

Stan Brakhage, Regina, Saskatchewan, March 1988. Photo: Robert Ramage

STAN BRAKHAGE

ON CANADIAN PAINTING AND CINEMA

Editor's Note: In March 1988 the Saskatchewan Film Pool brought Stan Brakhage and Bruce Elder to Regina for screenings and discussions of their and other avant-garde filmmakers' films. The event was organized by Richard Kerr. Brakhage presented his lecture, illustrated with slides and films, on 12 March 1988. In the transcript of the lecture presented here, a few digressions and exchanges with audience members have been deleted (indicated by ellipsis marks) in order to maintain the lecture's focus on Brakhage's observations on Canadian painters and filmmakers. At the same time, the occasional verbal slips, incomplete sentences, ambiguous references, and the like have been retained in an effort to reproduce on the printed page (as far as it is possible to do so) the "voice" of the speaker. A complete transcript of the lecture is on file at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University, Montréal. My thanks to Brett Kashmere at Concordia for providing a copy-edited version of the transcript, and to Marilyn Brakhage for granting permission to publish it here.

When I was a child and I first heard the term "to bring coals to Newcastle," I was very puzzled by it because as a child I didn't know Newcastle. I didn't know it was the coal centre of England. All I knew were the words "new" and "castle," so I had this picture of a prince bringing a lump of coal to a new castle, which was very white up on the hill with spirals and so on, fluffy cloud bits here and there in it, bringing this piece of coal up to this shiny new fairytale book castle. It was a compelling image, so I was persuaded. I recognized by the way adults were using the phrase that they knew it was something you weren't supposed to do. But very early I began to question things that adults automatically said you weren't supposed to do, and I thought it was a compelling image. Later I learned more about Newcastle and "coals to Newcastle," that it would be absurd to be bringing coal into the coal centre of England. I had to rethink my attitude, but essentially I came back to an even more strengthening favouring

of this interpretation, because then I had been fortified by my childhood emotions. (I'm telling you, by the way, a lot about how I work and live as I spin off this yarn.) I knew by then that people grow so habitual in their attitudes towards something that they are like fish in water. As Newcastle people must be with coal. I thought that there would be nothing more wonderful than someone who would bring incredible complexity and crystalline wonder of a hardened black (but multi-shaded black) and sudden glistening piece of coal to Newcastle people, and show them in all senses the wonder of something that they were producing for the world.

So that's my only excuse, by way of apology, as you do have this "Stan Brakhage presents Canadian Film Art" which otherwise is utterly presumptuous. Ordinarily, people born and raised in Canada have told me that they have the Group of Seven presented to them so continually and constantly, in such an assumption of Canadian culture in public schools, that by the time they are in the sixth grade they are entirely sick of them. The public schools have reproductions (and I have not been in any of them so I don't know what the quality of reproductions they are) and no doubt they have the problems of all reproductions of paintings. These are presented so steadily to the Canadian populace that they have become bored. The problem of hanging a picture on a wall, particularly in a public institute, is that very quickly it disappears there. Your first day of school, something to the left of the clock that's a glorious sunset of a reproduction of a Canadian landscape painting, might be very intriguing to a child, but by the sixth grade the clock has totally triumphed over it for many years. These pictures do tend to disappear into the walls where they are, unless people absolutely lie to themselves that they are blinded by some of them. So I don't mean in the slightest to presume that I know more than you about Canadian art, because that would be absurd. I also honour your native childhood's immediate responses to whatever you've seen of your own culture. I am a latecomer here, a stranger so to speak, and I have only the validity, one that I'd like to exercise this afternoon, that I know where I'm from.

That's about the only thing that the stranger ever has, coming to another culture. But for me, for twenty-five years (just so you know this isn't a sudden or new infatuation) I have been coming to Canada. Not until last summer did I ever come just as a tourist. I've come not on business either, though that's what you have to call it to explain what you're doing to the customs officials, but I have come bringing films. I have come wishing to see films and to meet the Canadian filmmakers and to share works with them. I did this across the '60s and into the early '70s, in Toronto and London and other cities in that neighbourhood. Very early I began to be stunned by an art movement that wasn't known at all in my culture. Subsequently I made attempts over the years, again and again, to get the Museum of Modern Art to exhibit the great Canadian painting movement known as the Group of Seven, plus Tom Thomson.

Certainly Thomson is to me a great painter. Now here's where many people regard me as outrageous, but trust me that I at least test these feelings constantly. Don't just sink into some nostalgia here. I, within several years, came to be convinced that Tom Thomson was as significant a painter as Vincent Van Gogh. I must say that all the subsequent years, some twenty years of viewing his work over and over again, wherever I could see it, has sustained that belief in me. But then it must also be said: I don't tend to play baseball with the arts, so I don't have Van Gogh and Thomson in any competition with each other. My experiencing of the works of both of them across all these years has been out of a deep, compelling need. I'd lean on sports just to say that they are in the same league; they are both great painters and are painters akin in other ways, too. They have been terribly important to me as they were against the salon painting of the late nineteenth century. Despite the acceptance of the Impressionists and other movements since, salon painting still continues to dominate the basic cultural attitudes of both our cultures. Here are two men who painted in such a way that one can have the feeling that you are watching the painting being painted as you stand before it. It's an electric and immediate connection, which was pushed to an extreme, an extreme terribly important to me also, as I name now a third artist: Jackson Pollock.

