

Wilczek, Emily (2007) "The 'problem' of language in the films of artist Stan Brakhage"
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Introduce Brakhage:

- American artist from a tradition of artists working with film, rather than mainstream cinema, rooted more in theatrical, literary and photographic tradition.
- Prolific – more than 400 films from 9secs to over 4hours. Made between 1953 – 2003.
- Followed artists such as Len Lye and Harry Smith who also painted directly onto filmstock, but is now perhaps the most well known practitioner of this method.
- Celebrated for his intense use of colour, rich "abstract" imagery (a term he refutes), and rhythmic form.

In considering the aesthetics of Brakhage's screen, I will be addressing three things; Firstly, the method by which he made his work; Secondly the aesthetic and conceptual inspiration he took from other artists; and thirdly how we, the viewers, make sense of his films, particularly in light of his own writings about them.

Brakhage described the Abstract Expressionists, who were his contemporaries, as "struggling against the strictures of language" a problem he seemed to share. In his book *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage gives the example of a field of grass that we may describe as "green." This naming, he suggests, reduces the complexity of the field to one over-simplified term. Because we have learnt to call grass "green" we see green, and one colour alone without its possible variations. Brakhage continues by citing painters such as the Fauves who would vividly paint their landscapes orange, purple, and blue, unrestricted by the conventional pallet. Their perception, he claimed, had not been dulled by the "strictures of language."

Brakhage's antagonistic relationship with language is apparent, ironically enough, in the considerable quantity of books and articles he has published. Stylistically complex, as are his films, his writing defies simple interpretation. This seems to be the very crux of Brakhage's problem with language: in naming we may be conveying the idea of something very complex, changing, or difficult, in a single word. Verbal language oversimplifies, and cannot represent the complexities of the act of seeing. In other words, Brakhage wanted to purge the nameable image from his films.

For a time, in Brakhage's later career, he focused solely on the handpainted film. It's within this body of work that one can most explicitly identify his desire for the exclusion of the nameable element. These films rely least on visual references to our shared experience of the world, often being very personal meditations on Brakhage's own "*moving-visual thinking*." Although they're often abstract interpretations of lived experience, such as sex, slipping on ice, even watching television (!) these events are depicted as he perceives them in his mind's eye, and therefore reject the forms that may be generally associated with such events. Consequently in these films Brakhage has developed one of the most unique aesthetics of artists' film, and indeed, cinema in general. He uses the physicality of the medium, both as a canvas, often painting on to found footage, and photography, and combines this with a pace and rhythm unique to himself.

Taking one of his shorter hand-painted films as an example, Brakhage's unusual style becomes apparent.

[Show *Nightmusic* 1986, 32 seconds]

According to Brakhage *Nightmusic* is a “little film... [that] attempts to capture the beauty of sadness, as the eyes have it when closed in meditation on sorrow.” We understand from this that Brakhage is attempting to capture the experience of an emotion – one that we can all relate to – but conveying his personal encounter with it. Brakhage is concerned with the unique qualities of his perception, and in *Nightmusic* this becomes his chief concern. The film is brief, but in that time there is an intensity of images that fluctuate with every frame. *Nightmusic* resembles a moving version of the colourful astronomical images made of the cosmos; whorls like star clusters, brightly coloured, complex, full pictures, without apparent regularity of form. The “bursts of colour make a musical dance”; the images change so quickly as to appear at times superimposed, like the interweaving bodies of dancers. At other times visually complex pictures give way to larger, simpler blocks of colour, which give the impression of a calmer, more ponderous time.

Imaginative life belongs to a different order of reality to how this may be physically resembled in pictures. Whilst *Nightmusic* can not *exactly* depict Brakhage’s visions of the beauty of sadness, it can certainly show a resemblance as close as Brakhage can make it, to these imaginings. Brakhage’s films, such as *Nightmusic*, seem to solely present the truth of his consciousness. Their form is unprecedented, individual, and inspired by the peculiarities of his vision.

