

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH STAN BRAKHAGE

Stan Brakhage was America's preeminent avant-garde filmmaker. From the early 1950s until his death in 2003, he made more than 300 films, each an adventure in visual perception. His films have astonishing variety, ranging from psychodrama and hand-painted animation to diaristic study, abstract collage, and epic lyricism. In this talk, opening a month-long retrospective, Brakhage humorously recalled his brief flirtation with Hollywood. For Brakhage, film was not primarily a narrative medium: "There are other things that are more natural to film, and that's where I try to begin. Resisting story, but something more like how the mind thinks—free of words." Here, he introduces a screening of *Desistfilm*, *The Way to Shadow Garden*, *In Between*, *Reflections on Black*, *The Wonder Ring*, and *Night Cats*, followed by a discussion of his work with Chief Curator David Schwartz.

Introduction by Stan Brakhage to a screening of short films and a Pinewood Dialogue moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 9, 1991):

SCHWARTZ: And now, Stan Brakhage. (Applause)

BRAKHAGE: Thank you, thank you. Just a few things to say beforehand and then after you've seen all the films I'll be glad to entertain some of your questions.

First of all, when I made these films I went on instinct very largely. And particularly those you're going to see on tonight's program, and all the ideas that I had then, and still today, were derived from looking at my own films and trying to understand what it was I had been compelled to do. I was—as a child and when I began making these films, and still am now—a constant movie-goer. In fact, movies were used as the most inexpensive form of babysitting for me across large periods of my childhood in the middle of a divorce when my mother really couldn't afford any other way to keep me occupied while she earned a living for both of us. So they were intrinsic with me, and when I began making, I began making along the line of what were the most interesting to me, then at seventeen years old movies I was then seeing, which were really Italian neo-realism, basically. Little did I know at that point that that was, at the moment, a kind of crossroads for the commercial international commercial cinema—a crossing of

earlier Realist ideas (that had come out of [Emile] Zola, for example, and the early stage in France), and Surrealism ([Jean] Cocteau), and that [Frederico] Fellini was then going to become a major representative of that growth in the world.

During the making of most of the films that you'll see on this program, in fact all of them, it still lingered in the back of my mind that I probably eventually would go to Hollywood. And hoping to get there just at the point that the renaissance was occurring (Laughs)... or that the Irish Abbey theater-ness of it was beginning... or whatever! And that never happened—because something else was happening.

Now recently I've had to rethink (because of hiring in the faculty where I teach at the University of Colorado): what is it that you would give to a film student to begin with that would be comparable to, let's say, line drawing that painter students for centuries have received as a beginning discipline? And the word "discipline" helped me; and actually John Writer (an older filmmaker) proposed that "story" would be that thing that would be comparable to line drawing; that in making a film, "story" would be it.

I bristled tremendously at this, because it seems to me most of my life, and instinctively (as I think you'll see in these films), there's been a resistance to story. All of these films have some story—at least those that we'll see on the program—but there's a bristling at that possibility. And not just that kind of bristling to say, "Well, we'll put the middle at the beginning and then the end in the middle and then begin at the end, or shift around Aristotle's imperatives." But, really, that the very act of telling a story—my feeling was—is something that language can do, and that the moving visual medium is very inept at [doing]. So that it (understandably!) takes a hundred million dollars, a gigantic crew, camera people, a union working overtime, to achieve—to squeeze out of this recalcitrant medium-story telling. It's a tough, hard thing to do, whereas there are other things that are more natural to film, and that's where I try to begin. Resisting story, but something more like how the mind thinks—free of words.