Pollock and others of the Tenth Street painters were involved in the post-World War II painting movements, or "Action Painting," as it came to be called. Probably my most vital connection is with Jackson Pollock. I first encountered his work through reproduction in high school. I remember how utterly within minutes, as has subsequently proved to be true, my life was changed forever. This was despite the fact that the reproduction was a very poor one in *Life* magazine that was doing nothing but making fun of him. Peggy Guggenheim had bought one of these things that you could, as the article put it, "sell by the yard, so much per foot," and so on. The writer of the article was treating this magic of Pollock's "desperate cheating" as if it were yard goods or some form of decoration. Indeed, as he triumphed as a painter, and socially his reputation increased, people began using Pollock as decoration for drapes and so on, it's a common decoration. It decorates Styrofoam very easily. The manufacturing of it and the watered down versions weakened Pollock's original impulse: it became decoration. But in fact, as anyone knows who has opened himself or herself to Pollock (whether you like it or not), to stand before Pollock and really open yourself to those lines of making, is to have a sense not only that you are there as they're being made, but that you're there down to the split second of their making. That was part of the aesthetics: to be "instant" as Charles Olson was to put it later when he talked about poetry movements in the United States. Well, to me, that vital impulse of his comes out of Tom Thomson. I'd like to show you some slides.

I'll refer to my notes here. [Slide:] *A Pine Tree*. I guess most of you know



that all of Thomson's work was created in a very few years. That came as a surprise to me this year, when I looked it up. 1916 to 1920, whenever he died, I think it was '20 or '21? Also what is so remarkable is that these are quite small paintings; almost all of them are about this size (8" x 10"). He went into your backwoods, which were the backwoods near the terrain he inhabited at the time. He wouldn't carry much paint, or much to paint on. He opened himself to the nature that he was looking at in such a way that it is both wondrous and beautiful, and at the same time, to me,

always terrifying. These paintings don't have the immediacy of controlled paint, with its marks of splash and violence, but they *do* carry the violence of the feelings, of the almost "violated" feelings of this remarkably sensitive man.

This terror in the landscapes of Tom Thomson is to me a little more difficult perhaps to feel, but not because it's a lesser art. It's more difficult, because before Van Gogh, there wasn't that much painting of cornfields and so on, or cultivated fields. We don't have much imagery of that, but we have a pack of lies that has crusted human sensibility about nature. A desperate pack of lies developed by people who are in the process of destroying that nature as rapidly as we are enabled as a species to do so. And at the same time, we sit in stark terror of it. It is in that sense almost a comfort to some people in our times to think that humans are the ones who will destroy all animal life on earth, rather than, let's say, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, a shift in the polar magnetism, or a pebble, as it were, hurtling through space, that could perchance strike this world, planet Earth, and render everything impossible. A shrug of the sun which could be happening right now, in four minutes we wouldn't know what hit us. Is it four minutes or five minutes now? They keep changing that time that it takes the light to get from the sun to the earth.

Next slide: *The Jack Pine*. There is an empathy here. Van Gogh, for example, doesn't empathize. To some extent he empathized with some sunflowers, notably brought into great prominence in that they sold for an incredible amount of millions to a Japanese businessman, and now sit cloistered in a vault. That sale, by the way, has also vaulted most of the world's Western art, because you can no longer insure it for travelling shows. That's just a footnote to kick with. I'm not going to lean on the social this afternoon, too heavily. But to empathize with a tree! I mean, this tree is almost like a paradigm for raw nerve endings. To

empathize with a tree and at the same time recognize the monstrosity of what it is, the threat that it can be both a paradigm and an emblem of that nature which Canadians are up against. This is one of the few places on earth which is as extreme as you can get, and yet still continue to have a civilization: you have the United States on one side and nature on the other. An implacable nature on the other that essentially can't be lived in. Places to the north that are so cold and so constantly under winter snow that you could walk outside for a very few steps, lose your way and freeze to death in a few minutes much of the year.

