

Intertext in Stan Brakhage's 23rd Psalm Branch

Between 1964 and 1969, Brakhage devoted a considerable portion of his energies to a series of 8 mm films. By titling these works "*Songs*," Brakhage highlighted their relation to Pound's *Cantos*, to the *canti* that make up Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, to the biblical Psalms and (at least regarding the particular work that is the subject of this essay) to the *Canticle (or Song) of Mary*. Most of these 8 mm. films were titled only by number, *Song 1*, *Song 2*, etc; but to the twenty-third *canto* in this series, Brakhage gave a special title, *23rd Psalm Branch*. The similarities most films in this series have to his 16 mm. works, as well as to their poetic and musical models, are clear.

However, *23rd Psalm Branch*, an enormously troubled and enormously troubling film from 1967, represents a radical departure from Brakhage's characteristic filmmaking methods. In most of Brakhage's photographed films, the filmmaker's camera handling is a matter of paramount importance. How he moved the camera—whether, at any given moment, he moved the camera abruptly or gradually, quickly or slowly, whether he moved it in a jerky, spastic manner or smoothly—suggests much about the artist's immediate emotional reaction to the events he photographed. If this is generally true of Brakhage's films, it is even more than usually true of the *Songs*. Brakhage embarked on a making 8 mm. films after his 16 mm. camera equipment had been stolen: forced to work in an amateur gauge, Brakhage could not rely on a repertoire of laboratory effects—of fades and dissolves, colour modifications, superimpositions and adjustments in images' intensities. Working in the amateur gauge forced Brakhage to cope with reduced laboratory means and so he relied more than ever on the bodily effects in his 8mm films—for example, he produced complex combinations of images by matting images by hand.

By contrast, *23rd Psalm Branch* relies somewhat less on corporeal effects. Partly that is because it is largely a found-footage film that incorporates newsreel,

documentaries or feature film footage. In addition to the footage Brakhage shot for the film, the film draws on many sources of imagery whose cinematographic styles seem, in comparison with Brakhage's expressive camera handling, quite staid.

The film departed from Brakhage's usual forms and characteristic devices in other ways as well. In the work he did between 1952 and 1957, Brakhage had come to identify authenticity with a form of Emersonian self-reliance that once could fairly be called "individuality," and he associated, in a most extraordinary manner, individuality with a unique way of seeing. The many devices Brakhage invented in those years, and in the years shortly following, were all in the service of discovering, and conveying, his own unique manner of seeing.

But *23rd Psalm Branch* is a crisis work, a work made in the grip of an emotional and spiritual crisis that impelled the filmmaker to break with his most cherished beliefs and to find the means, even means he would ordinarily have repudiated, to convey the depth of his anguish and despair. Among Brakhage's beliefs, none is more commonly cited than his belief in language's reductive effects. The young artist famously declared, near the beginning of *Metaphors on Vision*, "I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word."

To discover the nature of thinking prior to its being shaped by words was Brakhage's project for more than four decades. However, in a significant departure from his usual practice, Stan Brakhage gave words an important role in *23rd Psalm Branch*. Brakhage was an erudite artist, and the intertextual allusions articulated through these textual incorporations are rich and wide-ranging. Because the film's emotional meaning becomes clearer when the significance of these allusions are apprehended, exploring of single one of those allusions, to Louis Zukofsky's 'A'-11, the purpose of this paper.

Before turning to that citation, some general remarks on *23rd Psalm Branch* are in order. *23rd Psalm Branch* proposes a deep despair concerning the role of art has deep

roots in the conceptual and affective content of the film. As the film's frequent use of means for obscuring its photographic images shows, despair, anguish, and a pervading sense of menace can manifest themselves in as the negative hallucination that destroys all mental representations and opens a tear in the manifold of awareness. The destruction wreaked by the negative hallucination threatens one of Brakhage's most cherished beliefs—the Romantic belief, expounded with extraordinary force and beauty in his major mythopoeic film *Dog Star Man*—that the imagination is capable of reintegrating a disassociated sensibility in which reason and emotion have become separated. The imagination can also fuse human consciousness and nature, and in the process reconnect reason and emotion. 23rd Psalm Branch reveals the effects of the loss of that ideal, of that hope being dashed: the mechanism of identification with the aggressor provides energy to the negative hallucination, which then answers the destructiveness of external world with a destructiveness of its own. What is more, the process reveals the impotence of imagination—negative imagery insists on penetrating into consciousness' inner recesses, and the self cannot keep it out, nor can the imagination (the self's true activity) transform it, so forcefully and insistently does it impose itself. And since the imagination cannot transform such brutally insistent imagery, and so cannot make the imagery its own, that imagery presents itself to consciousness as an alien entity. While Brakhage had earlier accepted the Romantic belief that the imaginary is an agency that heals the breach between self and world, these dystonic images which have invaded the self's inner core seem to prove that that endeavour is in vain. The terrible force with which the imagery of the Vietnam impacts upon consciousness defeats the protections normally offered by the processes of projection and introjection, as it allows "bad objects" to enter the interior chamber of consciousness and fails to shelter "good objects" there—this is the meaning of the story of imagery of the Vietnam war entering the Brakhage household.

