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Stan Brakhage

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Stan Brakhage's career as a Film Experimentalist is already well-launched although he is, being only twenty-five, one of the very youngest of the accredited group of American Experimentalists. That he was adopted exactly when fourteen days old saved him from what is sometimes a baby-orphan's traumatic fate: growing up in an orphanage. He was reared in the Midwest and has lived in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and California, where he went to join the Avantgarde film movement at the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco; however, finding its leading lights absent, he was discouraged in the first flush of his Experimentalist zeal, and having reached failure in the love affair which had been coincident with his first film *Interim*, he switched capriciously to writing.

Interim had been made in Denver, his home, following a willful secession from Dartmouth, where for one semester he had been studying on a scholarship (with poor results) and where a psychological crisis had been the cause of his desertion. Brakhage is not reticent about his temperamentality and yet his accounts of certain episodes in his life have been inconsistent. One may be sure of two things, however, and these are traits typical of the youthful artist: love has been a major problem for him, while still, rather than permit it to interfere with his film work, he has always tended to instrumentalize it. One such attempt, and remarkably successful, was *Interim* itself, which he filmed as a

simple erotic episode in pantomime: the only accompaniment to the young lovers' accidental meeting and ephemeral contact is the score by James Tenner, which is excellent, and pared well with the idyllic action.

There is nothing sensational, technical or otherwise, about *Interim* — like life for one who was then, in 1951, only eighteen. Yet as a young Experimentalist's first endeavor, it is phenomenally free of awkwardness, showing a very rare quality: the taste that is "tact." True, tact itself is not among the most decisive Experimental factors, for it is also conspicuous in the best French commercial films and in a film such as Dreyer's *Day of Wrath*. Perhaps, in passing, a definition of the aesthetic content of the term "tact" may be given. Quite apart from imaginative daring, scope of vision or novelty of technique, tact is that firm, rhythmic touch upon all elements (story, actor, camera and psychology) which makes a work of art agreeable, neat and in no way offensive. It never pays to underrate this facility, in whatever domain of film, especially because an ambitious young Experimentalist may be a little wild or a little vulgar without realizing it. Such elder Experimentalists as Maya Deren and Sidney Peterson, at this date, top Brakhage in imagination, but considering the total output of all the Experimentalists I know about, Brakhage emerges with the highest score in tact among all his fellow craft-men.

Continually broke in San Francisco, but writing and studying poetry while talking with elder poets Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen, Brakhage felt, at last, stalemated. He therefore returned to Denver to start a theater in a surplus war-tent, where he tackled Wedekind, Strindberg and Chekhov. But his eye was still on film-making, and with specially raised funds he made his second film, *Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection*, in an abandoned mine's surface buildings. It was a bit over-ambitiously planned (owing mainly to too large a demand on amateur actors) but it showed his smooth, tactful touch despite its reliance on what, in 1953, was an Experimentalist cliché: the contemporary ruin as a neo-Gothic background. There was, even here, further proof

of Brakhage's control of camera rhythm, if nothing positively original in mood or technique.

Restive, without funds for creating, the young Experimentalist once more turned toward San Francisco, where he now became friends with the poet, Robert Duncan, and lived in a basement room below Duncan's apartment. Then Brakhage's father, when he went home for the next Christmas, agreed to finance a film for him. The result was *Desistfilm*, based on a cult of the local youth in which Brakhage was joined by a small circle of friends. The subject is simply a wild party in which young people of both sexes get high on wine and behave in provincial emulation of such international fashions as Existentialism and Dada, with the accent, however, on rejection rather than *engagement*: the film remains, at best, fragmentary. Now a plan to tour, and make films along the way, started with his collaboration with Larry Jordan, *The Extraordinary Child*, a self-consciously zany work that flowed out of *Desistfilm* but showed sloppiness and did not come off. Brakhage ended broke in a eucalyptus grove outside Niles, Calif. Drawing courage from this briefly enforced term of meditation, he went back to San Francisco to establish a film-workshop, and by filming TV commercials for various civic organizations, made enough to do his next two films: *In Between* and *The Way to Shadow Garden*.