Next slide: *Sunset*. When I see this I'm put very much in mind of Whistler, a wonderful scene with Whistler. He and a young woman are on the docks, looking at the River Thames and watching the sunset, and this young woman exclaims, "Oh what a beautiful sunset." And Whistler replies, "Yes, nature is catching up." Somehow the wit of that has passed over all of you. Am I becoming too pontifical, and is this too much like a lecture? She said, "Oh what a beautiful sunset" and he replied, "Yes, nature is catching up." Do some forced laughs here and there. Do let me tell you the deep and terrible joke behind this then, which perhaps she didn't get either. She just thought, "Oh Mr. Whistler, just presumptuous of God himself; he's an egomaniac as most artists are and so on." In that little joke he was stating a fact. That is to say that our ability to *see* sunsets or be interested in them at all, was dependent on what, at that point in the West, was a movement only several hundred years old. Before that a picture only showed interest in the sun as a round ball in the sky, as children in grade school are still taught to draw it.

The diminishment of the light, the sun's absence, means the deadliness of night to humans. For all of the gas lighting in London at the time, and even for all the Edison electricity that lights up our world now (so that small dogs don't even bay at the moon anymore they are so bedazzled by human cars, moons moving down the roads in all directions), we still sit with good reason, in terror of the night. I'm going to place this sunset like that and you will feel it. Some people go to sunsets with their radios and their tents and all their paraphernalia close to themselves, and they *still* feel it. And the need to feel the past and how dependent we are on this light, and what one can imagine one faces, as those are the stars. So again this sunset is not a solemn and illusory sunset. It's not beclouded by the idealism of the painters, as most sunsets have been in the West. It isn't a beautiful red; it isn't the volcanic ash sunsets or Turner, which were terrifying enough in themselves. But what I can feel at least is the brush stroke of this man trembling in terror of the dying light. In terror of that utterly disturbing salmon-coloured inexplicable light, one could say. It's not blood red so that you can call it a war and take arms against it in the night. This is a salmon-coloured shot-through fabric that's moving over the water. And look at the terror under the water, the reflections on the water, the terror of the night.

Next slide: *Clouds Zeppelin*. Ask yourself, rummage through your knowledge

of Western painting: Have you ever seen a cloud so strange? Yes, to symbolize is comforting to the human mind, so there are clouds which seem to loom over one as if they were gigantic shadows, and anthropomorphized clouds, as if some paw were about to come down onto the earth. But what Canada's Tom Thomson has painted here is a disturbingly inexplicable cloud you can't even make something of, as some people do to gain comfort. You couldn't even make a decent phallus out of that. I mean that's just plain weird, like nature. We desperately anthropomorphize external nature as human beings. I put that painting up against Walt Disney and all that he stands for. Frozen in ice, desperate bastard that he was, hoping to be wakened up and cured of his cancer, to inherit the earth. I put forward this very small painting of Tom Thomson's, made across a very short period of time, utterly unrecognised to the rest of the world, unexportable it would almost seem to be, unknown to the New York City of painting.

New slide: *Northern Lights*. Northern Lights are a subject of beauty and wonder: everyone goes out once to see the Aurora Borealis and all its wondrous play across the face of the earth. It's like early TV in the sky, or those colour fountain displays that people used to make in the band park in the summers. But is it? No, to me, there it is looking more like a celestial or cosmic mountain on fire, and an explosion, and what it fires over is desperate. It opens into a cave of some degree of stark terror, to me. Mountains have been painted before. They've been painted black, and they've been painted like whales, and they've been painted with a brush, with trees in the foreground and so on. But I'm talking about the brush stroke where I feel the handwriting or the absolute most literal sensibility of style of the person facing that phenomenon, and who's making it as making a likeness of it.

Next slide: *Autumn Birch*, 1950. With a title like that it should grace anybody's calendar, and I'm sure it ordinarily does. Probably Canadian calendars. It ordinarily really disturbs me to see calendars. I, who have a reputation as one of the foremost nature filmmakers in the world. People were terribly disappointed when I moved down from the mountains. As if Daniel Boone had taken a suite at the Chelsea Hotel, as he does in the films. I'm not at all in the English tradition of going around and naming things and finding comfort in that in the slightest. I'm interested in the human sensibility of reaction. I'm interested in following a track of not just humans, but snails also. I follow the tracks they leave on garden walls or across leaves, as that slime crystallizes in the moonlight. I'm similarly interested in the tracks as we cross each others' paths, either culturally or personally across the face of the English, let alone the Latin, names of all these weird creatures that exist outside ourselves and whose realm can, as Charles Olson put it: "Yes, kill you, what they forget about nature is that it can kill you." But Charles was wise enough to include human nature within that. Nature can kill you. Since I made the *23rd Psalm Branch* in the '60s, I ordinarily have the view that *more* is the natural disaster. It is incumbent upon us, as the species here on

earth, to evolve something that would also be natural: this would be a natural growth through which such disasters could not occur. Okay, *Birches*. Could I go back to the one on the river and those trees?