What is more, the twenty-third psalm of the Bible is a song of praise to successfully achieved introjection. The psalmist declares, "Yea, though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (*Psalms* 23: 4 A.V.). Internalizing love’s comforting capacity—a comfort experiences as belonging to a different order—is the essence of introjection. One can be even more concrete about the psalm’s allusions to the processes of projection and introjection: for the rod that the fourth verse refers is a club shepherds used to fend off wild animals, while the staff is a crooked instrument they used to keep the sheep from wandering off. One instrument kept the sheep within the protective fold, the other kept out beasts that threatened to attack and destroy the innocent creatures within the fold. The 23rd Psalm’s image of the rod and staff relates to the opposition of inside and outside that is at the core of processing of projection and introjection—and that structures *23rd Psalm Branch*.

For a filmmaker who has celebrated the triumph of imagination, as Brakhage has, it is devastating to recognize the imagination’s impotence: it is hardly surprising, then, that he strove to refuse that insight. The desperate acceleration of the pace of the film conveys the anxiety Brakhage felt to demonstrate that, in the end, the creative imagination can prevail even over a destructive forces as strong and unrelenting as those unloosed by that blood-drenched century in which Brakhage worked. The feeling of devastation that follows on recognizing the imagination’s impotence is also indicated by the prominent role a dichotomizing structure has *23rd Psalm Branch*, a structure that opposes, in a highly schematized fashion, several types of images: images from the past with images from the present; images from Brakhage’s personal space (domestic scenes and the Colorado landscape) with images of the more distant, less personal spaces of the outside world; images of home with images of war; forms painted by hand with historical footage. The structuring principle behind all these oppositions is the highly fraught dialectic between personal space and the alien other that intrudes upon that personal space—a opposition that Brakhage’s imagination struggles (though at first without success) to maintain.

What gives that dialectical principle its affective power is the feeling of the

intractably factual quality of the alien destructive forms of the outside world as they intrude into the space of consciousness—that force with which these untransformed and therefore unassimilated images impose themselves on consciousness resembles the force with which television’s imagery of the Vietnam war intruded into the Brakhage household, imposed itself on the psyches therein, and created strife there. Television images imposed themselves on consciousness as an alien, mechanical imaginary that could not be assimilated into the self’s imaginary. Among the tragic losses the film treats are those of the mechanisms of projection and introjection that give the imagination (the self) a safe place to be. The self feels violated when violent material is harboured within the self: when the self is subjected to a violent invasion, the whole world becomes place of terror and destruction. This is indeed the *imago mundi* that *23rd Psalm Branch* presents.

The text “Take back Beethoven’s 9th, then, he said” is followed by a long panning shot of passing landscapes that are distinguished from those of the long prologue by being more legible. In keeping with the film’s structure of oppositions, Brakhage introduces many images of destruction into this lateral movement of the panning shot: a montage of explosions; then explosions combined with guns firing; the explosion of an atomic bomb; land submerged under a flood; a cannon firing; water bursting over a dam; more bombs; and a green-hued image of the façade of apartment being brought down by wreckers; burning buildings; a boat sinking; and bombs exploding in the sky. That the film evolves its structure from the polarization of opposites becomes even more evident as Brakhage intercuts brief shots of the Colorado landscape with historical footage depicting his a man working with a detonating device: the man sets everything in place, crouches near the device, and a bomb explodes—destroying an area surrounded mountains that resemble those that surround the cabin where Brakhage lived at the time he made this film (and featured in *My Mountain: Song 27*).

After showing us these words, the camera whirls away from the letter (as though to

confirm that humans are constantly zig-zagging about, constantly on the go, and completely lacking roots), and we see stones, the ground sweeping by, flashes of sun with a bluish cast (possibly to convey that the filmmaker is seeing the air as filled with orgonic energy), and then hand-painted forms in a myriad of colours. The images of stones, dynamized ground, and (possibly) the sun filling the air with orgonic energy suggest Brakhage's efforts to endow the alien world of Nature with attributes of consciousness. The painting-on-film, on the other hand, suggests the realm of the subjective (as it so often does in Brakhage's films)—sometimes in an effort to obscure the internalized image, sometimes in an effort to reconnect the self to nature and to the human world (however violent they may be), and sometimes even in an effort express the energies of the external realm. True to the film's pattern of dichotomies, the following images present domestic scenes (i.e., of events belonging to the filmmaker's personal space): we see pictures of his home, images of his children playing naked and riding a sledge, less rapid shots of laundry hung out dry, which seem serene until one notices the ominous shadow of tree shadows cast on a sheet—the ominousness of these shadows is emphasized by the slower pace of these shots. There follow several static images of a mannikin's head, which lacks facial features that are joined by very disruptive and aggressive splice bars (which again provide evidence of the filmmaker's complicity in acts of destruction). Soon after the faceless mannikin's head, we see an image of a sleeping child, who reappears shortly afterwards with paint over her face: the relation between the child and the faceless mannikin is that between a personalized and impersonal imagery (another form of the relation between the personal and the alien realms).

Shots of clouds, taken from an airplane, follow; these images are marked with a very pronounced frame line across the top of the screen—another form that indicates the destructive impulses the filmmaker experiences. Violent bursts of clear leader strengthen the sense of that Brakhage is engaging in acts of formal violence. The montage incorporates images of the wings of airplanes, of the dead, of crematoria, with shots

taken from the airplane illustrating the idea of “zig-zigs” and “checker boards of man.”

