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Cover Page Footnote

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*The Avant-Garde in American Film:
An Interview with Stan Brakhage*

Stan Brakhage is one of the most respected, and certainly the most prolific, of American filmmakers working in the genre known variously as avant-garde, experimental, or personal film. His influence on film makers and artists has been felt for almost forty years, and extends also from his teaching, writings, lectures, and collaborative projects.

This interview took place during the last week of January, 1987, in New York City, where Brakhage was presenting programs of new work at the Museum of Modern Art and at Millennium Film Workshop.

Suppose we start with the topic of your sense of the avant-garde film movement, for lack of a better name, which has gone through a number of evolutionary phases since Lumière and Méliès.

Well, in the deep sense, the film movements have not gone through evolutions since the time that some men, and women I'm sure, too, crawled back deep underground into caves and painted —by tallow light — on the walls these extraordinary images, in some cases even sealing those caves airtight shut with clay that has the same finger imprintment as is in the paint with no evidence of there ever having been any other person in this room. That was all researched by Alexander Marshack and written about in his book *The Roots of Civilization*. Some of these people sealed those caves airtight shut which is one of the reasons we have them in such fine condition. Lascaux they've had to close up again, you know, because the oxygen was destroying the paintings. The bacteria, and so on.

So, the film movements, to put it in perspective, haven't changed on that level from that impulse from them.

From the original impulse . . .

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which every little kid has and demonstrates beautifully. Humans are intrinsically creative. I point to children's paintings as "exhibit A." This is a strong impulse, and very often children's paintings are already "show and tell," so they move a little toward entertainment and engaging with all the other aspects of art as shamanism, or for applause, or whatever. But the children who have little collections and secret places that have beautiful arrangements, or the drawings they do that aren't being done just to bring to mommy and daddy, but just the delight in the drawing is the same impulse also. It's intrinsically human, and it's so intrinsically human, that people have to go to great lengths to kill it. And most people do.

Some people, for reasons we do not thoroughly understand, are unable to do this, and therefore continue to practice these ordinary humannesses in their adulthood. And whether they work on eggs, which they bury in the earth to petrify, or with such an ephemera as film, or with words, or music, or build things — just like Simon Rodia making his Watts Towers, or that Breton postman, or what the hell ever: some people continue to do these things that go straight back, whatever medium they're using, to those caves or even earlier. Little carvings on bones that are so fragile — bones that are still extant — that are so finely wrought, that you need a magnifying glass to appreciate them. They were just taken as human scratches until so simple a thing as a magnifying glass, a powerful magnifying glass, came to show the articulation of the line. And when it's shown, the articulation of the line, they are of such style and exactitude that you can tell what season is being depicted by the beards on the fish that are drawn on them and so on.

And so this is the intrinsic human impulse. And the only thing that film is — that's a real wonderful distinction for me — is that it is the first time we have a way really to show the full spectrum of moving visual thinking. And of course what's mostly been done with it is just to make it a cheap way, to ship around a stage play, or make moving illustrations for novels and short stories and so on, which despite that being the overwhelming assumption of what they are, there are people who use this new possibility in what would seem the more normal way, that is, to have it be what nothing else in the world can be: a way to express moving visual thinking.

And some of it's as hermetic, for whatever reasons, as going back three miles, in one case, deep under the mountain, by tallow light, to

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make these things. “What were those people thinking of?” a *Variety* magazine would ask. But you can ask any kid, who may not choose to tell why he or she has such secret places of such creative wonder.

One of these things, these exhibits from ancient times, is tough to get up to: you have to climb a sheer rock wall that’s very hard to climb — even with today’s instruments, like spikes in the stone, and so on. And when you get up to it you find an opening, with an ornamented deer’s head facing directly out into space and other paints and objects behind it. It’s fashionable, along the line of people’s bias that everything has to be religious, or whatever, to think that this is all for the gods, or something. I don’t care if they think that because people don’t know anything more about the gods, if they’re honest, than they do about the unconscious, if they’re honest, or about the creative process, if they’re honest, or about loving. There are things that are utterly mysterious to us, and despite all our attempts to master them, remain utterly mysterious.

Do you see certain times as representative of more creative work — for instance, France in the 1920s; or this country when French and German and other filmmakers immigrated in the 1930s and 1940s? Do you see an evolution in that sense?

I see that with children, that unless it’s an extraordinarily repressive upbringing time for the children, which it often is, that they are quite ordinarily creative, and I think it’s the same with society. I mean when you have periods where there is not much public display, if this is what you’re talking about, of the arts, they are periods of the most extreme repression against creativity imaginable; and you almost have to imagine it because the effect of such repression is that we don’t have any way to remember such periods. They don’t leave any trace in history. If it’s totally successful in repressing creativity as a public display, the only trace you’ll have is those few people that will go back into that mountain in some sense or other and persist and seal it off.