[Slide:] *Northern River*. The river, as you see, didn't interest me too much and it didn't interest him too much, because it's mostly white with some trails that cross it. But what is amazing is that this is a carrier of the direct influence of *art nouveau*, over into the Canadian woods, circa the teens of this century. And he also carries *other* people who are up against weather, in the sense that you are *Nordic* people. We have to remember that the whole Group of Seven painting school shifted and changed through the inspiration of Tom Thomson, when Thomson and some of the others attended a Nordic painting exhibition. I think they went down to Buffalo for that. So there it is again, there's not any anthropomorphism I see in this painting, but there is empathy along a line of design which belongs to one of the most decadent art movements of the turn of the century, coming directly out of Whistler's England. It was a decadent movement that sought to go back to the Pre-Raphaelite painters, to painters before Raphael. This movement found sources of inspiration in the medieval. It had high ideals, which included in the case of William Morris, the idealism of Marxism. As this movement slipped into decadence, it went into a particular motif of decoration.

Of course by the time it has come all the way through the sensibilities of Tom Thomson, and the woods, it's not decoration at all anymore. As the impulses of similar European peoples and of an English art movement have come through him, he has made these a piece of the grammar or the handwriting of nature painting. This is because they stand for the terrifying decadence of higher ideals, as shown for example in this tree bark. This is a little complicated, and we will not have time to go into it probably, but I'm glad to introduce it anyway. It's just to kick against the assumption that Tom Thomson was an important Tom Sawyer type who goes out into the woods and "jez paints." Just from his raw nerves with no thought whatsoever, just giving himself over to nature and hanging these lovely pictures, which then hang beside a clock in any school.

Next slide: *Autumn Birches*. By the time they're in his paintings they could be aspens just as well. They are lines in the mind, lines of the mind's reception of this external phenomenon that is the real terror. They are desperate hieroglyphs of leaning branches. They are the stripping of what we like to regard as the grace of trees in the autumn, dropping their leaves so that we can shuffle them along with our feet and pick them up and press them into the back pages of books to be thrown out later by the next generation. They are to me a desperate going to sleep of these trees in preparation for winter. They are the death of the actual material that is dropping from those trees, and they die in a blaze of what we choose to call *beautiful* leaves. We collect these desperately into bouquets, and they are the bloody corpses of that year's flowering.

Next slide: Here is Lauren Harris' *Trees and Pool*. This is mostly to demonstrate that though I respect all these painters too, I'd like to show you how akin they were to the inspiration of Tom Thomson.

Next slide: *Clouds, Lake Superior*. And then we move immediately to see where Lauren Harris distinguished himself as one of the Group of Seven from Thomson and went to this extreme. And this extreme actuality is not an extreme. People have written a lot about how he went far north. There is a wonderful picture of him sitting as an old man in a parka on a pile of ice somewhere. He describes desperately holding his oil paints against his chest, inside his parka, and getting them out quickly and getting a dip and putting the paint on the canvas before it freezes. That is wondrous enough, and that's how he did it exterior-wise. But what's really interesting to me is how, starting with Thomson's vision

of nature in the mind, a carrier of so many impulses out of the pre-Raphaelite movement, Lauren Harris takes it all the way over into the mind. He takes it to that part of the mind where it desperately makes well-rounded cookie shapes of the external world, absolutes of mind's desperation I call it.

Next slide: Lauren Harris, *Green Lake, Jasper Park*. So out of the two of them together, Harris clearly has his beginnings, his roots in the discoveries of Thomson or what they shared together. These tendencies the other painters had is pushed to this extreme.

Thomson, I sense, has a nervous sensibility that never could have done such a thing. However he was killed, he was burning out like Van Gogh, his raw nerve endings extended to the dilemmas of the human up against nature.

Frederick Varley—I don't have his portrait of Mrs. E.—I don't have what I'd like to show you. Varley, who painted these incredible figures, at least two of which I know about that are visions of aura and of the transcendent human. So he just more or less came along today for the ride. He's interesting in that of all of them he's the one to me that was most involved in being human. He attuned whatever sensibility he had very largely and because of love. I think this is part of his story, a great love for which he lost everything else. He came to be able to see the human through the magnificence of his portraits and the desperation of his struggle. Van Gogh really doesn't have a very clear vision of the human. Varley, I feel, does, and is moving toward how to deal with the human in the world in some way that there just isn't time for today.



Photo: Robert Ramage

And then there is J.E.H. MacDonald to whom I've actually dedicated a film, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, because it was certainly inspired primarily by him. So there he is, essentially a nineteenth century painter, a very youthful painting. In 1912, a very accomplished master in the nineteenth century mode. This was the direct influence of European salon painting: safe and easy visions, though there is a nervous wonder to his clouds that can make us realize that there is something in him that could push him to the extreme of Van Gogh with his whirling stars and quivering palms.

Next slide: *Mist and Fantasy*. This painting shows the temptation of this man to fall into a trap, in my view, to become illustrative, as the Pre-Raphaelites did, so that their paintings could very safely sit on the most conservative churches' kindergarten calendars. Much of the Nordic art did move toward illustrations for fantasy and children's stories. So I think this was a crisis in his life. It was in 1922, shortly after which came this painting which inspired so many people.