Himself a writer of felicitous verse, Brakhage has always been eager to communicate with poets, and his works usually echo his current social relations in the shape of poetic "influences" as both consciously and unconsciously transmitted to him. In *Between*, done in the milieu of Duncan and his friends, is not a happy effort, being marred by amateurism to an embarrassing degree; not that Duncan and his friends were to blame: an artist is responsible to his influences as well as to himself. Brakhage, up to this point, was uneven. But *The Way to Shadow Garden*, which followed, marks a distinct advance in his imaginative development. Here, according to his own account, he investigated the "drama" of the protagonist's relationship with the objects in his room, the latter reversing

the order of nature and acting upon him. As usual, though, the idea was a very subjective one. Brakhage used one of his friends as his protected self. Some of the film's details are unconvincing yet the whole is a sensitively executed, if slight, "epic" of modern psychological tension. Beginning with *The Way to Shadow Garden*, an upward arc is discernible in Brakhage's filmic oeuvre.

Probably his decision to come to New York, and present his talent on as wide a stage as possible, was a token of his victorious growth as well as of his self-confidence. Self-doubt, of course, has infallibly assailed Stan Brakhage as it does all artists. But his drive has never deserted him for long. He did not complete editing on the last two films till after he arrived in New York, where he not only proceeded to make two more films but also met other Experimentalists, including Maya Deren and Willard Maas, and other poets and critics, among them the present writer. Brakhage, I believe, has a genuinely passionate nature — by which, of course, I mean something fundamentally psychic, while excluding from it neither the heart nor the flesh. The combination of passion and inexperience inevitably leads to the confusion of interpersonal complications, and most certainly in New York, where Neurotica is the Tenth Muse. Moreover, there the sense of rivalry is keen no matter on what level, or in what sphere of professionalism: hence, in New York, Brakhage's temperamentality was duly put through its paces and yet, happily, not to his or anyone's serious detriment. Economically and artistically, he repeated all his previous patterns: poverty, caprice and desperation on one hand: the kindness of friends and institutions, the will and the capacity to work, on the other. A benefit performance of four of his films was held in the auditorium of The Living Theatre. From the Creative Film Foundation, which began operating about this time, he received a grant whose value in cash terms turned out to be less than he had expected; nevertheless, a brief film was inaugurated with its help.

Meanwhile, Brakhage's mind and heart were involved with the idea of turning love into

marriage: for some while, he was engaged — or at least felt engaged — to a young woman from Denver who had come to New York to start a theatrical career. Frustration, professional and private, is usually an artist's natural, if transient, lot. Maybe Brakhage has had a bit more than his share of it: anyway, he never married the Denver girl, even though he came near it. Till his marriage at the beginning of 1958, his most serious romance was with her. Brakhage has found New York, admittedly, both fascinating and forbidding, and spasmodically feels drawn there, when away, as he used to feel drawn to San Francisco.

Inner and outer crises tempted him away from New York following the summer of 1955 (when he had spent more than six months there and made *Reflections on Black* and *The Wonder Ring*) to Los Angeles. In this city, he formed a connection with Raymond Rohauer, who commissioned what turned out to be Brakhage's best film that, to date, had been exhibited: *Flesh of Morning*. It has his most personal signature by virtual necessity because, for the first time, he enacts his own protagonist. Because, moreover, he photographed it himself without help, it issued as a remarkable tour-de-force, and challenges for supremacy any other short lyric film I know.

Nightcats was begun in Los Angeles and completed, along with two new, quite brief, films (*Daybreak* and *White Eye*) during his second sojourn in New York, which came in 1956. During this period he also worked transiently — but with loyal application — in the bookshop managed by his friend, Charles Boultenhouse. Along with the beautifully poetic *Flesh of Morning* and the beautifully apt *Wonder Ring*, which technically form his high points, Brakhage is faced, in *Nightcats* and *White Eye*, by two works directly posing for him the artist's ineradicable problem of the threatening gap between intention and achievement, meaning and form. Both these films are visually tactful: the disturbing quality they share, about equally, is the implication of straining for a difficult statement in which they fall heroically short.

