

Visionary Film and the “World’s Body”: Stan Brakhage and Theopoetic

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Amos Wilder’s 1964 article “Art and Theological Meaning” describes the necessity of openness to what he calls, drawing on poet/filmmaker Jean Cocteau as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the “secular transcendence” or “lay mystery” in modern art and culture. By employing this term Wilder – New Testament scholar, poet, and brother of the great American playwright Thornton Wilder – intended to convey a willingness to experience the divine not just in church and sacrament, but perhaps to an even greater extent in “secular” cultural forms in art and literature: “If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular.”¹ After the radical mid-century “death of God” theologies of Harvey Cox, Thomas J.J. Altizer et al, Heidegger’s (Nietzschean) dismantling of “onto-theology,” and in the wake of Bonhoeffer’s intimations of a “religionless Christianity,” the quest for a “secular transcendence” or “transcendence in immanence” entailed a search for a fresh theology which would leave behind dead propositionalism and be open to theophanies at the boundaries of poetry, creativity, and culture. Theopoetics, as initially described by writers like Amos Wilder and Stanley Hopper – and still deeply relevant to our own cultural situation “after the death of God”² – espouses the possibility of a new, embodied language for theology, where experience of the world becomes a medium in and through which the divine is communicated.³

¹ Amos Wilder, “Art and Theological Meaning,” in *The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 407-8.

² As described in John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

³ As an aside, much of my own work deals with “theological aesthetics” as developed by theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Richard Viladesau. The relationship between “theological aesthetics” and “theopoetics” might be described thusly: the latter subsists in a conceptual space “after the death of God,” the former “before” such an event took place (theo-

Art mediates such a secular transcendence, not by lifting us into an unearthly zone of pure contemplation, but by immersing us in the poetics of lived existence. For Wilder, a robust “aesthetic” must always be rooted in what he calls the “World’s Body,” a phrase taken from the poet John Crowe Ransom – in embodied, sensory engagement with the real world in its manifold, ‘messy’ complexity.⁴ The work of the artist, which deals in the “primordial givens” of sensation and desire, returns us to a Heideggerian “wonder” at what is “immediately presented to consciousness in touch, sight, and sound.”⁵ For Wilder, such “heightened awareness” of the world through art opens onto apocalypse – an unveiling of transcendence where myth and imagination are surer guides than scientific or “existential” theologizing. An important implication of theo-poetics is thus that the “sublime, unbaptized sensuous imaginative talents and works” of artists are necessary in order to prophetically “ferment” theology;⁶ openness to art’s baptismal immersion in the ‘secular’ world of *aisthesis*, of sensory perception, prevents docetism, what Wilder memorably terms the ministrations of “a spurious and phantom Christ.”⁷

As an example of art which engages with the World’s Body in the mode of mythopoeisis, wonder and the “primordial givens” of *aisthesis*, I propose consideration of the work of prolific American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1933-2003). Over the course of almost fifty years, Brakhage scratched, painted, hand-processed, and generally experimented in every conceivable way with celluloid in the effort to give the film-viewer a new set of eyes – eyes which would see the world afresh, attentive to both its beauty and messiness. Brakhage’s “lyrical” films, the best known of which are probably *Window*

aesthetics thus being akin to what David Miller calls “theo-poetry”). Yet of course this bifurcation can oversimplify the matter, a situation I hope to address in future research.

⁴ Amos Wilder, “Christianity and the Arts: The Historic Divorce and the Contemporary Situation,” *The Christian Scholar* 40:4 (December 1957): 261-268.

⁵ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 4.

⁶ Wilder, “Art and Theological Meaning,” 413.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 410.