Next slide: *The Tangled Garden*. There are several versions of it; I myself like this one best. I ask you to recognize the power of this man now, and this great painting. Remember Van Gogh's famous sunflower painting, which must have been reproduced in your newspapers, as it's so expensive. Compare Van Gogh's sunflowers to that large, incredible, overwhelming, grotesque, but magnificently beautiful towering and toppling-over pine, in the middle of this painting. We all have times we sketch something, and look at the details of all of the rest of it. In this little story on painters I'd like to think of MacDonald as having reconciled the horror in the backyard, and in that sense being a transition over to the film-makers I want to lead into and talk about very shortly.

Next slide: *Forest Wilderness*. Thomson was now dead for several years by the time this painting was made. MacDonald is too infected by his ready mastery of landscape; it pulls him down, it keeps him from opening himself in the way he did in *The Tangled Garden*.

Next slide: *Autumn Bound*. And if he does open himself up, it's as if there is a vision in him to be of the earth royally; there is much movement in MacDonald. He's naturally filled with semblances that are created of movement. And these little mountains do not hop and skip, they boil.

Next slide: *Falls, Montreal River, 1920*. Again the colours of fantasy: he's driven back on himself again and in his work to fantasize particularly with his colours. It becomes clear, that things can almost become illustrative in a way that we illustrate and in which we mostly like to lie to children, and to completely falsify their vision of life on earth. But yet in this painting there is an integrity that's battling through there—that's something out of *The Tangled Garden*.

Next slide: *Snow on Lake Louise*. Here he's obviously been moved or inspired by his friend Varley to push it all the way over into the cookie shapes of the mind. Although my involvement with these painters is more than a quarter century old now, I didn't have the fortune to grow up with something of their

vision in my eyes, as I did the Pre-Raphaelites' vision for example, or all they more directly influenced and inspired. I grew up in Kansas with Watt. Anyone knows that painting by Watt, the most famous nineteenth century English painter. Far more famous than, I think, any painting by Turner. This is Watt's painting of a woman blindfolded, playing a harp, sitting on the world, wearing a kind of filmy dress. That was over my bed, and other such Pre-Raphaelite painters, and others directly inspired by them. So I'm the muggy American in these crowds, but too much infected by failed English idealism. But then you've got your problems too. As I sense the Canadian sensibility, there is a problem: being up against the United States culturally on the one side, and having a death-duelling, uninhabitable nature on the other.

These things by the way, come out of my own thinking over the years, but one day I had a really magnificent conversation with Bruce Elder. He and Marilyn and I and some other people went to the McMichael Gallery, outside of Toronto where they house so many of the Group of Seven. And I had been there before, but this was a particularly wonderful day, and we all got exhausted and had a conversation going, some fuss over Varley, and then sat outside and had a picnic, and discussed. Essentially I think Bruce has been the most clear about the desperation that's in this painting vis-à-vis Nature. People are always trying to lie about what they are so afraid of, and every now and again some poor bastard can't do it and breaks the rhythm of paint or print or something, with the truth, which finally is what I'm saying art is to me. It is someone who is able to say as instantly and forever what he or she does fully believe at that moment. And that's the best definition of any other capital "T" Truth, definitions which otherwise seem to have the states' stamp of approval behind them and so are automatically suspect. But that trembling should be there. It doesn't matter whether they are wrong or not really, so long as they are true to the nerve endings of what they see, of what they feel; so long as they are true to the meaning of what they are working on and the possibilities of such an art. Then if they can get that instant over into those art forms that permit us to share them, then the important thing has been done. That they may be factually in error or not doesn't seem terribly important. So again, let me say that with Arthur Lipsett, whom I want to present to you, first *21-87*.

[Screening: *21-87* (1962, Arthur Lipsett)]

I'd never even heard of Arthur Lipsett before this last month. I went to Vancouver and gave some shows there, and I asked to see some Canadian filmmakers whose work I hadn't been able to see. Someone said, "Did you ever hear of Arthur Lipsett?" And I said, "No." They said, "Well, maybe we can get some from the National Film Board" and so on. It turns out that the Canadian Film Board (where he worked and made all these films through their collection of film out-takes, and under their auspices) didn't seem to respect him at all. In fact, I've had confirmation that they're dumping all his films. They're throwing them

out in the trash! The print that I'm showing you right now comes from the trash, thanks to Richard Kerr. If I had just known of Arthur Lipsett in the '60s! So many people would have cared in the United States to see his work, and they would have felt it vibrantly. He would have been important. He's close in a way to Bruce Conner, but what's so wonderful is that he's *different* from Bruce Conner. It would have been wonderful to have had the two of them. It would have been like having two eyes along the same track of moving visual thinking of the media and the media-dominated world imagery in our society. Conner, as much as I respect and admire him, tends to shear over into camp a lot, to flub it off as a joke, to cover his own too strong feelings about what he's showing.

