Understanding Stan Brakhage as a Poetic Filmmaker

by

Jacqueline Griffin

100098771

submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

University of East Anglia

School of Art, Media, and American Studies

June 2023

Abstract

This thesis explores how Stan Brakhage can be understood as a poetic filmmaker and aims to investigate how the model for poetic proposed by Maya Deren can aid in this understanding. Maya Deren's model proposes that films may be categorised along two axes, the horizontal which includes narrative, plot, and a linear sense of time, and the vertical, which is the domain of the subjective and emotional, with a manipulated sense of time. Deren's model claims that the vertical is the realm of the poetic. This research also investigates the model's traits and how Brakhage's filmmaking exemplifies these as well as what any limits of the model might be and how Brakhage's films might test these limits. Specific traits of Deren's model identified within this thesis are the unconventional use of point-of-view/perspective shots, the use of dissolves, the use of editing to manipulate narrative time, abstraction through defocus, extreme close-up, and the use of audio. The research methodology includes archival study and involves an in-depth textual analysis of several Stan Brakhage films, ranging from 1952 to 2000 and covering multiple genres and filmmaking styles. The findings indicate that multiple poetic devices were used by Brakhage in alignment with the ideas proposed by Deren. Further, the study reveals that these devices were used to varying degrees in each film and also reveals how the use of poetic devices in Brakhage's films challenges the commonly held concept of Stan Brakhage as a 'silent' filmmaker. This has important implications for understanding Brakhage's use of filmic poetic devices, the validity of Deren's model, and solidifying the medium specificity of his filmmaking. The study concludes with recommendations for future research to further explore the bounds and usages of Deren's model in relation to Brakhage's other work and beyond Brakhage.

Word count: 80,599

List of Contents

List of Film Stills and Images

Film stills

All stills have been used with permission from Marilyn Brakhage for academic use only.[1]

---

[1] See Appendix III

Images

Non-original images have been used with permission from Mark Toscano.[2]

---

[2] See Appendix IV

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my profound gratitude to those who have supported me and contributed to the completion of this thesis.

I wish to unreservedly thank my supervisor, Dr. Keith M. Johnston. Without his steadfast and unwavering support (and his apt and helpful critiques), there is no doubt in my mind that I would not have been able to cross the finish line. You have been the absolute definition of firm but kind. I also want to thank my secondary supervisor Dr. Tim Snelson for his constant support and positivity throughout this process, for which I am eternally grateful.

A huge thank you must go to both Marilyn Brakhage and Fred Camper, both of whom delighted and surprised me when they replied to my emails and without whom, much of this would be impossible. An additional thank you to Mark Toscano for his preservation work on Stan Brakhage's films and for allowing me to use his images.

Many thanks to Jacob Barreras and Brad Arnold of the University of Colorado, Boulder for their help with accessing and reviewing the Brakhage Collection held there. Likewise, many thanks to all the archivists and staff at LUX in London for the same.

Special thanks to my partner in life and crime, Gregg. Words are not enough. We have been through many trials, this being but one, and you have been amazing in your belief in me, support, love, and kindness. I am so grateful for our life, for all of our children, and for having each other. "We are going to be doctors." Love.

Thank you to my shining stars, Audrey Ella AKA Max and Annie, one day I hope you read this and if you do, I want you to know that I wouldn't change a single moment. Bringing you into our lives is the best thing we've ever done. Your wit, drive, and complete enjoyment of life inspires me every day. You are my wonderful kiddos. I love you to the moon and back.

Thank you to my entire family for teaching me how to laugh, you are all insane and I love you.

Mom and Dad, thank you for your constant love and support. This road hasn't been easy, but it's been made much more manageable knowing that you always had my back. I love you both. Pete and Sophia, thank you for keeping me humble and honest and constantly making me laugh when I needed it the most - Buddy and Sweetie, I love you. Gran and Papa, you have always been there and always shown unconditional love and support. Thank you and I love you both. Uncle Michael and Aunt Michelle, you are both just rockstars, I love you. Thank you for your support, help, and love.

Uncle Paul, I know you would be proud of me right now. I love you forever.

Briony and Nicola, thank you for helping me find myself and the confidence to complete this journey.

And finally, thank you Dylan Thomas and Arthur Miller. If it was not for your sexist and misogynist dismissal of Maya Deren and her ideas in 1953, I may not have gotten angry enough to write all of this.

Introduction

> Poetry has played a key role in shaping the aesthetic history of cinema.
>
> Sarah Keller[3]

> The 'Poetic cinema' resides far away from theories or definition; beyond meanings or interpretations it is found in a space without a place.
>
> Judith Sacal[4]

> Perhaps no filmmaker was quite as invested in the conversation between film and poetry as Stan Brakhage.
>
> Daniel Kane[5]

In the second quote above, Judith Sacal describes the 'poetic cinema' as intangible, impossible to define, and purely subjective. She says, "It [the poetic cinema] has no rules, allegories or symbols…"[6] At the beginning of this research, such a viewpoint was quite dominant whenever I could recall encountering 'poetic' being ascribed to film. I felt such a claim was too broad.

In this research, I will seek an understanding of poetic cinema, what this term might mean, and how poetic cinema might be created from a formal perspective. To do so, I will focus on a case study of a singular filmmaker to gain an understanding of them as a poetic filmmaker. The filmmaker I have selected for my study is Stan Brakhage, a prolific American

---

[3] Keller, 'Poetry and "Film Poetics"', 35.
[4] Sacal, 'Being and Cinema'.
[5] Kane, *We Saw The Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*, 51.
[6] Sacal, 'Being and Cinema'.

experimental filmmaker active from 1952-2003. Thus, the primary research question posed by this thesis is:

- How can Stan Brakhage be understood as a poetic filmmaker?

This will be expanded on and fully answered throughout the body of the research, but to put it succinctly, Stan Brakhage can be understood as a poetic filmmaker by identifying and recognising the specific poetic traits present within his filmmaking. To answer this question, I have adopted a model of the poetic cinema proposed by Maya Deren at The Poetry and the Film Symposium organised by Cinema 16 in 1953. In the literature review, I will consider other existing models of poetic cinema and make my argument for selecting Deren's model over the others. Her model, as she proposed it, is somewhat limited, and an aspect of this research is to seek a fuller understanding of her proposal, how it might be applied in different types of films, and how different filmic devices may or may not be seen to work within her model. As such, additional research questions asked in this thesis are:

- How can the model supplied by Maya Deren be used to create an understanding of Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker?
- What are the traits of this model, and how does Brakhage's work exemplify them?
- What are the limits to this model, and how does Brakhage's filmmaking test them?
- How might this model be considered beyond Brakhage?

Deren's model will be explained fully in the following chapters, and it provides a useful way to textually approach Brakhage's films without needing to find comparisons to other works, whether they be films, poems, or pieces of literature. The medium specificity of Deren's model is important here. Different chapters will engage with different traits of the model and apply them to Brakhage's work. Specific traits of Deren's that will be engaged with through this thesis are the unconventional use of point-of-view/perspective shots, the use of dissolves and the use of editing to manipulate narrative time (discussed in Chapter Two), abstraction through defocus and extreme close-up (discussed in Chapter Three), and the use of audio as an abstraction and manipulative device (discussed in Chapter Four). Throughout the chapters, the

limits of the model – specifically its dependence upon objectivity – will become apparent and this will be most thoroughly engaged with in Chapter Five. In the explorations of the model's traits and its limits – especially in exploring commonly used devices – several recommendations for how this might be considered beyond Brakhage are made throughout the text.

It is worth noting that in understanding Stan Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker, an argument could be made to identify Brakhage not just as a filmmaker but as a poet. The final questions asked by this research will be:

- Does this research identify Brakhage as a poet? If so, what is gained from identifying 'Brakhage' as a poet?

While I will engage with the weight of these questions, the final determination that I have made is that I am not ultimately looking to identify Brakhage as a poet.

Methodology

To complete this research, I will adopt several methods, both in terms of collecting and collating data and analysing that data. The two primary methodologies I will use are secondary research, including archival research methods and textual analysis. I will additionally conduct qualitative research through a semi-structured interview with noted Brakhage scholar Fred Camper. I am specifically avoiding biographical and autobiographical input for the most part, including Stan Brakhage's own writings. While I certainly reference Brakhage's writing on occasion, I am most interested in allowing the films to speak for themselves as much as possible.

Archival Research

In her 2009 article for *College English*, Barbara E. L'Eplattenier notes that, despite being an archivist herself, at the time, limited resources existed regarding the methods surrounding this work.[7] In her later book, co-authored with Alexis E. Ramsey, she and Ramsey present a blueprint of methods for archival research. Accessing archives, including how to find and

---

[7] L'Eplattenier, 'An Argument for Archival Research Methods'.

contact archivists, and working with archives are two of the key elements relevant to this research. They designed this to prevent the "archive fever" that can result when one was simply to "go into the archives and 'play'."[8] Their work is important in solidifying the research framework around using archives. Also, as Lynée Lewis Gaillet notes below:

> Increasingly, scholars interested in primary investigation are (1) revisiting primary and canonical materials with a new set of research questions in mind, (2) mining a broader range of archives than heretofore considered, (3) viewing (and adding to existing) archives in ways that make knowledge rather than simply finding what's already known, and (4) taking advantage of new technologies to expand the scope and possibilities inherent in archival investigation.[9]

Certainly, in the context of this research, Gaillet's first three points are all extremely relevant. The primary consideration for conducting archival research for this thesis was to view and write about Brakhage films which were less widely known (points two and three) to answer the research questions and add to the intervention of my work (point one). While some writing exists on most of Brakhage's films, there was both a desire and a research need to conduct primary research, which was used to aid in film selection.

Due to the nature of Brakhage's body of work and its limited distribution at the time of release, most of his films are only viewable by visiting archives where his work is stored. There are very few such archives worldwide. The most famous is at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the United States, where Brakhage taught film for several years. This archive also houses the entirety of his estate's donated documents, notes, letters, photos, film negatives, and audio recordings in their special archive, The Stan Brakhage Collection. Theirs is the most complete archive relating to Brakhage's work. I visited the collection in 2014, towards the beginning of my research.

---

[8] Ramsey et al., *Working in the Archives*, 3.
[9] Gaillet, '(Per)Forming Archival Research Methodologies'.

As my research continued, it was necessary to rewatch some films or, in some cases, there was a need to view an entirely new film as I adjusted my research and became increasingly familiar with Brakhage's filmography. In *British Cinema in Documents,* Sarah Street notes that this is something to have an awareness of when conducting archival research: "…interesting documentation often resides in unlikely places and the researcher needs to think imaginatively in the pursuit of new sources, the discovery of which can often lead to a revision of accepted opinion on a particular issue, film or personality."[10] The cost of another research trip to Colorado was untenable. However, I was lucky enough to become aware of an archive in London, Lux, which held prints of many of Brakhage's films. I have been able to arrange two trips to Lux to examine these prints, although the COVID-19 pandemic significantly hampered the accessibility of archival visits. The lack of access did impact some of my film selection and research goals.

It is important to note that many of the film prints are not originals but copies in both archives. It is also worth mentioning that there is a risk that some of Brakhage's prints could be damaged or otherwise not up to standard.[11] I even occasionally found that prints were mislabeled or otherwise listed with incorrect data; on one such occasion, the archivist informed me that I was the first person to view the print; they had relied on outside information to archive the print, which needed to be corrected.[12] Such instances demonstrated the importance of the primary research I was conducting.

In addition to the archives, there is a small selection of Brakhage's work available on Blu-ray/DVD, distributed by Criterion, as well as some pirated copies of his work that are viewable online. While there was an occasional need to return to films distributed on the Blu-ray/DVDs, this was not a resource of primary consideration, and efforts have been taken to rely as much as possible on films only available through the archives. Pirated copies have not been relied on as a primary source due to the unverifiable nature of the prints, transfers, and edits. However, when a film has been viewed in the archives, and a pirated copy exists

---

[10] Street, *British Cinema in Documents*, 172.
[11] See Appendix I: Camper, An Interview with Fred Camper, 245–48.
[12] When I went to view *Fireloop* at the Lux archives in London, I was informed that I was the first person to do so. This trip confirmed that the film is, in fact, approximately 3 minutes long rather than the listed 10 minutes.

somewhere, such as YouTube, I have used this resource to refresh my memory and enable visual references during writing.

Textual Analysis

This research will adopt a three-pronged approach to textual analysis. Expressly, this research will undertake montage analysis, mise-en-scène analysis, and audio-visual analysis, informed by the work of Robert P. Kolker, John Gibbs, Jim Hiller, and Michel Chion. I chose these three different analysis methods to approach the wide range of genres and methods found within Brakhage's work.

Overall, Brakhage's work might best be considered 'experimental', which according to Hiller, is opposed to convention.[13] Convention might be understood in this context as "Hollywood convention" or, in other words, the mainstream cinema. Kolker identifies "continuity editing" as the main mechanism in "Hollywood convention".[14] He outlines this as a method designed to hide the film form from the viewer.

> The key to the continuity style is its self-effacement, its ability to show without showing itself, tell a story and make the storytelling disappear…[15]

However, Kolker identifies two structural forms he frames in opposition to continuity editing: montage and mise-en-scène. While the structure of montage focuses on the edit (and therefore, montage analysis similarly focuses on the edit), mise-en-scène structure focuses on the shot itself (again, as does its analysis).[16] Kolker describes both forms as "attention-drawing," whereas the continuity style seeks to hide itself.[17] Both forms can offer practical approaches for considering the poetic in Brakhage's films – montage analysis and mise-en-scène analysis.

---

13 Hiller, 'Swimming and Sinking', 155.
14 Kolker, 'The Film Text and Film Form', 19.
15 Kolker, 19.
16 Kolker, 15.
17 Kolker, 17.

For Kolker, mise-en-scène and montage focus on the "two basic building-blocks of film, the shot and the cut," respectively.[18] Kolker points out that montage theory was especially exemplified by the work, both film and theory, of Sergei Eisenstein, who believed that it was the edit which gave a film or even a sequence its meaning. A shot on its own was merely "raw material" that the filmmaker would manipulate into "a temporal structure of rhythmic, conflicting, kinetic montage…"[19]

Montage requires active engagement on the viewer's part to connect and respond to the separate images and to draw understanding from "the invisible space" *between* them.[20] Montage analysis focuses on how different selected shots interact with one another and suggests new meanings created from their "collision".[21] In contrast to this, mise-en-scène focuses on the shot itself. Mise-en-scène analysis, which Kolker points out was championed by Andre Bazin in particular, sees editing as a manipulative process and emphasises "the long take".[22]

Using multiple approaches to textual analysis is helpful due to the range of styles and techniques found in Brakhage's work. For instance, while much of Brakhage's work could be readily considered using montage analysis, with its clear emphasis on editing, some of Brakhage's work is referred to as melodrama,[23] which Gibbs argues is most usefully understood using mise-en-scène analysis.[24] Additionally, this research is interested in considering sound as a potential poetic device. Informed by the work of Michel Chion, selected films will be considered using audio-visual analysis. Chion's "masking" method will be used to interrogate the possible poetic nature of sound in some of Brakhage's films.[25]

"Masking" involves watching a film or a selected scene multiple times with variance in audio and visual components. For instance, Chion describes showing a sequence from *La Dolce Vita* to his students five times in a row, "twice with both the sound and image running, once without sound, once with no image, and finally a last time with both the sound and image

---

[18] Kolker, 15.
[19] Kolker, 15.
[20] Kolker, 17.
[21] Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 38.
[22] Kolker, 'The Film Text and Film Form', 16–17.
[23] James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage: The Activity of His Nature', 10.
[24] Gibbs, *The Life of Mise-En-Scène Visual Style and British Film Criticism, 1946–78*, 194.
[25] Chion, *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*, 187.

again."[26] Chion argues that this technique allows the viewer to "hear the sound as it is, and not as the image transforms and disguises it…."[27]

Chion then breaks the analysis down into three components: characterisation, or "the general quality of the sound and particularly its consistency"; synchronisation, which "defines…the audiovisual phrasing of the sequence"; and comparison, which focuses on the juxtaposition between the image and the audio.[28] This research will focus primarily on the comparison, which Chion argues allows the viewer to "discover both *negative sounds* in the image…and *negative images* in the sound", whereby either a sound or an image is produced in the mind of the viewer rather than actually present in the film.[29] Chion states that "cinema's poetry springs from such things", and this research will interrogate that with respect to Maya Deren's model of poetry and the films of Stan Brakhage.[30]

Chapter Outlines and Film Selection

In the first chapter, I will undertake a detailed literature review, encompassing an overview of Stan Brakhage and existing scholarship regarding him and his filmmaking, an overview of authorship, a detailed discussion of the theories about poetic film, and a review of terminology including clarification of its usage within this thesis. This chapter will more clearly outline my reasons for adopting Maya Deren's model of poetic film in favour of others.

Chapter Two will examine Brakhage and his use and subversion of narrative conventions. The chapter will pay particular attention to the specific narrative devices of perspective/point-of-view shots and dissolve transitions and examine the use of negative imagery, focusing exclusively on narrative films. To do so, I will use a combination of mise-en-scène and montage analysis. To frame this analysis, I will consider melodramatic theory conventions, as Brakhage's dramas have loosely been categorised as such (P. Adams Sitney coined the term "psychodrama" to describe them, seen as a subset of melodrama).[31]

---

[26] Chion, 194.
[27] Chion, 187.
[28] Chion, 189–91.
[29] Chion, 192.
[30] Chion, 192.
[31] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 14.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that Brakhage challenged narrative conventions - even in his more 'traditional' films - and he did this in a poetic manner. I will demonstrate how Brakhage's use and/or subversion of these conventions meet Deren's criteria laid out in her model for poetic film. Moreover, this chapter will illustrate how "vertical" and "diagonal" "attacks" can be incorporated into dramatic films, even those that heavily utilise convention.

Such a focus considerably limits the scope within Brakhage's filmography, as he made very few narratives, which has greatly influenced my film selection. For instance, I wanted to include *Faustfilm: An Opera* (1987) and viewed it at the Brakhage Collection in Colorado for that purpose. However, as the chapter's focus shifted and archival viewing became impacted by COVID-19, I opted to include films which were more easily accessible but which were still not as widely discussed. The selected films discussed in this chapter will include Brakhage's first film *Interim* (1952), *The Way to the Shadow Garden* (1954), *Reflections on Black* (1955), *Flesh of Morning* (1956), and *Blue Moses* (1962).

In Chapter Three, I will focus on Brakhage's use of abstraction in his documentary filmmaking. To do so, I will consider documentary theory, particularly poetic documentary, informed mainly by Bill Nichols, and establish the concept of abstraction. This chapter aims to show how Stan Brakhage's documentaries embody Bill Nichols' notion of the poetic documentary, which echoes Maya Deren's concept of the vertical. Like Chapter Two, I will primarily use mise-en-scène and montage analysis to examine the selected films. I will look at how abstraction can be used to achieve Deren's poetic film model.

Many of Brakhage's films could be considered documentaries, so narrowing down and selecting just a few to examine was challenging. Ultimately, I selected *The Wonder Ring* (1955), *Sirius Remembered* (1959), *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), and *Text of Light* (1974). I will also undertake the additional analysis of *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000), which is fictional and not a documentary. Using this film, I will show how the aspects of Brakhage's documentaries that meet Deren's criteria for the poetic film are not limited by genre; the abstraction technique seen across Brakhage's documentaries can also be used to similar effect in abstract narrative work.

Chapter Four will concentrate on Brakhage's poetic use of sound using audio-visual analysis, including Michel Chion's masking technique. I will look at Brakhage's films that employ sound devices, which are rarely discussed in connection to Brakhage's work. In fact, many of Brakhage's films *are* without an accompanying soundtrack. Brakhage's limited catalogue of sound films possibly leads to many considering his "legacy" to be that of a silent filmmaker.[32]

I will consider sound in Brakhage's films from two perspectives. Firstly, I will examine a selection of Brakhage's films for which he designed and finished the film with a soundtrack. Some of these will be films discussed in previous or following chapters, but I will analyse them from a different perspective. Those films are *Interim, The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black, Flesh of Morning, Fire of Waters* (1965), *Fireloop* (1986), and *Loud Visual Noises* (1987). I will illustrate how Brakhage's use of sound in these films impacts their ability to fit within Deren's model of poetic film.

Secondly, I will briefly consider the notion of "silence" in the films *Mothlight* (1964) and *The Text of Light*. I will compare the relatively noisy original viewing methods – either through a projector or Steenbeck, now only achievable through special permissions or archival visitation – to the genuinely silent modern viewing on DVD and Blu-ray. I will show how ambient noise impacts the film from a poetic perspective, continuing to use Deren's model, and how Brakhage intended for this noise, or at the very least, expected it to be present. I will further demonstrate this impact on Brakhage's overall legacy as a silent filmmaker and question whether this should change how his use of sound is viewed more broadly.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I will focus on the importance of context for poeticism in Brakhage's direct animation filmmaking. To do so, I will first provide a context for direct animation, drawing mainly from the work of Maureen Furniss. I will additionally clarify the difference between the abstract and the non-representational; this chapter is primarily concerned with non-representational work and how this impacts a film's ability to be considered using Deren's model of poetic film. In this chapter, I will use a selection of

---

[32] 'Brakhage's Silent Legacy for Sound Cinema'.

Brakhage's films to show how important context is to fulfil Deren's criteria. This chapter will test the limits of Deren's model.

Most of Brakhage's later films used direct animation to some degree. In terms of the number of films he released (but not necessarily the overall runtime), this could be considered his most prolific period of filmmaking. As with the chapter on documentaries, there were dozens, if not hundreds, of films from which to choose. Ultimately, I chose films that allowed me to cover the span of his career and effectively demonstrate the importance of context to poeticism. The films chosen for this chapter are *Mothlight, The Horseman, The Woman, and the Moth* (1968), *Fireloop, The Dante Quartet* (1987), *Stellar* (1993), *Study in Color and Black and White* (1993), and *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* (1994).

By examining a wide span of Brakhage's work, both in terms of style and career, this research aims to interrogate the notion of poetic cinema proposed by Maya Deren in 1953 by using Stan Brakhage as a case study. This will provide not only new insight into the work of Stan Brakhage but will also show the practicalities and applications of Maya Deren's model.

The Films

I have chosen to include descriptions of each film I examine in this thesis to either refresh the reader's memory or provide context for any reader who may not have seen these films and is unlikely to be able to do so. I will briefly overview each film within the given chapters but will not do so in as much detail as below. The selected films of the thesis are presented in chronological order.

Interim (1952)[33]

His first directing endeavour, *Interim*, is Brakhage's most classic drama. A unique film in Brakhage's oeuvre, Brakhage wrote and directed *Interim* but was not the camera person/cinematographer (Stan Phillips shot the film). The film is 24 minutes long.

The narrative of *Interim* deals with a short-lived romance. A boy, played by Walt Newcomb, walks along a bridge and takes the steps down below, where he meets (perhaps for

---

[33] *Interim.*

the first time) a girl, played by Janice Hubka. As he walks towards a rail yard, she follows and joins him. They wait for a train to pass before they continue. They walk along together over the tracks and head into the hills. Sitting beside a small river, the boy puts his hand over the girl's. He rubs his hand on hers suggestively.

Storm clouds approach, and it quickly begins to rain, so they run for shelter, which they find in an old, abandoned shack. They speak, though their conversation is not heard (the only sound is the rain), and they draw closer and eventually kiss passionately. When the rain stops, they leave, and as the girl waits for a passing train, the boy turns and walks away. By the time she realises he is gone, he has nearly climbed the stairs back to the overpass. Though the girl watches the boy leave, he does not turn back to look at her.

The Way to The Shadow Garden (1954)[34]

Described by Sitney as a "trance" or "lyrical" film, *The Way to the Shadow Garden* marks Brakhage's third collaboration with actor Walt Newcomb, who previously acted in *Interim* and *Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection* (1953). Sitney describes the lyrical film as that which, "postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film" and "affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting its traditional use as a window into illusion."[35] The 11-minute film follows a young man, played by Newcomb, at his home. His one-room flat has a kind of mystique and life of its own which triggers an existential crisis within the young man. His emotions change quickly from confusion to anger to exaltation. Aware of a strange presence, he searches the room, ripping the bed covers off the bed before going to his desk to smoke and read, trying to calm himself.

The unseen presence approaches, and the man senses this. The room and/or the presence breaks the man's mental state altogether, and he gouges out his own eyes. He blindly feels his way to the door frame, writhing in agony. At this point, the picture becomes the film negative, and the man falls to the ground. The camera moves through foliage outside, and the man's hands come into the frame, grasping for the leaves. Brakhage settles the camera on a close-up shot, leaving the audience with the haunting reversed image of Newcomb covered in

---

[34] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*
[35] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 160.

blood and staring into the lens before Brakhage cuts back to the house one final time, and the film fades to black.

Reflections on Black (1955)[36]

Another of the films described by P. Adams Sitney as a "trance film", *Reflections on Black* has a complex narrative structure. At 12 minutes long, it uses three vignettes embedded within a larger story. The film follows a male protagonist, whom it is speculated is blind.[37] Dressed in a long coat and hat and hidden in high-contrast lighting, the Blind Man would not look out of place in a film noir detective story. He walks down the street. Approaching him from the other direction, a woman walks towards him. As they pass each other, they pause, momentarily shoulder to shoulder, before continuing. The camera pans past pallets and brick walls, showing a woman smoking in the corner. Then the Blind Man reaches a set of stairs.

As the Blind Man ascends, he "sees" three different vignettes, each from a different perspective. This "sight" is indicated by star-like scratches made directly onto the film over the Blind Man's eyes. The first vignette shows the domestic futilities of a woman trapped in a monotonous and (it is hinted at) abusive home life. In the second, the Blind Man appears to be fully sighted and partaking in an affair with a different woman. Her husband interrupts them as they kiss, and the scratched stars appear over the Blind Man's eyes.

The film then cuts back to the protagonist ascending the stairs. The Blind Man begins entirely obscured by shadow but walks into the light, his head bowed. As he steps up, he slowly raises his head. Once again, the growing burst-like scratches appear over his eyes until they exit the frame. The film then cuts to a single large burst scratched over the entire surface of the film cell, filling up the full frame, and begins the final vignette.

The third vignette is shot in a first-person perspective and features the same woman from the first vignette. Brakhage uses several extreme close-ups of both the woman and everyday household objects, like a kettle, which eventually boils over. However, the final shot is a medium close-up, traditionally framed, of the woman looking directly into the camera. She smiles with a gaping mouth. The film cuts suddenly to black and ends.

---

[36] *Reflections on Black.*
[37] Lev, *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, 187.

The Wonder Ring (1955)[38]

Brakhage opens this entirely handheld silent six-minute film using a lot of conventional editing. A train station is established in an exterior wide shot before moving inside. The camera tilts up sun-dappled stairs as though following an invisible passenger's feet climbing up to the station entrance. A sweeping pan shows the station door, light reflecting off windows separating the platform and ticketing areas. Inside, Brakhage uses hazy, out-of-focus wide shots which establish the setting but quickly returns to focusing on small details – signs, lights, and windows. Passengers waiting at the station platform are visible but out of focus. A train whips past, just moving squares of light and colour contextualised by the setting.

The transition to the travelling train is sudden; a static shot of the platform abruptly begins moving, and it is only then that the change of setting becomes apparent. Brakhage mainly points the camera out of the window as the New York City skyline whips by. The movement of the train changes direction without warning. Brakhage shows occasional glimpses inside the train, but passengers are out of focus or merely reflected in the carriage's windows. As the journey continues, the image becomes increasingly blurred, just the movement of light and colour in horizontal lines across the frame, until suddenly Brakhage cuts to black, and the film ends.

Flesh of Morning (1956)[39]

The 21-minute film opens with the image of a piece of paper uncrumpling, followed by an animated title. The paper burns but remains out of focus. A musical score fills the audio track, composed entirely and exclusively of big band/jazz-style percussion, popular at the time. The composition is performed on a full set of drums (bass, snare, toms, and cymbals), with additional percussive instruments appearing at various points throughout the film. A young man, played by Stan Brakhage, is alone. He moves through his house with an unknown purpose, the film perspective flitting between third and first-person.

The man continues through the house, reaching a bedroom. Though women's clothes are strewn about the floor, there is a sense of ownership; this is his bedroom. He lights a cigarette and grabs at a gossamer-like cloth that appears to be pantyhose. He rubs the women's pantyhose in his hands. This act emotionally tortures the man and is intimate, voyeuristic, and

---

[38] *The Wonder Ring.*
[39] *Flesh of Morning.*

21

oddly disturbing. The film never explains why these clothes are here and that the woman they belong to is not. The presence of these items causes both pain and anxiety in the man. The lighting and smoking of cigarettes indicate a desire to relieve sexual tension.

A photograph of a young woman is revealed, possibly the owner of the clothing. Peter Michelson describes the photograph as "[becoming] a phantasm."[40] There is an extreme contrast between the woman's starkly white face and black dress and the black background of the photo. The lighting changes, leaving the man in shadow. The woman transcends the photograph, becoming real though remaining in shadow – a phantasm of fantasy. The drumming intensifies. The woman turns, and the drum score settles until it is only a single snare drum. The woman, still in shadow and dressed entirely in black, removes her gloves. The drumming once again intensifies, and the man undresses.

This instigates a sequence which, while never revealing any nudity, articulates the act of masturbation through body movements, breathing, and the use of the edit. Brakhage re-uses the negative film technique seen previously in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* for this sequence, which adds a jarring effect. When the man orgasms, indicated in a close-up of his face, the camera moves to the window once more and shows the world outside moving on, unknowing. Children play and run. A reproductive link could be drawn from this comparative imagery. The camera returns to the man lying in bed, seemingly praying, before the film ends.

Sirius Remembered (1959)[41]
This ten-minute silent film opens with a gestural camera sweeping back and forth across tall reed-like grass, a still figure (a dog, though this is not necessarily discernible from the imagery alone) visible in the background. The film jump cuts as the camera continues to sweep, and in these jump cuts, extreme close-ups of the figure invade the frame. Fur textures and an eye are seen before the film cuts to an unmoving, relatively peaceful shot of trees swaying gently in the wind. Then the film returns to the figure and once again instigates the constant movement and jump cuts.

The film is now almost entirely shown in extreme close-ups, which move rapidly; it is difficult to get a sense of the imagery beyond light and texture. Suddenly the camera sweeps in

---

[40] Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, 244.
[41] *Sirius Remembered.*

a continuous pan, dissolving from shot to shot and 'blowing out' the frame with over-exposure. When the film returns to the same scene with the figure lying in the woods, it is now winter, and snow is laid heavily on the ground. The same type of gestural movement, jump cuts, and extreme close-ups continues until suddenly the snow is gone, and it is spring. The figure remains.

The film continues its pattern of movement, jump cuts, and close-ups, increasing in frequency. Near the very end of the film, a close-up of the dog's mouth, teeth exposed almost in a snarl, is the first true confirmation the film gives of the species. The film then returns to the slightly wider, sweeping gestural shots but without this time cutting to an extreme close-up of the dog, focusing instead only on nature. Then it abruptly ends.

Blue Moses (1962)[42]

The film opens with a credit sequence, unusual for Brakhage films; this is his only film which does so other than *Interim*. Set on the hillsides of Colorado, actor Robert Benson appears first in heavy makeup inside a cave. The film dissolves into a shot of Benson without makeup and talking to the audience, appearing as himself. Benson interacts directly with the audience through the camera lens, immediately calling attention to the cameraman (Brakhage himself): "Do not be afraid! We're not alone. There's the cameraman...or was!...once...what can I say?" The continuation into "...or was!..." suggests the character's knowledge of the film's current state of being as a projection, or now perhaps video.[43]

Benson appears throughout the film as different variations of characters, created using obvious and heavy makeup, more often seen in classic theatre than in cinema. Eventually, he peels his makeup and prosthetics off, saying, "Look...this is ridiculous! I'm an actor!" The film repeats a scene from earlier, but Brakhage begins layering other footage over the top. This time Benson says, "But don't be afraid! There's a filmmaker behind every scene – in the back of every word I speak – behind you, too, so to speak – no! Don't turn around. It's useless."[44] The camera whips back and forth, following Benson's directions.

---

[42] *Blue Moses.*
[43] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 162–64.
[44] Brakhage, 164.

Finally, in a close-up with a flickering light over him (mimicking a projector light), Benson yells at the audience, "No! It's impossible! How do I know? I know!" Brakhage cuts back to the cave scene where a fully costumed and made-up Benson takes several bows. Brakhage cuts to a rock with "The End" scrawled on it and the film finishes.

Blue Moses presents an interesting challenge for research as it is only truly available by visiting an archive with a viable copy of the film. There are a few pirated versions available on YouTube, but these come with their own unique issues – one such upload contains only approximately 2 minutes of the film,[45] while another upload, while containing the entire runtime, is without audio[46]. Having arranged to visit both the Brakhage Collection in Colorado and Lux in London to view the film properly, I felt more confident in the integrity of the material. Archival research is not without its own problems, however, and degradation of the film print (through no fault of either archive) means I am viewing a slightly transformed version of Brakhage's work. I feel quite strongly that Brakhage would not only accept this but that, in all likelihood, he would prefer his films to take on lives of their own in a physical sense.

Mothlight (1963)[47]

Mothlight is arguably the most famous film of Brakhage's entire career. It indicates Brakhage's first foray into the realm of entirely constructed film, showing a complete abandonment of film technique. *Mothlight* is somewhat exclusive among the many constructed abstract films Brakhage made throughout his filmmaking career due to the unique construction process, which Brakhage repeated on very rare occasions. This silent film is his most well-known attempt at this method.

Brakhage created the unusual images of *Mothlight* by painstakingly arranging and glueing fragments of insects and plants to a facsimile of celluloid constructed out of clear leader and tape.[48] This results in the transmission of the image, similar to recording on film, but without the use of a camera. The process itself bears more similarity to collage than

---

[45] *Part from the Film 'Blue Moses' by Stan Brakhage.*
[46] *Blue Moses (1962, Stan Brakhage).*
[47] *Mothlight.*
[48] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 217.

filmmaking.[49] Ultimately, however, the generated film reflects imagery as a series of animated still photographs (as opposed to painted or drawn frames).

Fire of Waters (1965)[50]

A six-minute film, *Fire of Waters* spends nearly the first five of these in near-complete darkness, with only hints of the frame occasionally viewable. The frame is almost entirely black, but with the clear sense that this is filmed footage, *not* simply the lack of picture. Different flashes of light appear seemingly at random, barely illuminating much beyond their small space on the vast black frame. These flashes provide momentary and dim glimpses of suburbia. Meanwhile, the soundtrack (for this is one of Brakhage's few sound films) hums with absence throughout, interrupted only three times and seemingly at random.

Around the five-minute mark, suddenly the frame is filled with light and the suburban landscape – a house, trees, and telephone poles – comes into full view. Brakhage cuts between three static shots, all with similar features, the last of which predominantly features telephone poles and wires running across the frame, before once again cutting to the nearly pitch-black frame, which occasionally brightens (as though created by unseen lightning or off-screen bursts of light). The film culminates with the frame returning to full view - once again a house, trees, and telephone poll – alongside a high-pitched, almost feral sound. It is abrupt and somewhat assaulting. The film cuts to black and ends.

The Horseman, The Woman, and the Moth (1968)[51]

At 19 minutes, this silent film is predominantly abstract. Fred Camper describes it thus: "The viewer is confronted with bewildering abstract colors and shapes that vibrate with the rhythmic intensity of a great piece of music and appear to knock against each other with the chaotic tension of violent struggle."[52] Created using paint, glued elements (like moth wings) and mould and crystal developments as well as traditionally filmed photography, *The Horseman, The Woman, and the Moth* is a "long myth" wherein the image of a man appears multiple times (it appears to be the same image, or a single shot used repeatedly).[53] As the film continues, the

---

[49] Sitney, 167.
[50] *Fire of Waters.*
[51] *The Horseman, The Woman, and the Moth.*
[52] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 298.
[53] Roark, *Dissolve: Screenplays to the Films of Stan Brakhage*, 86.

image is treated with the methods described above, so the man appears consumed, the moth overtaking everything. By the end of the film, an image of the man reappears but seems to be in negative, with a monstrous effect.

The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes (1971)[54]

Part of Brakhage's Pittsburgh Trilogy, this 32-minute silent film opens immediately with isolated images of a body being manipulated by a man (who is a forensic pathologist). Brakhage shows the man moving an arm and measuring a nose in tight close-ups. There is a shaky, isolated shot of a hand. Suddenly, the film cuts to a wide and a naked male body is fully revealed. The next several minutes of the film continues in much the same way; a handheld camera holds on extreme close-ups as anonymous pathologists attend to various corpses. Body parts are isolated through this consistent use of close-up, and it becomes impossible to separate one corpse from another.

At around the nine-minute mark, the autopsies begin in earnest, with bodies cut open, bones sawed, and skin peeled back. Brakhage continues to use extreme close-ups for several minutes before a wider shot is finally revealed. By this point, the corpse is barely recognisable as a body. Brakhage continues cutting between a wide range of extreme close-ups and very occasionally wider shots (usually obscured in some way), creating almost landscapes out of the corpses. This is by far the most prolonged sequence of the film, lasting until nearly the very end. However, at approximately 31 minutes, Brakhage shows an extreme close-up of doors closing before he abruptly cuts to a wide shot of a pathologist making notes into a Dictaphone. The film is silent, so there is no hint of what is being said. Cutting to a few close-ups of the pathologist's face, waist, and hand putting down the Dictaphone, the film hard-cuts to black and ends.

The Text of Light (1974)[55]

Part of his "imagnostic"[56] film series, Brakhage famously made this film by capturing light through an ashtray.[57] Approximately 72 minutes long and completely silent, the film

---

[54] *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes.*

[55] *The Text of Light.*

[56] Brakhage came up with the term "imagnostic" to refer to a "combination of image and knowledge" Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*, 103.

[57] Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 149, 159.

features spectral colours moving gently across the frame. Though entirely abstract (perhaps *not* entirely, Fred Camper claims to identify trees and a street at two different points in the film[58]), the resulting imagery is landscape-esque. For instance, in the opening moments, round bursts of yellow light isolated in an otherwise black frame look like a rising sun or bursting star in a dark sky. Later, a similar technique is used with white light that appears to be the full moon. At other times, slow-moving blue light dappled with white could be mistaken for an underwater scene.

Though there is quicker movement on occasion, Brakhage mostly features a 'lazy' frame and a slow-paced edit, much in contrast to his oft-seen style of quick movement and cuts. Brakhage uses traditional edits to move between each shot; dissolves, which aesthetically might seem to fit given the slow approach taken, do not feature. The only time a similar device is used is a fade to black that signals the film's end.

Fireloop (1986)[59]

Part of Brakhage's hand-painted films, *Fireloop* runs for three minutes. Part of the *Caswollon Trilogy,* the film features what appears to be approximately an eight to ten-second loop of hand-painted footage, repeated for the entire duration of the film. This accompanies a developing soundtrack, evolving from its introductory sound over black (a bit like thunder) to its ultimate layered soundscape (which includes sci-fi-type sounds, voices, rumbling, and cracking).

The visual loop moves from a fast-paced swirl of paint over the full frame to a slower, more static image (created by optical printing), where the brush strokes are highly visible and embedded in black. Unfortunately, the print I viewed was somewhat damaged. So while I believe the colour to be predominantly red and other warm tones, this is unreliable as the entire print had a red tinge.

---

[58] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 105.
[59] *Fireloop.*

Loud Visual Noises (1987)

Made as a companion to *Fireloop*, this two-minute film is also hand-painted. The paint is applied in a range of colours, but rather than filling the whole frame, it tends to be in small dots and lines. As a result, black dominates the frame. The movement is frantic and constant (whereas in *Fireloop*, there were static points) and seems to move upward. Though warm tones primarily dominate the film, there is a mix of cool – red and blue are consistent, along with white (possibly the result of scratches rather than paint).

The film was also released in two versions, one silent and one with sound. The sound version, with audio compiled by Joel Haertling, is echoey and dreamlike. Haertling combines multiple tracks from several musicians and bands, seemingly layering them over one another to create a haunting soundtrack.

The Dante Quartet (1987)

Despite being a four-part silent film, this only runs for about six minutes. The first part, "Hell Itself", features blotchy brush strokes over pre-recorded film stock moving slowly; Brakhage used an optical printer to hold induvial painted frames for over 1/24 second. Despite many cool colours (purples and blues, especially), browns and muted blacks dominate the segment.

"Hell Spit Flexion", made on a different film stock to "Hell Itself" and thus appearing smaller in the overall frame, mixes hand-painting with recorded footage, much of it indicating Brakhage's gestural camera movements. Where "Hell Itself" moved slowly, "Hell Spit Flexion" is quick and frenetic, often cutting to black, which dominates in terms of colour.

"Purgation" features a chaotic dance of colour, just as frenetic as the movement in "Hell Spit Flexion" but taking up the full frame as in "Hell Itself". There is a hint of pre-recorded footage underneath, but the dominance is the swirling paint, which 'dances' and then 'freezes', fading out before starting again. Brakhage repeats this cycle several times, playing with different colour dominance – first purple, then green, then red and yellow – a kaleidoscopic display, ending with root or vein-like off-white 'frozen' on the screen and fading out.

"existence is song" ends the film and is somehow more frenetic than the previous two segments while portraying a sense of calm. Dominated by blues and purples to begin, it adopts

a similar 'dance' and 'freeze' motif. Colours swirl, more evenly distributed than any other segment, and then a fade to black – this repeats several times before the film ends.

Stellar (1993)

Another hand-painted work, *Stellar* runs for approximately three minutes and is silent. The film is dominated by black, with Brakhage's brush strokes seeming to mimic deep-space photography. However, this is most evident if you can slow the film down or pause it, as the paint appears to 'move' and change rapidly. Deep reds and blues look like planets nestled in darkness, while round dots of white give the appearance of stars. However, as they all move past so rapidly, the film becomes trancelike and leaves more impressions of these things rather than overt depictions.

Study in Color and Black & White (1993)[60]

At two minutes long, viewing this hand-painted silent film could initially be confusing. Distracted viewers might miss the quick moments of brush strokes that pop into an otherwise completely black frame momentarily. Were it another filmmaker, they could easily be written off as mistakes. The appearances of colour are so quick and minimal that they look almost like artefacts on the film projection. Then, after nearly a full minute of this, the frame bursts into colour, with quick swathes of yellow and red, before almost immediately returning to the same minimalist style as the opening. The artefact-like paint strokes continue to appear, slightly more present than previously, but still intermittent and dominated by the black screen.

First Hymn to the Night – Novalis (1994)[61]

A unique film in Brakhage's catalogue, *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* features a version[62] of snippets from the first of six poems called 'Hymns to the Night' by German Romanticist poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, who was known as Novalis. While the original poem is quite lengthy (three long stanzas, arranged more like paragraphs), Brakhage includes just a few bits of the poem, a few words at a time, by scratching the words onto the film cells by hand.

The film is three minutes long and silent, and hand-painted colour frames appear between the pieces of text. These often fill the frame, span the colour spectrum, and have a

---

[60] *Study in Color and Black & White.*
[61] *First Hymn to the Night - Novalis*, 1994.
[62] I am unsure if Brakhage reinterpreted the poem himself or was merely working from a particular translation

frenetic 'movement' to them, almost appearing to vibrate at times. The selected text Brakhage uses in the film is as follows:

> the universally gladdening Light…As inmost soul…it is breathed by stars…by stone…by suckling plant…multiform beast…and by (you). I turn aside to holy Night…I seek to blend with ashes. Night opens in us…infinite eyes…blessed love.[63]

The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him (2000)[64]

One of a four-part series wherein Brakhage imagined the life of his wife Marilyn, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* is 49 minutes long and silent. A contemplation on the sea and life surrounding it, the film moves between abstracted imagery, such as extreme close-ups of swelling waves or surf and more concrete and identifiable images, like birds flying, boats on the water, shorelines, or a couple walking on the beach.

With its aquatic theme, the colour blue dominates, but there is a consistent return to red, often abstracted, throughout. Brakhage's gestural camera movements mimic the push and pull of the ocean waves, which is likewise referenced by the constant push and pull between the abstract and concrete. The whole film feels like a gently rocking wave, the ocean at its calm rather than its fury. There is a sense of peace and meditativeness throughout the film.

---

[63] *First Hymn to the Night - Novalis*, 1994; Stan Brakhage quoted on 'First Hymn to the Night - Novalis'.
[64] *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him.*

1. Literature Review

I will undertake a detailed literature review in this chapter to frame my research. I have set this literature review out in four main sections under the following headings: Establishing Terminology, Stan Brakhage, Authorship, and Poetry/Poeticism. These headings are broad and, in some cases, are broken down into further subheadings. Poetry/Poeticism is a large area and therefore requires considerable time and detail to overview appropriately.

Each category has been addressed from the perspective of this research. These categories are not intended to be overviews of the entire subject(s); instead, they are written from a 'broad to narrow' approach where the overall topic is acknowledged and then whittled down to the relevant area for this thesis. I will begin this review by overviewing and defining the various terminology I engage with for this research. This overview is vital due to the confusing nature of some of these terms. I will then continue into the Stan Brakhage section, discuss some biographical information about Brakhage and his general place in film scholarship, and then consider existing literature about his filmmaking, potential similarities to this thesis as well as crucial differences therein. The Authorship section acknowledges the vast field of authorship before focusing primarily on auteur theory and its relevance here. Lastly, in the Poetry/Poeticism segment, I will explore different poetic film models, ultimately focusing on the model Maya Deren proposed in 1953.

Establishing Terminology

This thesis will engage with various terms, many of which can be contradictory, redundant, or vague. It is an essential first step for this thesis to consider the range of terms and definitions central to its study. The terms which must be defined are film, cinema, avant-garde, experimental, poetry, poetic, poeticism/poeticity, poetics, film poem, film-poem, and poetry film.

Film and Cinema

Defining film and cinema as separate terms might at first seem redundant. However, as Robert P. Kolker discusses, seeing these words as having two distinct meanings is useful.[65] The general use of 'film' and 'cinema' adopted by this research is taken from Kolker via Christian Metz, who separates 'cinema' from 'film' by defining cinema as "the encompassing institution of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception" and film as the "film text".[66] Text is "a coherent, delimited, comprehensible structure of meaning…that contains a complex of events…that are related to each other within a context, which can be a story or a narrative."[67]

In other words, 'film' refers to the individual product produced, distributed, exhibited, and/or received. Use of the terms 'film' and 'cinema' in this research will ascribe to the above definition, including when used in conjunction with modifiers, such as avant-garde, experimental, or poetic (i.e., 'experimental film' refers to a text while 'experimental cinema' refers to the institution of production of said text).

Avant-Garde and Experimental

Both the terms 'avant-garde' and 'experimental' are used frequently within the context of the cinema and have been fraught with arguments around cultural and artistic significance. While some writers appear to distinguish these two words as having separate meanings,[68] others move between the terms interchangeably.[69] When distinguished, 'avant-garde' often refers to specific movements,[70] such as the French surrealists of the 1920s,[71] whereas 'experimental' tends to be seen as more all-encompassing and less restrictive; it does not necessarily refer to a specific movement.

However, even when efforts have been made to keep these terms separate, they often become intermingled, whether intentionally or not. Fred Camper notes that no single agreed-upon term exists, even among filmmakers. While some filmmakers, including Stan Brakhage, disliked 'avant-garde', others felt 'experimental' was problematic and indicative of unfinished

---

[65] Kolker, 'The Film Text and Film Form', 11.
[66] Kolker, 11.
[67] Kolker, 12.
[68] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*.
[69] Blaetz, 'Avant-Garde and Experimental Film'.
[70] 'Avant-Garde Art: Definition, Meaning, History'.
[71] Austruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo'.

or unpolished work, and others still preferred 'underground' or 'independent', but these were both also met with critiques.[72] To avoid confusion and cultural associations with the term 'avant-garde', which do not apply to the work in question, I will implement the term 'experimental' for general usage in this thesis.

Further confusion arises when attempting to decide what makes a film experimental. Camper states:

> Obviously there is no hard-and-fast algorithm for deciding what is or is not an avant-garde or experimental film, and there can be lots of "is it or isn't it" debates at the margins.[73]

Fortunately, however, Camper also offers a rough guide for assessing whether a film can be accepted as experimental. He proposes a "six-part 'test'" whereby a film does not necessarily need to "pass" all six criteria, but he suggests "that a film that most on this list would agree is "avant-garde" or "experimental" will pass most of them."[74] I will restate a condensed version of Camper's criteria here:

1. It is created by one person, or occasionally a small group collectively, working on a minuscule budget…
2. It eschews the production-line model by which the various functions of filmmaker are divided among different individuals and groups…
3. It does not try offer a linear story that unfolds in the theatrical space of mainstream narrative…
4. It makes conscious use of the materials of cinema in a way that calls attention to the medium…

---

72 Camper, 'Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film'.
73 Camper.
74 Camper.

5. It has an oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics of mass media and the value systems of mainstream culture…

6. It doesn't offer a clear, univalent "message." More than mainstream films, it is fraught with conscious ambiguities, encourages multiple interpretations, and marshals paradoxical and contradictory techniques and subject-matter to create a work that requires the active participation of the viewer.[75]

As various films are engaged with throughout this thesis, this general "test" of whether the film might be considered experimental or not will be useful, even passively. It is helpful to frame my understanding of 'experimental' more clearly.

Poetry, Poetic, Poetics, and Poeticism

I will now consider the terms 'poetry', 'poetic', 'poetics', and 'poeticism'. The first of these terms, arguably the most central to this thesis alongside 'film', is 'poetry'. Through the ages, many of history's most famous poets were asked or took it upon themselves, at one point or another, to attempt a definition of this seemingly simple word. Their thoughts on the subject range and, as might be expected from poets, while they can be seen as beautiful, they do not objectively provide a good sense of definitions for poetry.

> Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.[76]

> Poetry is an art practised with the terribly plastic material of human language…Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air… Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the

[75] Camper.
[76] William Wordsworth quoted in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 291.

unknown and the unknowable…Poetry is the capture of a picture, a song, or a flair, in a deliberate prism of words.[77]

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.[78]

However, there is a readily available, though less interesting, answer. The terms 'poetry' and 'poetics' stem from the same root word in Greek, *poiesis,* which translates to "to make", but in philosophical terms, it is expanded to mean "the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before".[79] As she acknowledges the frequent "conflation" between the terms 'poetry' and 'poetics', Sarah Keller notes that the latter term dates "at least as far back as Aristotle…"[80] The ancient Greek philosopher saw 'poetics' as "a system…bound up with mimetic functions."[81] However, Aristotle also provides an early understanding of 'poetry', defining it as a mode of writing that "sprung from two causes…First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood…Next, there is instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm."[82] Modern definitions also relate 'poetry' to writing or language, especially the construction of language for harmonic effect. Jeffrey Wainwright offers that poetry is "…*a particular space*, created or adapted by the poet out of the flux of language-use with great deliberation."[83]

Wainwright discusses several variants of poetry, some of which, like 'concrete poetry', 'emblem poetry' and 'sound poetry', are less semantically dependent on language.[84] However, these and other experimental forms of 'poetry' still depend on language to construct them. Aristotle's 'poetry' is, in a sense, broader than current understandings of poetry but nevertheless is still tied to the word. More modern usage of the term 'poetry' has become

---

[77] Carl Sandburg quoted in 'The Almanac'.
[78] Emily Dickinson quoted in Grimes, 'If the Top of My Head Were Taken Off . . .'
[79] Polkinghorne, *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care*, 115.
[80] Keller, 'Poetry and "Film Poetics"', 19.
[81] Keller, 19.
[82] Aristotle quoted in Ieropoulos, 'The Film Poem'.
[83] Wainwright, *Poetry: The Basics*, 9.
[84] Wainwright, 222, 224, 236.

cemented not only in language but in a specific manipulation of language, which becomes ever more focused on imagery. As Michelle Bonczek Evory writes in her text *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations*, "Images are poetry's body and soul."[85]

The modern idea of poetry is then one that allows a *reader* or *listener* (because this is absorbed through written or spoken language) to envision clearly that which the author intends. As Jeremy Arnold puts it, "A poem allows someone to preserve a mental experience so that an outsider can access it as if it were their own."[86] The tools of the poem - and thus of poetry - are words as well as the techniques and qualities of written language. However, even as the notion of written poetry becomes increasingly linked to conjuring mental images, it can be difficult when applying the idea of poetry to other art forms. Jean Cocteau writes, speaking on cinematography and poetry, "May film remain film and none of its images be capable of translation into any language other than the dead language of the image…"[87]

Even within a prescriptive view that limits notions of poetry to the written (or spoken) word, there is also a long-standing acknowledgement that those things which may not necessarily be 'poetry' may, in fact, be 'poetic'. Damion Searls laments this contradiction in his article 'Write Tight' for *The Paris Review*: "But if good prose can be poetic, a novel can be 'pure poetry,' and poems can be prosaic, then it's not clear what anyone is talking about, really."[88] Sarah Keller has similar concerns in her article *Poetry and 'Film Poetics'*: "…it can mean any and everything not fully accounted for by narrative or documentary concerns…"[89]

'Poetic' is the adjectivised form of 'poetry'. When used to describe the written or spoken word, it is readily understood to mean that a 'poetic' phrase sounds to the reader or listener like it might be found *in* poetry. However, when combined with a term like 'cinema' or 'film', the understanding of 'poetic' becomes muddied. What is it that makes a film 'poetic'? What does the 'poetic cinema' entail? Or the poetic novel or poetic album? Throughout this thesis, I intend to investigate this quality, what I am referring to as a film's poeticism or its capacity to be poetic. There is a challenge here because, as Sarah Keller states, "poetry has made an appearance in every mode of cinema production, the possibilities that inhere in

---

[85] Evory, *Naming the Unnameable*, no page number.
[86] Jeremy Arnold quoted in Evory, no page number.
[87] Cocteau, *The Art of Cinema*, 28.
[88] Searls, 'Write Tight'.
[89] Keller, 'Poetry and "Film Poetics"', 19.

'poetic cinema' are as multiple as the meanings that inhere in poetry itself."[90] It is important that I establish my meaning when using these terms.

Simply put, poeticism is just a quality of a text to be poetic. I had initially adopted the term poeticity, seen here as synonymous with poeticism, and have chosen to use poeticism throughout this thesis as it is a more readily identifiable word. In describing poeticity, Andras Sándor states, "In poetic texts, language at the text level initiates processes in mental space which may be an inner space unstructured by the (visual, acoustic, etc.) images that open it up."[91] According to Sándor, much of the 'processing' is done beyond the text, within the reader's mind. Rather than just following straight across the page, meaning builds *up* as what Sándor calls "metasemiotic".[92] Thus, if a text (in the case of this research, a film) is poetic, it should "open up" the viewer to elucidate more than simply the images that are on the screen, but invite further meaning to be extrapolated using various devices.

Occasionally, the term 'poetics' may appear. As stated previously, it comes from the same Greek root word, *poiesis* meaning "to make", as does 'poetry', though 'poetics' has retained more of its original meaning. When discussing the 'poetics' of something - the poetics of film, the poetics of engineering, or the poetics of beekeeping – this, by definition, refers to the actual process of doing. However, because of the similarities, 'poetic' and 'poetics' are sometimes used interchangeably. Though they are technically not synonyms, the cultural usage around these terms is such that this research accepts that there will be instances where the word 'poetics' takes on alternate meanings. If I do need to engage with this term, I will highlight which meaning of the word I am referring to (either as the process of making or as a synonym to 'poetic'), but every effort has been made to avoid usage of 'poetics' and instead favour the use of 'poeticism'.

Other Terms Around Poetry and Film

When engaging with the combined idea of poetry and film, it is necessary to point out that there is a cinematic genre entirely dedicated to the combination of these two distinct arts

---

[90] Keller, 17.
[91] Sándor, 'Poeticity'.
[92] Sándor.

and that this genre has a rich history dating back almost as far as cinema itself. There are a variety of terms that may be encountered regarding this. While I address this approach toward the poetic cinema under the Hybrid Model section below, it is necessary first to overview some of the terminologies.

> The reason I used the word 'poetry' is to set it off against the 'film novel', which is represented by the entertainment film, or the reportage which is represented by the documentary. Where I would consider the entertainment film as 'novel', I would describe the exploration into the realm of mood, the lyrical sensation as 'poetry'.[93]

The use of the term 'film poem' first came about as a method of distinction more than anything else. Early impressionist filmmakers, such as Jean Epstein, wished their work to stand out from narrative mainstream cinema and drew on their influence of poetry as a point of difference.[94] Similarly, Man Ray would refer to his film *Emak-Bakia* (1927) as a "cinépoème" (translated to cinepoem or filmpoem), which Sarah Tremlett argues created "a blueprint for all film poems today."[95] There was an implication of a more artistic film, a more personal and expressive cinema.[96]

According to Robert Scott Speranza, 'avant-garde' and 'film poem' were, at one point, interchangeable terms.[97] Perhaps this interchangeability led to a perceived "overuse" of the term 'film poem'.[98]Since the 1920s, many terms have been associated with 'film poem', but not all are understood to be synonymous with it. For her part, Tremlett isolates 'film poem' to the early avant-garde and links it most closely to the more loosely understood 'poetic film' mentioned briefly above.[99]

---

[93] 'Hans Richter on the Nature of Film Poetry'.
[94] Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, 14.
[95] Tremlett, 15.
[96] Ieropoulos, 'The Film Poem'.
[97] Speranza, 'Verses in the Celluloid: Poetry in Film From 1910-2002, With Special Attention to the Development of the Film-Poem'.
[98] Ieropoulos, 'The Film Poem'.
[99] Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, 14–15.

This development of the term 'film poem' and the addition of several other terms has led to some confusion, which I will attempt to clarify now. Some theorists will demarcate a more modern usage and different meaning to the term 'film poem' by hyphenating the words into 'film-poem'. Speranza describes the 'film-poem' as a collaborative effort between a filmmaker and a poet, usually two separate people. The film-poem is comprised of two main primary elements – the film and the poem. As a rule of thumb, these are composed individually and brought together during editing. The poet works with the director and editor to combine the written word with the filmed image, culminating in the final work, the film-poem.[100] Speranza states, "The work should be absorbed via both media simultaneously".[101]

The films Speranza concerns himself with are mostly productions from the 1980s onwards and primarily made by poet Tony Harrison. Speranza claims that,

> No other form of filmmaking mirrors poetic inspiration in its own production process, or selections aspects of editing or mise-en-scene [*sic*] in parallel with poetic composition.[102]

The films are made in the same way as is any other, with the addition of a "poet write[ing] the poetry *as the film is being shot* [emphasis in original]".[103] It is best then to limit Speranza's definition of the film-poem to films that "seek to use little or no prose in their dialogue or voice-over; the text that accompanies the filmed images is entirely, or at least primarily, verse," and those films for which the poetry is composed in conjunction with the filming process.[104]

Speranza's definition of the Harrisonian film-poem is narrow in that he seeks to include only those works for which the poetry is composed specifically for the use within the film in question. This excludes a range of films, which Speranza addresses but neglects to categorise, which use pre-existing poetry. Speranza considers films such as these predecessors to the

---

[100] Speranza, 'Verses in the Celluloid: Poetry in Film From 1910-2002, With Special Attention to the Development of the Film-Poem', 125.
[101] Speranza, 8.
[102] Speranza, 122.
[103] Speranza, 121.
[104] Speranza, 121.

Harrisonian model he lays out and very briefly discusses *Manhatta* (1921), *Night Mail* (1936), and *Metroland* (1971) as examples.[105] Though he says these films "did not abide by [the] same sort of standards adhered to by modern film-poets… [these films] helped in setting those standards".[106] Tremlett instead classifies these films and others under what she describes as a broad term: 'poetry film'.[107]

The term 'poetry film' had previously been adapted by both William Wees and Alistair Cook, though the two had slightly differing approaches. Wees defines 'poetry film' as "…a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own."[108] According to Wees, the poetry film is a "hybrid art form" and, possibly, an entirely new genre "interested in the fine line between text as word or image…."[109] To delineate between the "hybrid" works he was concerned with, Wees separates the term 'film poem' from 'poetry film'. To Wees, the 'film poem' exists merely as a polemic device to distinguish the avant-garde from mainstream cinema.

William Wees offers a more expansive definition of 'poetry film' than Alistair Cook. According to Cook, the "embodiment of…poetry film is the unabridged reading of a poem by the poet, or another, over a film that attempts to combine the poem with visual and audio elements".[110] Cook sees this combination of the two art forms as the pinnacle of poetry film. Later, filmmaker Ian Cottage would offer an even further prescriptive definition (and a new term) in the form of a manifesto. Cottage's rules narrow the definition of a 'poem film' to the point of polemic. The fourteen points of Cottage's manifesto, 'Making Poem Films,' indicate a dogmatic and exclusive approach to the film-poem, and this tradition carried forward through the 1990s with the slight rise in film-poem production and even a dedicated festival.[111]

For his part, Speranza uses the term 'film poem' (without a hyphen) to account for Wees' and early filmmakers' use of the term 'film poem'. However, rather than likewise adopting 'poetry film', Speranza uses the term 'film-poem' (*with* the hyphen). The terms 'poem film', 'poetry film',

---

[105] Speranza, 122.
[106] Speranza, 122.
[107] Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, 15–34.
[108] William Wees quoted in Ieropoulos, 'Poetry-Film & The Film Poem'.
[109] Ieropoulos.
[110] 'About | Filmpoem'.
[111] Cottage, 'Poem Film Manifesto'.

and 'film-poem' are nearly identical, with 'poem film being the most restrictive while 'poetry film' is the most flexible.[112] 'Film-poem' oscillates between the two, not quite as restrictive as the 'poem film' for it does not adhere to a manifesto, but certainly more restrictive than 'poetry film'.