Water Baby Moving (1959) and the epic *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) explore autobiographical images of birth, childhood, nature, sex, and being-in-the-world with a prelapsarian naïvete; his more ‘abstract’ (though he hated the term) creations penetrate beyond natural forms to cascades of light, colour, and movement, approximating an Abstract Expressionist painting “come to life.”⁸ Throughout his work, his filmmaking style was organic, exploratory, hands-on, and above all deeply personal – with most every completed piece identified with a hand-scratched, almost childlike, “By Brakhage.” The rapidly moving shapes and figures of his most abstract works approximate what he called “closed-eye vision” – what we see on the inside of our eyelids when we shut them tight. Taken as a whole, Brakhage’s films offer us the possibility of a world that “shimmers” with mystery and beauty – pregnant with what the Greeks called *thaumazein*, primordial wonder. In his films, the mythopoeic, “visionary”⁹ possibilities of the filmic medium are pushed to the very limit – without actors, script, soundtrack, what is left is pure light.

How does this artistic practice inform an embodied theopoetics? Brakhage’s filmic visions may perplex and frustrate. Yet what I see in Brakhage’s films is the possibility of a new way of seeing – in Wilder’s paradigm, an *apocalyptic* eye that ‘lifts the veil’ on the flesh of the world in order for us to see the “glory and freshness” in each created form. By connecting filmic experience to a preverbal, primordial realm of imagination – literally image-making, a process of perception, appropriation, and creation not unlike William Blake’s “double vision” – Brakhage’s films point us toward a cinematic theopoetics, a renewed experience of the divine in the somatic, sensuous contours of the “World’s Body.” As Brakhage wrote in words reminiscent of William Blake, “the Vision of the saint

⁸ R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 3.

⁹ See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

and the artist” is precisely “an increased ability to see” – an expanded eye, open to dreams, hallucinations, and epiphanies, for Brakhage open even to the obscure “eyes” of animals and insects and the electrical impulses which make human seeing physiologically possible.¹⁰ Yet such a complex openness is guided by the simple “vision” of the child, holding on to wonder rather than seeking to, in the fashion of modernity, dominate and classify. By pushing the medium-specific qualities of film and photography to an extreme – shimmering light, movement, montage, ghostly presences, landscapes tumbling over each other in an array of semiotic excess – Brakhage’s films point us toward a dialectical “double vision” where we can begin to perceive (to borrow again from Blake) “Infinity in a grain of sand / And eternity in an hour.” As Brakhage wrote of those who sought to practice a “visionary film,”

“The artist has carried the tradition of vision and visualization down through the ages. In the present time a very few have continued the process of visual perception in its deepest sense and transformed their inspirations into cinematic experiences. [These few filmmakers] create a new language made possible by the moving picture image... They are essentially preoccupied by and deal imagistically with – birth, sex, death, and the search for God.”¹¹

Brakhage is precisely one of these “visionary filmmakers.” My theopoetic soundings in Brakhage’s filmography are in the tradition of R. Bruce Elder, a philosopher and important alternative filmmaker in his own right, who argues for “critical practices that are open to unauthorized modes of experience” in our understanding of Brakhage’s work.¹² The way we usually approach art tends to downplay notions of the sacred or

¹⁰ Stan Brakhage, “Metaphors on Vision,” 72.

¹¹ Ibid., 72.

¹² Elder, 5.

transcendent, favouring structural, sociopolitical, or semantic analysis – all valuable tools for understanding. Yet, as Elder describes it, such modes of aesthetic inquiry can become a capitulation to modernity, fitting the artwork into a preconceived, rationally discernible structure rather than allowing it to be in all its provocative complexity:

“Many commentators yearn to tame art’s unruly power by turning it into a form of assertoric discourse. They want to convert the unruly, raw, and strange aesthetic experience into a cognitive experience, to flatten it into a form that modernity might validate. They do this by writing criticism that dismisses not only those vague but powerful intimations of the divine that drive artists to make art, but also those non-categorical apprehensions that artworks elicit.”¹³