In *Nightcats* (his third color film) Brakhage has deliberately used real organisms, rats, as color and black-and-white abstractions: this dominantly abstract method automatically ignores the second-level tension produced by feline image and behavior in contrast with the first-level tension composed by pure color-and value-relationships. Some of the transitions created by camera movement between such abstractions and objects are artful, but the basic problem of the proper interrelation of levels has not been solved. The same is true of *White Eye*: the interior/exterior tension between the snowy landscape, seen beyond windows, and a hand inside, attempting to write a love letter, has no lucid resolution. *Daybreak*, on the contrary, is an excellent vignette dealing with a highly critical passage in a young woman's psychic life even if, photographically speaking, it is a bit tame.

Verbal soundtracks might solve the artistic problems of the other two films; as a rule, Brakhage depends (for reasons of economy) on rather makeshift musical scores, and in his work, music has never been a major creative factor. No suspended formal problem of any kind handicaps either *Reflections on Black* or *The Wonder Ring*, the latter of which was made possible by the artist, Joseph Cornell, who wished to see a film record made of the Third Avenue "EI" in New York before it ceased operation prior to its demolition. *Reflections*, being purely a psychological fantasy involving a set of domestic scenes between lovers, offered a problem infinitely removed from that of the "EI" film. Yet Brakhage had no trouble handling both films very competently. Entered in the first Creative Film Foundation annual competition, *Reflections on Black* won an award, and like other films of Brakhage's, is now distributed by Cinema 16.

Whatever difficult meaning inheres in the sequence of cryptic dumbshows furnished by the domestic partners in *Reflections* is contained entirely in the action itself, without such independent formal motivation as Brakhage imposed on *Nightcats*. Again, in *The Wonder*

Ring, the color and chiaroscuro, the changing movement of the "EI" train and the varied rhythm and texture of images seen through the irregular window-glass flow simply and naturally from the eyesight of the observer with his camera: a passenger enjoying the same views that had been available for so many years to countless "EI" riders. This is a gemlike little film precisely because its maker's tact eliminated the possibility of any pretentiousness; it has no smallest trace of the artiness from which Brakhage's first color film, *In Between*, suffered.

Loving, his latest film to be released, was made — like the still unreleased *Anticipation of the Night* — in Denver in 1957, and is a brief but interesting, and very probably unique, exercise in cinematic sensibility; we are, say the first few shots, in the woods on a sunshiny day. Then a quick succession of glimpses shows us a couple in the throes of unceremonious love-making. So close are the images that, while we never doubt what is going on, everything seems optically discursive, like things seen through half-shut eyes, things seen (as preoccupied lovers would see them) with half or less than half conscious recognition of the setting, and sometimes upside down; this is because the truer, dominant sensations are tactile, not optical; and in turn, it is as if the growing things see the lovers as a corresponding succession of details torn from context, as though the human beings, too, could become fluid, vanishing abstractions.

A very superior little "essay" in optical psychology, *Loving* is fragmentary when considered beside *Flesh of Morning*. Not only is it much shorter, but also, in terms of sexual experience, it is at the antipodes from the earlier film, where the young male is alone in a state of temptation toward self, surrounded by fetiches of the loved girl — and with a camera handy; psychologically, the camera is identical with the protagonist, for as I said, here Brakhage performed the bravura feat of enacting the Narcissistic drama himself. The tension is simply composed but exquisite in duration: shall he or shall he not satisfy himself in the usual way? The orgasm approaches like a tragic fate. . . . Though its

nature somewhat restricts its exhibition, Brakhage had the courage to include it among the films he submitted to the Brussels international festival, whose prizes are yet to be awarded.

Already, Stan Brakhage has won his special admirers and these wish him well in the career that, given even moderate good fortune, certainly lies ahead of him. I have not yet seen *Anticipation of the Night*. But the young Experimentalist's program note, accompanying his newest film on its flight to Belgium, is so poetically suggestive that perhaps this monograph can be ended no better than with its quotation entire : "The daylight shadow of a man in its movement evokes lights in the night. A rose bowl, held in hand, reflects both sun and moon-like illumination. The opening of a doorway onto trees anticipates the twilight into the night. A child is born on a lawn, born of water, with its promissory rainbow, and the wild rose. It becomes the moon and the source of all night light. Lights of the night become young children playing a circular game. The moon moves over a pillared temple to which all lights return. There is seen the sleep of the innocents and their animal dreams, becoming their amusement, their circular game, becoming the morning. The trees change color and lose their leaves for the morn, becoming the complexity of branches on which the shadow man hangs himself."

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