So then I think, at that point, I should turn these varieties over to you. Right at the start. Desistfilm was made directly out of the surface of daily living: of what I and my high school friends were then facing. Then you see a progress of these through the dreams—the nightmare dreams—close friends of mine were having. Or Reflections on Black will put me so much in mind (as it always does) of New York City, where I was then living on the Lower East Side, in conditions which I am, yes, symbolizing, creating a dreamscape for, but which in fact weren't too distinct from what the living then was for me. The background noises of it, the stilted, mannered, awkward conjunctions of people trying to get to know each other in some catastrophe of filth and city horror.... (Laughter) And so on! (Laughs) And yet to do this not with story, but to be more true to how the mind's actually moving with moving visual images. So that's what I was trying to do. Thank you. (Applause)

[Film screening]

Pinewood Dialogue with Stan Brakhage, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 9, 1991):

BRAKHAGE: Thank you, David, the programming was very good. I mean, it's hard for me to imagine, when I read somewhere, what order someone has made of something. Then I see, and I see all kinds of things that I hadn't seen before, because of the sensitive anthologizing. And also the projectioning [sic] is just wonderful here, you're so lucky to have such a place as this. And I often say—when I go

places, say: "Well, I'm not really an experimental filmmaker, but the projectioning is often very experimental." (Laughs) So it's really excellent here—and it's a good-feeling auditorium. So I guess with whatever time we have left, I just open myself to your questions and comments and try to entertain those as best I can, yes?

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Isn't material in your film *Wonder Ring* associated with Joseph Cornell?

BRAKHAGE: Well, yes, he commissioned that film actually, and in a wonderful way. First of all, he was in deep grief that the Third Avenue elevated [train] was going to be torn down; it was terribly important to him. And so he wanted a filmmaker to film it. Parker Tyler suggested me, and Joseph (being as cautious as he always was) said, well, he has to arrange a meeting. And it was so typical: he chose that... I was given tickets to go to a special occasion where Eva Le Gallienne was reading Hans Christian Anderson's stories at an anniversary of Christian Anderson in the New York Public Library. And I found myself the only man there and not very well-dressed for the occasion! (Laughs) I dressed as best I could, but I was living in that place you saw in Reflections on Black at the time, so... (Laughs) And then I was the only man there. And then I noticed there was another man, a kind of really thin, very shy man, that kept peering out from behind bookshelves and pillars and so on. (Laughs) So he was watching how I would react to Hans Christian Anderson before coming up and introducing himself. And then he asked if I had ever ridden on the Third Avenue L. I lived a block from it. but I never had. So he then sent some tokens in an envelope in the mail. Six of them as I recall. (Laughs) So I rode up and down dutifully all six times, and then he called. And I was properly enthusiastic, so then he sent more tokens, and three rolls of Kodachrome. And so that's how that film came to exist.

And then he made his own version of it. In other words, I gave him all the outtakes, and a print, of course. He then made his own version of it, which is the *Wonder Ring* as you'd see it in a mirror, which we sort of pronounced "Gnir Rednow," not knowing how else to deal with it. And that's a marvelous film that I hope you get to see some time. It's quite different from this one.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Were the actors in your first few films actually aspiring actors and actresses?

BRAKHAGE: They had done plays, high school plays, and things of that sort—now that's in the earlier ones. *Reflections on Black* were some people living here in New York who were aspiring to an acting career

Let's see, let's start with Desistfilm: Really, they're just high school friends. One of them, the man investigating his navel—(and I always determine if the times are happier times as to whether people laugh or not at that film, so I was glad to hear some laughter today!)—he's actually one of Canada's foremost character actors now. For the last several vears he's been permanent with the Shaw group (that's at Niagara, where they perform mostly Bernard Shaw). But the rest... Really, even at that time he wasn't what you'd call "an aspiring actor" he hadn't appeared in anything, you know. The man who holds up the matches is Larry Jordan, the filmmaker; all these people went off in different directions, and did many different things. The one using the mandolin for a machine gun was voted America's Father of the Year one year, for example. (Laughter) So they all had various careers. The woman got famous for a while contacting the ghost of Jimmy Dean in medium sessions... (Laughter) So, on and on. But [Walter] Newcombe (who plays in that film, and who is the only protagonist in *The* Way to Shadow Garden) is a schoolteacher who—I guess his claim to fame, like they say-is he organized the teacher's union in Denver. And so they all did various things.

My sense of the acting, of course, is that I am a great respecter [sic] of the art of acting. And in fact that's the primary reason I (and I think practically anyone else) goes to the movies, so to speak. It's just been a flourishing of something extraordinary in our times. And so the movies there are very much a recorder of these extraordinary performances. And these performances are much changed than they would be on the stage (I mean, of course, by the power of the movies). So that's a craft, an elegant art that I deeply admire.