Tremlett warns against using these terms interchangeably without considering their subtle differences and the potential cultural implications or preferences for one term over another.[113] However, broadly speaking, it can be determined that 'film poem' is most closely related to a loose concept of 'poetic cinema', which is not bound to verbal poetry and/or language, whereas 'poetry film', 'film-poem', and 'poem film' are all dependent upon a linguistic element. As the focus of this thesis (Stan Brakhage) is probably *most* known for lacking any verbal elements in his films, I feel it is helpful to make this delineation.

Now that terminology has been established and defined, I will conduct the literature review regarding Stan Brakhage, authorship, and models of Poetic Cinema.

Stan Brakhage

There are a lot of movies made for nobody.

-Stan Brakhage[114]

While I intend to approach my analysis from a textual standpoint, with limited biographical input, it is worthwhile to overview Stan Brakhage's life and career to contextualise my research. A practising filmmaker from approximately 1952-2003, Stan Brakhage's substantial body of work is relatively understudied due to his relative obscurity and the difficulty in obtaining most of his films to watch them. Brakhage's career is marked by a few

---

[112] Speranza's model requires that the poem and the film are constructed simultaneously, whereas Wees merely requires that the resultant product be a "hybrid" of verbal poetry and film.
[113] Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, 38–39.
[114] 'Stan Brakhage'.

highly successful and celebrated films within the avant-garde and broader film criticism communities, such as *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and *Mothlight* (1964). Still, much of his work remains unseen for all intents and purposes.

Stan Brakhage's childhood was dotted with various dramatic circumstances which could be argued are typical of yielding artistic personalities; his adoptive parents divorced while he was young, his father came out as gay and moved to Chicago, and as a young teen, Brakhage spent some time in a youth home before once again living with his mother in Denver.[115]

Though initially interested in being a poet, he became enamoured with filmmaking after making his first film *Interim* (1951), with his "dramatic group", the Gadflies. He decided to pursue that instead, moving to California.[116] Living with artists and poets, Brakhage began making connections to other filmmakers, in particular, Kenneth Anger, who fostered a relationship between Brakhage and the New York-based Amos Vogel[117], who founded Cinema 16, a flourishing film society renowned for its experimental content.[118] Brakhage moved to New York briefly, connecting him with even more filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Jonas Mekas.

However, after a few years of flitting between Los Angeles and New York, Brakhage returned to Denver, where he met and married Mary Jane Collum (now known as Jane Wodening). They moved to a small village called Lump Gulch in the mountains near Boulder, Colorado, where they would raise five children. The Brakhage family carried out a somewhat hermit-like existence in this ex-mining village which still exists today as little more than a street with a general store and a bar.[119]

Eschewing the industry side of cinema, Brakhage chose instead to make films that were mostly self-financed and from his own home. Throughout this time, Brakhage also found work as an educator in film history, first for the Art Institute of Chicago, which he commuted to and later for the University of Colorado at Boulder. And, of course, he continued to make films,

---

[115] James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage: The Activity of His Nature', 1.
[116] James, 2.
[117] James, 2.
[118] Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, 22.
[119] As a point of interest, I visited Lump Gulch during my archival research visit to the University of Chicago at Boulder.

many of which featured snippets or even long sequences of his family life, some of which were quite intimate, like childbirth or the decomposition of the family pet dog.[120]

Then, in 1987, a radical shift occurred in Brakhage's life when he and Jane divorced, and both vacated Lump Gulch. He moved into the nearby city of Boulder, closer to his job at the University, and two years later remarried Marilyn Jull. At that time, there was also a noticeable shift in Brakhage's subject matter and approach in his filmmaking. These events essentially ended the long period of "personal cinema" in Brakhage's career. It mostly halted his work with recorded cinema, leading him to focus much more heavily – though not exclusively - on hand-made work until he died in 2003. While Brakhage made some films earlier in his career in which he painstakingly created the imagery by hand through painting, pasting, scratching, or perhaps a combination, after this point in time, many of his films were either entirely or predominantly hand-made using those methods. Due to the production methods, manner of distribution (often self-funded), and the sheer number of films that Brakhage made, many of them are not readily available for viewing by the public.

Most of Brakhage's nearly 400 films are only viewable by archival visits to a few specific locales, such as Denver, Colorado, in the United States or London, England. Indeed, most of his films face a huge accessibility barrier to public consumption. A student of Brakhage is then somewhat reliant on previous descriptions and analyses of films to understand and interpret his work, which leads to perhaps the most challenging issue – much of the existing writings about Brakhage's films focus on personal and/or biographically-based understandings of the films.

Most recently, renowned Brakhage scholar Fred Camper has published a large volume entitled *Seeking Brakhage.*[121] This text is comprehensive in its overview of many of Brakhage's films, its inclusion of a new article, 'Still Seeking Brakhage', wherein Camper discusses at length his continuing search for understanding and rediscovery in Brakhage's films, as well as its re-publication of many of Camper's various writings about Brakhage over the years. The book includes a valuable article initially published for the Chicago Review entitled 'Brakhage's

---

[120] Of interest to note here, though not necessarily relevant to this thesis, is the involvement in filmmaking by Jane, confirmed by Stan Brakhage's notes. This involvement is especially notable in films such as *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959), where much of the camera work was done by Jane as well as Stan.

[121] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage.*

Contradictions'. This article, wherein Camper refers to one of Brakhage's films as a "light-poem", was inspirational in beginning this research and was highly influential upon initial film selection.[122] It was the first article that I came across which I felt tried to understand Brakhage using the more technical, text-informed approach that I was interested in. While Camper's personal connection to Brakhage is apparent, there is a clear attempt to distance himself from Brakhage's work in his interpretations. It also establishes a theme of oppositions or contradictions found in Brakhage's work; this theme finds parity with the model of poetic cinema adopted in this thesis, which is discussed in more detail below.

Camper's use of poetic terminology is not necessarily unique; the tendency to discuss his films in terms of poetry may be found in much of the writing about Stan Brakhage. Notions relating Brakhage to the poet or his films to poetry appear several times in the canon of film criticism dedicated to his work. P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000,* is one of the first and most well-known examples of a 'poetic' comparison to Brakhage's work (the first edition was published in 1974). Sitney cites Brakhage, specifically his early work, as the exemplar of "lyrical film"[123].[124] Sitney expanded significantly on his ideas around cinema and poetry, including how he saw it related to Brakhage in his book *The Cinema of Poetry,* published in 2015.[125] Sitney teases out Brakhage's influence and likeness to poets Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson, Brakhage's "pursuit of cinematic poetry as the means not to 'allow the brain to falsify' the 'earlier reality' of what his eyes see," and extensively discusses Brakhage's four films adapting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic poem *Faust* before considering the influence of poetry on Brakhage's later photographic work, in particular the Vancouver Island films.[126]

Like Camper, Sitney is considered an authority on Brakhage, and his work has been useful, especially as a starting point for film selection. However, by his own admission, Sitney prefers to ground his examination of Brakhage's films in "historical-critical frames."[127] Sitney often tries to understand Brakhage's work within the context of his (Brakhage's) life,

---

122 Camper, 'Brakhage's Contradictions'.
123 The lyrical film "postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film", Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000,* 160
124 Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 160–80.
125 Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 149–94.
126 Sitney, 149–94.
127 Sitney, 'Introduction', 8.

examining how they may be connected to huge events life marriage, childbirth, and divorce. Meanwhile, Camper does focus more on textual analysis. However, neither Sitney nor Camper seeks to approach and understand Brakhage specifically as a poetic filmmaker. While they both reference the poetic concerning Brakhage, their focus is to ensure Brakhage's place as an influential and vital figure in film history.

Further works include a 1982 article published in *Film Quarterly* by David James, 'The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson', which, as the title suggests, draws a comparison between Stan Brakhage and post-modernist poet Charles Olson.[128] James briefly addresses Maya Deren's attempt for a medium-specific view of poetry at the symposium in 1953 but dismisses it as "idealist". His essay is dedicated to "suggest[ing] that the most appropriate formal analogy for Brakhage is…the work of Charles Olson."[129] He argues that Brakhage, like Olson, rejected ego and focused on the body – for Olson, this was the breath between lines and for Brakhage, it was his physical body as an extension of the camera.[130] James notes that Brakhage himself claims that the "energy of immediacy" he finds in his own work is directly influenced by Charles Olson.[131] Furthermore, James expands the Romantic influence beyond Brakhage's filmmaking and into his life and lifestyle, arguing that Brakhage's "retreat" into the mountainside village in Colorado should be seen as a "political act" and that the film *The Text of Light* could be read as anti-capitalist.[132] James's conclusions rely heavily on biographical and autobiographical analyses, drawing some direct comparisons to biographical accounts of Romantic poets like Wordsworth, and his concept of poetry is broad – "the poetry becomes an articulation of that [attempted direct contact between consciousness and nature] as well as a means to it."[133]

Then in 1998, R. Bruce Elder published a lengthy exploration of the influence of poetry on Brakhage with his book *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.*[134] This large volume expands on James's claims, and looks both at Brakhage's biography and a selection of his films and draws comparisons to the

---

[128] James, 'The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet'.
[129] James, 35.
[130] James, 40.
[131] James, 41.
[132] James, 42–43.
[133] James, 39.
[134] Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.*

poetry of Pound, Stein, and Olson. Because of his interest in highlighting Brakhage as a Romantic, Elder, like James, focuses more on Brakhage's approach to filmmaking rather than the films themselves. Though Elder does engage in slightly more textual analysis, both writers take similar approaches in that they seek to make connections between Brakhage's filmmaking and written poetry. This approach is closer to the Hybrid Model discussed below than the one undertaken in this thesis.

A chapter of the 2009 publication *We Saw the Light: Conversations between New American Cinema and Poetry* by Daniel Kane further documents, through analysis and interpretation of Brakhage's correspondences with friend and poet Robert Creeley, the profound impact that poetry in its traditional sense had on Brakhage and his approach toward filmmaking.[135] Kane proposes that not only was Brakhage influenced by poetry, including that of Creeley, but that Creeley's poetry was in turn influenced by Brakhage's filmmaking – thus the 'conversation' between the two.

While Maya Deren is seen as an influence on Brakhage and discussed in an historical and biographical context, her approach to poetic cinema has not been applied analytically to Brakhage's filmmaking. John Pruitt, writing for the Chicago Review in 2001, examines the artistic relationship between these two filmmakers stating "Maya Deren is worth considering as Brakhage's most important immediate predecessor."[136] Pruitt's use of 'poetics' (rather than 'poetic') should be noted. Pruitt focuses on a wholly different aspect of Deren's cinematic theories than I do in this thesis. His argument focuses on the apparent disconnect between the two filmmakers' overall approaches toward filmmaking and restoring them:

> Rather than see an opposition or break, there is an advantage to the perspective that Brakhage was taking Deren's poetics of cinema in the direction they wanted to go but which for some reason or other she herself couldn't take them.[137]

---

[135] Kane, *We Saw The Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*, 51–78.
[136] Pruitt, 'Stan Brakhage and the Long Reach of Maya Deren's Poetics of Film', 116.
[137] Pruitt, 123.

Other writings on Brakhage include a collective work called *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, edited by David James (as David E. James). Filmmaker, artist, and friend of Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, contributes a short note entitled 'Brakhage. Breer. Menken. The Pure Poets of Cinema' which, at a mere two pages, refrains from analysis but suggests that poetry "…transform[s] reality into art…" and thus infers the same of Brakhage's work.[138] However, Annette Michelson's 'Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura' offers far more, not just establishing Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker but attempting to attain an understanding of this.[139]

Michelson delves into the roots of associating film and poetry, looking briefly at Maya Deren after examining Sergei Eisenstein in detail. She argues that Eisenstein's films can be understood as modern versions of epic poems, drawing a parallel between the "theatre of gesture", which typified epic theatre and Eisenstein's use of montage.[140] She then relates this to the notion of "temporality" suggested by Maya Deren's "'vertical' 'lyric' film" (to be discussed in detail in a later section of this chapter). Further, she suggests that it was Brakhage who "…radicalise[d] this revision of temporality…."[141]

Further articles from this collection have also proven helpful to this research. The first is Paul Arthur's 'Becoming Dark with Excess of Light: The Vancouver Island Films', which offers a rare discussion on the entire Vancouver Island quadrilogy, whereas many writers focus primarily on *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991).[142] The second is Nicky Hamlyn's 'The Roman Numeral Series', which discusses the concept of 'defocus', and while I chose not to include Brakhage's *Roman Numeral* series (1979-80) in this research, Hamlyn's identification and definition of this technique is essential to this work and, indeed, to approaching Brakhage's filmmaking from a textual perspective in general.[143]

There are a few further works which also bear mentioning. In 2018, a collection of writing solely dedicated to Stan Brakhage's film work was published, edited by Marco Lori and Esther Leslie. *Stan Brakhage: the realm buster* includes essays and articles which focus mainly on individual works or seek to offer interpretations of Brakhage's concept of "metaphors on

---

[138] Mekas, 'Brakhage. Breer. Menken. The Pure Poets of Cinema', 27–28.
[139] Michelson, 'Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura', 36–56.
[140] Michelson, 48–49.
[141] Michelson, 52–53.
[142] Arthur, 'Becoming Dark with Excess of Light', 207–25.
[143] Hamlyn, 'The Roman Numeral Series', 113–16.

vision" as it manifests in his films.[144] This book was edited together from a conference organised by Marco Lori, which was dedicated to the same theme and which I attended. The book's editors take clear inspiration from the same Camper article mentioned above but adopt a different approach than this research does to interpreting the analysis of Brakhage's films.[145] A general theme of looking at the "representation and perception" in Brakhage's work persists throughout the volume, which seeks to give Brakhage's films "the attention [they] deserve."[146] Several articles adopt a similar hybrid approach that James and Elder took previously, though the articles focus on different influences than James and Elder do.[147] Though the conference and book examine Brakhage from a different perspective than I do in this thesis, several articles prove extremely useful. They will be used at various points of this research. Peter Mudie's 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings'[148] and Stephen Mooney's 'Stan Brakhage's Temporality, Disjunction and Reflexive Process'[149] provide excellent secondary research to support the findings of various aspects of this thesis.

Finally, there is another book that is worth mentioning. While it has not formed a basis for my research, it is an interesting artefact and supports the argument that poetry and the poetic are often associated with Stan Brakhage's work. Randy Roark's book *Dissolve: Screenplays to the Films of Stan Brakhage* features hundreds of poems inspired by Brakhage's films which are presented as retroactively written screenplays for them.[150] The book is academically valuable for its inclusion of commentary on many of the films listed, both by Brakhage and many of the noted scholars above.

While some of these works use or incorporate other methods as well, the overarching approach toward Brakhage and his work tends to be biographical analysis. Such an approach is unsurprising as many of the writers knew Brakhage personally, which is evident in their articles and books as they draw on insight gained through conversations with Brakhage, as well as observations on and general knowledge of Brakhage's life. While such work is valuable, my own research will supplement these works by focusing primarily on a textual analysis of a wide

---

[144] Lori and Leslie, *Stan Brakhage: The Realm Buster*.
[145] Lori and Leslie, 1.
[146] Lori and Leslie, back cover.
[147] Lori and Leslie, 1–8.
[148] Mudie, 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings'.
[149] Mooney, 'Stan Brakhage's Temporality, Disjunction and Reflexive Process'.
[150] Roark, *Dissolve: Screenplays to the Films of Stan Brakhage*.

range of Brakhage's films. Not only am I applying the textual analysis of these films in a new way by using Maya Deren's model of poetic cinema, but I have also taken pains to try and look at films not discussed as much by these previous writers. Where relevant or interesting for research, I will draw lightly on biographical and autobiographical insight (with a preference toward autobiographical) but strive to rely as much upon the films themselves as possible. A central resource for such insight is Brakhage's book *Metaphors on Vision*, which contains his writings on film and copies of his notes and, where relevant, scripts.[151]

Throughout the various articles and books written on Brakhage, there is a strong sense of his ownership over his film work. Indeed, he almost always (with limited exception) worked as a lone artist, having complete control over every aspect of his films. With other filmmakers, there is sometimes an argument over who the work's true 'author' is. However, with Brakhage, this argument becomes moot. This notion of the sole author, highly unique in cinema, feeds into a very Romantic view of authorship.

Authorship
Authorship: The Auteur/Author-Figure as Poet

A consideration of authorship is essential here because identifying a filmmaker as a poet is also to identify that filmmaker as an author. Furthermore, despite my rejections of linking the poetic to value, 'poet' is a loaded term that carries social and cultural perceptions of value and independent contribution. If a filmmaker is a poet, it is suggested by this terminology that the 'poet' is the sole contributor (author) of the work in question. This concept most readily falls under the authorship theory of auteurism, which will now be investigated.

As the Romantic period emerged in the late 1700s and more importance was placed on the human element of art (and by default, less importance placed on the divine, as was seen in the Middle Ages and Renaissance), the identification of the 'author' of a work became paramount.[152] A search for authorship ultimately becomes a search for origination – what sole person may be said to be the actual source of artistic value.[153] Authorship endeavours to answer the question of who bears ultimate responsibility for a piece of work, whether that work is art

---

[151] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*.
[152] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', 98.
[153] Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, 4.

or science. However, as Jack Stillinger discusses in detail in his book *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, the concept of 'sole authorship' is contentious. Authorship remains a debated topic among many scholars, and film theorists are no exception. Even in earlier art forms such as literature, art, and theatre, there is an argument to be made that any work is the result of cooperation and teamwork.[154] However, this particularly becomes an issue in the cinematic arts, given the overtly collaborative nature of filmmaking.[155]

From its inception, cinema has been a primarily industrial endeavour, with studios formed within years of the first films shown. Since then, the studio has remained the predominant method of film production, albeit in varying scales from "independent" films to multi-million-dollar studio "mega-productions".[156] As a result, the collaborative effort in film production has become the norm. Even in films made outside of the studio system, ideas around film authorship, including *auteur* theory, are almost always positioned in relation to the film industry. It considers the various writers, producers, actors, and crew, as well as the director. Several theories of authorship pertain specifically to film production, but for this thesis, the *auteur* theory will be examined as a theory which is particularly suited to analyse the avant-garde and/or experimental film.

> Perhaps in no other type of film (or genre) is there a better case made for the auteur than in avant-garde.[157]

The avant-garde movement in cinema started in the 1920s with Surrealist and Dadaist cinema, particularly the work of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. The French military term, meaning "before the guard," referred to the movement's experimental nature and their esteem as pioneers in art.[158] The avant-garde was often seen as lone filmmakers or a small group of filmmakers making work antithetical to established norms.[159] Art historian Mikkel Bolt

---

[154] In painting, this might be the apprentice who mixes the paints or stretches the canvas or the model who poses, whereas, in writing, this might be the typesetter or printer.

[155] Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, 163–81.

[156] 'Film History Before 1920'.

[157] Verrone, *The Avant-Garde Feature Film: A Critical History*, 48.

[158] Mekas, 'My Definition of the Avant-Garde'.

[159] Note this is still a collaborative process, as Bruce Kawin points out

Rasmussen explains, "The avant-garde sought to confer the creativity of the artists to everyone outside the confines of the art institution."[160] The avant-garde has undergone several, often self-appointed, permutations (neo-avant-garde, post-neo-avant-garde, etc.) and continues to evolve today.

When Alexandre Austruc published his 1948 article, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera Stylo", he explained that when he used the term 'avant-garde,' he referred not to the original films of the avant-garde movement (i.e. the surrealist films of the 1920s) but to films, or rather filmmakers, who "break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language."[161] He saw these filmmakers as part of "the age of the *camera-stylo*".[162] The phrase '*camera-stylo*' or 'camera pen' intentionally conjures a literary metaphor. Austruc not only likened cinema to literature but also argued that cinema would equal, if not surpass, literature in its expressive capabilities.[163] He claimed that the use of images to portray certain emotions and even actions becomes itself a language and that it is the avant-garde which most successfully utilises this language.

Austruc appears to have influenced a young French filmmaker named François Truffaut. Truffaut published "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" in 1954, introducing the term *auteur* rather than simply the English 'author' to denote a writer-director of cinema who rebels against the "Tradition of Quality."[164] This "Tradition," according to Truffaut, engenders a "uniformity" among the films produced by "*matteurs-en-scène*". For Truffaut, a *'matteur-en-scène'* adapted screenplays with no poetic vision or interpretation, merely producing visual replication of the written word.[165]

As the title indicates, Truffaut focused exclusively on French directors and the culture surrounding filmmaking in France at the time of writing. Truffaut argued this was a culture of psychological realism in place of the former poetic realism prior to the Second World War.[166]

---

[160] Rasmussen, 'The Self-Destruction of the Avant Garde', 121–30.
[161] Austruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo'.
[162] Austruc.
[163] Austruc.
[164] Truffaut, 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema'.
[165] Truffaut.
[166] Truffaut.

According to Truffaut, this push towards psychological realism comes from an anti-bourgeois sentiment. However, the films are somewhat contradictorily produced by the bourgeoisie. Truffaut sees no value in such a cinema.

Truffaut's choice of phrasing – 'poetic realism' and 'psychological realism' – is intriguing. It tacitly implies that the *auteur* is more poetic than the mainstream filmmaker. However, Truffaut failed to explain precisely what 'poetic realism' means (or, indeed, poetic), concentrating instead on what he means when referring to 'psychological realism'. One can infer an inverse relationship between the two terms; if 'psychological realism' means a tendency (in French cinema, according to Truffaut) to adapt written material without any artist's interpretation, then 'poetic realism' implies a personal analysis implemented into the filmic representation of the written word. This notion will be expanded upon momentarily when Bruce Kawin's "redefinitions" of *auteur* are explored.

Truffaut appears to be attacking the same group of filmmakers that Austruc separated - those who responded solely to the construct demanded by the narrative. For Truffaut, an *auteur* uses a film to express part of their personality, whereas the *matteur-en-scène* merely transfers the work of another.[167] Truffaut saw these two opposing sides (*auteurs* and *matteurs-en-scène)* as existing in a constant state of struggle.

This sense of struggle formed the crux of Andrew Sarris's argument in his article, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962'. Sarris developed a structure for his understanding of *auteur* theory, setting forth a list of criteria. The element of industry, present but not most prominent in both Austruc and Truffaut's articles, becomes a central point for Sarris. This requirement becomes clear when dissecting Sarris's three criteria of the *auteur*. Sarris almost exclusively referred to directors when discussing an *auteur*. However, as I will discuss shortly, some theorists claim that an *auteur* might be anyone whose influence is felt overall throughout a film.[168]

Sarris's first criterion states that, to be an *auteur*, the director must be technically competent – "A great director has to be at least a good director."[169] Sarris does not define what technical competence entails, leaving this widely open to interpretation. In his second point, his

[167] Buscombe, 'Ideas of Authorship', 76–83.
[168] Cameron, 'Films, Directors, and Critics', 32.
[169] Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962'.

devotion to industry becomes most noticeable – "Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style, which serve as his signature."[170] He argued that because of the industrial relationship in American cinema (i.e., films are commissioned), a director's only option to express his[171] personality comes through visual interpretation of the material.[172]

Sarris' third point incorporates the previous two. "The third and *ultimate* [my emphasis – J.G.] premise of *auteur* theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material."[173] The material the personality must distinguish from, by Sarris's reckoning, is that of the industry, and this is his primary reason for ranking American films above all others – the almost universal presence of the Hollywood industry in American films.[174] Sarris and other proponents of *auteurism* of the time integrally tie the film *industry* to this authorship theory. As he puts it, "Hollywood pictures are not so much custom-built as manufactured."[175] It additionally ties the "director's personality" to value, and the influence of *auteur* could account for the biographical focus in much of the existing scholarship on Brakhage.

One might consider Sarris's version of *auteur* theory as intentionalist in nature, which ties into the theory's relationship to industry – the concept of the *auteur's* vision holding supreme meaning over and above the influences of the industry.[176] When examining a filmmaker like Stan Brakhage, who existed almost exclusively on the outskirts of the film industry, *auteur* theory, as described above, becomes increasingly difficult to apply to such a filmmaker when looked at in detail. In fact, many avant-garde filmmakers not only operate independently of the film industry but actively reject it.

Though largely embraced, *auteur* theory found its critics immediately, such as Pauline Kael[177] and Edward Buscombe[178]. Kael, in particular, directly attacked not only Sarris's writing on *auteur* theory but Sarris himself in her response article "Circles and Squares" in 1963. Kael

---

[170] Sarris.

[171] The male pronoun is used here to reflect Sarris's writing, which exclusively refers to directors, especially auteurs, in the masculine.

[172] Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962'.

[173] Sarris.

[174] Sarris.

[175] Sarris.

[176] Sellors, *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*, 33.

[177] Kael, 'Circles and Squares'.

[178] Buscombe, 'Ideas of Authorship'.

dismissed Sarris's discussions of *auteur* theory as a "cult of personality", arguing that Sarris merely provided a means to rank filmmakers according to personal taste.[179] Kael refrains from reframing or reconstructing Sarris's *auteur* theory in her article. Meanwhile, Buscombe, despite his criticisms, acknowledges that *auteur* has led to significant results in structural analysis of some films.[180]

More recently, however, Bruce Kawin also took issue with Sarris's version of *auteur*. He criticises Sarris and "the *auteurists*" for singling out the director. However, he maintains the caveat that *auteur* has value in that "often personal coherence *can* emerge from a collaborative project."[181] The key differences between Kawin's "redefined *auteur*" and Sarris's traditional *auteur* methods are in the respective scopes of each and Kawin's rejection of the value statements imputed by Sarris's *auteur* theory.

Kawin's approach allows for this 'coherence' of a film to be recognised regardless of whether the person in question was the director – he uses George Lucas's clear influence over *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), directed by Irvin Kershner and *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (1983), directed by Richard Marquand, as examples of this. While George Lucas directed neither film, he retains ownership of them within the zeitgeist.[182] Kawin's "redefined auteur method" seeks to resolve what he cites as two "contradictory facts" of film production:

> … (1) that filmmaking is a collaboration, and (2) that some films do reveal the workings of a particular stylistic imagination, one that tends to recur in other films made by the same artist(s).[183]

---

179 Kael, 'Circles and Squares'.
180 Buscombe, 'Ideas of Authorship', 81.
181 Kawin, 'Authorship, Design, and Execution', 192–93.
182 Kawin, 193.
183 Kawin, 197.

Kawin stresses the collaborative process, noting that a film may have more than one *auteur* and dismissing the notion that an *auteur*-less film is the work of "hacks".[184]

Kawin notes that collaboration on a film may be a financial arrangement: "Even a solo filmmaker like Brakhage must scrape together the money to make his films."[185]Regarding the work of Brakhage, it is often considered to have been entirely isolated, with Stan Brakhage considered the sole pair of hands who affected the work.[186] As certain investigations into the production of some of his films will show in later chapters, this is only sometimes the case. In the more traditional version of *auteur* theory, the efforts of those collaborators would be deemed inconsequential and unworthy of acknowledgement. For this research, I have chosen to adhere to Kawin's "redefined *auteur*" because it allows for the acknowledgement of collaborative efforts while still seeking to find "the workings of a particular stylistic imagination" which occur throughout a filmmaker's (in this case, Brakhage's) career.

Despite Kawin's rejection of purported value, to claim an individual as the sole author or originator of a work, or bodies of work, has cultural significance, more so if the work itself is widely deemed artistically valuable. This claim becomes even more culturally loaded if the author is also deemed a 'poet'. Eric Falci says, "Poetry of course has value…poets and poetry have been important parts of every human culture that we know about…"[187] and Rev. Dr Gideon Cecil adds, "…poets are important in every society because their prophetic words of wisdom will live on after they are gone."[188]

As discussed in the section on terminology, the concept of poetry and, therefore, of poets is heavily embedded in a linguistic understanding; applying this to film can be complex and contentious. Therefore, I must explore, understand, and choose a model by which I can attempt to do this. The following section explores the different schools of thought in applying poetry and/or the poetic to cinema and identifies my chosen model for doing so in this research.

---

[184] Kawin, 193.
[185] Kawin, 197.
[186] Some films might raise contentions to this point, but this is seen as an overarching view.
[187] Falci, *The Value of Poetry*, 1.
[188] Rev.Dr.Gideon Cecil quoted in KNews, 'The Value of Poetry and Great Literature'.

Poetry/Poeticism
The Poetic Cinema: Two Schools of Thought

Here I will investigate multiple theories on poetic cinema, which span almost the length of the 20th century and may be divided roughly into two schools of thought. On one side is the view that sees poetic cinema as a combination of the two art forms of film and poetry. Meanwhile, a second school of thought rejects that notion and views film as medium-specific, separate from language and all other art forms.

I will explore how a film might be considered 'poetic' from these two distinct perspectives. The first of these - the model I call 'the hybrid model' - links cinema to verbal language and is first found in Russian Formalism, based largely on Sergei Eisenstein's early theories of montage and his writing relating the film to the haiku. This theory was further explored by William Wees and then Ian Cottage and Robert Scott Speranza with the rise of the poetry film/poem film/film-poem in the '80s and '90s.

The second model under scrutiny here I have based primarily on what was presented by Maya Deren at a symposium in 1953. To expand upon her ideas and more fully understand them, I will also look at the theories of Andrei Tarkovsky, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Jean Mitry and consider how they agree or disagree with Deren. I have separated them from the above model because many of these theorists see the notion of poetry as transcendent beyond linguistics and seek to understand how a film might resolve itself poetically without being a verbal language. These theorists are not traditionally seen as unified in their contentions, but some vital points of parity among them aid in understanding Deren's model.

Hybrid Model

The Hybrid Model has its roots in Russian Formalism, initially represented by the work of Sergei Eisenstein, as well as filmmakers like Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, and Lev Kuleshov. As the model developed, filmmakers and theorists like William Wees, Robert Scott Speranza, and Fil Ieropoulos contributed to the understanding of this model. Some of their work was discussed in the Establishing Terminology segment. As such, this section may feel repetitive as it reviews some of the same areas, but it does so with a different focus. Of the Russian Formalists, Eisenstein offers the most extensive and comprehensive basis regarding both written theory and (attempted) practical implementation of said theories. These

filmmakers grew out of traditions in Russian poetry, led by the Imagists, which advocated for juxtaposing terms, especially opposing terms, to create heightened meaning.[189]

Eisenstein's influence by Imagism is apparent in particular areas. The first was Vadim Shershenevich, one of the foremost advocates in Russian Imagism, who developed a concept called an "Image catalogue".[190] The "image catalogue" was "a text with omitted verbs, while the poet has used clear omissions, pronouns, ellipses, instrumental nouns or inversion with a genitive construction to replace the verbs."[191] The "Image catalogue" demands that the "reader… reconstruct the interconnections between the words…" and this demand upon the reader, or in the case of cinema, the spectator, appears in Eisenstein's theory of montage.[192]

Eisenstein identified five "methods" of montage in *Film Form*: metric montage, rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtonal montage, and intellectual montage.[193] Generally speaking, Eisenstein saw montage as central to cinema and conveying meaning to the spectator, regardless of method. In Eisenstein's view, the spectator *must* actively participate in the film-viewing process. Where Pudovkin and Kuleshov looked at shots as merely linked, one following another, and used like building blocks, Eisenstein viewed them as "colliding" hieroglyphs that must be interpreted, creating new meaning, sometimes within the frames themselves.[194] Eisenstein calls on the spectator to "experience…complet[ing] an image", for without the viewer's participation, juxtaposed images would exist in isolation.[195]

> …the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles
> not so much a sum of one shot plus another shot – as it does a *creation*
> [emphasis in text] …The error lay in placing the main emphasis on the
> possibilities of juxtaposition, while less attention seems to be paid to the
> problem of *analysing* the *material* [emphasis in text] that was juxtaposed.[196]

---

[189] Huttunen, 'Montage in Russian Imaginism', 219–21.
[190] Huttunen, 221.
[191] Huttunen, 221.
[192] Huttunen, 221.
[193] Ėjzenštejn and Leyda, *Film Form*, 72–83.
[194] Corghi, 'Montage in Cinematography—Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein'.
[195] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*, 73.
[196] Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 17.

Crucially, this was a *led* participation of the spectator on the filmmaker's part. Eisenstein believed that the conflict created by montage should be a "suitable formula" for a viewer to engage emotionally with a film. This suggests that there is not only an objective quality to cinematic images (image A combined with image B will always equal emotion A, and so on) but also an innate grammar of sorts which allows these combinations to be unpacked by an audience. By further inference, careful manipulation of an image creates a subjective experience on the viewer's part.

Eisenstein argued that each shot, or 'cell', can be likened to a hieroglyph, as found in the Japanese poetry of haiku.[197] In synthesis with his theories on montage, Eisenstein places a great deal of emphasis on rhythm, particularly tonal/overtonal rhythm, often using a musical metaphor. To understand the meaning (and it follows, the potential for poetry) within a film, the montage must not only be disseminated in terms of hieroglyphs but also in terms of its elements such as lighting, composition, acting, etc. Though in his early writing, he was solely concerned with the "dominant" (the most apparent meaning provided by montage), Eisenstein later saw the need for analysing all of the elements to identify "'subsidiary' codes." J. Dudley Andrew says that in describing "polyphonic montage", Eisenstein was "Stimulated by his sense of musical form…."[198] In "polyphonic montage", Eisenstein argued the filmmaker needed to follow the dominant line but needed to work with overtones to mimic "impressionism", which would result in "unity through synthesis."[199]

Eisenstein sought to not only understand the meaning provided by individual collisions but to achieve a greater understanding of a film as a whole. He sought to do this by analysing the conflict of both the dominant and subsidiary "lines" through a film. Eisenstein's theory suggests that hieroglyphs/images contain objective meaning, as they are of reality, and that this reality is broken down and reconstructed by the filmmaker through the combination of hieroglyphs/images. It links the film form to linguistic form in that it seeks to view the single

---

[197] Eisenstein, 50.
[198] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*, 60.
[199] Andrew, 60.

'cell' (or hieroglyph/image) as ambiguous until it is combined with other 'cells' in the same way a single word is ambiguous until it is combined with other words.

More recently, ideas of the 'poetic cinema', which draw upon a linguistic model of the image, are offered by the writings of William Wees and subsequently Ian Cottage and Fil Ieropoulos as well as Robert Scott Speranza in his examinations of the work of Tony Harrison. Wees, Cottage, and Speranza use nearly identical definitions and criteria for 'poetic cinema'. Their shared contentions recall Eisenstein's early theory around montage and the juxtaposition of images. These definitions insist upon an influence from verbal poetry rather than considering 'poetry' in the broader sense, as seen in the work of theorists explored in the next section. By the 1990s, the notions around the film-poem, poem film, and/or poetry film became almost dogmatic.[200]

Wees defines 'poetry film' as "…a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own."[201] This definition bears a striking resemblance to Eisenstein's. However, unlike Eisenstein, Wees does not view the film as simply *like* language. According to Wees, the poetry film is a "hybrid art form" and, possibly, an entirely new genre "interested in the fine line between text as word or image…."[202]

As this hybrid model regained traction, festivals formed societies dedicated to this "new" art form. At one such event in 1995, Ian Cottage first delivered his 'Poem Film Manifesto', which outlined 14 rules that a poem film (or film-poem/poetry film) must adhere to. The manifesto dictates the method and manner of production rather than outlining any specific and textual traits that a poem film might reflect.

Later, Speranza's definition of the 'film-poem' or 'Harrisonian film-poem' broadened this manifesto and provided clarity. The individual elements of a film and a poem are the two essential components of the film-poem or Harrisonian film-poem. Generally, these are created individually and then merged during editing. The poet is usually separate from the filmmaker,

---

[200] Ieropoulos, 'Poetry-Film & The Film Poem'.
[201] William Wees quoted in Ieropoulos.
[202] Ieropoulos.

working with the director and the editor on the final product, which combines the poet's words and the filmmaker's images.[203]

This model (what I have called the Hybrid Model) is interested in how images might be used to expand upon the meaning of the written word, whether that word is spoken within the film, merely implied, or shown visually as a written word. The "synthesis" described by Wees is meant to heighten meaning in both art forms (verbal poetry and film). However, the adherence to notions of verbal poetry suggests that structural analysis of the film might prove difficult because it would rely on a 'grammar' based on the medium of language, even in cases when there are no words as such to reference (silent films or abstracted sound).

Whether following the prescriptive rules of later poetry film practitioners and theorists or seeking to ascribe to the earlier, slightly less dogmatic understanding, this model is concerned solely with a hybrid product between literature and film. Whether it be called poem film, film-poem or poetry film, there is an absolute reliance that a verbal-linguistic element be present in one way or another. This model could easily result in an "all or nothing" analysis whereby a film is flatly rejected or accepted. I am not interested in that sense of a "broad brush" approach for this research. Firstly, because it is, at the very least, restrictive. Secondly, it would mean rejecting the idea of 'poetic moments' within otherwise non-poetic works, which the next model discussed allows for and readily embraces. Lastly, and most importantly, there are better models with which to approach Brakhage.

While there are a few Brakhage films which would fit within the prescript of the Hybrid Model (one of which would even fit with the more exclusive definition proposed by Speranza), the large majority of Brakhage's films not only do not meet the prescriptive criteria but are entirely absent of verbal language. However, there is an exciting potential for further tangential research considering a few of Brakhage's films against this Hybrid Model. Specifically, those films are Brakhage's *Faust* series (1987-89), which is comprised of four films adapted from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic poem version of the story by the same name, and Brakhage's film *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* (1994), which is included in the final chapter of

---

[203] Speranza, 'Verses in the Celluloid: Poetry in Film From 1910-2002, With Special Attention to the Development of the Film-Poem'.

this thesis. For my purposes in this research, however, it is necessary to consider a broader approach to poetic cinema.

Maya Deren's Model

The second model discussed here explores the idea that film functions independently of verbal language and explores notions around the objectivity and subjectivity of a given image or sequence of images. This model is developed primarily from the writings of filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren and is bolstered by considering the theories from filmmakers and theorists Andrei Tarkovsky, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean Mitry, and Sergei Eisenstein.

For this research, I have chosen to focus on Deren's theory and terminology for a few reasons. Of the theorists discussed, Maya Deren presents her argument in an extremely straightforward and accessible manner. She offers simple terminology (vertical and horizontal) that relates to how the plot and narrative of a film are already often described. Additionally, the expansiveness of her theory, its lack of exclusivity and its lack of an insistence upon any value statement is something that I find unique but also important and in alignment with my ideas about how the poetic should be approached. Finally, I feel that Deren was unfairly treated when she proposed her theory, subjected to blatant sexism and misogyny, and subsequently – most likely, at least in part, due to a series of tragic life events - never able to expand upon her ideas. It feels important to bring her work to the fore in this field.

In 1953, Amos Vogel of Cinema 16 put together a panel called 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium' with a range of speakers in relevant fields, including filmmaker and poet Maya Deren, film theorist and poet Parker Tyler, poet Dylan Thomas, and writer Arthur Miller with Willard Maas moderating. Throughout the symposium, Arthur Miller and Dylan Thomas remain insistent on a complete separation between poetry and film. At the same time, Parker Tyler adopts a view most similar to the hybrid model outlined previously. However, Maya Deren's contributions to the symposium move the idea of poetry away from a strictly literary sense of the word and also away from the notion of poetry as artistic value. To fully understand how Deren differentiates herself from Tyler (and the hybrid model described above), I will first overview Parker Tyler's position during the symposium as Maya Deren makes some direct contrasts to this.

Parker Tyler uses several examples to describe poetry in cinema as he understands it. He positions himself between Maya Deren and Arthur Miller and Dylan Thomas in that he believes there is a place for poetry in film, which Miller and Dylan do *not*. Still, unlike Maya Deren, as will be explored shortly, he sees both a strong link to literature and a need for value statements.[204] Tyler's own poetry has been shown to be distinctly cinematic, which is perhaps why he insists on the reverse.[205] Tyler only elaborates a little on his ideas, so this section is dedicated to unpacking the thoughts laid out at the symposium.

Speaking first at the event, Tyler, in seeking to understand poetry as it pertains to film, separates the concept of poetry into two classifications of "poetical expression": the visual and the visual-verbal.[206] These two categories are more described than defined. 'Visual' poetry, Tyler suggests, may be broken into several subcategories. First, there is what he refers to as "pure cinema" – a film with no dialogue – the prime examples of which "emphasized a surrealist poetry of the image…."[207] In this category, he includes films such as *Blood of a Poet* and *Un Chien Andalou*. Parker seems to be generally describing the Surrealist movement in cinema as inherently poetic, and though he does not expand on this point, considering this with his later statement that "[the] poetic film means using the film as a conscious and exclusive means of creating ideas through images,"[208] suggests that Tyler sees an inherently linguistic and/or communicative nature to imagery and that he attributes this especially to the surrealists: "…the surrealists started out by excerpting parts of commercial films, jumbling them up, making little poems out of them."[209]

The following three subcategories are less expanded upon. The second is the "cine-poem," which Tyler traces to the beginning of the "avant-garde poetry movement in America"; this film focuses on representations of city life, focusing on abstract patterns found naturally. He does not give any examples. His third subcategory, "painting in motion", is described as the "pure abstract film" characterised by such artists as experimental animator Norman McLaren or experimental filmmakers John and James Whitney. His fourth subcategory, "naturalistic

---

[204] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[205] Fialkowski, 'Parker Tyler'.
[206] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[207] Parker Tyler quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[208] Parker Tyler quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[209] Parker Tyler quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

poetry", stands out as he mentions director Robert Flaherty, who made *Nanook of the North* and several other successful documentaries, as the prime example. Including such films seems to directly contradict his previous statements, which focus on visuals only – *Nanook* has several intertitles – but he quickly qualifies this: "We presume that his films can be considered integral without the commentary."[210] Finally, he briefly mentions using dream and/or hallucination scenes in "commercial" films as moments of poetry *within* otherwise non-poetic films. There is potentially a tie to surrealism with this fifth subcategory; therefore, it may be better placed within the first category. However, Tyler mentions it as a separate subcategory, which is why it has been singled out.

Moving on to the visual-verbal, Tyler again breaks it into multiple subcategories. He spends significantly less time expanding his thoughts on these films, perhaps ranking them "lower" than visual poetry (this is unclear). Nevertheless, Tyler lists the subcategories as the following: fantasy films, films set to poems or poetic prose, "severe formalism", myth films, "naturalistic poetry documents", and "fifty-fifty fusion". Some of these subcategories are problematic, either because they are overly broad (fantasy films) or because they appear to be nearly identical to a subcategory described as a purely visual poem ("naturalistic poetry documents"). Furthermore, three of these categories could be combined. Films set to poems or poetic prose, myth films, and fifty-fifty fusions, for which Shakespeare and operas are the prime examples, create repetitive categorisation. A myth film such as *Beauty and the Beast*, the example used by Tyler, is based on prose, which could be arguably poetic, and Shakespeare's plays, written in iambic pentameter, are a mixture of prose and verse.[211]

However, in his brief discussion of "severe formalism," Tyler makes his most compelling case for a combined model of poetry and film. Using Eisenstein, Tyler points out the detailed level of written preparation before the shoot in terms of the script and shot plan, arguing that the film existed *as literature* before it existed as a film. Despite this, he cannot determine the role of verbal poetry in film. Tyler's definition of poetry remains restricted to a verbal and/or literary sense, which he also seems compelled to rank.

---

[210] Parker Tyler quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium*.
[211] 'Prose and Verse in Shakespeare's Plays'.

Adopting a different approach, Maya Deren first seeks to define poetry – "What distinguishes what we would call poetry from anything else?"[212] Deren's most succinct description of the poem – "A poem…. creates visible or auditory forms for something which is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of movement" - bears some initial similarities to Tyler's brief description – "…a conscious and exclusive means of creating ideas through images…."[213] Deren's and Tyler's definitions each strongly resemble the quotations in the discussion on poetry above. However, Deren speaks of "poem" in an extremely broad sense, which Tyler, referring strictly to a verbal-linguistic sense of the word, does not. Deren then frames this broad definition so that it may be applied to any art form, though she focuses on cinema.

Deren's argument centres on an analogy that takes the basic geometric concepts of "horizontal" and "vertical" and applies these to both narrative and poetic aspects of cinema, respectively. Deren chooses these terms to demonstrate what she sees as different methods of "attack" in each aspect. Though she cannot fully explain her theory during the symposium due to the relatively scornful response from both Thomas and Miller, Deren does develop relative descriptions for both "horizontal" and "vertical". Deren's notion of the "horizontal" is very much connected to the passage of time and the events which unfold throughout a film, play, or story – "…you have the drama moving forward on the "horizontal" plane of development, of one circumstance – one action – leading to another…."[214] Meanwhile, the "vertical" sees the development of the plot pause momentarily while a single action, emotion, or thought is investigated further.

> Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to an experience…It is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means.[215]

---

[212] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[213] Maya Deren and Parker Tyler quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[214] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[215] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

Crucially, Deren does not see either term as mutually exclusive of the other –
predominately narrative (i.e., horizontal) films may have poetic (i.e., vertical) moments or even
whole sequences. She uses Shakespeare's plays as an example to demonstrate this. A play,
Hamlet, for instance, is essentially constructed of a series of connected events, or
"horizontally". However, she says Shakespeare's use of soliloquies exemplifies moments of
poetry or "vertical" attack (unrelated to any rhyme scheme or meter).[216] Deren points out that
Shakespeare's soliloquies have no bearing on the plot. Instead, they allow for a character to
more deeply explore a particular emotion or struggle; in a sense, the time of the play stops
moving forward (or horizontally) momentarily and instead, to use an idiom, 'plumbs the
depths' of a character (or moves vertically). Again, Deren's argument is similar to aspects of
Parker Tyler's discussions. Her use of Shakespeare to demonstrate art which is both "vertical"
and "horizontal", could be construed as Tyler's visual-verbal "fifty-fifty" subcategory but with
added nuance.[217] However, Deren expands on Tyler's limited description, transcending his
argument beyond cinema with a verbal referent.

Furthermore, Deren's model of poetry is far more inclusive than Tyler's and many
other theorists on the subject. Her model disregards, or at the very least does not bother to
address, any value statements. Neither the "horizontal" nor the "vertical" are presented by
Deren as one being greater than the other; they are merely presented as alternating "attacks" by
which an artist might present their work. Deren separates her model from many of the other
models of poetry in film, which view the 'poetic' as much the same as 'artistic' or 'valuable'.
Thus, Deren's model allows for 'bad poetry' – a concept even similar models (such as
Tarkovsky's, addressed next) exclude.

Additionally, Deren suggests that the "horizontal" and "vertical" may potentially be
found within the same film - though, she argues, not simultaneously. Later theorists,
particularly Tarkovsky and Pasolini, would dispute this in their writings. This is part of the
cause of the rift between her and Dylan Thomas and Arthur Miller throughout the symposium

---

[216] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[217] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

in 1953. Thomas and Miller argue that in narrative work, the "horizontal" and "vertical" are the same.[218]

Maya Deren is additionally accused of using overly technical language during the symposium by Parker Tyler. She counters that 'horizontal' and 'vertical' are quite basic elements of physics.[219] Nevertheless, the men on the panel all have difficulty grasping Deren's terminology. Pausing momentarily to attempt to parse these terms, it might be helpful to reassess them.

Based on her description of the 'vertical' quoted above, it may be surmised that Deren's concept of the 'horizontal' consists of that which "is occurring". Deren relates this to the passage of time and the sequence of events. More concisely, it might be known as the objective – that which is or is existing - within the scope of the art (for Deren, the poetic is not restricted to one art form or another). According to Deren, the 'vertical' occurs when a point within this objectivity is 'paused' and investigated. Again, this may be for any time within the piece or the piece's sole concern. This "investigation" of emotions ("what it feels like or what it means"[220]), it " allows space for reflection and intensification"[221], and could more plainly be referred to as the subjective. Sarah Keller states that the "poetic form serves as a conduit to venture outside of the confines of narrative."[222] Using Deren's terminology of the 'vertical' for "poetic form", it can be inferred that the 'horizontal' remains within the "confines of narrative". The table below demonstrates how these two 'attacks' reflect one another:

---

[218] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[219] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[220] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[221] Keller, 'Poetry and "Film Poetics"', 30.
[222] Keller, 35.

Vertical	Horizontal
Subjective	Objective
Abstract	Concrete
Manipulated time, often 'paused'	Progressive time, usually linear and forward
Emotive – concerned with the "feeling" over narrative	Plot-based – concerned with narrative over emotions

Image 1.1 Table of Maya Deren's Poetic Model

Terminology aside, Deren persevered with her understanding of poetry in film, despite the opposition from the rest of the panel. She also makes a point to separate the concept of poetry, as she addresses it, from the *techniques* associated with verbal poetry (rhyme, alliteration, etc.). Crucially, Deren does not rely on a linguistic referent to make her arguments, as seen in the hybrid model and Parker Tyler's discussions, but instead chooses to deal with the film as an entirely separate form.

Overall, Deren's model sees the potential for poetry in any piece of art, including cinema, and this potential exists in a state of flux. A film could (potentially) only explore a single moment or emotion and thus be entirely "vertical" or poetic, or it could just as well solely explore a narrative, moving from one event and emotion to the next in a "horizontal" fashion, or it could move from one of these "investigations" to the other once or multiple times throughout its runtime. Deren's model requires further thought. She does not, or perhaps more accurately, is not allowed to expand her model enough to include markers or visual cues that a critic might use to readily identify the horizontal, the vertical, or a transition between the two (the only given example is verbal – Shakespeare's soliloquies).[223]

---

[223] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

In subsequent writing, Deren abandons the terminology proposed at this symposium but remains steadfast in her assertion that a film can uniquely manipulate time.[224] Throughout her extensive writing on cinema, Deren appears preoccupied with this particular quality of cinema, which she believes to be medium-specific.[225] With limited exception, she largely discontinues using the term 'poetic' in her few writings on film from this point forward.[226] I should note that shortly after the symposium, Deren fell extremely ill, and as a result, the remainder of her life (she died in 1961) was spent living through various hardships; most of her theoretical and practical film work was created in the 1940s and early 50s.[227]

As a figure herself, Maya Deren remains underappreciated in broader film criticism but certainly not wholly forgotten. An in-depth biography was published in 2022, along with a feature article in the New Yorker. In 2013, *The International Journal of Screendance* dedicated an entire issue to Deren. Several contributors note the influence of poetry (and other mediums such as dance) on Deren and analyse this regarding her own filmmaking. With limited exception, however, (an article of interest is 'Film as Poetry' by Claudia Kappenberg, which, in considering her theories and filmmaking, compares Deren's theories with the film philosophies of Giles Deleuze[228]) the special issue is more focused on Deren as a filmmaker. While her horizontal-vertical model is not explored in great depth in most articles, it resonates across the scholarship on her work in the issue:

> Brannigan examines Meshes…arguing how the 'vertical' form of the film frees the figure from the linear cause-and-effect progression of the horizontal form.[229]

---

[224] Deren, *Essential Deren*, 110–28, 176–77.

[225] Kappenberg, 'Film as Poetry', 103; Deren, *Essential Deren*.

[226] Deren, *Essential Deren*, 254–55.

[227] Brody, 'How Maya Deren Became the Symbol and Champion of American Experimental Film'.

[228] Kappenberg, 'Film as Poetry'.

[229] James, 'On Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity', 49.

> …Deren used dance to thread the stacks of her vertical, associative montage…[230]

Deren's model is beneficial for this research in providing a way to discuss poetic cinema. This thesis will investigate how Brakhage's films can be understood using Deren's model, which should provide some insight and further clarification of the model itself. There are some potential limitations to the model when it comes to identifying the poetic without using an objective counter to its subjectivity; this will be explored and tested in the final chapter. This exploration should allow for more explicit bounds to be seen on Deren's model and a better understanding of how it can be applied to Brakhage's films and wider cinema.

As mentioned before, Maya Deren presents a relatively loose structure for her model and never truly completes her thoughts either in the symposium or in any later writings or talks. While this could present a potential issue in using her model, several other theorists' ideas around poetic cinema, while not having complete parity, can be used to bolster Deren's concepts. I will now discuss theories from Andrei Tarkovsky, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Jean Mitry and consider how they can be synthesised with Deren and used to provide possible avenues of analysis for Brakhage while also aiding in understanding Deren's model.

Andrei Tarkovsky

Three decades after the Poetry and the Film Symposium, Andrei Tarkovsky published *Sculpting in Time* in 1986, in which he loosely outlines his model for poetry in cinema (in his words). Tarkovsky's model has four distinctive characteristics, which will be explored and discussed. First and foremost, Tarkovsky discards the notion of 'poetic cinema', which focuses on symbolism, instead viewing observation as the height of poetry, especially in cinema. His insistence on differentiating between 'poetic cinema' and 'poetry' is subtle but critical. Second, he appears to view a film as either poetic or non-poetic rather than distinguishing between poetry and narrative moments. Third, and connected to the first point, Tarkovsky makes several clear value statements regarding poetic film versus non-poetic film. In Tarkovsky's model, what he determines to be poetic films rank higher than non-poetic; the poetic film is

---

[230] Mayer, 'If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution!', 25.

69

considered a greater film by its very nature *as* a poetic film. Fourth and finally, though both theorists see time as a crucial aspect of their models, Tarkovsky and Deren took slightly different approaches to the role of time in creating poetry in cinema.

Like Deren, Tarkovsky's idea of poetry is not restricted to cinema or even to language. "When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality."[231] Tarkovsky viewed the height of cinema as those films which reflect the "truth… [of] the unseen nature of life…" which, to him, is poetry.[232] He argues that artistic cinema is poetic by its very nature[233], and that this occurs through the combination of several inherent qualities. First, Tarkovsky argues, the artistic image always occurs as a metonym. In a film, the artist arranges these images as their subjective observation of the world, forcing the spectator to actively create associative links ("poetic linkage") to gain understanding. As P. Adams Sitney describes it, "The proper viewing of a film requires the spectator to organize its disparate elements by intuiting the poetic linkages of its construction, guided by the fundamental metonymy of cinematic imagery."[234]

However, Tarkovsky reviled the use of symbolism to connect these 'linkages'.[235] This is a relatively unique stance among many of the theorists examined in this chapter, most of whom readily embrace symbolism as a poetic device. However, probably most similar to Eisenstein, who was most interested in juxtaposing concrete imagery to create meaning, Tarkovsky sees symbolism as obscuring truth, which lies at the heart of cinema (and, therefore, poetry).

> I, therefore, find particularly irritating the pretensions of modern 'poetic cinema', which involves breaking off contact with fact and with time realism, and makes for preciousness and affection.[236]

---

[231] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 21.
[232] Tarkovsky, 68.
[233] Tarkovsky, 18, 23, 66–68 Tarkovsky mentions this point several times throughout the text, rephrasing in a variety of ways.
[234] Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 68.
[235] Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 216 Tarkovsky actually calls it "vulgar symbolism".
[236] Tarkovsky, 69.t

Tarkovsky's almost mocking use of quotes around 'poetic cinema' in the above phrase is found throughout *Sculpting in Time* (for his part, he refers to 'poetry', as explained above). He argues that 'poetic cinema' moves away from the intended nature of cinema as an art form by allowing "symbols, allegories and other such figures…" to replace "what is factual and concrete."[237]

Throughout his book, Tarkovsky's value on poetry over non-poetic cinema becomes increasingly apparent. Tarkovsky continually conflates 'poetry' and/or 'the poetic' with artistic quality, and he moves freely between "artist" and "poet" as if the terms are interchangeable. Furthermore, his descriptions of "the poet" and/or "the artist" are romanticised. There seems to be an attempt to heighten cinema to the level of respect shown to Russian writers and poets, such as Alexander Pushkin, and to show the contribution of filmmakers to Russian society, something which would have been vitally important in the Cold War Era Russia that Tarkovsky lived and worked in.

> The poet has nothing to be proud of: he is not master of the situation, but a servant. Creative work is his only possible form of existence, and his every work is like a deed he has no power to annul.[238]

Through this romanticising of the artist as a poet, Tarkovsky outlines his argument for that which embodies poetry. This primarily revolves around what he calls "emotional persuasiveness".[239] Tarkovsky sees "emotional persuasiveness" as necessarily ambiguous but also as instigative.[240] Furthermore, by declaring notions of poetry to be synonymous with the artistic value that a given work might possess, Tarkovsky appears to create a binary system for distinguishing between poetic and non-poetic, not unlike the binary set out by *auteurism,* where films and filmmakers are either included or excluded, creating a cultural hierarchy. This is

---

[237] Tarkovsky, 66.
[238] Tarkovsky, 43.
[239] Tarkovsky, 51.
[240] Tarkovsky, 54.

unlike Deren's rather fluid approach to poetry in the film, which allows a work (again, Deren argued for poetry to be seen in multiple art forms) to move between poetic and non-poetic moments and simultaneously allows for 'bad poetry'.

Sitney points out that Deren and Tarkovsky agree that the cinema image should maintain a level of "objectivity" or refrain from artistic manipulations of the image through the lens or directly upon the film itself.[241] Tarkovsky appears wedded to a strict narrative order by which a film can be objectively considered:

> One of the binding and immutable conditions of cinema is that actions on the screen have to develop sequentially, regardless of the fact of being conceived as simultaneous of retrospective or what have you.[242]

Tarkovsky's esteem of objectivity further informs his overall concept of cinematic poetry as films which "'lay open the logic of a person's thought… [to] …record the very *movement* of reality…'"[243] His insistence on observation and reality leads Tarkovsky to prefer horizontal films, borrowing Maya Deren's terminology. That is, Tarkovsky found no value in films which manipulated reality in terms of time, concentrating on single moments ('freezing time') or moving backwards and forwards through time at will, but saw poetry as the narrative "sculpting" of time as it occurs naturally.[244] "Time, *printed in its factual forms and manifestations*: such is the supreme idea of cinema as art…[emphasis in original]."[245]

In Tarkovsky's view, the "ultimate cinema" should "reconstruct…life."[246] A director's job, and therefore a poet's job, was to "sculpt" away that which was not needed so that what is left is still a representation of life "as it occurs" and is a "direct observation of life" which is "key to poetry in cinema."[247] This, more than any other aspect of Tarkovsky's theory, directly

---

241 Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 69–70.
242 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 70.
243 Tarkovsky, 99 emphasis in text.
244 Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 70.
245 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 63.
246 Tarkovsky, 65.t
247 Tarkovsky, 67.

opposes Deren's theory, which embraces the manipulation of time and argues that those manipulations are the root of cinematic poetry.

However, while Tarkovsky and Deren may disagree on *how* objectivity is achieved, both theorists structure their ideas on the poetic around the subjective or ambiguous and its relationship to the objective. Also, while Tarkovsky rejects symbolism, his suggestion that editing can create 'poetry' is interesting, helpful for this research, and creates no contradiction to Deren's ideas. However, it would be helpful to narrow 'editing' down to specific techniques. While there are several important key differences of opinion, Pier Paolo Pasolini offers a more specific avenue for considering editing.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Pier Paolo Pasolini developed an entirely different concept surrounding cinematic poetry in his manifesto, "Il 'cinema di poeisa" or "The Cinema of Poetry". As Sitney describes, Pasolini's essay went through multiple variations, additions, and editions from its introduction in 1965 up to Pasolini's death in 1975 and has continued to be influential and controversial in film criticism.[248] Pasolini is far more concerned with a verbal connection to cinema, and his essay often suffers from self-contradiction, not least in its own definition of poetry.[249] In many ways, Pasolini's cinema of poetry excludes nothing and includes everything: "…to make films is to be a poet."[250]

There is an equivocation in Pasolini's writing between "poetry" and "expression." As both Sitney and Patrick Keating point out, Pasolini draws much of the basis for his theory from Croce.[251] This leads Pasolini to view the cinema, in a very general sense, as poetic "substantially and naturally", for the cinema, by its very function, expresses functioning "as a means of communication".[252] However, Pasolini qualifies "The cinema of poetry" as:

---

[248] Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 15.
[249] Keating, 'Pasolini, Croce, and the Cinema of Poetry'.
[250] Pier Paolo Pasolini quoted in Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*, 154.
[251] Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 16–20; Keating, 'Pasolini, Croce, and the Cinema of Poetry'.
[252] Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*, 153.

> …the cinema which adopts a particular technique just as a poet adopts a particular technique when he writes verse…The equivalent of what you see in a text of poetry you can also find in a cinema text, through the stylemes (*sic*), i.e., through the camera movements and the montage.[253]

This indicates the importance of the visual sign to Pasolini over the verbal sign. Pasolini differentiates from the Harrisonian film poem in that while he compares cinema to language, he is not necessarily seeking written poetry to be explicitly present. Within the visual sign alone, Pasolini argues there can be more ambiguity.

