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STAN BRAKHAGE'S SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE:  
ITS ORIGINS, CORPOREALITY, AND FORM

Marco Lori

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy,  
Birkbeck, University of London,  
March, 2017.

I, Marco Lori, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.  
Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has  
been indicated in the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the topic of film-maker Stan Brakhage's occult-derived spirituality. The origins and contents of his positions about spirituality and art are traced back to an occult-derived philosophical tradition discussed by and subsequently associated with the poet Ezra Pound. Pound recovered and reworked certain occult-related beliefs which in turn had roots in a medieval synthesis of ancient Greek doctrines. These beliefs constitute a precise historical perspective against which to read and understand Brakhage's apparently eccentric positions about art as spiritual revelation, trance states, the Muses, the artist as instrument, and the divine as ineffable.

After defining the origins and substance of what I term Brakhage's spiritual imperative, other aspects of his spiritual quest are considered. The corporeality as functional to it, positioning it beyond a mere metaphysical sphere, and the formal features through which such spirituality is articulated and manifested, constitute the other two directions of my investigation. The corporeality of the world is discussed as a vital part of Brakhage's spiritual imperative in his stances towards science, sex, the body, and rhythm.

The actual form through which it is manifested his spirituality in art, and the theoretical implications of that form, are the topic of the third and last part of the investigation. This form is identified as fragmentation, intended by Brakhage to produce not only a continuous present for the viewers of his work, but also to imply a precise model for reality. Such model relates Brakhage's spiritual imperative with his lifelong aversion to what he regarded as constricting forms, such as narrative and grammatical structures.

The thesis aims to demonstrate the origins and theoretical content of Brakhage's spiritual ideas as occult-derived, mainly through Pound; and to assess the resulting spirituality as deeply intertwined with the corporeality of the world, and manifested through a form related to his critical stances towards language and narration.

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## 1 – INTRODUCTION

Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) has become renowned as the iconic film-maker of North America's personal, avant-garde cinema. In the history of avant-garde filmmaking he is assessed as the champion of a poetic, personal trend that has been termed "visionary", and has been related mainly to post-Romantic art and theory.<sup>1</sup> Within such a trend, a tendency towards viewing the world as wondrous and ineffable has always been a constant, and Brakhage was no exception to that tendency. During his life he held many controversial, contradictory, or simply odd positions. Among this last category are a set of intertwined peculiar beliefs as regards the spiritual value and function of art, epitomised by his notion that art necessarily entails revelation of a spiritual kind. Other aspects have been strong within his oeuvre, and some have already been analysed by scholars,<sup>2</sup> but the spiritual aspiration of his work has been, I believe, at the very root of his lifelong devotion to art. This thesis will investigate such a spiritual tendency in relation to art. The investigation of Brakhage's spirituality will be articulated along two main lines: in the first, a model for its historical and theoretical origins will be proposed (see chapter Two), while in the second many aspects and stances of Brakhage's art will be put in the perspective of such a spiritual quest and, whether derived or not from it, revealed as functional to it (see chapters Three and Four).

What was, where it came from, and what it entailed, are the three fundamental questions with which the investigation of Brakhage's spirituality will be carried out. A line of inquiry about such issues must however remain an hypothesis, since Brakhage's own formulations were generally vague, sometimes contradictory, usually enigmatic, scattered throughout the years, and apparently naïve. This is to say that he never came to clear and precise formulations, not only because such matters naturally resist that, as we shall see; but also because of a more general obscurity anyone who is familiar with his jargon is used to. But still, the insistence and fervour with which he came back repeatedly to such points demand the attempt to place them

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<sup>1</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3<sup>rd</sup> expanded ed. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See the section 'Literature Review' later in this chapter, below.

in an historical and cultural perspective. Furthermore, this task has become more needed since, even if the underlying spirituality of his art is not an unknown subject, it has been never systematically investigated, especially given its idiosyncratic nature and its historical and theoretical origins.

The fulcrum of the investigation is chapter Two, with its hypothesis about the historical origins, and consequent theoretical content, of Brakhage's sense of the sacred in general and in relation to art. In considering Brakhage's cultural milieu against some specific, but puzzling, positions he expressed, the figure of poet Ezra Pound came to impose itself. The strong familiarity the film-maker had with the poet's ideas, as well as the striking affinities between their positions about spiritual matters and art, show a line of influence, direct or indirect, from one to the other. I specified the possibility of such influences being direct or indirect, since it is not clear if Brakhage consciously elaborated his positions on the basis of those of Pound, or if he reworked them indirectly through other sources, such as the many artists in Pound's artistic lineage that he befriended throughout his life. In this dissertation it is thus argued that whichever was the case, the original source was Pound, especially because the film-maker came firstly in contact with his work at a very early age. For this reason, other figures taken into consideration here, such as the poet Robert Duncan, are only considered as reinforcements and echoes of ideas originated in Pound, or that Brakhage had already encountered in his work.

This thesis was sparked off by some of Brakhage's seemingly most peculiar statements on his work, as when he described working in a state of trance, being possessed by the Muses during the creative process, having the work given to him by ineffable forces, being a mere instrument of such a process, and the presence of something divine in the work of art.<sup>3</sup> A more coherent sense of what Brakhage intended with this spiritual urgency will be given by putting his statements into an historical perspective alongside Pound, who held similar positions. The spiritual urge underlying Brakhage's art was a profound belief rooted in his personal *Weltanschauung*, a religio-philosophical worldview which I argue found its roots mainly in the occult-oriented ideas of Pound, and in the poet's reworking of a

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<sup>3</sup> For a text in which Brakhage discussed all these points see his interview in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 36-122.

medieval complex of doctrines synthesised and employed by a group of past fellow artists. The parallels I draw between the two artists' positions centre around a particular line of investigation within Pound's literature, focussed upon the mix of occult elements idiosyncratically combined by the poet. The line of enquiry I have followed was one first proposed by Leon Surette and Demetres Tryphonopoulos.<sup>4</sup> Within this specific line, which was so fruitful in advancing the study of Pound's ideas, I argue there is much common ground between Pound's beliefs and Brakhage's understanding of spirituality, physical reality and art.

As will be described in detail, Brakhage believed that art is inextricably connected with spiritual revelation, and that among human actions, art has the greatest potential to lead others to an ineffable sense of the divine. In this work the source of these ideas is retraced through Brakhage's engagements with poets' lore—the main poet here being Pound. Furthermore, in outlining such precedents to which his ideas may lead back, it is also described how the corporeality of the world—for instance, its sensual and somatic aspect—is part of this spiritual system, unconfined to merely idealistic and transcendental positions. Such an engagement of the spiritual with the material also comes to determine a sort of form through which one may experience the ineffable.

This thesis pays particular, though not exclusive, attention to the last period of Brakhage's career, beginning with the divorce from his first wife and his second marriage at the end of the 1980s, and lasting until his death in 2003. In fact during this last period his artistic concerns became more overtly centred around spirituality. This sense of change was also felt by Brakhage, who observed himself as having “been delayed” or “deflected” by the “culture within which [he] was trapped”, which he felt forced him to react with temporary aesthetic solutions instead of more solid ones.<sup>5</sup> After the 1980s, the spiritual aspect of his art became the principal arena for

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<sup>4</sup> Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992); and Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Gary Higgins, Rodrigo Garcia Lopes, and Thomas Connick, 'Grisled Roots: An Interview with Stan Brakhage', in *Millennium Film Journal*, Number 26 (Fall 1992), pp. 56-66; p. 63.

the competing tensions typical of his work; through a spiritual lens he investigated corporeality, subjectivity and otherness, internality and externality, visibility and invisibility, abstraction<sup>6</sup> and documentation. Nevertheless, this thesis is not exclusively focussed on this last period of Brakhage's life, because it was also important to stress that the seeds that sprouted during roughly his last fifteen years were already present from the beginning of his career, and I wanted to have the liberty of drawing from as many sources as possible in order to sustain my arguments.

Although Brakhage's urgency in articulating spirituality through art, and the belief that art is intimately tied to revelation, grew stronger during roughly the last fifteen years of his life, it was nevertheless a constant theme for his entire career. In his 1963 *Metaphors on Vision*, for instance, he listed the main themes of his cinema as "birth, sex, death, and the search for God."<sup>7</sup> This early commitment was basically maintained throughout his career. The theme of birth, for instance, was treated mainly in the so-called birth films: *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961). In those films, Brakhage filmed the births of his first and third daughter. This theme was developed also through the more universal concept of creation. *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964) is rich in cosmogonic resonances, while in *Creation* (1979) the meaning of the title is intended in its biblical sense. *The Process* (1972) illustrates both the perceptual process of our sensory system and the mysterious creative process of art, thus representing the birth of a work of art. In all these variations on the birth theme there is a sense of fascination for the mysteries of creation which is, in a sense, doubled in the search for the divinity behind such mystery.

Explicit sexual themes were especially articulated at the beginning of his career, with the exception of *Confession* (1986), which depicted a sexual affair he

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<sup>6</sup> Brakhage did not like this term. I am employing it here in a general way, more readily clear to the reader than the more precise "non-referential" (or, in many cases, "partially non-referential", as both referential and non-referential at the same time). The aim of this dissertation is not to debate its meaning for Brakhage's art, although such a debate would be very relevant to clarify the status of representation within his artistic endeavour.

<sup>7</sup> Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. and with an introduction by P. Adams Sitney, *Film Culture*, Number 30 (1963), [n.p.].

had while still married to his first wife. However, here the sex was instrumental to the purpose of the film as stated in the title, and was not employed as a theme in and of itself. The explicit representations of sex were thematically relevant in his films *Loving* (1957), *Lovemaking* (1968) and *Dog Star Man: Part III* (1964). But the idea of sex was also always connected with love, as I discuss further in chapter Three, and it became a strong theme of his later period, expanding to assume explicit spiritual tones. It was not only the love for a partner, but also and especially a form of cosmic attraction that was explored in these films. Thus also sex became part of the search for God.

The theme of death was most explicitly present in the first half of his career, crucially in *Sirius Remembered* (1959), *The Dead* (1960), *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), *Burial Path* (1978) and *Thot-Fal'n* (1978). The first film was about the actual physical and biological experience of a dog's dead body; the second was about the past; the third involved documenting autopsy routines; and the fourth and fifth were about the process of memory and forgetfulness. Later these same themes were not so explicitly connected with decay and oblivion, but were associated with the idea of metamorphosis and change. That association is clear in *The Dante Quartet* (1987) and *Passage Through: A Ritual* (1990), both works about spiritual renewal implying a previous, metaphorical, death; and in *Commingled Containers* (1996), made right before Brakhage had to undergo a delicate and life-threatening surgery. These films exemplify a sense of death as a mystical passage from one state to another, a metamorphosis, in a mystical search for the divine. In the 1990s, the search for God gradually became the primary concern in Brakhage's art, especially after 1996, as I shall discuss in chapter Two, mainly because all the other themes had been channelled or transformed into this one. It was not that the search for God overshadowed other themes, but rather that other themes assumed a tendency towards a divine aspiration which, in turn, absorbed them.

Considering the relevance of the major themes explored throughout Brakhage's career helps to identify the focus of his attention. In this particular case it shows how the spiritual tendency of his oeuvre grew stronger through the years, and clarified and refined itself. This particular spirituality, I argue, came from a specific synthesis of spiritual themes and ideas about art that Ezra Pound distilled from

different sources. Brakhage could not have been unfamiliar with Pound's spiritual thought, and it bears enough similarities with Brakhage's own statements to sustain the hypothesis of Pound's direct influence.

As I mentioned above, the thesis is divided into three chapters that articulate the two directions that the investigation takes. In chapter Two, the origins and a general theoretical outline of Brakhage's spiritual imperative are given, and the systemic coherence of such an imperative is set against the historical perspective of its philosophical forebears. Some ostensibly odd beliefs of Brakhage about the creative process and the function of art are detailed. Such ideas are then compared with a complex of similar positions Pound took from occult lore, which in turn were rooted in a medieval synthesis of doctrines refined by certain love poets in Provence and Tuscany. I rely upon Giorgio Agamben's historical and philosophical criticism for the background from which such an innovative medieval synthesis was drawn. Agamben's essay is unique in coherently and succinctly highlighting exactly and only that specific synthesis, and those specific elements, that attracted Pound's idiosyncratic attention. It thus provided a perfect tool for focussing directly on the poet's historical and philosophical background, avoiding larger discussions about Western Esotericism which are outside of the scope of this work. In the last part of chapter Two Brakhage's important film *The Dante Quartet* is discussed in detail as the work that more explicitly and directly is rooted in Pound's occult-derived ideas.

Chapter Three discusses how Brakhage's spiritual quest was not limited to spiritual matters, but on the contrary implied also a strong involvement with the corporeality of the world. Specific issues such as the stance towards science, the value of sex and love, the role of the body, and the identification of rhythm as a common feature of both the spiritual and the material, are then explored. Some of Brakhage's positions and ideas towards such issues are framed in the perspective of his spiritual imperative. Brakhage's somatic cinema is then read against the mystical background of Pound's ideas outlining a spiritual view of the world that inextricably depends upon the world's corporeality.

Finally, in chapter Four, another element of Brakhage's spiritual imperative is discussed: the influence of such a complex of ideas upon the form of the spiritual

revelation and consequently upon the form of art. Fragmentation is identified as this preferred form, and it is then analysed in its theoretical and formal consequences. Beyond arguing about different possible sources for such a tendency in Brakhage, fragmentation is assessed as both an ideal medium for and a function of his spirituality, and it is in such a context that Brakhage's lifelong aversion to language and narration is considered. In the last part of the chapter, everyday life is explored as yet one further means by which Brakhage attempted to formally articulate his spirituality.

I chose the expression "spiritual imperative" not only to stress Brakhage's constant, and apparently inescapable, drive towards a spiritualisation of his art and of the world, but also to give the idea of a precise push that will eventually articulate itself in a quite coherent system of beliefs. Indeed, Brakhage began his career by talking about a necessity pushing him towards his art, as well as of being impelled beyond his will in his endeavour.<sup>8</sup> I use it here interchangeably with other similar expressions like spiritual quest, spiritual endeavour, or simply spirituality for the sake of clarity.

Throughout this work I shall refer mainly to the many interviews given by Brakhage in the course of his career, as I have found them to be often much more precise and clear about his ideas than the supposedly theoretical texts he authored. This course was necessitated by the character of Brakhage's writing, which is always obscure, enigmatic and metaphoric, suggestive rather than descriptive. His writing style tends in fact to be much closer to poetry than prose, exhibiting still further the influence of poets, as I shall briefly discuss in chapter Four in relation to parataxis. Yet textual evidence remains quite valuable in studying Brakhage even where there is no exact organic theory set out by the author to serve as a corollary to his art. I have thus largely drawn from Brakhage's interviews for direct statements of his views, though whenever the meaning of his theoretical texts have been clear enough to constitute proof in support of a specific point, I have incorporated them as well.

A detailed reading of a selection of key films will be provided for the points discussed throughout the thesis. The selection has been necessitated by Brakhage's

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<sup>8</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

enormous filmography (around 350 titles), and the detailed analysis of those chosen titles, by their complexity. My readings of such films are addressed to highlight in them points discussed in the dissertation and the formal or content values that verify the presence of his peculiar spiritual quest. It is not to be intended that such aspects are present only in the films I analyse, but that in them they are particularly evident or central. Unfortunately the close readings of further titles proved impossible within the space. All the films I discuss in detail are also included in the Criterion Blu-Ray anthology of Brakhage's work produced in 2010.<sup>9</sup> I have attended screenings of many of Brakhage's films in their original formats, and I have viewed not only those films I discuss in detail here, but also many that were not included among the Criterion anthology. Nevertheless, the choice to concentrate my attention upon the films I shall examine has been conditioned by the needs of my investigation, and it has been enriched by the advantages offered by the digital medium—namely, the chance to watch certain portions of the films repetitively and to easily observe them frame by frame. For these reasons, the digital versions of the films were employed as a handy reference in the course of writing this dissertation, but I ultimately relied upon their projected cinematic form, in accordance with Brakhage's intentions, to fully understand the works experientially.

### 1.1 – Film and poetry: Ezra Pound and cinema

I shall refer mainly to poets in order to draw comparisons, retrace ideas and discuss Brakhage's positions. This may appear strange in an investigation centred on a film-maker, but in the case of Brakhage it is crucial, given how often he refers to poets as inspirations or mentors throughout his career. Brakhage in fact often thought of poetry in relation to his art not only because he was an avid reader of it, a personal friend of many poets, or because he thought of poetry as having a "visual possibility",<sup>10</sup> but especially because he looked at poetry and poets in order to find suggestions, stances, or even guidelines about the nature and creation of a work of art, as well as general theoretical and philosophical notions about art and reality. The

<sup>9</sup> See the Videography, below.

<sup>10</sup> Brakhage interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 46.

poets he mentioned in particular as influential include Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, though the list may be extended to include Ronald Johnson, Michael McClure, Louis Zukofsky, Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, and others. Brakhage was an avid reader of poetry since he was a teenager, and was so fascinated by poetry that, before deciding to dedicate his energies to film-making, he even dreamed of becoming a poet.

It is also important to note that Brakhage's formative years as an artist coincided not only with a period of particular vitality for North American avant-garde cinema, but also with an equally vital period for North American poetry. During this period, the idea of cinema as close to poetry more than other arts was instrumental in emancipating these new forms of cinema from the dominance of the Hollywood film industry, as well as serving as a way of establishing a clear identity and coherent dignity for the increasing number of scattered new artists. Poetry, with its long-established history, its still-renewing potential for cultural resistance and disruption, and its many theories about the role of art and of the artist in the world, was the perfect ally for artists working in a still young medium hoping to shake off the industrial logic and public image it had inherited. Through such poetic allies, film-makers stressed the personal dimension of their cinema, their independence from the alienated society of the 1950s, an artisan-like process of production and a noble place for the artist in the world and in history.

As Daniel Kane remarks, within the cultural milieu where Brakhage grew up as an artist—namely, the North American avant-garde film scene epitomised by the magazine *Film Culture*—it was quite usual to define a film-maker's work as “film poetry.”<sup>11</sup> This correspondence between the two media has deep roots, dating back at least to the famous symposium of October 28, 1953, organised by the Cinema 16 of Amos Vogel, which featured a discussion between Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan

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<sup>11</sup> See Daniel Kane, *We Saw the Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p. 24. Kane focusses his study on the relationship between New American Poetry and New American Cinema. A chapter (pp. 51-78) is also devoted to the influences of Brakhage's cinema on Robert Creeley's poetry. In fact, his study is focussed on investigating the influences of film on poetry, and not the opposite, but it is nevertheless crucial in documenting how the two notions were commonly perceived as intertwined before “the linguistic turn in the humanities” (pp. 2-3).

Thomas and Parker Tyler, and was chaired by Willard Maas. The event was titled 'Poetry and the Film: A Symposium', and a partial transcript of it was published ten years later in *Film Culture* 29, in 1963.<sup>12</sup>

I shall consider both the composition of a poem and the making of a film as artistic activities associated by similar creative processes, not only because the poets who Brakhage was mainly thinking about all give a clear cinematic sense to the reader through their imagery, but also because issues like the relation of the artist to the work, the relation of the work to the receiver, the role of the work in society, and the function of the artwork in relation to a spiritual quest, are not specific to a particular medium, but are issues of equal concern for poets, film-makers, musicians, painters, and other artists. What is less relevant to this investigation is the search for more *literal* correspondences between poetry and cinema, though Brakhage claimed to perceive such correspondences very clearly, through the media's mutual musical aspirations, their unfolding in time and movements, and the possibilities of their conveying multiple meanings with a single element. There may be interesting potential for further research into the more mimetic correspondences between the two art forms in Brakhage's work, such as the unique *Elementary Phrases*, which Brakhage made in collaboration with Phil Solomon in 1994, where the hand-painted abstract material was structurally organised by quantities of frames, mimicking a poem's lines and stanzas.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, here only the more theoretical and philosophical concerns involving Brakhage's deepest beliefs about spirituality and art are here examined.