With Lipsett it's there immediately. I feel, as I only can feel, eternity in full: the immediacy of reception, of recognition. I'm kin instantly here now, I am sensing this man in this, one of the most boring places on earth, as the National Film Board finally came to be, already by 1963. Pumped up with the humorousness of its star, and glare, Norman McLaren. He had won an Academy Award, which destroyed his sensibility for many years, in my opinion. Down in the archives—for those of you who know archives, these are the tombs of human failure—you rummage among the out-takes. In these circumstances you are like some mad medieval priest, copying down Sappho in brutal peril of his soul, after the Pope had condemned copying and preserving Sappho. Lipsett was able to empathize directly with these strips of film, which is what makes it so much a film, and makes these films orders of human thinking.

I'm at one last night too, with the electrifying message that can't come often enough, and came finally, as it always will, through art making it new again. Through Elder's beautiful autobiographical film, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, the message is that love is not enough, that love and compassion are necessary. Lipsett also reverberates, as he was reverberating with whatever crafts, commercial or documented, were down there in those archives. The stupid, stupid idea of documentary, which had such power in the beginning when Grierson was young, and had come to be such a fake by the time he transported it all the way over here to your continent. Lipsett was sitting and taking those leavings, those dregs and pickings from among the documentaries. Then his raw sensibilities, his nerve ends in relation, his *empathy* (which is to me the most important word we have going now in the English language) enabled him to make this great film.

And also, it's a fact that this was an extraordinary work to be coming out of anywhere in 1963, of its kind. It's now come to be so imitated that most rock stars sell their craft, with watered down imitations of Bruce Conner, essentially, on video. Everyone says, "Oh have you seen that?" and so on. So the forms and styles of making come through, and quickly get co-opted and quickly get used to do the opposite of the original work. But all the same, the wonder is that the human sensibility, however watered down (like Tom Thomson has come to be in your mind) can enable you (at least this is my plea) to open yourself to imme-

diacy, and be there with the maker, when the immediate impulse was being realized. And some makers like Van Gogh and Thomson and Lipsett, in a way, in a different way, and Conner, make this immediacy more accessible, the immediacy of the making is included somehow in the process. Any questions, comments?

[Question from audience:] You just saw Lipsett a month ago or so. I'm curious about this idea of being with the maker. When the film started to roll, how long into the film [was it before] your emotions [were] engaged?

Thirty seconds. I realized, my God, you know. I expected something, I mean, I knew that they were going out of their way to find these things for me, so there must be something. But then I'm always expecting something, and I'm almost always disappointed. But I was just moved. First of all, before the brain is even through fidgeting, the stomach says, "my God," you know, draws in. I saw, and immediately felt him, and that to me is a rare quality. And then to know that if I'd happened to have seen Lipsett under the wrong circumstances, in passing, or in the '60s, it might have been harder to have that immediate impression.

[Question from audience:] About Tom Thomson as on the school calendar: Lipsett was much the same way in my part of Canada. We'd see him in a social studies class in low school. So there's sort of a connection there.

Well, as I said last night, these usurpations or these placeages [*sic*] can ruin things briefly. Kubelka's relationship with Beethoven is perhaps wrecked for life, because the Nazis used "Bo Bo Bo Bomm, Bo Bo Bo Bomm," to do their schtick, throughout his childhood. Now, it *is* important how things are encountered. It's also important that, whatever life these things are going to have on earth, now begins the completion of the magic circle. Lipsett's absolutely useless if his work doesn't take root in some person or another. And some won't like it, or they'll say, "What's he getting at?" Or "I don't get that," or whatever. That's okay because we

are wondrously that various. But this is where the work can now have a life on earth, despite the National Film Board. I mean I wouldn't want to be just against them, and I certainly don't want to speak against your institutes. Those of the United States are equal if not worse. They are probably worse, because they are more powerful, most of them. The institutional co-opting of the arts is devastating. Dante has to withstand twice or three times as many footnotes as there are texts. Most of the footnotes are utterly designed by academics, dead-in-the-head academics, over this cen-

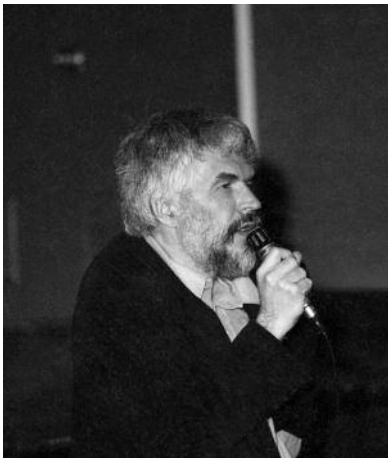


Photo: Robert Ramage

tury, determined to destroy the fear that this poetry has engendered in them.