It, again, was not one that interested me all that much. Even when I had real young professional

actors in *Reflections on Black*, I don't direct them in ways to fully use their sensitivities. They tend to look over-acted—they over-act; and they are forced to do that by me. And I don't really have a very clear, you know, explanation for that, except to say that people in ordinary life, it seems to me, over-act—ordinarily in crisis. And I was again trying, somehow—by subverting story and narrative drama and so on—I was (not very consciously)—I was accepting of what is an awkward and disturbing acting, which tends to say "I am acting."

You could almost say it's like an embarrassing... embarrassment, that's again and again created. I don't, finally, know whether it works or not. I don't, finally, think that there was much future for what we then called "psychodrama" or "closet drama."

But I do know this: that the roots of any making seem, again, to go back to "psychodrama"—to "psyche" at least. Or to some kind of notion: if drama is going to be in film; and if you do accept that "story as a basis" would be like line drawing for painting in beginning at film; then certainly for any possible art of film, it would have to tap "psyche" in a way that Hollywood deliberately, and very carefully, absolutely excludes from its making. It does so, I think, deeply-on an unconscious level—because its chore is more of a social one. It is (as I've felt) the social dance, or the "tribal dance." So it cannot allow "psyche" in (except as "psyche" is everyone's; or "the group psyche"). So the roots of any given art, probably, are in touching "psyche" in that sense, and the psychodrama is something that... it seems quite natural as a beginning. Then, (as you've already seen in this first program), I'm growing beyond (I don't say beyond, I'm not going to say certainly above) but out of those possibilities.

I've entertained your questions so far I don't know where I am! (Laughs) Let me ask one question: if you go further east where we now are, do you come to Flushing? (Laughter) Is that out east from here? Yes? Well, then to answer the question at the dinner: David, I have been to Flushing before. And what reminded me of it was seeing *Reflections on Black*, because somewhere between Manhattan and Flushing, where I used to go to visit Joseph, was a recording studio. And it probably was one of this complex of buildings—I mean they did the best professional recording out here. So I, with great

terror and trepidation, got on the subway and came (which became the elevated, or whatever it was, anyway), and got out here. Managed to get off at the right stop. I suddenly had vague memories, "Yes I have been here before," and the reason I had to make this trip is that I had sent the film out to have a soundtrack put on. These worried engineers called me and said, "We have a clatter in the background that we can't get rid of and we're not going to print it unless you come out, and listen to it, and give us the okay."

I knew what it was: it was that the only way I had to record anything was with one of those old Bell and Howells that had a magnetic stripe. You couldn't muffle the Bell and Howell better than that! I was extemporizing on the piano in that sequence, (and with the humming then, later), in order to make this track. And so they just gave me a very hard time and finally I had the hubris (I mean, coming from a burned out building on the Lower East Side where I was then living) to say to them, "Listen this was a great performance by a great pianist and even though it has this noise in the background it must be preserved." So they forged ahead. (Laughs) Thus the film had the soundtrack. So, yes, I have been to Flushing before.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Could you talk about your early career as an artist? How did you decide where you wanted to go in your explorations with film?

BRAKHAGE: Yes, well it was then (and it still is) very confusing, especially for film, where the question is: Is it an art at all? I have, after all this struggle, come to be convinced that it can be, but whether it yet is or not... I'm not sure. Has something yet been made of real lasting value? And then, even if it were, the question still sits there: Could we preserve it if it were? Or is there or is it all kind of sand blowing in the wind? So those are the dilemmas.

I mean, just put it simply (far too simply): I wanted to be a poet since I was eight or nine years old, and the very idea that I would end up working with a medium that involved such equipment, and complexity, and such expense—such a terrifying expense!—is just appalling to me. I mean, I don't know how it happened. I wonder what I did that was so bad in some previous reincarnation to be stuck

with this. There's that aspect which I was early on aware of. Because I just thought of myself as a poet making a film, like Jean Cocteau did, or like others did. You know: [W.H.] Auden did a soundtrack for Night Mail, and Dylan Thomas was variously involved with film... I thought, you know, I was doing something really more like Cocteau (or hoping to, aspiring to...)