Then the range of imagery expands somewhat, and the montage seems to hold a more dispersed set of images in a tentative unity. Night lights of a city appear, at first as superimposition. Then we see a newsreel image containing the name “NAGASAKI”; that image is answered with one presenting the New York skyline. The relation between the two images is a relation between “here” and “there,” between “America” and “the Far East”; it is therefore another version of the polarity between personal space and outside realm that provides the film with its central structuring principle and suggests that the filmmaker’s American homeland might be destroyed as Nagasaki was.

Another passage of pulsating colour fields appears, then another passage of painting-on-film. Then we see a book open on the table. It is Louis Zukofsky’s “A,” and it lies open at the beginning of its eleventh section, a passage that declares the desire to raise grief to music: P. Adams Sitney correctly points out that raising grief to music is the very aspiration of *23rd Song Branch* and, in fact, the program note of Brakhage’s screening of the film at the San Francisco Cinematheque was simply “‘Song, my song, raise grief to music’—Louis Zukofsky, “A”. More images of explosions and bombs going off mark the end of this passage; thus, while the images in the immediately preceding passage belong to the personal realm, the images incorporated into this montage belong to the public realm.

The next images, of children’s drawings that hint of violence, also relate to the intrusion of the outer world of violence into the inner recesses of consciousness and to the inability of imagination to triumph over violent and intractably factual images; as though to insist that the children’s drawings belong to the inner realm, Brakhage intercuts them with images of his own face. The drawings then drop out of view and, again as though to stress that he is presenting the dynamics of consciousness, Brakhage intercuts images of his face with intervals of black leader (which again signify the gap in consciousness that the negative hallucination creates). The montage continues by presenting graphics of Egyptian warriors, several medieval drawings

documenting war; these drawings and graphics offer instances of artists engaging, through narrative, in the violence of the world: Brakhage seems to tell himself that he is not the first artist to have been invaded by, and swamped by, violence.

The rhythmic montage continues as these graphics transform into picture fragments presenting reproductions of figures from a Hellenic vase, warriors in battle—the transformation again indicates how the violence of the outer realm imposes itself upon consciousness. The battle imagery, which presents a figure with a shield and helmet standing victoriously and grinding his opponent under his heel (an image Brakhage probably took as indicating the psychological factors that have led humans to make war, everywhere, and at all times), breaks up in red flares (to signify violence); when an image returns, introduced as a zoom that draws back from its subject until it becomes discernible, we see the face of the poet Louis Zukofsky and then, through another zoom, that of his wife, composer Celia Zukofsky. A series of images of wrecked buildings, interspersed with very convulsive flashes of homogeneously coloured frames, precedes a re-presentation of Zukofsky's image, which presents him as a frail and deliberate-looking man. Zukofsky's deliberateness suggests the inner realm, so, in conformity with the film's structuring pattern of opposites, the imagery that follows these subjective shots is objective historical footage, in this case, images of corpses, the products of the German death factories of 1933–1945. Bringing together the image of Zukofsky's face and the footage from the death factories shortly after the more insistent presentation of Brakhage's own face implies that Brakhage is reflecting on the possibility that, conditions being different, he [Brakhage] too might have been among the victims of the National Socialist tyranny (or, even, that he might yet become a victim of the rise of American Fascism). This implication, too, derives from the central structuring opposition, for the victimization of imaginative people by a brutal polity lies on the same axis as the penetration of brutal imagery into the more sensitive reaches of consciousness. By way of contrast, Zukofsky's face is calm and gentle; Zukofsky is the first artist the film presents (even by allusion) who does not engage with the violence of the circumambient

world, but transcends it through his imagination. Zukofsky's face shows the possibility of—or is a beacon light towards—a new path. In real life, Zukofsky had faced the challenges of twentieth-century prejudice, yet matured into serene comic artist; he represents that state of being that, the film suggests, Brakhage longed to attain, but could not. Zukofsky's serenity raises the question whether Brakhage's failure is the consequence of his having inadequate internal resources.

More black leader follows (again indicating the effect of this violence is to produce a negative hallucination.) Between these pulsating stretch of black leader, Brakhage presents images of himself sitting in front of Roy Lichtenstein's famous painting of man pointing a gun at the viewer. Gail Camhi points out the rhythm of black intervals here is similar to that which introduced images of individual victims in the German death factories. This passage therefore is a sort of threnody for an art world has been invaded by the malevolent spirit of the time (the era of the Vietnam war) and untroubledly, and with only the mildest irony, appropriate for their own art images of violence produced by (so-called) popular culture.

As though to counteract the violence of Lichtenstein's art, more images of Zukofsky follow, intercut images from the concentration camps. Then city traffic lights appear and, seemingly, zoom towards the picture plane, then off the screen. Then the direction of the movement of the lights reverses, so when lights reappear on the screen, they seem to zoom into the images' depth—however now the lights are mediated by a television screen. We see the poet Louis Zukofsky and his composer-wife, Celia, in a living room; a checkered table cloth covers a table, rhyming with a phrase (“the checkerboard of Man”) we will soon encounter.

Consistent with the film's dichotomizing structure, the texts that appear in the *23rd Psalm Branch* can be group into to three paired sets. The allusion to Andrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* pairs with a text from Louis Zukovsky's “A”-11. The text is revealed gradually. First we see:

River

Song

Light

After this, a number of shots go by, including one of Zukofsky's signature. Then this appears:

River that must

Song, my song,

Light as my love

The text appears a third time, in this form:

River that must turn full after I stop

Song, my song, raise grief to music

Light as my loves' thought the few.

