

# SEARCHING FOR NEW LANGUAGES

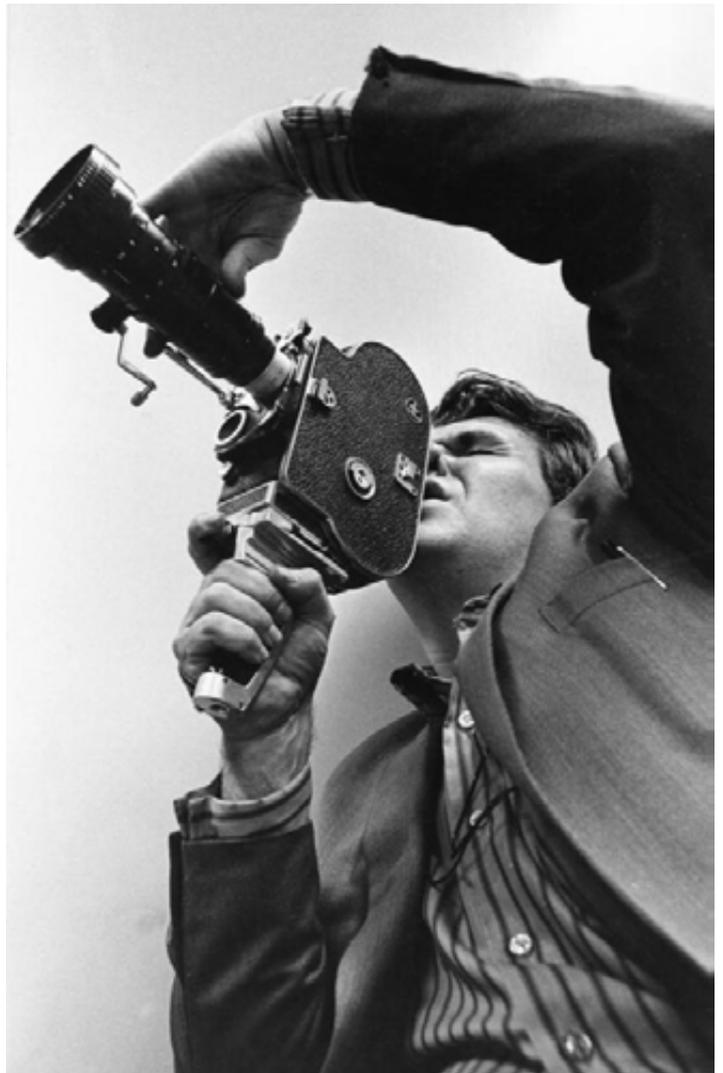
## A LOOK AT STAN BRAKHAGE

Originally published: *One+One Filmmakers Journal*, November 28, 2010 by Clara Pais

*Imagine an eye unrul'd 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 colours 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 colour. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word'.*

This is Stan Brakhage's proposition, in 1963, on his letter to P. Adams Sitney that was compiled and published in his *Metaphors on Vision*. To create an eye untamed by culture, a cinema that speaks its own language, different from any other. To recreate language is quite a challenging purpose – it's trying to deconstruct one of our most intrinsic conditions, to understand its rules and rewrite them. Imagine, like Brakhage suggests, how it would be to perceive without fitting shapes, colours, sound and movement into the categories that we have already culturally established. How would we actually perceive them? How can we then construct film, what do we base it on? I am not sure Brakhage's thought went so far in his beginnings but his fellow filmmakers were definitely a great influence - the American independent scene in his time was named avant-garde because of its persistent challenging of conventional cinematic language. Exploring film at a very low cost, from narrative, to documentary to visual poetry, they were examples of different working methods for Brakhage, something closer to artistic exploration and formal experimentation. Maya Deren, Marie Menken and Sidney Peterson were all personal friends of Brakhage at different points of his life and major influences.

Consider nowadays, when the abundance of new virtual technology is opening up new paths in image and meaning making, and neuroscientific methods enable us to understand how these affect our brain – these questions can start being answered. A new language begins to come forward and it seems to be coming out of these cinematic codes developed at the margins of the cinema. Brakhage's artistic and formal strategies are incredibly interesting to analyse in this light, since they seem to be directly responding to the demands of contemporary modes of communication. In order to illustrate the points of connection, I will try to describe his methodology and approach in this article.