Brakhage never completely abandoned the photographed image during his career. Even in his later films that are almost solely hand-painted, there still exists the photographed image, even if this is deteriorated and scratched found-footage, or obscured by layers of paint. This is evident in his 9-second film from 1972 *Eye Myth*.

[Show *Eye Myth*]

Here we see the recognisable image, or trace, of a man’s figure beneath the layers of paint. However, where such a recognisable image exists in Brakhage’s films, it is without the indexical link to reality: not illusionistic, but aesthetic. One may search for meaning in the ambiguous pictures, in a reasoning, analytical way, but a more fruitful engagement with the film would come from *seeing* rather than *thinking*; An engagement where the images are freed of their meaning: presentations, rather than re-presentations?

Brakhage was acutely aware of the problems of including photographed elements in his films, as they are so quickly translatable to nameable things outside the presence of the filmstrip. The problem, he felt, is that we automatically ‘translate’ the referents in the photographic images into their symbolic signs. But by short-circuiting or retarding this ‘natural’ operation – by, say, presenting the person or field or window in soft-focus or underexposure, or by rapidly panning over the scene – he can induce in the viewer a more direct encounter with the image as colour, shape, movement or texture. That is, we might suspend our desire to label, or even misrecognise the object in front of us, and by so doing come to a fuller appreciation of qualities normally unseen.

Perhaps Stan Brakhage was attempting, then, to dislodge the constituents of daily life from their usual symbolic position in a film, to liberate the image from its usual paradigmatic role. In his own words:

And if a film be, rather, illustrative – a series of pictures of nameable forms – WHAT on earth might alleviate the inaesthetic burden of referential nomenclature?

My answer is... a freeing of each image... to its un-owned self-life within the continuities (rather than context) of the work.

According to Brakhage (again from his book *Metaphors on Vision*:
Film ought aesthetically to exist flickering electric and free of photographic animation, free of the mechanical trickery of, the outright fakery of the illusion of movie pictures... This anyway, is the aspiration of artists whose Art aspires to 'Art is art-as-art. And everything else is everything else.'
(Quoting Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Expressionist painter at the end there.)

Here, Brakhage's quoting of Abstract Expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt, reveals their shared sensibility: i.e. to realise the potential of one's own medium, exploring its material qualities and aesthetics. In the films we've already seen today, one may see a visual connection between the free flowing, complex mark-making of Jackson Pollock, for instance, and Brakhage's work. But the connection is deeper rooted than just aesthetic similarities. So, on the one hand we have the shared goal of using one's medium not as a communicative tool, but as catalyst for visual, rather than verbal, thinking. But if the destination was the same, the journeys were very different. Whilst Brakhage clearly admired the sensibilities of these artists, the theoretical context in which their work was discussed, seems almost anathema to his ideas.

In W.J.T. Mitchell's book *Picture Theory*, he discusses the critical discourse (dominated by Clement Greenberg) that surrounded abstract painting, and attempted to purify it from language. This desire came less from the painters themselves, than from art theorists who sought to elevate art to the same critical level that poetry had achieved.

Greenberg's argument is grounded on the premise that the arts have "proper characters", which may be "perverted and distorted" if "forced to deny their own nature". Greenberg stakes his case as if purely reflecting the circumstances of the time, as if the call for purism had come from the artists, and "We must respect this." In his essay "Laocoon", however, he gives away his true concerns for purity, citing literature as a "corrupting influence" and using other such words that suggest a certain fear of artistic crossovers. Whilst it's evident that some artists *were* against the descriptive element in painting, Greenberg had his own agenda, making value judgments determined by the "purity" of an artwork. This desire for pure form stemmed from an age-old conflict between word and image, where in the past the pictorial arts had been relegated to a trivial, illustrative role, which the avant-garde of the early twentieth century then struggled against.