For Pasolini, this ambiguity arises out of one of four conditions for poetry, which are implied by the essay though not explicitly stated.[254] These conditions require that to achieve the level of poetry, "X" must be 1) concrete, 2) irrational, 3) exclusively formal, and 4) an "expression of an individual point of view" or, more succinctly, ambiguous.[255] Pasolini's emphasis on ambiguity could be understood as an emphasis on subjectivity or "vertical investigation".

Pasolini offers the "free indirect point-of-view shot" as his solution to meeting all four criteria within narrative cinema, which is his primary focus. Perhaps ironically and certainly contradictorily, Pasolini draws this technique from literature.[256] This shot is distinguished from the direct point-of-view shot, generally referred to simply as point-of-view, which shows the subjective viewpoint of a character.

The *indirect* point-of-view shot "allows a director to smuggle a purely formal expression of *his/her* point-of-view into a narrative film by disguising it as the purely formal expression of a character's point-of-view."[257] These are shots that, though they are not from a character's point-of-view, signal subjectivity. These shots satisfy all four criteria in Pasolini's Cinema of

---

[253] Stack, 153–54.
[254] Keating, 'Pasolini, Croce, and the Cinema of Poetry'.
[255] Keating.
[256] Keating.
[257] Keating.

Poetry and allow poetry to be found in otherwise narrative cinema. Pasolini identifies filmmakers who use this style effectively - Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Goddard.

Pasolini's notion of the free indirect point-of-view shot provides an opportunity for an observable poetic style in cinema, which can elucidate the "vertical investigation" more clearly as it occurs in a given film. Like Deren and Tarkovsky, Pasolini seems most interested in narrative cinema. Considering him has been necessary because his ideas provide a particular angle from which to approach the analysis of films to test Deren's model. This allows Deren's model to be more workable.

Thus far, Tarkovsky and Pasolini have helped flesh out possible ways to consider Deren's concept of layers of subjectivity, a crucial part of her "vertical investigation". However, her notion of manipulating time is not similarly reflected in either Tarkovsky's or Pasolini's theories. Jean Mitry's film theories relating to poetry are extremely useful for this purpose. Where Deren's theory somewhat lacks a sense of structure and does not offer much in the way of easily identifying at which points a film may or may not be poetic, Mitry's theories offer the potential to add to Deren's ideas.

Jean Mitry

Jean Mitry seeks to break the cinema of its associations with both the theatre and, to a slightly lesser extent, the novel, and in so doing, simultaneously seeks to define cinema for itself. Despite bearing similarities to both the theatre and the novel, Mitry points out the cinema's unique qualities and how it establishes its own form of communication.

Time in cinema is both fixed and ever-present, and its elements are diegetic by nature, whereas time in the theatre is in flux. Meanwhile, the novel and film differ primarily in their relationships to space. Space in a film is a concrete reality, and "the cinema is always relative to space…and it is the image itself which is drawn along in time constantly modifying its space as we watch."[258] The novel and film function as inverses of each other: "The novel is a narrative which organises itself into a world, the film is a world which organises itself into a narrative."[259] For Mitry, this makes the cinema inherently poetic.

---

[258] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 66.
[259] Jean Mitry quoted in Matias, 66.

Where a poem and a film could both describe the movement of a stretch of water, it could be said that the poem becomes a wave, while the film becomes a poem.[260]

Developed through several years of exhaustive research, Mitry is concerned not only with whether a film *could be* poetic in its expression but with *how* it expresses itself. He argued that true cinema naturally resulted from a "quasi-poetic" process.[261] However, Mitry fiercely argues against viewing cinema as using a language in any verbal sense and also argues against attempting to understand cinema through the guise of other art forms, such as painting or music. Like Deren, he tries to understand cinema on its own terms. For Mitry, a film may convey meaning and appear to be manipulated by a set of guidelines and, as such, functions *like* a language in the sense that it communicates. However, Mitry argues the process for this in cinema is unique and separate from traditional ideas of 'language'.[262]

Mitry argues that the unique properties of the cinematic image convey significance, the most crucial of which is that a filmmaker has chosen the image. According to Mitry, what is contained within the image *must* be of significance because the image is 'framed' and, therefore, part of reality obscured from view while the analogue within the image is showcased. This is further enhanced by editing and montage. Images appear in a dictated (or *directed*) order, which affects how the spectator perceives the reality of the images: "Film images exist not simply as chosen by someone else but as organized into a filmic world by them."[263]

Mitry balanced his theory between the oppositional dialectic[264] that had formed between proponents of montage cinema, where images are 'collided' together to create new meaning, and the cinema of 'continuity', which preferred longer takes and deeper focused

---

[260] Jean Mitry quoted in Matias, 68.
[261] Andrew, *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*, 206.
[262] Andrew, 209.
[263] Andrew, 192.
[264] Metz makes a point to say that this is less of an issue anymore.

shots to be "more respectful of the spatio-temporal continuities of the physical world," as described by Diana Matias.[265]

Mitry points out that while the 'cinema of continuity' may purport to rely more on the spectator (whereas the montage supposedly manipulates the spectator into realising the filmmaker's desired meaning), every aspect of the 'cinema of continuity' is just as controlled as in the montage – the image is chosen and ordered, the actors are blocked. "The cinema is above all a vast work of assemblage," and so, the 'cinema of continuity' in Mitry's view, is merely another form of montage.[266] In this way, Mitry is far less wedded to a strict approach to narrative time than Tarkovsky and Pasolini, instead placing primacy on the filmmaker's intentions in assembling footage in a chosen order.

Mitry further challenges the notion of creating meaning purely through montage, championed by Eisenstein. According to Mitry, this idea fails to account for the spectator's subjectivity properly. For instance, in the example of Lev Kuleshov's famous experiments wherein he edited together the same shot of an actor, Mozhukhin, with various unconnected images like that of a woman, a child would not intuit 'desire' between the images of Mozhukhin and the woman because this is outside of a child's experience.[267] The film's reality *must* be established first for an image to convey anything beyond that which it analogues.

However, as indicated above, Mitry does not abandon montage but rather reframes his theory so that it might work with reality – "For Mitry, every abstract meaning in cinema must be grounded first in our concrete feelings."[268] Mitry sees cinema as a concrete art – it is of the world – whereas language is abstract and, therefore, can be manipulated to convey meaning outside of the readers' experience. If a film desires to do this, it must first establish its world, or any abstractions within the film will be meaningless to the viewer.[269] Here Mitry finds parity with not only Deren but Pasolini, who agree that for the subjective to have any distinct meaning to a viewer, it *must* be embedded in at least some sense of objectivity.

---

265 Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory'. 42
266 Matias, 43.
267 Andrew, *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*, 197.
268 Andrew, 201.
269 Andrew, 201.

Despite his condemnations of attempts to use montage to function as a kind of cinematic language, Mitry sees montage as the primary "instrument" of film.[270] Mitry identifies two distinct types of montage. The first is what he terms "lyrical montage," by which he generally refers to the "status quo" style of editing in Hollywood films, i.e., conventional editing and/or montage. In lyrical montage, the focus remains on "moments of the greatest dramatic intensity" to construct the world of the film, from which then meaning may be drawn.[271] Deren would describe this as the "horizontal investigation."

Of more interest to this research is "reflexive montage," which, according to Mitry, allows a filmmaker to develop significance "to the side" of the film's narrative.[272] This aligns with Eisenstein's idea of "overtones" and essentially refers to a style of editing which focuses on subtext while not losing sight of the overarching story (which is the focus of 'lyrical montage'). 'Reflexive montage' might therefore focus more on the subjective and/or emotional facets of a film's reality, or what Deren would call the "vertical investigation".

As Mitry saw it, the subjective in cinema was potentially problematic but not something to be rejected in the same way that Tarkovsky did. Mitry thought it had equal potential for poetry.[273] He proposed that several types of possible 'subjective images' may be used in a film. The first is the "purely mental image", or a character's internal imagination/dreaming.[274] Second is the "associated image", whereby an objective view of a character or similar is given subjectivity through camera movement, editing, or camera angle (but most usually camera movement).[275] Third is the "analytical image", which is the point of view shot (Metz calls this "*champ-countrechamp* process") – these shots require objective shots to establish themselves; otherwise, it's argued an audience would not identify the analytical shot in isolation.[276] The concepts of "pure mental image", "analytical image", and "associated image" each have some resemblance to Pasolini's free-indirect point of view shot. Fourth, Mitry discusses the "imaginary sphere proper", which allows an imagined or fantasy world to become

---

[270] Andrew, 202.

[271] Andrew, 202.

[272] Andrew, 202.

[273] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 45–46; Andrew, *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*, 209.

[274] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 48.

[275] Matias, 48.

[276] Matias, 48–49.

objectivised.[277] And finally, there is the "memory image", which is similar to the mental image but separated when combined with character commentary that occurs in the present and is identified as uniquely filmic.[278]

Mitry, as with the other theorists discussed, focuses primarily on narrative filmmaking, though his notion of this is more expansive than Tarkovsky and Pasolini, aligning him more closely with Deren. His proposals for categories of subjective images help bolster Deren's idea of "vertical investigation" and make it somewhat more tangible and applicable in analysis.

Conclusion

Deren's model consists of two main elements regarding how the "vertical" functions – she suggests that it is subjective (and there is a sense that this subjectivity needs to be seen in opposition to some objective 'truths', at least within the world of the film) and she suggests that there is a sense of manipulating time. Of the other theorists discussed here, Deren is somewhat unique in her second assertion. Though Mitry is somewhat aligned with her, he is not as explicit. However, regarding Deren's notion of subjectivity and objectivity and their interplay, all except for Tarkovsky find agreement.

The most significant weakness of Deren's theory is that it does not suggest reliable ways to identify elements of poetry as, seen in cinema, readily. Supplementing Deren with Pasolini's idea of free indirect point-of-view and Jean Mitry's notions surrounding the subjective image, montage, metaphor, and symbol allows a clearer and more analysable model to be discerned. Additionally, contrasting Deren and Tarkovsky has allowed me to understand Deren more clearly by finding and dissecting their many points of disagreement.

I am accepting Maya Deren's proposal that the poetic cinema is 'vertical' or subjective, secondarily accepting her assertion that the poetic may occur in cinema at any point for any length of time, and taking on an understanding of Jean Mitry's indicators of subjection in cinema, a model forms which may be applied to a given film at will. For this thesis, I propose a model of poetic film based primarily on Deren's theories of the vertical and horizontal, bolstered by the other theorists discussed. There are certain tenets that I will accept for my

---

[277] Matias, 48–49.
[278] Matias, 48–49.

model to function. The first is that the filmic image is concrete and of reality. To present an image on the screen, it must first exist in one form or another. To put it another way, there must be imagery to watch a film. I propose to expand this to include *all* imagery, including the non-representational. However, regardless of whether the imagery is representational or non-representational, it is an inherent aspect of cinema that it is visual.

The second tenet is that the cinema is expressive. That is, a viewer/spectator takes meaning from cinema, so there is always some level of subjectivity at play. I argue that a viewer is likely to accept the third-person presentation of a film as objective during viewing – this is the world or reality of the film or the horizontal. This model understands a film's reality as self-contained and established *within* itself, though it may present or reflect the world's reality. However, this model additionally understands and accepts that the presentation of this 'reality' has been carefully chosen by the filmmaker for viewing. Therefore, the representation of the film's world is often simultaneously objective (horizontal) and subjective (vertical) to at least some degree.

Therefore, a film can be seen as operating on two layers. The first layer, which this research will argue is usually seen as non-poetic, is objective *in reference to* the reality established by the film. However, because of the presented nature of cinema (a film has been recorded and prepared in a particular way and order for the viewer), this 'objective reality' of the film's world is technically subjective. It is, however, often accepted by the viewer as objective. This layer is concerned with narrative (events, time, and space) and is, to use Deren's phraseology, 'horizontal'. Mitry's "lyrical montage" typifies moments of such objectivity, and all edits, camera movements and angles are designed to follow the dramatic events or Eisenstein's "dominant line" of the film.

The second layer is subjective in reference to the film. This layer is less concerned with plot and typifies Deren's concept of the vertical' – "not so much what is occurring, but what it feels like". This layer reveals itself through "reflexive montage" and subjective images such as the mental image, associated image, memory image, or analytical image. This layer follows the "subsidiary lines" or emotional/tonal events and is not necessarily concerned with action or plot.

Despite both Tarkovsky and Pasolini's apparent insistence on restricting the poetic to more traditional narrative cinema, Deren's model seeks to expand the understanding of poetic to encompass both traditional and avant-garde work. Maya Deren claims the 'vertical' (poetic/subjective) may either consume a film from start to finish or merely be one part of an otherwise 'horizontal' (objective/dramatic) film. This broadness enables me to more readily try and apply this model to a filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, whose body of work ranges from narrative to non-representational filmmaking and thus can be extremely difficult to analyse using more traditionally focused film theories.

2. Brakhage and Narrative Convention

> The drama is complete poetry. The ode and the epic contain it only in germ; it contains both of them in a state of high development, and epitomizes both.
>
> Victor Hugo[279]

For most of his career, Stan Brakhage created with non-narrative films. When he did venture into narrative storytelling, he then tended to avoid the conventions within. However, though he is primarily known for his experimental and non-narrative film work, Stan Brakhage did journey into conventional narrative cinema on occasion. Brakhage's early career focused almost exclusively on work in the narrative form, only later moving towards the non-narrative styles he has become practically synonymous with. In his later career, Brakhage would occasionally return to the dramatic format, clearly preferring non-narrative filmmaking. Nevertheless, from his first film *Interim* (1952), Brakhage repeatedly showed throughout his career that not only did he understand the conventions of storytelling, but he could also twist them to suit his own purposes. Paul Taberham points out that Brakhage clearly saw his own work as "inextricably tied to narrative," and quotes Hollis Frampton describing what he (Frampton) called 'Brakhage's Theorem':

> For any finite series of shots . . . there exists in a real time a rational narrative, such that every term in the series, together with its position, duration, partition, and reference, shall be perfectly and entirely accounted for.[280]

Despite working with narrative cinema, Brakhage employed techniques more often associated with non-traditional storytelling to subvert audience expectations.

---

[279] Hugo, *Delphi Complete Works of Victor Hugo (Illustrated)*, page unknown.
[280] Taberham, *LESSONS IN PERCEPTION: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker as Practical Psychologist*, 64.

This chapter focuses on Brakhage's films which, I will argue, at times both embrace and subvert narrative conventions of storytelling for poetic effect. My analysis will demonstrate how an increased use of ambiguity and the development of a more sensual, subjective film experience can be best understood in relation to Maya Deren's criteria of vertical investigation or poetic film.[281] I will identify specific ways that Brakhage achieved this, drawing out specific threads across the films. The first of these is the subverted use of perspective and the point-of-view shot, which can be seen as a use of the "free indirect point-of-view"[282] or "associated image"[283] discussed in the literature review. Brakhage juxtaposes this subversion with more conventional uses of the point-of-view shot, emphasising this further. The second thread is Brakhage's use of physical film manipulation to indicate a new 'vision' or perspective seen within the film, what Jean Mitry would call the "pure mental image" and is described as a key aspect of 'psychodrama'.[284] The final thread examined here is Brakhage's subversion of transitions, specifically the dissolve. Brakhage achieves additional poeticism by using this device. The dissolve, which usually compresses narrative time in cinema, is frequently used by Brakhage to *expand* narrative time, which can give the sense of "pause" described by Deren.

Literature Review

Considering narrative form through a poetic lens might at first seem counterintuitive. Narrative takes what Maya Deren would call a "horizontal approach"; it moves forward in narrative time and is more focused on things like cause and effect rather than emotions or memories.[285] As noted in the literature review, Deren states explicitly that a film's "approach" is not static; a film can be predominantly "horizontal" or narrative and still momentarily 'pause' to take a "vertical approach" within the plot, or vice versa or any other combination of the two approaches.[286] Her definition is similar to the commonly accepted definition of narrative found in David Bordwell, Kristin Thomas, and Jeff Smith's book *Film Art: An Introduction.*

---

[281] Maya Deren quoted in *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[282] Keating, 'Pasolini, Croce, and the Cinema of Poetry'.
[283] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 185.
[284] Matias, 48.
[285] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[286] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

David Bordwell et al. broadly define "narrative" as "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space."[287] Bordwell describes "story" as a separate term (though notes it is often used interchangeably with 'narrative'): "…story is the chain of events in *chronological* order."[288] Meanwhile, the plot is the "presentation" of the story and "includes…all the story events that are directly depicted," – is something left out to create suspense or perhaps revealed to create dramatic irony?[289] All these elements work together on a timeline of cause and effect, or narrative – Event A triggers Event B, which is presented through Character 1's perspective, and so on.

In order to understand how conventions might be subverted, it is good to ground one's understanding of convention in context. How are the devices of perspective and/or point-of-view and dissolve transitions traditionally used in narrative cinema? Are there branches of narrative cinema which might more closely relate to the films discussed here? To answer this, I will first continue to look at the basic and broadly taught and accepted uses of the terminology supplied by Bordwell et al. I will then follow this up with a brief discussion of the term 'psychodrama' and the techniques Brakhage uses that lead to this terminology usage, specifically scratching on film and negative imagery.

According to Bordwell et al., filmmakers use editing to exercise creative control over four key areas of a film – graphic relations, rhythmic relations, spatial relations, and temporal relations.[290] They point out that while editing "offer(s) unlimited creative possibilities," the majority of films and filmmakers adhere to continuity editing, which uses a much, "more narrow set of editing possibilities," to keep the viewer informed of the various relations mentioned above.[291] Point-of-view shots can be an effective tool of continuity editing, the primary goal of which is narrative continuity, or "to tell a story clearly".[292] The point-of-view shot is essentially a more specific version of the "shot/reverse shot" technique, which is primarily used in continuity editing to establish spatial relationships within a scene.[293] This technique serves as a plot device to move the story forward. Because they are "optically

---

[287] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 73.
[288] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 75 emphasis my own.
[289] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 75–76.
[290] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 219.
[291] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 230.
[292] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 230.
[293] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 233.

subjective," they help the audience to see action from a particular character's perspective.[294] Using point-of-view shots can create dramatic irony and suspense, or might simply establish the geography of a given scene.

Meanwhile, the dissolve transition, technically described as when the editor or filmmaker "briefly superimposes the end of shot A and the beginning of shot B", is traditionally used as a kind of "ellipsis".[295] An ellipsis is conventionally used to compress the story time on screen and is a form of controlling the temporal relations of a scene or film.[296] The dissolve functions "mainly to facilitate a transition."[297] It is important to note that while the dissolve is less commonly used in modern cinema, prior to the 1960s (when Brakhage began making films), it was a frequently used device.[298] Bordwell et al. note that the use of an ellipsis to expand story time is far less common, citing Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein as an example of "temporal expansion through editing" in his films *Strike* (1925) and *October* (1927).[299] In their 2011 article "The Changing Poetics of the Hollywood Dissolve", James E. Cutting, Kaitlin L. Brunick, and Jordon E. DeLong briefly explore the history and use of the dissolve. They identify five main functions of the dissolve transition: travel through space, travel through time, setups, altered mental state, and celebrations. For the last three categories, Cutting et al. refer mainly to how dissolves are used both within and as transitions to different types of montage sequences.[300]

Both devices are recognised and understood as tools commonly used to construct continuity editing, which is most often found in traditional cinema. Many of the films discussed in this chapter were described as 'psychodramas' by P. Adams Sitney in his book *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000.* 'Psychodrama' is a contraction of psychological drama.[301] Sitney loosely defines the psychodrama as a film in which the filmmaker realises the film's theme through the process of filmmaking.[302] As will be seen throughout this thesis, the filmmaking process was especially important for Stan Brakhage and

---

[294] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 241.

[295] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 217, 228.

[296] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 228.

[297] Cutting, Brunick, and Delong, 'The Changing Poetics of the Dissolve in Hollywood Film', 149.

[298] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 229.

[299] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 229.

[300] Cutting, Brunick, and Delong, 'The Changing Poetics of the Dissolve in Hollywood Film', 163–65.

[301] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 14.

[302] Sitney, 14.

as such should be especially important when considering his films. In both his conventional *and* unconventional work, Brakhage was highly preoccupied with the process of filmmaking and the physicality of the medium. This chapter will explore this preoccupation through Brakhage's manipulation of the film image and stock. I will argue this achieves a poetic effect and carries on building themes around vision that are explored through his use of point-of-view.

Scratching directly onto the film stock is a form of direct animation, which will be analysed in detail in the last chapter of this thesis. Maureen Furniss defines direct animation as animation that is, "made by working directly on the surface of clear, white or black film-leader, or on pieces of exposed and developed film containing other images."[303] While used sparingly in the films discussed here, this technique requires a literal hands-on approach to the film and inevitably highlights the physicality of the medium as a result, especially given the sharp contrast between traditionally filmed footage and physically manipulated footage.

Similarly, the use of negative film stock brings the process of making a film to the fore, even more so when used in contrast with traditionally processed footage. There is a connection to the moment of filming, as the negative is produced immediately by the camera and thus could be considered, at least in celluloid filmmaking, the most original document of the film.[304] It is the raw material; the output of the camera before it is processed and turned into the type of image shown conventionally. Using such imagery inextricably links itself to the process of making the film.

These two techniques can be understood in context as subversions upon mise-en-scène. Mise-en-scène, literally "putting into the scene", refers to "setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging and performance."[305] While these films predominantly use traditional/conventional approaches to mise-en-scène (which in itself is wide-ranging and can accentuate the filmmaker's desired intentions from the realistic to the fantastical)[306], the uses of scratching and negative imagery immediately contrast against this conventional usage. The use of such techniques results in what Taberham calls a "veiled narrative", wherein a film might

---

[303] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 40.
[304] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 10.
[305] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 113.
[306] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 112–13.

use a relatively conventional means of structuring its plot but "events are rendered ambiguous because the film relies heavily on symbolism and allegory" and additionally "space and time are sometimes deliberately disorientated through spatial elisions and temporal ellipses."[307]

Overview of films & selection rationale

In this chapter, I will show how Stan Brakhage both used and subverted conventions to create poetic expression in the narrative films discussed. To illustrate this, I have chosen a variety of films from the beginning of his career, when Brakhage primarily experimented with narrative form. The films chosen are *Interim* (1952), *The Way to the Shadow Garden* (1954), *Reflections on Black* (1955), *Flesh of Morning* (1956), and *Blue Moses* (1962). *Interim* was chosen to act as a baseline. This is Brakhage's first film, inspired by Italian neo-realism, and by far his most conventionally structured.[308] The other four films (*The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black*, *Flesh of Morning*, and *Blue Moses)* were chosen due to the specific techniques employed within them, namely the subverted use of point-of-view shots, the subverted use of dissolve transitions, and subverted mise-en-scène.

I contend that the films under consideration in this chapter each contain poetry, albeit to varying degrees. This is consistent with Deren's claim that a film, even a conventional one, may be entirely poetic or only contain but a moment of poeticism within it. In this chapter, I am interested in how the subverted use of perspective, transitions, and mise-en-scène in these films establishes a moment, or extended moments, of poeticism.

Interim (1952)

As his first directing endeavour, *Interim* serves as an interesting and important work in the span of Stan Brakhage's career. *Interim* is Brakhage's most classic drama. In terms of the techniques discussed in this chapter, *Interim* follows convention. This aspect of the film makes it a useful comparison piece, particularly when discussing point-of-view shots, a technique that Brakhage often uses in *Interim*.

The Way To The Shadow Garden (1954)

P. Adams Sitney describes *The Way to the Shadow Garden* as one of four "trance films" by Brakhage, whom he argues is the innovator of the "lyrical film."[309] For Sitney, a lyrical film

---

[307] Taberham, *LESSONS IN PERCEPTION: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker as Practical Psychologist*, 48.

[308] Roark, *Dissolve: Screenplays to the Films of Stan Brakhage*, 4.

[309] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 160.

possesses a few key qualities: "the lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film", the film contains a significant amount of movement both within the frame and because of editing, and the lyrical filmmaker, "affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting its traditional use as a window into illusion."[310] Though P. Adams Sitney considers *The Way to the Shadow Garden* the "most orthodox" of Brakhage's trance films he discusses, the way the film unfolds is unique and more experiential than expository, focusing much more on tone and feeling than on plot.

Reflections on Black (1955)

Reflections on Black follows a loose narrative, but Brakhage works in many experimental elements both in terms of editing and mise-en-scène. In fact, this is the first film in which Brakhage experiments with scratching directly onto the celluloid, a technique which would eventually become a trademark of his later work.

Flesh of Morning (1956)

One of Brakhage's most formally straightforward films, both in technique and plot, *Flesh of Morning* is "a psycho-drama of masturbation."[311] The third of Brakhage's "trance films," the film explores male sexual frustration from an extremely personal perspective; Brakhage himself acts in this film.[312] However, rather than exploitive imagery or the cheap shots of pornography, Brakhage uses the editing and framing, as well as the score, to construct a brief but effective and realistic plot that speaks to the woes of male adolescence. This is one of the first films which Brakhage self-describes as a "poem."[313]

Blue Moses (1962)

Blue Moses is a short film approximately 11 minutes long that follows a single unnamed character played by Robert Benson. Brakhage's script reveals that the visual aspects of the film were significantly less in his thoughts than the dialogue; he states in the opening of the script, "(I'm deliberately NOT writing out the visual aspects of this drama because I don't want to get it SET and would rather 'talk it thru' [*sic*] with you as we go along."[314] This is unique in Brakhage's career for two reasons. First, Brakhage was almost exclusively a visual filmmaker

---

[310] Sitney, 160.
[311] Lev, *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, 243.
[312] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 175.s
[313] Lev, *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, 243.
[314] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 162–64.

and often highly focused on visual aesthetics for his films. Second, Brakhage rarely used sound at all, let alone dialogue, so the emphasis on the spoken word in this film is both interesting and important. Additionally, Brakhage rarely used actors for his films, and this was his last film to do so until he made the *Faust* series in the late 80s.

Analysis
Point-of-View Shots In Convention

In this small selection of Brakhage's work, there are two distinct uses of perspective through the point-of-view (POV) shot technique. The first, most notably used throughout *Interim*, reflects a more conventional approach more aligned to continuity editing. In this instance, Brakhage follows the basic formula of the POV shot: see the character looking and then see what the character sees. For instance, when Brakhage introduces the girl in *Interim*, he uses a point-of-view shot to create a non-verbal connection between the two characters (the girl and the boy, both unnamed) as she watches him walk by beneath the overpass. Her eyes follow the boy as he walks away from her, his back to her; Brakhage then cuts to a shot of the boy walking away – the girl's perspective.
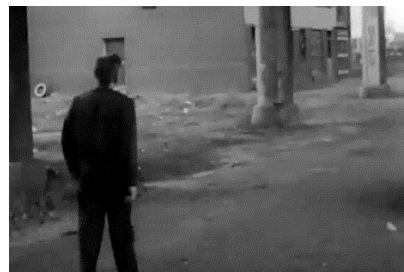
The film ends with a similar edit. The boy walks away, and the girl watches him go before leaving herself.

Film Stills 2.5, 2.6. *The girl watches the boy leave in the closing of Interim*[316]

In the words of Bordwell et al., this technique is "optically subjective," and it allows for some insight into a character's thoughts or feelings.[317] It most closely resembles Mitry's "analytical image".[318] Brakhage shows that the girl is watching the boy through shot selection and her performance indicates intrigue when she first sees him and sadness when she watches him walk away. In each case, it is a compelling, wordless expression of emotion, suggesting vertical movement; it also moves the narrative forward horizontally.

Maya Deren is adamant in her argument that *any* film can adopt a "vertical attack," even momentarily, where the action or "narrative development" stops and a "'vertical' development…based on the intent of the moment" takes over.[319] However, with *Interim,* Brakhage adopts what I am calling in this research a diagonal attack. I propose that a diagonal attack occurs when a film simultaneously moves horizontally (furthering plot and/or narrative) and vertically (furthering emotional depth). Furthermore, I would suggest that the diagonal is prevalent in most narrative films, despite Deren's binary of horizontal and vertical. This binary

---

[315] *Interim.*

[316] *Interim.*

[317] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 241.

[318] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 186.

[319] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

was part of the critique of her proposal at the symposium. However, as I will show, this concept of diagonal is predominant in convention but is not necessarily so outside of it.

Brakhage's use of this 'diagonal attack' is highly evident in his use of point-of-view shots in *Interim*. This makes sense regarding his career and artistic growth because *Interim*, being his first film, draws more upon convention and existing techniques than any other film in his entire 350-plus title oeuvre. Like in so many conventional narrative films before and after, the use of point-of-view in *Interim* provides a subjective insight into character development while retaining relative objectivity within the narrative and gently moving the story forward.

However, this diagonal attack belies the potential for poeticism in film as a medium. This idea lies at the heart of Deren's argument, most clearly elucidated by her statement that she does not feel a film must be exclusively 'horizontal' or 'vertical' but can move between these two 'attacks'. She suggests a sense of potential for the vertical must always exist. This potential is something a Brakhage film like *Interim* highlights exceptionally well. By using techniques that emphasise the naturally subjective aspects of the perspective shots, Brakhage allows room for a slightly more poetic reading of the film and in particular the point-of-view sequences. Given the right emphasis and use of similar techniques, I would argue that this would be achievable in most films. However, by mainly following convention with his structure, editing, shot choices and cinematography, and narrative, *Interim* never fully lands as a 'poetic' film. Instead, those sequences which carry ambiguity similarly carry the poeticism of the film. When this poeticism is not drawn out, the balance between the objective narrative and subjective emotionality favours the objective/horizontal or, crudely, the non-poetic.

Subverting Convention

Throughout *Interim*, Brakhage takes a diagonal 'attack' and uses continuity editing techniques. *Interim* serves as possibly the sole example in the hundreds of films Brakhage made throughout his extensive career in which he attempted to stay within Hollywood conventions. It is useful as a prime example of a conventional film - every shot and technique propel the narrative forward; there are no 'pauses' or vertical shifts. Brakhage used these techniques again in *The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black* and *Flesh of Morning*. However, in all three films, he began to experiment with subversion. While he still used perspective and editing in a more conventional sense to connect characters and maintain control over the spatial relations, Brakhage began using the innate subjectivity and techniques of the point-of-view shot to create

91

ambiguity, moving closer to Mitry's ideas of "associated image" and "pure mental image".[320] In some instances, he even began using the point-of-view shot to create 'vertical' pauses.

In *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, for instance, Brakhage dissolves between a high angle of actor Walt Newcomb's hand clutching a clock to a low angle of Walt Newcomb in a mid-shot (see below). Setting the use of the dissolve aside momentarily, the two shots connect very conventionally in terms of spatial relations, using continuity editing and the shot-reverse shot technique. Newcomb's character is meant to be looking at the clock in his hand, and the shots mirror each other with their angles, and Newcomb's eyeline clearly points to his left hand (which Brakhage has already established is the hand holding the clock). This shows a conventional approach to continuity editing and is "analytical" in Mitry's terms.

Film stills 2.7-2.8. Eyeline between Walt Newcomb and a pocket watch[321]

Later in the film, Brakhage dissolves from another mid-shot of Newcomb staring at a lightbulb to a close-up of the lightbulb itself.

---

[320] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 185.
[321] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

The initial angle and movement of the close-up mimic the character's perspective in a classic use of the point-of-view technique. This is then revealed not to be a true point-of-view shot as the camera moves again and the character enters the frame.

Film stills 2.11, 2.12. *Reveal of fake POV*[323]

The introduction of Newcomb's character (the *only* character in the film) betrays the shot as *not* a point-of-view shot but a third-person perspective shot. It *must* be third-person because we have seen no other people in the room with Newcomb. However, as the shot follows Newcomb towards the bed as he removes his shirt, it takes on an increasingly voyeuristic quality. The shot is handheld and awkwardly framed as though the camera is hidden. Newcomb pulls the covers from the empty bed, and the camera focuses on the sheets before cutting to a series of static shots of the bedsheets on the bed from different angles. It is the next shot that is the most revealing.

---

[322] {Citation}
[323] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

Film still 2.13. *Walt Newcomb looks into camera*[324]

The film cuts to a shot of Walt Newcomb looking directly into the lens, and not just looking but *staring* with intensity. Using such a technique (looking into the camera lens) makes it feel like he is looking directly at the viewer. He shakes his head and backs away, and the camera tilts down slowly and steadily to keep Newcomb in the frame. It then pans to the left and settles in a Dutch angle, or canted shot, as Newcomb crosses the room and sits at his desk. When the shot moves into the Dutch angle, the shot transitions (without editing) from appearing to be a first-person perspective to having an objective, third-person feel.

Film stills 2.14-2.16. *Shot moves from a close-up to Dutch wide*[325]

This short sequence subverts the standard of point-of-view shots in continuity editing by manipulating the spatial awareness and creating the expectation of another person/character. It most closely resembles the "associated image" and the "free indirect point-of-view". This is a technique that Brakhage uses throughout *The Way to the Shadow Garden* for poetic effect and also begins to establish the theme of vision/altered vision that is a major aspect of not just many of the films in this chapter but Brakhage's work as a whole. This

---

[324] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*
[325] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

theme persisted in different forms throughout his entire career. The initial experimentation Brakhage undertook with these films would eventually give way to a full-fledged exploration of vision. This ultimately resulted in the hand-painted and scratched films Brakhage became most well-known for in the late 80s and 90s until he died in 2003.

The entire opening sequence of the film has the voyeuristic handheld movement of point-of-view shots. Brakhage introduces Newcomb's character in a steady wide shot of an urban street, with the opening titles handwritten overtop. Despite being set at night, the entire shot is well-lit with relatively low contrast as the young man meanders toward the camera, his gait Chaplin-esque. Though diminutive in the frame, the young man is dominant due to his movement and isolation. Unmotivated by anything within the frame, the camera pans to the right and the image becomes much darker (in terms of light). There is a hidden dissolve as the pan continues, finally settling on two windows, bright and large in an otherwise black frame.

Their composition within the frame makes them look like eyes - two windows side by side, each with triangular objects jutting up from below as pupils – and this gives the first indication of a second character with its own 'sight' or 'vision.' The change in lighting contrast also gives this setting a less urban feel – the only light pollution comes from within the house itself.

Film still 2.17. Windows look like eyes in The Way to the Shadow Garden[326]

---

[326] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

It is the next shot, however, which solidifies through mise-en-scène the characterisation of the room. Beginning close-up against the glass windowpane (but from the *other* side), a handheld shot wanders through the room. This handheld technique, combined with the wandering, dreamlike movement of the camera functions as a point-of-view, but there is no visible human character to whom this might belong. Instead, this shot represents the vision of the room itself. It has an uneasy, voyeuristic quality due to the use of the handheld, moving camera with no indication of *who* this perspective belongs to (free indirect point-of-view). It creates the notion that this perspective belongs to the room itself. Conventionally, this technique is often used in monster movies or thrillers, though usually a monster/killer is eventually revealed, as in *Jaws* (1975).[327] Subverting convention as Brakhage does here heightens the poetic ambiguity.

Eventually, the wandering camera settles on Walt Newcomb's character entering the room, but only briefly. Brakhage almost immediately cuts from the handheld shot to a swift but steady panning shot to the left (this at first appears to be a point of view from Newcomb's character), which then settles into a steady medium shot which Newcomb enters to close some open shutters. This more objective style is typical of that associated with Newcomb's character, like the wide opening shot. When Walt Newcomb steps into the room, it becomes clear, like with the lightbulb shot discussed above, that these shots have *not* been from his character's perspective, again heightening poetic ambiguity.

As the film continues, Brakhage cuts between obvious character point-of-view shots and shots that have the quality of a point-of-view shot (handheld, a sense of autonomy) but could not be from the film's only character's perspective – free indirect point-of-view. It adds an ethereal life and a subjectivity, key to Deren's poeticism, to the room that *The Way to the Shadow Garden* is set within. Additionally, it highlights the innate voyeurism of the filmmaking process – there is always another, unseen character, i.e., the camera operator and/or director. This becomes particularly emphasised in a short sequence just over halfway through the film.

Newcomb's character, now shirtless, sits and smokes at his desk. Brakhage frames this in a wide, static, Dutch angle. After a jump cut, the camera rises from the bed across the room and moves toward Newcomb with an ambling gait, now shaky and handheld. This shot ends

---

[327] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 242–43.

with Newcomb in close-up before cutting to another static shot from the reverse. Newcomb looks over his shoulder (to where the camera had approached him) and finds an odd statue 'magically' there. The appearance of this statue is the impetus for the character gouging his own eyes out, perhaps an attempt to "see" the mysterious unknown character.

In addition to using and subverting traditional point-of-view to use perspective in a poetic manner, Brakhage also used the less conventional technique of editing film negatives together with developed footage. Brakhage uses negative imagery to express a sense of heightened vision, creating additional subjectivity and ambiguity. For instance, *The Way to the Shadow Garden* culminates with an entire sequence in negative after Walt Newcomb's character gouges out his own eyes and escapes the mysterious room. The film abruptly changes from a regular developed film to the negative as Newcomb's character stands, backlit, on the threshold between the indoors and outdoors. The change in film stock appears to affect him physically; he writhes before collapsing on the ground. Brakhage adopts a camera movement style similar to the film's opening; the handheld camera sweeps throughout the outdoors. Quick movements combined with the negative imagery make the fast-paced foliage act as a precursor to Brakhage's later seminal work, *Mothlight*.

The camera settles back on the character. With blood streaming from his eyes, bright white in the negative film, Newcomb crouches behind a bush. He seems crazed and wild and appears to be looking directly into the camera, having finally achieved the ability to "see" it.

P. Adams Sitney argues the jump to negative film is a "metaphor of vision" – representations of the character's actual sight as well as interpretations and variations thereupon - which he also states is a running theme of Brakhage's "trance films."[329]

In *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, Brakhage begins to adopt this theme of 'vision', and he continues this in *Reflections on Black*. Brakhage uses this theme in *Reflections on Black*, expressed with the subverted point-of-view technique, to manipulate the narrative in a poetic way. Brakhage establishes various 'visions' in this film by using conventional and subverted point-of-view shots. Where he began experimenting with this ability to manipulate and control while remaining largely narratively driven in *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, *Reflections on Black* shows a greater push toward exploring the emotional resonance and the 'vertical investigation' or poeticism.

Through lighting and framing, Brakhage suggests early in the film that the main character, an unnamed man in a trench coat and fedora, might be at least partially blind. This suggestion becomes first apparent during a particular use of a point-of-view shot that emphasises the character's state of vision. In the film's opening, the two characters slowly walk toward each other, eventually meeting. They stop inches away from each other, but neither turns to look at the other. Although the female character's face is brightly lit in the high contrast shot below (she is facing the single key light), Brakhage refrains from showing the Blind Man's eyes in any of the shots.

---

[328] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*
[329] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 157–58.

Film still 2.19. *Two characters face each other without making eye contact*[330]

After the woman passes by, the Blind Man turns slightly, his face still in shadow. Brakhage then cuts between this and a blurred shot of someone - it is presumed the woman - moving. I argue this is a point-of-view shot from the Blind Man's perspective.

The usage of this shot follows convention more than most other uses of this same technique in *Reflections on Black.* The editing technique follows the concept of 'see the person looking and then see what they see.' Though the shot is shaky and entirely out of focus, some movement is discernible. The shot barely manages to continue the narrative (much of this work must be done on the viewer's part) but does convey valuable insight into the Blind Man himself. As a representation of the Blind Man's sight, it indicates perhaps he is not entirely blind but that his vision is severely handicapped. This point-of-view shot represents the first 'state of vision' experienced by the Blind Man. This state exists within the objective – or "horizontal" - level of the film; it is part of the story being told. While the shot is subjective to the extent that it shows a character's perspective, this subjectivity exists in service of the overall accepted objectivity of the film's world and narrative.

The Blind Man continues his journey, and for the first time, his face is in the light and his eyes are visible. However, they remain closed as he walks on. An unusual panning shot sweeps past wooden pallet-style walls (creating a noir feel from their horizontal lines). As the camera pan continues, the woman is visible, huddled in a far corner. The camera finally lands

---

[330] *Reflections on Black.*

99

back on the man who begins ascending a staircase. This shot is decidedly not a point-of-view – the pan left is smooth and mechanical despite likely being handheld, and both established characters are visible in the shot. Yet, it illustrates a voyeuristic tone. It gives the impression that the Blind Man 'sees' the woman in the corner, leaves her and continues his journey. The use of 'impossible' point-of-view shots (free indirect point-of-view) in *Reflections on Black* adds an ethereal element. It is as though the blind main character "sees" each of the three vignettes that play out behind closed doors. It also gives the impression that these vignettes occur outside of the narrative or that the narrative 'pauses' while these vignettes are explored, thus resulting in them creating a vertical investigation, or poeticism.

These vignettes occur *between* the general narrative of the film, which is as simple as following a poorly sighted man as he walks through a building at night. When the vignettes finish and the film returns to the protagonist (the Blind Man), there is no indication of the passage of time – he merely continues his journey. However, there *is* the indication that he has witnessed the events of each vignette through this 'second sight,' implying that for the Blind Man, these vignettes occur within but a moment. Meanwhile, in the film, they stretch out over several minutes. Such temporal manipulations are key factors in Deren's poetic model. These vignettes act as temporal pauses in not only the film's narrative but also the perspective from which the film is conveyed. Despite both the main narrative (the man walking along and up the flights of stairs) and the vignettes being filmed in similar styles, especially in terms of framing and camera movement (almost exclusively shot using a tripod or similar stabilising element), the vignettes are the subjective perspective of the Blind Man through his 'second sight,' described above. These two perspectives, or 'sights', are collapsed and expanded using the vignette, resulting in the 'vertical' movement of the film or its poetic quality.

The final vignette of the three is particularly significant and illustrates the variable use of perspectives well. The technique for the point-of-view shot that leads into this vignette links directly to the protagonist's vision. Throughout the film, Brakhage uses specific framing and lighting to infer the Blind Man's lack of sight - an early POV shot in the film is extremely blurry and dim, the Blind Man is usually in complete or partial darkness, and his eyes are never seen outside of the vignettes. Brakhage takes this further by applying scratches directly onto the celluloid over the top of the Blind Man's eyes (this will be discussed further down). This is how Brakhage leads into each vignette, with a shot of the Blind Man with starburst-like

scratches over his eyes. This is also how Brakhage leads the film *out* of the second vignette. Then, once the film begins the third vignette, Brakhage uses these scratched bursts taking up the entire frame, interrupting the first shot of the vignette. Until this point in the film, these bursts had only been seen from a third-person perspective over the protagonist's eyes. By filling the entire frame with the scratched bursts, Brakhage places the viewer within the Blind Man's 'vision' and indicates that these shots are all point-of-view.

Another indicator that this vignette is told from the Blind Man's perspective is the use of extreme close-ups. In using isolated and abstracted shots of the woman's face, Brakhage mimics a blind person's feeling over another's face to 'see' them. The visual information is absorbed slowly and in pieces, mimicking the hand feeling along the body's contours. Most shots throughout the vignette are extreme close-ups or cutaways. The cutaways are all short visual cues of things that would create a specific sound – lighting a gas stove, placing a kettle down, opening a silverware drawer – but the vignette plays out with only white noise. In seeing the cutaways, edited together with quick, decisive cuts, the edits create the effect of producing sound.

The use of this technique in *Reflections on Black* creates three separate pauses in the horizontal narrative – the Blind Man walking up the steps – and during each pause, an entire vignette plays out that takes up several minutes of screen time but only mere moments of narrative time. In a similar fashion to "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce (where an entire short story is revealed to have taken place within the mind of a convict in the moments between the hangman pulling the lever releasing him to his death and the rope reaching capacity and executing the convict) each vignette in *Reflections on Black* seems to happen entirely in these small moments between steps on the Blind Man's journey.[331] During each vignette or occurrence, the film's 'narrative movement' is much more vertical (or poetic) than horizontal (narratively driven) as Brakhage explores this character's alternate vision. It is unclear if these vignettes are even objective to the world of the story. Arguably, they are entirely fabricated by the Blind Man's psyche and are representations of Mitry's "pure mental image."

---

[331] Bierce, *An Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge and Other Stories.*

Additionally, in *Reflections on Black,* Brakhage combines a subversion on point-of-view with direct animation to create a similar indication of altered vision. As illustrated by the below stills, he creates a reverse point-of-view shot as the Blind Man approaches a woman on the stairs. The technical application of this shot lies entirely in line with existing convention; the angles complement by reflecting one another and matching eyelines, the edit connects the shot of "what is seen" with "who is seeing," and so on. However, the man is not only presumed blind, but he also keeps his eyes shut. When he does open them, it is as if stars burst from his eyes; Brakhage scratched onto the film itself to create this effect.

Film stills 2.20-2.23. *Hand-made scratches appear over the Blind Man's eyes*[332]

As the use of subverted point-of-view in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* discussed above, the subversion of this technique in this instance is self-reflexive. In *The Way to the Shadow Garden,* Walter Newcomb staring into the camera alerts the audience to their presence and reminds us that we are partaking in the film viewing experience. Likewise, the unexpected reveal of the Blind Man as the "seer" in this pair of shots, combined with the hand-scratched stars over his eyes, draws attention to the act of seeing/viewing.

Another film that explored a more emotional use of point-of-view to achieve the "pure mental image" is *Flesh of Morning.* Like in *The Way to the Shadow Garden,* Brakhage first

---

[332] *Reflections on Black.*

establishes two main perspectives throughout *Flesh of Morning* – third-person and first-person. The film follows a young man, played by Brakhage, as he wanders in his apartment until he finds a photograph of a woman, who then "becomes a phantasm" appearing in the room. The man masturbates, and the film ends.

Brakhage uses conventional methods, such as point-of-view cutting, to indicate changes in perspective. Third-person perspective throughout the film usually contains the main subject, in this case, the character played by Brakhage. These shots tend to have less camera movement. When portraying first-person perspective, the character, whose gaze the viewer assumes, is absent from the frame. The camera is handheld, and the character and the gaze are connected through editing. These shots are used as the man wanders through the apartment, predominantly in a conventional way to 'see what he sees'. However, certain aspects of these shots indicate more than a simple portrayal of visual information.

Once again, 'vision' or, more accurately, a disruption of vision becomes a theme, as it did with *Reflections on Black*. As Peter Michelson points out, Brakhage primarily accomplishes a change in perspective by cutting between shots which include the young man in the frame and those which mimic not just *what* the young man would see but *how* he sees – "The young man's psyche conditions how he sees and consequently how the viewer sees."[333] For instance, Michelson credits the use of overexposure in a shot which shows the man's view of the outdoors as an indicator of stress and anxiety. So too, he argues, is the shot of the man's face reflected in a metallic coffee pot, distorted like a carnival mirror.

---

[333] Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, 244.

Film still 2.24. *A distorted view of self*[334]

However, as the film builds towards its climax, Brakhage introduces a third perspective using negative film to differentiate, similarly seen in *The Way to the Shadow Garden*. Peter Michelson argues that the negative stock represents a change from objective to subjective points of view.[335] This is an inner-subjective vision used in this instance to convey sexual ecstasy. It is only used during the masturbation sequence, never before or after, and the previous establishment of subjective vision does not match. Whereas the use of subjective perspective ('vision') elsewhere in the film was relatively conventional – use of handheld and framing to indicate the shot mimics the subject's eyeline – the subject (i.e., Brakhage) is present in these shots, from angles which would be impossible to interpret as the man's eyeline.

Brakhage uses the negative to portray a new perspective or point-of-view, a "heightened" vision which is entirely subjective in relation to both the actual world and the world of the film. Such a use of perspective most readily exemplifies Mitry's idea of the "pure mental image", as the shots are not merely indications of what the character is seeing but are meant to provide insight into his mental state and internal struggle (but *without* any character commentary or real contextualisation, which would move away from "pure mental image" and closer to either "analytical" or "memory image"). Like in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black*, there is a sense of awareness of the film technology, process, and filmmaker.

---

[334] *Flesh of Morning.*
[335] Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, 244.

Moreover, this use of perspective, with its heightened subjectivity, aligns predominantly with Deren's notion of the vertical, the poetic.

In *Blue Moses*, Brakhage drew attention to this awareness much more overtly. The entirety of the dialogue (a unique feature of a Brakhage film in and of itself) is spoken in direct address to the audience. Much of it refers to the very nature of the film – the camera operator, the director, the actor. Brakhage further supports this by using the camera as a stand-in for the audience's perspective. This becomes evident early on as the camera appears to respond to what Robert Benson says. For example, when Benson says, "I'm here to find out...about the tracks...", the camera whips around and points at the ground. Brakhage's use of jump cuts combined with the fast and whippy handheld movement create a frantic sense of panic that becomes extremely disorienting.

Not only is the camera responsive to Benson, but the reverse holds true as well. Throughout the film, Benson adopts several different characters, but each one directly addresses the camera, either asking it questions or giving it various commands. This culminates in the final sequence, where Brakhage's subversion of perspective and audience expectations becomes most apparent. Benson, as one of his more 'over the top' theatrical characters, begins removing his makeup and exclaims, "Look, this is ridiculous! I'm an actor! You're my audience." Brakhage layers this repeated audio over itself, cutting to a wider shot of the same scene. However, suddenly Benson steps in front of this shot, revealing that what appeared to be part of the film was actually a *projection* of the film against a wall. The shot itself is a recording of this projection of the previous shot. Benson then says, "...don't be afraid! There's a filmmaker behind every scene...behind you, too, so to speak...", and the camera quickly whip-pans, as though checking to see who is there. When the camera turns back, Benson further directs, "No! Don't turn around!"

Such a shot is reminiscent of the subverted point-of-view shots seen in *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, where Brakhage suggests that the shot indicates one thing but quickly upends this. While these shots themselves are not constructed as conventional point-of-view shots, the entire film is presented from the viewer's perspective. Therefore, convention is irrelevant – every shot of *Blue Moses* is a point-of-view shot. This makes it almost impossible to establish objectivity and seems to be most like Mitry's "imaginary sphere proper", as the whole film

exists as the fantasy of the imagined audience member. It is probably Brakhage's most blatant commentary on the film process.

Brakhage uses a subverted point-of-view technique to shift each film for varying effect in *The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black*, *Flesh of Morning*, and *Blue Moses*. In *Reflections on Black*, this results in a clear 'pause' to the horizontal narrative, thereby shifting the film into the vertical or poetic. Even though Brakhage uses a similar technique in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Flesh of Morning*, whether the films shift entirely to the vertical or instead adopt a more "traditional" diagonal approach is not as clear. Meanwhile, *Blue Moses* disrupts the horizontal by completely shattering the perception of the film's objectivity. This is combined with the use of direct address and layered editing, but the use of the point-of-view shot brings these elements together. When the camera whip-pans around and then back 'to the front', it is like Brakhage foresaw the advent of immersive technologies. It breaks the perception of an objective film world and invites the audience to participate.

Furthermore, Brakhage's use of negative film to delineate between layers of subjectivity is effective in both *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Flesh of Morning*. Using imagery that is so far removed from reality and so much embedded in the technology of film itself allows Brakhage to create something entirely extraordinary. As a metonym for subjectivity, it is effective because it is so unfamiliar – a person cannot view the world in negative without the aid of camera equipment of some kind – thus, it abstracts the imagery, creating a distinct sense of ambiguity.

Subverting the Dissolve Transition

Another key technique in many of these films is the use of the dissolve transition. In the films *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Blue Moses*, Brakhage subverts conventions around dissolves by using the transition to simultaneously layer multiple moments from various perspectives, creating a collage-like effect. This might best be categorised as an "altered mental state", according to Cutting et al., but Brakhage's use is not within a montage.[336] This collage

---

[336] Cutting, Brunick, and Delong, 'The Changing Poetics of the Dissolve in Hollywood Film', 164.

effect also works to collapse or 'pause' narrative time, allowing the film to 'vertically investigate'.

In *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, Brakhage uses the dissolve to connect the different 'visions' of the film and to portray the inner anguish of the main character visually. Initially, Brakhage seems to introduce the dissolves solely to join two disparate points of view. In the first appearance of the dissolve transition, Brakhage cuts from a third-person to a first-person perspective. The positioning and movement of Newcomb's hand as he closes his fist around the clock would indicate that these moments occur simultaneously.

Film still 2.25. *Layered dissolves distort time*[337]

It should be noted that the time on the clock is about five minutes later in the second shot. This could be intentional and therefore designed to show the passage of time, which is a conventional use of dissolve. However, given the identical movement creating a match cut and the minimal time difference (just five minutes), it seems likely that this is a production error; the clock was not turned off, and five minutes elapsed between capturing takes of each shot. The use of dissolves in the rest of the film is consistent with the former analysis.

Brakhage uses dissolves three more times in the film. The subsequent use of the dissolve follows almost immediately after the hand clenching the clock. The film focuses in close-up on the character, in apparent pain or distress. Brakhage dissolves to different takes of the same shot, creating a layering effect.

---

[337] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

Film Still 2.26. *Layered dissolves show mental strife*[338]

Again, the film does not show the passage of time. The dissolve sequence ends abruptly, with the character seemingly in the exact same moment as it began. Instead, Brakhage uses the dissolve to layer multiple images upon one another, which allows the narrative to pause while the character's emotions are explored – a purely vertical or poetic moment. In this case, the character is under enormous strain and experiencing some inner struggle, which he suppresses, and then the narrative continues. This provides insight and exploration into his mental and emotional state, supporting a poetic reading of the film under Deren's model.

Like in *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, Brakhage uses dissolves in *Blue Moses* in some unexpected and unconventional ways. For instance, Brakhage uses dissolves to layer footage as he did in *The Way to the Shadow Garden*. However, where Brakhage used the technique in that film to enhance the character's altered mental state, in *Blue Moses* takes this layering technique even further. Brakhage not only used dissolves in the edit to layer, but as discussed in the section regarding perspective, he also projected edited footage over his actor and filmed that. This created a dissolve effect *in camera* and allowed his actor to directly address the audience, as discussed above, while simultaneously allowing the scene to continue to play out. The scene projected appears earlier in the film, and at first, it appears as though Brakhage is simply editing that scene back into the film to repeat it. There is no indication at first that the shot is

---

[338] *The Way to the Shadow Garden.*

anything out of the ordinary. However, actor Robert Benson then steps in front of the projection and begins repeating the dialogue from that very scene.

The original scene's audio fades out, and Benson and the camera exchange the "don't turn around" dialogue discussed above. Then Benson turns around so his back is to the camera; he is shirtless. The camera moves closer to him, and he makes a strongman pose with his arms. The scene from earlier in the film is still projected over him. Brakhage dissolves to a shot with Benson in the same pose but facing the camera. The earlier scene is no longer projecting. Benson stands in front of a white box. Again, Brakhage layers this using the dissolve technique with the previous scene (where Benson steps out in front of the projection).

The sequence creates a dual sense of narrative and time. On the one hand, the scenes are repeated several times. On the other hand, however, each scene repetition includes major variations from prior iterations. Brakhage took the dissolve technique and applied it in such a way that completely altered its function. Rather than serving as just a transition from one scene or one shot to another, it collapses the film onto itself. In a sense, doing so allows the film to communicate with itself – quite literally, in that Benson addresses his filmed self. It not only pauses the narrative and/or horizontal movement of the film but explores the very notion of time within cinema in general. The ability to manipulate time in such a way is medium-specific and speaks to the heart of Deren's argument about finding the poetic in film. Such a manipulation destroys any sense of narrative or 'horizontal' as it becomes impossibly tangled up within itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Brakhage's use of narrative conventions. This examination has shown that Brakhage not only used subverted narrative conventions throughout his career – even in his more 'conventional' films – he did so to poetic effect. Furthermore, I have shown through this chapter how dramatic films, even ones that rely heavily on convention, can incorporate both "vertical" and diagonal "attacks" into their storytelling. By subverting conventions around continuity editing/point-of-view shots, transitions, and film stock, Stan Brakhage was able to create poetic moments within narrative cinema. Each of these techniques contributed to the poetic aspects of the films in question.

By exploring a selection of films that range in their implementation of experimental techniques from almost no experimentation (*Interim*) to extreme experimentation (*Blue Moses*), this chapter demonstrates Deren's assertion that the poetic can be present in momentary instances of otherwise traditional narratives or be much more overt and seen throughout a film. This shows the ability of conventional cinema to adopt poeticism for effect. Each of the films discussed within this chapter has been shown to contain at least some elements of the poetic as well as elements of conventional narrative, demonstrating this fluidity.

For instance, the analysis here of *Reflections on Black* most aptly supports Deren's idea of momentary "vertical investigation" in showing how the film's predominant plot is paused while the main character's 'heightened' or inner vision explores his emotional state. This is supported by the edit but most strongly indicated by how Brakhage uses perspective and point-of-view. The film then returns to its narrative or "horizontal investigation." This film (along with *Flesh of Morning,* which this analysis showed takes a similar approach using different techniques) seems to be most like that which Deren imagined when she presented her argument.

In addition, the analyses of *Interim* and *The Way to the Shadow Garden* both demonstrate how the poetic might occur gradually or on what I have proposed calling a "diagonal" attack. *Interim* shows how a conventional film, using continuity editing and a straightforward narrative such as you might find in mainstream or "Hollywood" cinema, can adopt aspects of "vertical investigation," resulting in a poetic aspect to the film. Meanwhile, *The Way to the Shadow Garden* demonstrates how less conventional films might still be predominantly horizontal rather than fully 'pausing' to shift completely to the vertical. Furthermore, the analysis of *Blue Moses* demonstrated how the subversion of these techniques can be taken to extremes, resulting in a film with limited 'horizontal' exploration and intense subjectivity or 'vertical' exploration.

The next chapter will investigate the notions of abstraction and ambiguity, created here through specific subverted conventions, within a different genre - documentary. In this current chapter, I discussed how techniques such as point of view might create a sense of ambiguity or how dissolve transitions can be used to pause time rather than simply compress or expand it. The following chapter focuses much more intently on the device of abstraction and analyses how this can affect the documentary subject.

3. Brakhage's Use of Abstraction in Documentary[339]

…the 'absolute realism' of the motion picture image is a contemporary
mechanical myth.

Stan Brakhage[340]

Poetry is having to do with the actual process of thought, as absolutely distinct
from what I don't regard as poetry at all, the writer telling you his mind, or
something of that sort.

Stan Brakhage[341]

I am the most thorough documentary filmmaker in the world because I
document the act of seeing as well as everything that the light brings me…

Stan Brakhage[342]

One of the oldest forms of filmmaking, "documentary" tends to conjure specific
generic descriptors such as truthful, factual, or real. However, just because a documentary
purports to record factual events does not preclude it from skewed or even entirely fabricated
presentations of reality. From the beginning with the Cinema of Attractions – a term used by
Tom Gunning to refer to early, spectatorship cinema marked by voyeurism and exhibitionism
which was often, though not always, factual and depicted a single event[343] - through to the
modern day, documentarians manipulated objective reality to achieve their desired effect. The

---

[339]Marley, *The Art of Fact: The Place of Poetics within Documentary Filmmaking.* A version of this chapter is set
to be published in the forthcoming book *The Art of Fact: The Place of Poetics within Documentary Filmmaking,*
edited by Dr. Keith Marley and published by Cambridge University Press

[340] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, unknown.

[341] Brakhage, unknown.

[342] Stan Brakhage quoted in Ganguly, 'Adventures in Perception'.

[343] Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', 382–84.

very nature of filming an event places a perspective on it because as much as a filmmaker chooses to show us something, the nature of cinema, with its relatively limited frame of view, means the filmmaker is also choosing *not* to show us something. A keen awareness of this aspect and power of documentary filmmaking can result in profoundly personal and expressive work that moves from simply pointing a camera and capturing reality to *using* reality to divulge something more poetic and intimate. With a director like Stan Brakhage, he intended to take objective reality and make it ambiguous and expressive of "actual…thought" to make it poetic.[344] Therefore, this chapter is concerned with Brakhage's poetic documentary films, how he broadened poetic documentary techniques by applying them to fictional filmmaking, and how this might develop an understanding of Brakhage as a film poet.

This chapter will show how Stan Brakhage's documentaries exemplify not only Bill Nichols' notion of the poetic documentary, with a focus on "mood, tone, and affect", but that this, in turn, reflects Maya Deren's concept of the poetic as "vertical".[345] I will explore ideas around poetic documentaries to do so, primarily informed by the existing work of Bill Nichols. Using Deren's notion of the "vertical" along with Nichols's ideas around poetic documentary, this chapter will look at techniques present in Stan Brakhage's poetic documentaries, and my analysis will demonstrate how that allowed him to focus on mood and tone over narrative. In exploring these notions, I will identify a more nuanced understanding of Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker, using Maya Deren's concept of poetic cinema.

The textual analysis undertaken in this chapter will show that Stan Brakhage should be considered a poetic documentarian. The selected films demonstrate this in particular ways. This chapter will focus on two categories of techniques falling under the somewhat broad descriptions of abstraction and manipulation of cinematic time. Namely, these films use abstraction to manipulate the films' sense of visual, and the films manipulate temporal reality, forcing focus away from narrative design and onto mood and tone. These categories will be further broken down during the analysis.