What Brakhage’s films disclose is not only an art-historical genealogy in the context of twentieth-century art and literature – an “imagistic” creative practice in the vein, as Elder reminds us, of the poets Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson – but a moment of overshadowing, where the divine is intimated as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Brakhage said his films were about birth, sex, death, and the search for God. Watching them, or at least the small sample I have seen of the some 340 films he made over the course of his life, his work becomes in itself a theopoetics, a poetry made not of words but of images, experiences, and dreams. In brief, Brakhage’s films allow us to approach the possibility of an embodied theopoetics in a new, image-oriented paradigm, pointing us towards a better understanding of Hölderlin’s phrase, much-beloved by Heidegger: “poetically man dwells upon the earth.”

¹³ Elder, 5.

“Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green?” How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? ... Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the ‘beginning was the word.’ ”

- Stan Brakhage, “Metaphors of Vision”

This famous quote from Brakhage compares the “vision” made possible by film to the preverbal, prelapsarian perception of a baby. The infant, we can imagine, experiences the world through a kind of synaesthesia where the activities of the various senses are as yet undifferentiated and the world of Things appears as a single, undulating surface of as-yet-unnamed phenomenality. Before we know what “Green” is, before we know what colours, shapes, and smells are as distinct phenomena, we “see” (or better, “experience”) these things in a different way. As R. Bruce Elder writes, “a central proposition of Brakhage’s film aesthetics is that film can revivify this primordial, corporeal awareness,” not simply by returning us to a childhood state but by infusing a preverbal, embodied sensoriness – a kind of receptivity, Wilder’s “heightened awareness” – into our ordinary way of looking.¹⁴

Perhaps this same preverbal, primordial reality is described by Jean-Luc Marion when he calls the chaotic, pulsating manifold accessed by sensory experience the “flux of the visible,” which like a “river of formless colours” surrounds our bodies and provides the

¹⁴ Elder, 14.

ground for our perception of discrete phenomena.¹⁵ For Marion, Kantian “intuition” (*intuitas*) is what allows us to make individuated forms out of the chaos, arresting the constant “slipperiness” of the visible through the organizing power of the eye.¹⁶ Intuition thus consists of a kind of active framing or fixing, which Marion sees as the original meaning of *intuitas* – guarding or keeping “custody” over the visual. Applied to the film frame, the paradox of cinema becomes clear. The filmic frame “fixes” the visible in a finite form, allowing us only to see a certain, square slice of reality – it is a tool of ocular organization, a “tutored” way of seeing in Brakhage’s terminology. Yet as Brakhage reminds us, there is more contained in the frame – or more accurately, in 24 frames per second, showed sequentially – than can be grasped by the structuring, intuitive eye. Rather, we can imagine a more perfect poetry, an Edenic, primordial “eye” which sees even on the limited space of the screen the “shimmering” surface of reality – bringing us into communion with what I am calling the “World’s Body.”

Brakhage began his career by making films such as *Reflections on Black* (1955) and *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1955) which take the archetypal experience of the “trance” as a metaphor of cinematic vision. Here we are immersed into the perceptual world of characters who are blind or dreaming. This comes, in part, through mise-en-scene – the dreamlike quality of the imagery itself. Yet for Brakhage, unlike for example a “dream” in a film by a Surrealist filmmaker like Luis Buñuel, the “dreaming” extends to the filmic process, pushing gently at the conventional boundaries of the medium – negative images, hand-processed celluloid, scratches on the filmstrip which, when projected, appear as rapidly vibrating ruptures of the white screen through the image.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Idol or the Radiance of the Painting,” *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

Through a detour through found-footage (occasioned by a collaboration with Joseph Cornell) and a type of “city poem” (*The Wonder Ring*, 1955), Brakhage stumbled upon what P. Adams Sitney calls “the lyrical film,” which “postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film.”¹⁷ The camera “eye” in its constant, handheld movement becomes a cipher for the very act of seeing. This roving, lyrical eye, however, also includes montage or editing, superimposition, and the practices of post-production, insofar as these replicate the structures of consciousness. The iconic image of Brakhage is as a solitary figure swinging a 16mm camera through the forest, attentive to each detail as it passes by his lens.

