage has roughly re-traced the route of the mysterious Native American Tribe in order to visit the former home of a celebrated twentieth-century poet and novelist who likewise retreated into the desert from a failed civilization.

But it is in the third part of the *Visions* series, "Plato's Cave," that an exploitation of real camera presence is made most ironically powerful. The film opens with a series of barren landscapes which are oddly dreamlike thanks to the presence of continual panning and occasional dissolves that are accompanied by an electronic score from a rare musical collaborator, in this case, Rick Corrigan. The film seems to carry us into a "cave" and out again, into the glare of the desert sun, a progression which perhaps approximates Plato's myth from *The Republic*: philosophy leads us from the chimerical world of illusion into the harsh glare of reality itself. Towards the end of the film, what "reality itself" has to offer is a series of eerie shots of a so-called "dust devil"—a swirl of dirt and loose brush caught in an updraft generated by high, static desert heat (see plate 2). The camera gazes on the fleeting phenomenon, once again, as a tourist's would—that is, Brakhage places it squarely in the center of the frame and keeps shooting, rewinding the camera (evidently) and shooting it again—a gesture which captures his accidentally coming upon it and its powerful and even threatening allure which nevertheless stands now quite outside the formalized dreamlike landscape shots with which the film begins. Its "outsideness" is emphasized by another accident: a fence can be seen in the mid-ground, between the camera and the dust devil. And then, just as we begin to wonder why the filmmaker is lingering on this "meaningless shot," Brakhage responds to this outside presence with the slightest gesture, a camera sweep, which seems to ever so fleetingly mirror the movement of the dust devil. Brakhage is taking the first step of formal control beyond the neutral point of naïve photography, and making a "creative use of reality," if you will,

but then the film instantly plunges into black leader.

The presence of the music over the black leader shows us that the film is still going and helps us to make a connection and read this non-space as a deep space—as Plato's cave once again. We are back in the world of illusion and mental darkness but only on terms which we recognize as clearly symbolic and not representational (i.e. photographic). The shot holds long enough that we begin to have time to study our own reading of the image and see precisely how context has imposed an image (the cave) on a non-image (black leader). Brakhage's own notes help us to see this final gesture as a brilliantly ironic response to Plato: "The film is, I believe, a vision of mentality as most people must (to the irritation of Plato) have it, safely encaved and metaphorical, for the nervous system to survive" (CCC). The barren desert landscape and glaring sun is merely a "phenomenological world," and as such it is "uninhabitable." The entire "vision" of the cave is a mental construct resting on nothing except our own human necessity to make such constructs to live within. Paradoxically, of course, that threatening exterior world only has presence as a symbol, too, in the figure of the "dust devil." Plato's cave is the locus we find ourselves in when we try to get *any* meaning from *any* visual phenomenon, even if we are trying to render utter meaninglessness. To my way of thinking, this is a cinematic ending which lives up to the philosophic enterprise of the *Visions* series as a whole, as well as to the title of this particular film. It is also a "dramatic close" not dissimilar from the one discussed earlier in the first part of *Dog Star Man*, except that here the filmic gesture in and of itself, so characteristic of the later Brakhage, is much more refined and gives off a sense of effortlessness to the extent that an unsuspecting viewer may miss it altogether. There is less heroism and more quietude, which befits the relative shift to a greater photographic transparency.

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One clear objection to the general thrust of my argument can be made from the observation that the vast majority of Brakhage's films from the last few years have been in the abstract, painterly mode, a trend which runs counter to Deren's prescriptions of over fifty years earlier.

Apart from the possible determining factors of economics mentioned earlier, it is entirely possible that Brakhage's enterprise as a painter/filmmaker only makes, in turn, the special, dialectical mode of the photographic works all the more vivid. In a long booklength conversation with the painter and printmaker Philip Taaffe, Brakhage seems to recognize the distinction:

SB: I don't mean to be presumptuous, but maybe at this point in your evolution you're painting the space as thought would have it, rather than space in the exterior world. How one might *think* a region, rather than a reflection upon an exterior one.

PT: That's a very good point. Painted space is mental space.

SB: And that again puts you in alignment with what I think is the important and necessary continuum of the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic: they were the first to paint closed-eye vision. They painted it without knowing it, without being conscious of it.⁸

Note that Brakhage reads the Abstract Expressionist movement, a movement he views as closely bound up with his early, crucially formative period of the 1950s, from a point of view which tries to de-emphasize a notion of painterly innovation for its own sake. Rather, he sees abstraction, at least a particular practice of it, as if it were a visual record of a perceptual phenomenon—in Brakhage's sense, of hypnogogic or "closed-eye" vision. This only confirms, I think, that Brakhage's willful and bold flights of interior imagination have always achieved their cinematic forcefulness by not losing sight of that which, within his chosen medium, opposes them and threatens, in fact, to make them lose their way.