But then what I did wasn't really all that much like Cocteau, as you saw. You know, there are certain obvious imitations from him. But, basically, it's not really cinema at all like his. His really is a literary cinema, and much as I love literature, right from scratch I began just intrinsically resisting it as an influence. Even by the time of making all these...by the way, there are two films earlier than Desistfilm. One was very modeled after Italian neo-realist work, and to some extent after Orson Welles. The second one was really very much Orson Welles, and Carol Reed, in some sense. It was close enough to that Hollywood standard that it actually got me a job to understudy [Alfred] Hitchcock. That's a film called Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection. These were both rather long films for beginning films, one was half an hour and the other about thirty-five minutes.

And then came *Desistfilm*. And David's right to choose *Desistfilm* in this limited retrospective because *Desistfilm* is *my* real beginning, where I wasn't any longer... (how shall I say?) enthralled by the early movie-going. But then, for years, still, I had the assumption—and probably it was still lingering there by the time I made *Nightcats*. I think *Nightcats* was the last trip to LA, and that was where I'd had this offer—and turned it down—from the Hitchcock studios to study under him, and then to make films in the Hitchcock TV series.

So I don't know how I did that at that time. Actually, I never actually had the guts to call them up and say, "I'm not doing it," I just sort of let all our contacts lapse and they kept calling and leaving their message for me to call back. Because I sat in the cowardness, and in a state of terror. I was living in a Los Angeles Mexican slum with my high school friend Ramiro Cortez's mother, who was despising both of us that we weren't out getting a job. (Laughs) And I was going to be paid (and this is we're talking way back then in the 1950s)—I was going to be paid six hundred dollars a week! Just to

go to school! And study under Hitchcock. And I just let it drift away... So that's where I really first really had the sense of what at least what kind an artist I would aspire to be. And what kind of an art I thought film could be. And that it was not going be possible in Hollywood.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Why not?

BRAKHAGE: Well, why—oh God, how can I tell you unless you've been there? (Laughter) And walked through those thick carpets? (Laughter) And encountered, in 1952, a woman in a pale lavender gown in the afternoon, a strapless and practically backless so that cleavage was showing at the bottom, with slightly tinted platinum hair, leading you through this thick carpet to a desk as big as this whole front three rows behind which sat her tin—twin sister who then—("tin" was a nice pun) (Laughter)—who then escorted you into a little wizened man sitting behind a larger desk being brought his milk in the afternoon, and talking to Loretta on the phone, and calming her down. And being told by this little man that Alfred Hitchcock was the world's greatest filmmaker. And being so overwhelmed at this point that I couldn't say, "No!" You know, I just... (Laughs) All I was doing was grappling with the seat that was enfolding me. (Laughs) So, I knew they'd kill me. I knew that they'd kill people that were a lot stronger than me— Orson Welles for example. Or... I knew right at that point what had happened to Charles Laughton, because he'd gone too far with Night of the Hunter. How they could take—away from him, entirely!— Norman Mailer's Naked and the Dead, and give to such a slouch as Rouben Mamoulian (who made a very bad movie out of it). That literally, it's slaughter! I mean, I don't know, is that enough? Otherwise you have to go see for yourself what a canning factory it

And then, having said that, how I start with my respect for what it is. I mean there are people who really are in involved—as "artisans" I would call them—in the "tribal dance." And some of them actually have the martyrdom of being artists. They manage to juggle, somehow, this vast canning factory with all its pomp, and ceremony, and big bucks, and power—more super charged than Washington, actually! And they manage to, every now and again, give us some, some kind of an art out of it. But it certainly isn't Elizabethan England or,

you know... [William] Yeats could never stand driving people away from the ticket counter and create an Irish abbey there. Not in these times. I mean, the dream always is that eventually it, or something comparable will be.