Literature Review

To explore the debates around poetic film and documentary, I will briefly overview theories from John Grierson and Bill Nichols, with additions from Vlad Alexandru and

---

[344] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, page unknown.
[345] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

Cameron Rose. Arguably, cinema started with documentary of a kind – actuality cinema.[346] The earliest captured films were often just observational clips of people performing everyday tasks or short documents of events presented without the structuring and re-structuring found in what would become the documentary genre. Thomas Edison's film *Electrocuting an Elephant* is a prime example of this type of filmmaking. Like many others of its time, this film presents a shot of an occurrence without interference by way of cuts, audio, or narrative. There is still some selectivity involved regarding where the camera is placed and when recording is both started and stopped, but these films are considered to be presenting actuality.

The documentary genre developed from here through what John Grierson would call "the creative treatment of actuality."[347] Documentarians introduced edits, narratives, and even characters and arcs. This resulted in occasionally borderline or sometimes completely fictionalised films being passed off as documentaries (*Nanook of the North* is probably the most well-known example). Grierson sought to address the looseness with which he felt the term 'documentary' was bandied about and described three "principles" of documentary.

> (1)… Documentary would photograph the living scene and scenery. (2) We believe the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world... (3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer...than the acted article.[348]

Pointedly expanding on John Grierson's 1933 "first principles" of documentary, Nichols says that documentaries "…draw on the historical world for their raw material…"[349] Offering a more specific argument as to what constitutes documentary, Nichols claims that we can make the following mutable 'assumptions' regarding documentary film:

---

[346] Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde'.
[347] John Grierson quoted in Kerrigan and Mcintyre, 'The Creative Treatment of Actuality'.
[348] Grierson, 'FROM "FIRST PRINCIPLES OF DOCUMENTARY" (UK, 1932)'.
[349] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*, 117.

1. Documentaries are about reality… 2. Documentaries are about real people…who do not play or perform roles as actors do… 3. Documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world…[350]

Further on, Nichols makes the case for the poetic "mode" of documentary. He draws more heavily on Dziga Vertov's concept of documentary, which stresses rhythm rather than stories. Vertov is quoted as saying, "Kinochestvo is the art of organizing objects moving in space as rhythmic harmony, in harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object…"[351] Nichols expands:

The poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a specific location in time and place that follows from such editing… This mode explores associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions… This mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion…We learn in this case by affect or feeling, by gaining a sense of what it feels like to see and experience the world in a particular, poetic way.[352]

Like Vertov, Nichols emphasises rhythm and associations created by the visuals, and he notes that these are used especially to emphasise the mood and tone rather than narrative, character, or plot. There is almost a disinterest in knowledge or in conveying facts. While the poetic documentary holds true to the concept that it is "about reality", there is a clear indication in the description from Nichols that the goal of these documentaries is not so much to learn but to feel. Vlad Alexandru adds, "The poetic mode is manifested through a highly subjectivized interpretation of the content chosen to be treated in the documentary film."[353]

This idea of the poetic documentary echoes the much broader definition of the poetic cinema from Maya Deren over half a century prior (re-quoted for ease of reference):

---

[350] Nichols, 5–7.
[351] Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 8.
[352] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*, 116–17.
[353] Alexandru, 'VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY', 57.

A poem…creates visible or auditory forms for something which is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I could call the "vertical" attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the "horizontal" attack of a drama, which is concerned with the development, let's say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling.[354]

The definitions share similar concerns that the poetic film is abstract and expressive. There is also an emphasis on visuals in poetic documentaries. Alexandru states, "The visual world of poetic documentaries is the central point around which the entire narrative structure collapses."[355] Where other modes of documentary arrange their images (shots and scenes) to convey the narrative, the poetic mode focuses on using the visual to, again, stress mood and tone. In their thesis, Cameron Rose describes how this can often be abstract:

These films also concentrate on the formal aspects of the image, often reducing their subjects to abstract geometric forms, rhythmic patterns of light… By defamiliarising the subject through abstraction and the normalising narrative of a day-in-the-life (a popular theme in poetic documentary), the viewer is given space to negotiate their own meaning more freely.[356]

Abstraction can be seen as an attempt to 'purify' a subject matter by 'moving away' from its context.[357] 'Moving away' does not necessarily mean physically moving away from a subject (though this is certainly one way to attempt abstraction) but is meant metaphorically. For instance, if, in describing a book either verbally or visually, to 'move away' from the book means that some technique employed is obscuring the concept or image of 'a book' from the reader/viewer. In this way, it is abstraction which can create ambiguity. According to Steve

---

[354] Maya Deren quoted in 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium'.
[355] Alexandru, 'VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY', 63.
[356] Rose, 'Poetic Documentary and Visual Anthropology: Representing Intellectual Disability on Screen', 54.
[357] Park, 'Abstraction'.

Park, the 'moving away' of abstraction is crucial because it creates a binary between the resultant image or notion and whatever it opposes.[358] These two images or concepts are intrinsically linked; one *cannot* exist without the other - Park claims that "in poetry, abstraction refers to thought expressed without a concrete image."[359] The traits of abstraction and ambiguity can also be one of the most difficult to achieve in such a medium as film.

This difficulty results from an intrinsic quality of physical photography and film media. An image captured by the camera is indexical in that it relates directly to the physical world it represents.[360] For one to take a picture of an apple, the apple must exist in the first instance, and the photographer or filmmaker has little control over that image other than selecting it. The image offers what is often perceived as objective factual information about the world, especially in the case of a documentary.[361] However, Nichols points out that interpretation is critical to understanding the information and that the filmmaker can guide and manipulate this interpretation.[362] For instance, as with the example of the apple above, if a filmmaker chooses only to show an extreme close-up of the fruit, only a viewer remarkably familiar with apple skin might readily identify it as such. In the case of poetic documentaries, this interpretation can be further "limited by…formal abstractions that lose touch with historical reality…."[363] Nichols' "formal abstractions" evoke Grierson's "creative treatment". These "abstractions" or "creative treatments" can result in ambiguity in interpretation, a key element of poetic documentary and, indeed, of Deren's concept of poetic cinema. These abstractions and ambiguities can result in a disregard for cinematic and/or narrative time, which is seen as another element of poetic documentary as well as Deren's model for poetic cinema.

Narrative time plays a key role in Deren's concept of the poetic in cinema and feeds heavily into her horizontal/vertical concept. Likewise, Nichols suggests that a manipulated timeline is a key marker of a poetic documentary, saying that time and space in the 'poetic mode' are treated as "Discontinuous. Us[ing] images that build mood or pattern without full regard for their original proximity."[364] Manipulating narrative time is likely to influence the viewer. Films often compress time, allowing for the narrative to occur over a matter of days,

---

[358] Park.
[359] Park.
[360] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*, 29.
[361] Nichols, 29–30.
[362] Nichols, 73.
[363] Nichols, 108.
[364] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*.

weeks, or even years while sitting through a 90-minute film. A filmmaker may prolong or compress narrative time in a film, making the *perception* of watching appear to cover a much longer or shorter time span than the *experience* of viewing was. Often, however, the perception of time feels real.

Film Selection & Rationale

For this chapter, I will look at *The Wonder Ring* (1955), *Sirius Remembered* (1959), *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1972), and *The Text of Light* (1974). These are four of Brakhage's mid-career films, each taking a varied approach to entirely different subjects. These films were selected from numerous possibilities – a large majority of Brakhage's film work *may* be considered documentary filmmaking. Each of these four films disregards traditional narrative structure and time in favour of establishing and exploring a particular mood. Brakhage accomplishes this largely through the devices of abstraction and ambiguity. This ranges from the extreme abandonment of narrative in *Sirius Remembered* and *The Text of Light* to the more familiar use of compressed narrative time in *The Wonder Ring. The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* sits between these two, not entirely abandoning narrative but certainly presenting its narrative in a less accessible way than seen in *The Wonder Ring.* Considering these four Brakhage films in the context laid out above, I argue that the films are about reality, but while they portray what happens in the real world, they take a poetic approach to do so.

These four films were selected from the hundreds of films that Brakhage made over his career. The selection process was partly intentional – I set out to focus on particular films of Brakhage's when I began my research – but also partly incidental. As my research continued, certain throughlines and similarities began to reveal themselves as I made my way through a not-inconsiderable number of films. I knew that I wanted to look at *The Text of Light,* for example, based purely on what I had read in previous descriptions of the film by P. Adams Sitney, Fred Camper, and R. Bruce Elder. However, I had not considered it a documentary at the time and was planning on placing the film elsewhere in the thesis, in a category I was calling "recorded abstract". When I delved into documentary theory and began thinking about what, at its very basic, it means for a film to document reality, I felt strongly that *The Text of Light* not only fit the remit but would provide an interesting contrast to typical notions of what a documentary should be.

In contrast, *The Wonder Ring* and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* were always intended to be included and discussed as documentaries. This began from a perspective of ease of access, as both films are readily available for home viewing, and I was already familiar with them. However, what became apparent as my research continued is that these two films, on their own, provide little in the way of intervention regarding Brakhage and documentary studies. Both have been written about relatively extensively. What they do offer is both a baseline or anchor point from which a reader or viewer can access Brakhage and extrapolate to his less readily-accessible work, as well as an interesting point of contrast when discussing more abstract documentaries like *The Text of Light* or *Sirius Remembered.*

Sirius Remembered was an extremely late addition to the chapter and, indeed the thesis as a whole. Like *The Text of Light*, it is only viewable (properly) via archival research, and my initial selection of films did not include *Sirius Remembered.* Scholars (like Paul Arthur, Tyrus Miller, and Carolee Schneemann[365]) briefly mention the film, often in relation to Brakhage's preoccupation with death, but move swiftly on to later, more familiar works. It was not until mid-2022, on my third archival visit, that I decided to even view the film for the first time, mainly due to reading Brakhage's own thoughts on the film in *Metaphors on Vision*, wherein Brakhage describes his attempts to make a visual poem using rhythm and repetition.[366] Upon viewing, it became immediately apparent that it was worth inclusion in the chapter for its subject matter, editing style, and use of abstraction.

As a grouping, these four films make sense. While Brakhage's career is split mainly between family-focused experimental films[367] and hand-painted experimental films, the films of this chapter stand out as neither. While these films use somewhat different visual approaches, there are significant stylistic similarities between them which are often associated with Brakhage films – handheld camera, an awareness of and use of the lens's focal length to manipulate the imagery and a completely silent soundtrack. Each of the films demonstrates an attempt to use abstraction, which is either combined with or results in temporal manipulations with the arguable result of being poetic.

---

[365] James, *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, 83, 187, 209.

[366] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 103–6.

[367] By this, I mean that they focus on human subjects, usually from within Brakhage's own family; many, if not most, of these films are also documentaries.

The Wonder Ring (1955)

      The Wonder Ring is an interesting film in Stan Brakhage's filmography as it is a commissioned piece, and Brakhage rarely ever worked as a filmmaker-for-hire. Joseph Cornell, a New York-based artist and filmmaker, enlisted Brakhage to make a film about the El train line in New York City, which was at the time facing imminent disbandment. Reportedly unhappy with Brakhage's attempt, Cornell released his own version, *Gnir Rednow* (1955-56), using outtakes filmed by Brakhage.[368] While mentioned frequently by Brakhage scholars such as P. Adams Sitney and Fred Camper in a biographical context, it is perhaps the debatable authorship of this film that leaves it out of many of the analytical texts on Brakhage's work. *The Wonder Ring* is available on the Brakhage Criterion release DVDs and Blu-rays.

Sirius Remembered[369] (1959)

      This 12-minute "death poem"[370] details the decomposition of the Brakhage family pet dog. In this film, Brakhage predicts his hand-drawn style, creating it instead with very rapid movement and jarring jump cuts. *Sirius Remembered* may be found pirated on YouTube, but the transfers are unreliable at best and extremely corrupt at worst. To view this film, I needed to visit the archives at Lux in London.

The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes (1971)

      This stoic film which depicts multiple autopsies in great detail, is one of Brakhage's most well-known films, aside from *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and *Mothlight* (1964). Though part of the research aims of this thesis were to write about those Brakhage films which are less commonly seen, it was important to include works which a reader might be more familiar with, even without a particularly special interest in Brakhage. At the very least, it was necessary to include films that a reader *could* easily find and view, which allows for the possibility of anchoring some of the discussion to something familiar and tangible. At just under 32 minutes,

---

[368] Brakhage is given co-credit on *Gnir Rednow.*

[369] I had an internal argument about whether to write this out as "*Sirius Re Membered",* despite this film officially being listed as *Sirius Remembered,* because of the very intentional way that Brakhage handwrote the title within the film. I have opted to write it out according to the official listing but wished to make a note that when viewing the film, the title reads out as "*Sirius Re Membered*"

[370] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 103.

The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes is an intense watch, bordering on brutality, but softened by the way Brakhage chooses to shoot and edit the subject matter.

The Text of Light (1974)

The Text of Light is a film that seems to be a sort of holy grail for Brakhage scholars. Difficult to find, hard to sit through due to its length, and nearly impossible to parse, *Text of Light* is the pinnacle of abstract cinema. At a 72-minute runtime, it is entirely silent, like much of Brakhage's work, and features only visuals of light abstracted through glass. There are a few pirated copies online at places like YouTube. However, these are poor-quality VHS 'rips' and watching a film so clearly made to be screened on a physical format with digital technology simply does not capture the viewing experience intended. *The Text of Light* is available at the Brakhage Archives in The University of Colorado at Boulder, where you can hire a theatre and projectionist to screen the film for you, and a 16mm print is available to hire from Lux in London.

How Abstraction Creates a Poetic Mood

Brakhage employs several different abstraction techniques in each of these films, but this chapter will focus on two in particular: defocus and extreme close-up. All four films demonstrate these techniques to varying degrees. Defocus, a term coined by Nicky Hamlyn, is especially evident in *The Wonder Ring*. At the same time, the use of extreme close-up as an abstraction device is more notable in *Sirius Remembered* and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*. The film *The Text of Light* combines the two techniques to the point of exclusivity, taking a "vertical" approach to its most extreme.

Nicky Hamlyn argues that "defocusing" allows the filmmaker to "liberate" colour, enabling it to become a subject itself rather than merely a quality of another subject.[371] Hamlyn uses the term "defocus" rather than "out of focus" to indicate not just an intentionality behind the use of non-focused shots but to remove the innate "value" placed upon focus in "dominant cinema".[372] In *The Wonder Ring*, Brakhage's use of defocus creates a sense of nostalgia by playing upon existing conventions within which a similar kind of blurring of images and editing might indicate a dream or a fantasy sequence. Brakhage carefully uses the

---

[371] Hamlyn, 'The Roman Numeral Series'.
[372] Hamlyn.

120

shots of *The Wonder Ring* to bring the viewer on a disconnected and meandering journey along the El train line. In isolation, many of Brakhage's shots read somewhat or even entirely ambiguously; context is only provided through the editing and the construction of the narrative timeline (this will be explored further in the next section). Though not used to the extreme that is seen in *The Text of Light*, Brakhage manipulates the use of focus, light, movement, and colour in *The Wonder Ring* to abstract the images and facilitate a dreamy quality[373] to what would otherwise be simply a historical document.

The Wonder Ring is, when taken as a whole, arguably unambiguous. It is very plainly a film documenting a rail line. However, Brakhage uses abstraction to emphasise a nostalgic mood which dominates the film. While there is a loose structure, plot is sacrificed in favour of tone and emotional exploration. Brakhage uses a wide, nearly static establishing shot to open the film (outside the now defunct Third Avenue elevated train line). He then moves inside the station, using a close shot, slowly tilting up the station steps to reveal a sign that reads "TO TICKET OFFICE." However, from this point, Brakhage uses predominantly close-up detail shots with movement (either in the frame or in camera), cross-cutting these with wide static shots of the station platform. Like much of the film, the detail shots only have context in situ – but they *do* have context.

Without the contextual embedding of the whole film – the wide shots of the station and the train tracks, the shots out the window of a moving train – a particularly hazy shot (seen through the windows of a stopped train at the station with people, out of focus, disembarking as yet another train passes by) may look like a meaningless myriad of moving shapes vaguely resembling people and objects. However, when embedded in the overall film, the shot becomes an analogue for a memory. The abstraction of the out-of-focus 'window' shot juxtaposed with the sharp contextual detail found in the close-up shots of the train station defocuses the image both literally and figuratively. It is a repeated technique throughout the film, which captures a sense of the thing rather than the thing itself. This enables Brakhage to evoke the notion of memory, of the emotion of taking this particular train line. This sensual focus on the mood, rather than a narrative structure, contributes heavily to considering *The Wonder Ring* a poetic documentary.

---

[373] I have adapted the term "dreamy" here. This is not to indicate necessarily how Stan Brakhage might have described the fil himself, but rather my own interpretation.

Film Still 3.1. *Abstracted shot of passengers in The Wonder Ring*[374]

Like *The Wonder Ring*, both *Sirius Remembered* and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* significantly explore abstraction while still retaining a sense of the original subject. Though the subject matter of the film is clear from the onset (a dead dog and dead bodies in a morgue, respectively), in both films, Brakhage frames the bodies in such a way that these usually repulsive subjects are at the very least palatable. The subjects become changed and sometimes even unrecognisable. The viewer lacks a context with which to consider them in their entirety. In showing only intricate details in the colour film *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, and generally avoiding wide shots which would in any sense 'display' the corpses[375], the cold reality of a post-mortem becomes more of a study of textures and colours. Likewise, in *Sirius Remembered*, the beloved family dog Sirius is shown to the viewer in (in this case, black and white) textures and moments which flicker by rather than forcing the viewer to confront the gruesome reality of a dead dog decomposing in the brush. As R. Bruce Elder states, Brakhage "uses close-up to reduce the emotional impact of the image."[376]

---

[374] *The Wonder Ring.*

[375] A few wide shots are shown, but these are minimal and relatively quite far into the film (with one exception)

[376] Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, 399.

122

In both films, the extreme close-ups are used to reflect upon the subject matter while simultaneously distancing us from it, resulting in a stoic mood for each film. *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* offers less context than *The Wonder Ring*; after Brakhage's trademark handwritten title scrawl appears, there is a quick flurry of blurred images, and then there are hands, gloved and un-gloved, performing what looks to be an examination of some sort on a person or people. Would the "untutored eye," as Brakhage would call it, recognise that the examination is on a dead body?[377] Death is not truly confirmed until Brakhage cuts to a wide shot, which reveals a toe tag fluttering at the bottom of the screen, but this is not for over an entire minute. By choosing to show individual sections of a corpse, Brakhage separates the body part from the whole (and, therefore, arguably separates the corpse itself from the notion of death). These intricate details are viewed individually, which acts as a separation from the overall representation of actual death, which is often difficult to confront and which Brakhage admits to grappling with personally.[378]

Each film sees Brakhage isolating various parts of the body through the composition. In *Sirius Remembered*, Brakhage quickly edits from fur textures to a close-up of what appears to be an eye, to a tail, to a paw. Brakhage uses this technique to put across a tone of slightly detached nostalgia. While clearly, this is a beloved pet – why else would Brakhage be so drawn to capturing its journey of decomposition and decay – simultaneously, there is a conceptual distancing, a sense of removal and detachment.

> Suddenly I was faced in the center of my life with the death of a loved being which tended to undermine all my abstract thoughts of death.[379]

The detached mood of *Sirius Remembered* is what gives the film its weight; this is what makes it a 'death poem'. Rather than simply documenting the dog's decay, Brakhage creates a tension between the dog that was living and the dog that is now dead, and the use of extreme close-ups reinforces this. The film title's dual meaning becomes apparent as the film progresses; Brakhage literally re-constructs his former pet through the edit. An extreme close-up of a bit of fur flashes and combines with the movement, which was inspired by "dogs

---

[377] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*.
[378] Brakhage, 103.
[379] Brakhage, 103.

dancing and prancing around a corpse,"[380] could momentarily deceive a viewer. Brakhage's wife at the time, Jane, watched Brakhage as he filmed *Sirius Remembered* over a period of several months:

> She [Jane] told me that every time I went to photograph that body…I was trying to bring it back to life by putting it in movement again… I was uprighting [*sic*] it by taking the camera at an angle that tended to make the dog's image upright on the screen…[381]

Meanwhile, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* shares the detachment of *Sirius Remembered* but not its nostalgia. Like with *Sirius Remembered,* Brakhage uses the frame to "cut off" limbs and heads. However, it does not have the effect of "reconstruction". In this instance, the technique reflects the piecemeal slicing of the bodies through autopsy and foreshadows the eventual depiction of the post-mortem dissection. Brakhage refrains from showing any such gruesome subject matter until approximately one-third of the way through the film. Instead, he focuses on the relatively mundane activities of washing and measuring various body parts for an extensive period, raising the tension with every moment of delay.

Where the tension in *Sirius Remembered* was between the life and death of its subject, here, the tension is between death and waiting for death. The film plods on through the mundanity, yet Brakhage does not hide what he is about to do. It is clear from the outset that this film is documenting death in a particular way, so the more delayed this moment becomes, the more the tension rises. When the act of autopsy is finally revealed (nearly ten minutes in[382]), it is simultaneously a disappointment and a relief. Most of the view of the cutting is initially blocked and out of focus. When finally showing the dissected body, in focus and entirely in the frame, it is in such a state of deconstruction that it is hardly distinguishable as a person. Several different corpses are shown, but they become indistinguishable because of the abstract technique employed. By the end of the film, one might even wonder what was so gruesome about it in the first place, only to then remember what it was being shown.

---

[380] Brakhage, 104.
[381] Brakhage, 104.
[382] It is important to remember this contextually. It is a 32-minute film, so approximately an entire third of the film has passed by this point - the equivalent of a whole "act" in a conventional feature film.

Film Still 3.2. *Extreme close-up of a corpse in The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*[383]

The use of abstraction in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered* offers a profound statement on the universality and inescapability of death and cultivates an utter indifference to it throughout the film. The "defamiliarisation" of the subject matter, as Rose describes above, is seen in these films for its full effect in the poetic documentary mode. These two films, even more so than *The Wonder Ring,* demonstrate how abstraction can create a poetic documentary while maintaining a sense of the original subject matter.

Now having examined defocus on its own with *The Wonder Ring* and extreme close-up on its own with *Sirius Remembered* and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes,* I would like to look at a film which employs both techniques simultaneously. Brakhage's seminal work, *The Text of Light*, combines these abstraction techniques and takes them to extremes. Once called "Brakhage's most leisurely work," *The Text of Light* documents spectral light moving and morphing in a slow and mesmerising fashion.[384] The film's entire runtime of 70 minutes[385] portrays light passing through a glass ashtray, abstracted beyond the point of recognition, resulting in a kaleidoscopic display of light and colour. In this entirely abstract film (unlike the

---

[383] *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes.*
[384] Hamlyn, 'The Roman Numeral Series', 124.
[385] 'Text of Light'. Some listings say 75, some say 68, and others say 80. I have used the listing from Lux

previously discussed films of this chapter, which combined abstraction with more concrete imagery), it is harder to discuss themes, but there remains a sense of mood and tone.

P. Adams Sitney argues that the ashtray becomes "an extension of the lens", leaving the film's actual subject open to interpretation.[386] It does raise the question – did Brakhage film *through* an ashtray, or did he, in fact, film an ashtray in an extreme macro close-up? In either instance, the resulting image is abstracted to such a great extent that it is most accurate to suggest that the subject of the film is light. More specifically, the subject of *The Text of Light* could be described as the *quality* of light that is reflected and refracted by a glass ashtray, defocused beyond recognition[387].

While Brakhage had previously used the technique of defocus in *The Wonder Ring,* he did so alongside other, more conventional techniques - this mix of techniques allowed for the contextualisation of the imagery. Meanwhile, defocus dominates the aesthetic in The Text of Light and is never contextualised. The focus on light and colour through the 'defocus' of the subject creates a film fixated on its own technology. The "engage[s us] in a different perceptual mode."[388] It is an inward-facing film, by which I mean Brakhage concerns himself primarily with images created within the technology of the film camera, and this not only entreats a viewer to actively consider the technology, process and the act of watching the film but also creates a meditative environment that allows a viewer to reflect on their own selves. Viewing the film is a unique experience that cannot be recreated practically outside of film technology.

***Film Still 3.3.** Light creates abstract shapes in The Text of Light*[389]

---

[386] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 407.
[387] A note that Fred Camper states that there are one or two moments where other subject matter, such as trees, can be discerned
[388] Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, 138.
[389] *The Text of Light*.

A viewer could interpret one of thousands of representations in the abstract shapes. For instance, Fred Camper describes the film as an abstract metaphor for things more concrete and physical:

> Brakhage discovers metaphors for landscapes in the patterns of reflection and diffraction: rivers, volcanoes, and mountains are suggested by images so delicate they're worthy of J.M.W. Turner.[390]

It is expected to seek a point of reference and familiarity in the physical world, thus restoring colour and light to form and re-constructing an abstracted image. After all, as discussed above, an abstract image *is* innately tied to the concrete image that it is abstracting. The desire to see the familiar is not dissimilar to the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia, which causes people to see faces on mountainsides or the Virgin Mary on a piece of toast.[391] Again, this active viewership is entreated by Brakhage throughout the film. This is perhaps the most profound and compelling exploration of Brakhage's most oft-quoted question:

> 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? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color.[392]

In this film, Brakhage attempts to "untutor" our eyes. Discussing or describing *The Text of Light* in traditional, narrative, or "horizontal" terms is impossible. The film exists solely in the poetic, in the "vertical". Even then, because it relies so heavily on the viewer, their interpretation, and their experience, describing the tone and mood of the film is deeply personal and fluctuating.

Cinematic convention tends to dictate that regardless of how long a filmmaker might delay contextualising an abstraction, eventually, they will reveal said context. This could result

---

[390] Camper, 'The Text of Light'.
[391] Technica, 'Why Humans See Faces in Everyday Objects'.
[392] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 114.

in a frustrating first viewing. Only by letting go of conventional expectations does the film bring satisfaction in its enduring kaleidoscope of colours. Then the evocations described by Camper and others may surface more readily. These will likely be different from viewer to viewer. For instance, my account of the film likens the moving light and colours to dancers rather than landscapes. This highlights the subjective dominance of *The Text of Light,* in turn highlighting the poeticism of the film.

  The Text of Light is one of the more distinct examples of Brakhage's manipulation of extreme close-ups combined with defocus to abstract; all concept of the original subject matter is completely lost. This allows for deep, intrapersonal reflection when viewing the film – the viewer's control over what the images signify is at its height – but in this way, meaning is both easily won and lost. In contrast, Brakhage's use of extreme close-ups in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered* manage to retain a sense of the original subject matter. The contrast of defocus with in-focus/concrete imagery in *The Wonder Ring* allows for the same. In this way, those films (*The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes, Sirius Remembered,* and *The Wonder Ring*) allow Brakhage to guide and influence viewers on how the tone and mood might be interpreted. *The Text of Light* sees Brakhage giving up this power and, in some ways, handing some ownership and authorship over to the viewer.

  In all four films, these techniques (extreme close-up and defocus) are used as effective tools that emphasise the film's mood and tone over plot and narrative; they are thus poetic documentaries. To some extent, each film takes a "vertical"/poetic approach, mainly due to the use of these techniques. The most contentious of these is *The Text of Light.* The relationship between the objective and subjective, crucial to Deren's model of poetic cinema (though arguably less so to an understanding of poetic documentary), is at its most tenuous in *The Text of Light,* as the film is so abstracted that the objective imagery is almost entirely lost. However, the relationship is sustained by the constant desire and sense of discovery in observing and absorbing the abstracted images.

The Manipulation of Conventional Cinematic Narrative Time

  I would now like to consider another technique that each of these films employs, enhancing their poetic qualities – the manipulation of conventional cinematic narrative time. Conventionally speaking, narrative time is often manipulated in films, usually to compress

events into a tighter timeline or sequence. However, when considering poetic modes of filmmaking that take "vertical" approaches, this convention may be subverted and used to elongate the narrative or even just a few moments of plot. This technique can enhance the mood and tone of the film by "pausing" the action to investigate further "what it feels like or what it means".[393] Like the techniques of abstraction discussed above, elongating time to enhance mood and tone can add to the poeticism of a film and, in the case of the four documentaries included in this chapter, aids in understanding them as poetic documentaries.

In *The Wonder Ring,* Brakhage uses editing in combination with aspects of the mise-en-scène to cause time and narrative to become confused. Despite a distinctive and established "beginning" at the train station and "middle" on a train, and "end" where the film cuts to black, it is impossible to glean a sense of narrative time from the film. This is due to Brakhage's disregard for and subversion of editing conventions. For example, the train moves right to the left in one shot and then moves in the opposite direction on the next cut without warning. Conventionally, when showing the movement of travel in one direction, this directionality should continue between cuts unless there is an indication that the direction of travel has changed. However, in *The Wonder Ring*, Brakhage cuts between footage of moving train cars and the passing scenery through train windows, changing direction readily and without warning. What might usually be considered a mistake by the conventions of both documentary and narrative cinema feels purposeful and evocative; Brakhage uses such discontinuous editing to contribute to the dreamy mood, capturing a nostalgic 'moment in time' of the now defunct train line. By obscuring whether this is different train journeys in alternate directions or if it is simply that Brakhage pointed the camera out of the opposite window, it becomes impossible to tell if the film follows a single journey or multiple; the film might take place over a few minutes or a few hours or even a few days or years.

Though this manipulation of convention does not 'pause' so much as distort the sequence of events, it does serve to fulfil Deren's more crucial qualifier. The distortion of the timeline in *The Wonder Ring* allows Brakhage to develop and explore the feeling of nostalgia more fully. Moreover, it allows Brakhage to evoke and explore feelings of memory and how things are remembered, which is inevitably flawed and fractured. So an individual might recall going East one moment and West the next, and these moments would become condensed in

---

[393] *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

their memory. This comes through the mood and tone of the piece rather than the narrative or plot, which is accomplished mainly through this distorted timeline technique. It is combined with the defocused abstraction described above to fully develop the film into the poetic documentary that it is.

Like *The Wonder Ring, The Text of Light* and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* distort narrative time. *The Text of Light*, with its seemingly endless stream of shots of refracted light, disregards narrative time entirely[394]. It focuses instead on the tonal qualities and interplay of light. Brakhage builds a mood that exemplifies nostalgia and wonder, relying on subverted conventions much as he did in *The Wonder Ring*. The interplay between the passage of real time and the lack of *any* passage of narrative time lulls and almost hypnotises while the light gently dances across the frames. While it is arguable that 'nothing happens' throughout *The Text of Light* or even that it is a series of obscured events, it is equally arguable that Brakhage takes but a few mere moments and stretches them across the 70-minute run time. This ambiguity allows the viewer to explore internally; again, this is an inward-facing film in terms of its self-reflexivity and meditative hypnosis. With no sense of narrative time offered and with the combined effect of extreme close-up and defocus abstracting any sense of identifiable imagery (which would also potentially allow for *some* sense of time or narrative), *The Text of Light* meanders through the projector. A viewer's *notion* of the duration could be momentary or excruciatingly long; the 70 minutes could feel like 70 seconds or 70 hours. Brakhage's manipulation of the narrative timeline in this film moves entirely away from the "horizontal" and approaches the film from an exclusively "vertical attack."

Meanwhile, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* finds itself between the extreme lack of narrative time in *The Text of Light* and the present, if disjointed narrative time found in *The Wonder Ring*. In the same way, Brakhage uses abstracted close-ups in this film (*The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*) and *Sirius Remembered* to distance the viewer from the subject matter; in this film, he also distances the subject matter through repetition. This repetition likewise distorts the sense of the passage of time by almost over-compressing it and presenting what appears to be hours, if not days, in just half an hour. Subverting convention in an entirely different way than seen in *The Wonder Ring* and *The Text of Light* but for a similar effect, by the end of the film, any sense of narrative time has been entirely lost; Brakhage presents what feels

---

[394] Are shots re-used and repeated? It becomes impossible to tell.

130

like countless dead bodies to the camera to be sliced, sewn up, and shuffled on. This distortion of narrative time, alongside the use of abstraction, contributes heavily to the poetic aspects of *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes.*

It is through this abandonment of narrative, combined with the abstraction techniques discussed above that the documentary's hollow, stoic tone becomes so present. Brakhage's portrayal of the disinterested attitude of morticians is heavily emphasised due to the use of repetition[395] and over-compressed time. This results in a complete lack of identity of any of the corpses and a complete distortion of any sense of narrative. In *The Wonder Ring,* Brakhage used this time distortion to create a nostalgic dreamlike quality, while the result is much the opposite here. While the first reaction to the film is one of repulsion, by the final minutes of this half-hour film, the mood is more akin to a numbness bordering on indifference. Death may be a reality, but it is just another part of life for this film.

Brakhage achieves a similar mood and tone in *Sirius Remembered.* In that film, Brakhage also uses repetition (though he would argue this it is *not* repetition as Gertrude Stein inspired him – "…there is no repetition; every time a word is 'repeated' it is a new word by virtue of what word precedes it…."[396]), but in a different way than he does in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes.* In *Sirius Remembered*, Brakhage's editing and approach to narrative time are much more conventional. Similar shots in terms of angle and framing are shown of the dog throughout the seasons, which are clearly identified, as the dog undergoes decomposition. In doing so, Brakhage provides a relatively straightforward and solid timeline that the film follows – the film is broken into three segments fall, winter, and spring. The editorial approach in terms of narrative time is largely conventional. They are shown in order and without too much moving back and forth between them so they do not become confused or distorted.

This does not preclude *Sirius Remembered* from being considered a poetic film. However, it is interesting to consider this film alongside the other three in this regard and as a poetic *documentary.* To understand *Sirius Remembered* as poetic accepts the fact that Brakhage takes a more conventional approach to the sense of narrative time (though it is undoubtedly not conventionally edited from shot to shot) and suggests that Deren's notion of distorting time is less important than her emphasis on mood and tone ("what it feels like or what it

---

[395] Not a literal repetition of shots but a repetition of bodies
[396] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 104.

131

means."[397]). This is certainly echoed by Nichols's criteria for the poetic mode of documentary in that it "…stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion…."[398] Furthermore, Nichols also stresses a lack of convention: "The poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a specific location in time and place that follows from such editing."[399]

Like Deren, it strikes me that Nichols's greater emphasis is on mood and tone and that he expects the "sacrifice" of convention to generate this emphasis. *Sirius Remembered* is most certainly dominated by mood and tone over narrative or "factual knowledge". It is not a film examining what happens during decomposition, nor does it pretend to be. It is a nostalgic experience of saying goodbye to a clearly beloved pet while simultaneously distancing itself from mourning and death by attempting to recreate the life the pet once had. That is paramount in the film both in its approach and in viewing it, but it is not accomplished in any part through a distortion of narrative time or a subversion of conventions around cinematic narrative time. It *is* unconventionally edited but without sacrificing a sense of time or place. I still consider it a poetic documentary because the abstraction techniques are used in such a way as to allow mood and tone to dominate. I think it makes *Sirius Remembered* an extremely interesting inclusion because it does not quite "fit" the notion of poetic documentary with which I began this research, but it clearly shows that this definition must be flexible.

In all four films, Brakhage constructs a disjointed narrative timeline and uses abstraction techniques. These traits are indicative of poetic documentary. Not only are the 'formal abstractions' in all four films exemplifying the poetic documentary, but Brakhage's use and command of abstraction and time also exemplifies Deren's "vertical attack" or model of poetic cinema. While *The Text of Light, Sirius Remembered, The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *The Wonder Ring* demonstrate the supposed 'limitations' of the poetic mode described by Nichols in sacrificing narrative through 'formal abstractions', I do not believe Deren would describe these as 'limitations' in terms of the broader understanding around poetic cinema.

---

[397] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*
[398] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*, 116.
[399] Nichols, 116.

Instead, in the instances outlined here, the disregard for narrative should be seen as simply alternative, poetic approaches.

Conclusion

By using four of Stan Brakhage's factually based films, in this chapter, I have attempted to highlight the qualities of poetic documentaries. I have also sought to demonstrate how to understand such films within the broad context of Maya Deren's model for poetic cinema. I showed how *The Text of Light*, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, *Sirius Remembered* and *The Wonder Ring* used these devices to different degrees and for varying effects. In so doing, loose terms such as "horizontal" and "vertical", as well as "formal abstractions", are given context. Therefore, while analysing these four films shows that Brakhage may be considered a poetic documentarian, this analysis may be extrapolated and applied elsewhere. Understanding what might make a poetic documentary poetic allows this analysis to be drawn out and applied to non-factual filmmaking.

To demonstrate this, I will briefly consider another of Brakhage's films, which, while not a documentary, was made with a documentary approach and uses the same techniques described in this chapter. This film, entitled *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000), was made as part of Brakhage's "Vancouver Island films", alongside *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991) and *The Mammals of Victoria* (1994). Using the same metric established earlier in this chapter, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* cannot be considered a documentary, as it is a work of fiction, entirely fabricated and presenting a fake reality. It is, however, made in a documentary style, "…conceived as an imaginary biography of different stages of [Brakhage's second wife] Marilyn's life…."[400]

Like the films discussed above, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* uses abstraction and a disregard for temporal consistency to nurture and develop the film's mood and tone. The film has a profound sense of ambiguous nostalgia. In fact, this film bears a remarkable resemblance in many of its sequences to *The Text of Light*, so much so that it is almost a response to it. Where *The Text of Light* is a study of and meditation on light, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* appears to be a similar study on water.

---

[400] Arthur, 'Becoming Dark with Excess of Light', 210.

> Throughout [the film], the interwoven play of light and water tell the inferred "tale" of the film through rhythm and tempo, through visible textures and forms in gradual evolution, through resultant "moods" generated by these modes of making, and, then, by the increasingly distant boat images, birds, animals, fleeting silhouettes of people and their artifacts, flotsam and jetsam of the sea-dead, as well as (near the end, almost as at a funeral) flowers in bloom, swallowed by darkness midst the crumbling of sand castles.[401]

Made close to the end of Brakhage's career (and close to his death) in 2000, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* seems to culminate all the various techniques Brakhage had practised throughout his life up to that point.

> They [The Vancouver Island Films] are valedictory, embracing ideas or images from earlier films in a spirit of prudent mastery…[402]

The theme of death and a sense of nostalgia are both prominent in the film, and Brakhage uses the "oceanic contemplation" of the film to evoke these.[403] The film moves gently between shots showing a definitively identifiable object, such as a boat or the ocean, to shots which simply show colour, light, or movement – perhaps all three – and then back again. Rocking between the concrete and the abstract, not only does the film imagery show and evoke water, the construction and editing of the film feels tidelike, drawing the viewer gently back and forth.

Where *The Text of Light* became abstracted to the point of aimlessness, turning the viewer inward, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* takes the same technique of extreme defocus found in *The Text of Light* but firmly anchors it to contrasted concrete imagery such as a boat or flowers. So too, does the film use extreme close-up, as Brakhage did in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered*. Like in those films, extreme close-ups create 'new' images out of the photographed. In *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered*, Brakhage uses this technique to distance the viewer (and himself) from the subject

---

[401] Stan Brakhage quoted in Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 189.
[402] Arthur, 'Becoming Dark with Excess of Light', 211.
[403] Stan Brakhage quoted in Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 189.

matter – death. In contrast, the use of extreme close-ups in *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* acts as an invitation to participate in the film's meditation. Brakhage reinforces this invitation by using wide, concrete shots in conjunction with defocused shots and extreme close-ups. There is a sense of embracing death and celebrating life.

For example, at some points, Brakhage chooses a shot that is clearly a boat, or a bird, or a wide shot of waves – shots that are readily and easily identifiable and where the image is iconic and not abstracted. Meanwhile, at other points, Brakhage chooses shots which are abstracted but contextualized using wide shots alongside (like in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*). These might be shots of shimmering light on the water that, for a moment, looks as though it might be a shot of a city at night or out-of-focus movement that seems to be children on swings, their movement wavelike, tempting thoughts to drift back to the ocean and mortality.

Brakhage also uses techniques in *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* to abstract any sense of time. Cinematic narrative time is discarded in favour of playing upon expectations that further bolster the film's themes of life and death. This is accomplished through similar applications and subversions of conventional editing seen in the films described above. It is never more evident in this film than in its final minutes. After a flurry of images leading into a shot of undulating water, Brakhage settles for a moment and cuts to a wide shot of a couple walking along the shoreline. Then, with a single cut, the couple disappears. It is one of cinema's oldest tricks, used often by filmmakers like Georges Méliès, but still effective.[404]

Where Méliès used this type of editing illusion to make characters appear and disappear or change appearance as if by magic, in this instance, Brakhage's use of the same technique, while technically making the couple disappear, creates more of a sense of nostalgia than magic. It is unclear how long ago it might have been that the couple walked the beach –it might be a few moments or several years ago. The same sense of fractured memory that Brakhage creates in *The Wonder Ring* is especially present at the end of *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him,* and both films carry the same evocation of death. In *The Wonder Ring,* it's the rail line, but in *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him,* it feels more significant, more emblematic of 'Death the concept', and with the added search for Life. Brakhage finishes the film with

---

[404] *The Man With the Rubber Head*; *The Mermaid.*

abstracted shots of shimmering light, shadows, and movement before cutting to black. This is extremely similar to how Brakhage chose to end *The Wonder Ring* - as that film draws to a close, Brakhage cuts between a series of defocused shots looking outside the train's window. The speed at which the world flies by outside the train car seems to increase, and the world itself increasingly loses focus. In the last moments, the image blurs beyond any recognition just before cutting to black, a kind of filmic death alluding to the actual 'death' via decommissioning and destruction of the El line.

Brakhage uses the same techniques in *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him,* a decidedly fictional narrative (if unconventional) film, that he does in the four films discussed above as poetic documentaries. Furthermore, those techniques make those films poetic (they are documentaries, whether they are poetic or not). This additional analysis of a fictional film shows that the poetic techniques described in this chapter are not limited to the documentary genre but may be applied more broadly to achieve similar effects.

This chapter examined four of Stan Brakhage's documentary films and used an understanding of poetic film from Maya Deren in addition to an understanding of poetic documentary from Bill Nichols. Using visual textual analysis of the films, two main categories of poetic technique were established – abstraction, which included defocus and extreme close-up, and the manipulation of cinematic narrative time. These techniques were displayed in all four films to varying degrees and through different manifestations. However, in each instance, Brakhage used these techniques to explore and bolster the mood and tone, and this was always dominant over any sense of narrative.

This chapter has shown through visual analysis how Stan Brakhage's documentaries exemplify the concept of the poetic documentary put forth by Bill Nichols and, furthermore, how this can be applied more broadly using Maya Deren's notion of a "vertical attack" for a poetic film. In addition to visual analysis, some historical context has been helpful in understanding in which order Brakhage made each of these films and, therefore, how his poetic approach in documentary filmmaking developed and was honed throughout his career. Furthermore, with the inclusion of the fiction film *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, the visual analysis with historical context shows how Brakhage broadened this approach beyond documentary and shows how much he was able to refine and apply the discussed techniques.

So far, this thesis has examined several visual techniques (Deren would say "attacks") that Brakhage used to create poetic films, ranging from the use of perspective/point-of-view shots and transitions discussed in the previous chapter to the techniques of abstraction and manipulated narrative time discussed in this one. Where this and the previous chapter have been predominantly concerned with the visual analysis of films, most of which have been 'silent', the next chapter explores Brakhage's filmmaking from a new angle: sound analysis.

4. Brakhage and the Poetic Use of Sound

The previous chapters have focused almost exclusively on visual analysis. Indeed, Stan Brakhage is often described as an exclusively silent filmmaker; therefore, focusing on the visual attributes of his filmmaking would seem to make the most sense. However, several of his works contain soundtracks and use sound in unique and interesting ways. Despite this, there is a dearth of aural analysis of Brakhage's work. I believe that understanding Brakhage's approach and use of sound in all his films, including the silent ones, is essential to a fuller understanding of him as not just a poetic filmmaker but a filmmaker in general.

The majority of Stan Brakhage's sound films were made before 1965. In fact, from 1965 to 1986, he only made two films that did include a soundtrack (*Scenes From Under Childhood I* (1967) and *Stars Are Beautiful* (1974), though the soundtrack for *Scenes From Under Childhood* is considered optional). For comparison, depending on how you catalogue his filmography (some films are anthologies and can be counted as one large work, or each part can be counted individually), he made anywhere from 80 to 120 silent films in that same period (1965-1986). Then in 1986, Brakhage suddenly returned to exploring sound and did so for the next few years with several different projects.

From 1986 until 1993, Brakhage experimented more with using sound than at any other point in his career (out of 27 total sound films, 14 are in these seven years). However, unlike early in his filmmaking, where he maintained nearly sole control and worked almost exclusively in isolation, in this period of his career, Brakhage collaborates with a musician or actors in almost every film he makes that uses sound. In fact, 198"s *Fireloop* arguably marks Brakhage's first collaboration in any capacity since *Blue Moses* in 1962. From this point until his death in 2003, Brakhage would collaborate with other artists on several more of his films – more than at any other point in his filmmaking career – either using a composer or, as is the

case in several instances, a co-filmmaker. There is a sense of 'returning to one's roots' in this era of Brakhage's filmmaking, and it seems that he used his films during this time to explore personal struggles and life changes.

In this chapter, I will show how sound (or lack of sound) may be used to further understand Maya Deren's concept of the 'vertical' movement within a film. Sound is a powerful tool at a filmmaker's disposal.[405] It can either enhance ambiguity or remove it, depending on how it is wielded.[406] David Bordwell et al. show through their analyses of multiple films how sound may help place the film within a real-world setting and clarify potentially ambiguous moments; they also show through analysis of *The Conversation* how it could be used unconventionally to accomplish the opposite effects.[407] This chapter focuses on how Stan Brakhage used and understood sound as the powerful tool that it is and how his restrained use of this device often resulted in poeticism.

My analysis will show how Brakhage used sound with the intention and understanding that it is a vitally important aspect of the film viewing experience, including some of those instances when he removed sound completely from his films. Exactly 27 of Brakhage's few hundred films used a soundtrack, though it is my contention that all his films, in fact, did 'use' sound. In addition to looking at Brakhage's use of sound effects and score, this chapter will also demonstrate how the use of silence (or not quite silence, to be more precise) informs Brakhage's poetic cinema.

The focus of this chapter will be primarily on the more experimental approaches to sound design, which Brakhage took more often than conventional approaches, though he did occasionally use sound conventionally. To do so, I will re-examine some films previously discussed in other chapters, such as *Interim, The Way to the Shadow Garden*, and *Reflections on Black,* but I will also examine films not yet discussed in this thesis, such as *Fire of Waters, Fireloop,* and *Loud Visual Noises*. Additionally, this chapter will discuss Brakhage's use of no soundtrack (not to be confused with actual silence) and look at how this translates in the digital

---

[405] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 263.
[406] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 302.
[407] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 263–302.

era. This discussion will focus on the films *The Text of Light*, visually analysed in the previous chapter, as well as the film *Mothlight* (1963), which has yet to be examined in this thesis.

Sound has long been embedded into the film viewing experience. Even during the silent era of filmmaking, films were nearly always played with, at the very least, musical accompaniment.[408] Modern audiences are increasingly aware of sound. I believe intentionally removing or withholding audio from a film should be considered a radical act. It forces the viewer to be hyper-aware of incidental sounds in the viewing environment – the soft hum of an air conditioner, the unmistakable flickering noise of the projector, and perhaps the occasional snore from a patron in the back row. It removes a crucial element of the cinematic experience which allows a viewer to become completely absorbed by a film; I argue that it confronts a viewer, constantly, with the fact that they are viewing something and that this "something" is constructed to represent a reality but is not itself necessarily real in the same sense.

Such confrontation (or perhaps what Fred Camper would describe as "Brakhage's Contradictions") is common throughout Stan Brakhage's work; one could almost say it is ubiquitous.[409] The vast majority of his films were recorded or created without any audio whatsoever, and he is often described as a "usually" or "majority" silent filmmaker.[410] However, less common within Brakhage's work (and less discussed in scholarship surrounding Brakhage) is his work with sound.

> The more informed I became with aesthetics of sound, the less I began to feel
> any need for an audio accompaniment to the visuals I was making…The more
> silently-oriented my creative philosophies have become, the more inspired-by-
> music have my photographic aesthetics and my actual editing orders become,

---

[408] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 264.
[409] Camper, 'Brakhage's Contradictions'.
[410] 'Light Cone - Stan BRAKHAGE'.

both engendering a coming-into-being of the physiological relationship between seeing and hearing in the making of a work of art in film.[411]

Even in the above quote, which is Brakhage discussing why he *does not* use audio very often, it is clear that he saw a relationship between his work, and in particular, his editing and sound (he specifies music). At the very least, Brakhage was always aware of the impact of sound or lack of sound on his films.[412] While I am not taking a biographical approach to the analysis of films, it is both relevant and interesting to provide insight into Brakhage's intention and overall filmmaking philosophy. Especially as this chapter will delve into an analysis of audio which *could* result from mistakes or ignorance of various processes, by gaining insight into Brakhage's understanding of these elements, I can more ably argue that they are purposefully made choices and not 'mere accidents.'

This chapter is primarily interested in exactly that – Brakhage's intentional work with sound and how, or if, this affects or contributes to the poetic nature of the films in question. To do so, I will first discuss sound more generally as a poetic filmic device. I will also briefly review conversations around sound in cinema, including a focus on Michel Chion's analysis of the audio-visual with a specific focus on his masking technique. I will then aurally analyse several of Brakhage's films and consider if and how the audio creates and/or contributes to the films' poeticism, continuing to use Maya Deren's model of poetic cinema.

An additional interest of this chapter is a brief discussion around the use of sound (or, more accurately, the use of the lack of sound) in Brakhage's silent films. I am addressing this, firstly, because so much of Brakhage's work is silent to the extent that discussing his relationship with audio necessitates a discussion around his use of silence. And secondly, because I am interested in if and how a film's lack of audio may affect its poeticism. If audio can be used to increase poeticism, then silence should also impact a film's poeticism.

---

[411] Brakhage, 'Letter to Ronna Page (On Music).'
[412] Camper, An Interview with Fred Camper.

Literature Review
Sound As a Poetic Device

Sound is perhaps one of the most obvious components of poetry in its classic sense – rhyme and meter, for instance, both depend on the way a word or phrase sounds. This classically poetic nature of sound becomes less clear as a sound is further removed from written or spoken language. When considering the sound typically found in films (aside from language), it is useful to use an expanded notion of poetry, such as I have discussed throughout this thesis. So, moving away from linguistic notions around poetry like rhyme, how can sound make a film poetic?

As discussed in the introduction and previous chapters, ambiguity and the manipulation of time are key aspects of the concept of poetic cinema developed by this thesis, which is largely informed by Maya Deren's discussions on poetry in film. The notion of sound as ambiguous is interesting because, as noted by Bordwell et al., often, it is sound that solidifies a film's situation within perceived reality.[413] Sound strengthens suspension of disbelief by crafting the expected noises of a given cinematic universe – even when that universe is itself fantastic.

Consider sequences such as the ship's sinking from James Cameron's *Titanic* - the loud, thunderous metallic creaking combined with the screams of frightened passengers was added in after shooting. Yet, it seems as embedded in the reality presented as do the actors on screen. Likewise, consider the roars of different dinosaurs in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* franchise. Despite being completely invented sounds (obviously, no dinosaurs exist anymore to record), the roars were crucial to the ferociousness of the dinosaurs; a tyrannosaurus rex that squawks rather than roars would appear significantly less intimidating and would contradict the terrifying visual.

Connected to the ability of sound to fully embed or displace a viewer from a film's proposed reality is the ability of sound to either exist covertly or draw a viewer's attention to the viewing process. A film that calls attention to its status as a film is called self-reflexive.[414] When a film uses reflexivity, it can add to its poetic nature. Multiple levels of subjectivity and/or ambiguity may be felt by a viewer when a film, in a sense, 'declares itself' to be a film;

---

[413] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 302.
[414] Withalm, 'The Self-Reflexive Screen', 125.

the viewer becomes much more presently aware of the filmmaker's perspective while simultaneously experiencing the perspective(s) portrayed within the film. Sound is one of the best tools a filmmaker can use to either hide their presence/perspective or highlight it.

Sound in Theory

"Sound matters." Gianluca Sergi opens his book on sound, *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood,* with this simple statement.[415] Despite the film industry's famously silent origins, cinema has evolved to the point it now seems incomplete without sound. Some film theorists, from the Russian formalists such as Eisenstein to slightly more modern theorists like Rudolf Arnheim, have been dismissive of the importance of sound in cinema. Arnheim is quoted as, "Speech, wisely subordinated, supplements, explains and deepens the image; but the image continues to rule the screen, and to explore its properties remains a topical task."[416] However, despite a reticence to embrace sound, many theorists such as Michel Chion, Walter Murch, Rick Altman, and Elisabeth Weis make strong arguments for the importance of sound. Gianluca Sergi helpfully summarises the arguments around sound in his chapters 'Critical receptions of sound' and 'Suggestions for sound analysis', and I have expanded on his summaries from the theorists' own writing.

Sergi describes Chion as 'fundamental' and 'one of the most outspoken theoreticians on sound'.[417] In Chion's book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1994), he describes a method for analysing film audio, which he dubs "masking".[418] Masking involves watching a film multiple times while manipulating the viewing experience in various and specific ways. Chion suggests watching the film as intended, then without the audio, then without the imagery, and then as intended again. Though Chion takes care not to claim that there is one particular order in which to undertake this technique, he does suggest that analysis is best served by first viewing and/or listening to the video and audio elements separately before watching the elements all together.[419] He claims that this is the best way to understand the audial and visual elements both individually and together: "This gives you the opportunity to hear the sound as it is, and

---

[415] Sergi, *The Dolby Era*, 3.
[416] Arnheim, *Film As Art*, Foreward.
[417] Sergi, *The Dolby Era*, 67.
[418] Chion, *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*, 187–88.
[419] Chion, 187.

not as the image transforms and disguises it; it also lets you see the image as it is, and not as sound recreates it."[420]

Due to the nature of the archival research undertaken with Brakhage's films and the timeline of my exposure to these films before this research, an entirely novel viewing experience through masking in the way Chion suggests is impossible. However, this does not diminish the analytical efficacy of this method enough to warrant discarding it. Chion strongly recommends masking to "observe and analyze (sic) the sound-image structure of a film" and merely suggests separate viewing of the elements first as the most ideal scenario.[421] Chion also describes the method of "forced marriage," for which Chion suggests removing all the original audio of a film or sequence and replacing it with a variety of different pieces of music.[422] This method has not been used for this research, as only one film had a traditional musical score to begin with, and, as Altman discusses in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice,* "…not a single sound in cinema can be adequately described with musical terminology."[423]

In addition to these two methods, Chion briefly outlines three main qualities of analysis that he proposes using masking and forced marriage to elucidate: overall quality and consistency of the sound, important points of synchronisation, and comparison (both technical and figurative) between the sound and the image.[424] Chion describes consistency as "the degree of interaction between different audio elements (voices, music, noise)."[425] By identifying the different audio elements, determining which of these is most dominant, and how distant and distinct these sounds are from one another, Chion suggests a greater understanding of the film's subtleties. Chion describes important points of synchronisation as moments in a film where the audio and visual synch in such a way that it is "crucial for meaning and dynamics."[426] He admits a film might have thousands of individual synch points but argues that "only certain ones are important, the ones whose placement defines what we might call the audio-visual

---

[420] Chion, 187.
[421] Chion, 187.
[422] Chion, 188.
[423] Altman, 'The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound', 16.
[424] Chion, *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*, 189–92.
[425] Chion, 189.
[426] Chion, 190.

phrasing of the sequence."[427] Meanwhile, he describes comparison as looking at how "sound and image behave with respect to a given formal aspect of representation."[428]

Of these three, comparison provides the most insight into how sound is used within a film to relay certain information. Chion proposes asking a series of questions and using masking to analyse and understand the technical and figurative comparisons between image and sound. For technical comparison, "How does the soundtrack behave in relation to variations in scale and depth?" Do the image and accompanying audio match in terms of quality, consistency, and synchronisation? For figurative comparison, he suggests two complementary questions, "What do I see of what I hear?" and "What do I hear of what I see?" In answering these questions, Chion suggests a viewer might find "negative images" and "negative sounds," or images or sounds created by the audio or the visual, respectively.[429]

> The sounds that are there, the images that are there often have no other function than artfully outlining the form of these "absent presence"," these sounds and images, which, in their very negativity, are often the more important. *Cinema's poetry springs from such things.*[430]

Sergi is critical of Chion's masking method, seeing it as analysing on a "micro-level."[431] Indeed, in hyper-focusing on the 'right' sync points, it is likely that the overall context could be completely lost. Sergi nevertheless admits that even he occasionally will use Chion's masking technique. Despite its potential weaknesses, Chion's masking is useful for this research but should also be balanced with a more 'macro-level' approach. Sergi does offer an option for this which I have also adopted. He proposes, in two parts, "a more organic approach," which considers several aspects of filmmaking (audience, research, budget, technology, and creativity)

---

427 Chion, 190.
428 Chion, 190.
429 Chion, 192.
430 Chion, 192 emphasis my own.
431 Sergi, *The Dolby Era*, 137.

and where the analytical focus is in four categories: orchestration, contrast, focus, and definition.[432]

Orchestration can be thought of as the "balance between the four elements in a soundtrack– - those elements being dialogue, music, sound effects, and silence - as well as the balance between the placement of those effects in either the front, rear, or centre speakers (all films discussed here were mixed in mono, rendering this second part of the definition somewhat moot for the purposes here).[433] Contrast refers to changes in the soundtrack between or sometimes within sequences. This contrast may be in terms of its loudness, ambient quality, type of sound, or perhaps the orchestration of sounds shift to create a noticeable difference.[434]

> …sounds are always playing in relation to what came before and what came after…[435]

Focus refers to the "clarity" of a given sound effect or group of sound effects. Essentially, Sergi describes focus as the result of the orchestration – when considering the full balance of a soundtrack, what are the sounds that an audience's attention is being drawn to?[436] Sergi does not explicitly link these two categories, but one clearly denotes the other. However, focus gets more specific than just 'dialogue' or 'sound effects'. It refers to the specific speaker or specific sound effect (or music sting, and so on). Additionally, the focus could be obscured by the density of sounds, as in the example Sergi uses of *Blade Runner.* 'Clarity' is a better term here, as it does not have the implicit visual link that 'focus' does and is, without needing much expansion, much more self-explanatory than 'focus'.

---

[432] Sergi, 140–56.
[433] Sergi, 145.
[434] Sergi, 148–49.
[435] Gary Rydstrom quoted in Sergi, 149.
[436] Sergi, 151–52.

Lastly, though Sergi makes it a point to say that there is no ranking order in which to consider these four categories, definition refers to the audience's ability to differentiate between given sound effects within a film and therefore assign them to the 'correct' source as well as to help set the mood and tone for a scene, character, or even film overall. Sergi notes that "…sound can function like a signature for a specific character…" or even that sound can "…become a character, both at an individual level…or a collective level"."[437] Additionally, the definition of a scene's mood or tone can be shaped by removing an expected or "core sound".[438]

These four categories are closely linked, one often setting up the other, such as how orchestration helps determine focus. While Sergi does not get overly detailed in his book on this analytical approach and how it might be used – he uses a single example of *Forrest Gump* (1994)[439] – this "macro-level" approach, as he calls it, used in conjunction with other approaches described here, like Chion's, allows for a more expansive, holistic analysis of sound.

Chion's method of audio-visual analysis, specifically his masking method, will be used in the analysis of Brakhage's sound films when possible. Predominantly, however, I will be adopting a more "macro-level" (to use Sergi's term) approach which considers the sounds and sound design within the context of the entire film as well as within the context of Brakhage's filmography. This approach has the advantage of not always requiring specialist equipment, not requiring an 'ideal' viewing environment, and not over-focusing on singular elements to such an extent that the larger context of a film is lost. At the same time, employing Chion's masking method allows the analysis to focus on a micro-level to explore specific films or parts of films more deeply. This analysis will show how Brakhage, despite being commonly thought of as a 'silent' filmmaker, used sound to contribute to the poeticism of his films.

Overview of films & selection rationale

This chapter was a late addition to the thesis and initially developed out of my own discovery of and interest in Brakhage as a sound filmmaker. This somewhat late discovery impacted film selection, and as a result, I re-examined some films for this chapter that are

---

[437] Sergi, *The Dolby Era*, 155.
[438] Sergi, 155.
[439] Sergi, *The Dolby Era*.

looked at elsewhere. However, great effort has been made to separate the analysis here from the analysis of these films found in other chapters. I did, however, intentionally add some films specifically for this chapter; the rationale for each is found below.

I will be separating my film selections into two categories. The first category includes those films which have been discussed previously in the thesis but have been selected for this chapter to examine them differently. For ease, these are labelled as 'previously discussed films.' The second category includes those films which have yet to be discussed in this research. These are labelled as 'new films.'

Additionally, there is a third sub-category of sorts. I will look at Brakhage's use of sound in the majority of his films and consider the concept of 'silence' as it applies to these films. While this is extremely broad, I will be using two films in particular to elucidate my argument: *The Text of Light* (discussed in the previous chapter using visual analysis) and *Mothlight* (1963) (as yet, undiscussed in this body of work). These films appear in the sections below (previously discussed and new, respectively).