The knowledge and passion for poetry that Brakhage maintained throughout his life, as well as the influence his favourite authors had upon his mind, did not cause such authors, or at least not all of them, to reciprocate with a passion or knowledge for cinema, even when, as I mentioned above, the dynamism of their poetry was particularly suggestive of cinematic effects. While some of the figures I

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<sup>12</sup> Reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (Oxford/New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 171-186.

<sup>13</sup> Discussed in "'A Lifetime of Study, of Poetry, Music, Painting, Film and Vision Went into Any and All of Stan's Work' | Interview with Marilyn Brakhage' [Stan Brakhage's widow], online at *Flicker Alley* (posted 18 December 2015): <http://www.flickeralley.com/stan-brakhage-marilyn-brakhage-interview/> (accessed 3 February 2016).

mentioned above were drawn to learn about the subject of cinema, that certainly was not the case with the main source from which I shall draw in defining Brakhage's spiritual perspective: Ezra Pound. While in Brakhage's mind the intertwined, and sometimes interchangeable, nature of film and poetry would remain a fact, in the mind of Pound that had never been the case. On the contrary, cinema was seen by Pound as a form of entertainment rather than art. And yet, apart from the qualities evocative of cinema within his extremely innovative and pioneering poetry, Pound experienced firsthand the golden era of the avant-garde movements at the beginning of the last century, when cinema was often hailed as a major new resource. It is interesting, then, to point out how Pound never suspected the cinematic quality of his poetry, and, while being so close to some artistic figures experimenting with cinema, never considered the artistic potential of such a medium.

The poetry of Pound has many features that can be associated with cinema, and it relies heavily upon them for its effectiveness. Among them, the most relevant are the use of the image as the privileged vessel and creator of emotions and meanings; the musical use of rhythm which, coupled with the sudden changes and combinations or juxtapositions that this poetry prescribes, becomes literally a montage of fragments; and finally the quick pace produced by the vortex of resonances and connections, for both form and meaning. By accumulating different effects, Pound wanted to reach a precise poetic correlative of ineffable phenomena, states of mind and complex concepts. Despite this, the cinematic tendency of his poetry is rarely discussed by scholars. The first to compare his juxtapositions of images in *The Cantos* to those of director Sergei Eisenstein was Robert Duncan.<sup>14</sup> Another to subsequently hint about this possibility was Hugh Kenner in 1971, when he suggested a similarity between the theory of montage of the Russian film director and the "ideogrammic method" of composition of Pound: both, indeed, were inspired by the ideogram.<sup>15</sup>

Probably inspired by Kenner, though closer to Duncan's comparison, a thought-provoking attempt which can prove very effective in illuminating the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, eds. ad with an introduction by Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2011), p. 313.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley/Loas Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 162.

cinematic proclivities of Pound's poetry is that of Italian scholar Piero Sanavio, in a study unfortunately never translated into English and originally published in 1977.<sup>16</sup> After commenting on the similarities of Eisenstein's and Pound's compositional methods, and noticing how both were originally inspired by the Oriental ideogram form, Sanavio tries to transcribe the opening of Pound's 'Canto IV' into a cinematic sequence (in a tentative screenplay) by simply listing what the single shots would show.<sup>17</sup> The result, which is basically what a reader envisions in her mind while reading a Pound poem, is more reminiscent of a New American Cinema film than one by Eisenstein. Nonetheless, this experiment helps in demonstrating the degree to which many passages by Pound are perceived in our minds as something like cinematic sequences due to their dynamic and image-based nature. Also, Bruce E. Fleming draws from Kenner's comparison of Pound and Eisenstein when he identifies a possible general aim for Modernism: Pound and Eisenstein, he argues, found in the ideogram a more direct way of relating the subject to the external world, a way that is congruous with the "nature of reality", and that is the final aim of Modernism.<sup>18</sup> What attracted Pound and Eisenstein to the ideogram, according to Fleming, can be used as a general definition for Modernism: a quest for an "unmediated relation" with reality, a "direct treatment rather than indirect."<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Pound and Eisenstein have been discussed by Susan McCabe in a study of Modernism and cinema.<sup>20</sup> She notices how "Pound's Imagism anticipates Eisenstein's highly somatized theories of montage", not only due to the central role of rhythm they attribute to their respective arts, but also because of the

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<sup>16</sup> Piero Sanavio, *Ezra Pound: Bellum Perenne* (Rimini: Raffaelli Editore, 2002). His attempt at teasing out the similarities between Pound and Eisenstein may have been inspired by Kenner, since in the bibliography (p. 339) Sanavio lists the same biography of Eisenstein that Kenner cited: Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1960); cf. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 571 note 162.

<sup>17</sup> Sanavio, *Ezra Pound: Bellum Perenne*, pp. 69-71.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce E. Fleming, 'The Ideogram in Pound and Eisenstein: Sketch for a Theory of Modernism', in *Southwest Review*, 74.1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 87-97; p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93 and p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

“cinematic writing” of the poet.<sup>21</sup> McCabe repeats Sanavio’s experiment by considering a very short and compressed poem of Pound (a *haiku* of two verses) as a film scene.<sup>22</sup> The sudden visual movements we experience through the reading of Pound’s poetry is clearly and easily linked to avant-garde film.

Pound was a major figure in the poetic, musical, critical and artistic scene of first half of the twentieth century, so one might expect an involvement in avant-garde cinema to flourish in those same years. However, this is not the case, and aside from rare statements in which Pound used cinema as an example to explain poetic theories,<sup>23</sup> passing mentions of his fascination for Disney’s movies,<sup>24</sup> and his personal friendship with Jean Cocteau,<sup>25</sup> his direct involvement with cinema was extremely limited. There are only rumours about his collaboration with Alvin Langdon Coburn for a now lost Vorticist film,<sup>26</sup> and about his participation in the production of Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (and in this latter case it is not even clear how much Pound was actually involved).<sup>27</sup>

Even if Pound’s poetry had many film-like features, his opinion of cinema was generally ambivalent, and ultimately negative.<sup>28</sup> In 1916, for instance, he wrote

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 21 and p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Ezra Pound cited in Lisa Cartwright, ‘U.S. Modernism and the Emergence of “The Right Wing of Film Art”: The Films of James Sibley Watson, Jr., and Melville Webber’, in Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945* (Madison/London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 156-179; p. 171; and Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Noted in James J. Wilhelm, *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years, 1925-1972* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> Discussed in Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 384.

<sup>26</sup> See Hollis Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. and with an introduction by Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> See William Moritz, ‘Americans in Paris: Man Ray and Dudley Murphy’, in Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945* (Madison/London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 118-136; pp. 126-133; McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism*, p. 198; and Rebecca Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 187.

<sup>28</sup> See McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism*, p. 13.

that cinema is “developing an art sense”, while in 1922 he concluded that “cinema is no use as art.”<sup>29</sup> McCabe, writing from a feminist perspective, stresses how Pound saw cinema as a manifestation of an “hysteric effeminacy”, and because of this he regarded it as an “ephemeral art” in contrast with the masculinity he wanted to profess.<sup>30</sup> This speculation, though, is unconvincing. The sexism of Pound is easily locatable in many of the poet’s other ideas, but there is not enough evidence in this case to account for his underestimation of cinema. Perhaps it was his conservatism, or perhaps his view of cinema as popular and superficial entertainment (thus discounting any consideration of its artistic potentialities). The question remains as to why Pound ignored the cinematic art, and the most apt conclusion for the moment is that he saw cinema as “outside of the scope” of his “poetics.”<sup>31</sup>

A possible indirect aesthetic influence by Pound upon a film project prior to 1943 has been proposed by Lisa Cartwright, who argues for an application of Pound’s theory of aesthetics to the film medium in a formal way, similar, indeed, to how Sitney applied those ideas to Brakhage.<sup>32</sup> In tracing the emergence of a “right wing film art” rooted in US Modernism, Cartwright discusses the influence of Pound’s poetic theory on the collaboration between E.E. Cummings and independent film-maker James Sibley Watson, Jr.<sup>33</sup> The central aspect upon which she focusses is the relevance of geometry to Pound’s theories, for the poetic form and for the “production of meaning in any form.”<sup>34</sup> The relevance of this within the poet’s “epistemological schema” directs attention to the work of the “technician”.<sup>35</sup> In this sense she frames the role of Watson as that of the necessary “technical facilitator”<sup>36</sup> for Cummings’s “reflexive, formal”<sup>37</sup> film scripts. Within this “right wing film art”,

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism*, p. 146 and p. 188, respectively.

<sup>30</sup> McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> See P. Adams Sitney, ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’, in *Film Culture*, Number 31 (1963/1964), pp. 15-21.

<sup>33</sup> Cartwright, ‘U.S. Modernism and the Emergence of “The Right Wing of Film Art”’.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

the focus on the formal aspect is crucial because of the separation forced by this “North American liberal modernist tradition” between art and politics,<sup>38</sup> or better, between “formal strategies” and “political agendas.”<sup>39</sup> This separation would be the main reason for distinguishing the Vorticist influence of Pound on Cummings’s idea of film from a more immediate formal resemblance with Cubist strategies.<sup>40</sup> Certainly for Cummings, the influence of his close friend Pound was primarily in respect of Cubism, but the richness of Pound’s aesthetics is somewhat circumscribed by this approach. The centrality of geometry, a centrality that is, however, much more lively during Pound’s early years, is part of a larger tendency to generate dialogue and interplay between the humanities and sciences from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Cartwright is precise when she writes of “Pound’s epistemological schema” and of “his use of science as a model for poetic language and production in general”.<sup>41</sup> These expressions give a glimpse of the wider horizon of Pound’s thinking, as when he wrote about the role of the engineer:

The engineer, understanding and translating for the many, builds for the uninitiated bridges and devices. He speaks their language. For the initiated the signs are a door into eternity and into the boundless ether.<sup>42</sup>

In this 1912 article, the occult vocabulary of initiates and secret languages already corroborates those studies that assert the relevance of such ideas for Pound.<sup>43</sup> I shall further elaborate upon those ideas in the following chapters. Here it is significant that for the purposes of her discourse Cartwright underlines “a conjuncture of mysticism and a progressive revision of Christian doctrine in the light of modern science”, developed by the magazine *The Dial*<sup>44</sup> in a manner influential to the North American right wing. Watson was involved in the magazine as well as

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-171.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>42</sup> Pound quoted in *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>43</sup> See especially Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*; and Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*.

<sup>44</sup> Cartwright, ‘U.S. Modernism and the Emergence of “The Right Wing of Film Art”’, p. 159.

Pound, and is quoted by Cartwright from a 1921 article from *The Dial*.<sup>45</sup> Within such a view a higher form of knowledge or cognition is part of an occult and esoteric understanding of the world, in which a teacher is fundamental because of the difficulty and importance of the “language” as well as the risks of losing oneself. It involves not just a mere list of formal precepts in order to focus exclusively on the form as isolated from everything else. In her conclusion, Cartwright leaves the door open to further investigations on the influence of Pound, Cummings and *The Dial* “on the film avant-garde before and after 1943” in the direction of “a U.S. literary and visual-cinematic tradition”.<sup>46</sup> But her perspective of a national specificity weakens especially when discussed in relation to such a figure as Pound, who lived almost all of his life in Europe and drew so extensively from European culture.

So there are acknowledged cinematic-like qualities in Pound’s poetry, connecting him with Eisenstein—an important figure for New American Cinema—and with avant-garde cinema in general. This might partly explain why Pound’s poetry was so inspiring for Brakhage. Yet Pound himself was unaware of such qualities. Furthermore he curiously discarded cinema as inferior to art, though he was peripherally involved in cinematic projects himself. Finally, the speculations of Cartwright may imply an influence of Pound’s theories, and in particular the occult ones, on US avant-garde cinema. This direction will be partly the one I shall follow in relation to Brakhage.

## 1.2 – Literature review

Brakhage’s critical literature is as voluminous as it is scattered. Many scholars or critics approached his work only through their analysis of a single film. In fact, because of the number of his films, the difficulties potential viewers have in gaining access to some of them, and the near-impossibility of giving a coherent account of his art which would include all the aspects, trends and tendencies, as general as they may be, the form of the single film analysis is still the most common. In contrast to this tendency, in this literature review I shall try to highlight those

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

critical pieces or those approaches which either try to give a comprehensive view of his artistic oeuvre, or propose particularly original critical angles suitable for being extended to his whole work. At the same time I hope to give a comprehensive image of such a rich critical panorama. For the same reasons, I shall dedicate more attention to those works which, for different and sometimes contradictory reasons, I believe are richer in resonances, and less to those that require fewer comments, which are more immediately self-evident. I have chosen to pursue this particular overview due to its relevance to the subject of my work, rather than due to any qualitative judgement.

Together with that of David James, William Wees and Bruce Elder, P. Adams Sitney's work on Brakhage has been seminal.<sup>47</sup> Sitney is, in fact, the first and most renowned exegete of Brakhage, having basically set the canonical image of him for both enthusiasts and detractors. Since "his history of the American avant-garde until the early 1970s and of Brakhage's centrality in it was instantly definitive and displaced previous writing",<sup>48</sup> I shall dedicate more space to the analysis of his by now classic work. Sitney's cinematic canon is more clearly outlined by what is unsaid than by what is directly stated, with the exception of the features of the lyrical film. His canonisation of Brakhage is successful for at least two reasons: for the advocates of Brakhage it gives a simple and clear reference frame and interpretative structure to accommodate all the contradictions, eccentricities and more uncomfortable aspects of his art; for the detractors it makes Brakhage virtually impermeable to new approaches by proposing as merits exactly those aspects usually

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<sup>47</sup> Of all these scholars, only Elder dedicated a monograph to Brakhage (*The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998)), while the others discussed him in one or more chapters within their critical works (see David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); William Charles Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1992); P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*; Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)).

<sup>48</sup> David E. James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', in David E. James, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), pp. 1-19; p. 12.

otherwise seen as limits by them.

*Visionary Film*, first published in 1974, is the touchstone of Sitney's approach. For Sitney, North American avant-garde film-makers operate thematically in the context of post-Romantic poets and formally in that of Abstract Expressionist painters. Sitney not only wants to "trace the heritage of Romanticism"<sup>49</sup> but of a Romanticism peculiarly and exclusively North American. Such an approach overlooks much of the cultural background for figures such as Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Ronald Johnson, Gertrude Stein, and others. The Romantic tradition Sitney insists upon highlighting is not as purely American as Sitney insists, but rather is philosophically rooted in Germany while its most famous poetry flourished in England. Imagism and Vorticism were formulated in England, while relevant figures such as Pound and Stein lived almost all their lives in Europe. Sitney's wilful creation of a national Romantic movement places the New American Cinema in a twofold position, in which on the one side it would constitute an autochthonous, world-leading filmic avant-garde, while on the other it creates a certain isolationism in respect to more international perspectives on film avant-garde after World War II and the history of art in general. Focussed on his specifically North American heritage idea, which is subsequently condensed around Emersonian aesthetics in *Eyes Upside Down*, Sitney does not expand upon the works of Brakhage within a transnational panorama, but rather discusses him only in relation to formalist issues. Yet even within the North American panorama, figures such as Duncan or Olson were not considered in *Visionary Film*, even as James does consider them in his investigation of Brakhage as a poet within society, or as Elder does in his work on the theoretical and cultural background of Brakhage's aesthetics. The fact that James, for instance, writes fifteen years after Sitney's *Visionary Film* accounts only for the long unfolding of Brakhage's ever-evolving work, since the friendship with Olson took place during the 1960s and the friendship with Duncan began in the 1950s and continued through many years in their correspondence. Sitney only considers Olson in *Eyes Upside Down* in relation to Emerson's ideas in the introduction and, in line with his project, for Olson's idea of form in relation to Brakhage.<sup>50</sup>

The central figure of *Visionary Film* is a Brakhage placed within its narrative

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<sup>49</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, pp. 332-333.

as the champion of the lyrical film and of the mythopoeic film. Following Sitney's arguments, these two "genres" are basically one since the mythopoeic film is a lyrical film plus imagery and symbols taken from mythology. The subjectivity of the lyrical film is the very core of the interpretative frame in which Sitney places Brakhage, since it is a subjectivity withdrawn into itself which can only request from the viewer an allegiance with the personal fantasy of the artist. Sitney's innovation was in interpreting a shift in the subject of the film: Brakhage moved from the commonly accepted third-person cinema, in which the emotions were indirectly conveyed, to a first-person cinema in which a private expression of the self was attempted. This shift, which for Sitney constitutes Brakhage's first famous innovation, is behind all of Sitney's subsequent exegesis.

The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a person looking. As viewers we see this mediator's intense experience of seeing.<sup>51</sup>

Although such a shift was articulated in many different ways, with many different consequences, here, where there was a hero portrayed, the artist becomes that hero. Furthermore, the crucial parallel between the camera and the eye moves the focus of attention onto the formal aspects of the film. Romanticism is reduced to the commonplace of a painful opposition between consciousness and nature. The consciousness of the artist is divided from, and antagonistic to, nature in a radical and pervasive way.<sup>52</sup> This split is seen as informing all of Brakhage's aesthetics. During the 1970s, the horror of nature is substituted by the "horrors of solipsism".<sup>53</sup> Subsequent commentaries are framed by this view of a Romantic dialectic.<sup>54</sup>

Sitney's extended descriptions of some of Brakhage's films only reinforce

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<sup>51</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 160.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 168, 172, 174 and 196.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388.

<sup>54</sup> See James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', p. 18 note 25.

these categories. The descriptive parts of the book are massive, often so detailed that it seems almost superfluous for the reader to actually watch the films. In this sense, the book appears as a sort of catalogue divided into the categories Sitney creates (trance film, lyrical film, mythopoeic film, structural film, and so on). The impression it leaves is of a reading that might be better placed in the service of classical literature, stemming from a tradition of literary criticism. As James writes, Sitney's "work is limited to stylistic and epistemological issues."<sup>55</sup>

*Eyes Upside Down* continues in a more clear and precise way the discourse of *Visionary Film*. In this 2008 study, Sitney finds in the Emersonian heritage a suitably exclusive concept to substitute for Romanticism, such that it might remain peculiarly North American. The problem is that for him all American aesthetics are Emersonian.<sup>56</sup> By affirming that "Emersonian aesthetics is so radical, so diffuse, and even so contradictory that it elicits perennial refocusing",<sup>57</sup> he is widening the possibilities of these aesthetics though he is also implying that it is a category within which basically everything can fit. The main three features of this Emersonian aesthetic that he highlights are the "transformation of Necessity into a category of poetics"; "the primacy of the visible"; and "the transformative value of vehicular motion".<sup>58</sup> None of these three categories are especially relevant in any of the three chapters he devotes to Brakhage in the book. In the conclusion of the book, Sitney reveals his real topic: the analysis of the "characteristic genre" of the "crisis lyric".<sup>59</sup> This genre is here intended as a formal transposition of a religious rhetoric, epitomised by Ian Hugo's quotation "I always rise after the crucifixion", in which "the moments of pain, anger, and terror are not represented directly".<sup>60</sup> In a typical religious scheme of redemption, after the crisis there is the "exhilaration of filmic discovery".<sup>61</sup> Brakhage is now "the orphic film-maker whose poesis was a religious vocation";<sup>62</sup> this is a more spiritual and mystical drive attributed to the film-maker

<sup>55</sup> James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 30 note 1.