Brakhage’s concerns are everyday – exceedingly particular – yet broad in their resonance.¹⁸ His lyrical films from the 1960s and 70s often turned the lens onto his own friends and family, resulting in a series of portraits both intimate and universal in their appeal. Here is the messy, real-world life of the Brakhage family – and yet, through film, we can see the beauty of the moment. The seminal *Window Water Baby Moving* shows the birth of the filmmaker’s first child, through a non-linear narrative – we cut from the baby, to the birth, to the pregnant belly of Brakhage’s wife, then back to the baby, in a roughly cyclical pattern. Along the way, however, the camera “eye” is fascinated by such details as the soft light streaming through the window and the glistening water in the bathtub. This is not just a home movie, but a kind of lyrical visual poem, film as poetry without words – we are seeing the birth of a child through the filmmaker’s eyes, as an aesthetic and quasi-religious, not just necessary, event and/or ritual. Babies recur throughout Brakhage’s films, as in *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) and *Dog Star Man*, a symbol of regeneration, familial bonds, and innocence. *Scenes from Under Childhood*

¹⁷ Sitney, 160.

¹⁸ Rebecca A. Sheehan, “Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday,” *Screen* 53:2 (2012): 118-135.

(1967-1970), inspired by the music of Oliver Messiaen, goes along with the passage from “Metaphors of Vision” as a more sustained attempt to express in cinematic terms what the world looks like to a child – even to a fetus in the womb! However, through all these iterations the figure of the child is not idealized. For one, we are often looking at Brakhage’s own children, real human beings rather than ideal types. Second, however, childhood remains ultimately inaccessible to us, those whose eyes have already begun the symbolic death (a “fall” into language) which is capitulation to the way of seeing characterized by classification and order. There is no way back to (perceptual) Edenic innocence, to the primordial “eye” of the child – “one can never go back, not even in imagination.”¹⁹

Sex is similarly treated by Brakhage in a way that is not sensationalized, but deeply tied to natural rhythms and, perhaps most surprisingly in our sex-obsessed culture, to love and family. Here films such as *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959) and the *Sexual Meditations* cycle (1970-72) embed sex in relationality, the procession of the seasons, and the natural world – the conflation of “bodies,” heavenly and earthly (as in the cross-cutting between the woman’s body and solar flares in *Dog Star Man*), in the context of real-world sensuality and relationships. If the child is reminiscent of the Blakean “Song of Innocence,” sex moves toward the “Song of Experience,”: “Brakhage, like Blake, describes the sources of renewal as an innocence of the senses and erotic union, and, again like Blake, suggests that alone each is insufficient and that together they open the still very difficult possibility of physical and spiritual resurrection.”²⁰

¹⁹ Sitney, 193.

²⁰ Ibid., 194.

There is also death – for example, in *The Dead* (1960), which explores a graveyard even as it depicts living subjects radiating a (superimposed) “spectral light”;²¹ *Burial Path* (1977), which alternates between a dead and living bird, *Sirius Remembered*, which follows the decomposition of the deceased family dog, and *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1971), which takes footage from an autopsy film. Birth, sex, and death form a kind of mythic structure around which Brakhage’s own life, ur-narratives, and poetic imagery coalesce.

