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# The Anti-Heroic in Recent American Avant-garde Film

No one has ever figured out an appropriate name for the movement known as American experimental, avant-garde, or at one time 'underground' filmmaking. In the late 1930s artists such as Joseph Cornell and Harry Smith began making films with minimal means, usually in 16-millimeter. By the 1940s a few filmmakers were meeting each other; Sidney Peterson and James Broughton even collaborated. By the 1950s there was a very fragile 'movement', defined by the limited means and artisanal conditions of its productions — the filmmaker worked alone or with a few helpers, in contradistinction to commercial filmmaking — and also by forms that were in some sense congruous with advanced movements in the other arts. If there was a story being told, it was at best ambiguous and obscure, and there was a tendency to emphasize film's plastic and graphic elements through composition and editing.

As the movement slowly grew in the 1950s, American painting was blossoming, especially within the Abstract Expressionist movement. It is often said that it was the Abstract Expressionists that transferred the world's art capital from Paris to New York in the years following World War II. These paintings were often huge, like the American landscape; the physical and emotional life of the artist sprawled over large territory, 'conquering' the canvas in the same way that Americans had earlier 'conquered' the continent. Abstract Expressionism, a huge influence on Stan Brakhage who in turn was a huge influence on many filmmakers who followed him, was nothing if not heroic.

Yet even Brakhage's films are less 'heroic', less records of conquest, than is usually assumed. Dog Star Man, his best known early narrative, is a record of failure at even the most modest of tasks: the woodsman protagonist, played by Brakhage himself, fails to climb a mountain, and even fails to chop up a tree. In recent decades, artists have moved further away from the heroic; in Chicago, where I live, more than one art exhibit has announced specifically anti-heroic themes. Many factors are at work here, one of which is that while America was by far the world's most powerful nation at the end of World War II, and was widely admired, the situation has shifted considerably, particularly beginning with the failed pursuit of the Vietnam War. Many, including many Americans, now find grounds for severe criticism of the U.S. and its actions. Most recently, the proud, confident, 'heroic' response of our leaders to the attacks of September 11, crossing continents to invade other countries, has, not having produced the promised results but something rather close to their opposite, undermined the confidence of many while giving the doubters even more reason to doubt. Further, the ascension of alternative moving image media, first video and then digitally based formats, has undercut the primal authority the film image was originally received with. More generally, the proliferation of images in our culture, from magazines to television to the Web further undercuts the ideal that an image might represent truth.

The artist's heroic stance has been undermined by another defining characteristic of American avant-garde film that has been with us since its origins. Such films are designed, many times consciously so, to make the viewer aware of the viewing process. One cannot sit back and hope to be swept away by these movies, as happens in entertainment features, and expect to come to anything close to an understanding of it. From Joseph Cornell's early reediting of a Hollywood 'B' film in his *Rose Hobart* (1936) to they way Ernie Gehr pushed rapid editing between

different perspectives of the same space to the limits of perception in *Serene Velocity* (1970), these films ask the viewer to play an active and questioning role in their perception and apprehension, presenting themselves less as truth revealed than as objects of engagement.

Perhaps the closest this program comes to the heroic is in Stan Brakhage's ravishing *Water for Maya* (2000), if only for the transcendently beautiful quality of its complex layers of shapes and colors, painted directly on the original film strip, and the feeling of unstoppable onrushing water that results. But these pale, multi-layered images with their gently contrasting colors are too ephemeral to assert anything other than impermanence. The other Brakhage film on the program, *Ascension* (2002), one of several completed when he already knew he might be dying, is even more tentative, its often bright colors giving the feeling of momentary apparitions.