In our time, it’s — for me — it’s been open season on the arts for at least fifteen years now as a direct, repressive result of the engenderment of freedom that occurred across the 1960s.

That’s something I wanted to ask you to talk about, how you feel

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things are now, especially where the issue of money is involved and many people are so concerned with making works of art into commodities.

God . . . I'm only ashamed that my voice got so stentorian. I'm ashamed because it will depress me later, that I still care in those utterly useless ways that I have for years, out here, beating the drum for the arts, or something, when the truth is, I'm trying very hard now not to care any more at all. And I'm trying very hard because I don't want to be depressed later.

Most of my contemporaries are dead. Or worse, they're beaten. And I'm not just talking film, I'm talking poetry, and painting. Or they're in hiding is my best hope, for a lot of them I haven't heard from in a long time. But I bump into some of those every now and again, and they've sold out, they're broken down. Good people that managed to carry their creativity through even into their thirties. Or they're not broken down, but they have no way economically to effect going on. And a lot of them are just dead, which in that case is a mercy. And I was very nearly beaten. I mean two years ago I finished no films at all. And that's the first time since nineteen, and I remember what made it impossible when I was nineteen.

Now I have a whole lot of new work which a lot of people are going to be happy to see, but there's a whole host of younger filmmakers, for whom seeing me come into town and fill up three slots, two at Millennium and one at MOMA, is just an offense.

Really?

Sure, because as I fill up these slots, there's long queues of people who have a film or other they wish to show, and they can't —there's less and less slots.

Do you have a sense of this happening?

Sense of it? I have hate mail to confirm it, and so I'm sure. I really don't want to go on and on about that. But people do need to know about it, that what we have here in all the arts is less and less places for any kind of creativity to be exhibited, other than entertainment and escapisms and dance music, and so on. There's less and less literal

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places where this can happen, you know, however few or many would gather there. And that's such an opposite of the '60s, that you have, in effect, small ponds drying up. And what happens then, unhappily — at least in my experience — is that people turn against each other and competition comes into it and we have a whole competitive art scene that's going that's not like my experience at all when I was young. The '50s were terrible, I mean the McCarthy repression era and so on; but unless you were doing plays on Broadway, or something like that, like poor Tennessee Williams, or whatever, if in the normal, ordinary running where the artist meets society in its variety of peoples, my experience was there wasn't a lot of this, and there was not this kind of animosity, and there was not this kind of awful envy, and jealousy, and all that comes with competition. And now it's just awful.

What do you think the main factors are that are causing this? Is it wanting to be recognized, or wanting the money that comes with it?

There's the other aspect of the arts which is shamanism. There's too much shamanism, and I've been as guilty of it as anybody else: thinking you're going to change the world or something by some revelation that comes with it. Art is so revelatory: I mean that there's that natural instinct that makes Ezra Pound say that "artists are the antenna of the race." Well, that's true. I certainly had way too much of that feeling and helped create co-ops, and things like Anthology Film Archives or whatever in that kind of impulse, and I'm out here beating the drum, and writing blurbs for people I believe in so that people will rent their films, and writing books, and so on, and I've come to the end of that.

You have?

Yes, because I don't want to speak against what I and so many others did. And those were also assumptions of the '60s. But in this society, those assumptions have come to be almost totally defeated. And so there's also auras of humiliation that hang over the old veterans of those wars, you know. And I don't know what the solution to it is, either. The main thing I say these days is "I don't know, I just work here."

People usually hold that a lot of the accepted grammar of filmmaking in narrative form comes from Griffith and a lot of it comes from Eisenstein, among others; but they don't see the influence of your work, even though — and you've said — it's there, it's clearly there. Can you talk about this a little bit?

Well, let me talk first about Griffith, in the sense of [filmmakers] just picking up tricks, which commercial people are doing now all the time, picking up tricks to help sell some junk, or create an escape; and, by the way, I also go to the movies, and I'm not against that. Outside of that, the only conscious evolution of what Griffith left us that I know of is *The Night of the Hunter*, directed by Charles Laughton, which is a quite conscious attempt to use not only the tricks, which to be sure are part of standard grammar now, but to evolve the spirit and an esthetic, vis a vis sound film which takes right up from Griffith. And I don't know any other work that has that consciousness, vis-à-vis Griffith . . . Yes, I can think of one other that has something of that: *Hallelujah the Hills*, by Adolfas Mekas. And I'm sure there must be others, you could name a few others.