The films which have left the greatest impact on me have been those which plunged into near-total abstraction – particularly *Mothlight* (1963) and the *The Dante Quartet* (1987). *Mothlight* was made by literally attaching pieces of dead moths – wings, legs, and so on – to the filmstrip and optically printing the result. It is a bizarre yet breathtaking film – the wings of the moths merge into, at 24 frames per second, a dazzling array of ornate, delicate forms. *The Dante Quartet* – which consists of four parts, mirroring Dante’s descent into Hell – was made by painting on the celluloid, a technique so strange and so far removed from what we normally consider cinema the results have to be seen to be believed – rhythmic, colourful and emotional constructions that evoke both the “transcendent quest” and the “apocalyptic sublime.”²² Each frame is a Turner-esque masterpiece in its own right; together with texts from Dante, they convey the darkness of hell and the bright lights of heaven with an unearthly glow. *Text of Light* (1974) is an entire film made from the light refracted through a glass ashtray. Other hand-painted, hand-processed films of particular significance for me are the beautiful *Stellar* (1993), the *Persian Series* from the early 2000s, and *Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* (1997). Fred Camper terms films from this later stage of Brakhage’s *oeuvre*

²¹ Ibid., 173.

²² Brett Kashmere, “Adventures in Perception: Stan Brakhage’s *Dante Quartet* and the Romantic Tradition,” *Splice* (Winter 2005): 6-9.

“light-poems,” and the description is apt. These are poems made not out of words, but out of light, colour, and texture. Another helpful term Brakhage himself introduced for a time is “imagnostic” filmmaking, film as a tactile way of knowing. “By attacking the surface of the film and by using materials which reflect back on the conditions of film-making, Brakhage begins to formulate an equation between the process of making film and the search for consciousness...”²³ Film becomes itself a mode of perception, the filmstrip playing a role analogous to our intuition as it is “imprinted” (again, Kant comes to mind) by contact with other phenomena.

A final connection to be mentioned is the concept of myth. As Brakhage’s friend Fred Camper wrote, the filmmaker was “omnivorous in his acknowledged influences,” artistic, literary, philosophical, and religious. The titles of his films often reflect classical myths and archetypes. The “protagonist” of *Dog Star Man* is particularly interesting as a kind of mythic hero, making his way up the mountain with an axe – perhaps symbolizing, as Sitney suggests, the “cutting” and splicing of film. Rooted deeply in the natural world, the *Dog Star Man* is at the intersection of animal and angel (“dog” and “star,” respectively), the heavenly and the earthly, and together with the woman forms a kind of microcosm of the mythic universe.

Brakhage offers us, in the words of Bruce Elder, “a poetics that construes the creative process as one that begins beyond the self of the individual poet, and is affected by – in tune with – all the fluctuations in the circumambient field.”²⁴ Such an aesthetic, in the tradition of the poet Charles Olson, necessitates an appropriate vocabulary. An “imagnostic” mode of filmmaking is a form of externalized thinking – knowing through images, rather than through words. Brakhage’s criticism of Cocteau, whom he greatly

²³ Sitney, 158.

²⁴ Elder, 9.

admired, was an overreliance on text – for Brakhage, though textual/linguistic and narrative elements have a place in cinema, the true currency of film is images. To use images as a way of interacting with the “field” in which one finds oneself – ontologically speaking, to use images as a means of accessing Being – is a radical departure from our normal way of thinking and filmmaking, though perhaps one more in tune with how our visually-oriented brains actually function. Mythopoeic, visionary film involves an attunement (*Stimmung*) with one’s environment, a phenomenological reduction which allows subject and object to meet in one continuous “body.” This is, as in the thought of Merleau-Ponty, an analogue for the complex, sensual contours of human “perception.”

What then is the theopoetic (or, more simply, theological) significance of these films?