<sup>56</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

than in *Visionary Film*, where Brakhage's poesis is considered only a by-product of the struggle of consciousness and nature within the mythopoeic process.

For the crisis lyric, two of "the three greater tasks for film" Brakhage formulated in 1983 are fundamental: "[t]o keep it personal" and "[t]o do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious."<sup>63</sup> Sitney paraphrases these prescriptions as the "centrality of personal life and the illumination of the unconscious."<sup>64</sup> There is also another, formal, aspect considered in the book: the "arranging [of] films into sequences."<sup>65</sup> These are the main themes of the study instead of the elusive Emersonian aesthetics (not least because Whitman is also of equal importance throughout the book); and they are themes which are no different from the core features of the lyrical film in *Visionary Film*. Sitney also states that he avoids the possible political dimensions of some of the films discussed for lack of expertise and space. Nevertheless, he is aware of this possibility, and he describes Brakhage's work in relation to the spirit of self-reliance inherent in North American culture:

Brakhage's own tradition of the American epic that Whitman founded on Emersonian principles entails complex expansions on the political consequences of self-reliance in a massively expanding democracy.<sup>66</sup>

This timid opening represents a startling change in respect to some of his past statements, as will shortly be examined.

In chapter three of *Eyes Upside Down*, Sitney discusses Brakhage on the basis of a particular form: the autobiographical series. Before doing this he attempts to divide Brakhage's career into periods.<sup>67</sup> As examples of the autobiographical series, he discusses *Sincerity* (1973-1980) and *Duplicity* (1978-1980), in which the "extension of intimacy into epics"<sup>68</sup> marks the persistence of the perspectives of *Visionary Film*. In chapter eleven, the spirituality and the religious elements of

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<sup>63</sup> Brakhage quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 243 and 397.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-76.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

*Creation* (1979) are considered as a “tale of the tribe” re-told and reinvented by the artist.<sup>69</sup> The material is “supercharged [...] with visionary power and wit”, and the general form of the film represents a mythical structure (in this case, a Judeo-Christian one).<sup>70</sup> All of this is intertwined with autobiographical elements referring to the solitude/non-solitude of the artist.<sup>71</sup> Also, this scheme of visionary power fitting into a mythical framework and at the service of self-representation, does not vary from the scheme displayed in *Visionary Film*. In *Eyes Upside Down*, it is applied in a more sophisticated way and in a sense glued together by the Emersonian aesthetics. Furthermore, for Sitney *Creation* parallels the *Sincerity* series as a crisis and autobiographical film, since the old genre, “the solitary film-maker overwhelmed by awesome nature”, is mixed with autobiographical events in the guise of a marital crisis.<sup>72</sup> *The Dante Quartet* (1987) is then discussed as another crisis film. Brakhage’s Dante is for Sitney mainly a visionary.<sup>73</sup> The crisis and the renewal conveyed by *The Dante Quartet*, explained by biographical details, are considered only as rhetorical figures applied to the film’s form; and the film as a whole is ultimately a dialogue of literary quotations and refractions: “As Brakhage once implied of Zukofsky, he now indicates, quoting Rilke, what Emerson affirmed in response to all genuine poetry [...].”<sup>74</sup>

In the third and final chapter devoted to Brakhage, chapter fifteen, the *Visions in Meditation* series (1989-1990) is discussed. Here narration is reduced and adapted, following Gertrude Stein, to an all-purpose model from which Sitney compares the views on narration of Brakhage and Hollis Frampton (using the example of *The Riddle of Lumen* for Brakhage).<sup>75</sup> Sitney also insists on Brakhage’s sense of the sacred and belief in God, which would in the end be a quite orthodox allegiance to Judeo-Christian topoi.<sup>76</sup>

Sitney’s extreme idealism pushes him to see everything as fiction. In

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 325-330.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

*Visionary Film*, Sitney adopts the opposition to Hollywood typical of the 1960s film avant-garde. For his purposes this opposition is very useful, since he can set a parallel between the difference of poetry from fiction with the difference of avant-garde film from commercial cinema.<sup>77</sup> But this does not mean that he adopts a theoretical rejection of narrative, a device so necessary for fiction. About *Visionary Film*, for instance, he says that “like any sustained critical history, if it is one, [it] is a story book.”<sup>78</sup> Applying the same methodology, the three main questions of Malcolm Le Grice’s *Abstract Film and Beyond* are interpreted by Sitney as stories: “the film tells how it got made”, “[w]hat happened when the viewer wised up”, “[s]omething was happening in the room while the film was on”.<sup>79</sup> In a debate with Le Grice, Sitney wants the audience to know that his favourite “story” is “how the spirit came to name itself”, and that he loves “stories and illusions.”<sup>80</sup> His interpretation of Brakhage, to which certainly some statements and films of Brakhage are quite susceptible, comes from this kind of extreme idealism, from the adoption of the category of Romanticism as peculiarly American, and most of all from adopting ‘romantic’ as an all-purpose term, since “‘romantic’ and ‘dialectical’ are practically identical terms.”<sup>81</sup> The preferred rhetorical figure for this perspective is the metaphor, which in Sitney’s view turns everything into a fiction. The materialist perspective adopted by Le Grice means nothing to Sitney, or at best it is absorbed by Sitney’s all-purpose model:

[F]or me, material plays no role at all in film. Material is like a metaphor. It is one of the metaphors which is interesting in this particular time. Like the

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<sup>77</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. xii.

<sup>78</sup> Sitney in Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, with a Preface by Sean Cubitt (London: BFI, 2001), p. 138. See also a similar, though negative, remark about Sitney’s treatment of Brakhage: “Biographical trivia, lengthy attention to the artist as husband and father, domestic details and descriptions of the artist’s great travails do serve to make the book, as Gene Youngblood put it, ‘read like a good novel.’” (Carel Rowie, ‘Visionary Film: The New American Avant Garde by P. Adams Sitney’, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1975), pp. 34-37; p. 36)

<sup>79</sup> Sitney in Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, p. 138.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-140.

metaphor of the self, the mirror, and the empty frame [...].”<sup>82</sup>

Sitney borrows a lot of terms from rhetoric and ancient Greek culture, since these provide him with clear and simple labels to apply on all the different devices, technical and otherwise, present in the films. Furthermore, this also provides a strong link with the Greek past, and thus a form of authority for the theoretical discourse. It seems that for Sitney cinematic analysis is always and only a problem of rhetoric but never of what there is behind this rhetoric as a cause or as a basis. Among anagogy, synecdoche, metonymy,<sup>83</sup> and other terms, the most relevant remains the metaphor. Metaphor is central to *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964), which is Brakhage’s most discussed work in *Visionary Film*. In *Dog Star Man* “the rhetoric of Romanticism” unfolds itself in all its topoi: “the birth of consciousness, the cycle of the seasons, man’s struggle with nature, and sexual balance”.<sup>84</sup> But metaphor serves also to divert other possible issues in favour of idealism and Brakhage as a visionary, since it stands at the core of that “equation between the process of making film and the search for consciousness” which is the product of Brakhage’s use of “materials which reflect back on the conditions of film-making”.<sup>85</sup> This summarising statement is straightforward and exhaustive:

Brakhage’s point is that we are always surrounded by a world of metaphors, overlaid like a palimpsest, conventionalized traces of once powerful perceptions, which induce us to see the world as reflections of ourselves. [...] [It is] a world of symbolical meanings.<sup>86</sup>

An appearance of balance within this extreme idealism is given in his writings by the abundant use of biographical and technical data about the authors and the films. But the efforts made by Le Grice to attach the history of avant-garde film to a wider history or art, or in the case of Brakhage to be recognised as part of an

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-144. And later in this same interview: “I care very little about the metaphor called society. This may be my doom. I have no respect for leftist ideology.” (p. 150)

<sup>83</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, pp. 193, 215 and 394, respectively.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

artistic tradition, are meaningless for Sitney, since he claims to be unenthusiastic about film as a “moving” art-form:

I must also confess that I was more moved by the great poems of Dante, Homer, and Milton or the novels of Melville and Stendhal, or the paintings of Vermeer, Titian, or Cézanne, than by any films.<sup>87</sup>

In answer to the direct question of Le Grice about why he attaches himself to film history when he is not so “moved” by it, and since he does not see the work of the twentieth century “as an advance over the work of the nineteenth century”, Sitney answers,

That’s a trade question. This has for various personal circumstances become the area of my publishing and public life. [...] The problem is that there is a lot more space for a person of my peculiar mentality talking about twentieth-century film than talking about nineteenth-century paintings that are richer. This is a field in which there are giants.<sup>88</sup>

This kind of reasoning is in plain contrast with the ethical convictions and personal integrity that Brakhage displayed in his life. In this sense, then, Sitney is in the end “a conservative scholar of a revolutionary art”,<sup>89</sup> or, as Carel Rowie writes about *Visionary Film*, it “is far more *derrière-garde* than *avant*”,<sup>90</sup> and for this reason the more controversial and critical potentialities of the films are always flattened and defused within a taxonomy of classical categories.

Finally, in his 2015 *The Cinema of Poetry*, Sitney presents a series of chapters, each devoted to a film-maker, in which a range of possible interactions between cinema and poetry is surveyed. The relationship of cinema and poetry has admittedly been a central concern for Sitney since 1961, and came to inform all of his subsequent critical work.<sup>91</sup> The title is taken from an essay by Pier Paolo Pasolini,

<sup>87</sup> Sitney in Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, p. 138.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>89</sup> James Heddle, ‘Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde by P. Adams Sitney’, in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 61-63; p. 62.

<sup>90</sup> Rowie, ‘Visionary Film: The New American Avant Garde by P. Adams Sitney’, p. 34.

<sup>91</sup> Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, p. ix.

but whereas the Italian author interpreted it in an historical, political and class-oriented perspective, Sitney considers it “psychoanalytically”; in the book Sitney describes his life-long debts towards, admiration for, and dependence upon psychoanalysis applied to avant-garde cinema.<sup>92</sup> The chapter devoted to Brakhage, the longest of the book, presents an overview of the whole career of the film-maker in addition to a detailed analysis of the *Faust* series (1987-1989), and of the *Vancouver Island* films (1991-2002).<sup>93</sup> Sitney’s analysis relies heavily upon biographical data, and is presented in connection to, and in linear evolution with, previous works. The chapter intends to point out affinities between Brakhage and the poetry of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan and Ronald Johnson. Sitney retraces the film-maker’s formative years in light of such poetic figures, and views Brakhage’s development as leading to the crisis lyric. This includes also a general sketch of Brakhage’s whole oeuvre intertwined with biographical events.

The impression that this suite of examples from Brakhage’s filmography gives is of a general, yet richly detailed, introduction to his work, with a linear evolution nourished by details of specific figures and specific moments of his life, in the context of another elaboration of the idea of the crisis lyric. The two main trajectories that Sitney had previously recognised within Brakhage’s career are here proposed again: stemming always from the crisis film, we can observe abstraction as connected with optical phenomena, alongside a parallel autobiographical project involving the role of memory.<sup>94</sup> It must also be added here that, within the abstraction trend, the representation of internal physiological phenomena is considered as an end in itself, and as a tendency in the direction of realism.<sup>95</sup> Finally, one of the main wishes of Sitney, to which his critical efforts are often addressed, is to discern clear demarcations of periods in Brakhage’s cinema. These chronological demarcations are again admittedly frustrated by an oeuvre that does not obey a linear logic, though within his complete oeuvre it is possible to detect, and possibly define, shorter or

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> The Vancouver Island films are considered to be: *A Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991), *The Mammals of Victoria* (1994), *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000), *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (2002).

<sup>94</sup> Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry*, p. 159.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

longer, greater or lesser trends.<sup>96</sup> In the end also this recent work reinforces the idea of a visionary artist, a maker of fantasies structured through rhetorical figures.

In *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (1989), David James discusses from a social and materialist point of view the novelties and alternatives embodied in independent, underground and avant-garde cinema of that period. He never overlooks Hollywood and its importance as a nemesis for the independent productions of that decade. The chapter devoted to Brakhage articulates a fresh, comprehensive perspective on Brakhage, radically differing from *Visionary Film* which had appeared fifteen years earlier. James shifts the analysis of Brakhage's art to the opposite pole from the idealism of Sitney: social and historic categories substitute for Sitney's idealistic and formalistic perspective. While the focus remains on the Romantic tradition, James employs the British Romantic poets in brilliantly outlining the kinds of social displacement the artist experiences and which constitute the main fuel for the artist's production. By assuming a historical materialist perspective that highlights the social and historical situation within which film-makers lived and worked, the work of art is posited as a product of these pressures to which the artist is exposed. The work of British Romantic poets is taken as paramount and exemplary of the sense of alienation an artist experiences within the capitalistic era. James's discourse is focussed on the level of production, since the poet/film-maker must find new ways of producing outside of the market, as this in turn influences the content of the work which comes to represent the very sense of alienation of the poet. Thus James examines the individualism and the solipsism of such an art in relation to society. James provides a comprehensive model to understand *why* Brakhage is producing works of art and *why* he makes them in such a way. All of this is seen as the opposite, the negation, of the existent situation exemplified by the precedent of Hollywood, that looming shadow which is always present, especially over the alternative cinema of the 1960s.

While Brakhage is chosen as exemplary in inventing an alternative mode of production for avant-garde cinema, the theoretical tools employed by James could just as easily lead to the same conclusions about other film-makers, since James's

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

social and historical categories could frame the peculiar subjectivity of any artist. Even if the work of Brakhage is indeed partly a product of the historical period he lived in, a too severe application of James's set of assumptions can flatten out the mix of subjectivity and subversive potential within Brakhage's aesthetics.

William Wees's *Light Moving in Time* (1992) fills an important gap in the studies on Brakhage by organically discussing in detail the different types of visual perception and phenomena that the film-maker was struggling to convey. Wees does this by following Brakhage in considering simultaneously the science of the eye and the art of the eye.<sup>97</sup> Although the book is not exclusively on Brakhage, he comes out as the main figure in the quest for sight's liberation. The first three chapters are a general explanation and historical contextualisation of the Western tradition of visual perception, while the remaining four are discussions of Wees's conclusions articulated through the examples of Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Jordan Belson, Paul Sharits, James Whitney and Michael Snow. Apart from chapter four, which is exclusively on Brakhage, chapter three takes its title from a quotation from Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*. Furthermore, in the first three chapters Brakhage's ideas are repeatedly employed to demonstrate how the dominant pattern of visual perception is limited and how avant-garde film can expand it. Brakhage is mainly mobilised to postulate the liberation of visual perception via the rejection of common norms (notably of perspective) and the creation of alternatives exemplified by the use of specific film techniques and formal solutions to accomplish such a project. Thus Wees employs in a new and productive way the trite metaphor of the camera as an eye, and frames in a new light the formal innovations that are often considered as ends in themselves. Wees reads a social and political potential into vision's renewal, and he articulates the most revolutionary aspects of Brakhage's innovations within the field of perception in accord with the constant concerns of Brakhage himself throughout his career. The more technical, scientific, cultural and eventually political context he gives to Brakhage's aesthetics goes beyond the traditional field of Film Studies, linking Brakhage's work with a physiology of art expressed in this case through hypnagogia, closed-eye vision, phosphene patterns, visual noise, peripheral vision, after-images and other optical sensations. Wees successfully elucidates in an

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<sup>97</sup> Wees, *Light Moving in Time*, p. 1.

exhaustive way some of Brakhage's most interesting intentions, intentions that the film-maker himself was rarely able to clearly articulate with the necessary academic and textual rigour.

In 1998 Bruce Elder, a personal friend of Brakhage and a film-maker himself, published *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*. This gigantic study is divided between the promise of the title and the stated aim of Elder to analyse how "primordial, corporeal awareness"<sup>98</sup> is conveyed through Brakhage's work. The correlation of primordial and corporeal experiences, as well as the grounding of metaphysics in these experiences as a prior state of awareness within which subject and object are not yet separated, originates in Elder's interpretation of Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>99</sup> The book is also devoted to analysing a sense of the body derived from this primordial awareness and conveyed through art; the body experienced internally, through its processes and through proprioception; and the interaction of this bodily inwardness with the body of film, the medium.<sup>100</sup> These themes, which run through the entire book, grant to Elder a vantage point from which to consider some of the issues that concerned Brakhage throughout his career, and which became more relevant to Brakhage from the 1980s onward. In fact, of all Brakhage's critics, Elder devotes the most attention to the work and issues from the latter part of Brakhage's career. This is probably due to Elder's friendship with Brakhage since the 1980s and their exchanges of ideas. Elder highlights in particular abstraction as related to bodily awareness and also to the creative process that Brakhage came to call "moving visual thinking".

In the book it is not possible to recognise a coherent and univocal perspective on the film-maker. The study becomes at its best an impressive referential source with a vast quantity of data, quotations, and, most of all, suggestions and intuitions for framing Brakhage in new contexts (despite the fact that the title declares, again, the specifically North American nature of his background). Ironically, and probably against the intentions of the author, the text becomes a sort of open and fragmented work, and while this is a disadvantage from an academic point of view, I do not believe it to be an entirely negative quality in this case. The evident limits of the

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<sup>98</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 14.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

work are perfectly synthesised by William Wees in a review:

[...] his generalizations and leaps in logic confuse rather than clarify important issues. [...] As much as I admire Elder's erudition and insights, I do not find him very successful at developing clear, consistent lines of argument. His book is full of information and ideas, but they are presented in chunks that often don't fit very securely together. Frequently, long passages on writers and philosophers seem to be there as much for their own sake as for what they tell us about Brakhage and the American tradition of Pound, Stein, and Olson [...].<sup>101</sup>

Wees captures very well the sense of confusion experienced by the reader faced with some interminable descriptive passages about other authors which divert from the original topic. Among the authors considered in detail within the massive book, apart from those of the title, there are Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, D.H. Lawrence, William James, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams.

In a study published the previous year and titled *A Body of Vision*,<sup>102</sup> Elder treats "the topic of the representation of [...] the body as viewed from the outside".<sup>103</sup> Brakhage's presence in the book consists of a series of scattered references and quotations that serve as comparisons and further examples within specific chapters. There are only a handful of pages devoted exclusively to Brakhage spread across several chapters. A more substantial contribution was published by Elder in 2005 in the form of a long essay about the affinities between Dante's and Brakhage's conceptions of art, in relation to *The Dante Quartet* (1987).<sup>104</sup> That essay is rich in interesting insights which have proven useful to my own work. Elder's essay expands the horizon of *The Films of Stan Brakhage*, even if its scope is apparently

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<sup>101</sup> William Wees, 'The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson by R. Bruce Elder', in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Summer 2000), pp. 55-56; p. 55.

<sup>102</sup> R. Bruce Elder, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 30.