He started in the early fifties with a bunch of works that fall on the psychodrama category. The characteristic feature of these films is that the camera is used to portray the psychological reality of the protagonist, making it subjective by nature, be it either in the first person or a testimony of that individual's crisis. *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954) is a perfect example of this sort of genre that was developed by many of Brakhage's contemporaries. The protagonist is lost in a dreamlike world; both tantalized and threatened by his surroundings, he deals with his own reality. In this particular film, we see a young man coming home to his small apartment only to find himself estranged by every object. Everything seems to be wrong and he becomes increasingly nervous and paranoid despite his efforts to calm down. He ends up

plucking his eyes out and fleeing into the garden, which we see in negative film. The camera switches between rapid cutting and longer handheld shots to accentuate his disturbance, and has both a describing and an active role in it.

In fact, the opening of this short film is, in my opinion, crucial in defining how Brakhage uses his camera. It starts with a long shot of our protagonist, walking towards the camera introspectively. He is still far as we pan right, going ahead of him. We see two lighted windows and, with a cut, we're in. The movement becomes less restrained, a handheld camera explores the space like a burglar – the intentionality of the camera assures us there is someone there and objects framed up close seem to have a life of their own. As it turns around, the protagonist enters through the door and looks across the room. With a snap the camera is subjugated again and gives us the reverse shot – the open doors through which the wind blows, that the protagonist then closes. What happens here is that another entity besides the protagonist manifests itself, one that seems unrestrained and able to connect with the viewer with incredible power. It gives life and meaning by the sheer intent that we recognise in its gaze. That is the camera, by means of the filmmaker. This is a very important notion in understanding Brakhage – that the camera can illustrate life not as imagined by the filmmaker, but as he experiences it. Other things come into play as he builds up his body of work but I'd say this remains his driving force.

Later on he made a few films that are usually labeled as documentaries, though whether they fit into this description depends on what you comprehend of the films and of documentary itself. *Window Water Baby Moving* (1962) and *The act of seeing with one's own eyes* (1971) focus on life and death in a most peculiar way. The former films a home birth, quite directly and without inhibitions. The latter films a number of autopsies that are carried out in a morgue. The camera relentlessly explores what has before been hidden in both cases. However, there is more than just matter-of-factly stating events, there is cruelty and elegance – which makes us consider that after all there is a conscience behind the images, driving us closer to its own perception and reality. P Adams Sitney recognises it and marks it as Brakhage's fundamental concept: 'the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision'<sup>1</sup>. This attitude is more of a poet rather than the documentary filmmaker.

As poems, his films are constructed to manifest the mind and its subjective experience. Time, being absolutely fundamental in perceiving oneself and framing experience, is one of the trickiest aspects to tackle. Rather than following the usual linear structure, Brakhage unfolds events in a fashion that resembles the stream of human consciousness – as the natural order of events proceeds, suddenly shots of previous stages appear as if called upon by memory and are intertwined with the present, subverting and enhancing it. He uses many editing resources to achieve this – rapid editing, matching-on-action, superimposition, jump cutting – however, their meaning is not absolutely established, it rather establishes itself differently in each frame. Gene Youngblood writes about this, specifically speaking about *Dog Star Man*: 'The images develop their own syntactical meaning and a 'narrative' line is perceived, though the meaning of any given image may change in the context of different sequences. This constitutes a creative use of the language itself, over and above any particular 'content' conveyed by that language.'<sup>2</sup>

Each image seems to have a mental process or visual experience behind it, even if the meaning is unclear. In one of his most famous sequences, 'Prelude' (the first installment of *Dog Star Man*, finished in 1961) he presents a collage of moving images that momentarily superimpose, instead of cutting from one to the other, at a fast pace for nearly twenty-five minutes. The sheer amount of shots, rhythm and some of the techniques used, like painting and scratching on the celluloid, render obsolete any attempt to establish concrete meanings in the relationships between the images. The emphasis is on the vortex of consciousness around a present moment – both in the sense of tense and immediacy; Brakhage illustrates it perfectly when he says 'I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception.'<sup>3</sup> It is conscience that he is trying to reproduce – conscience as experience of being or of mind.

