STAN BRAKHAGE
Brakhage: a brief introduction

• US avant-garde filmmaker
• Started his career in the 1950s.

• Interested in pure light and motion and rhythm.
• Fast editing, not long takes
Beyond story-telling: avant-garde objectives

• Many avant-garde filmmakers rejected conventional story-telling and looked for other models.
• Maya Deren, for instance, turned to dance, anthropology, and poetry for inspiration.

• Brakhage turned to poetry and painting.
• He also wanted to explore the unique features of the film medium.
BASIC THEORY: perception, perceptual experience

• Everyday perception is limited by habits, expectations, previous knowledge.

• We have learnt to classify and organize our experience with reference to names and words.
  – For instance, the word “red” determines the colors that we see.
  – We see colors within artificial systems.
BASIC THEORY: perception, perceptual experience

Prisoners of norms $\rightarrow$ regaining perceptual richness

• We have become prisoners of artificial rules of art.
  – The rules of **perspective**
  – The rules of (so-called) good **composition**
  – The **names** and **systems** used to classify colors, shapes, and forms.
  – The **practical** needs and goals of everyday life.

• Due to those habits, we fail to notice the actual richness of real perception.

• The impressionists noticed that, even though our color impressions are always changing, we normally believe that colors are always the same.
  – We have developed an inability to see.
To see differently…
To see differently…
Recovering perceptual richness…world before language

• Brakhage wants to capture a world before language, before social conventions.
• He wants to recover the raw, pure experience of light and color, without any artificial filters.

“Imagine an eye unruled by manmade 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.”

— STAN BRAKHAGE

**For Brakhage, children are not aware of words, and therefore have rich experiences of the world.**
PROBLEMS WITH THE FILM MEDIUM

• The camera is designed to reproduce Western convergent perspective.
Many people believe that film and photography are more realistic.
• Brakhage strongly disagrees:
  “The absolute realism of the motion picture image is a 20th century, essentially Western, illusion.”

• How to use the cinema without reproducing the laws of perspective?
  • Brakhage developed many methods to achieve this objective.
MOTHLIGHT (1963)

• He collected dead moths, flowers, leaves, and seeds, and then glued them directly onto the film.
• This eliminates all traditional perspective depth.
• The film recalls the “cameraless” methods of Man Ray and others.

OTHER METHODS
• Spitting on the lens
  • Out of focus shots achieve an impressionistic effect
    • Hand-held camera
  • Over-exposure and under-exposure
  • Natural filters (rain, fog, glass, neon lights)
    • Multiple superimpositions
  • Automatic methods (“cooking” the film stock)
• Painting directly on film, or using an optical printer
  • Avoid establishing shots

All of these methods can help the cinema to break away from traditional Western perspective.
The key conflict of his films...

• Brakhage believed that a return to childhood is impossible. We can only try, but will never succeed completely.

“…one can never go back, not every in imagination…”

• He wants to escape artificial, social ways of looking, but this goal can never succeed completely.

Example: *ANTICIPATION OF THE NIGHT* (1958)
Methods to expand our perceptual possibilities in everyday life:

- Closed-eye vision
- Noticing the light patterns in a very dark room
- In a bright room, focus your eyes on a single point without blinking

In all of these cases, pay close attention to your experiences. Color patterns, color changes, light vibrations, haloes, etc. We must become aware of ourselves seeing. We must become perceptually self-conscious....In all of these cases, pay close attention to your experiences. Color patterns, color changes, light vibrations, haloes, etc. We must become aware of ourselves seeing. We must become perceptually self-conscious....
Influence from Pollock's “action painting”...

- Brakhage was influenced by the paintings of Jackson Pollock.
- Pollock developed a style of painting known as “abstract expressionism” or “action painting”.

Pollock would drip, pour, and spatter his pigments across a large raw canvas.
The artist would work in the painting, all over, in all directions.
This would create a different sense of space.
Influence from Pollock's “action painting”...

Pollock:
The painting itself would be a record of the artist’s body movement, like a footprint. This movement would express the inner energies (often unconscious) of the artist.

In the 1950s art critic Harold Rosenberg described Pollock as an "action painter".

• Painting is a performance.
• The main idea is that a Jackson Pollock painting is an expression of the process of making the painting.
• And the process of making the painting involves the artist’s whole body.
• Pollock also managed to create a wide range of different tones.
• Two details from the same painting…
Pollock's influence on Brakhage

• In the cinema, Brakhage uses techniques like superimposition and painting on film to create a similar non-perspectival space.
• The hand-held camera also provides a record of the artist’s body movement and body energies.
• Brakhage also wanted to create a wide range of tones.

Brakhage also used abstract animation techniques.

Examples: AUTUMUNAL (1993) and EPHEMERAL SOLIDITY (1993)
Many of his films are highly symbolic and general. They have nothing to do with actual life or concrete people. They represent general concepts and universal questions.

*Anticipation of the Night* is an example.

Brakhage, however, also wanted to bring his cinema into close contact with everyday reality. To relate his abstract themes to his concrete life. For this reason, he also made films about his everyday life.

*Cat’s Cradle* (1959), *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959)