<sup>104</sup> R. Bruce Elder, "'Moving Visual Thinking": Dante, Brakhage, and the Works of *Energieia*', in James Miller, ed., *Dante & The Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 394-449.

more restricted. Elder considers some points of contact between the medieval aesthetics of Dante and the contemporary aesthetics of Brakhage. He also mentions the influence of Robert Duncan on Brakhage in relation to Ezra Pound. Duncan is almost totally absent from Elder's 1998 study despite exerting an early and fundamental influence on the young Brakhage. The topic of spirituality, of the actual spiritual function of the work of art, as well as a series of hints directing attention towards possibly occult matters, are here laid out in a much more concrete and documented way than in previous texts. I shall discuss some of these aspects in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

In *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema* (1994), James Peterson proposes an approach to avant-garde cinema based on cognitive theories. His proposal is original and is focussed on the active strategies that the viewer uses to make meaning of the films. The devices a subject uses in understanding an avant-garde film are for Peterson the same used in making sense of any other film. The difference is in the way these models are applied. The radical otherness from commercial cinema, which is one of the main concerns of the American avant-garde particularly during the 1960s, is here nullified by taking in consideration only the cognitive reception on the part of the audience. This theoretical move is a consequence that Peterson is eager to draw from his discourse. It is a result of the theoretical tradition that champions narrative cinema. The paradox of applying the interpretative scheme of commercial cinema to its most radical opposition, and the "return to reason" implied in this move, is already evident in the title, in which the dreams of chaos of these films are in reality only visions of order. Apart from the fact that the negative judgement of this alternative cinema, underlined by the use of the term "chaos", is highly arguable, the conclusion of the book, that avant-garde film-makers employ the same schemata as commercial cinema but in a more open way, is quite reductive for a cinema that in many cases wants precisely to expand the possibilities of approaching experiences, memories, emotions and sensations. As a result, many reactions that a viewer may have spontaneously to those films are categorised as merely schemata and models for making meaning. This kind of over-rational approach leaves out all the various ways in which the senses

and emotions can be differently elicited by these films, and it ignores the basic contrast with the approach to conventional, narrative film. Even if the limitations of this model of analysis are manifold, the attempt is nonetheless honest and precise as well as clear: Peterson does not promise anything that in the end he does not achieve, given his cognitive film theory approach.

In Peterson's view, the central figure who has pushed the avant-garde film in North America towards a rhetoric of total liberation against Hollywood through his example and especially his writings is Stan Brakhage. Peterson refers to the deep influence that Brakhage exerted between the end of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, an influence that markedly decreased soon after. Brakhage's insistence on rejecting the common norms of perception, aiming to favour an open and untutored return to a virginal way of seeing, was exemplified for Brakhage by the child's mode of seeing. This is an extreme not only within avant-garde cinema but also within Brakhage's career, but nevertheless it is in this provocative way that Peterson depicts the entirety of the avant-garde movement. Among the three strains into which Peterson divides avant-garde cinema—the poetic, the minimal and the assemblage—Peterson argues that the first is the most important, with Brakhage standing as its foremost champion. While David James, in his study, exclusively considered Brakhage's work from the 1960s because that was the declared historical target of his book, Peterson exclusively considers Brakhage's career from the end of the 1950s to the first half of the 1960s arbitrarily. Peterson's most detailed analysis is of *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), while other examples considered are *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961) for the representation of space in relation to Abstract Expressionism, *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954) as an example of the poetic strain, and *Mothlight* (1963) as a pseudo-structuralist treatment of the film material.<sup>105</sup>

The only two Brakhage works post-1960s that Peterson considers are *Aftermath* (1981) and *The Dante Quartet*. The former is mentioned as an example of

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<sup>105</sup> James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1994). For *Window Water Baby Moving* see especially pp. 52-56; for *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* see pp. 63-64; for *The Way to Shadow Garden* see pp. 38-40; for *Mothlight* see pp. 80-85. Another Brakhage film occasionally mentioned in the book is *Anticipation of the Night* (1958).

the assemblage strain (an avant-garde “compilation” in this case), in which meaning is produced through the “appraisal of its overall mood or atmosphere.”<sup>106</sup> The latter is mentioned in a note as an example of the hand-painted abstractions of the late 1980s which would be “a bit closer” to Abstract Expressionism than previous works such as *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*.<sup>107</sup> This similarity, or this diminished difference (since one of the main points of Peterson’s chapter on Brakhage is to deny such a connection, following Sitney’s trivialisation of Abstract Expressionism in *Visionary Film*), is, however, very feeble because of persistent “differences in scale, working methods and presentational form”:<sup>108</sup> “differences in scale” because the canvas of a painting is much bigger than the frame of a film; differences in “working methods” because it is different to paint on film than to paint on canvas; and differences in “presentational form” because by watching a Brakhage film we have much less time to see the single frames as opposed to the time we have for staring at a painting. Leaving aside any comment on the superficiality of these objections, the aesthetics behind this gestural and inward abstraction are not considered. One of the reasons for such an oversight may be that, while Peterson’s perspective can offer interesting insights about the reception of some of Brakhage’s early films, it is far more disoriented and clueless when applied to the extreme abstraction of films such as *The Dante Quartet*. This is likely because Peterson’s approach is constructed by thinking mainly in terms of narrative logic.

The general analysis of Peterson’s discourse, even if quite reductive, follows a solid logic. But what is completely missing is consideration of the subversive potentiality of the avant-garde. This cannot be appreciated by whomever thinks that narrative devices and the rational cognitive resources employed to understand them are the primal and more *natural* activities of the subject in such circumstances. An art that tries to subvert accepted predetermined canons, like Brakhage’s project of freeing our visual experience, implies that there are limits to our rational apprehending of things, that some experiences are ineffable and cannot be reached and appreciated by rationality. Peterson’s work is useful because it posits a new and original perspective on avant-garde film, but it is risky because of the reductive

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<sup>106</sup> Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, pp. 161-162.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189 note 6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding this would entail. The avant-garde does not only advocate a “*total liberation*”, as Peterson claims,<sup>109</sup> but also the conservation and nourishment of a diversity of strategies and approaches, and not only as an exterior form.

Twenty years after Peterson’s book publication, Paul Taberham has tried anew to discuss Brakhage’s cinema through cognitive theories. His essay ‘Bottom-Up Processing, Entoptic Vision and the Innocent Eye in Stan Brakhage’s Work’<sup>110</sup> is, however, unrelated to Peterson’s work, especially from a methodological point of view. Taberham in fact looked for scientific theories and discoveries that would corroborate, explain or elucidate Brakhage’s project of presenting an innocent vision, as famously described in the poetic opening of Brakhage’s 1963 publication *Metaphors on Vision*. The strength of Taberham’s analysis comes from the fact that he does not bend the nature of Brakhage’s art or ideas to fit a scientific reality, but on the contrary, with the help of scientific knowledge, Taberham gives new and original insights into Brakhage’s work in relation to constructive theories of perception. So, for instance, Brakhage’s proposal of an innocent eye, easily discarded from a scientific standpoint if taken literally, is rather understood as it was originally intended: as a “drive toward an ideal”, a proposal aimed to “sensitize us to a richer and more varied visual life.”<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, working as a “practical psychologist” who studies “his own perceptions and intuitions”,<sup>112</sup> Brakhage created films that necessarily fail in the impossible task of making our eyes untutored again, but they do succeed in *retutoring* our visual skills—and not by “discarding prior visual habits”, but by “expansively developing new skills and sensitivities.”<sup>113</sup> This is the central claim of Taberham’s essay, and in a way it scientifically supports Brakhage’s intentions, inasmuch as his films reawaken “the viewer to the subjective dimensions of human vision that we typically ignore.”<sup>114</sup> Within the span of critical literature on Brakhage, this pioneering work is close, as well as admittedly indebted, to the 1992

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Taberham, ‘Bottom-Up Processing, Entoptic Vision and the Innocent Eye in Stan Brakhage’s Work’, in *Projections: The Journal of Movies and Mind*, Volume 8, Issue 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 1-22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

study by Wees, with the exception that here all the issues are framed within the field of constructivist theories.<sup>115</sup>

When we perceive something we process information because of a series of inferences. Such inferences can develop “from the bottom-up”, if the “sensory information” of what we perceive is enough to give meaning to it, or “from the top-down”, if our meaning-making process is “guided by expectations” or “background knowledge” not actually present in what we are perceiving.<sup>116</sup> Taberham points out how it is now common knowledge that our interaction with the world requires both processes, while Brakhage’s project aims for an untutored visual perception based exclusively upon the bottom-up process, thus stressing the value of what Taberham terms “surface details”.<sup>117</sup> This would be the scientific explanation for Brakhage’s idea of the untutored eye. Taberham looks also for precedents to this theory, finding a particularly apt one in John Ruskin’s innocent eye.<sup>118</sup> Ruskin preceded Brakhage also in lamenting what in scientific terms would be the prevalence of the top-down process at the expense of the bottom-up in society—a prevalence that, however, can never be turned into a total dominance of the latter, since perception is, to different degrees, always influenced by previous knowledge.<sup>119</sup> By using as a correlative to the innocent eye what James Gibson termed the “visual field”,<sup>120</sup> a bottom-up way of seeing opposed to the visual world, which in turn would be a way of seeing based on prior knowledge and conventions, Taberham finds a compromise to accommodate Brakhage’s positions in exchanging the term “untutored” with the term *retutored* eye.<sup>121</sup> In this way, the film-maker’s project has been given scientific explanation, as well as scientific substance.

Taberham explores also two ways in which Brakhage’s films can retutor our eyes. Firstly he considers the film-maker’s grounding of his artistic inspiration in

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> The original expression was “the *innocence of the eye*”, from John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing; In Three Letters to Beginners* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857), p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> Taberham, ‘Bottom-Up Processing’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>120</sup> See James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), pp. 26-27.

<sup>121</sup> Taberham, ‘Bottom-Up Processing’, pp. 6-7.

physiology. In particular he recreated in his films entoptic phenomena, which are “visual experiences whose source is within the eye itself.”<sup>122</sup> Brakhage’s films are packed with correlatives of entoptic phenomena, such as “floaters”, or *muscae volitantes*, purkinje tree effects, phosphenes, visual noise and flash blindness.<sup>123</sup> A second way in which the films are able to retutor our eyes is through the use of technical devices aimed at subordinating the meaning of the imagery to the films’ surface details—in other words, to force the primacy of bottom-up over top-down processing. These technical devices include poorly framed images, overexposure and underexposure, lenses distorting the image and sometimes negating perspective plausibility, and out of focus pictures.<sup>124</sup> In the conclusion of the essay, Taberham opens up another possible line of investigation when he suggests neural oscillations as the closest phenomena in the cognitive sciences to Brakhage’s theory of moving visual thinking.<sup>125</sup> Again, Taberham attempts to understand Brakhage’s ideas and give them a substance beyond the naïve appearance they may have by contextualising them within specific fields of knowledge.

In a recent study about the representation of the body in US avant-garde cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, Ara Osterweil dedicates one of the six chapters of her book, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film*, to Brakhage.<sup>126</sup> The book is focussed on how new ways of representing the body, and sex in particular, constituted and still constitute a form of cultural resistance to dominant forces. This “corporeal turn”, as it is defined in the book’s subtitle, preceded the historical phase of structural avant-garde cinema, and developed alongside the new countercultural tendencies of the period. Being focussed on a specific period, Osterweil, by a close study of archival material, is able to trace an interesting yet often overlooked trend in Brakhage’s art. By taking as main examples the treatment of the body in Brakhage’s *Loving* (1957), *Cat’s Cradle* (1959), *Window*

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-13.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-15.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>126</sup> Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2014). For the Brakhage chapter see pp. 93-135.

*Water Baby Moving* (1959), *Lovemaking* (1968) and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), and reading this trajectory in the light of his biography and artistic ideas, Osterweil is able to highlight a specific trend in which Brakhage moved from typically patriarchal tropes to more objective and open perspectives by reconsidering his personal and artistic view of the body. At the same time he moved from an abundant use of technical effects, typical of the visionary trend culminating in *Dog Star Man* (1964), to the cold minimalism of *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*. Osterweil does not include *Dog Star Man* in her analysis, both because she is interested in the more social and political aspects of bodily and sexual representations, and because the mystical, mythological and symbolical superstructures of the film are outside the scope of her subject matter.<sup>127</sup>

Faced with some particularly fertile corporeal “actions”, such as birth, sex and death, Brakhage started to polarise defamiliarisation from documentation, until, at the peak of this trend, epitomised by *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), he theorised a fundamental distinction between document and documentation, where a desire for objectivity is opposed to the forcing of a specific perspective.<sup>128</sup> Thus, in response to the urge to document the body, Brakhage started to “purge” his films of his signature technical intricacy.<sup>129</sup> This would also explain the anomalous technical sobriety of *The Pittsburgh Trilogy*. The results of this trend would align Brakhage with the rest of the film-makers considered in Osterweil’s book, as well as with the central concern of the book itself: that these film-makers’ approaches to “the opacity of corporeality” constitute a “bio-political resistance to heteronormative, racist, capitalist, and imperial forms of power.”<sup>130</sup> These forms of resistance, stemming from a particular approach to corporeality, according to Osterweil, are still overlooked today by critics establishing “myopic distinctions on the basis of film-makers’ gender or sexual preference”, as such critics remain under the growing influence of “the

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<sup>127</sup> A similar distinction can be made for the exclusion of *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961), another birth film like *Window Water Baby Moving*, but completely different in its massive superimposition over the images of Brakhage’s own peripheral visual phenomena experienced during the birth of his second child.

<sup>128</sup> Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 95.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

more cognitive concerns of structural cinema”.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, thanks to the way in which Brakhage came to treat the “object matter” (a term he employed during the 1972 world premiere of *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes*)<sup>132</sup> of the body, his films are able to “queer heterosexuality from the inside.”<sup>133</sup>

Avant-garde cinema, according to Osterweil, reflects back the illusion of immersion and identification of the spectator, and forces her to be aware of the world of which the film is also part. This is achieved not through sophisticated theoretical moves, but through the indeterminacy in the representation of corporeality present in all the aspects and features of the films she analyses.<sup>134</sup> The sensuousness of these films ultimately “engages the audience in the corporeality of the concrete world.”<sup>135</sup> In all of Osterweil’s discourse it is in fact fundamentally implied that such films are able to “move their audiences to dangerous, vertiginous forms of empathy”.<sup>136</sup> Thus, by undermining the idealistic illusionism and conformist social tropes typical of Hollywood cinema, these films, with their particular representation and treatment of the body, in a way send us back to the real, corporeal, messy world. In this sense, Osterweil’s conclusion is curiously close to the one pursued by structural/materialist film-makers like Peter Gidal, with the important distinction that Gidal’s refusal of representation, sensuousness and empathy would discard such goals as still idealistic.

This comparison of Brakhage’s approach with structural/materialist films acquires a special value if we consider that there has been only one attempt of reading a Brakhage film through the lens of such a theory, which constitutes a specific “branch” of the most generally defined structural cinema—a theoretically radical branch, inaugurated by Peter Gidal and connected to the London Film-makers’ Co-op, where the lack of the playfulness and wit often present in the films’ North American counterparts have been compensated for by an injection of structural Marxism. The attempt I am referring to is the 2005 essay ‘The *Roman Numeral*

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>132</sup> Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage at the Millennium: The Words of Stan Brakhage*, *Millennium Film Journal*, Number 47/48/49 (Fall/Winter 2007/2008), p. 12.

<sup>133</sup> Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 104.

<sup>134</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Series' authored by Nicky Hamlyn,<sup>137</sup> a former student of Gidal at the Royal College of Art, and the film-maker who cleaves closest to Gidal's aesthetics and theory among subsequent generations. Hamlyn chooses this series of short films (1979-1980) because of its photographed abstraction technically treated with such an incompleteness and vagueness establishing a constant indeterminacy about the meaning of the images. This sense of incompleteness obtained through specifically cinematic technical means, apart from purging the work of the sense of presence of the author behind the camera—a sense anathema to structural/materialist filmmaking—leaves the audience first to continuously question the cinematic apparatus, and subsequently to question their own relationship with it. This sense of the questioning of cinema's common assumptions about representation and illusion, obtained exclusively through the technical specificity of the medium, and through an impersonal process (since there is no figure asking or presenting issues, but all the questioning is supposed to sprout autonomously from the watching subject), is the final aim of structural/materialist cinema.

Hamlyn's analysis is not only relevant because of its similar conclusions to Osterweil, but also and especially because, in the structural/materialist historiography of avant-garde cinema, Brakhage stands at an unbridgeable distance with his visionary, personal and immanent cinema. Yet Hamlyn himself cannot avoid drawing a recurring parallel between Gidal's and Brakhage's films. This parallel is made on the basis of sensuous elements and speculations about the will and presence of the author. Referring in particular to Gidal's most well-known and representative film, *Room Film 1973*, he writes,

[...] psychologistic debates about the way a camera moves, or the symbolic significance of framing objects in the corner, or the meaning of cracks in a bare wall or whatever. Gidal's work has always been vulnerable to this kind of interpretative reading because it so often resembles that of filmmakers to whom he expresses himself ideologically opposed, notably Stan Brakhage, whose work is avowedly poetic and mythopoeic: the expression of a personal vision.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Nicky Hamlyn, 'The *Roman Numeral Series*', in David E. James, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), pp. 113-128.

<sup>138</sup> Nicky Hamlyn, 'From Structuralism to Imagism: Peter Gidal and His Influence in the 1980s', in

Hamlyn admits some “superficial similarities of strategy” in Brakhage’s and Gidal’s films, but he immediately points out that “in every other respect [they] are opposed”.<sup>139</sup> The green tone of the film grain plus its “sensuous movement” in Gidal’s *Room Film 1973* (1973) “even moved some viewers to compare his work to that of Brakhage”,<sup>140</sup> a parallel he repeats when writing about Brakhage’s *Roman Numeral series: IV* (1980), where there are “forms half-emerging out of heavy grain in a manner that recalls Peter Gidal’s *Room Film 1973*”.<sup>141</sup> A.L. Rees, one of the most authoritative historians of avant-garde cinema, shares a similar opinion:

At the same time these films are wholly—it might be ‘purely’—aesthetic, as in the almost musical structures, the greenish film-stock and the grain of *Room Film 1973* (a fully descriptive title). Like the colour flashes and vivid movement of his later films, they recall Brakhage—a comparison Gidal opposes, since he rejects Brakhage as myth maker and image maker.<sup>142</sup>

But beyond the aesthetic appearance of such films, the intentionality of the authors in creating specific technical effects is still the primary divide between Brakhage and Gidal:

However, where Brakhage works constantly to produce effects of ‘optical transformation’, which sooner or later all refer back to ‘the film-maker behind the camera’, for Gidal these effects are incidental: telling by-products of the engagement with the strategy of withholding clarity.<sup>143</sup>

From a structural/materialist point of view, the film that refers “back to ‘the film-maker behind the camera’” is the original sin of Brakhage. But if in Gidal such

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Nina Danino and Michael Mazière, eds., *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists’ Film and Video* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), pp. 233-237; p. 235.

<sup>139</sup> Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), p. 89.

<sup>140</sup> Nicky Hamlyn, ‘Structuralist Traces’, in Michael O’Pray, ed., *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926 to 1995: An Anthology of Writings* (Luton: The Arts Council of England/John Libbey Media/University of Luton, 1996), pp. 219-237; p. 224.

<sup>141</sup> Hamlyn, ‘The *Roman Numeral Series*’, p. 120.

<sup>142</sup> A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>143</sup> Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena*, p. 95.

unwanted effects can be by-products of the process of questioning, for Brakhage we can bypass the intentionality of the author in order to gain a more objective perspective on the questioning values of a film, as Hamlyn does for the *Roman Numeral* series. Thus Osterweil is right when she claims that Brakhage's techniques and treatment of the object matter often undermine from the inside, on a sensuous level, those conventions for which Brakhage's films are apparently bearers. Such an ambiguity is not confined to Brakhage's abstract visual films, though they may be more prone to ambiguity by nature; as Brakhage himself explained about his documentary *eyes* (1971), in which he followed a police patrol on routine duties, the documentary was at the time shown by Chicago's Black Panthers to demonstrate the brutality of the police, while the police showed the film to demonstrate their gentleness.<sup>144</sup> Hamlyn's analysis is of pivotal importance within Brakhage's critical literature because it demonstrates how the openness and malleability of Brakhage's work, as well as its aversion towards strict categories, is something concrete and in contrast with the commonly accepted interpretation of his work as naïve solipsism.