The way Brakhage first presents Zukofsky's lines makes the word "light" seem like a substantive. Though this impression is subsequently dispelled (as "light" is shown be an adjective modifying the word "thought") nonetheless, the impression endures that the word is used as a noun, to refer to the material of light; consequently we are tugged in the direction of construing the phrase as referring to a material, light—as though "light" refers to as something real, as real as thought. That is, we persist in our desire to construe "River/ Light/ Thought" as a paratactical form composed of three substantives, and of the juxtaposition of "light" and "thought" as suggesting that light and thought have similar natures.

So Brakhage's way of presenting the text connects the allusion with Zukofsky's interest in energy. Zukofsky was interested in electro-magnetic theory (he quotes

Michael Faraday three times in *A Test of Poetry*). Faraday taught Zukofsky that reality is field of energies. Zukofsky wrote in *Anew*

And there are waves—
Frequencies of light,
Others that may be heard.

A further link between eye and ear suggested here is central to both Zukofsky's and Brakhage's ideas about sensation: the very form of Brakhage's *Loud Visual Noises* (1987) makes clear his belief in the interaction of hearing and vision. More important yet, Zukofsky inferred from Faraday's writings that a poem is like a condenser (that is how Zukofsky, according to the usage of his day, referred to what we now call a capacitor, an electronic device that stores up a charge of electricity that can later be discharged by having electricity jump between two plates—and in doing so it emits a beautiful light). Zukofsky quotes Faraday to that effect in *Bottom on Shakespeare*: "*Spark*.—The brilliant star of light produced by the discharge of a volatile battery is known to all as the most beautiful light that man can produce by art." Zukofsky again associates poetry with the idea of a spark in that work when he quotes from Sir Philip Sidney's *A Defence of Poetry*:

The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error . . . a single word . . . may be a spark of inextinguishable thought . . . filling . . . with living images . . . Poetry reproduces all that it represents. . . . The great secret of morals is love; . . . an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.

The idea that a poem is "condenser" that has stored up energy, so that the energy might be transmitted from poet to reader, and in doing so, reproduce in the reader those

effects the poet first experiences, is the basis of Brakhage's perlocutionary poetics.

The passage from which "River/ Song/ Light" is drawn opens section 11 of "A"; it reads as follows:

River that must turn full after I stop dying
Song, my song, raise grief to music
Light as my loves' thought, the few sick
So sick of wrangling, thus weeping,
Sounds of light, stay in her keeping
And my son's face—this much for honor.

"A"-11 is a transitional work: those sections of "A" that were written shortly before or during World War II have political themes, and "A"-10 (1940) is perhaps the most political of all: it is an intense piece of writing, conveying Zukofsky's horror at the fall of France, a work composed by a "Poor songster so weak" he has "Stopped singing to curse." "A"-12 (1950–51) is of a very different cast: as long as all of "A" 1-11 combined, "A"-12 introduces materials from the poet's family life and celebrates Zukofsky's love for his wife, Celia, a composer, and his son, Paul, a violin-playing prodigy; from there on "A" interweaves the political, historical and personal in more or less equal measure.

Brakhage's *Songs*, as a cycle, resemble "A" in many ways: both are series works and both intermix family life and public events, extended and brief sections, history and the present, immediacy and otherness. Brakhage might have taken "A"-12 as an example of a "song branch" in Zukofsky's extended poem— and so he might have compared "A"-12 with *23rd Psalm Branch*. If he did, he would have been very troubled by this difference: that the progression from "A"-10 to "A"-12, is—to characterize the transition all-too-loosely—a progression from the public realm to personal, and from grief to celebration, while Brakhage's "song branch," by way of contrast, moves us into the public realm and into a harrowing of the soul. If in his mind he did relate *23rd Psalm*

Branch to “A”-12, Brakhage would surely have noticed the difference between the love and domestic happiness expressed in “A”-12 and his own home life, which, at the time he made 23rd *Psalm Branch*, had been reduced to a form of war.

“A”-11 represents an attenuation—or, better, a modification—of Zukofsky’s more formal ideals he espoused while composing “A” 1–10; thus, it marks the beginning of new phase and style of poetry for Zukofsky. From there on, we see less overt evidence of the virtuosic *Formtriebe* that configured the sonnet sequence in “A”-7 and the first *canzone* of “A”-9 (both of which are principally formal experiments); likewise, the formal austerity that was so pronounced in the collage texts, “A”-6 and “A”-8 is less forthright in the remaining sections of the work. In “A”-10 to “A”-12, we see emerge that character of Zukofsky’s verse that has made him so greatly admired by those who care about contemporary literature: Zukofsky’s poem becomes an extraordinary amalgam, which intermixes sharply observed particulars and the mind’s efforts at fathoming the meaning of those particulars. Zukovsky’s new poetic form would mix objects and concepts, particulars and thought, in way in way that only he has been able to achieve—though, of course, Brakhage came close, especially in 23rd *Psalm Branch*.