Previously Discussed Films

These films have been discussed previously in this research. However, they have been re-selected for this chapter to examine two things: how Brakhage used sound in his films initially (to see if there is any development when it comes to sound use later in his career) and, more importantly, to examine Brakhage's use of the film score.

Interim (1952)

Discussed in chapter two primarily for its use of point-of-view shots, Brakhage's most traditional film includes no dialogue but heavily employs a score. It is possible the lack of dialogue was due to insufficient funding to record live audio during filming, as this is Brakhage's first filmmaking endeavour. The score is composed by James Tenney. Brakhage's collaboration with Tenney and cinematographer Stan Phillips, plus the addition of two actors, make perhaps the most collaborative effort in Brakhage's entire career.

The Way to the Shadow Garden (1954)

Like *Interim,* this film was discussed in chapter two. *The Way to the Shadow Garden* is one of the few of Brakhage's 27 sound films, especially of those which adopt a relatively more

traditional audio approach, in which he was solely (or almost entirely) responsible for creating the audio track.[440] This film features several distinct audio effects that serve the narrative, mood, and tone.

Reflections on Black (1955)

This film was also discussed alongside *Interim* and *The Way to the Shadow Garden* in chapter two. Like *The Way to the Shadow Garden,* it is also a film in which Brakhage produced the audio himself or with limited assistance.[441] *Reflections on Black* uses sound design as score to punctuate the film's narrative, mood, and tone.

Flesh of Morning (1956)

Likewise discussed in chapter two, *Flesh of Morning* uses a unique jazz-drums score to accentuate the film's frenetic mood.

The Text of Light (1972)

Discussed at length in chapter three in terms of its visual abstraction, I have included the film for discussion here around those Brakhage films which are completely silent and how this impacts, if at all, the poeticism.

New Films

These films have been selected to look at both how Brakhage's use of sound progressed (if at all) over his career as well as to examine Brakhage's use of sound effects and manipulated audio recording and to see how this impacts and/or develops the mood and tone of a film.

Mothlight (1963)

Arguably one of Brakhage's most well-known films, *Mothlight* is often described as a film made without a camera.[442] To create this short film, Brakhage stuck bits of insects and leaves to clear sticky tape and printed this. It has been included for discussions around the impact of silence on poeticism and for investigating whether films like *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light* are truly intended to be 'silent'.

---

[440] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.
[441] Toscano.
[442] 'Mothlight - Stan Brakhage'.

This film was made in the early 60s but only completed around the same time he was making *Mothlight* and *Dog Star Man* (1961-64).[443] It is one of Brakhage's lesser-known and discussed works but is one of the films which film preservationist for the Academy Film Archive, Mark Toscano, has worked on restoring. This work has provided valuable insight into the filmmaking process that is not attainable through simply viewing the film, which in and of itself is a difficult task. There are some poor pirated versions on YouTube, but properly viewing the film requires an archival visit. Even then, the film was duplicated in 1972 to preserve the original print and allow "easier and safer printing."[444] Toscano's work with the original print and original audio tape provides unique insight into the sound processes.

Fireloop (1986)

Fireloop is the second in a series of films called *The Caswallon Trilogy*. The first and third films in the series are *The Aerodyne* (1986) and *Dance Shadows by Danielle Helander* (1986), respectively. *Fireloop* stands out within these three grouped films as not just the only hand-painted film but also the only one with a soundtrack. This film is also a rare example of artistic collaboration in Brakhage's body of work; Joel Haertling arranged the soundtrack to *Fireloop*.

Loud Visual Noises (1987)

Made as a companion film to *Fireloop*, *Loud Visual Noises* also sees Brakhage collaborating with Joel Haertling. Rather than composing for the film, Haertling "compiled" music which was made for the film by a variety of artists, including Die Tödliche Doris, Zoviet France, The Hafler Trio, Nurse With Wound, as well as Joel Haertling himself.[445] The film was released without a soundtrack as well. As another example of a collaborative soundtrack, this film, along with *Fireloop*, present interesting contrasts to other films considered in the chapter.

Analysis
Early Career

Many of Stan Brakhage's early films, such as *Reflections on Black*, *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, and *Flesh of Morning,* each have very intense and deliberate uses of sound, including both score and sound effects and sound design elements. Brakhage clearly uses sound in

---

[443] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.
[444] Toscano.
[445] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 423.

significant and similar ways, contributing to these fil's' poetic aesthetic. This aesthetic approach is best described and understood in relation to Maya Deren's ideas about film poetry and the emphasis poetic films place on subjective components such as mood and tone over more objective elements like narrative or plot. In many ways, sound accomplishes this in its conventional sense when it appears as music or score. Similar to the structure used in chapter two, where these films were originally discussed, the analysis here will look at Brakhage's use of sound both within and outside of convention to consider how this might impact the fil's' poeticism.

Both *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning* use the film score in a relatively conventional manner to support the emotional resonance of the films. In *Interim,* the combination of music and sound effects is used in place of dialogue to indicate mood, and the orchestration of these sounds heavily favours the music. The film jumps between the score by James Tenney and diegetic sound effects while mainly relying on Tenney's music. Tenney created the score using only the piano. The rhythm of the music feels slightly waltz-like. Where waltzes are traditionally romantic, originally danced by couples in a relatively intimate embrace, Tenney's score feels more fearful than romantic. Using such music in *Interim* indicates a dance between the boy and the girl but gives it a slightly dark undertone.

This pseudo-dance continues as the boy and girl walk along an underpass; the woman follows the boy until they are interrupted (and so is the score) by a passing train. The score stops, and the sound of a steam-powered train bustling past fills the aural space left, creating significant contrast. Only then does the boy seem to take notice of the girl, and from here forward, the score adopts a much more romantic tone as they wander together through the hillside, the orchestration and focus once again almost entirely on music. The tone shifts when it begins to rain on the young pair; the piano score turns frantic as they run for cover. Once inside an abandoned shed, the score drops out again, replaced by drizzling rain.

Now sheltered from the sudden storm, the young couple sit and wait out the rain. The score is replaced solely by the atmosphere – the sound of rain on the roof and wind. The contrast between the jazzy score and the stark ambient sound helps set the tone, the music's absence creating an almost uncomfortable feeling of voyeurism and invaded intimacy as the boy and girl kiss. It is awkward and juvenile; the lack of any other sound reflects the absence of

true passion between the pair. The kiss seems to destroy whatever connection the two had, and as the boy stares out the window at the rain, the music returns with sharp, slightly off-key notes as if to say something is wrong. It sounds like an alarm.

After the storm passes and the two return towards the town, they walk slowly, and the music is march-like before it is again interrupted by a passing train, this time a more modern one. The level of contrast in this interruption compared to the first is much less; the interruption feels much less sudden. The boy turns and walks away, and the girl watches him leave, just as she watched him arrive, before turning to leave herself. The score returns to the same musical theme from the beginning; it was all just a dance.

Where the film overall adopts a relatively narratively focused (i.e., horizontal) approach in terms of its mise-en-scène, the use of orchestration and contrast in the soundtrack, and especially the score, give the film its oddly sombre and occasionally voyeuristic tone. This film sees Brakhage operating largely within convention; it shows how even films which may not be primarily focused on a "vertical investigation" can incorporate aspects of poeticism and said vertical investigation to enhance the exploration of mood and tone within a film.

Similarly, *Flesh of Morning* relies heavily on the score to emphasise the mood and tone. In this film, made just a few years later, Brakhage uses music to portray a frenetic sexual urgency felt by the main character. Where *Interim* featured a piano-focused score that appropriately matched the use of a traditional waltz and attempted romance, in this case, Brakhage uses drums as the primary instrument with a wild jazz-drum solo accompanying the film. However, as in *Interim*, the score plays a key role in the film's aesthetic approach.

Modern audiences might most readily associate the unique drum-based score with the relatively recent *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014) by director Alejandro G. Iñárritu (score by Antonio Sanchez) or some of the episodic television shows that subsequently spoofed this, such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005). Iñárritu used a drum score in his film to increase pacing and tension (especially needed as there were no visible edits).[446] In *Flesh of Morning*, the drum track likewise creates a sense of urgency and imbues an

---

[446] Carlson, 'Antonio Sanchez, Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Milan M2-36689, 2014, CD.'

underlying energy into the film. As Brakhage developed as a filmmaker and largely eschewed sound, he found other ways to create this sense of urgency – often through the rapid editing and swooping camera movements that he became renowned for, neither of which are overly present in much of his earliest work. In *Flesh of Morning*, Brakhage relies heavily on the score to emphasise and often create the mood within the film. Like with *Interim*, the orchestration, focus, and definition of the soundtrack of *Flesh of Morning* are weighted entirely towards the music.

Percussion instruments like drums are useful for creating tension. The stereotypical heartbeat sound used ubiquitously in cinema to signify building tension is created using a bass or low tom drum. A natural link is made between rhythm and intensity; the heartbeat speeds up to indicate fear, tension, or anxiety.[447] As the character in *Flesh of Morning*, played by Brakhage, moves through his house and finds himself increasingly tormented by the phantasm of a woman, the drums on the soundtrack increase in rhythm.[448] They create a tachycardic intensity, which builds towards the film's climax. As with in *Interim*, Brakhage's use of score allows him to more deeply vertically 'investigate' an otherwise relatively horizontal film.

Only a handful of Brakhage's other films make any use of score. In cases like *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning,* Brakhage uses score in a very traditional sense by highlighting emotional cues throughout the respective films. The score serves as a supportive rather than informative feature of these two films; these films see Brakhage very much operating within the modes of convention (at least in terms of score). Despite this conventional use of sound, the score in each film is where Brakhage develops much of the mood and tone. Both *Flesh of Morning* and *Interim* have clear narratives (horizontal attacks) developed solely by the visuals but find much of their emotional depth (vertical attack) from the use of score.

While the use of score in *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning* largely operates within conventions, the use of score in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black* arguably moves away from conventional expectations. *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black* have less clear narratives than do *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning.* The use of sound in these two films (*Reflections on Black* and *The Way to the Shadow* Garden) not only supports the

---

[447] Carlson.
[448] Michelson, 'Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura'.

emotional cues from the visual but also develops further significance into the narratives that would otherwise be absent. This goes against convention, where audio and especially score are largely used to support the narrative action rather than develop the narrative, enhance the mood, and also layers in ambiguity and subjectivity.

Both films share several similarities in their unconventional approaches to sound. In *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflection on Black,* Brakhage uses sound design in unusual and unexpected ways. First, Brakhage uses asynchronous, seemingly non-diegetic sounds in both films. By this, I do not mean the sound is out of sync with the image, which would imply that the sound *does*, in fact, 'belong' there (or is diegetic to the scene) but is simply misplaced. Rather, I refer to the use of sounds which do not have any direct bearing on the imagery seen; they are difficult to assign definition, though they have intense clarity or focus. Second, both films have a particular and repeated use of tonal sounds. While very clearly not a part of any score, there is no discernible source for the respective noises, and the characters in each film do not acknowledge them. These noises are symbolic of the alternate 'visions' being experienced by each of the main characters respectively, and that the sound works as a signal or 'definition', to use Sergi's terminology, of said alternative visions.

In *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, the entire sound design track is created by what sounds like a single person, who is most likely Brakhage himself, making various noises with their mouth.[449] Chi'n's masking technique aids in identifying these sounds. At first, they mimic the expected sound effects – wind blowing, a heartbeat, and water splashing – but the noises quickly become increasingly odd and misplaced, losing definition within the scene. As the character, played by Walt Newcomb, enters a state of delirium, the vocal noises begin making chugging noises not unlike a steam train. When he gouges out his own eyes, the only accompanying noise is what sounds like someone blowing air out forcefully through closed teeth in a random rhythm. Overall, while the sound effects are the primary aural focus, the individual noises are difficult to define due to their vocalised nature.

Once this now blinded character exits the room and enters the titular "shadow garden", the footage becomes inverted and the sound changes to a sustained high-pitched whistle. The discussions on this film in the first chapter illustrate the various visual cues during

---

[449] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.

and preceding this sequence, which suggests that Brakhage represents an altered 'vision.' With its stark visual contrast, this change is accompanied by a significant aural contrast between the lower-end frequency sound of the air blowing and the high-frequency whistling sound. The low-frequency air blowing is matched to the "black-and-white banality" of the room, while the high-frequency whistling is matched to the negative sequence, with its silvery brightness due to the unprocessed film.[450] This sequence establishes the use of tones to aurally indicate changes in vision, a technique Brakhage continued experimenting with in *Reflections on Black*.

In *Reflections on Black,* Brakhage uses a mixture of sound design and more traditional instrumentation to create the film's unconventional score. Rather than traditional music, most of the 'score' is made from musically applied sounds. This unique use of 'score' appears primarily within two of the three vignettes experienced by the film's main character. These vignettes are discussed in chapter two as alternate 'visions', each with a distinct perspective adopted by the protagonist (the Blind Man). The first vignette adopts a wom'n's perspective, and the second adopts the perspective of an alternate reality wherein the Blind Man has his sight restored; these are both shown using a third-person camera technique. The third and final vignette is a first-person perspective of the Blind Man. Chapter two discusses how the visuals support these readings; now, I will look at how Brakhage uses sound to do the same and demonstrate how this contributes to poeticism within the film.

Before the first vignette, Brakhage creates a chaotic 'symphony' of sound effects, none of which have any diegetic cause for their use in the film. Over the titles, Brakhage uses a stuttering, loud clacking which sounds like it could be a train rushing by or several nearby firecrackers. This sound starts and stops abruptly with the appearance and disappearance of the title cards and then seems to aurally 'flicker' in the film's opening moments, popping in and out. With each appearance, Brakhage begins layering in other noises, such as a crowd of children yelling at each other indistinctly. Between each symphonic swell of noise, there is a relatively loud audio hiss, a form of "virtual silence", where there is a sound to indicate silence, and yet it is not actually silent.[451] In the words of S.A.F. Raeymaekers, "Almost every cinematic experience of silence will be virtual silence."[452] The changes between these sounds create

---

[450] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 297.
[451] Raeymaekers, 'Filmic Silence', 13–14.
[452] Raeymaekers, 13–14.

significant aural contrast that is crucially *not* matched by the imagery. This disjointed relationship between the audio and visual contributes to the film's unsettling tone.

Two sounds become thematic throughout the film, with Brakhage returning to them time and time again - that of a sustained non-diegetic tone and that of the slight audio hiss mentioned above. The sustained tone leads into the first vignette, where the film's soundtrack abruptly changes to a melancholic and notably discordant piano score. The piano is both poorly played and sounds out of tune. The intentional use of such off-key notes in the sequence underpins the fragmented and perturbed mind of the woman whose perspective the film briefly adopts for this vignette. When the film suddenly abandons the first vignette, the soundtrack changes just as abruptly to a jazzier tune that carries from the Blind Man's continued journey up the stairs into the second vignette.

This sound, mainly for the second vignette, is likewise comprised entirely of score, though completely different both in tone and instrumentation. The sound also changes in its consistency and clarity. The second vignette's music has a jazzy quality and sounds as though it is either a man humming or possibly playing a kazoo. The 'music' is low and somewhat 'buzzy' o' 'fuzzy', indicating either a poor-quality recording or that Brakhage manipulated the recording. Like the score in the first vignette, the score disappears once the film leaves this vignette and returns to the Blind Man on the stairs. Instead of a new score, once again, the film contains only the hissing semi-silence. However, rather than adopting a score for the third vignette, the audio hiss *continues* into the third vignette, and no score returns for the rest of the film.

The audio hiss – again, a sound used to indicate nothing or silence – literally represent sound's absence. This is not coincidental when the vignette in question shows the first-person perspective of a man without sight. Brakhage subverts this audio convention, using the lack of one sense to indicate the lack of a different sense entirely. This allows Brakhage to express the sense of loss without losing visuals. This is the most poetic expression of sound in the entire film; Brakhage's use of audio here allows the audience to feel the loss of a sense (in this case, sight) more deeply and to explore that feeling alongside the plot. It has no direct impact thereupon but rather enriches the emotional understanding of the protagonist.

Brakhage's use of score and sound effects in these four films can be thought of as belonging to two categories simultaneously: conventional and unconventional. All four films use the score and/or sound effects to *support* the visual story being told, enhancing the mood and tone. Particularly with *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black*, Brakhage uses score and, more so, sound effects to subvert convention, creating contrasting audio that begins to *create* mood and tone independently of the visual. The audio and visual work in concert with one another to ultimately create the mood and tone and convey some sense of narrative. More than that, Brakhage uses the audio to enhance a deeper exploration of a state of being; this is where the sense of Deren's 'vertical investigation' really comes into play.

Early/Mid-Career: Fire of Waters

As Brakhage continued his filmmaking career, he relied less and less on sound as he felt it distracted from the visual rhythms of his films.[453] He made very few sound films from the mid-1950s until the late 1980s. I, therefore, find films in this period which did use audio to be extremely unique. In total, six films made between 1956 and 1986 have a soundtrack. Of these, I would like to draw focus to a single film, *Fire of Waters* (1965).

Fire of Waters allows for a unique insight into Brakhage's intentions and methods because it was relatively recently restored at the Academy Film Archive by Mark Toscano. As with the other films, I have applied some of Michel Chion's techniques for audio-visual analysis to *Fire of Waters* as well as Sergi's 'macro-level' approach. Combining these techniques with Toscano's archival research allows for a particularly in-depth and unique analysis of this film. I believe that providing a more detailed analysis of this film will reveal much about Stan Brakhage's use of sound and that the archival research on this film supports the suggestion that Brakhage's use of audio, especially the use of the 'hiss' sound also seen in *Reflections on Black* is the result of intention and not a mistake. This film exemplifies Brakhage's understanding of the power of sound as a creative cinematic tool and his use of sound to approach a film vertically. *Fire of Waters* is especially suited to showcase why Brakhage's sound approach can be understood as an overall aesthetic approach that is in line with Maya Deren's ideas around film poetry.

---

[453] Camper, 'By Brakhage'.

Fire of Waters was most likely filmed in the earlier 1960s and returned to when Brakhage desired to continue working after the theft of his film equipment in 1964 (this story is not verified and is, in fact, contradicted by Jane Wodening).[454] Like the other films in this chapter, *Fire of Waters* incorporates a soundtrack, which, as previously established, is relatively uncommon in Brakhage's film work. The soundtrack of *Fire of Waters* stands out as the audio track is not done as score or sound effects used as score, like most of his early sound work. Additionally, *Fire of Waters* is one of the sound films where Brakhage was solely responsible for creating the audio track.[455]

One of the most interesting things about *Fire of Waters* is not just that Brakhage personally created sound effects for this film but *how* he created them. Thanks to the work of Mark Toscano, there is a unique insight into Brakhage's creative process on *Fire of Waters*. This allows for both a textual analysis of the film as well as an archival-based analysis of the film's construction, which will show how the use of audio in *Fire of Waters* allows the film to progress 'vertically'. Toscano writes, "Sound is employed to invoke a nonfigurative, emotional reaction in tandem with its accompanying imager"."[456]

Aurally, the film seems very different to its associated visuals. The introduction of sound effects ever so slightly precedes the initial visual of Brakhage's hand-scratched text. I will explore the different created sound effects momentarily but would like to first consider the more dominant sound 'effect' present in the film. As the film continues from the title screen, a subtle hiss is noticeable on the audio track. It is the sound of 'nothing– - not to be confused with actual silence, for the soundtrack is *present*, merely blank. This hiss is similar but not identical to the one noted above in the discussion around *Reflections on Black*. This hiss is quieter, less obvious, and could be taken as simply the by-product of the optical reader on the projector being left on rather than as an intentional noise. Fred Camper notes in his advice on projecting Brakhage's films how crucial it is to ensure the audio on the projector and/or sound system is turned off for viewing his silent films.[457] However, it is almost certain that it is intentional. The hiss, or sound of nothing, results from using what is called a "clear leader."[458]

---

[454] Toscano, 'Sartre's Nausea (1961) and Black Vision (1965) by Stan Brakhage / FIFTEEN YEARS?'
[455] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.
[456] Toscano.
[457] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 397.
[458] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.

It is important to remember that Brakhage worked exclusively with analogue materials, and his films were first distributed as 8mm or 16mm prints. If a film *did* include audio, like *Fire of Waters* does, it would be included as an optical or magnetic track on the print. Brakhage created the soundtrack for *Fire of Waters* separately on ¼" magnetic tape, which was then transferred to an optical track. There are three distinct sound effects, and these are joined together using 16mm clear leader. Toscano provides an effective visual displaying this:

Image 4.1. *Original audio reel of Fire of Waters* [459]

In the above image, the three pieces of audio are highly identifiable as the black lines. The lighter (and much larger) rings result from using the clear leader. The use of clear, rather than black, leader is significant because of how optical technology creates sounds. Light is shone through the track by a projector's exciter bulb or lamp. When light reaches the photocell, this creates noise; waveforms shape the light to dictate what light is allowed through and, thus, what the noise will be. If a filmmaker wants no sound at all, they can use a black leader to block all light from reaching the photocell. By using a clear leader, however, the light will not be stopped at all and creates a hiss.[460]

Brakhage's use of clear leader indicates that the hissing sound was entirely intentional and not merely the result of making use of available materials. Importantly, Toscano has conclusively determined that the hiss results from non-recorded sound (the clear leader) and is produced as a by-product of the technology.[461] Given Brakhage's near obsession with

---

[459] Toscano.

[460] Toscano.

[461] Toscano.

technology in art, it seems likely that the use of non-recorded sound in such a manner as this is deliberate. Toscano's work has uncovered the extent of this in his restoration work on the original print and soundtrack, which features significant structural differences from the 1972 copy. It is this restoration work which shows that it is, in fact, clear leader that Brakhage used, as the 1972 copy was transferred onto a single optical strip, thereby erasing the clearly demarcated structural differences and splices between black leader, recorded audio, and clear leader. An important point: on the original print, there are instances where Brakhage did use black leader, indicating that his use of clear leader was not a lack of materials but indeed intentional. See the following images of the original print of *Fire of Waters*, taken by Mark Toscano:
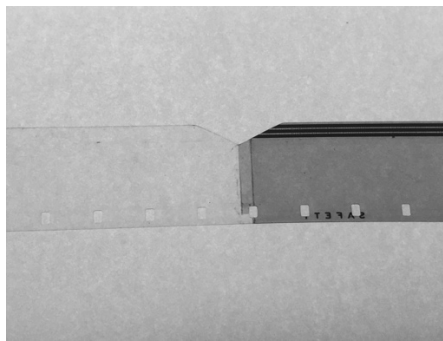

Image 4.2. *Splice in Fire of Waters original audio reel to clear leader*[462]
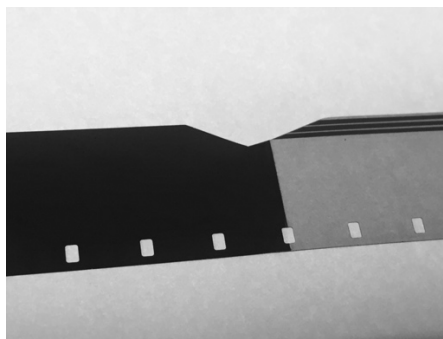

Image 4.3. *Splice in Fire of Waters original audio reel to black leader*[463]

In a practical sense, this change is essentially insignificant to the playback. Even Toscano admits that it is unlikely that even an expert viewer like himself would notice a

---

[462] Toscano.
[463] Toscano.

difference between the two prints.[464] However, the use of clear leader versus an optical track would cause and allow the film to change over time, almost from viewing to viewing, as the leader gained dirt smudges, scratches and other damage, subtly changing the audio texture of the film. The current copies of the film, however, contain one solid track of audio as the film existed in 1972, and though the prints will still collect dust and damage over time, the waveform remains unchanged. When the hiss plays in screenings of the film now, it is not a spontaneous creation by the machinery (non-recorded audio) but a pre-recorded sound, and this stops the film from evolving as it once did.

Toscano suggests that it reminds the audience of "the sound of film going through the projector."[465] It brings attention to the film's existence as a piece of art and technology *during* the viewing and, importantly, brings awareness to the film beyond the frame. The primary screen for modern audiences is a digital one, and as a result, this aspect of many earlier films may be lost. Nevertheless, Brakhage seemingly futureproofed at least this one film by embedding a reminder of its very technology into the soundtrack. As Toscano puts it, "the physicality of the medium is reaffirmed by this mode of sound-making.".[466] Indeed, in a film where Brakhage not only decided to abstract light but also appears to have been completely preoccupied with the very idea of light, the fact that he chose to use light to actively create sound is highly unlikely to be coincidental.

This meditation on the film's technology is not unlike similar meditations seen in *The Text of Light* and *Mothlight*, and like with those films, not only does this self-reflexivity create subjectivity and ambiguity, but it also manipulates the notion of time within the film. It does so by making the film 'about' three disparate moments in time - the time of recording, the time of the narrative (which is admittedly abstract and amorphous in *Fire of Waters*), and the time of viewing. The use of this sound (or perhaps more accurately, this manipulation of the sound technology) alone allows *Fire of Waters* to resolve in a poetic, vertical manner. However, Brakhage also shows a poetic use of more traditional sound effects in the film.

The film opens with the sound of howling wind beginning at just under 1 second into the runtime, with distinct clarity. Meanwhile, the handwritten title begins at approximately 3

---

[464] Toscano.

[465] Toscano.

[466] Toscano.

seconds. Unlike the majority of Brakhage's films, where the handwritten title cards simply cut to black or the chosen opening image, the title for *Fire of Waters* 'explodes' on the screen, synchronising with the end of the wind sound effect. This text expansion, or 'explosion', occurs in under a single second. This brevity and its synchronicity with a sound cut enforces the association of the abstract movement of words as an explosion (which is a thing that would typically emit quite a bit of light and heat). It is also an unusual use of synchronous sound, as Brakhage often uses asynchronous audio or score in his sound films, as described in some detail above.

The second sound effect (or third, if you include the hiss as a sound effect), or more accurately series of sounds effects, comes in at approximately 2 minutes 26 seconds. Immediately preceded by a flash of white/grey/orange, reminiscent of the opening 'explosion', a loud noise abruptly replaces the clear leader tone. This creates a great aural contrast, which matches the visual contrast created by the flash of light. Ill-defined, the noise is not distinctly identifiable without any visual context but, especially helped by using Chion's masking technique, sounds like a car on gravel or pavement. Seconds later, the sound of three semi-sustained tones in descending succession begins, repeating twice more. They sound possibly artificial, and the unidentified/car sound continues for the duration of the tones. The entire sequence is over a black screen; as the tones stop and the unidentified/car sound continues, there is a flash of lightning before returning to the black screen and the hiss, again creating an aural contrast.

The final sound effect appears in the film at approximately the 5-minute 41-second mark. Unlike the previous two iterations of sound effects, this effect comes in over an identifiable image – that of a house. The shot is extremely wide and low; the house is dwarfed in the screen by the sky, sitting at the lower left-hand side of the frame, while the lower right features a telephone pole. The entire top two-thirds of the frame is an empty sky. The sound effect is a high-pitched yelping, almost animal-like, and is fast-paced and repetitive. The shot flickers, apparently in time with the 'yelping'. The image appears to be doctored in post-production by lightning and darkening it to produce the flickering effect. As the 'yelping' decreases in speed, the image also ceases to flicker' The 'yelping' and the image both end abruptly as the film cuts to a black screen, a final aural-visual contrast.

These three distinct sound effects, from the film's beginning, middle, and end, respectively, are not incidental. Brakhage's approach to sound, in general, was deliberate, and *Fire of Waters* was no exception. He is quoted on Toscano's blog (and in P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film*), providing some clarity on the effects used:

> For years I had imposed the discipline on myself that if ever a single sound was needed anywhere on a track to go with an image, I would put that sound in even if no other sound was needed in the whole film. That permitted me when I felt the need of slowed-down bird sounds (that is a bird's cry slowed down so that it became like a western musical instrument), to put it in where I felt it was needed. Then that caused me to feel the need of a sound of wind rising to a certain pitch at the very beginning. At the end then the speeded-up sound of Jane giving birth to Myrenna occurs on two levels in the last shot of the house. It definitely sounds like a dog in somebody's backyard in the drama sense of that scene, yelping in pain. It carries the sense of a terror beyond that. That's how the sound came into it and balanced out.[467]

[467] Sitney, *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 179.

Setting aside the context provided by Brakhage himself, it is difficult to match the visuals of *Fire of Waters* to the given sound effects and identify the sounds themselves. With perhaps the exception of the animated text in the opening, the audio does not 'match' the video in a particularly noticeable fashion, though it does sometimes 'synchronise' with the imagery. This synchronisation would indicate that the sound effects are intended as diegetic effects and are not sound effects or sound design used as score, as seen in the films discussed previously. However, unlike the conventional use of a sound effect, which emphasises the action of a scene, what becomes apparent with the use of sound in *Fire of Waters* is an intention to convey emotion rather than plot.

The emotional resonance of the film depends heavily on Brakhage's sound design. The soundscape of *Fire of Waters* helps the film to move vertically, aided by the cinematography, with its high black-and-white contrast. This impacts on an emotional level more than a logical one. In particular, the second and third sounds create an eerie quality which is almost horror-film-esque, or as Brakhage describes, "they carry the sense of terror." The odd yelping that begins when the visual of the suburban neighbourhood is finally fully viewable (previously only seen in brief hints during flashes of light) creates a very strong sense of dystopia and disquiet in what should be ideal Americana. Overall, Brakhage's use of sound to create and expand upon the mood and tone adds layers of subjectivity to the film, especially when considered alongside the use of the self-reflexive audio hiss, aligning the film neatly with Deren's concept of "vertical investigation".

Sound in Brakhage's Later Films

Shifting towards the latter part of Brakhage's film career, there are a few films which are useful to analyse. As mentioned before, a large proportion of Brakhage's sound films were made later in his filmmaking career, including *The Faust* series (1987-1989), *Fireloop* (1986), *Loud Visual Noises* (1986), *Kindering* (1987) and *I…Dreaming* (1988), to name a few. While there is

---

[468] Toscano, 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'.

considerable cause for further work to be done regarding this era of Brakhage's sound filmmaking, I have chosen to focus on two films primarily - *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises.*

A few qualities of the selected films inform my reasons for narrowing the selection to these two films. One, *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises* both feature no dialogue (whereas *Faustfilm: An Opera* (1987) is quite dialogue heavy, and therefore I have decided to leave this out for the same reason I have not aurally examined *Blue Moses* (1962)); in this chapter, I am more interested in music, sound effects, and silence. Two, films like *Kindering* and *I…Dreaming* are available on the Brakhage Criterion releases. For this thesis's intervention, it was important to focus on films that were not so readily available for home viewing. Finally, as Mark Toscano points out, only about 8 of the 27 sound films feature soundtracks where Brakhage was the lone, or at least the most involved, creator of the audio.[469] Most of his later work, including *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises,* were collaborative efforts, and it is important to consider this work. While I am generally more interested in films where Brakhage is the sole author, his collaborative efforts should be addressed. As much of the other work analysed looked at Brakhage's individual sound work, it seems appropriate to look at two films where he heavily relied on other individuals regarding audio.

The two films, *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises* were constructed as companions to each other, despite the inclusion of *Fireloop* in the Caswallon Trilogy (*Loud Visual Noises* is not included in this trilogy). They share many visual similarities, some of which will be discussed in the following chapter. The soundtracks of these films represent later career examples of Brakhage using sound design and/or score as a main source of tone and mood creation, contributing to the 'vertical attack' or poeticism of the films. While both films' soundtracks were composed and/or constructed by Joel Haertling, and neither soundtrack syncs directly in an easily identifiable way to the visuals, they do depart from one another in significant ways.

Fireloop is comprised much more heavily of synthesised, technical sounds, whereas *Loud Visual Noises* tends to use organic sounds, such as voices, in combination with synthetic musical sounds. Particularly in *Fireloop*, the use of sound reflects the physical filmmaking process in which Brakhage used optical printing to create the looping/repeated visuals. While

---

[469] Toscano.

the visuals of the short film (approximately 3 minutes in length[470]) are a loop of the same approximately 8 seconds; the accompanying sound does not loop. Rather, the audio design *evolve*s, which in turn calls attention to the visual looping. This play on repetition calls back to one of Brakhage's first, arguably most prominent, influences, Gertrude Stein. It is not dissimilar from the same play on repetition seen in *Sirius Remembered,* simply emphasised by audio rather than visual this time. Specifically, the film plays upon Stein's concept that in repeating a word, its meaning changes, as experimented with in her poem Sacred Emily (e.g., "A rose is a rose is a rose"[471]).

The audio evolves 166through manipulation and addition of sounds, which muddies the focus and definition of the noises. As the film opens, a low rumble that could be thunder starts, but as the first loop begins, that rumble begins to sound less like thunder, less 'of nature', and more like a created sound – perhaps bowling. This further evolves the frequency of the sound becoming less low-end and more higher-end, sounding perhaps like popcorn or the little 'snap' noise created by sparking two live wires. Underneath this sound, an even more high-frequency sound layers in, like hard knocks on wood – or is it fireworks? It may be a single sound that persists throughout the entire film, but that is merely manipulated by the designer (Joel Haertling) to give the *effect* of difference. Meanwhile, other sounds appear sometimes between, sometimes layered over the evolving thunder/bowling/firework sound. There is a "wobbling" sound, as I wrote in my notes, "like a 1950s alien", and then there are vocal sounds "far underneath".[472]

The evolving nature of the sound, in conjunction with the looped abstract visual, encourages and even indulges in subjectivity. While the visual stays the same, this is most noticeable when the film is watched *without* the soundtrack, using Chion's masking technique. By adding in the audio, the repetition from the looped video *feels* less repetitious, allowing the film to explore the same moment multiple times but for different effect; using audio in such repetition allows the film to explore vertically. This film shows what a profoundly unique

---

[470] Note that this film is occasionally incorrectly listed as 10 minutes long.
[471] Stein, 'Stein's Rose'.
[472] See Appendix II, p 274

poetic tool audio can be and demonstrates how Brakhage developed his command of audio throughout his career.

Meanwhile, *Loud Visual Noises* does not employ this same repetitive visual technique found in *Fireloop*. Additionally, the sounds of *Loud Visual Noises* are more distinct, with more clarity, and they are more readily identifiable, such as vocals and music. Joel Haertling employs similar manipulative techniques to the sound effects in this film as he does in *Fireloop*. However, unlike *Fireloop,* the original sounds remain relatively clear and are much less dense as there is not as much layering of audio. A similarity with *Fireloop* is that the mood and tone are developed from the soundtrack of *Loud Visual Noises*. This is likewise emphasised using Chion's masking technique. Without the audio, *Loud Visual Noises* loses much of its haunting and mystifying qualities, clearly developed from Haertling's manipulation of sounds.

These two films present an interesting challenge to understanding Brakhage and his use of audio. While two films discussed previously in the chapter, *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning*, also used composers and additionally used the soundtrack to *enhance* the mood and tone of the films, in the two films discussed here (*Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises*), the mood and tone are almost completely if not entirely the result of the soundtrack. Through this focus on mood and tone, and because of a lack of visual narrative not present in the other films discussed, both films adopt an aural 'vertical attack'. Additionally, the poetic use of audio in these two films raises a question of authorship.

I believe it is important to acknowledge Joel Haertling's creative role in *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises*, and it is certainly within both the confines of Bruce Kawin's "redefined auteur method" and Brakhage's intentions to do so.[473] [474] Resolving such a question of authorship lies within whether the audio of these films "reveal(s) the workings of a particular stylistic imagination" that can be attributed to Brakhage. Certainly, *Fireloop* does, as the film continues a theme regarding repetition present in Brakhage's work from his earliest filmmaking endeavours. I have already pointed out its thematic similarity to films such as *Sirius Remembered*. However, *Loud Visual Noises* presents an interesting case.

---

[473] Kawin, 'Authorship, Design, and Execution', 197.
[474] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 314.

The film's visuals looked at in the next chapter, are resolutely of Brakhage. The audio, while it uses layering techniques seen in previous films, does so with more clarity than I would expect to find in audio produced by Brakhage himself. Where *Fireloop* seems to be a fully "Brakhagian" film, even in spite of other individual efforts, *Loud Visual Noises* comes across as more of a true collaboration. This is further supported by historical context. Uniquely, Brakhage created the visuals for *Loud Visual Noises* only *after* Joel Haertling supplied the soundtrack.[475]

The Sound of Near Silence

Until this point, this chapter has dealt exclusively with discussing the use of sound in those few Stan Brakhage films wherein he used an audio track, though, in those discussions, I have touched of the 'sound of silence' which Brakhage used in some of these sound films. However, since the vast majority of Brakhage's films contained no sound whatsoever, it is important to include a short discussion of if and how sound is impacted by removing the audio entirely. At this point, I'd like to examine the impact of this on the poetic qualities of a given film – how does lack of sound contribute, if at all, to a film's ability to 'vertically investigate'?

Commencing this research at the time that I have means that a selection of Brakhage's films are readily available for viewing on DVD and Blu-Ray. A further few more can be found pirated on YouTube. I have discussed previously my hesitancy in depending on these pirated copies of Brakhage's films for visual accuracy, especially with a filmmaker so well known for intentionally 'damaging' his prints in various ways. However, another issue arises not only with pirated digital copies of Brakhage's films but with *all* digital presentations of his work, and that is that Brakhage very intentionally never worked in a digital format.

Certainly, Brakhage's most well-known films were made long before the digital era, but he continued to work until he died in 2003, well after the advent of digital media and when such technology was readily available for even the humblest home movie makers. Arguably, Brakhage's more intense foray into hand-painted and constructed film from the late 80s until his death could even be seen as an intentional rejection of the loss of physicality innate to

---

[475] Camper, 314.

digital filmmaking. The question must be asked – what is lost when we transfer such an artist's work to a digital medium?

There is a clear sense from the community of Brakhage scholars that digital copies should by no means *replace* viewing prints of Brakhage's work entirely, but that they do allow for wider dissemination and knowledge of his work.[476] When discussing the difference in viewing digital copies versus print, often the argument is visually focused. This makes complete sense, especially for an artist widely known as an almost exclusively 'silent' filmmaker. There certainly are key visual differences between digital and film prints, though sometimes subtle. As Fred Camper states, "…the quality of projected film light is completely different from the light of a video monitor."[477] However, this chapter is about the poetic qualities of sound. I am interested in what is lost when transferring celluloid films to digital formats, particularly those considered silent films.

Why does this even matter? After all, if the films are intended to be silent, surely it could be argued that there is nothing to be lost. This would depend on the definition of silent. I argue that this 'sound of nothing' is Brakhage's signature sound. While most of Brakhage's films were made without any audio, that does not mean there was no sound when they were viewed. Projectors are loud devices. The film runs through at relatively high speeds, with sprockets and shutters moving rhythmically at a set rate. Larger cinemas which have the room and budget will have soundproof projection rooms to isolate this noise from their audiences. However, an experimental film's 'life' differs radically from a studio-produced mainstream movie.

Distribution for filmmakers like Brakhage often found its way to smaller, less well-funded theatres (if they were indeed theatres at all) that would not necessarily have had soundproofing.[478] Furthermore, Brakhage not only distributed his films in experimental cinema circles, but he also intended for his films to be viewed *in people's homes* on their own projection

---

[476] Kashmere, 'By Brakhage'.
[477] Camper, 'By Brakhage'.
[478] See Appendix I, 233

equipment.[479] He would make 8mm copies of his films for such distribution purposes.[480] The average homeowner is even less likely to have the room, budget, or inclination to create a soundproof room for their home projector. Watching a film with sound would allow these home-based audience members to ignore the rhythmic noise of the projector at least partially – as Fred Camper states, "…the rhythms of almost any soundtrack tend to dominate the rhythms within an image…."[481] Audiences are accustomed to viewing films in this way, with some audio accompaniment.

However, with Brakhage's silent films, there is no distracting audio track. But equally, there is no true silence, at least not when the films are projected. The rhythm of the projector is a consistent 'friend', which allows the films to be more readily experienced because it can create a meditative state. Therefore, it is especially difficult to view Brakhage's silent films digitally. The transfer from celluloid to digital removes this aural connection to the viewing process, and this connection helps remind of the extremely physical nature of his filmmaking. Fred Camper on discussing home viewing of Brakhage's films:

> Brakhage made most of his films silent because the rhythms of almost any soundtra ck tend to dominate the rhythms within an image, and visual rhythms are crucial to his work. Thus the interruptions of chatting, people coming into and leaving the ro om, the phone ringing, and so on can prove almost completely destructive to these films' subtle delicacies.[482]

These "interruptions" are ever more present with digital viewing. Even the sound of one's own movements becomes amplified when there is no ambient noise with which to mentally sink into. In contrast, the ambience provided by the projector (or even a Steenbeck) not only allows for any "interruptions" to be minimised, but this noise can actually be seen as

---

[479] Camper, 'By Brakhage'; Kashmere, 'By Brakhage'.
[480] It is important to remember that until the advent of VHS in the late 1970s (and even then, really until it became more affordable into the 1980s), an 8mm or Super8 projector was common in homes.
[481] Camper, 'By Brakhage'.
[482] Camper.

an integral and intentional part of the viewing process, which adds to the poeticism of films. In order to demonstrate this, I would like to talk briefly through two of Brakhage's silent films, which are both well-known – *Mothlight* (1963) and *The Text of Light* (1972). In fact, *Mothlight* is arguably Brakhage's most well-known film alongside *Dog Star Man* (1964).[483] *The Text of Light* has been discussed previously from a visual analysis perspective. This film is not properly available outside of archival viewing. Still, it is a particularly strong candidate to demonstrate the meditative qualities enhanced by the almost silence of a film projector that are less present or even entirely absent with complete silence. I will explore how awareness and acceptance of the films' ambient sound can contribute to the poetic aspects of a film, and in particular to the 'layers of subjectivity' described by Deren in her descriptions of the 'vertical investigation'. Conversely, this will show how stripping a film of the intended ambient noise of the projector can have a profoundly negative impact.

First, consider Brakhage's lengthy exploration of light and colour, *The Text of Light*. Would the film have the same meditative quality (discussed in chapter three) if it was not silent? This meditation results from the film's hypnotic abstraction of its visuals, which allows for introspection and, because there is no visual context, for broad interpretation. It also results from the lack of aural context. Th' film's silence allows viewers to ruminate on its hazy imagery, which never resolves into a fully focused picture. With no soundtrack to distract, the sounds of the viewing environment become emphasised. In this way, the environmental sounds *are* the soundtrack of *The Text of Light*. When Brakhage created the film, the environmental sounds would have been very different. Watching a silent film in 1972, the main noise would have been made by the projector. In simplistic terms, a projector can be thought of as a device that uses light to create images;[484] light creating imagery just so happens to be the subject of *The Text of Light*.[485]

In this way, the environmental sound of the projector, which would be seemingly enhanced due to the lack of any competing and/or louder audio from the film itself, becomes an intrinsic part of the viewing experience. This is, of course, extremely subjective from viewer to viewer – one individual may 'tune out' the sound of the projector where another may be

---

[483] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 374.
[484] Tyson, 'How Movie Projectors Work'.
[485] Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, 149, 159.

distracted by it, while still another may find that it creates a rhythm by which to set the film to. However, this 'noise' creates an additional layer of complexity in the film. I wrote in a previous chapter that the film's subject is light itself, captured abstractly through an ashtray, which Sitney described as being used as an "extension of the lens".[486] *The Text of Light* is all about what we see and how we see it – light, normally unnoticed, is changed into beautiful shapes and colours by viewing it through an obscura. It follows that Brakhage would see the projector as yet a further extension of the lens (and the lens being an extension of our own eyes). After all, a projector, in its most basic sense, is illumination. Why is this poetic?

To see the projector, and its noise, as part of the film is a self-reflexive act that requires an awareness of the sensation of watching; it is work on the part of the viewer to seek out more than simply "what is occurring" in the film (Deren's concept of "horizontal") but to ask *while watching*, what does this "feel like" and why (Deren's concept of "vertical"). What concepts are being explored that are not being conveyed by a narrative (especially considering the absolute lack of narrative in *The Text of Light*)? The film asks for active rather than passive viewership, for connections to be made rather than explained – it is a joint investigation by Brakhage and the viewer to find meaning. And, of course, as such, many will find nothing more than pretty patterns and a lengthy viewing process. Those willing to peel back the layers of subjectivity, to investigate the abstraction and find connections that reconstruct them a bit, might find themselves more substantially satisfied.

Compare this to Brakhage's earlier film *Mothlight*, which is also completely silent. Where *The Text of Light* abstracts its imagery completely, *Mothlight* is more of an exercise in deconstruction than abstraction. Brakhage made *Mothlight* by sticking bits of insects, twigs, and leaves to clear tape, which he then transferred onto film prints. Despite this literal deconstruction of insects and nature, the individual items are still readily identifiable. Where *The Text of Light* is long and almost lazy, *Mothlight* is a short visual assault at approximately three and a half minutes of "what a moth might see from birth to death if black were white and white were black…."[487] The film is stilted and frantic, moving with a *staccato* effect due to its constructed nature. Each frame is created individually and entirely separate from the one preceding and following it, unlike in recorded media, where frames, while separate, are created

---

[486] Sitney, 159.
[487] Stan Brakhage quoted in Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 376.

172

in a flow, and connected frames of the same shot are intrinsically linked. *Mothlight* essentially has an edit point on *every* frame. This is also markedly different from most of Brakhage's direct animation work, where he used optical printing to repeat frames.[488]

When the film is viewed in complete silence, this aspect of the film can be less apparent. Personally, my mind more easily wanders, and my eyes can lose focus of the imagery. I must work to maintain my focus on the film. Whereas, when viewing Brakhage's films either in the archive (using a Steenbeck) or even at home but adding the sound of a projector myself, my focus on the details of the film is much more rapt.[489] The sound of the sprockets advancing the frames syncs with each 'edit', and the flickering of the film feels less jarring. Where in *The Text of Light*, the noise of the projector acts as both a block of "interrupting" ambient noise as well as a self-reflexive tool, in *Mothlight*, the noise of the projector feels as if it is embedded in the film. It is not simply helping with focus; it reveals aspects of the filmmaking process that otherwise might go unnoticed without frame-by-frame scrutiny.

In this way, adding the sound of a projector or Steenbeck (whether practical or artificial) encourages a more self-reflexive viewing of the film. Critics like Fred Camper have previously argued that *Mothlight* is about film and projection: "This film collage is inevitably in part about film projection itself, about the way the projector's gate breaks up nature's continuities into individual frames."[490] In removing the projector's sound, as is inevitable in a digital transfer, a crucial part of the film experience is also removed. Aspects of the film become more obscured, and the self-reflexive nature of the film becomes far less apparent. Though different from *The Text of Light*, the use of ambient audio in *Mothlight* also fits with Deren's definition of a 'vertical investigation'. Th' film's self-reflexivity is present regardless of any narrative, which loosely exists when the additional context is provided by Brakhage's screening notes but is less difficult to ascertain without them. Instead, it probes at the layered meaning of the film ("layers of subjectivity") and investigates thereupon.

---

[488] Camper, An Interview with Fred Camper See Appendix I. 223
[489] For both *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light*, I have experimented with home viewings and Chion's masking technique by re-adding projector noise and viewing the films, then comparing this to viewing them silently.
[490] Camper, 'Program Notes by Fred Camper for a Brakhage Program He Curated'; Camper, An Interview with Fred Camper.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the different ways in which sound, either through its inclusion or exclusion, can affect and contribute to a sense of 'vertical investigation', thereby either contributing to a film's poeticism or, in fact, making a film poetic. Through in-depth aural analysis of several of Stan Brakhage's sound films, I have shown both Brakhage's command of audio, an oft-forgotten aspect of him as a filmmaker, as well as the power of sound as a poetic device in cinema. This power comes from audio's ability to both enhance and create a sense of mood and tone (exploring "what it feels like") but also its ability to create a sense of subjectiveness ("layers of subjectivity") in a generally iconic medium. As a bastion of poetic subjectivity, audio is one of a filmmaker's most powerful items in their toolkits. It is most effective when it does not merely reflect the imagery back to the viewer, as it does in *Interim* and, to a lesser extent, *Flesh of Morning*, but rather when it projects its own meaning, independent of the image, as it does in *Reflections on Black, The Way to the Shadow Garden, Fire of Waters, Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises*.

Additionally, I have raised questions about considering Brakhage as a silent filmmaker, even when viewing those films made without soundtracks. I have looked at two films that are traditionally considered to be s–lent - *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light* - and argued that they were always expected to be viewed with the ambient audio provided by film technology. Through my own experiments, using a play upon Chion's masking technique to re-add projection sound, I have discussed how the ambient noise can entirely alter the viewing experience and, in the opinion of this research, negatively affect the poeticism of the given films.

I have yet to examine all of Brakhage's sound films or, indeed, all of Brakhage's hundreds of silent films. However, I feel strongly that the examples given here may be extrapolated to the wider works by Brakhage and that it could even be worth considering other similar filmmakers with some of the techniques described here, especially the work of contemporaries of Brakhage, who were making 'silent' films and showcasing them in similar manners. Their films would benefit from a similar technique and analysis to the one applied to *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light*. Further work could and should be done on Brakhage and his approach to and command of sound.

Additionally, this chapter appropriately challenges the notion overall of Brakhage as a predominantly silent filmmaker. Assigning this attribute to Brakhage indicates that he did not

consider audio much, when in fact, as shown by the analysis and research here and quotes from Brakhage himself, entirely the opposite is the case. If anything, I would argue that Brakhage considered audio more carefully than most filmmakers and understood its artistic power, which can sometimes alter how an image is perceived. As I conclude this chapter and, furthermore, as I near the end of this research, that seems to be an important result: much of Brakhage's work seems haphazard, even accidental; however, it is clear, even simply from considering his careful and delicate approach to audio, that entirely the opposite is the case.

In the next chapter, I will examine Brakhage in relation to his direct animation work and continue to understand how notions of poeticism are affected therein. All previous chapters have explored how poeticism works within Brakhage and how he *can* be understood as a poetic filmmaker when using Maya Deren's model. The next chapter is a slight departure from this, as Brakhage's direct animation films present the biggest challenge in applying Deren's theories.

5. The Importance of Context for Poeticism in Brakhage's Direct Animation Filmmaking

> There appears to be a general difficulty with approaching these works, the
> commentary surrounding them are often based upon outlining subjective
> impressions of the work.
>
> -Peter Mudie writing on Brakhage[491]

The previous chapters all dealt with films which, while not traditional, were made using traditional techniques. Even *The Text of Light* (1972), entirely abstract though it is, was made using the traditional filmmaking method of pointing a camera at an object. In contrast, the films in this chapter have been created using a unique method – direct animation – and will be approached as entirely 'vertical' films. I will analyse these films using an understanding of direct animation heavily informed by Maureen Furniss, who provides a comprehensive analytical framework for approaching such animation in her book *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. This understanding is additionally supported using the work of Paul Wells, Paul Taberman, and Peter Mudie.

Brakhage eschews camera technology in the below films with limited exception, opting instead to create these films by hand using various methods. Daniel Kane suggests Brakhage shows a "faith in the innate magic of projected images" with such films.[492] These methods range from painting directly onto individual film cells or making scratches directly onto the celluloid to incorporating miscellaneous material by pasting or taping it directly onto the film

---

491 Mudie, 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings', 18.
492 Kane, *We Saw The Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*, 65.

product. The resulting films are non-representational (as opposed to abstract), highly synaesthetic, and continue the overall theme of Brakhage's career of representing alternate and altered vision. Moving into non-representational work poses new issues and demands a different understanding.

Synaesthesia is defined in psychological terms by Simon Baron-Cohen and John E. Harrison as "stimulation in one sense modality automatically triggers a perception in a second sense modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation of this second sense modality."[493] For a person with synaesthesia, sometimes known as a "synaesthete", this functionally results in what Paul Taberham explains as "sensory input that is processed in one region of the brain spontaneously and involuntarily triggers sensory experience in one or more additional regions," so that the synaesthete might 'hear' colour, 'see' or 'feel' music, or any number of variations of sensory overlap.[494] Taberham continues, "For a synaesthete, regions of the brain that do not normally communicate, such as the visual and auditory cortexes, show signs of what is known as crosstalk, or 'hyperconnectivity'" and he additionally notes that, "The influence of synaesthesia on the arts has been widespread."[495]

Through examining some of Brakhage's non-representational work, my analysis will show the increasing challenge in applying Maya Deren's concept of film poetry, which relies heavily on context. The purpose of such analysis is not to argue that entirely non-representational and ambiguous films can *not* be poetic – indeed, a key aspect of Deren's argument is that poetry springs from ambiguity. Rather, I will argue that to use Deren's concept of vertical versus horizontal investigation, it is much easier to identify a vertical moment or series of moments when there is some objective (or horizontal) moment or series of moments to compare it to. This is an apparent weakness in using Deren's poetic model. Thus, this research is approaching the limitations of Deren's model and will test and explore this. To do so, I will examine these films mainly one at a time, primarily looking at colour and movement in a very particular order. While some of these films feature audio, this chapter will

---

[493] Baron-Cohen and Harrison, *Synesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, 3 quoted in Taberham, Lessons in Perception, 151.

[494] Taberham, *LESSONS IN PERCEPTION: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker as Practical Psychologist*, 152.

[495] Taberham, 152–53.

focus solely on the visual aspects of Brakhage's use of a particular filmmaking technique (direct animation), as Brakhage's aural works were explored in the previous chapter.

Stan Brakhage's non-representational films tend to lack any sense of narrative, traditional or otherwise. The absence of contextualisation for the imagery makes examining these films in any capacity difficult, but even more so when considering them in terms of Maya Deren's model of filmic poeticism, which despite its relationship to ambiguity, relies very heavily on an ability to contextualise moments within a sense of time, narrative, and reality. In examining these films and paying particular attention to how poeticism is affected by and, in fact, dependent upon context, I will show how viewing Brakhage's non-representational cinema as poetic is limited when using Maya Deren's mode of filmic poeticism. This leads to the primary question posed by this chapter: do these 'layers of subjectivity' require a layer of objectivity for balance; that is to say, can we consider wholly ambiguous films poetic using Deren's model, or is it a requirement to have some tether to objectivity. Can this be achieved in films such as these?

Literature Review

This chapter deals with films which all fall under the broad category of 'experimental animation'. Paul Wells broadly defines animation as "…a film made by hand, frame-by-frame, providing an illusion of movement which has not been directly recorded in the conventional photographic sense."[496] However, he provides the caveat that "Although this is a definition which serves to inform conventional cel, hand-drawn and model animation, it has proven insufficient in the description of other kinds of animation…."[497] Wells goes on to describe what might be called the 'power' of animation:

> …animation can redefine the everyday, subvert our accepted notions of 'reality', and challenge the orthodox understanding and acceptance of our existence. Animation can defy the laws of gravity, challenge our perceived view

---

[496] Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 10.
[497] Wells, 10.

of space and time, and endow lifeless things with dynamic and vibrant properties. Animation can create original effects…[498]

Traditional or "orthodox" animation is described as "…consisting of configuration (as opposed to abstraction), temporal continuity, narrative form, a singular style and an 'invisible' creator."[499] It follows that experimental animation would seek to dismantle, reject, or otherwise ignore these parameters. Paul Taberham details several tendencies of experimental animation after summarizing definitions from both Wells and Furniss. I want to highlight a few of the tendencies he discusses:

> …It may be created by a single person or a small collective…They evoke more than they tell, and don't offer a single unambiguous 'message'…Surface detail typically plays a more significant role in the experience of the film than the content…The materials of animation may be consciously employed in a way that calls attention to the medium…The artist may try to express that which cannot be articulated by spoken word, such as abstract feelings or atmospheres. In a sense, they try to express the inexpressible by calling upon their non-rational intuitions.[500]

Immediately, some of these tendencies refer to Brakhage, based on what has already been established in this research. He worked on his own or with, at most, a few other collaborators. As shown in the previous chapter, he was profoundly preoccupied with film technology within his filmmaking. His live-action filmmaking shows an active interest in "evok[ing] more than tell[ing]" and a disregard for narrative. As Brakhage moved ever more toward creating animations rather than live actions, it is unsurprising that the resulting films were not only experimental but used alternative animation techniques, some of which had already been trialled in his early career, such as the scratches seen in *Reflections on Black*. There is

---

[498] Wells, 11.
[499] Taberham, 'It's Alive If You Are: Defining Experimental Animation', 21 summarising Paul Wells.
[500] Taberham, 'It's Alive If You Are: Defining Experimental Animation'. 24

in the use of such a technique a closeness between filmmaker and film – what Tess Takahashi describes as, "a desire for the pure communication of an image through techniques based on the impression of an implement held in the filmmaker's hand."[501]

This technique is what Maureen Furniss calls direct animation.[502] Furniss describes direction animation as "made by working directly on the surface of clear, white or black film-leader, or on pieces of exposed and developed film containing other images."[503] It was not always used in experimental cinema. In the case of filmmakers like George Méliès and his ilk, this technique was combined with traditional live-action filming to add colour to the films; direct animation was not the primary technique but rather a tool to enhance the live action. In contrast, Stan Brakhage followed a tradition of filmmakers like Len Lye, Norman McLaren, and Harry Smith who engaged in a variety of techniques that interacted directly with the film cells themselves, such as scratching or etching, painting, and bleaching, among others as the primary filmmaking technique.[504] Takahashi notes that Brakhage's direct animation films are often linked to abstract expressionism.[505]

Not only is this an alternative to live action filmmaking, but direct animation is also an alternative approach to traditional animation.[506] In her book *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, Furniss describes all animation as existing on a continuum, with mimesis at one end and abstract at the other.[507] The book primarily focuses on studio animation styles and techniques and only briefly discusses experimental animation, so this suggested continuum proves adequate for her purposes. She admits that when it comes to filmmakers like Brakhage, their work may not be completely adequately described by "abstract". Indeed, much of the work discussed here is *not* simply abstract but rather non-representational, which, considering the continuum suggested, could be considered as an offshoot of "abstract" or simply further along the continuum. However, there is a need to separate abstract from non-representational.

---

[501] Takahashi, "'METICULOUSLY, RECKLESSLY, WORKED UPON': Direct Animation, the Auratic and the Index', 105.
[502] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 42.
[503] Furniss, 40.
[504] Furniss, 40–44.
[505] Takahashi, "'METICULOUSLY, RECKLESSLY, WORKED UPON': Direct Animation, the Auratic and the Index', 105.
[506] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 40.
[507] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*.

Differentiating between the abstract and the non-representational can be difficult, but it is crucial. Several previous chapters have dealt with abstraction as a poetic technique and discussed abstracted imagery at length. As stated before, the abstract exists in relation to that which it is abstracting; an abstract image may bear little resemblance in actual appearance to what it represents, but it is *of* that thing or based on that thing.[508] In contrast, the non-representational is *not* intended to be a depiction of or otherwise derived from a recognisable subject.[509]

Peter Mudie comments on the difficulty in critically engaging with non-representational work in his essay 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings'.[510] He notes that much of the existing critical work relies on "subjective impressions" and that finding adequate language to discuss and describe non-representational cinema can be difficult. Mudie suggests that Brakhage, in making these films, "…pursue[d] many of the same objectives of the Abstract Expressionist painters…Like an expressionist painter, Brakhage was intensely focused on compositional challenges of his works, within his works."[511] The Abstract Expressionists (painters like Jackson Pollack, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, among others) "…aim[ed] to make art that while abstract was also expressive or emotional in its effect," according to the Tate Museum.[512] Despite mentioning differences, I note that the Tate includes non-representational (what they refer to as non-objective) within the greater heading of 'abstract'.[513]

Maureen Furniss recognises that animation, especially two-dimensional animation, is often "an extension of other arts."[514] She also acknowledges that the apparent pre-requisite knowledge to even approach analysing the mise-en-scène of animation is "daunting."[515] There are, however, three categories, as described by Furniss, that are inclusive of all types of animation, including direct animation, useful when considering their mise-en-scène: image design, colour and line, and movement and kinetics.[516] All three categories are influenced by

---

508 Tate, 'Abstract Art'.
509 'Representational, Abstract, or Nonrepresentational?'
510 Mudie, 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings'.
511 Mudie. 29
512 Tate, 'Abstract Expressionism'.
513 Tate, 'Abstract Art'.
514 Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 32.
515 Furniss, 60.
516 Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. 71-80

the means of production (i.e., studio or independent, etc.) and the availability and use of technology and materials.[517] Image design refers to characters and backgrounds and clearly describes representational animation, even if abstract.[518]

Colour is considered to have three qualities – hue, value, and intensity.[519] "Hues" are designated in a general sense on the spectrum of colour (this refers broadly to light spectrums) as violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. Furniss differentiates hue from the value or light value. When employed with hue and intensity, value creates gradations between the light and dark of a given colour. For example, she points out that black and white are not colours themselves but are, in fact, different values of the colour grey.[520] Intensity can be considered purity or saturation; the more 'intense' a colour is, the more saturated or pure.[521]

Furthermore, colours may be divided into the 'warm' and 'cool' categories, which describes both their function and suggested effect on a viewer. Warm colours include yellow, orange, and red, as well as any colours that fall between these, and they are both stimulating and considered to "move forward in space."[522] In contrast, the cool colours of violet, blue, and green and those colours in between are soothing and "move away from a viewer."[523] The meaning of warm and cool colours can be variable, dependent upon the cultural context of their usage.[524] Furniss briefly describes associations between colours suggested by Daniel Mendelowitz – "…warm colours might subtly suggest the danger of blood and heat or fire, but cool colours are more familiar in the soothing contexts of the sky, water, and plants in nature."[525] This is similar to the descriptions of colour symbolism found in Natalie Kalmus's 'Color Consciousness'.[526] However, both are culturally Western approaches – applicable for Brakhage, but worth noting that there can be cultural shifts around concepts and understandings of colour symbolism.