I suppose the dream once was that way here. I mean, there were people dreaming ([D.W.] Griffith, for example) of high art in the movies. [Art] that would just roll out into the nickelodeons, or the theaters. And occasionally every now and again someone does one, and they pay dearly for it.

So I wasn't that strong. I mean, I couldn't hold a candle to the kind of control of masses of people, and money, that Orson Welles can—and look what they did to him! So I kind of knew that, because I couldn't say, "No," (to this little wizened man), "Alfred Hitchcock is not the world's greatest filmmaker. [Sergei] Eisenstein is. Or I am!" (Laughs) You know, not that he'd have cared. He wouldn't have cared, he probably thought, "That's cute, the kid has spunk or something, you know! Give him a job!" But I couldn't do that see, so then I knew it's not for me. You know?

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Do you feel like the "psyche" can be addressed by the actor's performance?

BRAKHAGE: Well, it certainly is. Yeah, you're absolutely right. Because interestingly enough, last night Sidney Peterson—(some of you know his work, I'm sure, here)—we were talking about this very matter. One thing, right away, on the screen: the actor has to be him or herself, actually. And that's not true of the stage. With the stage, there's always projection. There's loudness (therefore that leads to a whole rank of gestures that are particular and marvelous for the stage, that are a transformation). But in the movies, the camera is that close, and that perceptive (even close or not), only that acting sense of being oneself—not acting!—is really where the magic is. And this certainly has roots in "psyche." So that, to me, is what the art of most of Hollywood (and European Hollywood, or Japanese, or Chinese Hollywood) is: it is the tapping of this great art of acting. And that certainly is touching "psyche."

But then it doesn't—It ends up being a record of that, which means (as anything other than a record

of that): the vision isn't taping "psyche"; the cutting isn't, the music isn't. The slavish strictures to story make it completely impossible because free of outside language, (as I feel it), "psyche" doesn't speak (with words). When you get to where we have that final word—it's sort of like, to me, that word that says, "Last chance, gas station," as you face Death Valley—is the ineffable. And at that point is where film really begins, coming into its own, vis-à-vis language. So then it ends up being a record of...

Or with wonderful moments, where you stumble into some vision or other—which, by the way, are fought for very hard. I've worked in the commercial industry, so I know how hard (even people lower down in the echelon, like a cutter) will fight to keep in a certain shot that has some quality that's utterly extraneous to the story. And literally, at board meetings, (I've been in attendance), where they will say, "Okay, well let Charlie have his shot, just because he's been so bothersome about it." Because they want to stay in his good graces—because he can wreck the whole damn thing for them! Recalcitrant workmen try to keep some envisionment in the movies... and succeed, now and again.

But what kind of an aesthetic is that? How would we go into museums to look at paintings—can you imagine the sense if we took these same values to a museum? We'd say, "Well in the upper right hand corner there is something there that's of an aesthetic importance, the rest is just the usual schlock. But look that this upper right hand corner!" (Laughter) Or, "There are these spots here and here. Notice how they cluster every time there's red; there's a little gathering of forms that seem to..." You see, we just take such low standards to the movies, of course. I mean, I shouldn't say, "we;" I mean, "I" do. Because otherwise I'd... I'd lose the movies. And so I really roll into the movies, and try to get myself calmed down to a three-year-old mind, and enjoy myself. Then, every now and again, [Martin] Scorsese, for example, pulls me up to the possibilities of an art there, and I'm deeply moved. Or acting performances that occur, make me try to avoid the clutter that's going on in the background (where anything might be there that just happens to be!) Wherever they were aiming the camera! There's a charge in the foreground in She Wore a Yellow Ribbon—and in the background, the

Indians and all that, and in the background, a Greyhound bus is working its way slowly up the hill. And most people never notice. So it isn't just me who tries not to notice the clutter in the background; most people don't, because it would ruin the movie. So they stay fixated on this that does, yes, touch "psyche;" the great art of acting in our time.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) What kind of experience are you looking for when you go and see a film by Bruce Baillie, or Michael Snow, or somebody who's not doing that?