These strategies are associated with expressionist and surrealist films but Brakhage uses them with an apparently directly opposite purpose: to achieve a sense of time that ultimately feels real. As pointed out before, the documental aspect of his work and his poetic approach do not invalidate each other. Malcolm Le Grice describes Brakhage's artistic process as '(...) one of impulsive selection and construction, never constraining himself by preconception of didactic procedure. (...) Structure or form in this kind of process is not a priori, but the result of a search for a logic during the selection and construction process.'<sup>4</sup> Brakhage speaks in more spiritual terms about his own process: 'Of necessity I become instrument for the passage of inner vision, through all my sensibilities, into its external form. My most active part in the process is to increase all my sensibilities (so that all films arise out of some total area of being or full life) and, at the given moment of possible creation to act only out of necessity.'<sup>5</sup> He sees himself as a vehicle of his own will, and wishes for film to be the direct manifestation of that will, in a rather phenomenological approach to art. It is arguable if this method is right to achieve that 'pure film' that he speaks of – one that is free from preconceptions and has a language of its own – but it definitely has at its core a necessity to unrestrain oneself from formulas, canons and conventional procedure.

All in all, considering the aspects of Brakhage's work – the variety of formal experimentations, and the dialogue between the documental concerns and the lyrical, subjective approach – it is difficult to think what more he could have done to reproduce the experience of human consciousness by using film. I wonder how his work would have evolved had he started exploring digital video and multimedia resources like the Internet, or even whether he would if he had the chance. The diversity of work that has been created by filmmakers that go into these areas is astonishing, from Doug Aitken's installations to Peter Greenaway's VJ performances, cinematic language started unfolding into different frames, durations and platforms in response to people's new visual cultural demands. After all, the appearance of the Internet and the specific form and rhythms of its language has modeled the structure of thoughts in the latest generations, as it has been very recently discussed in the BBC documentary series *The Virtual Revolution*. Professor David Nicholas at University College London conducted a study that revealed younger generations 'answered a question after looking at half a number of web pages – and spent only one sixth of the time viewing the information – than their elders.'<sup>6</sup> Further discussed on this documentary is that because of their handling of this medium during the years when their brains are still very actively creating new connections, these more recent generations have developed a tendency to associative thinking,



so strong that there is almost an inability to follow linear thinking. In terms of what they might expect from a cinematic experience, I believe there will be little interest for very restricted forms of communication where undivided attention is called for and totality of meaning is provided simply because people will not know how to deal with that.

This model of thought is highly subjective, since the formation of the brain connections is more influenced by the emotional and perceptual state of the sub-



ject at the moment of encounter with the concepts, than by relating it to previously acquired knowledge. In a way, it means our brain is becoming more pragmatic and subjective in the way it maps out the world, because of the sheer amount of stimulation it suffers. It is as if Brakhage worked his whole life to achieve a language that could speak to the new over-stimulated brains. Imagine a world before 'the beginning was the word' or any other code – a world that is pure experience. That is, imagine that the new film (which includes videogaming) becomes an extension of life itself, an overblown dimension that incorporates it because its mechanisms mimic the brain's. More than that, that it can recreate space and time and allow you to live in it. So what happens to perception here? There would be no more need for translation. Brakhage did much in just one medium to reach this. Now we have mediums that almost presuppose it – what can we do with them?

1. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*. Oxford University Press (1974) p.180

2. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc (1970) p.90

3. Stan Brakhage 'On Hollis Frampton', *Form and Structure in Recent Film*. Vancouver (1972)

4. Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract film and beyond*. London: Cassell & Collier Macmillan Publishers Ltd. (1977) p.90

5. Stan Brakhage, from a letter to P. Adams Sitney in *Metaphors on Vision* (1963)

6. transcribed from online Daily Mail article, 'Internet 'rewires our brains' and makes teenagers vulnerable to mental illness'. Retrieved March 10, 2010 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1249946/Internet-rewiring-brains-psychologists-warn-thousands-teens-need-mental-health-treatments.html>

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