---

[517] Furniss, 62–63.
[518] Furniss, 66.
[519] Furniss, 72.
[520] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*.
[521] Furniss, 72.
[522] Furniss, 72.
[523] Furniss, 73.
[524] Street, "'Colour Consciousness'".
[525] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 73.
[526] Kalmus, 'Color Consciousness', 142–44.

Meanwhile, movement is the main building block of animation; "Animation is the art of creating movement…."[527]All movement in animation is a perceptual representation of movement, an illusion created by the technology. This illusion may be created in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this chapter and discussing direct animation, the method of creating movement is called "straight ahead" animation, whereby the movement is created in the order in which it is ultimately shown.[528] This is opposed to "pose-to-pose" animation, primarily used in figurative animation and created using keyframes.[529]

Two qualities of movement are of particular interest here: metamorphosis and stillness. Metamorphosis is "the transitioning of one shape into another."[530] While Furniss primarily considers this quality in terms of figurative or representational work, there is a suggestion for its use in the non-representative when she discusses Sergei Eisenstein's thoughts on it. She points out that Eisenstein "suggested that metamorphosis can provide a means of connecting to areas of the subconscious, increasing our enjoyment of animated imagery."[531] Meanwhile, stillness, as might seem obvious, is the lack of movement. As this is both difficult to achieve and one of the building blocks of animation ("the impression of motion"[532]), Furniss points out that stillness is almost always intentional.[533]

This research posits that Brakhage uses colour and movement in several of these films to create visual metaphors. This chapter will try to answer whether an expression of a visual metaphor alone meets the criteria of a "vertical investigation". Does it successfully convey a sense of mood and tone, achieving the "layers of subjectivity" that Deren discusses?

Overview of films & selection rationale

The films selected for this chapter were done so over the course of the research; I did not necessarily start at the beginning of the project with these exact films in mind but over the

[527] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics.* 75
[528] Furniss, 76.
[529] Furniss, 75–76.
[530] Furniss, 77.
[531] Furniss, 77.
[532] Taberham, 'Music Visualisation and Medium Expansion: Key Themes in Experimental Animation'.
[533] Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, 77.

length of my study. I ultimately narrowed it down to these films for a few reasons, and I will briefly go over them now.

The most important selection criteria for the films in this chapter was to include films that would demonstrate not only different types of direct animation but also various approaches to establishing context or objectivity within the films. A much wider initial selection of films was whittled down primarily for this reasoning.

A second reason that felt particularly important for this chapter was familiarity. This chapter, more than any other, engages with Brakhage films which have been more widely discussed previously (notably *Mothlight* and *The Dante Quartet*), though it does so from a new angle. Due to the nature of several of these films and the relative difficulty in both viewing them but also in describing them for an unfamiliar viewer, I felt that including some films which have been more readily accessible was especially worthwhile in this chapter. Additionally, the accessibility of many of these films on the Brakhage Criterion DVDs, apart from *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* and *Fireloop*, allowed me to review the films repeatedly. Due to their lack of narrative and representational imagery, this was more important than for many of Brakhage's other films discussed in previous chapters.

Another criterion that ultimately led to this selection of films was simply run time. With limited exceptions, these films run under five minutes. This allowed me to include more films and achieve the variety in direct animation techniques and contextual approaches needed to fully explore how this film style can be understood (or not) using Maya Deren's model of poeticism.

Mothlight (1963)

Though *Mothlight* has been discussed previously and is widely known, Brakhage's direct animation technique for this film is unique and worth considering within the context of this chapter. Though many of the other films are part of Brakhage's hand-painted works, R. Bruce Elder argues that *Mothlight's* "dynamic quality [is] closer to those of the painted films, as the entire contents of each frame varies from the next."[534]

---

[534] Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, 390.

The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth (1968)

An early exploration into "hypnagogic vision", Brakhage made *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* by layering several types of images and techniques into this 25-minute "long myth".[535] Brakhage's defined "hypnagogic vision" as "what you see with your eyes closed – at first a field of grainy. shifting, multi-coloured sands that gradually assume various shapes. It's optic feedback: the nervous system projects what you have previously experienced – your visual memories – into the optic nerve endings."[536] Brakhage reuses techniques first established in *Mothlight,* again glueing moth wings to celluloid. However, he expands his explorations of direct manipulation of the film; Brakhage draws directly onto the film, melts wax, and creates mould and crystals *but also* uses captured imagery to create this strange film which ultimately feels like an odd combination of *Mothlight* and *The Dante Quartet.*

Fireloop (1986)

Fireloop is the second in a series of films called *The Caswallon Trilogy.* The first and third films in the series, *The Aerodyne* (1986) and *Dance Shadows by Danielle Helander* (1986), respectively, are live-action films. *Fireloop* stands out in the trilogy as the only hand-painted or constructed film, as well as the only film with a soundtrack, which Joel Haertling arranged.

The Dante Quartet (1987)

The Dante Quartet (1987) was made by Brakhage hand-painting over previously recorded footage.[537] The film, which has a runtime of approximately six minutes and seven seconds, is broken into four distinct sections, each with its own sub-title. The four sections are 'Hell', 'Hell Spit Flexion', 'Purgation' and 'existence is song'.[538] Brakhage himself describes the film as an attempt at portraying "…hypnagogic vision created by these [- the four sections -] emotional states."[539]

Brakhage's notion of "hypnagogic" or "closed-eye" vision was a career-long obsession, but *The Dante Quartet* stands out because of the clear subheadings in the sections of the film, a use of language, in the traditional sense, which is unusual in Brakhage films beyond the title screen.[540]

---

[535] 'The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth'.
[536] Stan Brakhage quoted in 'All That Is Light'.
[537] Camper, 'By Brakhage'.
[538] *The Dante Quartet*, 1987.
[539] Stan Brakhage quoted at 'The Dante Quartet'.
[540] 'All That Is Light'.

Stellar (1993)

One of Brakhage's more well-known hand-painted films, *Stellar* finds a unique place among the films considered here due to the techniques used in the optical printing process and the collaborative relationship between the filmmaker and the optical printer.[541] Though hand-painted and edited, the film was then greatly further manipulated during the optical printing process to create many of the effects present, such as fades, variable footage speeds and "hold frames."[542]

Brakhage sought to portray celestial bodies and forms with this film and carefully notes not only his use of colour but also his use of colour in conjunction with the optical printing process. The optical printer, Sam Buch, even receives special credit at the end of the film; this is truly unusual at this stage in Brakhage's career, as most films are simply credited as "by Brakhage" or, occasionally, "SB" in a circle.[543]

Study in Color and Black & White (1993)

One of Brakhage's many experiments with hand-painting and optical printing, *Study in Color and Black & White*, stands out for its use of monochrome and colour in a single film, with no transition between the two states. This creates a unique point of interest for the study of this film.

First Hymn to the Night – Novalis (1994)

An interesting combination of the abstract expressionist style, common to Brakhage's films at this stage in his career, with the Harrisonian film-poem, *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* moves back and forth between hand-painted film cells and hand-scratched lines of text. The text contains lines from the poem of the same name (First Hymn to the Night) by German Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (who went by the pseudonym Novalis). However, the film does not contain every line.

Losing Context, Losing Poeticism

Of the films chosen for this chapter, a few have more context and representational imagery than the others. *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* (1968) and *Mothlight* (1964) contain the most representational imagery, and *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* (1994) contains

---

[541] Betancourt, 'Cinegraphic: Stan Brakhage's Film Theory & Visual Music'.
[542] Betancourt.
[543] *Stellar*, 1993.

the additional context of actual text. Of these, *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* contains the most traditional filmed imagery, despite Brakhage's (sometimes extreme) techniques of direct animation also employed in the film and one of Brakhage's most well-known films, *Mothlight*, uses an entirely different filmmaking style to achieve similar abstraction techniques as found in films like *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, discussed previously.

Mothlight provides little traditionally filmed context. However, using the method of construction to create specific framing, movement, and use of colour, Brakhage makes strong links to nature and death. The colour green makes a consistent appearance and is created by elements of nature like leaves and stems. Aside from some red tinting, apparently due to age, the film contains very little other colour and, even then, only uses green sparingly. Brakhage instead chooses mostly to move between different valuations of black and white. Considering this alongside Brakhage's own description of the film, "What a moth might see from birth to death if black were white and white were black,"[544] (which provides context not present in the film itself) it is increasingly intriguing that Brakhage chose only to use green.

Fred Camper points out that there is no noticeable reversal of black and white throughout the film, so it follows that green should be considered true green and not an inversion.[545] Green is commonly associated with nature for the obvious reason that it is ubiquitously found there.[546] Furthermore, green not only takes on the metaphorical representation of life but often also of death.[547] When combined with the stark blacks and whites predominant in the film, the use of green creates a 'cool' and emotionally detached tone rather than a "lively" one. This is enhanced by the way the plants and insect parts are deconstructed and then re-constructed in the frames, almost like vivisection.

However, this sense of detached mood heavily relies upon the viewer's experiences with the colours black, white, and green, and indeed death. To use Brakhage's own words, "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'?"[548] This allows the film to 'move' and change over time as a viewer revisits it. Certainly, my

---

[544] Stan Brakhage quoted in Camper, 'Mothlight and Beyond'.
[545] Camper.
[546] Kalmus, 'Color Consciousness', 143.
[547] Kenner, *Symbols and Their Hidden Meanings: The Mysterious Significance and Forgotten Origins of Signs and Symbols in the Modern World*, 13–14.
[548] Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 114.

personal experiences with the film indicate this. When I first saw the film, my predominant takeaway was that it was trying to create the sense of *being* a moth from a first-person perspective; this very much focuses on the "What a moth might see" part of Brakhage's description. My experience of the film has since become much more profound and much darker, considering more presciently the inclusion of words like "birth" and "death".

This subjectivity is intrinsic to the visuals of this film in a unique way because of the direct animation. Whereas in the films discussed in previous chapters, Brakhage has manipulated and abstracted the imagery using techniques like framing, transitions, scratching, or editing, in this film, he is manipulating the very thing that he is 'filming' before presenting it. Brakhage has not taken pictures of insects and plants; he has taken the actual things themselves, dismantled them and re-placed them onto the frame in an intentional way. In so doing, he abstracts the subject achieving a final result similar to the abstraction seen in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *The Text of Light* but with an entirely different technique. The resulting image is still representational, providing what Deren would call a 'layer of objectivity' against which abstraction and subjectivity can play. In doing so, Deren's model of poeticism still applies. The next film, *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth*, moves further into non-representational imagery.

The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth is described by Brakhage as "A long myth drawn directly onto the film's surface, which is painted, dyed, treated so that it will grow controlled crystals and mould…."[549] I note that this film was very difficult for me, to view, as I found it extremely triggering for my photosensitive epilepsy.[550] However, it is a worthy inclusion as it demonstrates techniques and themes in Brakhage's work that are present and more developed elsewhere and because it is useful in this 'testing' of Deren's model of film poetry.

The film features "bewildering abstract colors and shapes that vibrate with the rhythmic intensity of a great piece of music…" and eventually, the repeated image of a man appears, "…seem[ing] to emerge from the paint, while still contained within it."[551] Brakhage then begins directly applying moth parts to the film; it appears as though the man is continually

---

[549] 'The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth'.
[550] See Appendix II, 291
[551] Camper, *Seeking Brakhage*, 298.

and repeatedly consumed, eventually becoming monstrous.[552] Fred Camper includes this film as one of Brakhage's "Key 'main line' films…" in which Brakhage "sever[s the imagery] from previously predictable ways of knowing…explicitly undercutting any expectations…created by his previous work."[553]

This "severing" of the image relies heavily on the viewer's "previous…ways of knowing" to have full impact; however, the filmmaking techniques here account for a very broad understanding of what this could be. Most expectations for the filmed image of a man will involve other filmed imagery, such as further imagery of this man with new context – previous chapters have discussed how Brakhage used and twisted traditional filming techniques to create subjectivity. With a filmed or photographed image, this subjectivity can be somewhat restricted unless the image is abstracted entirely, as demonstrated in chapter three in films like *The Text of Light*. In this film, Brakhage introduces both non-representational and representational but abstract direct animation to create subjectivity and also to create and enhance the mood and tone.

Since Brakhage supplies a layer of objectivity that is universal – an image of a man (yes, the meaning and/or significance of such an image may shift from viewer to viewer, but even a very young child would be able to identify the image as a *person*) – the layers of subjectivity created by the direct animation have a context within which to operate. This arguably gives the film a stronger sense of tone and mood than it might if it lacked this objective layer, more easily enabling Deren's theory of poeticism to be applied. In the next film discussed, *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis,* Brakhage fully explores non-representational direct animation but provides written text throughout the film, which provides the needed 'layer of objectivity'.

One of the few films he made to contain any text at all, in *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis,* Brakhage adapted and paraphrased lines from German Romantic poet Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, pen name Novalis.[554] These lines appear on black, painstakingly scratched into each film cell. Due to the size of the film cell (16mm), this

---

[552] See Appendix II, 291
[553] Camper, 'Brakhage's Contradictions', 70.
[554] Versluis, *Pollen and Fragments: Selected Poetry and Prose of Novalis*, 9.

technique allows for only a few words at a time, and occasionally a line must be split into two shots.[555]

Hand-painted colours appear in between the shots of the hand-scratched text. The film moves between the text and colour sequences repeatedly and in a consistent pattern for the entire film, intrinsically linking each line of text to its following colour sequence. Because of this consistency, this research can look for and discern possible codes and/or metaphors in the use of colour. For instance, the opening line, "the universally gladdening light," is followed immediately by a sequence of blue and green colour dominance.[556] The blue and green colour takes up the largest part of the screen; however, both red and yellow are strongly evident in more than one frame. As Kalmus points out – "The modification of a positive color by the introduction of another hue modifies the mental reaction to the degree of the intensity of that hue which is introduced" - by using contrasting colours in such a way, Brakhage's use of red and yellow stands out.[557] Later in the film, the phrase "by stars" is followed by a predominantly yellow, brown, and/or gold sequence. Considering these two sequences together, it is logical that yellow and its hues represents light.

Furthermore, the colour blue appears to be a metonym for "the night", while red, pink, and orange represent "you" or "us" and "love". Interestingly, purple, a mix of red and blue, is linked to the word "soul". Additionally of interest, the phrase "infinite eyes" is followed by a sequence with no dominant colour that moves through the entire spectrum. The film, which runs approximately 2 minutes 57 seconds, moves from a cool colour dominance (mostly blue) when the text is grander and broader, speaking about the night and the universe, to a warm colour dominance (reds, oranges, pinks) as it magnifies its ultimate subject, which is the love between the speaker and the addressee.

This movement from broad to specific, cool to warm, occurs very precisely at the first moment of direct address ("and by (you)"). Until this point in the film, the poem appears to be in the third person as it ponders the state of the universe as celestial beings. However, the phrase "and by (you)" instigates a change in mood, with the sudden appearance of pink, red, orange, and white among the aforementioned blue. These colours again tie in with the direct

---

[555] *First Hymn to the Night - Novalis*, 1994.
[556] *First Hymn to the Night - Novalis*.
[557] Kalmus, 'Color Consciousness', 145.

address of the unknown person to whom the speaker pledges their love, as the phrase "in us" is followed by an almost identical colour theme.

Because of the highly unusual use of text, *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* makes clearer metaphorical connections than a film like *Mothlight.* The use of written language in this film contextualises the colours and creates the objective 'layer', which allows for Deren's 'layer of subjectivity'. Without this text, it would be impossible to make such strong links between the colours and specific words or themes – this would become entirely subjective within each viewer, which then, by its nature, is not a 'layer' but rather the entire experience. As this chapter continues, the following films contain less and less context from which a 'layer of objectivity' might be created.

Brakhage's film *The Dante Quartet* is broken into four sections - 'Hell Itself', 'Hell Spit Flexion', 'Purgation', and 'existence is song'. As stated in the film overview section, the four parts of the film are "inspired by the closed-eye or hypnagogic vision created by these emotional states."[558] Each section adopts a unique colour theme, though all four remain predominantly within the warm side of the colour spectrum. I will now overview each of the four segments of *The Dante Quartet in relative detail.* As there is very little representational imagery (some of the pre-recorded film is visible underneath the hand-painted direct animation, which will be pointed out), the primary focus of the descriptions will be on colour usage.

'Hell Itself', painted onto pre-recorded IMAX, opens with a multitude of colours with low value and intensity. Across the frame, a brownish-yellow hue dominates. Despite this, cool colours (greens and blues) are used, somewhat inconsistent with classical Western depictions of hell. After cutting to black, the film implements an overlay of cracked black lines that spider across the frame. The frame itself varies in colours but relies heavily on reds, oranges, and yellows, resulting in a grotesque, wound-like image that *is* more consistent with classic Western depictions of hell.

Aside from the thematic use of colour, what stands out about the first section of *The Dante Quartet* is the value and intensity of the predominant colours. Black, combined with the 'washed out' colour palette, provokes similarities to the *chiaroscuro* painting style, most

---

558 'The Dante Quartet'.

191

prominent during the Renaissance. The Renaissance provides many of the classic representations of both hell and Dante. *Chiaroscuro*, literally from the Italian for "light" (chiar) and "dark" (scuro), is a technique that uses dark and light spaces in a frame (typically, a canvas but, in this case, a film cell) to create contrast and draw the eye to certain areas of the frame.[559] The use of this technique solely appears in the segment 'Hell Itself'.

Film Still 5.1. *Washed out colours, lights and darks in The Dante Quartet[560]*

As the film continues into 'Hell Spit Flexion', it undergoes several major changes in format and colour theme. For example, Brakhage used 16mm instead of IMAX for the second part of the film. This section also uses pre-recorded footage which Brakhage then paints over, but in this case, the pre-recorded footage is far more visible. This section uses the most visible pre-recorded footage in the entire film.

While the pre-recorded footage is not readily identifiable, it does affect the colour profile of the segment. Shot handheld with the rapid, gestural 'flying camera' movement typical of Brakhage's cinematography, light creates a block of colour. One such instance that stands out is a short sequence of recorded footage resulting in an entirely blue frame. This use of a highly dominant cool colour stands out; in fact, much of the first half of the segment uses predominantly cool hues. However, as the segment progresses, there is a noticeable shift to

---

[559] 'Chiaroscuro'.

[560] *The Dante Quartet*, 1987.

warm hues (about halfway through), and these are likewise created using light sources on the pre-recorded film as well as by adding bright, bold paints in mostly red and orange.

Interestingly, this segment was released as a standalone film in 1983, also titled *Hell Spit Flexion,* and many of the notes have been adjusted using the print of that original film. The 1983 print's colours are more vibrant, whereas the transfer of *The Dante Quartet* has muted some of the colours, particularly in this segment. What is unclear is if this was intentional on Brakhage's part during the construction of *The Dante Quartet* (which included splicing in *Hell Spit Flexion*) or if it was an accidental by-product due to printing errors, stock changes, or other elements outside of his control.[561]

The third part of *The Dante Quartet*, 'Purgation', once again marks a dramatic shift in format and style. Brakhage used 35mm pre-recorded film for this, brushing heavy layers of paint over the top. The hue and value of the colours in this section result in darker, bolder forms, with the pre-recorded imagery just barely visible underneath, not usually recognisable. Though there's not a discernible pattern to Brakhage's use of colour here, this section makes a clear use of optical printing to freeze certain frames of paint and then fade them away to black; this technique repeats several times throughout the section. The combination of bold paint colours and the heavy use of black within the painted frames and the editing contributes to the most ominous tone of any of the four sections.

Though this section of the film begins with a cool blue-green colour dominance, this soon is replaced by a warm red-orange-pink dominance which continues for the remainder of the segment. As this shift in colour dominance occurs, so too does the pre-recorded footage underneath the painting become more noticeable. This creates the sense of a world just out of reach, one that we can see but not touch. In Brakhage's films, the initial cool dominance would typically represent the natural living world, as seen and discussed above regarding *Mothlight*. In this case, it fades away (literally) or 'dies' (figuratively) to be replaced by purgatory, represented by the swathes of bright, warm tones. Dante describes purgatory as the place where "the human spirit purges himself, and climbing to Heaven makes himself worthy."[562] This purging process is strife and a form of punishment for those who are sinners but not necessarily the

---

[561] See Appendix I Camper, An Interview with Fred Camper., 245-48
[562] 'The World of Dante'.

damned. It is long and arduous, but the obscured vision of the Promised Land (Eden) remains a constant motivator. This is reflected in the use of colour and layering.

The next and final segment of *The Dante Quartet* is entitled "existence is song", and like the first segment, this is produced using IMAX film stock. Like the segment representing "Hell Itself", this section representing heaven fills the screen in the same ratio, creating an immediate visual link between the two sections. Also similar to "Hell Itself," the visual presence of the pre-recorded imagery underneath the painting is limited and mostly obscured. In the two middle segments ("Hell Spit Flexion" and "Purgation"), the pre-recorded images are easily noticeable even when they are not readily identifiable. However, in this last segment, with limited exception, it is not clear whether there is any pre-recorded material.

The exception to this occurs briefly and results in identifiable images of water. At full speed, it appears to be a fountain; though slowing the footage down (to 1/4 speed), it appears to be a waterfall. The water appears underneath layers of red, orange, and yellow, though the edge of the frame contains layers of green and blue (probably using optical printing). This layering of cool tones under warm colours, and the shape of the water's movement at full speed, gives it the appearance of being a fountain made of fire. It creates a sense of life, force, and creation. This would contrast appropriately with the use of colour in "Hell Itself", where drab yellows and browns create the sense of rotting death.
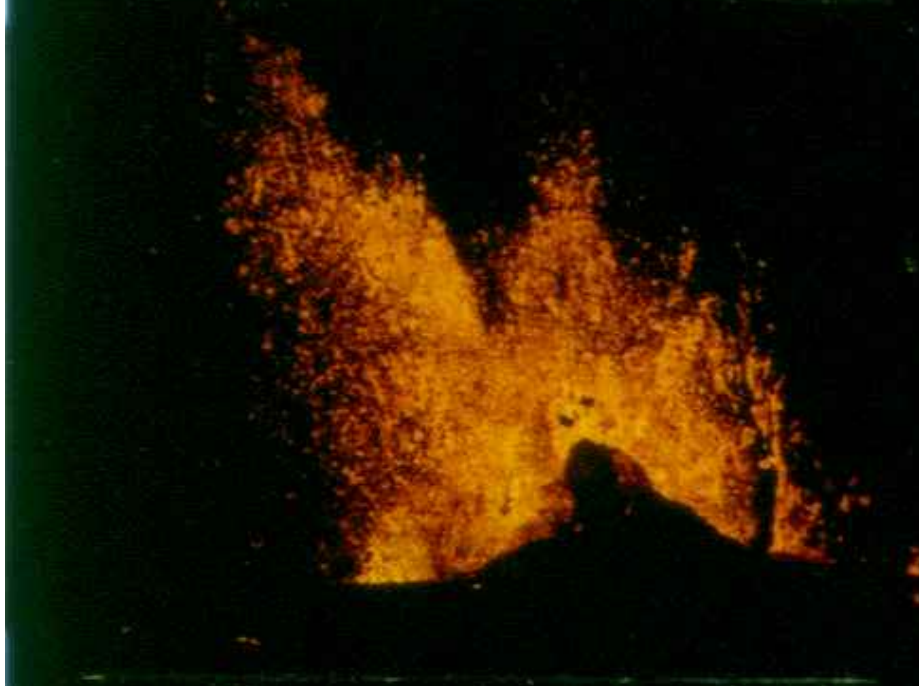
Film Still 5.2. *The "fountain of fire" in* The Dante Quartet[563]

      Symbolically, fire can be either destructive *or* creative, leading to its ubiquitous and varied use in myths and depictions throughout history. In "existence is song", the fire's red and orange hues are balanced by the greens and blues layered around it. Throughout the segment, the cool hues are linked to the natural world, even the universe. The opening frames are painted using entirely cool colours of blues and greens. The colours are optically layered with black paints and occasional reds and yellows, creating an image that looks like a planet viewed through the depths of space. Like the films *Stellar* and *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis,* Brakhage again uses a cool palette to indicate not only nature but the universe at large.

---

[563] *The Dante Quartet*, 1987.
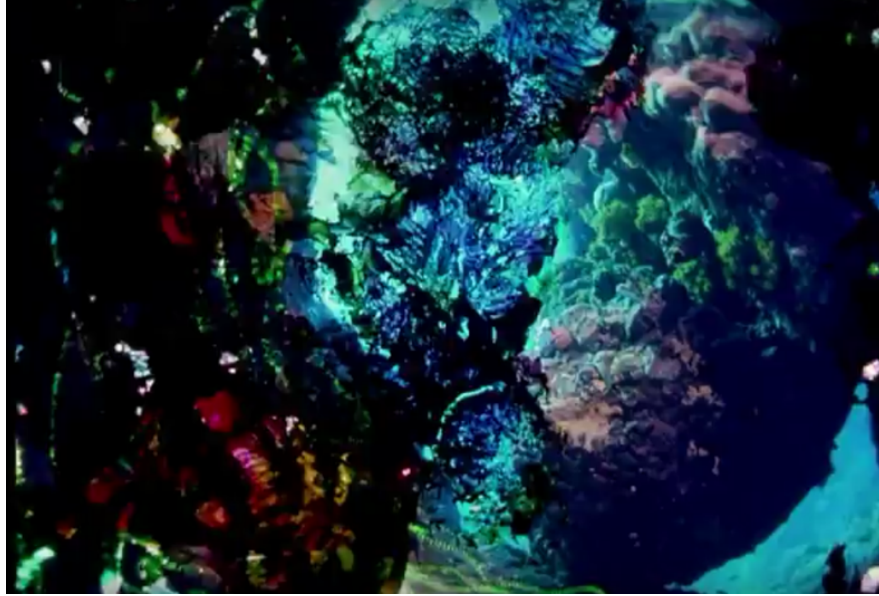
Film Still 5.3. *Cool colours look galactic in The Dante Quartet*[564]

Colour harmony causes "existence is song" to stand out among the four segments. There is no singular colour dominance in terms of 'cool' or 'warm', whereas the previous segments were all predominantly 'warm'. This segment moves fluidly between both, with neither 'family' of colours remaining dominant in the frame longer than the other. The use of colour in "existence is song" contrasts most directly with the other IMAX segment, "Hell Itself". Where the first segment used low-intensity and low-value warm tones to create almost grotesque abstractions, this segment uses both warm *and* cool colour tones and colours high in intensity and value to create bright, bold abstractions. Using both cool and warm colours gives this final segment a sense of equilibrium and peace that is not present in the previous segments. In a constant movement of colour, the cool hues interact with warm ones, though they always remain separate. There is a sense that the life force, represented by the warm tones, becomes harmonised with nature, represented by the cool tones.

The Dante Quartet primarily relies on the layering of painting and pre-recorded imagery. However, in certain instances, the optical printing becomes evident through Brakhage's use of overlapping, freeze-frames, and fades. Like the editing in *Mothlight*, the freeze-frame and fade in *The Dante Quartet* (often used in conjunction with one another) indicate more intention than chance. Brakhage emphasises certain painted frames in particular segments of this film through

---

[564] *The Dante Quartet.*

196

the freeze-frame and then fades them away. Freezing these images causes them to contrast greatly with the otherwise somewhat frenetic movement of paint elsewhere. It appears that Brakhage desires these images to, quite literally, resonate more, and this technique is used repeatedly in the segment "Purgation".

Meanwhile, the use of optical printing to overlap painted frames allows for colours to be 'mixed' on the frame without blending, resulting in more 'true' representations of those colours. This is particularly noticeable in "existence is song", where this overlapping allows for a wide spectrum of colour without the discolouration and 'browning' that is present in "Hell Itself" because of the blending of colours. Brakhage's unique use of optical printing in this film is interesting. He repeats the use of the same technique to achieve different effects and obtain various emotional responses.

In the above description of *The Dante Quartet*, I make several assessments regarding the use of colour and value and how this relates to the proposed theme of the four-part film. However, I wish to challenge my own descriptions. Except for very limited filmed imagery, only present in a short amount of the film's overall runtime, the only real context or 'objectivity' provided by *The Dante Quartet* is in its title and the titles of the four segments. 'Hell' tends to connote quite specific imagery within Western culture. To furthermore contextualise 'hell' with 'Dante' creates an even more specific depiction of hell. Would yellow and brown in 'Hell Itself' convey a sense of "rotting death" if it were called 'Autumn Foliage'? I highly doubt it.

This analysis of *The Dante Quartet* makes it even clearer to me that Deren's model of poetry in film *requires* context or a 'layer of objectivity' within which the 'layer of subjectivity' might operate. All analysis of the film directly correlates to the film's titles and the titles of the segments. I will continue to test this proposed limit of Deren's model by examining further direct animation films made by Brakhage. The following films provide less and less context within their titles, and unlike all the films discussed up to this point, none of the following films contain *any* representational imagery.

Brakhage's film *Stellar* employs 'cool' colours as a predominant theme. Except for the film's title (unusual in that it is typed out rather than hand-scratched), *Stellar* offers no representational links to the bursts of colour that seem to explode randomly around the screen.

Where *Mothlight* had identifiable objects, *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* links strongly to its text using montage editing techniques, and *The Dante Quartet* contained some representational imagery and relied on its powerful cultural context, *Stellar* simply plays, a firework-like display of painted colour very obviously not making concrete shapes. It begs the question: does the film even *have* its own tone, or is it created entirely by the individual's own thoughts on the title and meanings of different hues? Is just a title enough of an 'objective layer', and, in a similar issue presented with the above films, can we suitably rely on cultural understandings of properties such as colour to denote tone?

In analysing *Stellar,* hues of red are consistently noticeable, but blue remains the dominant colour throughout the film. Often other colours will be layered over a 'bed' of blue (which itself is embedded on an entirely black background) so that large swirls of warm colours like reds, oranges, and yellows appear engulfed in a larger, cooler surrounding. Despite the constant movement and changing of these secondary colours, the blue hues remain consistent throughout the film, dominated only by the black value of the frame at large.
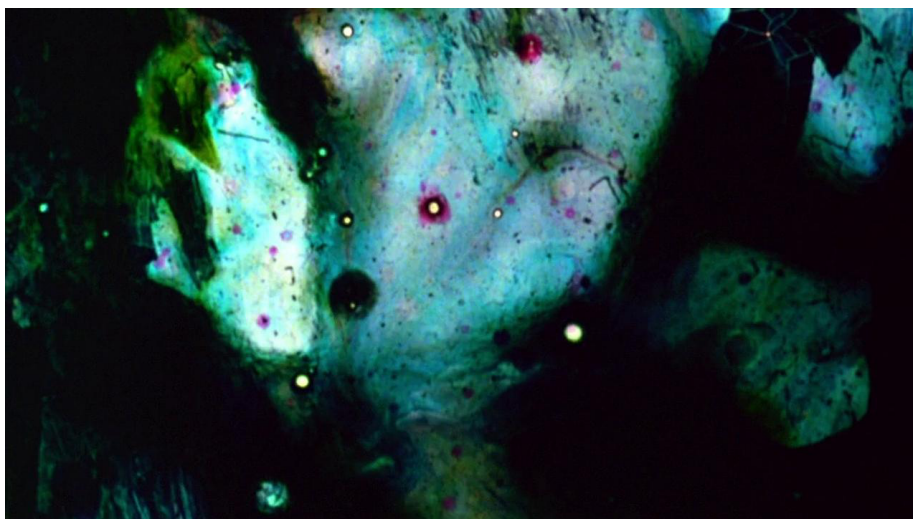
Film Still 5.4. *'Bed' of blue with star-like dots and warm tones in Stellar*[565]

The secondary colours (reds, oranges, yellows, etc.) will fade *over* the 'bed' or sometimes flicker at a rate that appears to be much faster than 24 frames per second. Occasionally the

---

[565] *Stellar*, 1993.

frame will freeze and quickly fade, giving the effect of the 'ghost' of an image on the eyes after a camera flash. These techniques were mainly accomplished through optical printing, and Brakhage credits Sam Bush of Western Cine as a collaborator and co-creator of *Stellar*. At the end of the film, Brakhage compares himself to a composer and describes Bush as a "visual musician", leading to a more synesthetic understanding of Brakhage's use of colour, as well as the film as a whole.

In the case of *Stellar*, Brakhage implies with the final credit that the images in the film are like the notes of a musical composition. Indeed, as Michael Betancourt discusses in his essay *Cinegraphic: Stan Brakhage's Film Theory & Visual Music*, the entire filmmaking process for *Stellar* bears remarkable similarity to the process of recording, mixing, and remixing a musical composition.[566] This coincides with the notion of a colour 'theme', which is blue in the case of *Stellar*. In the film, the colour blue is overlapped and sometimes interrupted by other colour 'interludes' created with the optical printing process. As a result, despite the silent soundtrack, the frame becomes bombarded with loud (a synesthetic property) colours throughout the short film.

Even considering Brakhage's use of synaesthesia – or sensory "crosstalk"[567] - as a visual metaphor, assigning a mood or tone to *Stellar* is almost impossible and relies heavily on an individual understanding of the title's meaning. The word stellar, from the Latin for star, has *three* different meanings.[568] Luckily, Brakhage clarified his intent: "The tone of the film is primarily dark blue, and the paint is composed (and re-photographed microscopically) to suggest galactic forms in a space of stars."[569] Without these clues, the film is a beautiful synesthetic experience, but one that lacks a sense of what Deren would describe as the 'vertical'. Even knowing the context, a sense of mood and tone is difficult to pinpoint.

Mood and tone are even more difficult to establish in the next film under consideration. In *Study in Color and Black & White,* Brakhage uses large amounts of negative space and employs a 'flashing' or 'flickering' technique of the colours. The film predominantly uses the colour red (though other colours are certainly used, as well) and uses both black and

---

[566] Betancourt, 'Cinegraphic: Stan Brakhage's Film Theory & Visual Music'.
[567] Taberham, *LESSONS IN PERCEPTION: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker as Practical Psychologist*, 153.
[568] 'Definition of STELLAR'.
[569] 'Stellar'.

white as points of stark contrast. The film's title reveals very little information, and Brakhage's own description offers little else:

> The title is almost the whole of any possible description of this hand-painted and photographically step-printed film which exhibits variably shaped small areas of colour (in a dark field) exploding into full frames of textured colour, interwoven with white scratch patterns that create a considerable sense of interior depth and three-dimensional movement.[570]

Study in Color and Black & White uses a 'burst' technique, not dissimilar to techniques seen in *Stellar*. However, instead of employing occasional 'bursts' or 'loud frames', this film slowly progresses from relatively infrequent 'bursts' of minimal colour, dwarfed in the frame by the relative amount of negative space (black), to much more frequent 'bursts' which also scale in size relative to the frame. The colours differ with each instance; red remains the primary dominant colour throughout, though blue and green both occasion the screen. As the film reaches its peak, with the most frequent and largest 'bursts', Brakhage begins implementing white and/or grey 'bursts'.

Brakhage's use of red as a dominant colour, in combination with the painting and editing technique employed, creates a very specific and recognisable type of hypnagogic vision – that which is representative of the 'afterburn' created on the eyes by a flash of light, particularly if the eye is closed. The light travels through the thin skin of the eyelid and turns red, highlighting the tiny veins which reside there. If the flash is bright and sudden enough, this image then remains in vision for a few moments even when the eye is re-opened. This attempt to portray the optic feedback of hypnagogic vision is effective as a visual metaphor.

However, unlike films discussed in previous chapters, such as *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black,* where alternative vision is not only expressed with visual metaphor but contributes heavily to the films' tone, mood, and overall poeticism (within Deren's model), in *Study in Color and Black & White* this expression of vision does not have the

---

[570] Stan Brakhage quoted on 'Study in Color and B&W'.

same effect. The metaphor sustains the entire length of the film. Thus, like *The Dante Quartet* and particularly *Stellar*, it lacks a 'setting' or 'layer of objectivity' with which to contextualise said metaphor. Thus, though the metaphor is expressed well visually, it does not contain the key component of Deren's model of poeticism in that the film does not explore "what it feels like or what it means" or otherwise "investigate" this metaphor; it is simply presented, without further comment or investigation.[571]

Meanwhile, *Fireloop* also sees Brakhage using optical printing to achieve a singular effect, this time repetition. Specifically, Brakhage repeats the same visual pattern of hand-painted colour. However, the soundtrack, which was explored in the previous chapter, does not loop in the same manner as the visual does. Brakhage takes a hand-painted sequence approximately eight to ten seconds long in this film and repeats it roughly thirty times. It is the second film in what is called *The Caswallon Trilogy*. The other two films of the trilogy (*The Aerodyne* and *Dance Shadows*) are both live-action and dance-oriented.

As discussed previously, the repetition of *Fireloop* (in combination with its soundtrack) creates an interesting and poetic dynamic. Like Gertrude Stein's famous, "A rose is a rose is a rose," the images of *Fireloop* are both the same and not the same.[572] Brakhage, quoted by R. Bruce Elder, once gave a lecture on how the reader could manipulate Stein's tautological poem to reveal multiple meanings:

> So the rose...is used in three basic symbol places: birth, sex, and death.
> (AROSE) Here we have a nice pun for birth, for something coming up; here
> we have his Eros, sex; and with a slight slur, we can get sorrows; with another
> slight slur we can get the connective, the thing that relates symbolically,
> arrows.[573]

---

[571] Maya Deren quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium*.

[572] Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, 214–17.

[573] Stan Brakhage quoted in Elder, 215–16.

A similar concept can be applied to *Fireloop,* a notion strengthened by the non-repetitive soundtrack which the repeated visuals are laid against. As an editorial choice, this intentional mismatch between the audial and visual aspects of the film leads to "slurs" in the reading of the film. As the picture repeats and the sound changes, the audio is relied upon more heavily to infer meaning, which is in constant flux. However, it is visually represented as identical, creating a film version of a type of homophone[574], a literary device in which two differently spelt words create the same sound.[575]

There is no need to re-explore the impact of the soundtrack on poeticism here; it has been discussed already. However, the reason I have chosen to include this film here, as well as in the previous chapter, is because it demonstrates very well the need for additional context when dealing with non-representational imagery to apply Deren's model of poeticism. Without the audio to create the altered meanings between each repetition of the visual, Brakhage's exploration of repetition would not have the same impact. It takes very close examination and repeated viewings, with a helpful hint provided by the film's title, to realise that the visual does, in fact, loop. If this looping were not accompanied by audio, and furthermore if Brakhage had even chosen also to loop the audio rather than keep it separate, *Fireloop* would not contain the 'investigative' qualities that it does; it would create a viewing experience more like watching *Stellar* or *Study in Color and Black & White.*

Conclusion

In exploring this selection of films, all of which include direct animation to some degree, I have established limitations and boundaries for applying Maya Deren's model of poeticism to films. Stan Brakhage's direct animation films were particularly useful in doing this because they are often entirely non-representational and thus lack an objective context within which to consider them. Crucially, stating such a limitation is *not* to argue that the films cannot be considered poetic by other means or models; this is simply to express a limitation of *Maya Deren's model of poeticism*, which, as demonstrated throughout the chapter, relies heavily on the objective.

---

[574] I propose calling this kind of device, an adaptation of the homophone for film, a homokine, "to move the same".

[575] 'Homophone - Definition and Examples of Homophone'.

Overall, this was an important inclusion in the research because the 'layer of objectivity' implied by Deren's description of a "layer of subjectivity" is so often taken for granted when dealing with representational films, even abstract ones. The iconic nature of the filmed image will intrinsically provide a layer of objectivity, even when that image is manipulated and abstracted. This connection to the objective is broken when dealing with the non-representational imagery made possible by animation (and in the case of the films under review in this chapter, direct animation).

By analysing the films in an order which places them from the most representational to the least, I have effectively demonstrated how Deren's model relies on objective context. Where the model not only allows for but relishes in abstraction, it falters when faced with non-representational work. Additionally, this chapter explores various ways that context and/or objectivity can be re-established when using non-representational methods, such as the text present in *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* and the use of audio in *Fireloop*.

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that the films under discussion here might be considered "entirely vertical". However, after considering the analysis, I no longer feel that is the case. Rather, I think to put it plainly, many of these films do not fit within Deren's provided model. For the films to be "entirely vertical", it would need to be a constant exploration of a feeling or meaning of a particular moment throughout the duration of the film(s), and based on the analysis, I do not think that is what is happening. These films explore experiences, modes of vision, and associations between colour and words and phrases, but the emotional experience of these explorations is guided more by the viewer than the film.

An important aspect of Maya Deren's model of poeticism is that there is no inherent perceived value in a film being considered poetic, and thus no loss of perceived value should a film *not* fit within her model. The limitations of the model expressed within this chapter show that it is very likely that when Deren proposed this model, she had in mind a particular kind of filmmaking which did not include the non-representational. Certainly, Deren's use of examples for how her model works are primarily not even from cinema but from literature (*Hamlet*), which would indicate that she was thinking of largely traditional storytelling. The fact that Deren's model is not particularly useful for considering non-representational work is not a failing on its part, simply a limitation that must be acknowledged.

Insofar as this affects viewing Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker, rather than disproving such a claim, it merely limits it. Some of the work discussed here, such as *Stellar* and *Study in Color and Black & White*, cannot easily be considered poetic by the framework set out in this thesis. However, they are synaesthetic and metaphoric, representing a particular type of vision, respectively. Meanwhile, a film like *The Dante Quartet*, despite its limited context and its similar exploration of 'hypnagogic vision', uses very similar techniques of colour and movement to instigate and investigate feelings surrounding the concept of hell, the afterlife, and existence itself – all of which are in relation to the objective context supplied by the titles. Such an investigation, which is not the recreation, attempted or otherwise, of an experience as is *Stellar* and *Study in Colour and Black & White*, allows *The Dante Quartet* to be considered poetic within Deren's model.

What began as a 'troublesome' chapter in my research ultimately has become one of the most helpful. A model without bounds is useless; this chapter engages with those boundaries and fleshes them out. Where I initially felt quite 'stuck' academically and unsure of how to apply Deren's concepts, I am now more confident in my conclusion that Deren's concepts do not necessarily apply to all these films. It highlights the need for further consideration and work to consider how to engage with films such as *A Study in Color and Black & White*, which don't neatly 'fit', and the need to explore in ways not outlined by Deren's model. Furthermore, films such as these show Brakhage's expansiveness as a filmmaker and the difficulty in viewing him as an author when using traditional concepts of authorship.

Conclusion

> Here we go up and down again.
>
>   -Dylan Thomas openly mocking Maya Deren, 1953[576]

In this research, I have posed a series of questions, the first and foremost of which is, "How can Stan Brakhage be understood as a poetic filmmaker?" Stan Brakhage has proven to be a challenging figure to engage with, especially when using traditional film theory. His wide-ranging exploration of different genres and techniques makes it tricky to assign a certain kind of filmmaking style to him. I have found that various filmmaking factions like to claim him as their own, whether it be documentarians, animators, or simply the vast category of experimental filmmakers. Regardless of these claims, the word that so often comes up concerning Brakhage's filmmaking is "poetic".

Therefore, it seemed appropriate to investigate Brakhage from multiple perspectives to determine how this notion of the "poetic" could be demonstrated throughout his varied career. To do so, I first needed to find and choose a model that could apply to Brakhage's films. This search led to the further research question, which extends the primary one by explicitly asking, "How can the model supplied by Maya Deren be used to create an understanding of Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker?" Additional questions were also raised, which were: " What are the traits of this model, and how does Brakhage's work exemplify them?", "What, if any, are the limits to this model and how does Brakhage's filmmaking test them?", "How might this model be

---

[576] Dylan Thomas quoted at *Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium.*

considered beyond Brakhage?", and finally, "Does this research identify Brakhage as a poet? If so, what is gained from identifying 'Brakhage' as a poet?"

Alternative models were acknowledged and briefly discussed in the introduction, but for this thesis, I chose to use Deren's model, as described by her in the Poetry and the Film Symposium in 1953. This choice provided an opportunity to illustrate how her model can be understood in more detail while allowing for a more in-depth understanding of Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker or even a poet. Deren could not fully elaborate on her ideas at this symposium, having been interrupted and mocked by other attendees (namely Arthur Miller and Dylan Thomas), and she died before publishing any further thoughts on the matter.

Deren's Model

Maya Deren's poetic model describes two types of "investigation" present within a film, the vertical and the horizontal. The horizontal is objective and narratively focused; it follows a traditional understanding of the passage of narrative time. The "horizontal investigation" is storytelling as it is most familiar to general audiences. Meanwhile, the vertical is ambiguous and may be thought of as "pausing" narrative time; the "vertical investigation" delves into "layers of subjectivity" or the feelings and emotions of a given moment or series of moments. The vertical is more concerned with mood and tone, whereas the horizontal is concerned with plot and narrative.

Deren's model was helpful for several reasons. First, there is no sense of inherent value implied by the vertical over the horizontal; Deren sees these as two facets of filmmaking. Second, Deren's model is expansive in that it allows for poetic moments in as much as it allows for poetic films in their entirety. Most films establish a sense of mood and tone throughout the exploration of their narrative. Deren's notion of pausing time allows for a way to separate this overall establishment of mood and tone from the intentional exploration of thoughts and feelings occurring outside or regardless of the passage of narrative time.

To fully explore how Brakhage could be understood as a poetic filmmaker using Deren's model, I decided to examine a wide range of his films, spanning as much of his entire career as possible. This decision presented a challenge in that Brakhage's filmmaking style and

approach varied greatly over this time (51 years). Still, it was an appropriate measure to ensure that my research contributed to rather than repeated claims about Brakhage. Despite his filmmaking's generic and technical expansiveness (or perhaps because of it), some of Brakhage's work tends to be overlooked within existing scholarship. I wanted to make a concerted effort to consider films that could be more widely known. I chose to balance this by also including films which have been more discussed, but I approached them in new ways.

My initial thought was to separate films by genre – psychodrama, documentary, and two categories of experimental ('recorded abstract' and 'constructed abstract'). This format only bears a passing resemblance to the final structure that I ended up using after realising several issues with this layout. I was first being too restrictive, particularly by narrowing down the narrative film to 'psychodrama'. Secondly, this structure required an exploration into genre studies that I did not feel was necessary to answer the main research question. Thirdly, as I continued my research, it became clear that there were aspects of Brakhage's filmmaking that I wished to explore in depth that did not adhere to generic categorisation.

After much trial and error, I ended up with the chapter categories present by carefully considering the best way to explore this poetic model through Brakhage's films. It then became clear that I wished to explore aspects of *how* this poetic model worked using Brakhage's films, and this led me to the broad individual chapter subjects of narrative, documentary, sound, and direct animation. Where my initial approach had been more concerned with considering Brakhage as a different type of filmmaker in each of these categories (i.e., Brakhage as a narrative filmmaker, Brakhage as a documentarian, Brakhage as an experimental filmmaker, etc.), I feel that the approach I ended up using is more holistic, choosing instead to assess the devices specific to each chapter subject and how Brakhage did or did not use these devices for poetic effect. This approach to Brakhage as a poet/author/artist is less fragmented and has allowed for overarching themes in his work to become more prominent in the analysis, albeit demonstrated in various ways.

Developments on Deren's Theory, Using Brakhage

In working with Deren's theory across my research, certain critical aspects of her model became apparent. First, the model is most applicable when examining narrative cinema (not to be confused with fictional storytelling vs factual). Chapter two demonstrates well how Deren's concept of film poetry can be applied in narrative cinema, both within and outside of

convention. Second, while Deren's notion of "pausing time" is a significant indicator of poeticism, greater weight should be placed on explorations in subjectivity. The 'ideal' poeticism combines these two components, but this is not exclusive. This non-exclusivity is demonstrated throughout the thesis but most clearly in chapter three regarding *Sirius Remembered*. Third, abstraction is allowed and even embraced by the model; however, it fails when presented with purely non-representational work. This point is explored across chapters three and five, though most thoroughly examined in chapter five. Finally, while the model is based mainly on visuals, chapter four shows how audio can be a formidable tool for poeticism and should not be discounted. I will now explore these points in more detail.

Chapter two showed how Brakhage was able to incorporate poeticism or "vertical attacks" into conventional storytelling and that he essentially did this by subverting traditional techniques. This demonstration allows for extrapolation to the broader conventional cinema. It shows that traditional narrative films, even if they rely on convention, can contain both the vertical and horizontal within their "investigations". The fluidity of the model that she described becomes very apparent through the analysis of this chapter; it is easy to see how this applies to more conventional filmmaking, even Hollywood or similar large-scale release cinema. I hypothesise that the kind of filmmaking under discussion in chapter two – broadly experimental narrative cinema – is what Deren had primarily in mind when she proposed her ideas; this is most like her most well-known work, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. It, therefore, makes sense that the model seems to work relatively well concerning these films.

This chapter illustrates the broad spectrum of poetic cinema by exploring a series of films ranging in experimentation levels from almost none to more extreme, at least within a narrative concept. The analysis in this chapter further demonstrated a critical aspect of Deren's theory - that traditional cinema can and does incorporate characteristics of poetic cinema within it, sometimes only momentarily. This chapter demonstrated the fluid capabilities of the model; each film featured both poetic devices and conventional narrative techniques.

For instance, this chapter used *Interim* to show how a conventional film, using continuity editing and a straightforward narrative such as you might find in mainstream or "Hollywood" cinema, can adopt aspects of "vertical investigation" and yet remain predominantly "horizontal" and/or conventional. I discussed how Brakhage used point-of-view shots in a largely conventional manner but maintained a strong sense of ambiguity

regarding the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This exemplifies how poetic moments or vertical attacks can appear even in the most conventional settings. Meanwhile, my analysis of *The Way to the Shadow Garden* demonstrated how less conventional films might still be predominantly horizontal or narratively driven but can implement "vertical" techniques which create ambiguity, shift the overall focus towards the mood and tone rather than the storyline, in some instances manipulate the sense of narrative time, and create a sense of alternate reality or vision. The analysis of *Reflections on Black* also supported Deren's idea of momentary "vertical investigation" but elucidated how a 'moment' can be elongated. I showed how the film's predominant plot is paused while the main character's 'heightened' or inner vision explores his emotional state within the three vignettes showcased in the film.

The analysis of the films in chapter three showed a consistency in Deren's model from the previous chapter in that it most easily 'works' with films which have a semblance of narrative and can be readily contextualised. The films included here push further away from the slightly more accessible experimental narrative filmmaking found in the first chapter and see Brakhage more deeply exploring abstraction techniques. Additionally, this chapter included two films that were 'difficult' (though notably possible) to apply Deren's model. The model's apparent boundaries and flexibilities began to reveal themselves in this chapter.

In this chapter, I suggested that Deren's notion of "pausing" time to pursue a vertical investigation might be considered an ideal aspect rather than a strict requirement. This conclusion resulted from the comparative analysis of *The Wonder Ring, The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes, The Text of Light,* and *Sirius Remembered.* I showed how each of *The Wonder Ring, The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, and *The Text of Light* manipulated and discarded a traditional sense of narrative time in favour of using devices like subverted editing convention, repetition, and abstraction, respectively. I discuss that, in so doing, the distorted sense of narrative time in these films heavily contributes to their mood and tone and the overarching vertical attack undertaken in each.

I then point out that *Sirius Remembered* appears to have a much more conventional, albeit condensed, approach to narrative time and that while it uses similar a repetition device found in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, it does not create the same sense of narrative confusion. There is undoubtedly a greater emphasis on mood and tone than narrative in *Sirius Remembered.* Decomposition is not the film's focus, nor is it intended to be. As a nostalgic

experience, it aims to recreate the life a much-loved pet once lived while separating itself from mourning and death. This nostalgia is a central theme of the film, both in its approach and viewing, but is not achieved through a distortion of narrative time or subversion of cinematic narrative conventions. Despite its unconventional editing, the film maintains a sense of time and place. The analysis of *Sirius Remembered* was one of the first indications of the need for flexibility in Deren's model.

The exploration of *The Text of Light* began to show further potential limits or flexibilities required for Deren's model. While the abstraction techniques discussed in *The Wonder Ring, The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes,* and *Sirius Remembered* are easily contextualised within the films, this is different regarding *The Text of Light*. I showed how this film uses extreme close-up and defocus to abstract its subject fully. One of the most abstract films Brakhage made through traditional live-action means, *The Text of Light* loses almost all context due to the extreme abstraction methods. However, because it is filmed and therefore known that the camera must be fixed on *something*, the search for contextualisation drives this film in a way not found in Brakhage's direct animation films. Ultimately, the film's subject is light and the ability of the film technology to capture this uniquely. I discuss how this can result in pareidolia - as different viewers seek to restore the lost context, they may see any one of hundreds or thousands of representations within the light. Nevertheless, unlike in fully non-representational work, an objective context exists in *The Text of Light*; however, it is entirely buried under 'layers of subjectivity'. I explore this relationship between context and abstraction, between objectivity and subjectivity more deeply in chapter five and discuss this in more detail in the section regarding limitations.

Finally, by undertaking an in-depth aural analysis of several of Stan Brakhage's sound films, I explored the power of sound as a poetic device in cinema beyond the specifics of Brakhage's oeuvre. I determined that this power comes from audio's ability to both enhance and create a sense of mood and tone (exploring "what it feels like") and also audio's ability to create a sense of subjectiveness ("layers of subjectivity") in an otherwise usually iconic medium. As a bastion of poetic subjectivity, audio is one of a filmmaker's most powerful items in their toolkit. It is most effective when it does not merely reflect the imagery to the viewer, as it does in *Interim* and, to a lesser extent, *Flesh of Morning*, but rather when it projects its own meaning, independent of the image, as it does in *Reflections on Black, The Way to the Shadow Garden, Fire of Waters,* and especially in *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises.*

Traits of the Model - Brakhage's Poetic Devices

Throughout the thesis, I engage with a variety of different devices which Brakhage used for poetic effect. Namely, these are abstraction (and this is further broken down into the subcategories of visual abstraction and aural abstraction), the use of perspective/point-of-view shots, transitions (especially dissolves) and subverted conventional editing, and lastly, self-reflexive mise-en-scène, editing, and aural design. Certain chapters focus more intently on individual devices (such as chapter two), whereas others are more of a broad exploration of technique (like chapter four). In many instances, it is the use of these devices which results in the manipulation of time.

Arguably, the most used device throughout Brakhage's work is abstraction, whether it is visual or aural. In chapter three, I showed how *The Wonder Ring* and *The Text of Light* used defocus to create abstraction, whereas *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered* more notably used extreme close-ups to accomplish the same. I discussed how juxtaposing abstracted and contextualised shots in the films *The Wonder Ring, The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes,* and *Sirius Remembered* creates a dreamlike quality and nostalgia. The most abstract of the films, *The Text of Light*, completely loses any concept of its original subject matter. There is the opportunity to engage in deep and personal reflection when viewing the film - control over what the images signify is at its height - but meaning can also be lost. As opposed to this, Brakhage's extreme close-ups in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered* still preserve a sense of the subject matter. The contrast between defocus and in-focus/concrete imagery in *The Wonder Ring* facilitates the same effect.

To show the broad application of abstraction as a poetic device, I also applied a similar analysis to a fictional narrative film, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him.* This late Brakhage film uses the same techniques as the four poetic documentaries discussed above and demonstrates that these poetic techniques of abstraction are not limited to the documentary genre. It has the same extreme defocus found in *The Text of Light* but is grounded in more tangible imagery. The film also uses extreme close-ups, as seen in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered*. Like in those films, extreme close-ups create 'new' images from the subjects they photograph. Where in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* and *Sirius Remembered*, this technique distances the viewer from the subject of death, in *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, these close-ups invite viewers to engage in the film's quiet

contemplation, reinforced through wide, concrete shots juxtaposed with defocused close-ups (the play between objective and subjective).

These two techniques of abstraction (extreme close-up and defocus) are used effectively in all five films, emphasising mood and tone over plot and narrative. These visual techniques contribute to each film's "vertical"/poetic approach. Meanwhile, the aural analysis of *The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black,* and to a greater extent, *Fire of Waters, Fireloop,* and *Loud Visual Noises* showed how audio could be used not just as a supportive device of a narrative but as a tool of abstraction. In these films, the audio is entirely separated from the visuals, and in this way, it is abstracted. The progression from his early to late career showed how Brakhage became ever more intentional in using audio as its own device rather than as an element to support visuals. *The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black* made for fascinating inclusion because they showed how, early in his career, Brakhage began moving away from convention and started to explore using audio not just to support and develop the mood and tone but to establish it. Much of the vertical investigation in these films *depend*s upon sound use.

Then, moving towards mid-career, in *Fire of Waters*, I was able to show that Brakhage used audio in such a way as to bring attention to the viewing process and the physicality of the medium, much in the same way he used abstraction in *The Text of Light* to accomplish a similar feat. I could do so largely thanks to the archival and restorative work previously done by Mark Toscano. This meant I not only analysed this film through intensive close viewing but also looked at the construction of the original print itself and was able to draw conclusions using both methods. Where in *The Text of Light,* Brakhage created an interplay between the abstracted imagery (the 'layers of subjectivity') and the object that was filmed originally (an ashtray, the objective), in *Fire of Waters,* there is an interplay between what is seen (the objective) and what is heard ('layers of subjectivity'), which do not match or sync.

I then showed how Brakhage progressed his use of sound even further towards the latter part of his career, looking at *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises*. These films showed how audio might be understood as poetic even in non-representational filmmaking (both films are direct animations). Where in *Fire of Waters*, the interplay between objective and subjective was created through the contrast between the visual and audio as well as through audio manipulation/abstraction, in *Fireloop* and *Loud Visual Noises,* there is no objectivity within the

212

imagery. The interplay comes entirely from within the audio, which is heavily manipulated in both films by composer Joel Haertling.

I argued that Brakhage used intentional aural design to achieve the vertical investigation described by Deren. I showed that this was done through *either* its inclusion or exclusion. I chose to adopt a novel approach, considering not only how sound might be thought of within Brakhage's known 'sound films' but how sound might be considered in the broader context of Brakhage's work. In this chapter, I argued that, despite only completing 27 'sound films' in a traditional sense, serious consideration is needed about whether the larger body of Brakhage's work should be considered, as it generally is, silent.

The chapter showed how films like *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning* adopt more conventional audio uses, specifically the film score, but that such uses can and should still be considered a poetic use of sound. From a visual standpoint, both films adopt a horizontal approach, despite various visual techniques and devices that momentarily explore and touch upon the vertical. However, each film draws heavily on its use of score to develop mood and tone, and it is from within the score these films delve most deeply into subjectivity, which then interplays with the visuals and the relative objectivity established there. The analysis of these films showed how such a notion of the poetic can be found even within (more) conventional filmmaking.

Both *Interim* and *Flesh of Morning* were also discussed in chapter two, where the argument focused mainly on the specific techniques of perspective and point-of-view shots, and transitions. Through the analysis of those two films as well as *The Way to the Shadow Garden, Reflections on Black,* and *Blue Moses,* I showed that by subverting the conventions established around these techniques, Brakhage created poetic moments or moved vertically in relatively otherwise horizontal filmmaking. This was evident in the analysis of perspective shots, dissolves, and negative film stock. It is noted that this interplay between convention and subversion is similar to the interplay discussed around abstraction between the objective (contextualised shots) and subjective (abstracted shots).

In my analysis of *Interim* and *The Way to the Shadow Garden*, I present arguments for how poeticism might develop gradually, or what I call a "diagonal" attack. With continuity editing and a straightforward narrative, as often found in mainstream or "Hollywood" cinema, *Interim* shows how conventional films can take on aspects of "vertical investigation" through their use

of point-of-view and perspective and become poetic while still pursuing narrative. At the same time, *The Way to the Shadow Garden* shows how an even less conventional film might still be predominantly horizontal rather than completely shifting vertically but continues to subvert the use of point-of-view shots. *Blue Moses* illustrates how these techniques can be subverted to extremes, resulting in a film with limited horizontal exploration and intense subjectivity. The analysis of *Blue Moses* also shows Brakhage using dissolves in a similar way that was seen in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* (to expand or pause rather than compress narrative time). This subverted use of the dissolve in both films created "layers of subjectivity" (an aspect of vertical investigation) in quite a literal fashion. The inclusion of *Blue Moses* shows that even clumsier attempts at achieving vertical attacks or investigations are still valid – it highlights the lack of implicit value in this model of film poetry.