But otherwise, in the normal way that we would talk about the arts, I don't see any evolution out of Griffith at all. You have to get down to where you say he invented the fade out. Well, so what? He probably didn't. Or the fade-out as meaning this or that, which it doesn't mean with any regularity, anyway. So even the grammar breaks down. And why it breaks down is the same way it will in people's prose speaking. If you have a society that doesn't have a certain number of people reading poetry, and therefore filtering into the society or the grocery store, or wherever, some rekindling of words, well then pretty soon the whole prose-speaking breaks down. So that, for example, politicians can get away with absurdities and nonsense like "at this point in time," and no one questions what the hell it means. That's the famous Watergate phrase. "At this point in time I don't remember . . ." This kind of bullshit can only occur when people aren't reading poetry. And I don't mean all the people, but I mean some people who are feeding it into society. Some people, a small number, always are reading work by living poets, and they're just naturally feeding these evolutions, these leaps of imagination, these rechargings, rekindlings of words, into the language.

Now in that sense also, the same thing is true with film. I mean

when you don't have a rekindling, a recharging of whatever the source of something was in the art, then the whole process breaks down, and we get what we ordinarily have on the movies these days: several people herded together mostly to frame them for the talking. At best, well recorded art of acting, with some support occasionally from the background — that is, you know, a decent photographer. But we get no evolution of style. Movies have come to a dead spot.

But there's kind of an irony, because I think most people would say that they can trace an evolutionary line from the early filmmakers, the pioneers, to contemporary American film; and yet they don't see the connection with more personal expressions like yours. They don't see the connections.

Well, now, I don't value it all that much, but picking up "tricks" out of the arts can revitalize the language of film, which then, yes, can come to be grammar, if it's long-lastingly useful. I mean, for instance, in a little film called *Cat's Cradle* (1959) I introduced the interruptive flash frame as a psychological device. Now it had been introduced, say, by Eisenstein, probably using short frames to simulate a machine-gun firing, let's say, or something like that. People had used short frames, and flash-back short frames, even. But not as psychology, that the interruptive single frame, or two frames can be there as a recognition of human thinking, of flashing back in that sense. That's a true flash-back. All I did is actually make that term flash-back, and flash-forward, true: that it is flashes.

Now that was evolved into something very complicated and beautiful by Gregory Markopoulos in *Twice a Man*, a film that had some envisionment in the '60s, and hasn't been seen since, partly by his taking it back into a cave and sealing it off from the society in his disillusionment with the '60s. But while it was being seen, it was seen — like all our work was — by Hollywood people and advertising agencies. You know, long before colleges rented our films, ad agencies rented them.

First of all they tried to get them for free. And quickly, any independent filmmaker learned you weren't going to get anything out of it, so then they just rented them. And you'd begin seeing cigarette ads advertised with interruptive flash frames, and even some of the psychological use that was quite different from my *Cat's Cradle* and

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Gregory's *Twice a Man*, but they'd have some of those same senses in the aesthetic. And then came *The Pawnbroker*, which was the first, to my knowledge, narrative usage of this. So there's a normal evolution. And now it is, yes, part of the grammar. It isn't used much these days, but you see it now and again used.

On MTV.

Yes, MTV. And MTV, of course, has used a lot of things. Mostly the one, I think, that's being mined most assiduously there is Bruce Conner. His aesthetics.

But see, finally, so what? That doesn't matter because if you're talking about the human spirit, never mind even art, of what importance are these things? It isn't the tricks that things finally come to, or even the grammar, as much as I respect the need for order in that sense; it is the spirit of the thing. And I don't think there's anything, however cheap or exalted, that's been made since these films had their rounds in the '60s that hasn't affected some of the spirit of making it. And some few of these filmmakers, of the Hollywood filmmakers, for instance, would say so. Scorsese has said so. Even Lucas. At one point my son told me that there was a magazine article that went through the army barracks, where Lucas had been asked who were his favorite filmmakers and he said me and Hollis Frampton and Kenneth Anger. Well now, I know why he said that, and I don't mean to imply by telling you this that I think those were his main influences. I don't think my work is a major influence on Lucas. But several other directors — a lot that come from Europe — would say I've been a major influence. Herzog has said that without the American Independent films he never would have been a filmmaker. That that was where he first realized film could be an art. So he credits me, and the American filmmakers, like I credit Jean Cocteau. It was when I saw *Orpheus* that I knew film could be an art. And so if you talk about influences or spiritual influences, yes, this work continues to generate both some grammar and some spiritual influence.