That's maybe too harsh, because among them are also that brave number of people, academics, scholars and so on, who open themselves. I mean I don't think academics are worse at this than is any other field. Most of the so-called artists are absolutely confiscating the field by evasions and imitations, by watering down the strong sensibility by playtime, or by turning it into a hobby, or a habit, or a pastime between Math and English, or something. Most people in most fields stand in a human condition that this last film is really about. They are in such terror and such confusion that you can hardly blame them. They are as Baudelaire put it, "innocent monsters." But occasionally (this is available to anybody at any time) you can open yourself to the terror of life on earth, and with this terror also comes all the joy. These are tied together, otherwise you'd have one toasted weenie or marshmallow picnic in the wilds, while trying to pretend you're in a movie, I guess.

Jack Chambers I've been with for many, many years. I did get to correspond with him to some extent, and had one whole glorious day with him in London, Ontario. I was close to him and involved in getting his work over into the United States, as I would have Lipsett if I'd known he existed. He is also dead now, after ten years of slowly dying of cancer, across which time he made the film we're going to see today. I was electrified with it again, and much more than any earlier. I've always been partisan to *The Hart of London*. The other film I knew well was *R-34*, but *Circle* came full circle in my life just a month ago. So I want to share that with you quite selfishly, because I really want to see it again myself. [Screening: *Circle* (1968-69, Jack Chambers)]

So maybe we should just move on back and resonate with the sense of nature, as I want to light that up. This is a nature film. J.H.E. MacDonald tangled, but *not* swept and mowed a garden or backyard, so I would remind you of J.H.E. MacDonald, and put that there as a kind of shimmering introduction to this film. Jack Chambers' footage, similarly to Lipsett's, was footage that was taken for entirely other purposes. It's what's in himself that he has put vibrantly into this footage. This makes the end of the film one of the most vibrant and terrifying paradigms of our passage through life that I've ever seen.

Circle is divided into three parts. Jack Chambers is to me the master, almost the creator, of what I'm calling "the long montage." This is where he creates whole sections, as he does in *The Hart of London*. The first hour of the film is one long emotional similarity of section that trembles toward a giant splice. This splice happens in the second hour of that film. *The Hart of London* features a kind of montage of huge sequences of cuts. This is distinct from Eisenstein's sense of montage, where, at every cut, there is a reverberation that makes the combination of these two shots noticeable. Here you notice much more than A + B. In *The Hart of London* there's one giant conjunction that reverberates back across the whole earlier section of the film, more than any film would do, real-

ly creates a reverberation across the second half of the film. And they're absolutely dependent on each other. At those cuts and here at the first cut: preparing himself, photographing himself, preparing the film, and then what he *does* film, and then the whole paradigmatic ending sequence.

I want to take just a moment to show you some of the paintings of Jack Chambers, so that you can see that he went to Europe to study in Spain principally, to see all of European art, to fill himself with it. In Spain he met his wife Olga, and then returned to this country to spend the rest of his life. One of the reasons he was such a famous painter was because his early works were so much sucking on Europe: that European Surrealism. It's not Surrealist painting; it's certainly unique. It isn't an imitation of anything European, but it's infused with the ideas, the ideals of Surrealism. That's in 1972, when Chambers mastered the craft of representation in paint that made it possible for him to be recognized by the extreme Realist schools of painting that have re-emerged. In my opinion these are as desperate and awful a ploy as that of the Pre-Raphaelites' school, and also doomed to a horrible, grotesque decadence.

Unfortunately I don't really have anything else to show you of his work. I feel that it's with a true film however, such as the one you've just seen, and then with Jack Chambers' late paintings, that he comes to an envisionment that makes him close to what I call a sense of his essential spiritual content, or the task of Canadian aesthetics. Also I want to pay homage to Michael Snow, so that it isn't said that I am excluding him from this showing in any sense. His films are just long, and they require whole readings to themselves really, to see what he's about. But here is a painting by Michael Snow, which I was caring very much for before he ever made a film, and I was interested in him as a painter that far back. Let's see, this is 1962, and this would be from the era of painting of Michael Snow that had engaged me that far back. There is another one called *Theory of Love* from 1961. This kind of aesthetic has engaged him (so far as I'm familiar with his work) more recently.

But let me also say that here's a perfect example of why I've been unable to see Chambers' *Circle* as well, except when I saw it shortly after it was made. It's because I have a prejudice against structuralism. It is not against the great makers who are designated as structuralist filmmakers and painters, and whatever, but it's because I've found the aesthetic is easy to teach. It's easy for students to adopt superficially and think they've made something of significance. Its concept reverberates on a single idea of art: you have an idea, and the idea includes the tactics of making the work and then the work will essentially make itself. It's an aesthetic that's great in the hands of those who don't use it that way, but it is open to this weakness. Its Achilles heel is that its progenitor is probably the most boring student art in the history of the world, and it's also because it's easy to do: anyone can do it superficially. And I was totally exasperated with it and the whole aesthetics of the time.