His defence of abstract art as "safe now... within its 'legitimate' boundaries", could be seen, then, as an attempt to ward off potential accusations that painting was still subservient to literature, the very art form it had sought emancipation from. In relation to Brakhage, however, there does not seem to be this fear of borrowing from areas perceived to belong to another medium. Brakhage brought painting into film, used the camera to record static as well as moving subjects, and other such activities that suggest he was prepared to find the means to suit his expression, rather than the other way round. And yet, his remonstrations against nameable elements appearing in his films are so strong, and reminiscent of Greenberg's ideas that it is hard to imagine they do not share some degree of motivation.

For both the Abstract Expressionists and Brakhage the goal was to make works that were not "merely... vessels of communication," and that a key way of doing this was through purging the nameable.

There is a fundamental problem, however, with artists trying to make a work of pure form. Whilst an artist may exclude language or *nameable* elements from their work, this does not preclude those elements from existing in its reception - we cannot simply divorce language from the

image. Discourse about images takes place in words, even abstract shapes may suggest narrative elements, and the maker cannot censor the thoughts occurring to viewers of a piece. As Mitchell points out in his introduction to *Picture Theory*, “There are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism.” This gesture was upheld by a good deal of art theory that proliferated, and legitimated the artworks of the first half of the twentieth century, drawing a heavy line between text and context.

The paradox of considering Brakhage’s work as pure form is his book *Metaphors on Vision*, “a film-maker’s book about the antagonism of language and vision.” True, it could be argued that this discourse exists *around* the work, and is not necessary to an understanding of it. This is where Brakhage and the Abstract Expressionists seem to diverge. Where Brakhage makes strong proclamations against critical discourse, “the world is really *attacking* its contemporary arts with language”, abstract painting depended on it, and it has even been a “constitutive *pre-text*” for the work. Mitchell accuses Greenberg of thus making abstract art elitist, only for the sophisticated bourgeois viewer conversant with the art-historical context of the work:

All the pretensions to purity, immediacy, and “innocent eyes” are belied by the reliance of high formalist art on a very impure socioeconomic base and its appeal to a sophisticated, cultivated spectator whose eyes are far from innocent.

So where the Abstract Expressionists have staked their claim for “innocent eyes”, and been accused of pretension, Brakhage, on the other hand has often been mistakenly understood as calling for “innocent vision”. This usually stems from an interpretation of his opening statements in *Metaphors on Vision*: “How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?” Brakhage is not calling for a regression to a child-like vision, knowing that we can never go back, but for a vision that is “foreign to language” - purity of visual form, that *cannot* be verbalised.

According to Brakhage expert Fred Camper his strength lies in:

“the transformative possibilities of actual and imagined imagery, visionary experiences that cannot be analyzed or described in words: he negotiates the difficult territory between what Barnett Newman called ‘the chaos of ecstasy’ and the formal coherence necessary to art.”

Conveying in films the complexity of his own perception, which to Brakhage may be *unnameable*, does not guarantee the same reaction in the viewer. Brakhage makes visible a very new type of vision in film, even those things encountered in daily life - windows, bodies, rooms - are presented in such a way that they seem to take on a new appearance.

More than anything, it is important to take from a study on Stan Brakhage, the feeling that his films contain an open, rather than fixed imagery. We can see from his films, and writings, that language is important, influential, and inseparable from Brakhage, the filmmaker. But always, this is a language in its most expressive, open form. In his own words:

...freedom, of expression-or-other, can only exist meaningfully out of full respect to the means of its becoming: and a work of art does *never* impress, in the usual sense of the word, but rather is free-express always.

This free-express leaves space for the viewer to personally relate to the film.

“A Brakhage film is not a stable object, not a *thing*; rather, it exists in the uncertain space between the images that are physically on the screen and the shifting nature of the viewer’s consciousness.”

Brakhage was striving for the unattainable modernist goal, shared with the Abstract Expressionists, of purifying his films of language. But, whilst they required a heavily theoretical context, to aid understanding of their paintings, Brakhage’s work in both film and text, requires us not to search for rigid meanings, so much as open and playful ones.