Christopher Becks's *Pan of the Landscape* (2005), made during the filmmaker's final two years of art school, reflects Brakhage's influence, especially at its opening. But soon differences begin to appear. The black shadow of something that looks a bit like a machine part slowly traverses the visual field, asserting the presence of the mechanisms of cinema (and of the optical printer, the 'special effects' rephotography device Becks used to make his film). Rapidly-moving colours are anchored by the silhouettes of buildings in the same way the painted patterns are stilled by the shadow, and the use in Brakhage's and others' films of painting on film as means of achieving a lyrical, visionary freedom of light and color is deeply undercut, as the solid stuff of the world begins to resemble a bit of a prison. Because of these physical realities acknowledged within the film, neither the artist nor his creations seems free, and the flim alternates between bursts of sensuousness and a more resigned, withdrawn, melancholy self-awareness.

S. Barber and Janie Geiser give anti-heroic themes a social dimension. Barber's *shipfilm* (1998) references imperialism in her account of a failed voyage using text and relatively static animations of a paper ship; its modest means suggests that imagined 'voyages' made with readily-available materials are preferable to grand conquests. For some artists, the prevalence of media in increasingly multiple forms is itself a reason to doubt images, but Janie Geiser eschews the flat, easily ironic route of many such doubters in favor of richly resonant fantasy worlds. Video monitors superimposed into a dollhouse in her *The Fourth Watch* (2000) show silent movie actors; this reference to the past suggests ghosts inhabit the dwelling. Thomas Comerford's *Figures in the Landscape* also refers to older media, in that it was shot with a pinhole camera, a form of camera obscura. The images show a sprawling Chicago suburb, while texts refer to earlier inhabitants — the Indians. The tentative, not completely sharp pinhole image combines with text to suggest that the landscapes shown, like all the landscapes we create, are themselves impermanent.

Since the mid-1990s, Brian Frye has made a large number of films that challenge principal avant-garde practices. Rather than calculating every part of his films for maximum aesthetic effect, like a painter, he strives to make films that look 'unmade' — that look, for example, as if they are home movies, or fragments of educational films. In his *Lachrymae* (2000), what at first seem like specks of white on the film in footage that has a distinct 'home movie' feel soon reveal themselves as fireflies. An attempt to 'capture' firefly light by cupping one of the insects in one's hands fails, as it must. In directing us to a modest but miraculous sight in the actual world rather than to artist-made wonders, the film reveals its anti-heroic modesty, underlined by its acknowledgement that even this particular natural wonder is elusive. Frye's *Mirror Manhattan* (2001) presents a view from a boat going around Manhattan

Island in which the skyline right side up is superimposed over the same skyline upside-down. Here Frye undercuts the authority of the film image itself, reminding us that its directional orientation is somewhat arbitrary — and that in the camera and projector the image is oriented upside-down and is reversed by the lens. More importantly, the superimposition of the two views suggests that *any* orientation is valid.

Robert Breer and Jonas Mekas are, with Brakhage, two of the central masters of this movement. Though Brakhage died in 2003, both Breer and Mekas remain active. Breer has been making animated films for 53 years, and his *What Goes Up...* (2003) continues his 'kitchen sink' approach of including as many different kinds of things as possible. Central to his art are a series of tensions. Rather than using animation to produce seamless illusions, his films reveal cinema's dual nature as both an illusion of movement and a succession of stills. The ultimate effect of his work is ecstatic: by combining various rhythmic patterns, abstract and photographed shapes, and flatness mixed with depth illusions, Breer energizes ordinary eyesight. The whole world can seem more alive, alive with rhythms and colors and shapes and textures as well, after seeing one of his films. But Breer's films also often have a theme of failure, of failed movements and failed aspirations, and the title *What Goes Up...*, in referencing the idiom 'What goes up must come down', refers to his childhood dreams of flying (illustrated here as in many of his films with airplanes) as well as to the limpness that follows orgasm for males.

Jonas Mekas has always celebrated the everyday, the 'mundane', and *Williamsburg, Brooklyn* (2003) uses some of the early footage he shot after arriving as a displaced person in the U.S. a half-century ago. It has the look of a home movie, but Mekas's commentary imbues its casualness with a visionary intensity. Ben Russell's *Daumë* is even stranger, its human presence so powerfully 'other' that it seems to parody and critique Western ideas about non-Western cultures.