I saw *Circle*, which I'd already heard about, and here again were the polemics of structuralism. Jack Chambers had made a film in which he went out, and from the same spot, photographed his backyard in the same way, all 365 days of the year. That's something that's easy to write about. That kind of trickery is a lot of fun for journalists to play with, so you get that kind of news. I just thought: Oh God, don't tell me Jack is also buying into this shoddy aesthetic, and so on. It really precluded me from seeing what's perfectly obvious if you're looking at the film. In the first place, it's a work of great, what I'll now call a long montage, in three sections. I was so exasperated, I took the first one to be just a structural tactic where he's sort of showing that he's getting his camera together and going to go out and do this thing that I'd already read he'd done. Then sure enough I was so annoyed that I was stupid and didn't see that this wasn't really what he'd done at all, he doesn't photograph. I mean it's a lie. He does photographs from the same vantage point, where he comes up against this inexorable and terrifying vision with a great variety of focus, of f-stop (that is the degree of exposure) but *also* with several lenses and with a constantly changing composition.

He's forever being fresh, just as fresh as Thomson and as Lipsett. Fresh with this inexorable vision, day after day. And I don't believe he did it every single day for 365 days, one year. What difference would it make except to some academic or journalist? He presents us in this film with this tough, inexorable, terrifying vision, with every ounce of his courage and energy, as he's dying, facing his backyard.

Migration, by David Rimmer: David Rimmer also is a case for me of a filmmaker who I was only allowed to see under the dominance of structural aesthetics. Those works that could be co-opted into that aesthetic were the only ones that circled into the U.S. or came to my attention. Though I had great respect for him as I do for many structural filmmakers, I really didn't get to see the wide variety of his workings and makings, until just a month ago. So that was a wonderful revelation, again another casualty of an aesthetic that essentially dominated the art worlds for over twenty years. There is something too easy and probably utterly hypocritical in the way in which it is taught, in which it is written about. That it's easy to write about has permitted that dominance, certainly over film and most of the other media, for that length of time. It's deadly in my opinion and it must be jettisoned. Then of course the sad thing will be that people will want to jettison everybody that ever had anything to do with structuralism or something like that. It's the politics: they do so interfere.
[Screening: *Migration* (1969, David Rimmer)]

This very unstructural work. I don't want to turn his beautiful art into an illustration totally, but at least to see if it joins these words that we've been exchanging. And to see if it can be felt that it has what I saw as a vibrant terror

in relation to nature, with regard to what we usually call nature: natural images from the wilds and so on. Let me just follow up on something: I think that it isn't fear of death that's the greatest terror of all. I fear, far more than dying, terror of nature in myself, even without any idea of salvation, or afterlife, or continuance in any sense whatever, or even the sense of purpose of my having been here in the first place; robbed of all those spiritual benefits that people had as easy assumption in earlier times. Robbed also of any sense that there may be any continuance of life on earth as we all sit under the threat of nuclear extinction. But these are not to me anyway, the greatest terrors, and where I feel terror it is terror of nature in myself. For me, I fear, for instance, insanity worse than death. That I'll lose my mind and even more than that, that I'll be overwhelmed by such proliferation and attention as you've just seen. I fear more than that, that I'll betray integrity—that is, the integrity of my being, that somehow I'll be tricked out so that I can no longer, I *will* no longer carry my form as that bird carries its form through migration. I will have lost my form so to speak.... I'm in most terror or far more than of death: of losing the integrity of form.

Then it is a good thing to say before Ellie Epps' film, *Notes on Origin*. I wasn't aware of her work at all: three films entirely. I saw all three of them the first time a month and a week ago, and met her. To me this next film also has something to do with that terror in resignation. If I become resigned as here, work is to me such a beautiful mediation, like in this film we're about to see: *Notes in Origin*. Is it possible in such resignations, still to be true to that which is given to me on earth to be true to, the integrity of my form?

[Screening: *Notes in Origin* (1987, Ellie Epp)]

I have to share with you the stories she told me about it, in particular about that shot over the ice with the trees in the distance. I hope it was visible to all of you: there was a beat constantly of the film, going like this. In wishing to gain all distance from what she was photographing, to get her own ego and the entire integrity of herself out of it, she placed the camera on a tripod on the ice and even used a cable, so that she would be some distance removed from the camera photographing these trees. But the ice carried her heartbeat over to the tripod and produced that beat on those trees. That's actually the heartbeat of the filmmaker, removed by cable, and standing some distance from the image she's taking.

Now I should give over talking, because thanks to the great and masterful editing of Bruce Elder, using the voices or the words at least, of Daniel Defoe and Ezra Pound and others, we have *1857 (Fool's Gold)*. I just want to pay tribute to it before going into it. To me, the very fact that he could continue after having made this work we're about to see, is significant; he's one of the greatest hopes to me—that he could not only continue, but go on to this major, immense work that he's been engaged in now for many years. It is the best tribute I know to the human spirit, in the face of what you're about to see.

[Screening: *1857 (Fool's Gold)* (1981, Bruce Elder)]

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