This much is commonplace knowledge. But the real nature of the transition from “A”-9 to “A”-12 really has not been well-understood. In “A”-9 Zukofsky demonstrates language’s urge towards abstraction, which he relates to the reification of labour, the fetishism of commodities and the alienation of labour product, following Marx’ analysis of the production process. There he shows that the work of meaning abstracts the word from the body. Zukofsky strived to have his work bring language back to the body: the extended quotations from Duns Scotus in “A”-8, as well as the scatological allusions that proliferate of “A”-7 make that evident enough. This struggle, against the reifying and distorting effects of language, became his *agon*. In “A”-11 and 12, Zukovsky found a way to curb languages reifying tendencies, to prevent language from taking us away from the real and towards the abstract.

The method relied on direct perception. One of Zukofsky’s contributions to the

famous 1931 issue of *Poetry*, on Objectivism, was a translation of René Taupin's "Three Poems by André Salmon," in which Taupin laid out his ideas on Nominalistic Poetry. Zukofsky translated his Taupin's explanation of that idea thus:

Would the image no longer do? The *real* would: the poet was now obliged to find it in all its intensity, in its anxiety to be handled. . . .
Nominalistic poetry is a synthesis of real detail, similar to the art of primitives . . .

The first requisite was to avoid the betrayal of words and emotions, so that the real would strike the poet directly . . . The most direct contact is obligatory, more striking than any metaphor tainted with impure interpretation.

Taupin's notions about overcoming the reifying and alienating effects of language through direct perception became central to Zukofsky's poetic theory. Discovering how to use direct perception was the great advance that "A"-11 marked. Some commentators have been inclined to argue that "A"-11 represents a farewell to Zukovsky's rigorous formal ideals (as well as the Marxist theory of production). I think, rather, that it represents the discovery of means to pursue those ideas otherwise, *viz.*, direct perception. Even as we proceed into, and beyond, "A"-12, the substance of Zukovsky's Marxist convictions remains secure, for direct perception relates art to concrete reality.

Brakhage wanted to share with Zukofsky similar ideas about the salutary effects of direct perception, about the ideal of direct contact, of thinking with things. He, too, wanted to found a poetics on the artist's immediate physiological response, a response free of the distortions of the generalizing mind. In *Poetry's* Objectivism issue, Zukofsky wrote on sincerity:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations,

precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness.

Thus, a poem is a completed sound structure—a melody, or, we might say, a song. At the same time it is an orderly organization of exact observations. “A”-6 turns these beliefs into verse:

The melody! the rest is accessory:

My one voice. My other: is

An objective—rays of the object brought to a focus,

An objective—nature as creator—desire for what is objectively perfect

Inextricably the direction of historic and

contemporary particulars.

Brakhage’s aesthetic convictions and practice was founded on a similar duality to that which we find in Zukofsky’s poetics. On the one hand, his films are exercises of thinking not with images or mirages, but with things as they exist. Like Zukofsky’s poetry, Brakhage’s films are concerned with details, and, as in Zukofsky’s poems, these objectively perfect details, by being composed into a completed structure of tensions and resolutions, are directed along the line of melody. Compositions of words become music, in Zukofsky’s sense, when an intricate patterning of sound attracts our attention to the material of poems, and the meaning becomes this pattern, or this “sound sense”: it is only by hearing the words reverberate in the mind and experiencing their resonant interaction that one can capture a poem’s meanings. For Brakhage, a composition of

dynamic elements becomes visual music when an intricate pattern of movement attracts our attention to the dynamics of thinking and meaning becomes the pattern traced by this dynamic form.

This poetic principle entails that poems are not representations of worked out ideas, but graphs of the mind movements; they track thought processes as they play out in the material of thinking, that is, by the rudimentary word (that is, the word as sound)—indeed, they are *enactments* of thought processes. According to Zukofsky's poetics, the dynamics of melodies are homologous with the dynamics of thought itself. Here meaning resides in the harmoniousness of vibrations sounding through time. But Brakhage's films, too, are elaborately crafted dynamic compositions that embody the dynamics of thought. Zukofsky and Brakhage both developed the idea that a work of art is an exercise in the calculus of thought by embracing the practice of an open form composition, that is, the practice of conveying the thing or event as it discloses itself, or as it happens.

Thus, "A"-10, "A"-11 and "A"-12 provide a model of raising grief to music, of coming through to the other side of sorrow and despair. However, at the time he made *23rd Psalm Branch*, Brakhage's belief in the viability of that enterprise of transforming grief was shattered. Zukofsky, he would have realized, was acquainted with that despair. In fact, the despair over the possibility of experiencing a transformation of ones' spiritual state is written into the *ballade* that Zukofsky imitated. Cavalcanti's poem begins, "Perch'io non spero di tornar già mai," a line that reappears in translation in T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," which begins, "Because I do not hope to turn again."

Finally, Zukofsky's interest in thinking with things that exist had led him to embrace collage form, that is, to produce work by assembling real-world objects and materials into a consummately integrated formal nexus. "A", along with Ezra Pounds *Cantos*, is likely the epitome of collage form in English literature. Brakhage's works gravitated towards the collage form and *Dog Star Man* is likely the epitome of collage form in film. Zukofsky's interests in collage form led him to create art through

appropriation—nearly all his writings confirm that, but “A”-10, Zukofsky’s war poem, certainly pushes that practice to its outer limits. So does Brakhage’s war film, *23rd Psalm Branch*. What is more, “A”-10 temporarily suspends the effort to create the complex song forms that characterized the earlier sections: since the people of France had stopped singing, Zukofsky, in “A”-10 has “stopped singing to talk.” Indeed, “A”-11’s invocation, to Song, to “raise grief to music,” was really a declaration of desire to return to the song form and to experience the transformations of consciousness of which song is capable—his calling out to Song to assist him constitutes an affirmation that the “better time” has come, a time when Zukofsky could look back and, with the people, remark on a phase in which “The poet stopped singing to talk.” Brakhage’s *23rd Psalm Branch* is likewise a departure from Brakhage’s usual forms (if indeed there are forms that are more typical of Brakhage’s *oeuvre* than others) to use more ordinary materials (materials appropriated from the everyday world)—we could say about this “Song,” that here Brakhage had stopped singing to talk.