Was Cocteau one of the strongest influences for you?

I don't know. Margie Keller makes a good case for it in that book

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on me and Cornell and Cocteau, and I think so in certain deep-rooted influences in the childhoods of all three of us, which come into film then in certain distinct but reverberatory ways.

The sense of identity and the sense of apprehending or seeing the world as a process of defining identity seems to be a strong element in a lot of your films. Has this changed as you've made more and more films? Have I assessed this correctly as an aspect of your work?

I don't know. I'm so much in a state that's rather painful but very good for creativity where I really don't know my identity nearly so well as I had thought I did. In fact I feel as though I really don't know who I am again, and it is a very creative state to be in. But I don't in any way have the illusions that I might have had when I was a young man that I'm going to find my identity by making films.

Had you thought that?

Yes, or that they'd solve any problems whatsoever. It doesn't solve problems. I do always have to make a film in order to exteriorize something that's inside. But then it takes a long time to see that in any sense of a message. It's more the feeling like beating your chest to get the feeling of the heart out because your heart's too big inside, beating too loud and nobody hears it, and it's too odd to have this compelling, overwhelming pounding going on and everyone else unaware of it. But what good does it do you, what are they going to do with the beating of your heart? And someone might tell you to sit down and take it easy, or give you a kiss, or a hug or whatever. But whatever has made the heart beat that loud is rooted elsewhere. So I think young artists tend to find that if they can get it out and see it or hear it or whatever, it's going to solve the problem, and problems usually solve themselves as the world turns. And so by the time it might you don't have that problem anymore.

There is this thing having to do with having an overwhelming thought or beating heart, and that is an impulse the same as with little kids, to make an arrangement secret or shared. Kids will share their secret drawings or places with their best friends, with someone that they trust and love, and it is an act of loving. And when the society is hostile, they won't.

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The question arises “Is my work obscure?” Is what you’re asking: is it too personal and too obscure?

No, that’s not it. I was really just trying to see if there were things you wanted to talk about in terms of what I thought was a concern with defining identity or determining identity through filmmaking.

I think that it’s a natural process and it happens like this: really, the question is being vital, which is to say, alive. And “alive”: not just walking around like a zombie and filling your niche or slot, or whatever, but being a walking, sentient being. Human, where you don’t even have to say “human animal,” where you *know* you’re an animal in every fiber of your being. And that comes through from the ground, unless it’s blocked: the ground of mind, which is the nervous system, the whole system.

So some people put that into painting, let’s say, like Rembrandt. And then people look at that painting, and if they can get past the esthetics, which are larded onto it, and the gold frame and the expense, and the glass and the horror of the museum, or whatso-damnever, and get through to Rembrandt, then through Rembrandt they can get through to that vitality that he had pass all the way through him, and find it in themselves. And then they can either have that like cheap thrills at the museum, and just lose it before they’re out the door, or they can be inspired. And it saves lives, in that sense, and it is in itself vital.

But aside from all the questions of art, or whatever anyone might write about it, that’s what it’s all about. And that’s what we most can share with each other. Some people only in love, but they resist love like that too. Or block it, or contain it, or make rules around it, or find some damn way to frame it; or have it as athletic sex or something. And art is, in that sense, a possible antidote to that.

For that reason it also gets contained and set up, framed, blocked, but in the meantime, also preserved and placed where some people can go if they can get through all that blockage and have it. So I really think the question of being creative is a lot like being loving. And what are you going to do with it? Most people try to have just enough of it to keep from totally dying in their spot, but block out having any more of it than would cause them to take any of the risks involved, like in loving or creating or thinking with your whole being.

So the drive of people is to have control over things. And do what? Go to visit these, as Charles Olson called them, these great ashcans in the sky? Or make plastic trees that actually grow or don't need to be watered or something? I guess that's the treatment people make of art, you know. They can go to look at nudes and sculptures, let's say, but not undress in front of each other. So there's that usage of art.

And the normal usage of film, 99 and 44/100ths percent of it, is for escape: a cheap drunk, where you experience people in the context of the drama being honest with each other in ways that you would never dare think of being in person; or expressing — whatever — rage. The actors will express our rage for us, or as Villiers de L'Isle-Adam put it in his play *Axel* (*Axel "Le Monde Passionnel"* [1890]), "our servants will do our living for us." Now that tends to be the entrapped usage of the artist within the social circumstance.