From Hamlyn's perspective, Brakhage's structural/materialist potential is only to be found in his photographed abstractions. The reason for the exclusion of the abstract hand-painted films is that this kind of total abstraction is

ultimately futile and unproductive because either the work is seen as heading into an ineffable realm where nothing can be said about it or, if seen as a reflection of its maker, leads backward into the untenable metaphysical idea about soul, origin, and genius, from which discussion is displaced into vague, ahistorical notions about oneness/affinity with nature and so on, none of which gets at what makes these films work on their spectators as films, what, in other words, makes them successful as art and amenable to critical analysis.<sup>145</sup>

My investigation will contradict such a position, being interested in the origins, content and consequences of the beliefs Brakhage held which fuelled the most spiritual aspirations of his impulse towards making art. On the contrary, Hamlyn attempts to basically consider the photographed abstract films minus Brakhage's presence, an interesting and fruitful approach which opens up Brakhage's

<sup>144</sup> Brakhage interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 93.

<sup>145</sup> Hamlyn, 'The *Roman Numeral Series*', p. 127.

work to new critical horizons but which unnecessarily determines that for different directions “nothing can be said”.

To Hamlyn what makes the art of cinema “amenable to critical analysis” is that it poses “questions about some of the presuppositions we bring to bear in our routine watching of moving images.”<sup>146</sup> What interests him in Brakhage’s *Roman Numeral* series is the efficacy with which the films establish and then dissolve unresolvable antinomies, leading to a general impetus to question the apparatus.<sup>147</sup> The formal operations in the series

function as ends in themselves, so that the films’ themes are neither existential nor mythopoeic, but formal/philosophical. This is also what distinguishes them just as clearly from the hand-painted films that followed soon after, in which the camera is abandoned, and thus the problematic indexical and iconic connections to an evasive yet evident profilmic, are severed.<sup>148</sup>

Hamlyn implies that the hand-painting technique is intentional and thus always controlled by the author, while in the photographic abstraction there is the possibility, through formal procedures, of suggesting the “equal validity of both intentional and unintentional features.”<sup>149</sup> This would again work to avoid the film-maker’s presence. But for Hamlyn, in general, Brakhage is always present in his films and thus always in control, and this cannot be avoided: while, for instance, “Gidal accepts that other things are going on in his films apart from what he is attempting to control”<sup>150</sup>, “the film-maker’s controlling presence”<sup>151</sup> is always perceivable in Brakhage. Eventually, in order to sustain his own analysis, Hamlyn is forced to correct such an assumption and admit that

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>147</sup> “It is more productive to see how the films’ formal operations work toward the dissolution of a related set of antinomies: matter and form, focus and defocus, rhythm and a-rhythm, montage and continuity, contrast and sameness, monochromy and polychromy [...]” (Ibid., p. 114)

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>150</sup> Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena*, p. 95.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

[t]here are, nevertheless, moments in Brakhage's work that, if one will detach the oeuvre as a whole from its reification of Brakhage as the subject and origin of the work, pose similar kinds of epistemological problems to the viewer through a strategy of withholding representation in such a way that the spectator must reflect not only on the conditions for knowledge, but also on the assumptions they bring to bear on a given image.<sup>152</sup>

The subversive potential of Brakhage's work as outlined by Osterweil in relation to corporeal representation, as well as its sensuousness and demanding empathy, extend their effects also to complicate, and ultimately enrich, critical debates upon the film-maker. This is also an interesting demonstration of how Brakhage's films can quite easily and often exceed the alleged solipsism and other categories by which the film-maker is typically understood.

Another useful resource within Brakhage's literature is a catalogue published in 1983 by Gerald Barrett and Wendy Brabner. This book, aptly titled *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources*, is a catalogue composed of two main parts: a catalogue of all his films up to 1981, with synopses and technical data, and a brief review of the writings about him up to that date. What is particularly relevant for Brakhage scholars is the first chapter of the book, titled 'Biographical Background', which contains a detailed biography of Brakhage's early life up to the end of the 1950s.<sup>153</sup>

An even more famous and by now standard source for references and biographical material is Fred Camper's personal website, [www.fredcamper.com](http://www.fredcamper.com). In the section devoted to Brakhage there is a comprehensive collection of links, lists and information pertaining to different aspects of Brakhage's work. There is a nearly complete filmography and a selection of biographical, general and journalistic articles, obituaries, screening programmes, reviews of single films, interviews and other material. The site works as a sort of Brakhage database, and Camper's incomparable knowledge of the films makes it also critically relevant.

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<sup>152</sup> Hamlyn, 'The Roman Numeral Series', p. 120. In my opinion, the value of such an admission greatly augments the value of his intelligent essay.

<sup>153</sup> Gerald R. Barrett and Wendy Brabner, *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983), pp. 1-24.

Other scholars who have been engaged with Brakhage include Scott MacDonald and Paul Arthur. MacDonald published in 2005 a long collage of interviews with Brakhage from the 1990s and early 2000s. This constitutes the fundamental source of information for the film-maker's later years.<sup>154</sup> MacDonald is particularly interested in aspects of Brakhage's spirituality. Arthur posits Brakhage as a major figure of the history of avant-garde film in the USA, and considers social and cultural (or countercultural) aspects of Brakhage's films in their relations to their audience.<sup>155</sup> From this perspective, Brakhage appears to be much more integrated in his contemporary cultural milieu than isolated because of his aesthetic choices.

The main contributions to Brakhage studies, apart from the abundant analyses of single films, focus on particular aspects, such as the effects of society on the artist (James) or the liberation of sight (Wees). Taberham, Osterweil and Hamlyn also analyse specific trends or aspects within Brakhage's work. In other analyses, such as those of Sitney or Peterson, predetermined systems of interpretation are applied to Brakhage. Elder, interestingly, tries to expand the horizon of the discussion by depicting in detail some of the many elements composing the cultural background of Brakhage. Unfortunately, his erudition does not achieve a clear and organic model or position. The difficulty with Brakhage remains the formulation of an exhaustive and general model for framing at a glance the dynamic nature of the scope of his oeuvre and its manifold trends, as well as presenting honestly and critically his many contradictions.

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<sup>154</sup> Brakhage interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, pp. 36-122.

<sup>155</sup> Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

## 2 – ART AS REVELATION: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

In this chapter I shall account for a series of seemingly odd beliefs that Stan Brakhage had about art—in particular, beliefs involving the spiritual value and function of art. To reassess the complex of spiritual beliefs held by Brakhage, I will retrace the origins of such ideas within his cultural milieu. Spirituality as a constituent element of film art is a familiar concept for those already accustomed to Brakhage’s persona and statements of intent. Unfortunately it has only be rarely and generally mentioned in the critical literature about him, and thus it has never been the focus of a specific investigation to define it and its origins. This is the gap I propose to fill in this chapter: by locating the theoretical and historical origins of such spiritual quest, many of Brakhage’s seemingly odd beliefs and apparently naïve statements about spirituality and art will be made coherent with a precise line of thought that finds in Ezra Pound’s occult-derived ideas its root. The complex of spiritual ideas, as well as their origins, defined here will also lay the groundwork for the considerations I shall pursue in subsequent chapters.

This chapter starts from Stan Brakhage’s idea that art necessarily entails revelation.<sup>156</sup> Throughout his career such a concept amounted to a deep-seated belief. Despite the apparent vagueness of this concept, I would like here to probe into it more deeply to gain a better sense of the spiritual philosophy underlying Brakhage’s aesthetic. Even though as a passing mention in an introduction, Scott MacDonald defines the term spiritual as “that mysterious dimension of experience beyond the material, or incarnated within the material, that is exhausted by neither the senses nor the intellect”.<sup>157</sup> In the case of Brakhage, even though his works often point beyond the material, spirituality is always incarnated or revealed within, through and from it.

<sup>156</sup> “So it’s revelation, I think, essentially what the art process is for.” Brakhage in a 1990 video interview conducted by Marilynne Mason, now in Stan Brakhage, *By Brakhage: An Anthology Volumes One and Two* (Criterion Collection, 2010, Three Discs), Disc One.

<sup>157</sup> Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2006), p. 1. Although MacDonald attempts this definition in the Introduction of his collection of interviews, spirituality is not a common theme in scholarship on the North American avant-garde cinema, and certainly not in Brakhage’s critical literature.

MacDonald's general definition is useful in introducing a series of ostensibly peculiar features of Brakhage's art that articulate his spiritual imperative. Brakhage declared that he created in a state of trance, intended as a mystical state. During this trance, he found himself to be simply an instrument operated by superior forces. He named such forces Muses, and described them as manifestations of the ineffable, which was Brakhage's preferred term for the divine. These concepts, if considered in relation to the connection between art and revelation, reinforce a vision of art as primarily a spiritual activity that could overlap with, or even substitute for, some functions of religious activity. Even if such ideas are not original *per se*, they tend to cast Brakhage in a certain eccentric light, particularly due to his repeated insistence upon them in writings and interviews as well as his apparent refusal or inability to be more precise about them.

I argue that Brakhage derived the majority of his spiritual ideas, directly and/or indirectly, from the formative influence of the poet Ezra Pound, and in particular from the echoes of a medieval *Weltanschauung*, later to become an occult tradition, which Pound reworked to extract from it a precise idea of art and its function. The function of art that Pound discerned in these earlier sources was, indeed, the eliciting of spiritual revelation. In investigating this lineage of influence, I shall consider Brakhage's accounts of his creative process and of art in general, as a system which draws its coherence from its historical roots.

The chapter will firstly establish the presence and importance of Pound in Brakhage's life and among the fellow artists he befriended. In doing so, special attention will be given to the figure of Robert Duncan. Having established the relevance of Pound's presence, a general outline of his occult-derived ideas about spirituality and art, following Tryphonopoulos and Surette, will precede a close analysis of the most occult-oriented ideas of Brakhage: the trance state, the Muses, the artist as instrument, the definition of the divine, and the value and function of myth. A short historical parenthesis about Agamben's retracing of the esoteric meaning of medieval love poetry will give further historical consistency to frame the bulk of Brakhage's spiritual quest. The last part of the chapter will be devoted to closely analyse a Brakhage's film directly inspired by Pound's occult tradition: the 1987 *The Dante Quartet*.

The artistic presence of Pound was crucial in Brakhage's career, through both direct and indirect influence. Pound was not simply one figure among many others, but was a primary inspiration for many of Brakhage's friends and mentors, a constant, living, though often physically distant, presence within his cultural milieu.

The first contact Brakhage had with Pound's work was on the occasion of Brakhage's sixteenth birthday (1949) when a group of friends gave him Pound's epic poem *The Cantos* as a present.<sup>158</sup> The present was intended as a joke, for the text was extremely complex, but Brakhage actually came to treasure the book "all his life",<sup>159</sup> defining it in 1977 as "the single most important book in my life."<sup>160</sup> The study of Pound became progressively more intense for Brakhage, and formed an essential part of his artistic apprenticeship:

But at every stage of gained knowledge *The Cantos* reveal more and more to me. [...] Pound goads me on because at each turn in the reading of him I come to new mysteries which he has set significantly within learned reach.<sup>161</sup>

Among Brakhage's friends and mentors, Pound was held in high esteem as a poet and as a guiding artistic figure.<sup>162</sup> Among fellow members of the New American Cinema, for instance, Maya Deren completed a master's thesis in 1939 on the

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<sup>158</sup> Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings*, ed. and with an introduction by Robert A. Haller (New York: Documentext, 1982), p. 224; and James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', p. 2.

<sup>160</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 224. The passage about the episode of the present is also quoted and commented on in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>161</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 229.

<sup>162</sup> About other notorious positions of Pound, namely the political ones, they have been simply discarded or overlooked by many of these authors. Robert Duncan summarises the general stance held by many American poets of his generation by explicitly stating, "[...] I overlooked the nitty-gritty Pound of unsettling attitudes. I wasn't going to argue with him any more than I'd argue with my mother about the nature of society." (Duncan in Robert Peters and Paul Trachtenberg, 'A Conversation with Robert Duncan (1976)', in *Chicago Review*, Volume 44, Number 1 (1998), pp. 92-116; p. 104)

influence of French Symbolism on “Anglo-American modernist poets” such as Pound and Eliot.<sup>163</sup> In 1957, Hollis Frampton visited the poet imprisoned in St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington “almost daily” for one year.<sup>164</sup> In a 1962 seminal essay titled ‘Notes on the New American Cinema’, the movement’s staunch advocate Jonas Mekas defined the primacy of the artist over the critic by paraphrasing a famous Pound dictum: “it is the artist, with all his imperfections, who is the antenna (e. pound) [sic] of his race, not the critic.”<sup>165</sup> Also Brakhage will quote the same dictum in a 1996 interview.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, film-maker Willard Maas, during a famous 1953 debate about film and poetry with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas and Parker Tyler, demonstrated his intimate familiarity with Pound’s work by quoting by heart Pound’s definition of the image.<sup>167</sup>

In addition to fellow film-makers influenced by Pound, there were also of course many poets in Pound’s lineage who had been friends and/or mentors of Brakhage: Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, Michael McClure, Ronald Johnson and Guy Davenport. Among their many expressions of appreciation for Pound, I shall only quote from those most significant to this investigation. McClure, for instance, dramatically depicted the situation faced by poets of Brakhage’s generation:

We saw that the art of poetry was essentially dead—killed by war, by academies, by neglect, by lack of love, and by disinterest. We knew we could bring it back to life. We could see what Pound had done [...].<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> McPherson, ‘Preface’, in Maya Deren, *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, ed. and with a preface by Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, New York: Documentext, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>164</sup> Jenkins in Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, p. 189 note 1.

<sup>165</sup> Mekas in Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 88. The original article was published in *Film Culture*, Number 24 (1962), pp. 6-16. The phrase Mekas is referring to is: “Artists are the antennae of the race.” (Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 73)

<sup>166</sup> Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 55.

<sup>167</sup> Maas in Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 183. The debate was originally published as ‘Poetry and Film: A Symposium’, *Film Culture*, Number 29 (1963), pp. 55-63.

<sup>168</sup> Michael McClure, *Scratching the Beat Surface: Essays on New Vision From Blake to Kerouac* (New York/London: Penguin Books 1982), p. 13.

The same emphasis upon the *use* of Pound's work as an "instrument" for subsequent art was also made by Olson, prior to McClure:

He seems to me definitely our Grandpa [...]. But the mind of Ez, that's the thing, that's the flare to light us back. He seems to me to have put himself in our hands as the cleanest sort of instrument [...].<sup>169</sup>

Ronald Johnson, who became particularly close to Brakhage during the 1990s,<sup>170</sup> likewise insisted upon Pound as a bridge:

There are few enough people who learned what Pound was really getting at. Olson did, and Hugh Kenner and Guy [Davenport]. They became men of great culture and went back into time to find what was live.<sup>171</sup>

It was Guy Davenport who most succinctly expressed this general point about the whole of Pound's work, with the formula "*to find the best in the past and pass it on.*"<sup>172</sup> This was the common idea of all these artists: finding value in Pound's effort to recover from the past something still useful and alive for the future. Brakhage's personal friendships with all of these artists, and his personal study of Pound's texts, made this idea a given fact in his mind. Thus I shall investigate which specific elements Brakhage considered to be the past tradition that Pound reformulated. It is likely that each of these figures interpreted this revived history in a personal way, much as Pound himself did, with different nuances based on personal interests and attitudes, but that the basis behind it remained constant. For the particular hypothesis of this work, the most relevant position on Pound in relation to the ideas Brakhage will come to express is that of Robert Duncan. It is he who most explicitly stressed

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<sup>169</sup> Olson quoted by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander in Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, with an introduction by Robert Creeley (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 406.

<sup>170</sup> See Stan Brakhage, 'Chicago Review Article', in *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences, Chicago Review*, Volume 47/48 (Volume 47:4, Winter 2001; Volume 48:1, Spring 2002), pp. 38-41.

<sup>171</sup> Johnson quoted in Ross Hair, *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>172</sup> Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (London: Picador, 1984), p. 167.

not only the specific poetical, and thus technical, nature of such a repeatedly-mentioned Poundian tradition, but also gave a glimpse into the theoretical and historical content of it:

As important for me is Pound's role as the carrier of a tradition or lore in poetry, that flowered in the Renaissance after Gemistos Plethon, in the Provence of the 12th century that gave rise to the Albigensian gnosis, the *trobar clus*, and the Kabbalah, in the Hellenistic world that furnished the ground for orientalizing-Greek mystery cults, Christianity, and neo-Platonism.<sup>173</sup>

Duncan clearly referred here to the mix of occult doctrines that, according to the studies of Demetres Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette,<sup>174</sup> were at the root of Pound's beliefs. In fact, among the artists in Brakhage's milieu, Duncan remained the closest to Pound's mystically-oriented ideas, frequently expressing an affinity for them through his poetry, lectures and interviews. Given the strong familiarity of the film-maker with the San Francisco poet during the crucial years of Brakhage's artistic apprenticeship, Duncan is a prime candidate for the reinforcement of such ideas in Brakhage's mind. I maintain that Duncan reinforced or reaffirmed ideas in Brakhage's mind, but that the original and main source was Pound.

In the fall of 1952, following a letter of introduction by the poet Kenneth Rexroth, a nineteen-year-old Brakhage moved to San Francisco to live in Robert Duncan's basement, a mere three years after receiving *The Cantos* as a birthday present.<sup>175</sup> Brakhage was allowed to live in the apartment in exchange for cleaning the house belonging to Duncan.<sup>176</sup> Duncan was a central figure in the San Francisco cultural scene of those years, and in the two years Brakhage was there he participated in the evening gatherings hosted at Duncan's house:

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<sup>173</sup> Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, ed. by Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 90.

<sup>174</sup> See particularly Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*; and Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*.

<sup>175</sup> Barrett and Brabner, *A Guide to References and Resources*, pp. 10-11. In Duncan's biography, Lisa Jarnot reports the date as 1953, following a 2000 conversation with Jess Collins: see Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan, the Ambassador From Venus: A Biography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2012), p. 125 and p. 458 note 2.

<sup>176</sup> Barrett and Brabner, *A Guide to References and Resources*, p. 11.

Duncan's house was my school and he was my teacher. Every evening there was a discussion about films, plays, poems, music, and paintings.<sup>177</sup>

During one of these discussions Duncan might have easily pointed out, as he would in essays written shortly after that time, how it was clear to him that Pound, in the essays *The Spirit of Romance* and 'Cavalcanti', was not turning to medieval knowledge with "the antiquarian's concerns", but was rather in search of "enduring terms".<sup>178</sup> Alongside the search for such still-timely terms, Pound also expressed the belief that sudden revelation is "the point of the writing", and likewise that the aim of the writer is "revelation."<sup>179</sup> While Pound considered only his own artistic medium in relation to revelation, his consideration could be easily extended to all other arts. In fact, Duncan did draw from Pound's writings exactly that conclusion, and regarded the work of art as a "mystical experience" that changes the work's audience.<sup>180</sup> For this reason, he felt that the main concern of the artist is "to make real what is only real in a heightened sense":<sup>181</sup> to try to convey through the work that higher state, that eternal state of mind, that experience of the divine, which the artist is specially attuned to enter. Whether Brakhage's statement, "So, it's revelation, I think, essentially what the art process is for,"<sup>182</sup> came directly from Pound or through the mediation of Duncan, it certainly followed this line of thought, where "[t]he arts traditionally exist in mystery."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Brakhage quoted in *ibid.* See also Brakhage interview in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 108.