BRAKHAGE: Well I'm going in the same way I go to a museum to see a painting, or sit down and read some poetry, or go to a concert, you know.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So what kind of things do you enjoy in those terms, in those high art standards?

BRAKHAGE: Well, let's don't say "high art." I just think it's a matter of art; I don't think there's high and low art; I think it's either art, or it's not. And then there's a big debate, and then that's a personal matter. Each person has their different sense of what an art is. And I grant that as terribly important. Because those are the grounds out of which art arises: each is being true—the makers have to be incredibly true, each to him or herself—in the making. Then, that touches some people. And most, not. Until it's been around for a long time (if it lasts). Then, it becomes kind of a thing that seems to reverberate with a great many people.

But certainly the reception is always as extremely personal as the making. I just take, I'm sure, the most normal expectations when I go to a gallery. I mean, does it move me? And if it does move me, is it influencing me to go do something? And if it is, then I feel "influenced" and I don't feel... I can't have an aesthetic experience. But if I'm "moved" from the inside of me out in front of a painting—you know, where the material is coming from the world that the painting is, and it's intact, and I'm intact then the hairs rise all up along the back, and the mind is thrilled! In most cases, I can look at that forever, and each see it new, and see more different things all the time. And I can't have that aesthetic experience while it's engaging me from the outside in. I don't know... Words are very limited here in talking about these things, (Laughs)

but I trust you can read between the lines of chatter here and get some sense of what I mean. It's a kind of a thrill... it's very hard to describe. The brain actually feeds on aesthetic experiences in some way that's just unlike anything else. It's very rare—and I don't, by the way, think it's any more important than anything else, than going to the movies... It is rarer, and if you need a lot of it (like, I'm kind of an "art hog" in that sense!) then I'm just feverishly searching for it all the time. It's... as crucial as prayer. Oh, that sounds so sanctimonious! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) I was struck how similar *Desistfilm* and *The Way to Shadow Garden* were to films by Sidney Peterson and Kenneth Anger...

BRACKHAGE: Yes.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Did you see their films at that time?

BRAKHAGE: I saw Sidney Peterson's work some time between the making of Reflections on Black and... Actually, the first Sidney Peterson I saw, I had already shot Reflections on Black, but I hadn't edited it. And I saw it here in New York. And I met him at that time. And I saw Lead Shoes and [Mr.] Frenhofer and the Minotaur. I had seen Kenneth Anger's work. When I showed In Between, [Richard] Griffiths, then the head of MoMA, dismissed it because he said it was imitative of Maya Deren (of that Stophicer [sic] sequence where he has her bumping against the walls, up and down the stairs). I had never seen that film at that point, but then I searched it out and saw it shortly thereafter. It was hard to see these films in those days! By the time I made Reflections of Black I had seen most of the Museum of Modern Art collection of early Dada and surrealist films. I had

seen Eisenstein. Not all of it, but it was, again, very hard to see.

I think that there are certain paths that are intrinsic to film, and it will draw people to them. And so you'll find, springing up in different people, certain possibilities. Because the human spirit (within a given culture, at least) has moved to begin to need these things, so they'll be begin to occur in different people, each in his and her own way. So that's the kind of cultural influence on the possibilities of an art.

But then, where... really where the aesthetic experience begins (for me, at least) is that point at which I really feel "individual person." It's almost as if it were...by being personal, it's a song to all other persons, to the uniqueness of every other person in the audience. Which is something quite opposite than what (as I also value) the traditional Hollywood movie does. It tries to make a "tribal dance," so we have something to share. So the two are necessary. People have made many corollaries, and one that seems useful, in a way, (though again it'll have the limits because it refers to another medium) to writing. But there's the difference between poem and prose, poetry and prose. Yet, of course, there are great works of prose that are often called "poetic prose" (Laughs) for the reason that they also make a kind of poem in the mind, regardless of story. And there are some poems that are telling a story... So it gets confusing, but basically, just as a very generalized thing, you might think of that distinction. And that can't arise in any public medium (like Hollywood), in times like these, for, again, the reason that the roots are not in "psyche," or, at best, only as "psyche's" manifestation in the art of acting as recorded.

Thank you. (Applause)

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