⁸ Philip Taaffe, *Composite Nature: A Conversation with Stan Brakhage* (NY: Peter Blum, 1998), p. 116.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

David Andrews is the author of *Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita* (Edwin Mellen, 1999). His essays, reviews, and interviews relating to the work of Gilbert Sorrentino can be found in the current issues of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction, Hunger, and Bridge*. He teaches literature and writing at University of Illinois at Chicago. • **Steve Anker** has been Artistic Director and Director of San Francisco Cinematheque since 1982, and Professor of Filmmaking and Film History at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1984. He co-curated and contributed a catalogue essay for the 76-program retrospective "Big As Life: An American History of 8mm Films," which was presented at MoMA from 1998 to 2001. • **Lee Ann Brown** is the editor and publisher of Tender Buttons, an award-winning independent press that features experimental poetry by women. Her first full-length book, *Polyverse* (Sun & Moon, 1999) won the New American Poetry Prize; *The Sleep That Changed Everything* is due from Wesleyan University Press in Fall 2002. She lives in New York City, and teaches at St. John's University on Staten Island. • **Fred Camper** is a writer and lecturer on film, art, and photography who lives in Chicago. He writes regularly for the *Chicago Reader*, and his website is www.fredcamper.com. • **Bradin Cormack** teaches English at the University of Chicago. • **Guy Davenport's** recent books are *The Hunter Gracchus & Other Papers on Literature and Art* (Counterpoint, 1996), *Objects on a Table* (Counterpoint, 1998), and *Twelve Stories* (Counterpoint, 1997). • **Anthony Doerr's** first book, a collection of stories entitled *The Shell Collector*, was published in January 2002 by Scribner. His stories appeared last year in the *Atlantic Monthly, Paris Review*, and elsewhere. He recently won a Literature Fellowship from the NEA, and he lives with his wife and dog in Boise, Idaho. • **Nathaniel Dorsky** was born in New York City in 1943, and has been making films in the avant garde tradition since 1964. His films have been premiered at the New York Film Festival over the last five years. He makes his living as a film editor in the film industry. • **Antonio Facchino** lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. He conducts poetry workshops with California Poets in the Schools and works as a Director of Photography for Think Tank Video. Other poems of his have appeared in *Santa Clara Review*. • **Paul Hoover's** recent poetry books include *Rehearsal in Black* (Salt Publications, 2001), *Totem and Shadow: New and Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1999), and *VIRIDIAN* (University of Georgia Press, 1997). He edited *Postmodern American Poetry* (W.W. Norton, 1994) and is editor of the literary magazine *New American Writing*. • **Christine Hume** teaches at Eastern Michigan University. • **Philip W. Jenks** lives in Portland, Oregon, and teaches

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• **Robert Kelly** writes, "My new collection of poems, *Lapis*, is due out in Spring from Black Sparrow. I'm at work on a long poem (*Orion: Opening the Seals*), a novel, and a collection of essays. Pierre Joris is editing a symposium on my work for Samizdat Press. I teach in the Writing Program at Bard College." • **Robert Lunday** will complete his PhD at the University of Houston in 2002. His first book, *Mad Flights*, a collection of short poems, was published in December 2001 by Ashland Poetry Press. • **Michael McClure's** newest works are a C.D. in collaboration with keyboardist Ray Manzarek, of the Doors, and *Plumstones: Cartoons of No Heaven* from O Books. • **Marie Nesthus** has been the Director of Donnell Media Center, the central film and video collection of The New York Public Library, since 1980. This article is a revised excerpt from her 1999 dissertation *A Crucible of Document: The Sequence Films of Stan Brakhage, 1968-1984*. • **John Pruitt** has published articles on avant-garde film in several publications, including *Millennium Film Journal*, *Field of Vision*, and *Motion-Picture*. Since 1981 he has taught Film History at Bard College. • **Kristin Prevallet** is the author of *Perturbation, My Sister* (First Intensity Press, 1997) and *Red* (Second Story Books, 2000). Her essays, poetry, and translations have appeared in a variety of magazines including *Poetry New York*, *Chain*, *Combo*, *Bombay Gin*, and *Salt Hill*. She lives in Brooklyn where she teaches writing studios at Pratt Institute and Cooper Union. • *Fear of Blushing*, a handpainted film by **Jennifer Reeves**, premiered at the New York Film Festival in October, 2001, and is on its way to various other film festivals. In the fall of 2000, *We are going Home* and *Darling International* (co-directed with M.M. Serra) were shown in the Whitney's "The Color of Ritual, The Color of Thought," an exhibition celebrating women avant-garde filmmakers. Reeves teaches film at Bard College and New School University, and lives in New York City. • **Spencer Selby's** most recent books are *The Big R* (Angle Press, 1998) and *Task* (Zasterle, 1999). He lives in Berkeley, California. • **Jim Shedden** is the director of two documentaries: *Michael Snow Up Close* (1994) and *Brakhage* (1998). The author of numerous articles on film, art, architecture, and music, Shedden is presently a Senior Producer at Bruce Mau Design. • **P. Adams Sitney** is Professor of Visual Arts at Princeton University. His *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* will appear in its third edition this spring. He is the author of *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema* and *Modernist Montage*. • **Chris Tysh** teaches creative writing and women's studies at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her most recent publication is *Continu-*

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§

Congratulations to Rae Armantrout, Ted Enslin, Pam Rehm, and Juliana Spahr: their poems published in *Chicago Review* 47:1 have been selected by Robert Creeley to appear in *Best American Poetry 2001*.

§

And our apologies to Devin Johnston for inadvertently omitting the last stanza of his "Two Songs," published in *CR* 47:3. The complete poem can be read on our website at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/review/473/johnston>.

I Sleeping (Being A Dream Journal and Parenthetical Explanation), by Stan Brakhage. Island Cinema Resources, 1988. 42 pp. \$7 plus \$2 postage, payable to "Robert A. Haller."

Galaxy: Avante-Garde Film-makers Look Across Space and Time, by Robert A. Haller. French and English Text. Anthology Film Archives, 2001. 60 pp. \$5 plus \$2 postage, payable to "Anthology Film Archives."

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