<sup>178</sup> Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, p. 135.

<sup>179</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 51.

<sup>180</sup> Duncan in Robert Peters and Paul Trachtenberg, 'A Conversation with Robert Duncan (1976)', in *Chicago Review*, Volume 43, Number 4 (1997), pp. 83-105; p. 104.

<sup>181</sup> Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, p. 136.

<sup>182</sup> Brakhage in a 1990 video interview conducted by Marilynne Mason, now in Brakhage, *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, Disc One.

<sup>183</sup> Brakhage in Higgins, Lopes, and Connick, 'Grisled Roots', p. 60. It is interesting that Brakhage did not state something like "within *this* tradition", or "within *my* tradition", but used the term "traditionally". This might be regarded as evidence of how this specific vision was assimilated by Brakhage as the standard and *true* one, repeatedly reinforced by his friends and mentors, and more generally by the cultural milieu within which he operated.

The theoretical content of the tradition that Pound reworked was drawn from occult lore Pound was exposed to during his formative years in London and Paris. The turn of the twentieth century marked the peak of a revival of occult interests. In Europe the major centres were London and Paris, both cities where Pound resided: in London from 1908 to 1920, and in Paris from 1921 to 1925. Pound's friendship and famous collaboration with W.B. Yeats provided his introduction to occult studies, while the scholarly books and teachings of theosophist G.R.S. Mead nourished and deepened Pound's occult interests.<sup>184</sup> From Mead, Pound would adopt the view that Gnosticism and Neoplatonism were the historical chain of transmission for Hellenic and pagan elements within the Christian world.<sup>185</sup> This spiritual lineage from Gnostic doctrine through occultism and into Pound was first coherently traced by Demetres Tryphonopoulos in his 1992 *The Celestial Tradition*, and by Leon Surette in his 1993 *The Birth of Modernism*, and I draw upon their scholarship in my account of Pound's ideas. These two scholars considered the occult knowledge popular at the time, which was further developed by many intellectual figures close to Pound, as central to the formulation of Pound's core ideas about the meaning and function of art, and likewise to the outlining of the theoretical content of Pound's purported historical tradition.

I shall rely on the work of Tryphonopoulos and Surette for the outline, definitions, terminology, and history of the occult elements within Pound's ideas.<sup>186</sup> This adoption accepts also the limits of their works, limits which do not limit the scope of this dissertation. If on the one hand it proved impossible within the space to discuss in details broader issues regarding the whole history of Western Esotericism; on the other, this would have been superfluous for the scope of this dissertation. Similarly, the occult revival at the turn of the twentieth century often mentioned, is

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<sup>184</sup> For the influence of Mead in relation to Hellenic and especially Neoplatonic elements of Pound's thought, see Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*. For a scrupulous philology of occult and occult-related influences throughout the early Modern period, see Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*.

<sup>185</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 105.

<sup>186</sup> Agamben's essay works as a further specification of some peculiar and relevant sources of Pound (missing from the works of Tryphonopoulos and Surette), that are meaningful in further establishing the historical origins also of Brakhage's ideas, even if Agamben's aim was not to discuss this.

relevant here only for the specific ideas Pound took from it, as the works of Tryphonopoulos and Surette outline, in building his own system from which Brakhage cherry-picked so much. Pound was not an occultist, and even if one wants to consider him as such, he would have been a very unique kind of occultist. Also for this reason it is not possible to place him within the perspective of an “official” history of Western Esotericism. But still, he took inspiration from occult traditions to build his ideas, and here they are relevant for their presence also in Brakhage.

Since Brakhage openly acknowledged the importance and influence of Pound, I shall here open a small parenthesis about the critical consideration of occult or esoteric elements in the interpretation of Brakhage’s ideas. Among the critical writings on Brakhage, it is only in Bruce Elder’s work that occult references or vocabulary surface, though they are considered only tangentially, and not directly in relation to Brakhage’s conceptions of art. For instance, when considering Henri Bergson’s theories in relation to Brakhage’s films,<sup>187</sup> Elder recognises the cultural importance of the “occult revival” (at least in France, although its epicentre was in London) between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as a favourable condition for the reception, though not for the formulation, of Bergson’s theories. Elder in fact regards Bergson as a relevant precursor to some of Alfred North Whitehead’s ideas, and consequently to Charles Olson’s quasi-scientific perspective on art; a perspective that will be wholly embraced by Elder, especially in its jargon, and that would constitute a cornerstone influence on Brakhage’s ideas.<sup>188</sup> Despite this narrow position, Elder cannot avoid conceding that many of Bergson’s ideas possess a strong Gnostic tendency, and he begrudgingly acknowledges that Bergson read Plotinus and eventually became “increasingly more enthusiastic about the mystical philosopher in his later years”.<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, the “American Tradition” in the title of Elder’s monograph is crucially influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose Gnosticism he equally recognises<sup>190</sup> as having helped shape that “American religion” which, according to Harold Bloom, “is really Gnosticism”.<sup>191</sup> Likewise the

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<sup>187</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 477 note 84.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 232. Elder is referring to Harold Bloom’s *The American Religion: The Emergence of the*

“Gnostic metaphysics” of *The Cantos*<sup>192</sup> or the occultism of Pound<sup>193</sup> do not pass unnoticed. In a note to a 2005 essay about Brakhage and Dante, Elder observes that Robert Duncan’s ideas were also “shaped [...] by his occultist upbringing”:<sup>194</sup>

Raised in a house of hermetic practitioners, Duncan continued to take an interest in arcana all his life. His work was deeply influenced by the occultism of Ezra Pound, whose coterie believed that Dante’s strong interest in the Troubadours and the Templars indicated a covert adherence to their unorthodox mystical traditions.<sup>195</sup>

Despite the presence of all these passing mentions, occultism is not considered in the investigation of Brakhage’s ideas, even as Elder regards the influence of occult philosophy as important in the “shaping” of all American art between the 1920s and the 1960s.<sup>196</sup> In the absence of any prior studies on the influence of occult ideas on Brakhage, the works of Tryphonopoulos and Surette offer a helpful starting point, given the attention they focus upon Pound’s philosophical lineage, the influence Pound had on the North American artistic scene, and the details of what he believed in. Knowing the influence that occultism had on Pound and the influence Pound in turn had on Brakhage, it does not follow that Brakhage was an occultist; nonetheless, it is important to outline the content of the poet’s occult-derived ideas to determine which further ideas they generated in the film-maker.

The tradition that Pound wanted to revive was a mystic cult of Amor, a system intended to link humans, nature and the divine, dating back to the Eleusis fertility rites. Pound believed the lineage of this tradition included such luminaries as Homer, Sextus Propertius, Ovid, Virgil, the Neoplatonics, Johannes Scotus

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*Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), which Elder calls an “extraordinary book”.

<sup>192</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 138.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>194</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 445 note 81.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 437 note 10.

<sup>196</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 439.

Erigena,<sup>197</sup> Robert Grosseteste, the troubadours, Peire Vidal, Cavalcanti and Dante. Some of these figures, like Erigena, Grosseteste, Vidal, Cavalcanti and Dante, would come to be included in Brakhage's own pantheon.<sup>198</sup> According to Pound's view of this tradition, a secret wisdom was passed on from one individual to another within this "timeless brotherhood of artists who share a sacred mystery or arcanum esoterically expressed in art."<sup>199</sup> Robert Duncan had an analogous perception of artistic tradition when he drafted a similar list composed of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton as bearers of a "poet-lore handed down [...] from poet to poet" in order to reveal through art "the nature of the divine world".<sup>200</sup> According to occult thinking, to which Pound subscribed, this tradition was carried on in secret by its alleged members. Each member interpreted some of its elements in an idiosyncratic way, but the main content of it, a secret content, was preserved against mainstream, institutional, and other external forces thanks to the members' secrecy.

The occult is an umbrella term for a set of different disciplines and doctrines which have been organised by each occultist in an idiosyncratic way. It pertains to what is beyond ordinary knowledge, involving supernatural forces which require secrecy. The obscure beliefs nourishing the occult tradition are often archaic, unconventional doctrines that had been overwhelmed, opposed or suppressed by mainstream institutional ideas. Tryphonopoulos outlines a general, useful definition of the occult: it is

the whole body of speculative, heterodox religious thought which lies outside all religious orthodoxies and includes such movements as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Cabalism, and Theosophy. Occultism always involves mysticism, a belief in the possibility of *gnosis*, or direct awareness of

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<sup>197</sup> Sometimes also written as "Eriugena".

<sup>198</sup> See Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, pp. 206-207; Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 158; and Stan Brakhage, *Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker* (New York: Documentext, 2003), pp. 56-57.

<sup>199</sup> Leon Surette, "'Dantescan Light': Ezra Pound and Eccentric Dante Scholars", in James Miller, ed., *Dante & The Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 327-345; p. 331.

<sup>200</sup> Robert Duncan, *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 28.

the Divine attained through *myesis*, or ritual initiation.<sup>201</sup>

The list of doctrines from which occultism may draw its beliefs is not limited to the ones Tryphonopoulos proposes. Surette, for instance, enlarges the range to include “any other mystical, illuminated, pneumatic, or visionary tradition whatsoever.”<sup>202</sup> Occultism is usually highly personal and “very thin on dogma and practice”<sup>203</sup> because it postulates the actual possibility of a subject having a *personal* contact with a deity, whomever or whatever it is. The subject interested in such a body of knowledge is regarded in occultism as a student, willing to learn

teachings about the supernatural, the other world, the noumenal, the au delà; teachings that are said to embrace the doctrines of all world religions and to be based on direct knowledge of [...] the noumenal.<sup>204</sup>

While occultism varies greatly in practice across different places and times, its similarities would necessarily include a heterogeneity of knowledge which flows into its beliefs; the unorthodox nature of such knowledge (often labelled as heresy in the past); and the extreme freedom of the student of occultism in picking through and reworking ideas, due to the lack of any orthodox religious dogma. A consequence of these features of occultism is that, when one tries to define common aspects of this knowledge, it is necessary to stick to more or less general formulations.

As Tryphonopoulos stresses, occultism always involves the possibility of *gnosis*, the direct experience of spiritual knowledge. The core of this discipline is the existence, possible achievement, and personal dimension of salvation, of *gnosis*.

Radically different from rational knowledge, *gnosis* is esoteric or mystical knowledge made available to the elect through revelation. [...] *Gnosis* is received either by coming into the possession of occult lore [...] or by undergoing a mystical experience.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. xii.

<sup>202</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 11.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>205</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 34.

Schematically, Gnosticism, and by extension also the occult, involves three basic elements: a “*gnostes* or knower”; a *praxis*, “human acts of self-modification which induce the proper disposition”; and a mystical “*gnosis theou* or direct beholding of the divine essence”.<sup>206</sup> The only condition for achieving *gnosis* is that either the candidate receives the secret of a revelation through a form of initiation, during which someone who already possesses the wisdom hands it on, or the candidate undergoes a mystical experience. In the perspectives of Pound, Duncan, and Brakhage, a work of art becomes the perfect instrument for eliciting revelation, assuming the function, the value, and sometimes the form of a ritual. Accordingly, Tryphonopoulos considers *The Cantos* as a text

specifically designed to bring about, in those readers who are open, pure of heart and willing to hear, the [...] true and complete seeing and knowing. The text can be the bridge [...] through which the initiate can attain revelation, the unmediated vision of the deity.<sup>207</sup>

This view offers some historical and theoretical substance to Brakhage’s otherwise obscure impression that every time he read *The Cantos* he came “to new mysteries which he [Pound] has set significantly within learned reach.”<sup>208</sup> Robert Duncan was an influence on this impression, as Duncan notably considered Pound’s poetry as a ritual.<sup>209</sup> Pound himself confirmed that interpretation when he explained the unique value of troubadour and Tuscan love poetry as having made a distinction between a simpler song and a *canzone* as a “ritual” with “its purpose and its effect”, “subtler” in its nature and designed to elicit its “revelations to those who are already expert.”<sup>210</sup> Brakhage, regarding his own art, more broadly wished that his work could be “of some use to someone”,<sup>211</sup> and that this *use* could indeed be of a spiritual kind:

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 7. Also, further to this point: “I suggest that *The Cantos* constitute a text designed to produce initiates as much as it is for initiates; the text’s purpose is to occasion a palingenesis achieved through participation in the ‘mystery’ contained in the text.” (p. 8)

<sup>208</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 229.

<sup>209</sup> See Duncan in Peters and Trachtenberg, ‘A Conversation with Robert Duncan’ (1997), p. 85.

<sup>210</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 89.

<sup>211</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 109.

That would be one of my most fervent, hoped-for intentions, that humans could use my work in some spiritual way, in some meditative way. Because then you're making it your own in a way that is *freeing*. One of my problems with a lot of religions is the tendency of people to get hung up on them.<sup>212</sup>

While the purpose of this investigation is not to try to establish if Brakhage was or was not an occultist, it is nevertheless instructive to observe how his vocabulary and his sense of his own films remain richly suggestive of occult spirituality, particularly in light of the history of the ideas he professed about art. I do not intend to categorise Brakhage as an occultist, in the same sense as, for instance, his film-maker friends Kenneth Anger or Harry Smith defined themselves; but in retracing the history of Brakhage's ideas about art, and mainly through the writings of Pound and Duncan, it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that they were influenced by and derived from some typically occult themes.

As previously mentioned, Brakhage often stated that his work was made under a sort of trance. As he described it in one of the most significant of such statements,

I work in a trance state. [...] [I]f I were called to the phone for something urgent, it took me up to thirty seconds to answer a question. The brain was coming up out of deep working concentration. Sometimes I hesitate to use the word "trance." The Western way to put it would be "concentration," except that we have diluted the meaning of concentration and shifted it away from a spiritual accent, because *this* kind of trance is certainly one where you could hope to, expect to, meet angels and hear voices [...].<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>213</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 114. And earlier, in the same interview: "[...] there is so much magic in the creative process that I can only touch on it as we talk about these things. These works were made in a kind of trance state where I used various tactics just to keep from sliding completely into insanity, which is always a fear when you get into a really complicated, deep, lengthy work." (p. 84). For another similar statement see Brakhage in Suranjan Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', in Winston Wheeler Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, eds., *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 139-162; p.

The meaning of trance is charged with a “spiritual accent”, while in non-spiritual terms one might speak of a very deep concentration. It is interesting here that during this state the artist is basically connected with another plane of existence, one so alien to quotidian matters as to seem a sort of other world in which there is actual danger of losing oneself and literally going crazy. At the same time this state produces a different mode of awareness, with a sensibility and receptivity conducive to artistic creation. In that sense, the difference between a normal state and an artistic trance would be a difference of modality or sensibility and not necessarily of another place magically visited by the mind. It is possible to frame Brakhage’s trance state as his personal version of that heightened state of perception from which, according to Duncan and Pound, art is born. This trance state would then also represent, in the occultist perspective, the access granted to some particular individuals, in this case artists, to that mystical experience that they try to share and elicit through the work of art.

What Stan Brakhage is talking about is clearly shown in a short film made by his wife, Marilyn Brakhage, during her husband’s film shoot for the *Visions in Meditation* series (1989-1990) in Mesa Verde and in the deserts of Colorado and New Mexico in 1988. In this short piece entitled *For Stan* (2009),<sup>214</sup> we can see the kind of spasmodic movements he was forced to make in attempting to convey with the camera what he was experiencing in his mind. While he runs around, closing his eyes between shots, panning the camera and changing the focus, it is possible to perceive the tension and focus of his mind and body during these acts. His concentration extends also to the side activities of filming like changing rolls or changing lenses, during which processes the same concentration is visible, though coupled with an extreme efficiency. Another interesting aspect one can notice in the film is that even when he walks around in search of his next shot he never seems to wander randomly; everything he does seems previously studied or prepared. Thus, the two most striking aspects of his actual process of filming that emerge from this piece are his idiosyncratic movements and his visibly deep concentration.

Further interesting evidence of the peculiarity of his movements during filming can be found in a humorous anecdote Brakhage reported, regarding his

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144. Reprinted from *Film Culture*, Number 78 (Summer 1994), pp. 18-38.

<sup>214</sup> Included on *By Brakhage: An Anthology, Volume Two* (The Criterion Collection, 2010, Disc Two).

shooting of *Unconscious London Strata* (1981) during a trip to London with his first wife, Jane. While shooting in the same manner as was shown in *For Stan*, a somewhat embarrassing incident occurred:

One day I'm shooting Big Ben on the street, and I'm clicking [frames with the camera] and moving—it must have seemed to people almost epileptic motion—and staying on the same subject for like five minutes. A crowd had gathered, and finally one of the British people asks Jane, “Would he mind if we took the picture for him?” She realized that they thought that I was desperately trying to get a picture but had some nervous disorder which caused me to twitch.<sup>215</sup>

The creation of hand-painted films, while obviously requiring a different process than the photographed examples above, still induced in Brakhage a trance-like state, and he has stated that all aspects of the film-making process, including editing, elicited and required similar spiritual “concentration”.

In describing his trance state, Brakhage noted that he was possessed by the Muses. These forces supposedly drove the artist in the creation of his work, taking control of the whole process while he lacked rational awareness during the trance. The Muses differed in names, forms and kinds, depending on the artist's particular attitude or sensibility in the moment of “possession”. Brakhage described the Muses in interviews:

For me the Muse is a persuasion. It often feels like a force in Nature that moves through certain people, but it should never be appropriated by human beings.<sup>216</sup>

Some of the people I know in the sciences have told me that there are well over a hundred dimensions. Usually, we're just barely considering the *fourth*. In my work process it is no surprise that there are over a hundred dimensions, and that “creatures” move through these dimensions [...].<sup>217</sup>

According to Brakhage, the Muses are forces that are part of nature and thus of this world. They can neither be controlled by the will of the artist nor be

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<sup>215</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 105.

<sup>216</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 144.

<sup>217</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 114.

humanised as they are in popular depictions, since they are inclinations operating from within. In fact, in trying to give an idea of them, Brakhage also defined them as “manifestations of the unconscious” in order to stress the fact that they are ineffable to the human mind while still present and real, rather than connected to some sort of psychoanalytic fantasy.<sup>218</sup> The different manifestations of these forces were for Brakhage the shared content of dreams, fantasies and myths. Thus, the ineffable and mysterious dimension from which the Muses arise could also generate “fairies, elves” or “demons.”<sup>219</sup> This apparently quite idiosyncratic view is actually very close to Pound’s definition of myths as “explications of mood” intended as a “psychic experience”, where one “understands Persephone and Demeter” or “the Laurel”, or where one may have “met Artemis”, experientially.<sup>220</sup> What for Brakhage appeared as Muses, then, may have been for Pound Greek myths.

Because of the “possession” experienced during the trance state and the consequent manifestation of unknown forces that took over the creative process, Brakhage was insistent that the artist becomes a mere instrument, or the “deflection of authority”, in David James’s description.<sup>221</sup> James was the first critic to discuss this point as a specific feature of Brakhage’s career. However, he was mostly focussed on Brakhage’s novel film-making practices that involved his family in the production of social artefacts as works of art. James viewed Brakhage’s works as home-made products in “a domestic premonition of a radical reorganization of the roles of producer and consumer in a genuinely social cinema.”<sup>222</sup> In fact, the “deflection of authority”, especially during the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s (the period James was discussing in his book), was intended to shift authorial power “from himself to the family unit”.<sup>223</sup> But as the 1960s ended it began to become evident that this “interactive family cinema was more an aspiration than a fully achieved practice”;<sup>224</sup> and that the “spectacularization of family life”<sup>225</sup> was

<sup>218</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 144.

