

Bruce Elder

Stan Brakhage: A Reflection

by
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Sometime around 1989, during one of my telephone conversations with Stan Brakhage, the discussion rolled around to poetry and Brakhage posed the question whether I owned copies of the published portions (*Foundations*, 1980, and *Spires 34-50*, 1984) of Ronald Johnson's long poem *ARK*. Though it was hardly the first time that he mentioned *ARK* to me, I allowed that, despite my awareness of his enthusiasm for the work, I did not. Within a week, the volumes arrived in the mail. A while later, a typescript arrived in the post, with a note written on the top: "Dear Bruce—This/ "Spires" by R.J. (from Kansas also by the way) much mixed with sea and sand and sky, of the mind, midst whirl of camera, catching light with Marilyn and Anton [Marilyn was married to Stan Brakhage], 'up island' [at Parksville, on Vancouver Island]... hoping it moves you too. Blessings, Stan Aug. 1990." They were *Spires* 50 to 66, from Johnson's *Ark*. Brakhage soon called so that we could talk about the new Johnson poems.

Right now, however, it is the question of what Brakhage

was trying to tell me about his own work that interests me most. Some affinities between Brakhage's work and Johnson's poetry are obvious. Brakhage and Johnson are both among the rare contemporaries committed to the visionary strain in art. Like Brakhage's films, *ARK* is paean to process, a hymn to light (the concrete that Johnson offers in "Beam 13" brings the ideas of process and flux together as compactly as any of Brakhage's films): *ARK* begins with a long time of light, then, in "Beam 4" after a very Brakhagian account of Vision, that proposes the eye is the sun in another form, goes on to say "there began to be eyes, and light began looking with itself." In *ARK*, matter produces consciousness, its straining for music produces Bach ("Beam 7"), and also ("Beam 17"):

he who
obsessed by light,
possessed by sight.

(One wonders whether Brakhage might not have taken this to refer to himself, though for Johnson, of course, it referred to the port.)

Both Brakhage and Johnson's art lean towards the cosmological (even the title of one of Brakhage's films, *Stellar*, is, but for initial capital, the concluding line in Johnson's "Beam 14"), and in both attention to detail, to the immediate particular, viewed with Zukofskian objectivist clarity balances the cosmological interests—in both artist's work, the expansive and the minute particular have a fascinating tensional relation. There is, too, a complex relation between the concrete and the optical/cosmological in Johnson's writings, as there is in Brakhage's filmmaking. Those who know Brakhage's writings or lectures on Gertrude Stein will know how often he referred to the famous "[a] rose is a rose is a rose," especially in its original presentation, closed in a circle. Brakhage was fond of pointing out that concrete contains references to "a rose," to "Rose," to "eros" (love), to "rows" (death), and to "arose" (resurrection). On his concrete (part of *ARK*, "Beam 24"),

earheartearth
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poet Ronald Johnson remarks, "Earheartearth is a linkage of ear to hear to heart. Art and hearth are also hid in it. All is at the core of fall. Even the stones here have overtones and the clouds may speak."

ARK (to say nothing of Johnson's other works) is an extraordinarily diverse collection—the poems it draws together range from concretes to lyrics (e.g. the PALMS, relatives of the biblical Psalms, in "The Song of Orpheus") to collage works (*ARK* 26) to prose poems (*ARK* 12) to found poems (*ARK* 14) to works that, by including imitation bird song (another enthusiasm Brakhage shared with Johnson, explaining party, his interest in Olivier Messaien); among recent poets only Kenneth Patchen and Louis Zukofsky, it seems to me, has a similar range. But Brakhage's films display a similar range—the common criticism of Brakhage's work, that I hear so often from academics, that "his films are all the same" is among the most foolish critical statements I can imagine: I can't think of another filmmaker whose films

span so great a range as that between *Anticipation of the Night* and *The Dante Quartet*, or between *Rage Net* and *The Mammals of Victoria*.

Brakhage desired to ground his cinema in the unique person that he was. This was, in fact, very much the Emersonian desire to undo the deforming influence of culture, and to return to the authenticity of the self-reliant individual. In "The American Scholar" Emerson had proposed. "If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the un-searched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." And, again, "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or provincial minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds." Johnson held similar beliefs. In "A Note" to his long poem *ARK*, Johnson writes, "... I knew I'd my own tack to take. If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw, I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again, attempting to know nothing a but a will to create, and a matter at hand." Pound had defined the epic poem as "a poem containing history" and made it his business to write an epic. Johnson separated himself from that ambition, wanting to get behind the distortions of history and back to the authentic individual. So did Brakhage, even while, I, as a filmmaker, continued to seek the Historical Sublime (so Brakhage's sending me the completed portions of *ARK* may have been to suggest to me the error of my ways).