Meanwhile, *Reflections on Black* shows moments of full "vertical attack"; Brakhage uses perspective and point-of-view to enter its three vignettes, each with its own unique character perspective and each occurring 'between' moments of narrative time, effectively creating a 'pause'. In *Reflections on Black,* Brakhage subverts point-of-view and perspective even further, using direct animation techniques to scratch onto the film surface. The act is intensely self-reflexive and creates a "pure mental image."[577] Additionally, the analysis of *Flesh of Morning* demonstrated the use of film negative to achieve a similar effect – a subversion on mise-en-scène and perspective to indicate an altered state of mind and/or altered vision, entirely from within the character's perspective – whilst ultimately conveying a relatively straightforward narrative in the film overall. Brakhage's use of film negative in *The Way to the Shadow Garden* achieved a similar effect, subverting both mise-en-scène and perspective. The use of film negative (which is both medium-specific and unconventional) is another example of self-reflexivity used for poetic effect.

Self-reflexivity as a poetic device became a continued theme across my examinations of Brakhage's work. This is evidenced throughout the chapters – not just in the use of film negative in *The Way to the Shadow Garden and Flesh of Morning*, and the use of scratches in *Reflections on Black*, but also in discussions around perspective and direct address in *Blue Moses*, and the inward facing meditativeness of the abstractions found in *The Text of Light*. However, it

---

[577] Matias, 'Current Problems of Film Theory', 48.

is perhaps most thoroughly discussed regarding the paradoxical-sounding topic of Brakhage's sound work in his silent films.

At the end of chapter four, I raised questions about considering Brakhage as a silent filmmaker, even when viewing those films made without soundtracks (most of his film work). Removing the natural ambient noise of a projector or Steenbeck can entirely alter the viewing experience. It negatively impacts the self-reflexivity of each film when the projector sound is removed, whether through an isolation booth or viewing them digitally. To demonstrate this, I looked at *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light*, two films heavily concerned with film technology and viewing experience. When a projector or Steenbeck is used (including those instances where I added this back into the films artificially), it leads to a more self-reflexive viewing of the films. A vital part of the film experience is lost when this sound is removed from a digital transfer. In doing so, the films' self-reflexive nature becomes less apparent. Despite their differences, ambient audio is used in *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light* in line with Deren's concept of vertical investigation. It makes these films self-reflexive outside the confines of narrative storying, instead investigating the layered meaning found within the films.

As a result, Brakhage's status as a primarily silent filmmaker is appropriately challenged and successfully rebutted. Assigning such an attribute to Brakhage suggests he did not pay much attention to audio. However, the analysis and research here demonstrate the complete opposite. Brakhage considered audio more carefully and understood its artistic power better than most filmmakers, realising that sound - even in its absence - can alter how a viewer perceives an image. There can sometimes be the appearance of random disorder in Brakhage's work; however, his careful and delicate approach to audio and appreciation of its potential shows his mastery over perceived chaos.

Limitations of the Model

In this thesis, I explored films which demonstrated the need for flexibility in Deren's model, such as *Sirius Remembered*. I also encountered points where the analysis of a film pushed the limits of what Deren's model could adequately account for, such as with *The Text of Light*. The final chapter of my research, which focused on direct animation, fully encounters the limits of Deren's model and engages with its usefulness in approaching certain kinds of films (in particular, the non-representational). It proved to be the most exciting chapter.

It became evident throughout this research that Deren's model, while mainly concerned with subjectivity, relies heavily on objectivity and juxtaposes these two poles to create its definition of poetry. This was borne out in the analysis of films up to this point. Then, when I set out to apply the model to Brakhage's direct animation films, I found myself frustrated. The model was not working in the same way it had for previous chapters, and try as I might, approaching it from various angles, I could not force it to. That was when I had a bit of a "lightbulb" moment; forgiving the tautology, the model did not work with these films because *it does not work with these films*. I was then able to pivot my focus.

In chapter five, I explored a selection of films, all of which include direct animation to some degree. In so doing, I established limitations and boundaries for applying Maya Deren's model of poeticism to films. Stan Brakhage's direct animation films were instrumental in exploring this because they are often entirely non-representational and thus can lack an objective context within which to consider them. I suggested early on that these films could be considered "entirely vertical," which would have allowed them to become included in Deren's model and for me to claim them as poetic. However, it became clear throughout the research for that chapter that this hypothesis needed to be revised and that many, if not most, of these films simply do not 'fit' within Deren's provided model. These films explore, at different points, experiences and perceptions, metaphors for ways of seeing and viewing, and associations between colour and words. However, in many cases, the emotional experience of these explorations, which is key to Deren's model, is guided more by the viewer than the film, and this is due to the lack of context provided by the films themselves.

Where in other instances, like with *Sirius Remembered* and *The Text of Light*, the model could be 'stretched' and, with some flexibility in interpretation, still apply, there was not enough context in a film like *A Study in Color and Black & White*, even when considering the biographical information and insight provided by Brakhage himself. This final chapter became a critical inclusion in the research overall because the 'layer of objectivity' implied by Deren's description of a "layer of subjectivity" can easily be taken for granted when dealing with representational films, even abstract ones. The iconic nature of the filmed image will provide a layer of objectivity, even when that image is manipulated and abstracted, such as seen previously with films like *The Text of Light*. This iconic connection to the objective is broken

when dealing with the non-representational imagery made possible by animation (specifically, in the case of the films under review in the last chapter, direct animation).

This chapter demonstrated how in films like *Mothlight, The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth,* and *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis,* Brakhage maintains a juxtaposition between the objective and subjective through various devices. Each adopts a different method: in *Mothlight*, despite its deconstructed nature, the insect wings, plants, and flowers are still readily identifiable, while *The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth* uses traditionally filmed footage of a man, and *First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* uses written text. I then showed how a film such as *The Dante Quartet* relies on cultural understandings and relationships to its title and subtitles to establish an objective context for its colour themes and movements to explore fully the subjective, emotive experience conveyed in the film. This was tested even further by the films *Stellar* and *Study in Colour and Black & White*, which both provide such limited context that it becomes nearly impossible to consider the films using Deren's model. While they can be seen as metaphoric for various experiences or visions, I could not argue that they investigated "what this means or what it feels like."[578]

Restating that one of the most critical aspects of Maya Deren's model is its disinterest in assigning value is vital. According to Deren, no inherent perceived value results from considering a film as poetic. Therefore, it naturally follows that should a film not be considered poetic, it suffers no loss of perceived value. Crucially, this is *not* to argue that the films cannot be considered poetic by other means and models but rather to express a limitation of Maya Deren's model of poeticism, which, as was demonstrated throughout the chapter, very heavily relies on the objective.

There is a lingering question of why Deren did not make allowances for non-representational films when she proposed her model. Aside from the immediate (and arguably sexist) backlash that Deren faced, the model's limitations expressed within this chapter show that it is very likely that she had in mind a particular kind of filmmaking and that this did not include the non-representational. Deren's use of examples for how her model works are primarily from literature (*Hamlet*). This indicates that she was thinking of largely traditional storytelling, and this is supported by the work in earlier chapters, where applying the model

---

[578] Maya Deren quoted in Sitney, 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium'.

was far less of an issue than understanding it. This is not a weakness of the model, simply a limitation that must be acknowledged.

Insofar as this affects viewing Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker, rather than disproving such a claim, it merely limits it. Some of the films discussed here, such as *Stellar* and *Study in Color and Black & White*, cannot readily be considered poetic by the framework set out in this thesis. They are synesthetic and metaphoric, representing a particular type of vision, but within Deren's model, they are not poetic. Meanwhile, despite its limited context, a film like *The Dante Quartet* uses very similar techniques of colour and movement to instigate and investigate feelings surrounding the concept of hell, the afterlife, and existence itself – all of which are in relation to the objective context supplied by the titles. Such an investigation, which is not the recreation, attempted or otherwise, of an experience as is *Stellar* and *Study in Colour and Black & White*, is what allows a film like *The Dante Quartet* to be considered poetic within Deren's model and thus shows Brakhage to be a poetic filmmaker.

Beyond Brakhage and Future Research/Unexplored Pathways

Beyond Brakhage and Future Research

After reflecting on this thesis, there are several ways the work can be applied beyond Brakhage and several avenues for future research. As I have indicated in previous chapters, my attempt to identify Brakhage's poetic devices within his films can also be seen as an attempt to identify poetic devices in general. Deren's model can be applied to a wide range of filmmaking approaches and is not limited to the experimental. Additionally, the devices discussed in the narrative and documentary filmmaking chapters are not *necessarily* genre-specific, and their use and understanding should be seen as potentially overlapping.

There is room for further exploration of narrative conventions and applying Deren's poetic model. The techniques I chose to analyse were the most evident across the selection of films. There was a need to be focused because I felt strongly about discussing multiple films and wanted to have not only a sense of the poetic use of these conventions but also a sense of *Brakhage's* use and what this said about him as a filmmaker and artist. However, I do not claim to have created an exhaustive list of poetic devices seen in narrative filmmaking, but rather a

building block for further exploration of how the poetic appears and functions in and around convention. I think quite interesting work could be done looking at more 'mainstream' films, drawing comparisons, and exploring how Deren's model applies within a Hollywood or 'blockbuster' current release.[579]

Chapter three highlighted how the qualities of a poetic film might be expressed in documentaries. Like in the chapter before it that focused on narrative, chapter three demonstrated a fluidity in using these techniques, with some films dipping in and out and others using them consistently. This showed how, like the techniques analysed in the chapter focused on narrative, the techniques analysed here are *not* restricted to experimental cinema but that the analysis may be extrapolated and applied beyond this. While this chapter showed that Brakhage might indeed be considered a poetic documentarian, in examining what techniques he used that made his documentaries poetic, it was shown that these were not documentary-specific. They may be drawn out and applied to the broader filmmaking community, including non-factual filmmaking. This was shown by adding a fifth film at the end of the chapter, *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him*, a fictional film made late in Brakhage's career.

I would also like to see more research done on those of Brakhage's 27 sound films I did not include. For instance, while I chose not to focus on dialogue and thus excluded *Blue Moses* and *Faustfilm: An Opera* from this chapter, they are worth further consideration in the wider context of Brakhage and his use of audio. I also think that more reconsideration could be done with many of Brakhage's 'silent' films. I examined two 'silent' films, both self-reflexive and relatively well-known. Further exploration into some of the lesser-known films without audio, or ones which are perhaps not as overtly self-reflexive, might reveal hidden layers of self-reflexivity in his work. For instance, attempting the same 'restoration' of ambient noise to a film like *The Wonder Ring* might make for fascinating results, given the subject matter of a rail line and the rhythmic similarity between train clacking and a running projector. There is much scope for further work based on the research set out in this chapter.

Furthermore, much of this analysis regarding the relationship of audio to the poetic (within Deren's model) may be applied beyond Brakhage and experimental film. Additionally, it is worth considering other filmmakers who, like Brakhage, created work using some of the

---

[579] I immediately think of a moment like the end credits of *Call Me By Your Name*, where one could argue that narrative time and screen time pass independently.

techniques described here. Especially those filmmakers who were/are making 'silent' films and showcasing or distributing them in similar manners may benefit from an analytical technique like the one applied to *Mothlight* and *The Text of Light,* where the ambient projection sound was re-added to view the film. While the chapter is highly successful, there is scope for further research and improvement. I began this angle of investigation as a section within another chapter before eventually realising that I had enough material to explore to warrant a chapter on its own. What became apparent was that the entire thesis could have focused solely on the content of this chapter.

Unexplored Pathways

An ongoing concern will always be whether there are other films I could have included. Bluntly, that answer is a resounding "yes." With a filmmaker like Brakhage and the amount of work he made, there will almost always be more films that could illustrate a point. While I am pleased with the films I chose to include, I had to leave out some films which would have bolstered the overall thesis. This was due to a variety of reasons.

For instance, a film that could have been usefully included in the analysis was *Faustfilm: An Opera*. If I included this film, it would have added to the chapters on both narrative and sound. It was made late in Brakhage's career compared to the films discussed, it is a rare example (like the included films) of Brakhage working with actors and included dialogue, and it is unique in that it is an adaptation of existing work (Goethe's *Faust*). However, due to the minimal availability of the film (archives only), my budget (both monetarily and temporally), and the film's length, I could only view the film once. My notes and memory of the film were insufficient for analysis.

An area of Brakhage's documentary work I could have looked at is the large corpus of 'home movie' films. These films featured Brakhage, his family, and his friends and were a significant area of interest for Brakhage throughout the late 1950s, the 1960s, and into the 1970s. Some films are relatively well known, such as *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), Brakhage's somewhat infamous birth film featuring the birth of his daughter. While *Sirius Remembered* could be considered part of this work, I largely stayed away from these films in my thesis, so further work could be done in analysing them using the same poetic model applied here. One of the main reasons I avoided these films is that they raised a big question of authorship. Brakhage's then-wife Jane Wodening occasionally acted as a camera operator for

several of them.[580] While this is a highly worthwhile area to explore, I did not have the space within my thesis to do such an exploration justice. It would make for important further research.

As I stated previously, I found the final chapter particularly challenging – the most challenging of all. This chapter unfolded in fits and starts; I would begin it, find myself stuck and leave it only to return with a new angle and discover the same problem repeatedly. The answer had been in front of me the entire time. From quite early on, we (my supervisor and I) had discussed the possibility of adding a chapter that tested the model's limits and engaged with ways it did not quite work, though I found this incredibly intimidating. That so blatantly was the key to my frustrations – it did not work, and I was attempting to force it into working. While I could recognise this and pivot appropriately, this ultimately led to the root of the main weakness in this chapter and ultimately in the PhD itself.

When I realised how I needed to change my approach to this chapter, I was a significant portion of the way through my research period. Had I come to this realisation earlier, I would have shifted both the chapter and large portions of the thesis more drastically, and I would have likely altered some of my film selection throughout the thesis. This is clearly where better planning and prioritisation would have been helpful. As it was, there was a need for this chapter to rely on films that I had taken detailed and reliable notes on if they were not available outside of archival viewing, ideally viewed recently enough that I had a good memory of them, or I would have to return to films which were readily available outside of archives. This does not damage my assessments and conclusions about the films and Brakhage, but it only partially fulfils my intentions to bring some of those 'hidden' Brakhage films to the fore.

These combined issues result in the chapter overviewing rather than thoroughly investigating how the limits of the model can be understood and that further work could be done that investigates in more depth the notion of context, for instance, and interrogating just how much context is needed for Deren's model to work. A significant number of Brakhage's films are made using direct animation; like the chapter on sound, an entire thesis could be dedicated solely to this topic. There is even an argument to revisit some of Brakhage's most

---

[580] Just two examples: In *Window Water Baby Moving*, Jane operates the camera *during labour* to capture Stan's reaction to the birth of their daughter. In *Wedlock House: An Intercourse*, Jane and Stan pass the camera between each other during an argument.Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*, 100–103.

abstract live-action films. Had I not run out of time, I would have added a chapter doing just that. Despite this, this is one of my strongest chapters. What began as a source of frustration has ultimately turned into one of the most rewarding aspects of the research.

In Conclusion

In this research, I have carefully considered Stan Brakhage as an example of a poetic filmmaker within Maya Deren's model; I have done so through close textual analysis of his films and archival research. I have supported this analysis through secondary research gathered from previously published sources as well as qualitative research in the form of a semi-structured interview with a noted Brakhage scholar, Fred Camper. I have concluded that understanding Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker does not necessarily equate to understanding him as a poet; Deren's model is not holistic and does not seek to 'claim' filmmakers in the same way as does, say, traditional *auteur* theory.

Indeed, similar themes and techniques are present throughout Brakhage's career – he expressed both within his work and his writing a lifelong endeavour to capture different types of vision. However, these themes were expressed differently throughout his career, and he did so using different methods. Indeed, between the first and last chapters, it is arguably more akin to studying an artist working in wholly different mediums over the course of a career than a filmmaker. I would argue that a more expansive concept of authorship is needed to fully understand Brakhage as both author and poet; this is not the purpose of Deren's model.

Instead, Deren offers the potential to find poetry in all films (though, as noted, there is some limit to her model's application). Brakhage has offered quite the perfect case study to test this, having explored and experimented in his filmmaking in many ways, spanning the spectrum from traditional narrative to completely non-representational. In examining how this model works within Brakhage's films, not only can I understand how the poetic manifests in his oeuvre, but I can also propose an understanding of different ways the poetic can manifest in any film.

I asked in ignorance at the outset of this research, "What is gained by viewing Brakhage as a poet?" Many things, such as cultural status, could be gained if I claimed that Brakhage was a poet because I found several aspects of poetic filmmaking in his films. Nevertheless, at the end of my research, I realised I asked the wrong question. I should have asked, "What is gained

by understanding Brakhage's use of poetic filmmaking devices?" What is gained is a new way to approach these explorations, an understanding of his use of filmic devices as poetic, and a way to extrapolate such poetic uses of filmic devices beyond his filmmaking. In breaking down Deren's model, understanding how it works and how it manifests through various devices, whether it be dissolves, use of perspective, abstraction, sound design, or something else, greater meaning and understanding can be given to the experience of viewing a film, to feeling the emotion of its characters, its subjects, or perhaps its maker.

For Brakhage specifically, it has revealed a thematic exploration of vision present in even his earliest work, a very intense and emotional relationship with life and death, and intentionality behind his explorations of vision, experience, and self-reflexivity. When I started my research and began looking for theories around poetry and film, I turned to Deren because I found the expansiveness of her model useful. I genuinely desired to discuss Brakhage beyond merely my likes and dislikes or from a biographical perspective. Her theory allowed me to do that and was the most testable.

The idea of a film moving vertically rather than horizontally made perfect sense, though it confused two of the 'greatest' writers of the 20th century. Using Stan Brakhage and examining so many of his films using this model allowed Maya Deren's theory to stand on its own through detailed examples and equally allowed for a way to discuss Brakhage's work beyond his status as an experimenter. It engendered a discussion around him *as* a filmmaker - something I found difficult when approaching him using many modern film theories - and does so because Deren's model disregards convention and assigns no value. It, therefore, allowed me to consider this one aspect of Brakhage – poetic filmmaking – from various angles. Thus, I could consider how he used poetic devices in narrative filmmaking, documentary, sound design, and direct animation without forcing his filmmaking to fit into any conventions found within these areas.

Considering all my research detailed within this thesis, I have come to the following conclusion: understanding Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker does not necessitate understanding him as a poet. Maya Deren's model of poetic filmmaking is not looking to identify poets. It seeks to understand how film can be understood to be poetic. It is much more important to understand Stan Brakhage as a poetic filmmaker than it is to understand him as a poet, and that is something I believe this model and my research make more accessible.

Appendix I: Interview with Fred Camper

2023

Interview has been edited for relevance and clarity. Some moments where the recording is unclear have been marked as such. In cases where further clarification has been provided by the interviewee, this is included in brackets [ ] and identified as such.

Jacqui Griffin (JG): Thank you so much for your time. So…my thesis, I, I've been a long time, I guess, for lack of a better word, "Fan" of Brakhage's work. I was first shown *Mothlight* at my very first film class at the University of Pittsburgh. And, you know, it kind of blew my mind at 18.

Fred Camper (FC): That's a great way to start. Was it the first week or just your first film class?

JG: It was very early on… it wasn't the very first week, but it was maybe the second or third.

FC: And who was the instructor, I have to ask, because I might know them.

JG: Oh, gosh, I cannot remember her name. It was a film analysis class, but I had an American independent teacher. And…my memory is shocking.

FC: It was a long time ago?

JG: (laughs) Yeah, it was a long time ago.

FC: Lucy Fisher?

JG: Oh, maybe.

FC: Kind of short?

JG: Blond hair?

FC: That I don't remember.

JG: Okay.

FC: Well, it doesn't matter.

JG: Yeah, but a really fantastic film program there. And yeah, it was one of those, I think the way with…I don't know, for me, I think Brakhage either really connects with people or doesn't right away. And for me it was like, "Wow, I need to know more about this person." So, when years later, when it came time to do a Ph.D., that seemed a very obvious answer for me because I felt like a lot of people talk about him still, but I felt like there was room there to discuss and well… the angle that I decided to take was understanding Brakhage as a poet, as a a poetic filmmaker... And I've used a very specific model to apply this, which is inspired largely from Maya Deren, actually?

FC: The vertical?

JG: (laughs) Yeah, the vertical, absolutely! Part of it is me sort of like carrying the torch because I felt like she was really poorly treated at the symposium.

FC: Famously.

JG: Famously, yeah, yeah, yeah, horribly treated.

FC: And we go up and down again.

JG: Yeah. Yeah and they cut her off. I mean it was that we don't need to get into it, but yeah, so part of it is me going … because she never got to really, after that unfortunately, never got to expand on it. And so that is basically the premise looking at obviously not all Brakhage films, it's I don't have time but a selection and going, "How do these work with this concept of the vertical and the horizontal?"

FC: Mm hmm

JG: And in fact, the most challenging was looking at the non-representational sort of the direct animation films. And I, I think I actually think it gets into something that you talk about with his contradictions. And I don't think I'm going to I'm talking a lot right now, but I promise I will interview you. My opinion here is that I don't think it has anything to do with them not being poetic but with the model that I'm using.

JG: So that's kind of where I'm at. I'm really close to the end. I'm very excited to be close to the end. And it's been very interesting.

FC: I didn't actually understand the sentence, "It doesn't have anything to do with them not being poetic, but with the model that I used." I didn't know what it meant.

JG: Oh, yes. So the vertical-horizontal model, at least in the way that it's described by Deren, seems to me to have this somewhat of a reliance on an interplay between the objective and the subjective. And I found that not all of Brakhage's later films, you know, where he's doing the painting, but some of them have very little context unless you do biographical - And I really wanted to actually stay away from biographical context. I really wanted to examine the films as themselves. And so, some of them like a good example, I think *The Dante Quartet*, it provides immediate context because Dante and the subtitles of each film immediately we have a cultural context for what that might evoke, but then *A Study in Color in black and white* is much more vague and difficult to pin down.

FC: Yep

JG: So it's hard to apply that model.

FC: Even more difficult would be my favourite of his of all his work, which is the *Romans, Arabics* and *Egyptian*, which is quoted. And there is no - there may be contradictions there, but there is no contradiction between the poetic and the realistic that I can see. I mean, you could probably find some version of that, but they're in their own world. And so I wouldn't use them. When we're arguing the vertical and the horizontal.

JG: And I haven't, you know.

227

FC: Good!

JG: Yeah, especially because Nicky Hamlyn has done quite a lot with the *Roman Numeral* series in particular. So I kind of was like, I'm going to stay away from those…He's written quite a bit about the Roman numeral series.

FC: Yeah. Yeah.

JG: So, it seemed like because I'm also having to keep in mind this idea of intervention and adding to Brakhage scholarship, I was really trying to use films that maybe weren't as discussed, which some I didn't always do. Like I talk about the act of seeing quite a bit because I think it was.

FC: I think it's a great move and it's something that is often not done. I mean, I remember reading the memoirs of the physicist Werner Heisenberg was describing it at the turn of the century, deciding whether to become a classical pianist or a physicist because he loved both. And he and his friends also were thinking along similar lines, where can I make the most contribution? And I don't think a lot of people think that way today.

JG: I've been very lucky with my supervision and being steered well. And yeah, but yeah, I guess so. I don't want to take up tons of your time. There is a few things I'd love your opinion on essentially, because I think it would help. You know, I'm making arguments if I can reference something that would be wonderful, but maybe it makes me think about stuff.

I thought I'd start with because you've got this recent publication and you have the article 'Still Seeking Brakhage' in it. I just [thought] there were a couple quotes that really stood out and I

wondered if I could just get your thoughts on, on the quotes themselves or maybe expand a bit. One was "he rejects picture in favour of active eyesight", which to me is a lot of this is harkening back to your article about Brakhage's contradictions. That's what that reminds me of. It's a contradiction. I wondered if you could expand there.

FC: Sure. I mean, one of the things he said, which I probably quote somewhere, is in his hand-painted films, as you probably know, most of them are optically printed…to repeat an image, two or three or four frames rather than just one. And there are some like *Mothlight* where he doesn't do that. And so, every frame is different. Another example of that would be the *Panels For the Walls of Heaven*, and then *Chinese Series* is repeated once in one of the two iterations, it's one frame per frame and in the other it's two frames.

But anyway, he says that he repeats two or three or four times and he thinks that more than four would be a slideshow. And, you know, and a slideshow suggests to me as he's using it, something more static. And his cinema is always moving, or I mean, *(laughs)* is usually moving. And there's this weird passage that bothered me at first in Scott MacDonald's interview, which he talks about his roving eye problem. You know, that? Yeah, you know, so and he thinks that's important.

And I actually have to admit, I agree with him it probably is important. His eyes just don't resolve things the way most people do. And he's got to seek out the parts of the scene, put them together in his head. And that goes to the key - what I think is the key phrase in the opening paragraph of Metaphors on Vision, not 'childhood seeing', but "encounter every object, not through their names, but as an adventure of perception."And, you know, and I use this in class, introducing students to Brakhage. I'll look at the desk that I'm sitting at, which is usually pretty boring and describe how you can make it interesting by moving your head, by looking at the different angles from which light is reflected off of it. By, in my case, by taking my glasses off so it's out of focus. And, and in other words, you don't know the desk anymore

as an object by its function or just as a static apparition, but rather as an "adventure of perception." And so, I mean, so 'picture' I'm using as a static concept.

And he also objected to, I don't know, he had a prejudice against still photographers making films. And I don't know that he ever said this, but I think his idea was that they would make a film out of still photographs. In other words, that they would see the qualities of a of a still photograph as something to adapt to cinema. And he once said, although I heard this only from a second-hand source who I consider pretty unreliable, but it makes some sense, that he tries to make the images of his film incomplete so they will need the next image to complete. And I mean, I think I can make that as an observation, whatever his intention might be or however inaccurately it might have been recorded. I'm I mean, his films are unbalanced in a lot of ways. That's really true of the *Romans* and *Arabics*, too. They're unbalanced. And by being unbalanced, they don't look to get rebalanced. So much as to continue the journey through this unbalanced world.

JG: Yeah, at least from a traditional sort of conventional perspective, seems to be a lack of resolution a lot of times that we're used to as an audience.

FC: Yeah. And the other thing that I talk about, and I'm not sure to what extent it's in, I guess it is a little in my old art form article, but I recently did a paper on *Murder Psalm* at the Society for Cinema Studies, which I will write up at some point and, you know, and get published. And I talked about it. There is his early films after he left Drama. You know, he's faced with the problem how to organize an abstract, a more abstract film. And so I do talk about how, in *Anticipation of the Night*, he'll match shapes, you know, and match camera movements as Maya Deren does, cutting between two different spaces with the same movement and almost hiding cut.

And those are relatively simple ways of organizing. *Mothlight* begins with a moth wing and ends with three and then two and then one. *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* begins with a curtain opening of black paint and it ends with the curtain closing. A black paint. You don't know that one or?

JG: I actually that one I haven't seen unfortunately.

FC: It's not on DVD. I guess sometimes you can find bad copies.

JG: You can sometimes find bad copies. I have done some archival visits, but I've obviously had to pick and choose.

FC: Well, finally, it's his second birth film and he I'm like *Window Water Baby Moving*. He paints over the image to as he says, captures some of the crisis eyesight that he had. But it begins with this black curtain of paint opening, and it ends with closing. And it's especially striking to me because it's not something he would have done ten years later or even five years later.

So so the the films don't come to rest or when they do as in, what I think is one of his greatest films, *The Riddle of Lumen*, it's on a dead or dying bug that, you know. No, that doesn't feel like it could possibly be addressed.

JG: Yeah, that's this. I have another quote here, but you're catching on something a theme that I've noticed throughout. So one film I talk about and I think it's interesting – *The Wonder Ring* which ends a abruptly.

FC: Yeah. But it begins conventionally!

JG: It begins conventionally!

FC: Yeah.

JG: And, and as the film progresses, it becomes more and more abstract, more difficult to follow. The train moves in opposite directions, and then it just ends.

FC: He's discovering his path toward a mature style.

JG: Yeah, absolutely. And I actually when I watched, I was able to see *The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* at LUX in London and I actually thought the ending was really similar. It's this abrupt kind of and I kind of wondered, do you feel that it's this constant - It seems like a death motif to me.

FC: Death D-E-A-T-H?

JG: Yeah

FC: That's interesting

JG: Yeah. And I wondered. I just wondered if it was like - if you could see this kind of overarching theme of him finding his themes in *Wonder Ring*? I felt very much I agree. He's finding himself in *Wonder Ring*.

FC: Well, another statement of his which I make a point of. And one of the parts of the book was what he said near the end of his life when I made a joke about the titles that he was describing, and rather than death, I'd say ambivalent about life is maybe more of a theme. Death obviously is there in some of them, and especially for obvious reasons *Anticipation of the Night*. But he goes on and when he goes on, he's evoking his ambivalence. And that's even realized in films not coming to rest. You know, whatever he's engaging with is temporary and momentary and, you know, alive in, you know what I think is a profound way.

JG: But that does that makes more sense to me. And it it's sort of you've I was going to ask you about another quote, but you've kind of already gotten there, which was "Brakhage was a poet of continually unfolding incompleteness." You've kind of already talked about it. And that's kind of what that those abrupt endings, that which are usually they seem to be in the middle of movement, which you would expect to see finish and then cut.

FC: Something like years ago, Sitney had a remark which I quote somewhere that there isn't that almost everything worth saying about Brakhage, he has said.

JG: You do have this quote in your book. Yeah, yeah.

FC: And the absolute key one there, which I make a big point of in talking about *Murder Psalm* even though it doesn't apply to *Murder Psalm* was in his ridiculous attack on structural film, which you may know because it's been printed, I think in Millennium Film Journal. He's complaining about the prominence of structural film. He thinks it's too predictable. Annette Michelson tries to argue with him and he says something like, "You only want to hear the sound of your own voice." Did you read this? It's pretty funny.

JG: It was it was a few years ago, but yes, I have.

FC: Well, the joke about it, which is not really relevant to our talk here, is that I read this time I didn't particularly notice the irony of him going in that that she likes to hear the sound of her own voice - which she does, by the way, but the irony is that this is Brakhage saying it - until two other people separately pointed out to me the irony. And those were Hollis Frampton and P. Adam Sitney, you know, pots and kettle, you know, they certainly recognized something that they're familiar with.

But what he said in the course of this, I think, kind of stupid attack was a kind of objection to the feeling of predictability and knowingness that comes out of predetermined structural film. And he says, "What interests me is what I don't know." And he was just starting the *Romans* then. And the *Romans, Arabics,* and *Egyptians* are the closest, I think, to trying to pursue the idea of what he doesn't know. The viewer is lost, because he's lost, and he's navigating his way through [*unclear*] lost sort of poetics of lost [*unclear*] lost-ness.

JG: I think it's interesting how sometimes the things that it's not just it's not exclusive to Brakhage, but that the things that we're searching for kind of come out in our work, [we say] "I don't like that" because we're sort of looking to resolve it for ourselves. I was going to ask if you felt like there was a connection between Brakhage's contradictions and poeticism. But I'm feeling like that it seems like you do. Yeah, that's coming across.

FC: Well, by poeticism are you talking about something specific or just about poetics in general?

JG: Yes, it is. It's tricky, isn't it, to bring these words in?

FC: Was there a movement called Poeticism that I don't know about?

JG: No, no, no. I'm just. So, do you find his contradictions to be poetic?

FC: Oh, that's an interesting question. Certainly sometimes. I'm reluctant to identify all of Brakhage's work with either poetics or music, which would be the other possibility or painting, which is a lesser possibility, but it's still there. I don't think it settles on any one of those as a whole corpus of work, although individual films might tend toward one another. So certainly *Dog Star Man The Art of Vision* is poetry in part.

JG: Mm.

FC: A metaphor, So on. *Romans*, *Arabics* and *Egyptians* are not full of metaphor, almost impossible. They do make suggestions of things that we've seen, But they're not - that's primarily what they're like. So yeah, I mean, poetry is one of, you could say two, because I think poetry and music are the main ones - or you could say many - the list of his influences and I say this in the book so you may have encountered it that I identify in the criterion liner notes, where there's four arts and he names two artists. But I don't say in the liner notes that's what he did I just say he was influenced by.

But the way that this was constructed was by my asking him who his most influential poets, painters and composers were. And it wasn't a surprise, his answers, [which were Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein; Jackson Pollock and J. M. W. Turner; Johann Sebastian Bach and Olivier Messiaen. (*clarified at a later date)*]

But it was useful to sort of have them on the record. I should have asked him six months later and seen what he said, but I think Stein and Pound would have been there, and my guess is Pollock and Turner would have been there. Those are the two painters he named and then Bach and Messiaen. What was interesting, though, is that he wanted to add dance and that was

entirely his idea. And he added [Martha] Graham and [Merce] Cunningham, which he said were important to him when he was young, discovered there were.

JG: Yeah. I have the liner notes in front of me. I mean his influence from Stein is, is like fairly…well explored by R. Bruce Elder. So I, I have kind of steered away from going too much into it, but I have looked because I look at *Sirius Remembered* and a few other films where I feel like he's doing this repetition thing that he talks about quite a bit of that "Rose is a rose is a rose" that seems to have really influenced his editing.

FC: In that period. Not necessarily 20 years later.

JG: No…Although I found I wondered because I started to look at sound. This is I want to ask you about sound…because I. I actually wonder if *Fireloop* is doing a similar thing. And I know it's much later and it's very unique to the rest, but it's from what I can tell, it's optically printed and then repeated the same about 8 seconds.

FC: I don't remember it. Well, I remember seeing it, but …it wouldn't surprise me.

JG: Yeah, because the sound is all different. So it's this repeated visual with a different audio. Yeah. Which really presents, when you look at it - I did some masking some of Michel Chion's masking. I'm not sure if I'm saying his name properly, but, you know, so I watched it as it was. I watched it without sound. I watched it with no video and the sound really changes the way you interpret the visual.

So yeah, it felt like a profound influence, but I'm digressing. His sound, his use of sound. You're very specific in your book about how his film should be watched. I really agree with

you because I've watched them in all kinds of ways now and watching them digitally, I think loses something.

FC: Oh, yeah.

JG: Now you have a thing about making sure the projector's sound is disabled, but do you do you consider his films to be actually silent?

FC: Well, he didn't. I mean, in a way, because he said that he made all edited all of them with the sound of the projector when he looked at them and he even wondered if he'd miscalculated because there are projection booths and it's possible to show his films without the sound of the projector. But I think what I meant - I'm not sure what you mean - I didn't mean the sound of the projector so much as the problem that if you leave the sound on, you'll get static.

JG: Yeah.

FC: And so in a program with some sound films and a Brakhage in the middle, they won't turn the volume off and you'll often get static.

JG: Yes. No, no, that that absolutely comes across. I haven't been able to find this as a quote him saying about the sound of the projector. Is that in *Metaphors* by chance or…?

FC: I heard it.

JG: You heard it!

FC: Yeah

JG: (*laughing*) I've been desperately looking for that because I suspected as much.

FC: (*laughing*) Well, now you can cite me and say that I did hear it.

JG: Yes, absolutely. This is wonderful.

FC: Not word for word, but I've got it pretty accurately I think. Let me see if I can. Yeah. I mean, the meaning is there, even if those aren't the words that he when he makes his films, he's always seeing them with the sound of a noisy projector. He maybe didn't say noisy, but we know they're noisy and that when he sees them silent, it's different for him. And I don't know how serious he was speculating. I didn't take it as that serious. But he did say he'd wondered if he'd miscalculated a bit since he was used to seeing them with the sound of the projector. And it was different.

JG: Yeah, yeah. And I've… because I've even…because you can get them online, you know, some of them are online. I've added, I've re-added the sound of a, I've found the sound of a projector at the correct speed and added it back in and compared it.

FC: That's amazing. And what, what was your opinion.

JG: For a film like say *Mothlight* or *Text of Light*? I think it makes a profound difference. It was… this is wonderful confirmation for me because I came to the conclusion that he absolutely intended those films to be viewed with this sort of organic sound as a component.

FC: I might argue with "intended" a little bit. Expected, maybe.

JG: Expected. Yeah. So yeah, maybe that's a better way to put it because of how he distributed his films and, you know, anticipated that they would be viewed.

FC: Yeah. And where in most places but not all places where he had showings…if he had a showing at the Museum of Modern Art, it would be silent.

JG: Yeah.

FC: I'm trying to remember Millennium Film Workshop, which is where he had a lot of showings and I think the projector was in the room and so it wouldn't have been silent. So in New York, where most of his premieres were at, Millennium wouldn't have been silent. Anthology was, I think in most of its iterations from the Invisible Cinema to later.

There is a big difference and it's really interesting. I admire you for doing this comparison.

JG: Thank you. Yeah, it started with *Fire of Waters*…Do you know Mark Toscano?

FC: Yeah

JG: Right. So, he's done some restoration work [on it], and looked at how that film was put together and it got me really interested in this sort of intentionality, perhaps, behind some of the use of sound…

FC: Did he come to some conclusions about *Fire of Waters?* That I don't know.

JG: There was…he found a really interesting thing, which was that Brakhage used clear leader for the silent parts rather than black leader.

FC: So there'd be some noise?

JG: There would be some noise, and over time the print would very subtly, I mean, almost imperceptibly, change and grow and live, which seems to be in line very much with his whole approach. So, it made me start thinking about his other films that maybe weren't… didn't have a soundtrack like.

FC: Yeah, you know, that makes perfect sense. And it's funny because I did see the *Art of Vision* silent in most of my viewings, not all, and it felt different. I think I preferred it silent actually, but I mean, I wouldn't argue if somebody heard it with the sound of the projector. This also brings back a memory of something only dimly related, but I think related, that he once told me. Somebody had given him a professional animation stand, work.

And this is when I connected in my mind, maybe with *23rd Psalm Branch* where he was photographing photographs and things from books, and he said something like he thought it was the most anti-art device he'd ever seen. And, the reason that - and I think I asked a short enough question to infer the reason - is that it aspired to a kind of transparency.

You know, when you make a film with an animation stand you're not supposed to know that the animation stand was there, you're supposed to be absorbed in the object that was being animated. And, you know, so no handheld. And that seemed a little related to the sound projector issue. And I mean, he was the old mantra that seems to be out of fashion, truth to materials. He was a truth to materials filmmaker a lot of the time. *Mothlight* is a great example because it's really partly about film projection and the difference between film projection and nature. And, you know, this is this is pretty interesting.

JG: I only really had one more question and I'm a little nervous to ask it because I think there's some sometimes implied value in these things. And that's not what this is meant. What I'm wondering is, in your opinion, is there a consideration to be made to discussing Brakhage as something more or other than 'filmmaker'? Do you think that maybe approaching him in a mixed media way or in an entirely separate way? Is there an argument for that or is film his medium and that's it, we just need to find the right way to discuss it.

FC: I guess I would go with the second as a tentative answer. I don't think it's a yes or no answer. I mean, he did make paintings. I'm not sure I've seen one of them as a painting and I don't know that he considered them separate artworks. He was, interestingly enough, amenable to every form of film medium. As you know, he worked in IMAX in 35 and 16 and Standard eight and Super eight. And there's also a Polovsion, I don't know if you know about that. It's in my filmography. So in 1979, I believe Polaroid came out with an instant movie system and it was very badly timed. Video was just becoming more usable. It was a total flop.

JG: Yeah.

FC: They were cassettes in which the film was Super eight in Dimensions and in Perforations. It was an additive colour process. So, there were lines of the three colour filters. If you look, if you magnified the film, you could see red, green and blue lines and the cassette had to be played in their player. You put it in the box. It took 2 minutes to process, approximately. And

then you could actually see it, but only in this video player that was back projected. I mean, it wasn't video, but in other words, it looked somewhat like video.

There was a woman at the school that I was teaching at who had a connection to Polaroid. And Polaroid had already been trying to nurture use of their still cameras by artists. So, she was able to get free equipment from them, and some cassettes, for "artistic purposes." And I was able to get them to Brakhage and he was interested right away. He didn't say no, no, no, and he knew that it was going to be projected in this box and you couldn't edit it. It had to be edited in-camera.

As I said, we broke one open once and among other things, found that the film was extremely dense. So, with the Super eight projector, if you tried to project it at large, it would just look incredibly pale. You had to project it, you know, two feet by one foot, you know, one and a half feet. So, it does seem amenable to optical printing restorations. And I thought the cassettes were lost many years, and it turns out they weren't, the MoMA had them somewhere. And now Toscano has them and in theory will try to restore them. But he doesn't know when. And he's very busy, so who knows. They may also not survive. We don't know how archival the material was.

JG: Yeah.

FC: But I mean, he definitely worked with it and I saw about ten of them and they were very good. One was really great, I thought. You know, sort of A-level Brakhage. But it was this box, it wasn't video. So, his objections to video didn't apply. And also, there's a funny anecdote worth telling.

So, what happened was he was commuting from Colorado to Chicago every two weeks, to teach his course. And so after he'd had this material for a few months, he brought it with him

to show to a few of us. And we set up the player in this small room and put in a cassette, or he put in a cassette, and it was out of focus. So, this box was, you know, designed for the male executive's fantasy of the 'stupid housewife.' You know, it had only two controls and the instructions were big letters in colours, you know, saying this is how you focus and this is how you frame it. And so, when I saw it was out of focus, I reached over to focus it, and Brakhage said, "What did you just do?" I said, "Well, I focused it" and he said, "Oh, I didn't know you could do that!" And then he said something like, "You know, I'm going to have to look at these again in a new light."

But the fact that he was willing to work with it is the main reason I'm telling you this. And it's connected to something else, which is that late in his life after he'd been railing at video for a long time, must have been in the last few years of his life, I posed the following to him. "Suppose somebody offered you the best digital video set up and a full time technician help you work with it?" And I didn't even finish the whole question. He said, "I would work with it", which I thought was pretty interesting. So, I mean, he was always willing to explore the boundaries of film, but he knew he wasn't a poet.

And his line about that was he realized very young that he wasn't a poet because words came too easily. Again, contrary to what most young aspiring artists would say, "Well, I write easily, so I want to make poetry, whereas film troubles me so I can't make it." And, you know, imagery troubled him and so it became something to engage with.

But that also, I think, tells you that he wasn't a poet. And, you know, he knew he wasn't a dancer and he did make paintings. But they're there in his films, I don't know that he maybe somebody considers the paintings that that survive to be artworks. I'm not sure that he did. So, I guess my answer would be somewhere in between. That, of course he's pushing the boundaries of cinema, but it's always cinema, certain number of frames per second.

And he had another line which he said often that, "If they stopped making film," because this was late in his life when film was endangered, "I would set up flat stones on a beach and make sketches on them and knock them over as a flip book." So, I mean, this is sequential imagery of some kind.

JG: This sequential motion imagery. Yeah.

FC: Well, yeah. And I mean, and his answer about the people who want to show his films with music, which is in my book, is, "You know, it's fine. I mean, I probably don't like it, but it's not a Brakhage and they shouldn't say it is." And, you know, so that's one example of his resistance to losing the boundary, the key boundaries of cinema.

There was a punk group called…they call themselves the No Names…the [*unclear*]…in San Francisco. And they did a Brakhage dance party showing his films with rock music and having people dance to them as a kind of. I took it as anti-Brakhage.

JG: (*laughing*) Yeah. Yeah. That sounds like a nightmare for him. That's interesting - the question arose out of my frustrations with the sort of limitations of the wider film scholarship to discuss his films…you know authorship theories and things like that and that the way that they're discussed in terms of convention and everything, it just led me a lot of frustration.

FC: So you think that modern film theory doesn't account for Brakhage? I mean, to put it crudely, I know you didn't say that.

JG: Crudely, I think kind of. Yes. That's sort of what I'm… I think it doesn't fully. Not fully is how I felt with it. And I'm constantly searching for that.

FC: Well, I've long wanted to write, and I've toyed at this in various ways over the years, what I would self-deprecatingly call the Unified Field Theory of Cinema. The one that will account - because I love classical Hollywood and think it's great art - So the one that will account for Howard Hawks and Stan Brakhage. And I don't think it's a theory. In other words, there isn't a set of tools particularly. But I do have a starting point that I guess will begin this white whale of a book that I may or may not do. And the starting point is a definition of cinema, which is still in progress. So, I'll give it to you and see what you think.

The work of cinema consists of the presentation of a series image of images in extremely rapid succession…a series of *rectangular* images in extremely rapid succession on a flat surface.

And that's immediately followed by a few caveats. Yes, slightly screwed screens are still cinema. Wraparound screen maybe isn't, you know, because you can't see the rectangle. Yes, it's an oval would probably be perceived as cinema. But who does that. Yes. Two screen projections or cinema. But three screens probably aren't. And then I quote Brakhage on slide show in terms of what extremely rapid succession means...and accept his idea that slower than six frames per second…[*unclear*] before… printing each frame four times is a slide show, and obviously much faster is still cinema.

So if you start from there, you know, you don't have all singing, all dancing, all talking. And it's a definition partly inspired by a book called Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, in which he tries to define comics, early on. He draws himself - the whole book as a comic. He draws himself on stage trying to come up with the definition of comics, and he proposes things and the audience objects, or it makes additions.

And when he finally thinks he has one, he announces it. And then there's a voice from the audience. Yes, but shouldn't it have Batman in it? And the guards off screen are apparently throwing him out. But that's the point. I don't have Batman in it. And, you know, so it doesn't have sound. It doesn't require visible images. And it would be my claim for Hawks or most of

the Hollywood filmmakers that I love that although the plot is usually very important in the acting can be part of it, there is a level of abstraction there that has its own integrity.

JG: Yeah, that, that's what I would be calling that movement in the vertical. Yeah. Because I think I like, I really like your definition because one of the reasons I chose Deren was because it wasn't restrictive. There wasn't a value. There wasn't this… It could apply to Hollywood and it could apply to experimental and, you know, and anything in between.

FC: Didn't she mention Shakespeare?

JG: She mentioned Shakespeare! That's like, her main point to elucidate is Hamlet. Yeah.

FC: Which has all the soliloquies and then the plot.

JG: Yeah. And to me, you know, when I first saw it, I'm like, Oh, this makes so much sense. So to then see it get bashed, I was like, No, it makes [sense.] It's very clear.

FC: Well, when I first read this, it was a very long time ago, and it was a woman instructor who had us read it. And I'll admit I was kind of clueless, but I had to agree with her when she said, Maya Deren is getting treated this way because she was a woman and that if a man said exactly the same thing, she didn't go on to say but the implication is that if you had a man saying exactly the same thing,he would have been taken more seriously. I don't see how you can avoid that interpretation.

JG: No, I mean, certainly not in 1953.

FC: What she says is much more intelligent that what the other people say.

JG: Oh, yeah, there is a lot of… there's quite a bit of rambling and... [*unclear*].

FC: And she actually has a proposal. So you can dislike it, but you have to respect it and argue with it because it's an intellectually legitimate proposition, even if you don't agree.

JG: Absolutely. So. So but to get back to *your* point, I think a broad view of cinema is - because I suppose the thing constantly coming up against is this inherent value statement that seems to be tied in to so much theory. So an *auteur* is "immediately better" than a non-auteur and so, so on and so forth. And to just go, no, this is cinema, you know, good or bad, it's cinema. I like that. I like that a lot.

FC: Yeah. Well, a related story, which explained a lot of theory to me, but it's kind of the opposite of what you're saying, so I'm not sure what you'll make of it. A long time ago, when the writing first came out, I read these two essays by Baudrillard, abouut the apparatus and I honestly didn't know what to make of them. I certainly loved Plato's cave allegory when I when I read it and recognised a little bit of cinema there, maybe, but I just couldn't figure out what I thought of the Baudrillard essay's, they were kind of interesting. And I asked Sitney and he had a great answer, I thought. He had two answers. The first one was these kinds of issues, and he meant philosophical issues, are only interesting when not discussed in terms of specific objects [*unclear*]. The second answer, which was easier to comprehend, was, I don't want to know what's in common between *Ordet* and a travelog. And I've appended that to a bad travelog since unlike Sitney, I don't want to exclude the possibility of there being a great travelog.

But it struck me that that is what a lot of film theory tries to do, is to say what's in common for all films and then only say things that can be true about all films. And you should do that.

That's what my definition tries to do. But. But *then* I'm going to talk about what I care about, which depends on more than just, you know, having the cinematic apparatus doing its work.

JG: Absolutely. Yeah. But you've given me a lot to think about there.

[*break*]

FC: …You know, if you were going to be here on July 15th of this year, which I'm sure you're not, I'm going to do one of these rare moments of screening a bunch of Brakhage films on film.

JG: Oh, wow. I'm actually pregnant at the minute, so I can't fly, but otherwise I would probably try and make a trip for that. That sounds amazing.

FC: Yeah, well, well, in two years you can bring JR.

JG: Yeah, absolutely. Because I, I went to a Brakhage conference in London. It was all off DVD. I was really disappointed. It was all off DVD. Yeah.

FC: Yeah. I mean, that's…well and when I did this paper on *Murder Psalm*, you know, I had to use the video and I had to use excerpts from the video and Marjorie Keller, in her excellent article on it, makes a big point about wagon wheels, TV imagery of wagon wheels and reds signifying the conquest of the West, and you could barely see them on the video and on the print it's really clear. So, it's a bad transfer or transfer from a bad print, but it's amazing how much was lost just in the loss of very dark images. So, it isn't even just a question of the

difference between the medium, but of the quality of the transfer and the quality of the print that was used in making it.

JG: Absolutely. And yeah, it's one of those things and it's so expensive to do some of those transfers to high quality that they're not necessarily going to do them again. And yeah, I have tried to rely on my viewings from archives and then just used DVDs or not that I support piracy necessarily but you know to refresh my memory of original notes for that reason.

FC: Sure. Have you ever been to the archive in Boulder?

JG: I did, yeah. I made like a whole pilgrimage, even went up the mountain to, you know, sort of check out where he was living, not the house or anything, but just, you know, the general vicinity.

FC: Yeah.

JG: Get a sense of what life would have been like commuting into Boulder and things like that. And they [the archives] were fantastic. Yeah.

FC: Oh yeah, yeah.

JG: I found a letter in the archives he wrote to Sylvester Stallone.

FC: Good grief!

JG: Yeah.

FC: It wasn't a fan letter, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was.

JG: It was! It was telling him how much he liked *Rocky IV*.

FC: Well, I mean, I've heard that when he went to Telluride, he became a groupie whenever there was a Hollywood star around. So that's pretty disturbing. I know he wrote a letter to Martin Scorsese when he was already dying about *The Gangs of New York*, even though he couldn't sit through all of it because of pain. And he praised it and he sent me a letter for some peculiar reason before he was going to mail it. And, you know, I said "It's fine." And then he said, "Of course what I'm not saying is that this film is everything I've opposed in my 50 years filmmaking." This is another thing I learned from him, which I might wind up using without naming the film, especially since Scorsese is still alive. But I then asked him because I'd actually seen *The Gangs of New York* - although I don't like, I don't like Scorsese at all -about early in the film there's a big fight and you cut to a point you shot of a little boy hiding out, looking at fight. And it's the most obvious P.O.V. cutting, you know, you see his emotion in that affects your emotional response to the fight. And I asked Brakhage if this is the kind of manipulation he meant. And he said yes. So I mean, he was a fan and he also hated this stuff, but it was drugs. And so on. Somebody tried to defend Rocky IV as art, I'm sure he would have had a fit.

JG: Oh, it was very specifically about the editing…We're going back a few years now, if I can remember…but I'm very I'm convinced it was about the editing of the fight sequences.

FC: Well yeah, I could believe that.

JG: Yeah.

FC: But I mean, he could have appreciated it without thinking it was a work of art.

JG: He didn't - I don't think he called it a work of art. I think he was he said he really liked the editing and the fight sequences.

FC: Did Stallone make – direct it?

JG: I don't know if Stallone directed Rocky four.

FC: That would be why you would write to him, if Stallone had directed it. I mean otherwise you should be writing to the editor.

JG: (*checking IMDb*) Stallone directed it. Yeah. Yeah. Wrote and directed Rocky IV. And there was no response [to the letter].

FC: Yeah. Well that's not surprising, but I guess the thing I was going to say is at the conference, I met two people who spent days in the archive just on the way there, you know, doing one kind of research or another. And the one other thing you should know is about the prints there. Do you know the problem with those?

JG: I don't know the problem with the prints, but they're not the originals because Mark has those, right?

FC: Well, there are no originals. I mean, in a sense. Mark has the printing masters, the negatives.

JG: Okay.

FC: And he yeah, right. He would have had the originals, too. Sure. So, the problem, it's worth knowing because it's a problem with all of Brakhage's films from about 97 but the Lab that he used all his life was obviously declining economically. All labs were by the nineties. And they had a large processing machine used to process the raw stock with which they made into internegatives.

So, starting in the early seventies, Brakhage was printing from internegatives rather than reversal printing. The lab would make an interneg and then use those to make prints. It might have been actually… I don't think it was the interneg stock processor, it was the lab needed to process positive prints made from interneg. The machine used for that, it broke and you know and it was too expensive to fix or replace, and they found another stock that would work and their other processing machine. And for about a year they used that and it looked okay according to the man who owned the lab.

But then they stopped making *that* stock. And so, the only way they could make prints was on a low contrast stock that didn't have true blacks. And when Phil Solomon started to see these prints, he was horrified. And I have some of them without knowing that was the problem. Although I did know there was a big problem with *Anticipation of the Night* and the lab actually replaced it without telling Brakhage about it, because the blacks really weren't black and they're still not black enough.

But so the films were being processed and processed incorrectly. And they, they had much lower contrast and were much brighter. Brakhage claimed in some cases to prefer that. But he tended to be a little lax about what prints he would accept and what prints he wouldn't, at least some of the time. Solomon, as I said, was horrified and called them the brown prints because they did have a kind of muddy-ness to them.

And but what's also interesting is this would have been the way that all of his last five years of films were printed or four years, whatever.

And so those are correct. And they're now being printed on the correct stock. And so they look they have a much higher contract, whereas he was calculating for the way that his labs new processing looked.

JG: Yeah.

FC: I've seen the difference. It's noticeable. But anyway, the prints in Colorado are dubious for that reason and Brakhage identified about ten of them…or eight of the films that had be printed correctly. It was more expensive for the lab to do that they had to send them out to be processed. And Phil thought it was his friendship with John Newell that prevented him from insisting on it with all [the films].

This is the two that I remember Brakhage saying needed to be printed correctly were *Anticipation of the Night* and *Chartres Series* where the blacks were really important.

JG: Okay.. Do you know if *Dante Quartet* was affected at all?

FC: I'm thinking the prints I've seen look like they're correct.

JG: Okay because I had a question about whether… there's a I think it's 'Hell Itself' is a bit washed out and I was not sure if that was intentional or if it was a misprint, basically.

FC: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know, to be honest.

JG: That's okay. Yeah. No, no, no, that's absolutely fine. But I did not know that. So that that's really valuable information.

FC: You could entirely be the case that hell itself did not look the way that it does. The last time I saw it was in 35 and it looked fine, but maybe that's because the print was made long before the lab had trouble. I don't think he would have been making new 35 prints in the nineties. So, any print made between the time that *Dante Quartet* was made and 1996 should be okay to be okay.

JG: It's just if it was like redone or potentially a transfer.

FC: I've never seen a *Dante Quartet* film that I thought looked like it was processed incorrectly.

JG: Okay. So yeah, because I obviously didn't see it originally, so I will then go, "That's how it was intended to be," then. That's good to know.

FC: Yeah. And the DVD, that's interesting because obviously the DVD was made long after machine broke, but I don't know what materials they had, they were using to the transfer.

JG: So I'm not sure. I might re-check it as well because - just before I before I go to submit, I might just re have another look at it with that in mind and really have a think about it. But yeah, this has really been invaluable. I'm going to be able to use a lot of this.

FC: And I enjoy it. I enjoyed it.

Appendix II: Notes on Films

Researcher's Thoughts on Notations

These notes are presented as written during archival visits to the University of Colorado at Boulder and LUX in London.

In the case of notes from LUX in 2022, which were typed, I have preserved the original notations, save for editing minor spelling corrections, so as to relate the fleeting, tricky, and occasionally panicked nature of archival viewing of such prints.

All other notes are scanned and presented in their handwritten form.

Unfortunately, there are not notes for all films viewed at the University of Colorado. The list of films viewed but with notes either misplaced or not taken is as follows:

Flesh of Morning
Faust (series)
Caswallon Trilogy
The Text of Light

The notes for *Short Films: 1975* also appear to be incomplete.

A novice researcher at the time, I struggled with the dark theatre and notation and, perhaps somewhat foolishly, assumed I would be able to return to view films again.

Additionally, *Night Music* was viewed at LUX in 2017 but no notes are available.

INTERIM   WALT NEWCOMB

SOUND

Young man walking along a road
*SOUND appears DIAGETIC

ON a BRIDGE, walks DOWN STAIRS
Piano SOUNDtrack/SCORE

UNDER BRIDGE
"J.S. Brakhage"
S. Phillips- CINEMATOGRAPHY

a girl putting a SWEATER ON, sees BOY
she BEGINS TO FOLLOW him

SCORE STOPS- Diagetic SOUND again - TRAIN

SCORE again AFTER TRAIN PASSES

They walk along TOGETHER

[Eyes]   extreme
         close up

low Piano ff NOTES accompanied By an approaching
storm

There's Dialogue through the film we never hear
they kiss
RAIN STOPS; they PART ways, another TRAIN
she watches him go

Image A2.1. *Research notes on archival viewing of Interim*

257

The Way to the Shadow Garden

Walt Newcomb

human SOUNDTRACK   SOUND OF WIND

Man walking slowly

Pan - traditional

handheld - ~~citizen~~ Citizen Kane shot

human NOISE MIMICING plane/Rocket, train, heartBeat, kettle

eyes MOVEMENT OF actor

EYES/VISION

USE OF DISSOLVES - NOT TO show Passage of TIME - appears TO indicate Mental INSTABILITY

SOUNDTRAck is PossiBly Representative of an inner Monologue

Pov shots

Deren's influence felt

again eye Movement

gouges out eyes

Now BLIND, RETURNS TO world

Negative film

g RINNING, eye MovemenT/BLOOD, whistle
↳ Looks like an imp oR Demon

Image A2.2. Research notes on archival viewing of The Way to the Shadow Garden

Reflections on Black

tone is dark
lot of tension

SOUND   repeated use of Dutch angles
Darker again

- almost mechanical sounding

in and out of city noises

Sound of children yelling

Man in coat + fedora walks (stalks)
Dutch angles
woman walks, weary (like she's been injured)
They approach each other + pass

Man climbs stairs
he lifts his head, his eyes are scratched out

woman + man in apt, he's shaving
they kiss
Piano plays - keeps striking wrong notes
cuts again - kiss was fantasy - they're both
unhappy
She thinks
he hangs himself - just a shadow -
she's happy he's alive, he looks on
repeated shots of woman dropping dishes

Back to man on stairs
he enters apt where a woman w/ glasses waits
he goes to smoke, she lights his cig

humming soundtrack
they kiss - another man enters,
scratched out eyes again

Image A2.3. Research notes on archival viewing of Reflections on Black

POV shot

SOUNDTRACK goes quiet

kettle Boils over

smiling woman

END

Image A2.4. Research notes on archival viewing of Reflections on Black, cont'd.

@ - viewed at UC Boulder, 2016

@

Light Planes
Trees
Playing w/ Focus

Still photographs? close up

largely seems to be an exploration on light + movement

light + shadow - an interplay

looks like Blinking, very Briefly a hand appears
clearly
everything else is Blurred + muted Tones

yellow, grey, green But Pale

all the
vision of
the face

this is a RECORDED ABSTRACT

a face, a close up, open & close eyes at the
very end → acts as a reveal in this film

Image A2.5. Research notes on archival viewing of @

The Thatch of Night (1990)

Silent

Light

about 30 seconds of mostly black

recording of city lights. w/ camera movement
creating lines + blurs of light
handheld

plays w/ focus in / out to create ring of
moving light

2:28 - sudden switch to blue
about 5 seconds then return to black

3:25 - clear view of a street for a moment
before loses focus & stops down
again

3:50
shimmering light

4:00 - movement of light seems like viewer is
either spinning or speeding by

4:55 - sudden burst of red

5:05 - burst of white

5:12 - burst of purple

Image A2.6. *Research notes on archival viewing of The Thatch of Night*

Short Films: 1976

NATURE, BIRD

close up of pigeon
RED, then yellow colour over screen
There appears to be nature

close up of a face, sleeping
RED spiky flowers
The sun - Both yellow & red

movement - water? snow?
Snow - as focus moves in, Becomes clearer
clearly handheld
Man? bundled up to go outside

he smiles

snow has fallen - road covered, pine trees

a plow
The sun is diffused
Quick flashing shots of sun
CU's of man operating plow & mechanics of plow
Plow on a treacherous mountainside

Yellow

fascination w/ plow & process
The snow looks like waves when the plow moves it
& it's in ECU

Man smoking & firing a rifle
golden hue
golden retriever

Personally find it boring

Image A2.7. *Research notes on archival viewing of Short Films: 1976*

Short Films: 1976   cont'd
man is dressed Semi fancy & old worldy - c. 1850s
  Revolver, silver
  are there two men? duel?
a child? or a woman? hard to tell
    triggering strange memories
Fires gun to   screen left

Short Films: 1975 – viewed at UC Boulder, 2016

cont'd   Short Films : 1975
  people out in nature, naked, having sex

  massaging - the light plays on them
  fast cutting, -shadow & light

  timelapse
  the light changes

what looks like hand painted cells

  some over recorded footage, some
    by themselves
  Seems to mimic rain (is that degeneration?)
Blue & white paint - looks like water, maybe wind
Black polka dots - not sure

red & yellow become introduced
    same colours as Beginning

people at a dinner table, but we look at
them through glass

Repeated shot but no focus - could be water

repeated in focus, revealed to be waves

a waterfall

the water sparkles, the repetition shows us

series of extreme close ups of various objects
    w/ focus pulls + iris racks

    smoke forward & backward

paintings depicting suns

repeated use of time lapse

    showing a burning candle at different speeds

girl w/ a racoon - this is odd, how does it
        relate?