<sup>219</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 113.

<sup>220</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 92.

<sup>221</sup> James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 38.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

already becoming counter-balanced by Brakhage's attempts at documenting the world beyond the home. An early example of this latter trend would be *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* films: in *eyes* (1971), Brakhage followed Pittsburgh police officers for several days at the end of September 1970; in *DEUS EX* (1971), he turned his attention to doctors struggling to save patients' lives at the West Pennsylvania Hospital of Pittsburgh; and in his famous *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), routine autopsy procedures at the Allegheny Coroner's Office in Pittsburgh are shown in vivid detail without any sense of emotional attachment.<sup>226</sup>

This contradiction between domestic and public film-making constitutes a clear case in which it is possible to verify Fred Camper's axiom that "for almost any generalizing statement one might make about a major Brakhage film, some form of its opposite is also true."<sup>227</sup> This empirical "formula" in fact may be extended to all of Brakhage's work, and not only for his major works, since indeterminacy, openness, and the undefined are often distinctive features of his work. Because of the contradictory status of Brakhage's authorship, and because of the relevance it assumes within the line of thought I am outlining here, I shall briefly discuss the questions of authorship in order to map out some coordinates.

The question of authorship, and especially of how Brakhage intended his films to be viewed in relation to their creator, arises from an initial and famous deflection of the question by the film-maker. Already in *Metaphors on Vision* (1963)—a text often perceived as Brakhage's fundamental manifesto (though it is necessary to distinguish in the text between lifelong aesthetic positions and short-lived ideas)—Brakhage declared,

"By Brakhage" should be understood to mean "by way of Stan and Jane Brakhage," as it does in all my films since marriage. It is coming to mean: "by way of Stan and Jane and all the children Brakhage" because all the discoveries which used to pass only thru the instrument of myself are coming to pass thru the sensibilities of those I love.... Ultimately "by Brakhage" will come to be

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<sup>226</sup> Another similar example from the same period is *Dominion* (1974), a short documentary about a businessman.

<sup>227</sup> Fred Camper, 'Brakhage's Contradictions', in *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences*, *Chicago Review*, Volume 47/48 (Volume 47:4, Winter 2001; Volume 48:1, Spring 2002), pp. 69-96; p. 72.

superfluous and understood as what it now ultimately is: by way of everything.<sup>228</sup>

The conclusion is somewhat unclear, though it is possible to notice not only the shifting of creative authorship towards his family as a whole, but also the first emergence of his idea of the artist as instrument, even if not yet in the mystical terms in which it will be posited in later statements. At the opposite end of this statement stands James' acute remark that Brakhage has often been "read by detractors and aficionados alike as an unreconstructed egotist, Romantic or otherwise".<sup>229</sup> This paradox, according to which Brakhage was, and still is, criticised or celebrated sometimes for the same reasons, not only refers back again to Camper's formula, but also dramatically shows how his effort to deflect authorship and create a family cinema evidently failed from the very beginning.

During the first half of the 1990s, and particularly from 1993 to 1996 when he exclusively hand-painted abstract films, he momentarily pursued a utopian project: that of making films about nothing. This idea of a film as a thing in itself beyond any sense of representation, when considered alongside Brakhage's view of the artist as an instrument, might suggest the vanishing of the authorial figure altogether. Brakhage's statements from those years would certainly suggest this:

And now I've come to a point where I believe that if film reflects anything that's nameable, then that limits the fullest possible aesthetic of film . . . it's not film anymore. [...] Film should not refer to anything in the world, it should be a thing in itself. And my new hand-painted work tries to achieve this.<sup>230</sup>

But even during this brief period, in almost all of his works, and especially in the hand-painted ones, the artist's signature "By Brakhage" was indelibly hand-carved in the film. Thus, even if the works were "about" nothing there was clearly an artist behind them. In 1998 he partly corrected his earlier statements by humbly pointing out that

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<sup>228</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]; also quoted in James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 38.

<sup>229</sup> James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 49.

<sup>230</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 150.

The only reason for having that name there is to say ‘by way of me,’ or ‘here’s what this creature did.’ I’m simply trying to keep that integrity clear, so it is known what I’m responsible for. And that I should protect, as long as I’m alive, what it was that I did and where I ended—not thinking that’s the best, but that’s just what I did.<sup>231</sup>

The expression “by way of me” echoes the one he employed 35 years earlier in *Metaphors on Vision*, even if the source is no longer the family unit but something mysterious and ineffable beyond human comprehension. What persisted for Brakhage was the idea of the artist as instrument. From this late statement it is also evident how the assertive tone from 1993 on making films about nothing was suitable only for that short-lived utopian experiment.

Finally it is worth remembering how the signature, the ultimate and most explicit mark of authorship, had been for a period the only proof of ownership of Brakhage’s works, since they were “for many years in the public domain, uncopyrighted.”<sup>232</sup> This detail constitutes yet a further contradiction in Brakhage’s position on authorship. The absence of copyright, at least in the past, contradicts the signature, which in turn openly contradicts Brakhage’s “rhetoric of disengagement”.<sup>233</sup> The signature “By Brakhage” contradicts the intended meaning “by way of Stan and Jane and all the children Brakhage”, which could in turn contradict the Romantic solipsism he was accused of. Furthermore, Brakhage’s notes on his abstract hand-painted films of the early 1990s contradict by their very existence the idea that the films are about nothing. Within this conundrum of facts and intents, Brakhage found resolution in a spiritual perspective to hold together such disparate tendencies:

You’re absolutely unique and individual, but you’re working within a sacred calling that goes back to the dawn of time, so who can stake a claim and say ‘This is mine?’<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Brakhage in Philip Taaffe, *Composite Nature: A Conversation with Stan Brakhage* (New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1998), p. 108.

<sup>232</sup> James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 49.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid..

<sup>234</sup> Brakhage in Taaffe, *Composite Nature*, p. 146.

The spiritual jargon of “a sacred calling” and of “the dawn of time”, as well as the typical paradoxical language of mystical formulations, supply Brakhage with a suggestive and effective way of holding together positions that otherwise could only be deemed contradictory.

This little excursus about the question of authorship in Brakhage highlights how, among all his contradictions and changes of mind through the years, the idea of the artist as an instrument was present at least since 1963, and was refined and framed in more spiritual terms particularly since the end of the 1980s. As a result, this dissertation shall mainly consider statements made by Brakhage during those later years, when he framed the persistent deflection of authorship not as a change in the production of social artefacts, but as a distinctive feature of a mystical creative process. According to his late statements, the Muses allegedly manifest themselves and *give* the work to him in his trance state, using the artist as a mere instrument:

[...] something beyond me is shaping the kinds of film I make and how I make them, and I am merely the instrument for this process.<sup>235</sup>

Brakhage did lose control over his actions, and yet this loss of authorial control was deflected towards the ineffable drive of these mysterious forces. Even if the question of control and authorship within such mystical terms cannot be definitively answered, the idea of the artist as instrument may be critically understood not primarily in terms of the deflection of authorship, but rather as a particular way for the artist to come to terms with his inability to explain what he was experiencing: the ineffable source of his creative urges.

The Muses manifesting themselves during the trance state came to Brakhage from an ineffable dimension that ultimately coincided with an illuminated or heightened state, or with the idea of the divine. Even if comprehending or defining this state in rational terms is impossible, various definitions have been attempted. Brakhage, for instance, highlighted the mysterious quality of such a state by

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<sup>235</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 84. And later, in the same interview: “I don’t feel like I *make* the films, but that they are made *through* me. [...] What’s good about your work is *given*.” (p. 114)

employing terms such as “ineffable”, “unknown”, “unconscious” or “Unnamable”, to define both the Muses as well as god.<sup>236</sup> What Brakhage meant by “unconscious” was not something primarily or exclusively psychoanalytic, as the term would suggest, but more simply something unknown. In fact, he equated the unconscious with both the unknown and the ineffable.<sup>237</sup> The unconscious, the unknown and the ineffable are three interchangeable terms in Brakhage’s vocabulary that defined the fundamental trait of his idea of the divine. The other primary features of his understanding of the divine included manifestations such as the Muses, which would account for imagination and myths, and the heightened state through which the artist creates his work, defined as trance.

Pound was more specific about these concepts, but his ideas once again bear a striking resemblance to Brakhage’s. For the poet, the very nature of the ineffable was something that could only be experienced for brief moments and never rationally comprehended. Pound warned that “trying to rationalize the prerational is poor fishing.”<sup>238</sup> He also asserted that “the Gods exist”,<sup>239</sup> and that, for him, a god was “an eternal state of mind.”<sup>240</sup> As a state of mind, a god is therefore something actually attainable. He further explained:

When is a god manifest? When the states of mind take form. When does a man become a god? When he enters one of these states of mind.<sup>241</sup>

States of mind are dependent upon a range of emotions, and for this reason Pound was referring to the gods as a plural category. The “insistence on the ineffability of genuine revelation”<sup>242</sup> typical of occult thought remained constant in

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<sup>236</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 113; and Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 144.

<sup>237</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 106.

<sup>238</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 45.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299; also quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 3. This is also restated later in the same text: “For the gods exist.” (Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 125)

<sup>240</sup> “What is a god? A god is an eternal state of mind.” (Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose: 1909-1965*, ed. and with an introduction by William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 47)

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 15.

Pound, as it was also significantly always present for Brakhage: the Muses that propelled Brakhage's work were defined as "manifestations of the unconscious", or more precisely "genetic manifestations that people shouldn't presume upon."<sup>243</sup> For both the poet and film-maker, the fact that the divine state of mind could be reached through emotions, which are typically subjective and difficult to precisely define or even rationalise, broke down any traditional dogmatic borders between the human and the divine. Indeed, when Brakhage used the term "genetic" to describe the Muses, he implies a material connection with and access to the divine. The ineffability, multiplicity/multiformity and personal and subjective accessibility are the three main traits of this idea of the divine for both Pound and Brakhage.

Being convinced of "the ineffability of genuine revelation", another important point established by both Pound and Brakhage was the inescapable veracity of such experiences. For both the poet and the film-maker, experiential knowledge was paramount to their spirituality, and direct experience overruled any considerations of whether their revelations were real or fantasy: if they experienced them, the revelations therefore must be true. Whereas fantasy, imagination and personal dispositions were understood as elements that influenced the access to the divine state of mind, the veracity of the existence of the divine state was for both artists beyond question. Due to their direct experiences, they regarded revelation as empirical, but the awareness of the divine could never be rationally expressed. For this reason it was still necessary for them to speak of beliefs:

I mean or imply that certain truth exists. [...] Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to fix it on paper. Certain objects are communicable to a man or woman only "with proper lighting", they are perceptible in our own minds only with proper "lighting", fitfully and by instants.<sup>244</sup>

For Pound, the point was not whether or not these truths exist, as for him they certainly did, but how to reach the right disposition in order to access them. With such a set of beliefs, art could be understood as a privileged way of reaching such a disposition.

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<sup>243</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 144.

<sup>244</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 295.

Brakhage had a lifelong quarrel with P. Adams Sitney about the veracity of such revelatory experiences. This quarrel, and the position held by Brakhage, demonstrate how for Brakhage, just as with Pound, the existence of certain truths was unquestionable and could not be categorically confined to mere fantasy. The visual phenomena that Brakhage translated into films with his extremely heterogeneous and inventive techniques were an attempt to convey what was going on in his mind and in his eyes, the act of seeing in general, as well as that spiritual drive that urged him to create which manifests itself in the mind of those with the right sensibility. All of this, he felt, would have no meaning whatsoever—neither his attempts nor the states he was trying to represent—if his imagery could be confined to the category of mere fantasy. In a conversation published in 1973 Brakhage lamented,

the minute P. Adams refused to search for his own hypnagogic vision, we had our next quarrel, which sprang up when I said I am the most thorough documentary film maker in the world because I document the act of seeing as well as everything that the light brings me. [...] He and many others are still trying to view me as an imaginative film maker, as an inventor of fantasies or metaphors.<sup>245</sup>

In line with his tendency to consider himself as an instrument of mysterious forces, he thought of his artistic efforts as an act of spiritual and physiological documentation. The explicit statement quoted above precedes the publication of the first edition of *Visionary Film*, where Sitney proposed the canonisation of Brakhage as the foremost visionary film-maker. Sitney, in discussing Brakhage, famously employed the term “mythopoeia”, the creation of myths still based on classical ones, and intended as visionary fantasies. Sitney argued that since *Reflections on Black* (1955) Brakhage had begun “to transcend the distinction between fantasy and actuality, moving into the cinema of triumphant imagination”,<sup>246</sup> and thus rejecting any kind of empirical truth about what the film-maker was experiencing or tried to convey in his films. Brakhage continued to argue this point in January 2002, a year

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<sup>245</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 188.

<sup>246</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 157.

before his death, when he stated to Scott MacDonald,

I always had a documentary streak in me, and in fact, my biggest argument with P. Adams [Sitney] was about this issue. I said, “I am *foremost* a documentarian, among all the other things you might call me, because I photograph not only what’s out there, but the act of seeing it. I’m documenting the very process whereby something is perceived.” He always argued with that. He needed to keep the outside and the inside separate, I guess.<sup>247</sup>

Here he neatly caught the essence of Sitney’s position of wanting “to keep the outside and the inside separate”, thus rebutting the critic’s idea that he transcended “the distinction between fantasy and actuality” only to exclusively privilege the former and establishing the indisputable primacy of “triumphant imagination”. William Wees, who brilliantly established a parallel between Brakhage’s imagery and actual peripheral visual phenomena—thus focussing on the physical facts that Brakhage attempted to document—stressed how “viewers of his films, including many critics, seem to have great difficulty equating the imagery of the films with the phenomena of actual visual perception.”<sup>248</sup> That Wees had in mind precisely Sitney is demonstrated by a similar remark made in the same book just a few pages later, where he notes that “Sitney’s refusal to close his eyes to find equivalents of Brakhage’s painting on film” is taken as a paramount example demonstrating the general “prejudice against the body as the source of art.”<sup>249</sup> As should be clear from Brakhage’s statements, though, this “source of art” is not only limited to the body, even if it has to pass through it. Whatever Sitney’s reasons are for his positions, his refusals and his consequent confinement of Brakhage’s films to a mere celebration of fantasy *de facto* greatly limit the possible implications and resonances of Brakhage’s art.

Sitney was the first to critically discuss Pound in relation to Brakhage. His argument focussed around few formal strategies to be applied to a film, but never touched more general issues such as the spiritual nature of art. For Sitney in fact the

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<sup>247</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 93.

<sup>248</sup> Wees, *Light Moving in Time*, p. 78.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

main contribution of the poet was that of inspiring the “central-image film”, according to which all the work is built and circulates around a single image.<sup>250</sup> This idea was derived by Pound from Japanese poetry and theatre: in poetry, from the *haiku* form in which a very short poem is written around a single action or image, giving the reader a sudden and immediate sense of the emotion or atmosphere involved; and in theatre, from *Noh* drama, in which a play is similarly built around a single image or action. The relevance of the image to the medium of poetry was at the base of the Imagist movement, the first attempted formulation of Pound’s compositional methodology. Sitney theorised the creation of a specific film genre derived from it: the Imagist film.

Imagist films are remarkable among avant-garde works for their lack of obscurity—at least on the primary visual level. Imagist films have a simple structure, a pattern in the shape of a human gesture, and all the complexities are allowed and/or helped to spring from that image.<sup>251</sup>

Sitney’s chief example is *Dog Star Man* (1964), where the central image is that of “a woodsman climbing a mountain”.<sup>252</sup> In particular, for *Dog Star Man: Part I* (1962), Brakhage himself established a parallel with *Noh* drama because of “the exploration in minute detail of a single action and all its ramifications.”<sup>253</sup> Pound had explained the importance of *Noh* drama in his 1916 *Gaudier-Brzeska*, where he also linked the form and its central-image process to *haiku* poems. Sitney quoted Pound’s explanation in the essay ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’ and in *Visionary Film*,<sup>254</sup> and insisted that “anyone seriously interested in Brakhage ought to read” *Gaudier-Brzeska*.<sup>255</sup>

*Dog Star Man: Part I* for Sitney is also Vorticist, another movement driven by Pound’s precepts for artists, formulated subsequent to Imagism and intended to surpass it. The vortex was for Pound the raw energy that the artist perceives before it

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<sup>250</sup> Sitney, ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’, p. 15.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>253</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]; quoted also in Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 190.

<sup>254</sup> Sitney, ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’, p. 18; and Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 196.

<sup>255</sup> Sitney, ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’, p. 18.

is channelled into the work, and the work must try to maintain the original intensity of the source through precision, honesty, movement and compression. An image created in this way becomes a “radiant node or cluster [...] from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”<sup>256</sup> Broadly speaking, Imagism was about the right image, while Vorticism was about movement. But *Dog Star Man: Part I* for Sitney is not only Vorticist but also and predominantly mythopoeic. With this new concept, with which he will fully canonise Brakhage in *Visionary Film*, Sitney applied another interpretative paradigm: that of the desperate conflict between two entities, namely the I and the outside—in the case of *Dog Star Man*, the entities are Brakhage the artist and nature (or the world in general).<sup>257</sup> This paradigm would also fit squarely with the allegiance Brakhage repeatedly declared to Romanticism.

Pound’s formulations for artistic creation—Imagism, Vorticism, and later the ideogram—were not merely or primarily formal recipes. In fact, Brakhage employed such formulations literally only in *Dog Star Man: Part I*. *Dog Star Man* is one of the very few films by Brakhage (if not the only one) in which the central-image “technique” is used, creating a “lack of obscurity”. Pound attempted to affirm and theorise a freedom of artistic expression which does not decrease the intensity, precision and honesty of the original source. This was meant to facilitate the revelatory function of the work of art, and be as faithful as possible to its mystical origins. Pound’s breaking of the pentameter in the quest for free verse, for instance, did not lead to a totally chaotic form. On the contrary, as famously stated by Eliot, “No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.”<sup>258</sup> Pound attempted to renew his art by first of all freeing himself from the old constricting rules and paradigms, but at the same time by recovering those still useful and lively for the modern world. The renewal did not affect only the formal structure of a work, but first and foremost reconsidered the stance of the artist towards the world. The destruction of previous forms were necessarily followed by the creation of new ones obeying new principles. What Pound retained, rediscovered and sometimes reinvented from the past were mainly Greek culture, the poetry of the Troubadours and the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo* (literally “sweet new style”), all of which were

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<sup>256</sup> Pound quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15; and Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 196.

<sup>257</sup> Sitney, ‘Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films’, p. 21.

<sup>258</sup> Eliot quoted in Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 12.

eventually combined with his understanding of the Chinese ideogram.