Zukofsky’s reference to turning to talk highlights another feature of Zukofsky’s work that has a parallel in Brakhage’s. “A”-12 offers a comment on Zukofsky’s ideas on poetry:

I’ll tell you
About my poetics
music
∫
speech
An integral
Lower limit speech
Upper limit music

A poem integrates all sorts of language use, from simple speech to music. It rehearses

the idea Gertrude Stein often expounded, of using everything. Brakhage's aesthetics convictions have led him to embrace the idea of using everything, and that includes using all forms of moving imagery, from quotidian informational images to pure abstractions. *23rd Psalm Branch* is such an integral—or it would be, if it were not for the maker's inability to create a perfect nexus that would hold its diverse materials together in an utterly harmonious unity.

Zukofsky had long been an important influence on Brakhage, and undoubtedly the poet's appearance in *23rd Psalm Branch*, along with citations from his poems, was Brakhage's way of paying homage to that influence. But that raises the pressing question, why Brakhage should want to pay homage to Zukofsky in this particular work. Undoubtedly an important reason is the extraordinary resemblance, which I have remarked on already, of *23rd Psalm Branch* and "A"-10. But there is deeper reason, I think. This reason has to do with an important difference between making poems by "thinking with things" and making films by "thinking with things." For Zukofsky, poetry offers a calculus of thought—or, rather of thinking, as it is articulated by the bursting into consciousness of detail after luminous detail. But poetry is still a verbal construct, and the object itself enters the poem in verbal form. Photography is quite different: the photographic (and cinematographic) images have a raw power that can make the mind dizzy. Consider Zukofsky's great war poem, "A"-10: "Paris/ Paris/ Of your beautiful phrases/ Is fallen/ The wire service halted// *Go ahead Paris.*" It is a poem of deep despair, both personal and political.

Similarities between "A"-10 and Brakhage's *23rd Psalm Branch* abound, right down to the incorporation of details of media reports on the war. But there are also important differences. "A"-10 shows a mind at work, forming, against all odds, a sure and complete structure for the poem. By contrast, Brakhage's *23rd Psalm Branch* could never achieve that degree of integration, for the fragments of which it is composed set the mind reeling. The imagination cannot transform such resolutely factual imagery and so cannot make the imagery its own; such imagery presents itself as an alien,

mechanical imaginary.

Thus, in imitating Zukofsky's collage form and his art of appropriation, Brakhage was brought up against the limits of cinematography, which impressed upon him the differences between poetry and film. He had turned to making songs in order to compose himself, to make himself whole again after he found himself bereft of his means of livelihood (his film equipment was stolen) and his sense of being the father-provider was shattered. Even his convictions about poetic cinema, it seemed, lay in ruins. The film image is too intimate with its model to allow the external world to be ejected from it.

The second textual allusion I deal with is introduced by phrases "I can't go on" and "I must stop! The War is as thoughts/thought (IDEAS, IMAGES), pattern. . . (RHYTHM) are—as endless as . . . precise as eyes' hell is!" These phrases appears twice: the first time, they are appear as handwritten on paper; in the other, they appear incised into the film's emulsion. These words appear following a section composed of newsreel images of soldiers, parades, crowds, Hitler, Mussolini, and other public figures: the images are obscured by dots and circles stenciled over them (as Brakhage tries to deny the potentially traumatizing TV imagery). This passage involves a high-tension dialogue between this imagery and patterns of dots and circles layered over them: sometimes the imagery can be easily seen through the stenciling, while at other times the overlaid forms all but conceal the image from view. Then, as though out of nowhere, we see "I can't go on" scratched into black leader. (The text is obviously preparing us for a transition to Part II, when the filmmaker, somehow, will go on.) More stenciled dots and circles appear more explosions and more painted forms. Then we are presented with an intensely (violently) bright image of the filmmaker's hand holding a pen and writing, in black ink on white paper, "I must stop. The war is as in thoughts." The shot ends abruptly—violently, one might say—with a cut to black leader and the words "IDEAS," then "IMAGES" carved into the black emulsion. The roughly carved white letters on black ground end as abruptly as they started and the film returns to the

intensely bright footage of the filmmaker jotting a note: he reconsiders what he had just written, crosses out the “s” on thoughts (with a diagonal line), then and begins writing another word (that begins with “p”). The alternation of images of intensely bright shots, which have white ground, and the shots with a black ground create a prolonged sort of flicker effect. It also reinforces the suggestion made by having the writer first write “thoughts” and then cross out the “s”: the interpolation of black leader interrupts the writing of the note, suggesting the mental hesitations that result from attempts to form new thoughts—thus, it reinforces the sense that the film is presenting a dynamics of consciousness.