Yet film also makes available this other usage too, if anyone has the guts or need, the felt need that they'll go back for vitality. They can get it there, and then hopefully move on. The most dangerous thing is people looking at films of mine and getting hung up on those ways of seeing that I have broken through to, and then stopping. And what, have Brakhage eyes? And the hope would be that they could then see the kind of difference, and some similar kinds of seeing each person has in his or her own head. Every human being is absolutely unique, like presumably every snowflake is. And at the same time, we are human, we share certain limits of being human, that are inner mostly, or cellular, you know. Deep inside, on the level like where we think, the nervous system, we do reach points where we share the same limits. But it isn't fashionable to talk about human limits, even, these days. That's another thing that the poet Charles Olson was so wondrous to me about is that he made several statements towards the end of his life about how we've got to stop this crazy sense that we're limitless and discover what are the limits of being human, because those are grounds we do really share. And again, where do people find *that* in the universalities of art?

What direction is your work taking now? What things are concerning you now?

All these things we're talking about concern me very much, and some of them have for years. I'll say this, I did find that in my last class [of film students at the University of Colorado] I came up with something that was terribly important to me. I was funky and tired that day, which is maybe why it came up. I wasn't teaching or having an interview, either. So I'll try to pass it on, because it's stayed in my mind, and a couple of the other students, too, have come back at me about it. I said, at some point, that students are always going out and making another film on the mountains, or the mall, or whatever, and the best ones have been inspired by some of the films I've shown. So they're trying, at least, to use those forms for articulation, and some even to evolve. Very few now, but every now and again a student will even evolve something that comes out of, I don't know, Bruce Conner, or Jordan Belson, or me.

But I said, really, the student films that are most interesting are where a student has a film that shows something that's very private, that no one else has ever seen before, and that everyone is curious about. Like nudity, for instance. Right away there's quite an attention to nudity. And it isn't because people are starved for pictures of nudes, like they were when I grew up. It's personal. I mean it's fascinating to see privacy in that sense. And then, some things about these films are even better, like tooth brushing. Everybody brushes their teeth differently, or whatever, and nobody watches people brushing their teeth. So start your grounds with the sharing of something like this.

Then it's interesting to me that in some forms, and some new forms, much more often, there tends to be a formality that begins to evolve. But it's very grubby, very grubby. And this is what I call the gristly roots, or Pound would call the *paedeuma* of a culture, where the roots of whatever — this tree that we all are — however historical or just in the present, however you want to plant that tree, it's down in the actual roots where you can't hardly tell these little fibers from the dirt that they're sucking on. Those are the grounds. And I said, for example, I'm pretty sure that at least fifty percent of you still taste your toe-jam like you did when you were little kids. And probably all of you or most of you are not at all aware that you do this consciously. And now, some of you may be embarrassed; now that I've said this, you may catch yourself at it. And so that would be roots of something that we do not know, and don't share.

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And, if you give it 300 or 3000 years, you get the Shakespeare of the toe-jam film. Toe-jam: that's the dirt between your toes. And people do this like an ape would do it, but much more inhibited, and absolutely unconsciously. And what I know about this is that society *can exist without Shakespeare, but not without these roots. If these roots aren't evolving, you got root rot.* And with Shakespeare, whom I care for very much and would not want to do without, the fact is that what he does, or the mastery — you know the finally picking up of the whole culture and making a mastery — if he doesn't do it someone else will. Maybe not as well, so you don't have the greatness in your culture of this. But someone else will do an adequate enough job at that eventual mastery. That's always there to be rounded out, and that moves out into the streets and everybody has it and they all know that: the King James version of the Bible, or whatever; Goethe. Pushkin, for Russia. Whatever. But what will rot the tree is if you don't have this going.

And furthermore, you can worry that students see too many films. And unless they see them to be inspired, to go and find their own beginnings, or unless they're Shakespeare, they'd be much better off to try to find out themselves what they're doing that they're not at all aware of. And then it's very hard to get a camera into it, or write about it, or paint it, or whatever. That's where the real vitality is from. And I am, myself, these days — at least in a large swath of my work, not all of it — trying to go back to some ground like that. And just trust that it will begin to evolve its own forms, and I see in the few examples I have that it does, it is. And they're grubby; and it isn't a question of trying to begin again, but it's actually the question — as is always the case, artist or not — of beginning at the beginning.

The beginning is always what we do not know. And identity is not the only purpose: finally it's really just simply what we do not know about that's intrinsic to the self. Not what I do not know because I've never been there — that I need to go to Timbuktu to make a film about the Timbuktians (but which also might be done; that might be fun, I've done that a few times). Great. But really, where I mostly live is where I had better be vital. Because if not, what can I do but make war, or fire off into space — and can I afford that? Or can anybody? So where I mostly live is where it has to be vital.

And that's the main business of the arts. And then it takes a long time to get to Shakespeare.