Bruce Elder situates Brakhage’s films in relation to what he calls the historical passage from “the givenness of nature to the encumbered modern self.” In the premodern world, nature drew its inherent value and goodness from its status as a good creation of a good God (as highlighted by Augustine in *City of God*).²⁵ In modernity, however, this situation has collapsed so that material beings and phenomena have no “ground” in terms of a theological *arche* or even a grounding in nature itself. The body itself thus becomes the last holdout of a sense of grounding or meaningfulness - “flesh grants us a primordial enjoyment of the field within which we have our being.”²⁶ Drawing on Heidegger, Elder suggests that “our embodied nature makes possible the disclosure of Being.” It is in our own flesh we come to an awareness of our ontological situatedness, an awareness with theological implications. Brakhage’s priority, according to Elder, is thus recovering “the forms of visionary experience proper to [one’s] own body.”²⁷ There is much to be said about this statement. But the idea connects nicely with Amos Wilder’s suggestions about

²⁵ Ibid., 8.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

the “World’s Body” as the locus of a “secular transcendence”; we can and must pursue a “visionary” experience at the point at which our bodies intersect the shimmering flesh of the world, open to the possibility of revelation of the God “in whom we live, move, and have our being.” Stan Brakhage’s “visionary film” serves as a model for how this embodied transcendence might look and feel – a revelation, after Wilder, of the sacred in the secular.

The contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney has echoed Wilder’s plea for a “secular transcendence” in his postsecular, phenomenological approach to the possibility of revelation, drawing our attention to the “flesh” of the world as the arena for divine disclosure.²⁸ Kearney posits the possibility of “anatheism,” a return to God “after” God beyond the impasse of dogmatically opposed atheism and theism. For him, an effective hermeneutic of religious belief requires a two-way transition between “art to faith” and “faith to art,” a process of enfleshment and appropriation which he provocatively describes in the language of “transubstantiation” – the sacred manifesting itself in the secular. Kearney’s thought pivots on the notion of an existential “wager” on God – a movement of risk, hope, and opening, which rather than closing itself off in one position (belief or unbelief) involves a new orientation towards art, religion, and culture. Drawing particularly on the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Kearney posits the “flesh” as the site of this anatheistic, theopoetic encounter. However, this is not simply human flesh but flesh conceived of as a ground of perception - construed as simultaneously Spirit and flesh, sacred and secular, divine and human – united by what Merleau-Ponty calls the “natal pact” of being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty’s work resists

²⁸ See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

a model of perception based on the “static singular perspective” seemingly implied by the single lens of the camera.²⁹

There are other links to be explored here too – perhaps a connection with Jacques Maritain’s notion of “connaturality,” a kind of resonance or exchange between Self and Things which serves as the basis for artistic practice. There is also the question of Brakhage’s more explicit appropriations of Christian imagery, as in *Christ Mass Sex Dance* (1991). However, here – to use a filmmaking metaphor – we must restrict our focus.

I would like to conclude with another quote from Fred Camper:

“Stan Brakhage’s films explode with sensual beauty: bursts of color heightened by extreme contrasts in hue and shape and by stunning depth effects; more monochromatic passages of nonetheless equal intensity that sensitize one to the glories of tiny differences; nearly flat, slowly changing fields of color that wave like blankets in the wind, only to be interrupted by a cut that opens up a vast space; rapid explosions of paint that seem just on the cusp of suggesting a nameable object. The viewer is taken through such complexities of experience that the effect is a little like having one’s eyes flushed out. But the work generally doesn’t aspire to what is often meant by purity; instead, it’s chock-full of the conflicting emotions and general messiness of life itself.”

Wilder’s contention was that the “sublime, unbaptized sensuous imaginative talents and works” of artists are necessary to “ferment” theology.³⁰ If Brakhage’s films can inform a

²⁹ Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, “From Vision to Touch: Returning Beauty to Lived Experience,” *The Other Journal* (May 2009).

theopoetics, they do so by helping us embed our own imagining bodies in the World's Body, seeing in the "messiness" of life and the flux of the visible echoes of the transcendent. A cinematic theopoetics, engaging in a kind of "imagnostic," visionary experience, has the potential to transform not only our lived experience but our theology, making a space for theophanies in the everyday – birth, sex, death, light, darkness – and thus preferring a flesh-and-blood Incarnation over a "phantom Christ."

³⁰ Wilder, "Art and Theological Meaning," 413.