The phrase “precise as eyes’ hell is!” alludes to the concluding passage in a much read poem by Charles Olson, “In Cold Hell, In Thicket”:

precise as hell is, precise
as any words, or wagon,
can be made.

The relevance of that entire poem to Brakhage’s enterprise in *23rd Psalm Branch* is telling. The second section reads:

All things are made bitter, words even
are made to taste like paper, wars get tossed up
like lead soldiers used to be
(in a child’s attic) lined up
to be knocked down, as I am

That phrase, “words even/ are made to taste like paper” articulates an allusion to Pound’s famous *Usura Canto*, “Canto XLV”

with usura, sin against nature,
is thy bread ever more of stale rags
Is thy bread dry as paper,
with no mountain wheat, no strong flour

Pound's Canto XLV is another song about the enfeebling of art and consciousness. It states his conviction that economic factors determine the superstructural features (the social relations and the culture) of given place and era: Pound's term for the cluster of economic factors that have enfeebled the culture of that era that began sometime in the 1200s (and, in his view, accelerated after 1656) is "usury." Olson's poem concerns the difficulty of trying to make art that will raise one's grief to art, while Pound's poem is even more despondent, for it declares that art is not possible in the era when usury has corrupted consciousness. Against that view, Olson continues to hold out the hope that art can give to dignity to suffering:

God, that man, as his acts must, as there is always
a thing can do, he can raise himself, he raises
on a reed he raises his

And there the line breaks off, as Olson's hopes for his reed song go unexpressed, likely even uncomprehended. It requires the greatest precision, the utmost of accuracy, to raise suffering

. . . raised

As though a word, an accuracy were a pincer!

This

is the abstract, this

is the cold doing, this

is the almost impossible

so shall you blame those
who give it up, those who say
it isn't worth the struggle?

Brakhage longs to embrace Olson's hope that a song could raise his grief to a dignity, even if the task requires an almost superhuman effort. However, he has come to feel that that defeat is inevitable.

In the first section (here I use the word "section" to refer to what in more conventional poetry we call a stanza) of Part I, reads:

In hell it is not easy
to know the trceries, the markings
(the canals, the pits, the mountings by which space
declares herself, arched, as she is, the sister,

We think of Brakhage's note in which (we conjecture) he told Jane about viewing a landscape from an airplane and examining the trceries of hills and valleys.

A new section begins three or four lines later.

How shall he who is not happy, who has been so made unclear,
who is no longer privileged to be at ease, who, in this brush, stands
reluctant, imageless, unpleasured, caught in a sort of hell, how
shall he convert this underbrush, how turn this unbidden place
how trace and arch again
the necessary goddess?

Olson, Brakhage implies, understands the anguish felt by the artist who no longer feels he can convert grief into music. Brakhage seeks solace in knowing that he has a kindred spirit.

As this is a poem about Cold Hell, “In Cold Hell, in Thicket: II” begins with an allusion to Dante Aligheri’s *Inferno*.

ya, selva oscura, but hell now
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is
the coat of your own self, the beasts
emblazoned on you

. . .

Who

can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,
where yourself is, your beloved is, where she
who is separate from you, is not separate, is not
goddess, is, as your core is,
the making of one hell

That, of course, is the very lesson that Brakhage learned—that the beast is inside him.

A few lines later Olson presents another view of a landscape from above—a landscape that was a battlefield.

. . . even from

the beauty of the rotting fern his eye
knows, as he looks down, as,
in utmost pain if cold can be so called,
he looks around this battlefield, this
rotted place where men did die, where boys
and immigrants have fallen, where nature

(the years that she's took over)

does not matter, where

that men killed, do kill, that woman kills

is part, too, of his question

And extending the allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, II: 2 opens

That it is simple, what the difference is—

that a man, men, are now their own wood

and thus their own hell and paradise

“A man, men, are now their own wood” —what traps us is within us. The thought terrified Brakhage.

ENDNOTES

23rd Psalm Branch is in two parts of approximately thirty minutes each. Brakhage uses words only in Part 1. That Part 1 is the part that deals explicitly with the Vietnam war makes clear that the crisis that prompts Brakhage to set aside (and only for this film) some long-cherished principles has to do with war. Part One includes newsreel footage from before and during World War II, “home movies” of the Brakhage household and natural environs, passages that have been painted with india ink (which cracks as it dries, leaving fascinating patterns) and in various colors, and stenciled with black dots usually, usually in rows. (That Brakhage managed to paint and stencil on tiny, tiny 8 mm. frames reveals much about the obsession that drove the filmmaker at this point in his life.) The stencilling alludes to the dots of a television raster.

If Brakhage imaginatively engaged in that process, that would make it all the more difficult for Brakhage to feel that he is not complicit in the society’s destructive bent—that he was not guilty.

Adorno remarked in *The Philosophy of Modern Music* that “what radical music perceives is the untransfigured suffering of man,” and celebrated artists’ and musicians’ usefulness in overcoming some of the social contradictions through the development of emancipated or autonomous art. (Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 105.) Brakhage might have recognized his affinity with “the untransfigured suffering of man,” yet have come to believe that the resolute facticity of photographic and cinematographic images precluded raising the expression suffering to the status of an autonomous art.