    Jane Brakhage shot some perhaps - appears to be
        shots of star w/ camera

the moon, reflecting sunlight, intercut w/
        racoon footage

Image A2.10. Research notes on archival viewing of Short Films: 1975, cont'd

Blue Moses

SOUND OF a record Player Being PUT ON

CREDITS WRITTEN ON ROCKS

    ROBERT BENSON

  STOP MOTION, MAN IN a CAVE

"La-DICS-and-gen-Tle-men"
    each a DIFFERENT SHOT/TAKE
"Don't Be aFRaiD, there's a cameraman?...orwas"

DIRECT ADDRESS TO AUDIENCE

SLOW MOTION

ACTOR has PAINTED FACE AT aBOUT 4:30
    - PAINTED BEARD, WRINKLES, NOSE
    looks LiKe a DRawing
CREDITS Keep REPEATING

  PAINTED CaVEMAN Begins "Following" - "Where are
    you going?"
6:40
  PAINTED BEARD Becomes a Fake BEARD - STOOD IN
    FIELD
Layers of his SPEech - "there's a FilmmakerJere
whole Film INTERCUT w/ Quick movement OF grasses
    Like RUNNING
Film w/IN Film- ACTOR APPEARS IN FRONT
  OF PROJECTED Footage of himself

Image A2.11. *Research notes on archival viewing of Blue Moses*

Blue Moses – viewed at LUX, 2017

Titles written physically on rocks

Wide shot, man appears, stop motion movement, he crouches down repeatedly in the center of the wide frame

Fade to close up of man with very obvious make up

'Ladies and gentlemen' but each syllable is a different cut

It then cuts to the man without the makeup

'There's a cameraman...or there was.'

The man addresses the audience about the film

'Do you see what you mean - meant - by all of that' - the man addresses the filmmaker

Brakhage's 'flying camera'

In slow motion, the man runs away from the camera as it fades

THEN TITLE APPEARS - BLUE MOSES written on stone (the title shots are repeated)

Man appears with even more makeup, looks like a cartoon

He starts singing, Brakhage layers both visuals and sounds of multiple takes of the singing

Man says 'where are you going' and the camera looks around. He repeats, the camera backs away through the tall grass/trees and then appears to 'run'

Disorientated 'viewer' or 'cameraman'

Overall japanese influence????? Kabuki?

The man wears a robe, heavy makeup, like a mask

The man starts taking his beard off, he tells the viewer that he's an actor. This is then repeated and layered using different takes and shots

'Your my audience, my captive audience. This whole film is about us'

Continued layering including the physical layering of the film through projection over another shot

Continued layering.

Visible shadow of cameraman

Flashing light - 'no it's impossible. How do i know, i know'

'Those tracks, those damn tracks. You see? You see?' and it returns to the opening wide shot with the man bowing (wearing the robe)

THE END - written on rocks

Blue Moses – viewed at LUX, 2022

Print is degraded missing title

Fade in of rocks

Then "by Brakhage"

Jump cuts
Dissolves between the characters

The camera man responds to Benson

"Do you see what she means - meant by all of that"
The tracks are tire tracks, lots

Handheld movement and jumpcuts

"I'm to find out…about the tracks…it doesn't matter"

Motion sick camera movement and editing combines to disorient

Slow fade to black

THEN title on rocks

Dissolves used again
New character

Repeating previous shots and dialogue

Kabuki-esque character, dribbling spit

Singing at the camera, dissolves into repeated shots of same character - creates a "round" with himself

"Where are you going"
Cut to by Brakhage

Camera is a point of view for the entire film

Running, disorienting movement again, dissolved over a static shot

"You see an eclipse, manufactured but not yet patented for your pleasure"

Next audible is "don't we"
"Let's play house. No? Aw, come on remember how it was? Issss. Waaaaas!"

Optical effect of circle of one shot within/over another

Benson starts removing his makeup - "look, this is ridiculous"
Layering audio
"You're my audience, my captive audience. This whole film is about us"

He walks out in front of a shot that we thought was part of the film but was in fact a projection

"It's impossible!"

No other audio than dialogue

Viewing 2 - dissolves

Dips in and out of white to titles and credits
Opens with stop motion extreme wide shot, man bowing

Dissolves into close up
Dissolves into midshot

Multiple dissolves over each other of character smiling into Benson as him

Dissolves again/match cutting to make-up'd character

Dissolves and match cutting are used to enforce that these characters are all the same, i.e. benson

Shot of character in wide/cowboy dissolve s quickly over a shot of benson and then back again

THEN the dissolves are used to mimic drunkenness - old hollywood trick

Layering of shots using dissolves

Dissolves to create the round - im not sure i understand that one

"Where are you going" - camera 'stands up and turns' - then we see by Brakhage again
Benson appears to be chasing the cameraman/Brakhage

Chase sequence, dissolves once again used for sense of panic/running

Benson walking towards camera, camera slowly moving back

Series of quick dissolves - "don't we"
Again frantic, then lands on Benson character sat next to house - let's play house line

Dissolve again used to mimic drunkenness or otherwise disoriented/high

CUTS to projection shot

Dissolves at the end combine the shot of Benson as within the projection

Dissolves all characters over one another and then it is the end

Dante's Quartet (1987)
16mm / silent   PAINTED + SCANNED?
Printed Titles - 16mm
Hell itself

Blue   Hell - 8mm
            hand Print

Purgation - super 16m   freeze frames
      Doorway?

      Face - fucking creepy
"Existence is Song?"
      16mm
      counter clockwise motion
  SB - Not "By Brakhage"

Image A2.12. Research notes on archival viewing of The Dante Quartet in 2016

The Dante Quartet (1987)
= The artist's translation of his own sight of 'Hell'
        'Purgatory'   'Heaven' (existence is song)
    - Brakhage described it as Narrative
    - Different gauges of film

IMAY
    35
    16MM

Hell itself
        IMAY
        Stepframe motion
        over pre-recorded footage
        ugly colours- off white, brown, pinkish
        brown or black seems to seep through everything
        - odd- makes use of greens, blues, yellow
                Not just red/orange or even a dominant
                there as typical 'hell'
    cuts to black
        + when returns, the brown dominance is gone
        + its just colours, which are then
        sort of taken over by these spidery black
            cracked rootlike things
    it is all step-framed (optical printing) + not animated stitch
                                            hand, no movement

Image A2.13. *Research notes on archival viewing of The Dante Quartet in 2017*

01:32 looks very similar to 'sky' 'galaxy' in other films

Hell Spit Flexion
    16mm
    this section uses the most of the recorded footage
    combination of hand-painted
    w/ abstracted recorded footage (Flying camera typical of Brakhage)

    significant amount of cutting to black + holding
    + the hand-painting uses far more negative space
      *resembles the "vision specks" found elsewhere in
      Brakhage's work

Purgation
    35 mm
    heavier paint than Hell Itself
    - implements use of optical fades
    - this is the most intimidating of all four
      - darker tones of paint, heavier
        most overtly "frightening"
    - still of face in sunglasses underneath quite
        intimidating
    constant use of clear imagery under heavy paint
      - just visible but not accessible
    a window into both heaven + hell - torment
    dark. reds, vibrant

Image A2.14. Research notes on archival viewing of The Dante Quartet in 2017, cont'd

existence is song
    IMAX
    bold colours vs the 'washed out' look of Hell
    moves quickly
    if there is pre-recorded footage, its not highly visible
      w/ the exception of a bursting fountain or volcano?
      "Life" - very much ALIVE

Image A2.15. Research notes on archival viewing of The Dante Quartet in 2017, cont'd

Lightning is the "fire of waters"

Fire of Waters

All Black/Sound? Dull hiss
except: blinking light, almost like a flashlight

Lightning behind Trees

a house light in a window
Bright light
head lights
lightning

Sound of Rain over Black   — — — = = —

Buzzing in a pattern

hiss again - Black

anticipation

lightning

Two small specks of light

Black
light - looks like exposed film, Not an image
Black
lightning
white
street-house, car, clear sky
lightning - goes Dark, just a light from
the house visible
Sounds like a squeaky Toy or woman reaching
            orgasm at end over shot of house w/ clear
            sky

Image A2.16. *Research notes on archival viewing of Fire of Waters in 2016*

Fire of Waters – viewed at LUX, 2017

Fires of Waters
unusually still frame (no movement at all)
all movement is w/in the frame + is created by
light (lightning, house lights, etc)
combined w/ audio tones
greyscale
film is isolating + haunting
(little to no manipulation of the images)

Image A2.17. Research notes on archival viewing of Fire of Waters in 2017

Eye Myth – viewed at LUX, 2017

Eye Myth (1967)
oxymoronic title – myth means "mouth"
myth that was just vision
hand-painted over pre-existing footage –
clear human shapes
the painting outlines these shapes as well

Image A2.18. Research notes on archival viewing of Eye Myth

Stellar – viewed at LUX, 2017

Stellar
definitely looks like outer space
white orbs as stars – these show up in other
films (I think Regen.kt?) – are they always stars

Image A2.19. Research notes on archival viewing of Stellar

FIRST HYMN TO THE NIGHT - Novalis

TEXT READS

"The UNIVERSALLY"
"gladening light"

Blue & green ~~Dot~~ colour dominance

"as IN-MOST soul"

RED then Purple then BLUE DOMINANCE
TRANSITIONS

"IT IS"
"BREATHED"

~~of~~ DINNWARD MOVEMENT (breathing in)
GREEN DOMINANCE

"BY STARS"

yellow / BROWN / gold DOMINANCE

"BY STARS"

link of the
STARS to
soul

STEP-FRAME, DOWNWARD blue & green

"BY suckling plant"
(black)
lots of negative SPACE, relative DOWNWARD MOVEMENT
blue,

"MULTIFORM BLAST"
Blue / seafoam

Image A2.20. *Research notes on archival viewing of First Hymn to the Night - Novalis*

"you" brings in warm colours, all of a sudden - extended amount of this time spent on this passage

"and by"
"(you)"

Pink, red, orange, blue, white - multitude of colours

"I turn"

cooler
↓
soulful
↓
fast

very quick edit - 2 frames of colour
• creates the perception of the action
green • orange w/ significant negative space

"aside"

green • blue, again fast
the speaker spends little time on himself

(you is Night)

"to holy Night" - only Night is capitalized

Blue + green w/ pops of red but overall very dark - lots of black/negative space

"I seek"
"to blend"
"with ashes"

you
+
Nigh
reinforced?
as warm colours

Pink, orange, purple, blue, then ultimately white/grey
full screen, very little negative space

"Night opens"

six or seven individual mini-sequences of reddish-pink separated by black

Image A2.21. Research notes on archival viewing of First Hymn to the Night – Novalis, cont'd

276

"INFINITE eyes"

NO DOMINANT colour - Full SPECTRUM, Full FRAME.

"in us"

Full FRAME, MOSTly PINK, RED, ORANGE

"BLESSED love"

white, ORANGE, PINK, RED

(SB)   00:02:47

"A hand-PAINTED Film whose emotionally referential shapes &
colours are interwoven with words (in English)
from the first 'Hymn to the Night...
            - Stan Brakhage

Image A2.22. Research notes on archival viewing of First Hymn to the Night - Novalis

IS ABSTRACT SYNONYMOUS W/ POETIC?,
IF NOT, HOW DO THESE TERMS DIFFER,
FORM?

TEXT OF LIGHT

CONTRADICTORY
- ATTEMPT TO DOCUMENT" AS THE EYE SEES
BUT THE NATURE OF DOCUMENTATION MEANS IT IS
ONLY VISIBLE THROUGH A CAMERA

FROM A GENERIC SENSE, -NOT ROMANTIC
AS IT IS AN ATTEMPT AT UNIVERSALITY
+ REMOVAL OF EGO

IS IT POETIC BECAUSE OF THE MANIPULATION?
INTENTIONAL OR NOT?

DAVID JAMES - "SHOT FRAME BY FRAME" -ACCURATE?

DECIDEDLY NOT NARRATIVE OR "PROSAIC"

PROSE + POETRY IN FILM ARE NOT MUTUALLY
EXCLUSIVE

Image A2.23. *Research notes on archival viewing of The Text of Light*

Loud Visual Noises – viewed at LUX, 2017

Hand-painted, scratched - red dominant, lots of negative space

> Occasional bursts of a grey-white frame causes dizziness
>
> Described as a 'companion piece' to *Fireloop*
>
> Soundtrack. Very different from *Fireloop*
>
> > Opens with a repetitive almost animal sound. Possible radio call
> >
> > Synth - sci-fi esque
> >
> > Voices, tones
> >
> > Train whistle
> >
> > Reversed mixed sound ends film
>
> Begs the question - what is a 'visual noise' - Synesthetic?
>
> 'By Brakhage'
>
> http://www.brainwashed.com/common/htdocs/discog/4st.php?site=nww

Loud Visual Noises – viewed at LUX, 2022

In Loud Visual Noises in particular, the sound is crucial to the film's synesthetic metaphor of "visual noise". The "visual noise" is just that – the actual synesthetic transfer of audio to the visual. The hand painted frames connote very little in terms of representing the accompanying audio. The film is heard rather than seen first with the bumpy sound of the optical track hitting light audially 'appearing' before any imagery.

Before viewing

-keep in mind synesthetic qualities of the film

-keep in mind abstraction

-keep in mind movement

-keep in mind soundtrack

 It moves upward

Traffic

Movement up

Sound isn't by Brakhage

-how does this change things? Or what does it change?

-collaboration is interesting

Primarily Warm colours that move continuously upward with what seems to be tiny dashes of light - pinpricks. Mimicking the eye???? Sight? vision???????

but it is the soundtrack that makes this film haunting and mystifying

Mix of warm and cool colours - red and blue primarily plus white scratches

Sound of radio being changed

Echo-y dreamlike, clearly recorded maybe multiple times and then played back and manipulated

Ends with exposed film rather than just blank frames

Quote from Brakhage, found on Lux:

This is a 'companion piece' to the similarly hand-painted Fire Loop (of Caswallon Trilogy) and is dedicated to the film-maker Paul Lundahl who supplied the title which prompted the film. – S.B.

Hell Spit Flexion – viewed at LUX, 2017

VERY different from what would appear as "Hell spit Flexion" in *The Dante Quartet*
> Primarily hand painted, bold high value colours
> Mix of warm and cool
> Long sustained frame of blue (entirely blue frame) - very like Jarmin's *Blue*
> Moves about halfway through from predominantly cool tones (and pre-recorded imagery, mostly of light flares) to predominantly warm tones, particularly RED (followed by orange)

Shapes - film contains the small white 'orbs' that I am beginning to find common in Brakhage's films - Taberham argues these are representations of vision?

Film is very short

Study in Color and Black & White – viewed at LUX, 2017

Confusing film.

Opens with very sparse, hand-painted colours in varying hues (mostly red, sometimes green or white)

As the film progresses, these frames of colour increase both in frequency and in terms of framing (starts with merely a few specks, the film culminates with full frames of colour)

The black and white is interspersed almost undetectably in the midst of the colour - HOW WAS THIS ACHIEVED?

Possibilities include: optical printing, white paint (though it looks like grey scale/b&w film),

The black and white frames look almost like medical photos

The flash frames generally look like the remainders of light on the human eye, as in the 'aftershock' of flash photography

The Aerodyne – viewed at LUX, 2017

Part 1 of Caswallon Trilogy

Documentary - about a play or dance possibly

Colour film, seriously degraded

Signed SB

Interesting for the focus on faces, lots of close ups. Interspersed with cut away close ups of hands, feet, etc

Interesting BIOGRAPHICALLY because of his divorce in 1986 and the change to signature SB

Fireloop – viewed at LUX, 2017

Part 2 of Caswallon Trilogy

Hand-painted

Blue-green-grey, red, white (hard brush strokes in white) on a 10 second (roughly) visual loop - approximately 30 times

The colours, though muted, are painted softly with no brush strokes, whereas the white is highly defined. Either visible brushstrokes or small round dots/specks/orbs

Soundtrack; before film begins, reverse audio of a voice

Low rumble comes in with title

at first it sounds like a thunderstorm, then maybe bowling, then popcorn or like electrical charges (the sound of two wires being sparked through speakers)

Underneath the low sound are multiple higher frequency 'hard' sounds, like wood on wood - knocks, hits, etc

Soundtrack is by J.H. - who is this?

As a part of the Caswallon Trilogy, this film stands out and doesn't seem to fit

Fireloop – viewed at LUX, 2022

Less noisy to start off than LVN

Over black - sound

Almost a rolling thunder comes in with the title this film is surprisingly 'cooler' than LVN but the movement is still upwards

It is blotchier and the sound is more electric

Crackling noise, almost like fireworks but muffled

Again the noise and visuals relate to each other very little

Its more like the visuals follow the music

Echoey

The visuals are softer somehow

The sound carries on past the end credits which is weird for brakhage

Reel is significantly shorter than listed on website

"Originally created as a special-effect element for a stage production, this hand-painted film presents one of Brakhage's most vivid "closed-eye envisionments"-here, of "a fire in the mind." - imdb, unknown author

Watching without visual

-rewind sound

-thunder sound that rolls into some kind of crackling like a small fire or actually bowling

-a small wobbling sound - like a 1950's alien

-then the fireworks

-all layered on top

-voices, far underneath

-the fireworks continue for a long time and then fade away to the bowling/hockey stick sounds

-a knocking

-another rumblings

Without sound

-the visuals come in waves - they come in and then go to black and back again

I think the visual might be looped over and over again

It is, it's the same 8 seconds of hand painted film copied and looped repeatedly

Quote from brakhage:

At the Art Cinema in Boulder, Colo., the Sunday Associated staged an adaptation of Jane Brakhage's story of Caesar's invasion of Britain, Caswallon the Headhunter. I contributed a hand painted film-loop, as part of the special effects, as well as making two films during rehearsals:(1) the first dance film I've made, Dance Shadows by Danielle Helander and (2) a film which meditates upon unique process of creativity engendered by Denise Judson and the Sunday Associates in production, The Aerodyne (Webster: Heavier -than-air aircraft that derives its lift in flight from forces resulting from its motion through air') -the latter two films silent. Thus the Caswallon Trilogy is composed of:

DANCE SHADOWS

Silent, Colour.

THE AERODYNE

Silent, Colour,

FIRELOOP

Sound, Colour.

Sound by Joel Haertling

Shot on super 8 and blown up to 16mm, these films are okay for 24 fps, as they were intended for variable speed 8 mm projectors, and, therefore, these new 'blowups' can certainly be run at either of those 16 mm projector speeds. – S.B.

Archivist told me the print had never been viewed before

Mistakenly listed as 10 minutes in length - actually approximately 3

Dance Shadows by Danielle Helander – viewed at LUX, 2017

Part 3 of Caswallon Trilogy

      Less documentary than *The Aerodyne*, more observational?

Short Films: 1975 – viewed at LUX, 2017
-severely degraded print

1. Jane's Memory
    a. Fades in, out of focus close ups of faces
    b. Red frame - flashes in and out

c. Inverted footage close up of male face

d. Focus in o eyes

e. The frame fully focuses and it's revealed the faces are still photographs captured by moving image camera of a man, woman, and child, focus pulls in and out as the film cuts between images

f. Flashes between still image of two and red, frequently; changes to srtill image of older woman

g. Flickers, light moves around the frame highlighting different photographs

h. Out of focus face of child slowly pulled into focus

i. Close up of a still photograph of eye

j. Cut to black

2. Dante's Styx

a. Opens on wide of ground - dust blowing cross so fast it looks like water rushing

b. ECU of plants, as if in an office

c. Window

d. Trash in a tree

e. Doorway

f. Pong

g. Pinball

h. Lights, many different kinds of lights

i. Unidentified close up - ground maybe

j. People walking down sidewalk in rain

k. Back to pinball

l. Out of focus person walking with umbrella

m. Side of building, six windows with bars.

n. Cut to looking through another window towards those same six windows

o. LOTS OF WINDOWS, GLASS, LIGHTS

p. Through a chainlink fence

q. Reflection of lights

r. The ground, various

s. Plane wing

t. Window with smoke passing by

u. Door with mirror

v. People, man in check shirt and young girl

w. Mans hand as he reads newspaper

- x. Out of focus
- y. Room, door with mirror, close up
- z. Man's penis
- aa. Windows - sam from before with bars
- bb. Wide landsscape of mountains
- cc. A plane flying
- dd. A city scape
- ee. Inside a plane
- ff. The plane's wing
- gg. City scape
- hh. Windows
- ii. Chainlink fence 0 view of city slow fade to interior
- jj. Vase, out of focus

3. Hollis Frampton
    - a. Opens on wide landscape, cuts to black
    - b. Extreme close ups of body parts, arms, hands, eyes
    - c. Plays with focus, concentrates on shots of face while Frampton appears to speak (silent)
    - d. Follows a pigeon on a street
    - e. Cuts to a window
    - f. Cuts to black

4. Lady in Glass
    - a. mid/wide shot of bathroom
    - b. Cuts to shot of Brakhage, sat with no shirt
    - c. Cuts to close up of a woman (jane?)
    - d. Cuts to ornate dining room,
    - e. Lots of crystal and stemware, tends to look through mirrors or glass at subjects, particularly the woman

5. Niagara Falls
    - a. Opens with image of travel, then cuts to scenes of nature. Trees first
    - b. Then out of focus shot of waterfall
    - c. Comes into focus, rushingf water
    - d. Camera follows water over edge and cuts away, and then back, repeats, etc
    - e. Cts to wide landscape, pine trees
    - f. Brief shot of people, tent

       g.   Out of focus clouds

       h.   Back to water

       i.   A chain

       j.   Cut to black

6.   Stars, Chickens, Eyes, Candles

       a.   openin g shot is bizarre and unidentifiable

       b.   Out of focus bird, alive

       c.   Out of focus…..

       d.   A canvas bag, with yarn stitches onto it

       e.   Leaves

       f.   Moving shadows

       g.   Reversed footage of smoke and a candle

       h.   A chidcken, cut to a gold statue

       i.   Smoke

       j.   A plant catching fire

       k.   A picture of a dog

       l.   An ECU of a flower, then of ash

       m. Defocus of light, a candle, shadow

       n.   A painting

       o.   Goat, nature, chicken,

       p.   Dead chicken or dying

       q.   Using focus to play with light and lens flares

       r.   Time laspse

       s.   Eye, fade to black

       t.   Nature, tree laves, a candle

       u.   Light over stone? Sparkles?

       v.   A line of light on black screen

       w. Arts and crafts, many shots of various things with feathers, gems, starts, paints, etc

       x.   Fur

       y.   A bird

       z.   Out of focus bird, pecks at the ground in a wide shot

       aa. Close up of painting stars, watching light move across objects

       bb. Candle, timelapse

       cc. Cut to black

7.   Turning the Racoon Loose

a. Close up of a racoon, intercut with shots of a child as well as a man holding a camera
b. Racoon appears to be a pet - there is a cage.
c. Cuts between close up of child and racoon and cut a way of hand petting racoon links the child to the racoon
d. Footage of Brakhage in cowboy hat filming
e. The child, a girl, looks in the other direction now, as the moon comes out
f. The racoon is under a rock
g. Moon is out of focus
h. Girl is out of focus
i. Moon leaves frame, out of focus in upper right corner
j. And comes back again in lower left, making the same journey to upper right
k. Girl pets racoon
l. Moon continues same journey, as these shots repeat, the moon gets smaller
m. Close up of girl.

8. Small Town Streets
a. Wide shot of suburbia, trees, house.
b. Interior of bedroom
c. Close up of tree
d. Various close ups of houses, windows, number signs, etc
e. Woman walking dog - could be girl, she walks away from camera
f. Continued cutaways of various homes and trees
g. Back to same interior of bedroom, with wood panelling - very 70s
h. Close ups of leaves, moving in wind
i. Final shot - interior bedroom - light moves by

9. Forest Love Scene
a. Two people on rocks and dirt
b. A pile of clothes
c. See the couple through trees
d. male massages female's back and feet
e. The disrobe
f. The camera uses jump cuts and multiple angles
g. Cuts to an extreme wide with the couple in middle, through trees
h. Back to extreme close ups and jump cuts
i. Elbows, bellow buttons, hands, genitals, mouths, - the bodies become indistinguishable

j.   Extreme close ups of hair and privates are cut with mouths, teeth

k.   Wide timelapse of the lovers

l.   Man smokes

m.   They get dressed, again in jump cuts, see through trees - there's a voyeuristic aspect that returns occasionally, which was interrupted by the close ups

10. Painted Lightning

a.   Appears to be partly hand-painted and scratched and partly recorded using defocus on lights

b.   Patterns are then scratched and painted over recorded images which are out of focus

c.   The hand made patterns move rapidly

d.   There is a visible mcu of a man briefly

e.   Spinning scratches/paint, orbs in a swirl

f.   Patterns of painted black moving quickly over whole frame

g.   Most of film is out of focus, light and shadow

h.   Wide shot of hall - square windows of light visible, rest dark

i.   Lots of camera movement, event when subject not clear

j.   Reflection of light in water

k.   Layered scratches and paint over images - faded over rather than direct

l.   The hand made swirls centre around a light source, sometimes - seem to mimic a visual sense of otherwise invisible intangible thing which is light

m.   Mostly white but also Yellow, blue, red

n.   Sometimes these scratches look like wind and painted lightning does seem to 'strike' down

Night Music – viewed at LUX, 2017

Primarily blue & green, secondary of orange and red

Full frame

Swirling movement

The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him – viewed at LUX, 2022

Newer print but still has the physicality of brakhages older works

PRINTED title not hand-written
f

Very close up shot of a boat
Light refracting off of something

Light sparkles and movement
Very fast light movements

Light over water

Something obscuring the lens and light hitting it to make a hexagonal shape

Foamy light

Bird flying across the water
Wave rolling in

It has moved from the extremely abstract to the relatively concrete but is pushing to the abstracted again
A push-pull between concrete and abstract

A shot of reefs that at first looked abstract and unidentifiable but after a moment its clear what it is

Lots of movement, faster paced than say text of light
When it moves to the concrete, the pace slows down significantly - why is the abstract so fast
Large water - ocean - to small water - fountain
To abstracted water moving and obscuring lens and creating light and colour and movement
It all seems to be the movement of light on water

Very sudden red screen - unsure what made it

Back to waves
Abstract movement - water or maybe steam? Moving up

It moves and shimmers,

Now stones i think under water but so close, too abstracted to tell

power

Stillness
And vastness
Sparkling light on the water
It could be a city or a universe, but it is water
Bubbles

Life

It grows, it moves, it expands. It is water and air. It is life.

Moon
Over water

Waves

It's gone less abstract again and slow, handheld

Defocus

Blinking cuts with defocused shots of waves
Now colour bleeds in and takes over - the red frame again. Some kind of light bleed from the camera

Like text of light, this is hypnotic and awe-inspiring, it's like an alien seeing the ocean for the first time and trying to capture it for its home planet

This is what it is, what it feels like

Now children on swings, abstracted but back and forth. Definitely children on swings

Clouds, light through them in patterns and shapes

Waves creeping over stones on a beach

The moon again

Flickers of red and then
Settles onto ocean debris - plants and reeds floating almost still but not quite

Now a wide, concrete shot of the water - an ocean or a large lake

Irises shot of two kayakers, then it cuts and there is only one

Cuts again and now it is abstracted and something I don't know
Now leaves in the water, reflected

Concrete, the shore from on the water, the water moves, maybe Brakhage was on a boat

Definitely on a boat now
It started with him on the shoreline and now he's out on the water

This abstraction i don't know what this is

Berries on a bush, red berries leaves, light bleed
It's back on land now
Lines in the sand, waves made by nature on the sand, waves waves
Broken shells

Movement, bit sickening its so fast

Barnacles? So close up, can't tell

Something tiny and abstract
Now waves, concrete
Wide shot of the …

A flipped shot of the ocean i think. Sky at the bottom
Cuts to the sky and shots of clouds
Is this movement through trees? Water? I see light and movement

A wave crashes - several shots, waves crashing into the shore - keeps fading out and then back in

The red frame again

Keeps going back to this red frame - colour or light bleed on the film
I think there was a shot of someone looking out a window or at a projection on a wall

Concrete - waves.
Then defocused

A seal - concrete, floating still, then abstracted as it thrashes

Very quick cutting between different kinds of nature - seal, bird, flowers, water, red and blue and then the red frame
The blue water, waves crashing into the shore
Again.

Waves
Waves

Now clouds.

Now abstracted light particles

Red yellow frame

Clouds moving - the waves of the sky

Geese floating

Water, shoreline handheld and shaky but not totally abstract

Water with boat on the horizon, out of focus

Small waves

Mountain ridge, camera sweeping across panning very fast following the line of the ridge

Abstract yellow-y water with shimmering light

Iris'd kayaker again

Trees

Shimmering water, things floating in it

Upside down waves
Upside down shore
Light reflecting

A small orange light - street light maybe

City in the distance over the shoreline

Very quick cuts of clouds

Murky water moving - algae moving

Boats on the water

Shimmering water moving,
Dead crab floating
Shore - small waves coming in

Foamy water waving into the shore

A mix of the abstracted and concrete - preponderance on that which gives us life - water

Foamy, gross, moving,

Water
Shimmering and moving

Horizon, some kind of sand abr

Orange-y shot of water with boats and horizon, mounts - very sudden change

Then back to blue and shimmery, but with a pinkish hue
Some kind of change has happened

Waves

All shots definitely handheld

The fast abstracted movement makes it look like his hand painted works

Quick shot of a dog bounding in the waves

Movement of waves

Shots of geese swimming, repeated, slightly out of focus but not abstracted

Sudden change to very still shoreline, sand, still water in it
Reddish shot of water and horizon, again still

Redding shot of mountains over water, still - all handheld still

The water is calmer now

A boat slowly moving off screen while a person, tiny in the corner stands.

Boats.

Everything is still very quiet and still

The water relatively calmer, even when the handheld gets shakier

Camera panning very fast across water
Splash into water, close up

Sudden move to land again - very brief - then back to the water

A flickering of colours, blue and white mostly, then a shot of slowly moving/pulsing
water/foam

Dark shot of water with horizon
Shot of greenery being washed up - lots of green dredge

Still has a pulsing sensation

Cut to black, fades u onto waves, dips in and out to waves or pulsing water

Red
Black frames and flickering light

Keeps dipping out to black and back in on various water scenes

Flowers all of a sudden

Then back to sky

Water moving. Not quite waves but undulating water

A couple walk along disappears with a cut

Is this insects at the end here ?

Rocks, shimmering light , shadows and movement

No "by brakhage" at the end….

Sirius Remembered – viewed at LUX, 2022

Isnt this meant to be silent?

Sirius
Re
Membered

Jarring editing
Jump cuts
Stark contrast to dissolves

No sound track but its there still, i can feel it
I feel like it's meant to be viewed with the sound ON even though there's nothing there

Lots of movement - contrasts starkly with death and abstracts in a different way than act of seeing does

Lots of sideways shots - POV of the dog as he lies decomposing??
Flickering edits of edit

The dog is almost gone now but i see his fur, his jaw

He is slowly becoming part of the earth

Still lots of sideways and fast paced shots but not quite as fast
Upside down, swooping and swerving over the dog

Up and down - motion sick

Very fast jump cuts

A dissolve sneaks in and another
And another

The dissolve seems to be used to place sirius and the ground together

The camera shakes its head no and it dissolves

Moving closer and closer to the eye
The dog is recomposed now
We're going back in time

We see him both decomposed and re-membered, reconstructed once again through film

Repeated shots of the camera tilting up

The film makes its point and continues on a bit for me

But the strongest aspect of it to me is not the visual but the silence/not silence

There is a dip to black and it comes up on snow and then it's lots of abstracted shots of the dog, moving very quickly and dissolved over one another

It blends fur with twigs
A brief sound - intentional or just noise/artefacts on the print?????

The film reminds me of Brakhage's later hand-drawn work and of course his autopsy opus, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*

The 'Brakhagian' style developed so much sooner than I realised

This is available on YouTube but the print/transfer has definitely been corrupted making it very difficult to tell

It's hard to remember that this was filmed in colour - it is so monochromatic that its as if it was filmed in B&W. the age of the print shows as well, the entire thing has a yellow hue. I can see the transition from this to mothlight. Brakhage seems almost more concerned with the nature surrounding the dog than the dog itself.

Brakhage is thoroughly aware of the preservation of film at this point. I firmly believe that the title indicates this and ti would be good to read through his own notes to find supporting evidence for this.

This is not an emotional film, it is stoic (like Act of Seeing). It is not romanticising the dog or its death

Quote from LUX

'The corpse of the family dog inspires rapid camera movement and rapid editing in an attempt to come to terms with death." – SB

'I was coming to terms with decay of a dead thing and the decay of the memories of a loved being that had died and it was undermining all abstract concepts of death. The form was being cast out by probably the same physical need that makes dogs dance and howl in rhythm around a corpse. I was taking song as my inspiration and for the rhythm structure, just as dogs dancing, prancing around a corpse, and howling in rhythm-structures or rhythm-intervals might be considered like the birth of some kind of son.' – SB

The Horseman, the Woman, and the Moth – viewed at LUX, 2022

The Horseman, the Woman, and the Moth

A long myth drawn directly onto the films surface, which is painted, dyed, treated so that it will grow controlled crystals and mould – as textures of the figures and forms of the drama, some images stamped through melted wax crayon techniques, some images actual objects (such as moth wings) collaged directly on the celluloid…so that the protagonists of this myth (as listed in the title) weave through crystalline structures and organic jungles of the colourful world of hypnagogic vision-edited into 'themes and variations' that tell a 'thousand and one 'stories while at the same time, evoking Baroque music…. the primary musical inspiration being harpsichord Sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. – S.B.

Where other hand drawn films are non-representational, this appears to be abstractions upon paintings

Mixing the real with the imaginary

Curious about the process as some of this looks like it would have make bumps onto the film - slowly scanning frame by frame perhaps?

Mothlight meets *The Dante Quartet*

Always experimenting on the same themes it appears. Movement then stillness

I can make out images of a man

Are there other films he made that combine his styles like this???? I haven't come across them. This is fascinating but difficult for me to watch
Very triggering for my epilepsy

It is the same still image of a man, treated over and over again

He is consumed

Repeatedly

Moved briefly into close up

Moth wing is coming into play now

This is interesting but not great. In terms of technique it's very fascinating but it doesn't have the emotional resonance of some of his other work

The moth seems to overtake everything

There's an image of the man, seems to be reversed and monstrous

I'm seeing some hints of footage

Appendix III: Email from Marilyn Brakhage

Re: Requesting permission to use stills in thesis

MARILYN BRAKHAGE <vams@shaw.ca>
Thu 18/05/2023 06:57
To:Jacqueline Griffin (AMA – Postgraduate Researcher) <J.Siler@uea.ac.uk>

Dear Jacqui,

I think it's fine for you to use the screen grabs in your thesis, though I'd prefer they be replaced by better quality images if it is to be published somewhere later.

Best of luck with all your work,

Marilyn

From: "Jacqueline Griffin, AMA - Postgraduate Researcher" <J.Siler@uea.ac.uk>
To: "MARILYN BRAKHAGE" <vams@shaw.ca>
Sent: Wednesday, May 17, 2023 5:15:06 AM
Subject: Re: Requesting permission to use stills in thesis

Dear Marilyn,

Thank you so much for your prompt response and sincere apologies for my delay in then responding back. I am incredibly grateful for your permission to use still images, thank you so much.

I do have the stills I need but I did want to raise a secondary question in regard to these: as this is not for publication, are you opposed to me using lower resolution 'screen grabs' of some films? For instance, I talk at length about some of the earlier films in Stan's career and am interested in very specific moments from these films (*The Way to the Shadow Garden* and *Reflections on Black*, for instance) and as placeholder have screen grabs to illustrate some of the points. If there's any opposition to this and you would prefer that I only use the high-resolution images available, that is completely understandable, and I will remove them and/or endeavour to replace them.

I will be happy to forward you a digital copy of my work once it is complete and I have approval from my examiners, this should hopefully be by the end of this calendar year but I will update you if it is delayed.

Best wishes,
Jacqui

Jacqueline Griffin
Doctoral Candidate
School of Art, Media, and American Studies
University of East Anglia

From: MARILYN BRAKHAGE <vams@shaw.ca>
Sent: 06 May 2023 06:08
To: Jacqueline Griffin (AMA - Postgraduate Researcher) <J.Siler@uea.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Requesting permission to use stills in thesis

> **Warning:** This email is from outside the UEA system. Do not click on links or attachments unless you expect them from the sender and know the content is safe.

Dear Jacqui,

Thanks for getting touch. Yes, of course, it is completely fine for you to use still images from the films in your thesis. Do you have the stills you need?

Image A3.1. *Email correspondence with Marilyn Brakhage*

Appendix IV: Email from Mark Toscano

Re: Fire of Waters

Mark Toscano <mrktosc@gmail.com>
Fri 11/08/2017 08:35
To:Jacqueline Griffin (AMA – Postgraduate Researcher) <J.Siler@uea.ac.uk>
Hi Jacqui –

Great to hear you're doing work on Brakhage, and especially pleased that you're looking into his sound filmmaking, which I agree is academically under-treated.

I am indeed restoring Fire of Waters right now. I don't really work with Boulder on any of the Brakhage restorations, as although they have his papers (which are great, and which I've looked through), they otherwise just have a mostly complete set of projection prints, which I don't need to access (I can access other copies elsewhere). His originals, internegatives, etc. are all at the Academy, where I work in LA.

I'm sure you did see the re-recorded track there – Boulder bought those prints around 2001-02 or so, and all of them were newly printed, so it would've definitely been from the 1972 re-recorded track.

Realistically, the difference between the two tracks is probably not super obvious. In fact, it's likely no one (including me) might even notice, actually. It's more of a conceptual difference I'd say, though still a meaningful one.

The photos are indeed my own too, and you're welcome to use them, if you can just credit them to Mark Toscano (mainly just so anyone else who's interested knows where to source them).

Glad you liked the piece, and no worries about the questions - your email is the kind of response that makes me really glad I put this stuff out there!

all the best,

Mark

On Thu, Aug 10, 2017 at 7:05 PM, Jacqueline Griffin (AMA) <J.Siler@uea.ac.uk> wrote:

Mark,

Thanks for the quick reply! I'm doing a PhD on Brakhage, looking at the concept of film poetry as it applies to his films. Fire of Waters happens to be one of the films I selected for its elusiveness, as you discuss in the post.

One of the aspects of his films I'm focusing my analysis on is sound, as I feel it's a relatively untouched area of his work. I gathered from the post that you are in the process of restoring Fire of Waters – are you working with the UCB archives? I saw the film there and I'm now thinking it will have been the 1972 print. I'm very intrigued by the difference in the original print versus the transfer.

I also would like to use the images in my work – are they your original photographs?

Thanks again, and sorry for all the questions. I really thoroughly enjoyed the article and found it incredibly insightful and useful.

Cheers,

Jacqui Griffin

Image A4.1. *Email correspondence with Mark Toscano*

Bibliography

'About | Filmpoem'. Accessed 13 September 2018. http://filmpoem.com/about/.

Alexandru, Vlad. 'VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY'. *International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education* 3 (25 August 2019): 56–63. https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2019.3.56-63.

Altman, Rick. 'The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound'. In *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

Andrew, J. Dudley. *The Major Film Theories, An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Arnheim, Rudolf. *Film As Art*. California: University of California Press, 1957.

Arthur, Paul. 'Becoming Dark with Excess of Light'. In *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, edited by David E. James, 207–25. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

Austruc, Alexandre. 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo'. *L'Écran Française*, 30 March 1948. http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/camera-stylo-astruc.shtml.

'Avant-Garde Art: Definition, Meaning, History'. Accessed 29 November 2018. http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/avant-garde-art.htm.

Baron-Cohen, Simon, and John E. Harrison, eds. *Synesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Reading*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997.

Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. In *Auteurs and Authorship, A Film Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Betancourt, Michael. 'Cinegraphic: Stan Brakhage's Film Theory & Visual Music', 4 September 2011. http://www.cinegraphic.net/article.php?story=20110902130305806.

BFI. 'All That Is Light: Stan Brakhage on Film'. Accessed 6 February 2024. https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/all-that-light-stan-brakhage-film.

Bierce, Ambrose. *An Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge and Other Stories*. New York: Dover Publications, 2008. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/375/375-h/375-h.htm.

Blaetz, Robin. 'Avant-Garde and Experimental Film : Cinema and Media Studies - Oi'. Oxford Bibliographies, 24 July 2018. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199791286-0082.

Blue Moses. 16mm; sound, Experimental, 1962.

Blue Moses (1962, Stan Brakhage), 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpKVXeJd7CA.

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. Twelfth. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2020.

Brakhage, Stan. 'Letter to Ronna Page (On Music).' In *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, edited by P. Adams Sitney. Anthology Film Archives Series 3. New York: New York University Press, 1978.

———. *Stan Brakhage - Metaphors on Vision*. Edited by P. Adams Sitney. Anthology Film Archives, 2017.

'Brakhage's Silent Legacy for Sound Cinema'. Accessed 25 November 2018. https://offscreen.com/view/brakhage3.

Brody, Richard. 'How Maya Deren Became the Symbol and Champion of American Experimental Film'. *The New Yorker*, 16 November 2022. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/how-maya-deren-became-the-symbol-and-champion-of-american-experimental-film.

Buscombe, Edward. 'Ideas of Authorship'. In *Auteurs and Authorship, A Film Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Cameron, Ian. 'Films, Directors, and Critics'. In *Auteurs and Authorships*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Camper, Fred. An Interview with Fred Camper. Interview by Jacqui Griffin. Zoom, 2023.

———. 'Brakhage's Contradictions'. *Chicago Review* 47/48 (2001): 69–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/25304808.

———. 'By Brakhage: The Act of Seeing . . .' The Criterion Collection, 25 May 2010. http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/272-by-brakhage-the-act-of-seeing.

———. 'Mothlight and Beyond'. La Furia Umana, 2011. http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/archives/34-lfu-10/125-fred-camper-mothlight-and-beyond.

———. 'Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film'. FredCamper.com. Accessed 9 June 2023. https://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html.

———. 'Program Notes by Fred Camper for a Brakhage Program He Curated'. Academic Blog. FredCamper.com, 2003. https://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/FC.html.

———. *Seeking Brakhage*. Eyewash Books, 2022.

———. 'The Text of Light'. Chicago Reader. Accessed 12 August 2020.
    https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-text-of-light/Film?oid=1073492.

Carlson, Gretchen. 'Antonio Sanchez, Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)
    Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Milan M2-36689, 2014, CD.' *Journal of the Society
    for American Music* 10, no. 2 (May 2016): 229–33.
    https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196316000158.

'Chiaroscuro'. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2017.

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Cocteau, Jean. *The Art of Cinema*. London and New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1988.

Corghi, Renato. 'Montage in Cinematography—Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein'.
    Intermittent Mechanism (blog), 4 November 2019.
    https://intermittentmechanism.blog/2019/11/04/montage-in-cinematography-lev-
    kuleshov-and-sergei-eisenstein/.

Cottage, Ian. 'Poem Film Manifesto'. Accessed 23 March 2018.
    http://iancottage.blogspot.com/2009/03/poem-film-manifesto.html.

Cutting, James E., Kaitlin L. Brunick, and Jordan E. Delong. 'The Changing Poetics of the
    Dissolve in Hollywood Film'. *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 29, no. 2 (1 July 2011): 149–
    69. https://doi.org/10.2190/EM.29.2.b.

'Definition of STELLAR', 1 May 2023. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stellar.

Deren, Maya. *Essential Deren : Collected Writings on Film*. Edited by Bruce R. McPherson.
    Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 2005.
    http://archive.org/details/essentialderenco0000dere.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *The Film Sense*. 1986th ed. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1943.

Ėjzenštejn, Sergej M., and Jay Leyda. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. A Harvest Book 153.
    New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1977.

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

Evory, Michelle Bonczek. *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations*.
    Open SUNY Textbooks, 2018. https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/naming-the-
    unnameable/.

Falci, Eric. *The Value of Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Fialkowski, Barbara. 'Parker Tyler: The Cinema of Poetry'. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, no. 1
(1978): 73–79.

'Film History Before 1920'. Accessed 8 June 2023.
https://www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro4.html.

Fire of Waters. 16mm; sound, 1965.

Fireloop. 16mm; sound, 1986.

First Hymn to the Night - Novalis. 16mm film; silent, 1994.

Flesh of Morning. 16mm; sound, Experimental Drama, 1956.

Furniss, Maureen. *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
2007.

Gaillet, Lynée Lewis. '(Per)Forming Archival Research Methodologies'. *College Composition and
Communication* 64, no. 1 (2012): 35–58.

Ganguly, Suranjan. 'Adventures in Perception: Stan Brakhage in His Own Words'. The
Criterion Collection. Accessed 8 March 2022.
https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4956-adventures-in-perception-stan-
brakhage-in-his-own-words.

Gibbs, John. *The Life of Mise-En-Scène Visual Style and British Film Criticism, 1946–78*.
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

Grierson, John. 'FROM "FIRST PRINCIPLES OF DOCUMENTARY" (UK, 1932)'. In
FROM "FIRST PRINCIPLES OF DOCUMENTARY" (UK, 1932), 453–59. University
of California Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957411-125.

Grimes, Shaunta. 'If the Top of My Head Were Taken Off . . .' *The Every Day Novelist* (blog), 15
January 2019. https://medium.com/the-1000-day-mfa/if-the-top-of-my-head-were-
taken-off-845b209cae71.

Gunning, Tom. 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde'.
In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam:
Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

Hamlyn, Nicky. 'The Roman Numeral Series'. In *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, edited by David E.
James, 113–28. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

'Hans Richter on the Nature of Film Poetry'. Accessed 13 September 2018.
http://uwewienke.blogspot.com/2013/04/hans-richter-on-nature-of-film-poetry.html.

Hiller, Jim. 'Swimming and Sinking'. In *Style and Meaning Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, edited by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, 155–66. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

'Homophone - Definition and Examples of Homophone', 19 February 2014. https://literarydevices.net/homophone/.

Hugo, Victor. *Delphi Complete Works of Victor Hugo (Illustrated)*. Delphi Classics, 2013.

Huttunen, Tomi. 'Montage in Russian Imaginism: Poetry, Theatre and Theory'. *Montaaž Vene Imažinismis: Luule, Teater Ja Teooria.* 41, no. 2/3 (July 2013): 219–29. https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2013.41.2-3.05.

Ieropoulos, Fil. 'Poetry-Film & The Film Poem: Some Clarifications', 7 October 2016. https://5metrosdepoemas.com/index.php/poesia-y-cine/56-el-cine-en-las-artes/611-poetry-film-the-film-poem-some-clarifications.

———. 'The Film Poem'. University of the Creative Arts, 2010.

Interim. 16mm; sound, Drama, 1952.

James, Andrew. 'On Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity: Meshes of the Afternoon'. *The International Journal of Screendance* 3 (2013). https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v3i0.5759.

James, David. 'The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson'. *Film Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1982): 35–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/1211925.

James, David E. 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage: The Activity of His Nature'. In *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, 1–19. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

———, ed. *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

Kael, Pauline. 'Circles and Squares'. In *Auteurs and Authorship, A Film Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Kalmus, Natalie M. 'Color Consciousness'. *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, August 1935, 139–47.

Kane, Daniel. *We Saw The Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

Kappenberg, Claudia. 'Film as Poetry'. *The International Journal of Screendance* 3 (2013). https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v3i0.5734.

Kashmere, Brett. 'By Brakhage: An Anthology'. Off Screen, January 2004. https://offscreen.com/view/brakhage5.

Kawin, Bruce. 'Authorship, Design, and Execution'. In *Auteurs and Authorship, A Film Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Keating, Patrick. 'Pasolini, Croce, and the Cinema of Poetry', n.d., 15.

Keller, Sarah. 'Poetry and "Film Poetics"'. In *A Companion to Experimental Cinema*, edited by Federico Windhausen. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023.

Kenner, T.A. *Symbols and Their Hidden Meanings: The Mysterious Significance and Forgotten Origins of Signs and Symbols in the Modern World*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006.

Kerrigan, Susan, and Phillip Mcintyre. 'The Creative Treatment of Actuality: Rationalizing and Reconceptualizing the Notion of Creativity for Documentary Practice'. *Journal of Media Practice* 11 (1 August 2010): 111–30. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.11.2.111_1.

KNews. 'The Value of Poetry and Great Literature'. Kaieteur News, 24 February 2019. https://www.kaieteurnewsonline.com/2019/02/24/the-value-of-poetry-and-great-literature/.

Kolker, Robert P. 'The Film Text and Film Form'. In *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, 11–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Le Grice, Malcolm. *Abstract Film and Beyond*. MIT Press, 28 Carleton St, 1977.

L'Eplattenier, Barbara E. 'An Argument for Archival Research Methods: Thinking Beyond Methodology'. *College English* 72, no. 1 (2009): 67–79.

Lev, Peter. *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*. University of California Press, 2006.

'Light Cone - Stan BRAKHAGE'. Accessed 4 January 2022. https://lightcone.org/en/filmmaker-34-stan-brakhage.

Lori, Marco, and Esther Leslie, eds. *Stan Brakhage: The Realm Buster*. United Kingdom: John Libbey Publishing, Ltd, 2018.

LUX. 'First Hymn to the Night - Novalis'. Accessed 22 June 2023. https://lux.org.uk/work/first-hymn-to-the-night-novalis/.

LUX. 'Stellar'. Accessed 9 May 2023. https://lux.org.uk/work/stellar/.

LUX. 'Study in Color and B&W'. Accessed 9 May 2023. https://lux.org.uk/work/study-in-color-and-bw/.

LUX. 'Text of Light'. Accessed 9 February 2023. https://lux.org.uk/work/text-of-light1/.

LUX. 'The Horseman, The Woman, and The Moth'. Accessed 3 May 2023. https://lux.org.uk/work/the-horseman-the-woman-and-the-moth/.

Marley, Keith. *The Art of Fact: The Place of Poetics within Documentary Filmmaking*. Cambridge University Press, n.d.

Matias, Diana. 'Current Problems of Film Theory: Christian Metz on Jean Mitry's L'Esthétique et Psychologie Du Cinéma, Vol II'. *Screen* 14, no. 1–2 (1 March 1973): 40–88. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/14.1-2.40.

Mayer, Sophia. 'If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution!: Tracing the Revolutions of Maya Deren's Dance in Jane Campion's In the Cut'. *The International Journal of Screendance* 3 (2013). https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v3i0.5705.

Mekas, Jonas. 'Brakhage. Breer. Menken. The Pure Poets of Cinema'. In *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, edited by David E. James, 27–28. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

———. 'My Definition of the Avant-Garde'. In *The Idea of the Avant-Garde and What It Means Today*, edited by Marc James Léger. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

Michelson, Annette. 'Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura'. In *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, edited by David E. James, 36–56. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

Michelson, Peter. *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*. SUNY Press, 1993.

Mooney, Stephen. 'Stan Brakhage's Temporality, Disjunction and Reflexive Process'. In *Stan Brakhage: The Realm Buster*, edited by Marco Lori and Esther Leslie. United Kingdom: John Libbey Publishing, Ltd, 2018.

Mothlight. 16mm; silent, Experimental. Canyon Cinema, 1963.

MUBI. 'Stan Brakhage'. Accessed 13 September 2018. https://mubi.com/cast/stan-brakhage.

Mudie, Peter. 'It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage's Object Collage/Time Paintings'. In *Stan Brakhage. The Realm Buster*, edited by Marco Lori and Esther Leslie. United Kingdom: John Libbey Publishing, Ltd, 2018.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*. 3rd ed. Indiana University Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005t6j.

Park, Steven. 'Abstraction'. The University of Chicago: Theories of Media, 2003. https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/abstraction.htm.

Part from the Film 'Blue Moses' by Stan Brakhage, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Abn1WCxqZUY.

Poetry and the Film: A Cinema 16 Symposium. New York, NY, 1953. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA-yzqykwcQ.

Polkinghorne, Donald. *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care.* SUNY Press, 2004.

Pruitt, John. 'Stan Brakhage and the Long Reach of Maya Deren's Poetics of Film'. *Chicago Review* 47/48, no. Winter, 2001-Spring, 2002 (2001): 116–32.

Raeymaekers, S. a. F. 'Filmic Silence: An Analytic Framework', 2014. https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/18063.

Ramsey, Alexis E., Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L'Eplattenier, and Lisa Mastrangelo-Do Not Use. *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition.* SIU Press, 2009.

Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt. 'The Self-Destruction of the Avant Garde'. In *The Idea of the Avant-Garde and What It Means Today*, edited by Marc James Léger. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

Reflections on Black. 16mm; sound, Experimental Drama, 1955.

Roark, Randy. *Dissolve: Screenplays to the Films of Stan Brakhage.* First. Boulder, CO: Cityful Press, 2002.

Rose, Cameron. 'Poetic Documentary and Visual Anthropology: Representing Intellectual Disability on Screen'. Monash University, 2014. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/41916510/Rose_exegesis_v6-2eTheses-libre.pdf?1454474651=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DPoetic_Documentary_and_Visual_Anthropolo.pdf&Expires=1686658760&Signature=c8MzUoSNFz2C6iPlN9K-KVD~CM0Vcp2jh2iKxXBCdtojeHFdRW~bWCau6p3kLLX9t0GbnAra8H-g0pNrwakJWYcOsq6onA1g7PtoqY~JpoJz~fGMX8Kvm57ibJ3IeXTY2mlQZizvvT7f5hbEzCgCtUpw4vdmahcOd6sgmlIeXE13PMLpVl39OsPQECuBlz-2trvf-cNb5IgVStF5OUa0NUOBpcvPP88v8re5pfk-cCsV2q1RX~ex9NxNbUbaG4QOxXRHBLtcnyU4NsD13P2CSDT4~lAY9h8OcfXXQ4cj0yBHrEnryApA19HKfUKJnvneql-bNzh3De0U6hIz-EheEw__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA.

Sacal, Judith. 'Being and Cinema: Beyond Time in Poetic Cinema'. *Rivista Di Estetica*, no. 46 (1 March 2011): 151–54. https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.1647.

Sándor, András. 'Poeticity'. *Poetics* 18, no. 3 (1 June 1989): 299–316. https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(89)90005-3.

Sarris, Andrew. 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962'. In *Auteurs and Authorships*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Searls, Damion. 'Write Tight'. *The Paris Review* (blog), 21 April 2015. https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/21/write-tight/.

Sellors, C. Paul. *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*. London: Wallflower Press, 2010.

Sergi, Gianluca. *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood*. Manchester University Press, 2004.

Sirius Remembered. 16mm; silent, 1959.

Sitney, P. Adams. 'Introduction'. In *Seeking Brakhage*, by Fred Camper. Eyewash Books, 2022.

———, ed. 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium'. In *Film Culture Reader*, 1st Cooper Square Press ed., 171–86. New York, NY: Cooper Square Press, 2000. https://monoskop.org/images/e/e0/Sitney_Adams_P_ed_Film_Culture_Reader_2nd _ed_2000.pdf.

———. *The Cinema of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. *Visionary Film, The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Smithsonian Learning Lab. 'Representational, Abstract, or Nonrepresentational?' Accessed 12 May 2023. https://learninglab.si.edu/q/ll-c/bVs3frKjf56y1Gjw.

Speranza, Robert Scott. 'Verses in the Celluloid: Poetry in Film From 1910-2002, With Special Attention to the Development of the Film-Poem'. Ph.D., University of Sheffield, 2002.

Stack, Oswald. *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1969.

Stein, Gertrude. 'Stein's Rose'. Accessed 29 March 2023. https://writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_Rose-is-a-rose.html.

Stellar. 16mm film; silent, 1993.

Stillinger, Jack. *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Street, Sarah. *British Cinema in Documents*. USA and Canada: Routledge, 2000. https://web-s-ebscohost-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHh3d19fMTE2MzM0MF9 fQU41?sid=94a274c7-d763-4121-91b2-7e6aa59cf417@redis&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_1&rid=0.

———. '"Colour Consciousness": Natalie Kalmus and Technicolor in Britain'. *Screen* 50, no. 2 (1 July 2009): 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjp010.

Study in Color and Black & White. 16mm; silent, 1993.

Taberham, Paul. 'It's Alive If You Are: Defining Experimental Animation'. In *Experimental Animation: From Analogue to Digital*, edited by Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands, and Paul Taberham, 1st ed., 280. London: Routledge, 2019.

———. *LESSONS IN PERCEPTION: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker as Practical Psychologist*. New York, NY | Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2018.

———. 'Music Visualisation and Medium Expansion: Key Themes in Experimental Animation'. In *A Companion to Experimental Cinema*, edited by Federico Windhausen, 210–29. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023.

Takahashi, Tess. '"METICULOUSLY, RECKLESSLY, WORKED UPON": Direct Animation, the Auratic and the Index'. In *EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATION: From Analogue to Digital*, edited by Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands, and Paul Taberham. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Tate. 'Abstract Art'. Tate. Accessed 13 May 2023. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art.

———. 'Abstract Expressionism'. Tate. Accessed 13 May 2023. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-expressionism.

Technica, Jennifer Ouellette, Ars. 'Why Humans See Faces in Everyday Objects'. *Wired*. Accessed 9 February 2023. https://arstechnica.com/science/2021/07/our-brains-read-expressions-of-illusory-faces-in-things-just-like-real-faces/.

The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes. 16mm film; silent, Documentary, 1971.

The Atlantic. 'The Almanac', 1 March 1998. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/03/the-almanac/377084/.

The British Library. 'Prose and Verse in Shakespeare's Plays'. Accessed 26 March 2018. https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/prose-and-verse-in-shakespeares-plays.

The Dante Quartet. 16 mm or 35mm; silent, Experimental, 1987.

'The Dante Quartet'. Accessed 29 November 2017. https://lux.org.uk/work/the-dante-quartet.

The Film-Makers' Cooperative. 'Mothlight - Stan Brakhage'. Accessed 15 June 2023.
    https://film-makerscoop.com/catalogue/stan-brakhage-mothlight.

The God of the Day Had Gone Down Upon Him. 16mm; silent, 2000.

The Horseman, The Woman, and the Moth. 16mm; sound, 1968.

The Man With the Rubber Head, 1901.

The Mermaid, 1904.

The Text of Light. 16mm; silent, 1974.

The Way to the Shadow Garden. 16mm; sound, Experimental Drama, 1954.

The Wonder Ring. 16mm film; silent, Documentary, 1955.

'The World of Dante'. Accessed 14 December 2017.
    http://www.worldofdante.org/purgatory1.html.

Toscano, Mark. 'Sartre's Nausea (1961) and Black Vision (1965) by Stan Brakhage /
    FIFTEEN YEARS? Part 3: 2005'. *PRESERVATION INSANITY* (blog), 28 June
    2018. https://preservationinsanity.wordpress.com/2018/06/27/sartres-nausea-1961-
    and-black-vision-1965-by-stan-brakhage-fifteen-years-part-3-2005/.

———. 'Stan Brakhage's Fire of Waters and Sculpting in Sound'. Blog. Preservation Insanity,
    6 August 2017. https://preservationinsanity.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/stan-
    brakhages-fire-of-waters-and-sculpting-in-sound/.

Tremlett, Sarah. *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*. Bristol:
    Intellect Ltd, 2021.

Truffaut, François. 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema'. *Cahiers Du Cinema* 31 (1954).

Tyson, Jeff. 'How Movie Projectors Work'. HowStuffWorks, 7 September 2000.
    https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/movie-projector.htm.

Verrone, William E. *The Avant-Garde Feature Film: A Critical History*. North Carolina, USA:
    McFarland & Co, 2012.

Versluis, Arthur, trans. *Pollen and Fragments: Selected Poetry and Prose of Novalis*. Grand Rapids, MI:
    Phanes Press, 1989.

Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Edited by Annette Michelson. Translated
    by Kevin O'Brien. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press,
    1984. chrome-
    extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://modernity.io/wp-
    content/uploads/2018/12/Vertov.pdf.

Wainwright, Jeffrey. *Poetry: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Wees, William. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992. https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft438nb2fr&brand=ucpress.

Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge, 2013. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315004044.

Withalm, Gloria. 'The Self-Reflexive Screen: Outlines of a Comprehensive Model'. In *The Self-Reflexive Screen: Outlines of a*, 125–42. De Gruyter Mouton, 2008. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198836.4.125.

Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. London: Routledge Classics, 2005.