The tonalities of colour fields and painting in *23rd Psalm Branch* merit additional commentary. P. Adams Sitney reveals that among the texts that Brakhage studied while making *23rd Psalm Branch* was Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline and Fall of the West*. (v. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002), 3rd Edition, 217). Spengler argued that each different people of each different age showed a different set of colour preferences. The Greeks favoured reds and yellows—red because it suggested life and love. Christians, in revolt against Greek “paganism,” favoured the opposite end of the spectrum, greens and blues, as well as whites: for them, red was too highly charged, because it was the colour of the sacred blood and yellow was a mark of shame, while cool colours like blue and green and white suggested contemplation and prayer. Later, the Romantics associated blues and greens with nature and white, the various shades of grey and black with abstract thought and the unknown.

Spengler’s correlation of colour preferences with the characteristic feature of a culture might go a long way towards explaining Brakhage’s use of colour. Spengler’s commentary on Romantic colour preferences seems to me particularly promising. Edgar Allan Poe was one of Stan Brakhage’s favorite poets (and, according to the radio series “A Test of Time,” Poe’s “A Dream within a Dream” his favorite poem). Consider frequent reference to whites, greys, blacks and reds in *Tales of Horror*.

The images of the Brakhage home and of his children playing naked and riding a sledge and the early images of laundry on the clothesline could be taken too as Brakhage’s efforts to identify with Zukofsky. That identification is soon forcefully undone.

For the Sitney citation, v. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 250.

Sitney recounts a humorous tale about reveals something of the depth of Brakhage's conviction that the same factors that lead men to war have existed everywhere and all times. He tells us that while Brakhage was making *23rd Psalm Branch*, he read Tacitus instead of the daily newspaper at the breakfast table, because the intrigues about which the first century historian wrote were just the same as those one reads about in newspapers, but Tacitus' tales were better told (P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd Edition, 217).

These images also allude to Section of 10 of Louis Zukofsky's *magnum opus*, "A".

Guy Davenport offers the following, pithily acute remark in "Scripta Zukofskii Elogia" section of chapter on Zukofsky in *The Geography of the Imagination*.

Fellow artists have treated [Zukofsky] as a phenomenon, a force, a man (like Mallarmé or Whistler) to make obeisance to whether you understand his work or not. His appearance in Brakhage's *23rd Psalm Branch* is characteristic of such homage. In a sequence about the Nazi concentration camps, Zukofsky's face is introduced as a motif. He was the kind of man who would have suffered Mandelstam's fate in Russia, Max Jacob's in France (Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 110).

Brakhage might well have wondered if he was himself the kind of man who might suffer Mandelstam's fate in Fascist America.

Gail Camhi, *op. cit.*, 101.

Louis Zukofsky's Table of Contents for "A" gives the date of "A"-11 as 1950; however, it was likely composed in the first half of 1951.

Louis Zukofsky, "No. 12" in *Anew: Poems* (Prairie City, Ill.: Press of James A. Decker, 1946), lines 4–6; reprinted in "Anew," in Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991), 82–3—here, 82.

The passage is reminiscent of the opening of the "MY EYE" section of Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*.

My eye, tuning toward the imaginary, will go to any wave-lengths for its sights. I'm writing of cognizance, mind's eye awareness of all addressing vibrations. What rays pass through this retina still unretained by mind? How long has sight's center continued pupil to other men's imaginings? This sensitive instrument must respond to all the gods who will deign to play upon it.

Louis Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), pages 1, 45, and 105. First published by Objectivist Press in 1948.

Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom on Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 206. First published by Arc Press, 1963.

I provide a reasonably detailed outline of Brakhage's perlocutionary poetics in *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999).

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-11, in "A", 124.

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-11, in "A", 113.

Guy Davenport offers this remark on the domestic quality of "A": "But Shakespeare and Bach would become the *lares penatesque* of this most passionately intellectual of American poets. Only Emily Dickinson has kept to her hearth more than Zukofsky" (Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*, 102).

Poetry XXXVII (Feb. 1931): 290–1.

Poetry XXXVII (Feb. 1931): 273.

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-6, in "A", 24.

The passage from "A"-6 makes explicit that an objective, that is to say, a lens, is simply the rays of the object brought into focus and so are objectively perfect.

Perhaps Zukofsky's most cogent statement of his poetics is a later article: "Five Statements for Poetry" (1958). There Zukofsky proposes that the new, objective poetry rejects obvious metaphor and symbolism and an exploitation of typography to demonstrate "how the voice should sound." In proposing this, he advocates that the sound of the composition take priority over meaning. In this respect, Zukofsky's practice approximates Gertrude Stein's. (Brakhage, too, would vigorously defend the idea that in poetry, sound structure had priority over meaning.) The sound itself offers a dynamic form homologous to the shape of emotions. A poem becomes a score (in this respect, too, Zukofsky's poetry's resembles the writing of Gertrude Stein).

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-10, in "A", 113.

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-10, in "A", 120.

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-12, in "A", 138.

Louis Zukofsky, "A"-10, in "A", 112. Notice that "A"-10 incorporates news reports coming over the radio. Brakhage's *23rd Psalm Branch*, too, incorporates news footage, and the occasion for making the film was the havoc that the news footage from Vietnam created in the Brakhage household.

Charles Olson, "In Cold Hell, In Thicket," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 160.

Ibid., 155.

Charles Olson, "In Cold Hell, In Thicket," in *Collected Poems*, 155.

Ibid., 156.

Ibid., 158.

Ibid., 158.

Ibid., 158.