In his own desperate search for renewal as an escape from classical film praxis, Brakhage turned to previous figures of experimental cinema as well as to the creative processes of poetry and painting. As with Pound, he found himself in the situation of not being able to aptly and precisely express what he was experiencing within the standard forms, or, more importantly, with standard conceptions of the medium and of the role of art. Brakhage read *Gaudier-Brzeska*, as he surely read many other Pound works, but what penetrated his thinking was not simply the central-image process with his mythical elements. It was, rather, something more philosophical and profound that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

The reason why Pound passed from Imagism to Vorticism was to avoid a fixed interpretation and description of the image as well as of his poetry, as such fixity would be inadequate to stand for the dynamism and complexity of reality:

The defect of earlier imagist propaganda was not in misstatement but in incomplete statement. The diluters took the handiest and easiest meaning, and thought only of the STATIONARY image. If you can't think of imagism or phanopoeia as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action.<sup>259</sup>

In the written medium of poetry, the concern for “moving” the images is something more urgent than in films, where the images are already necessarily moving. Pound's aim was to *catch* the dynamic and unfixed nature of reality by formulating a creative process that could be as close as possible to movement. Thus, while Imagism worked more as a critique of previous poetical forms and concerns, pushing towards a more effective form of description by privileging the visual image and stressing the precision of it, in Vorticism there was a more dynamic and generative interplay of form, meaning, sound and image. Within Vorticism, the values of movement and of transformation were paramount. For these reasons, Sitney's analysis of Brakhage's films is actually much closer to Imagism. He presented Brakhage as simply adopting literary tropes, while Pound's original motivation was to bring art closer to the dynamism of reality. The technical

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

experiments of *Dog Star Man* were employed to address to the acceleration and enrichment of the visual experience<sup>260</sup> in order to match what Brakhage as a person was actually experiencing during that time (the film is, in fact, based on a real personal crisis, as are many of Brakhage's films). Sitney overlooks the reality of Brakhage's experience, whether of physiological phenomena, such as Wees analysed, or of revelatory spiritual states. The "real" content and its possible implications are defused by Sitney in an explanation that reduces the work to the "lack of obscurity" of a central image, of "a woodsman climbing a mountain". Brakhage was undoubtedly influenced at the time by Pound's ideas of Imagism, especially when the film-maker wrote about "the exploration in minute detail of a single action and all its ramifications", but even in such a statement it would be remiss of a critic not to notice how the term "ramifications" already points beyond Imagism in the direction of Vorticism, as well as conveying to the viewer the original experience/emotion/state of mind of the artist.

As a result of Sitney's persuasive oversimplifications, *Dog Star Man* is still considered the chief example of the mythopoeic approach to film-making. While this accounts for only a part of Brakhage's intentions in making the film, its imagery certainly was informed by the film-maker's understanding of myth. I argue that Brakhage's idea of myth was derived directly from Pound, and that, in its peculiar role within the spiritual tradition I have retraced, it was not only a device used to bring art closer to the multiplicity and dynamism of reality, but also and especially intended to draw viewers closer to ineffable mysteries. It was intended, in a way, as a sort of spiritual device.

Despite its many novelties, *Dog Star Man* remains a work with strong classical elements, and it was possibly these features which attracted the attention of the young Sitney so intensely. Mythopoeia, for Sitney, is a device derived from literature, and his enthusiasm was generated by this hierarchical and derivative appropriation:

Before *Dog Star Man* I didn't believe mythopoeia was a cinematic possibility.  
[...] I am coming to believe that mythopoeia implies a kind of literary (and now

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<sup>260</sup> Notably, the extremely fast cutting and the painting on film.

filmic) Vorticism—plus, of course, a substantial load of guts.<sup>261</sup>

It is important to recognise the uniqueness of *Dog Star Man*, Brakhage's most famous film, within the panorama of Brakhage's oeuvre, especially for its clear use of the central-image technique (at least in *Part I*) and of a mythic theme reiterated throughout an exceptionally long film by Brakhage's standards. For instance, the formal difference between *Dog Star Man* and its "sequel" *Yggdrasill Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* (1997), in which the same cosmogonic themes are treated in a completely different way, is significant. The 1997 film is lacking any sign of mythopoeia or central-image beyond the mythical reference of the title. Almost completely abstract, mixing hand-painted abstraction with photographed abstraction, the film is deeply complex and celebratory of lively forces, presenting itself as spiritual without the painful struggle envisioned in *Dog Star Man*. The state of mind illustrated is explicitly connected with a divine plane, associating the eponymous mythological tree's roots, rife with esoteric meaning, with "the complex electrical synapses of thought process".<sup>262</sup>

For Pound, myth played a very important role in art, but not in a simple stylistic or decorative way. Rather, the mythic image, or situation for Pound represented the transmission of an internal crisis leading to a spiritual metamorphosis, which for Pound would be the real function of the myth. As previously mentioned, myths for Pound were "explications of mood", wherein a god is a "state of mind". The states experienced by the subject—trance states in the case of Brakhage—are those which put the human into contact with the divine, through a form of possession by mysterious forces. The mythic explications of such ineffable matters were for Pound not only necessary due to the ineffability of the experience itself, but also were necessitated by the persecution of enlightened subjects (mainly artists) throughout history. Thus, within his occult-influenced view of history, myths were also cloaking devices.

Because of its clandestinity, "the secret mind of Europe"<sup>263</sup> had to devise from

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<sup>261</sup> Sitney, 'Imagism in Four Avant-Garde Films', p. 21.

<sup>262</sup> Stan Brakhage, description of *Yggdrasill Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* on the Canyon Cinema online catalogue: <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=3753> (accessed 10/05/2015).

the beginning a subterfuge in order to hand on the mystery and to secure its continuation. This device was, for Pound, myth. In line with the occult understanding of myths “as records of contacts between the human and the divine”,<sup>264</sup> Pound stressed the concealing function of the myth, and in a famous passage he explained the process of mythopoeia in quite precise terms:

I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution. Speaking aesthetically, the myths are explications of mood: you may stop there, or you may probe deeper. Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur. I know, I mean, one man who understands Persephone and Demeter, and one who understands the Laurel, and another who has, I should say, met Artemis. These things are for them *real*.<sup>265</sup>

The translation of revelatory experiences into myths is no longer necessary because of the danger of persecution, but rather because of the experiences' ineffable nature. So, since “the whole greek [sic] time had been a mythopoeic sense, and concern with the un-named”,<sup>266</sup> the myth remained for Pound the primary form in which a revelation was communicated, as it “cannot be translated, paraphrased, or otherwise made explicit or manifest.”<sup>267</sup> The “mythological exposition” is a device through which one is permitted “an expression of intuition without denting the edges or shaving off the nose and ears of a verity.”<sup>268</sup> Robert Duncan defined the myth in strikingly similar terms:

Myth is the story told of what cannot be told, as mystery is the scene revealed of what cannot be revealed, and the mystic gnosis the thing known that cannot be

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<sup>263</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 104.

<sup>264</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 7.

<sup>265</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 92.

<sup>266</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 121.

<sup>267</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 31.

<sup>268</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 127.

known.<sup>269</sup>

Surette points out that the importance of mythopoeia in poets like Pound is usually considered in “an explicatory rather than investigative spirit.”<sup>270</sup> But if its relevance can be (partly) traced to major contributions in anthropology flourishing during Pound’s apprenticeship<sup>271</sup> or as a purely “stylistic resource”, a myth’s occult aspect and its function as “a source of inspiration and thematic enrichment” should also rightly be stressed.<sup>272</sup> In the same spirit, while Sitney can explicate Brakhage’s mythopoeia in terms of literary references and stylistic resources, an occult-inspired reading can suggest that Brakhage created his own myths because it was the only way in which he could hope to communicate the experiences and the emotions he underwent.

The last part of Pound’s statement on myth, in which he explained how someone can experience and thus understand Demeter or Persephone because they are *real* states, can offer a means of understanding some of the cryptic descriptions Brakhage gave of his trance state and of the Muses. These entities that enter the subject, a subject who can “hope to, expect to, meet angels and hear voices”,<sup>273</sup> in order to stimulate possibly the same state of mind Pound was referring to, were described by Brakhage as different for each individual sensibility:

I do bar certain entities from moving through me because they are not of my kind. I cannot dance with them. I bar just exactly some of those that—and I am not making a value judgement here—Kenneth Anger or Harry Smith can use very well and make a great, magnificent, powerful beauty from. *These* I don’t work with, so I do have my prohibitions in the trance state.<sup>274</sup>

Brakhage’s Muses are at least forces of persuasion which inform the nature of the work of art as the final outcome of the creative process. The form of the artwork

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<sup>269</sup> Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p. 1.

<sup>270</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 18.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 114.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

can indeed be a myth in Pound's sense, a form necessary to transmit the experience the artist undergoes in meeting and being possessed by the Muses. As a consequence, the work of art can then be an aid to the receiver in accessing the divine. In such a view, art becomes a tool or guide to revelation, and it may be regarded as a spiritual art. This idea derives from the traditional "hermeneutic of Hellenistic Neoplatonism", for which a myth, when intended in a particular and concealed way, can reveal "the nature of the divine."<sup>275</sup>

The function of the myth can thus be considered from an investigative angle, as what was passed down from the Hellenic world to the Middle Ages was not only and not primarily "a specific reading, a specific interpretation" of the myths, but "an idea of the scope of their meaning".<sup>276</sup> Pound, for instance, listed different figures within his "conspiracy of intelligence"<sup>277</sup> without worrying too much about historical accuracy or evidence "because *they all wrote about the same thing*".<sup>278</sup> And, while Brakhage was even less precise than Pound, he inherited the same idea about art as the expression by special individuals of something ineffable that happened to them, in order to drive the receiver of the work of art to a similar ineffable state or plane of existence; and he, as Pound, felt close to "artists of all kinds".<sup>279</sup> Thus, for Brakhage, even if the mythopoeia, or, for instance, the central-image technique, is present in only a few of his films, what remained constant throughout his career was his intention that the work of art serve to induce a spiritual process, an occasion for spiritual revelation. In this sense, then, the explicit mythological imagery of *Dog Star Man* becomes only one specific phase of this larger project, rather than a unique and isolated practice.

The occult perspective centred around the influence of Pound can thus enrich the critical framework within which assessing Brakhage, and give a more wide and precise meaning to many of his most enigmatic ideas. The historical background against which Brakhage was articulating his spiritual conception of art, in a highly intuitive and often unaware way, can be further strengthened thanks to an essay by

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<sup>275</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 27.

<sup>276</sup> Robert Lamberton quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 112.

<sup>277</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 263.

<sup>278</sup> Robert Lamberton quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 112.

<sup>279</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 117.

Giorgio Agamben where many of the points to which Pound was thinking about, and that subsequently inspired Brakhage, are presented as a unique and coherent philosophical system.

## 2.1 – An historical parenthesis: Agamben’s account of a medieval *Weltanschauung*

Tryphonopoulos and Surette are not particularly specific about the medieval sources of Pound, since their focus is on his pagan-derived elements as well as the occult revival Pound was part of in London and Paris. Giorgio Agamben, on the contrary, discusses exactly that peculiar artistic and philosophical tradition, with those specific figures Pound was interested in, without expanding his discourse to the whole of Western Esotericism. Since this is also a major concern of this thesis, namely to define historically and theoretically the tradition from which Brakhage indirectly drew, Agamben’s essay was the best choice especially for its clarity, precision, and concision. Pound’s so-called “tradition” is in fact not completely the result of his imagination; on the contrary, it reworks some Neoplatonic and Gnostic themes that had survived in medieval culture and were later recovered and combined by the troubadours and the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo*. Many elements of Pound’s heterogeneous philosophy are genuine historical traditions, and it is here useful to briefly recapitulate Giorgio Agamben’s account of such a medieval synthesis. Through this historical perspective, a good deal of Brakhage’s vocabulary and views can appear less idiosyncratic, and a more precise meaning can be found in Brakhage’s claim to be part of a tradition of “artists of all kinds.”<sup>280</sup>

What in the mind of Pound was a secret tradition, an esoteric brotherhood of artists and philosophers, was, for the love poets of medieval Provence and Tuscany, an ancient and elaborate agglomeration of diverse disciplines pointing towards an understanding of the relationship between visible and invisible forces. Giorgio Agamben retraced this medieval *Weltanschauung* as an encounter between Aristotelian phantasmology and Stoic-Neoplatonic pneumatology.<sup>281</sup> The result was

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid..

<sup>281</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University

an harmonious synthesis of intersecting fields of knowledge. In some medieval poems, for instance, one can easily find notions of medicine, cosmogony, religion and physics, all sitting side by side. Agamben's investigation will here be summarised and simplified in accordance with the needs of this discourse.

In medieval psychology and physiology, the theory of sensation established that "sensible objects impress their forms on the senses", and thereafter this impression (phantasm) is "received by the phantasy, or imaginative virtue, which conserves it even in the absence of the object".<sup>282</sup> This idea was first attested by Aristotle, who intended this impression as "movement" or "passion produced by the sensation".<sup>283</sup> After entering the phantasy/imagination, the impression assumes a status different from sensation, and "it is not possible to identify it with operations that are always true, like science and intellection".<sup>284</sup> The name "phantasm" comes from *phantasia* (imagination), which, as Aristotle observed, is etymologically connected with light (*phaos*), because for the Greeks sight was the most important sense and light was its necessary element.<sup>285</sup> The phantasm, this sensual impression re-elaborated by the imagination, would also be fundamental for memory, which is "the possession of a phantasm as icon of what it is a phantasm of";<sup>286</sup> for cognitive processes (so far as being considered a "necessary condition of intellection");<sup>287</sup> in dreams; and in language.

To the circulation (reception, re-elaboration and re-transmission, in the case of art) of these impressions was coupled the very ancient doctrine of the "pneuma", which provided a sort of physiological ground for it. The pneuma, often identified in air-like elements such as breath, wind and spirit, was for Aristotle the cause of male fertility, a necessary element of life which is of an "astral nature".<sup>288</sup> According to this theory, the pneuma circulates into the body, transforming itself through a

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of Minnesota Press, 1993). Originally published in Italian as *Stanze: La Parola e il Fantasma nella Cultura Occidentale* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1977).

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Aristotle quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

particular circulatory system separated from the blood's circulation. For the pneuma, as in the case of blood, problems with the circulation were said to cause illness.<sup>289</sup>

From this medical theory, the Stoics created a cosmology and psychology centred around the pneuma. For them it was a fire, a vital principle, of which the stars are made and living beings are vivified in a “single pneumatic circulation [that] animates the intelligence, the voice, the sperm, and the five senses”.<sup>290</sup> The Neoplatonics interpreted the pneuma as a “vehicle (*ochema*) or subtle body that accompanies the soul during the course of its soteriological romance from the stars to the earth”.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, for the Neoplatonics the pneuma assumed some features which were later echoed by Pound as well as Brakhage's ideas of trance, Muses and of art as spiritual revelation:

During earthly life, the pneuma is the instrument of the imagination and, as such, it is the subject of dreams, of astral influences, and of the divine illuminations (in divination, when according to Iamblichus, “the ethereal and luminous vehicle circumfusing the soul is illuminated by divine light” and “the divine phantasms, moved by the will of the gods, seize our imagination”; and in ecstasy, which is explained by Iamblichus as the descent of a divine pneuma into the body).<sup>292</sup>

The Neoplatonics extended the notion of pneuma and prepared the ground for its medieval reception. For this reception, a decisive role was played by medicine, for which the spirit was the medium between soul and body, “participating in the nature of both” (and present in the body in three different forms in the liver, the heart and the brain), and in the three chambers of the brain producing imagination, memory and reason.<sup>293</sup> Thus, a “single pneumatic current”<sup>294</sup> would enact not only life in the body but in every one of the faculties, including the mental ones. This scientific explanation sealed all potential philosophical speculations into a coherent system

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-92.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

which was supposed to find its verification in reality.

Agamben's conclusion about this medieval *Weltanschauung* is here very useful in giving an overview of this system's various consequences, which, when considered altogether, he termed *pneumophantasmology*:

The synthesis that results is so characteristic that European culture in this period might justly be defined as a pneumophantasmology, within whose compass—which circumscribes at once a cosmology, a physiology, a psychology, and a soteriology—the breath that animates the universe, circulates in the arteries, and fertilizes the sperm is the same one that, in the brain and in the heart, receives and forms the phantasms of the things we see, imagine, dream, and love. Insofar as it is the subtle body of the soul, it is in addition the intermediary between the soul and matter, the divine and the human, and, as such, allows the explanations of all the influxes between corporeal and incorporeal, from magical fascination to astrological inclinations.<sup>295</sup>

The young Pound, predisposed to the influence of the occult-related disciplines he studied during his apprenticeship,<sup>296</sup> entered this medieval knowledge mainly through the poetry of Guido Cavalcanti, and especially his masterpiece *Donna mi prega*. Pound expressed his organic understanding of this tradition in an essay published in 1934 entitled 'Cavalcanti'.<sup>297</sup> In this essay, many elements of the medieval synthesis that Agamben described were reiterated by Pound in a system very close to the one just outlined. Pound, for instance, did not fail to recognise that in Cavalcanti's work "[t]here is plenty of pneumatism",<sup>298</sup> and he quoted as a paradigmatic example the sonnet *Per gli occhi fiere un spirito sottile*,<sup>299</sup> discussed as well, for the same reason, by Agamben.<sup>300</sup>

Eventually this whole tradition retraced by Agamben fell "into the half-light

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>296</sup> See Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*.

<sup>297</sup> Now collected in Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and with an introduction by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 149-200.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>300</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 104.

of esoteric circles”.<sup>301</sup> This was the result of antagonism from scholastic theology, which recognised only the medical value of the pneuma and thus confined the whole doctrine to the domain of medicine, separate from all the soteriological and cosmological elements that granted to the pneuma the role of “concrete and real mediator of the ‘ineffable union’ between soul and body.”<sup>302</sup> This is why Pound recovered these concepts not only through the reading of the poems, but also through the help of occult lore. And it is also the reason for Pound’s insistence that the followers of this tradition had suffered persecution, which he then felt had, in turn, necessitated the esoteric function of myths.

Even if Brakhage did not have the erudition of Pound, and a mainly intuitive historical awareness, he nevertheless included many key figures of Pound’s pantheon in his own, like Dante, Cavalcanti, Grosseteste, Erigena. Brakhage indirectly assimilated echoes of *pneumophantasmology* through Pound in the form of ideas about spirituality and art. It is possible to see such echoes in his otherwise puzzling positions about art as revelation, trance states, Muses, being an instrument visited by mysterious forces, or the divine as ineffable. Within such a perspective, these ideas become a personal version of a real philosophical tradition.

## 2.2 – Dante according to Brakhage

There is a film in Brakhage’s oeuvre that more than any other work, draws directly from the tradition outlined so far. It is one of Brakhage’s most important films, and in it his mystical ideas about spirituality and art are articulated on many levels. This film is the 1987 *The Dante Quartet*. Critical work on the film has been abundant, especially from two of the world’s most renowned Brakhage scholars, P. Adams Sitney and Bruce Elder. Comparisons with their analyses will show how the approach to Brakhage’s spiritual quest proposed here is valuable in making sense of a sometimes puzzling film like this. Finally, the film marks a particular divide within Brakhage’s life and artistic career: the long, belated end of his first marriage and the beginning of the relationship with his second wife. As is often the case with

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

Brakhage, profound changes in his personal life also intensely affected his artistic production and ideas. Particularly at the end of the 1980s, fresh energies poured into his art, driving the films of his last decade towards abstraction and a profound spirituality.

*The Dante Quartet* was completed in 1987, and it was inspired by the *Divina Commedia*. The film took seven years for its four parts to be completed, or 37 years if one includes Brakhage's study of the *Commedia*.<sup>303</sup> This work, alongside few others, such as the *Faust* series (1987-89) and the *Visions in Meditation* series (1989-90), is one of the most representative of the major changes Brakhage's life and art underwent between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. His marriage with Marilyn Jull in 1989 finally brought peace to his personal life after the long period of crisis at the end of his first marriage culminated in divorce in 1987 (the year he first met Marilyn). In his art there was a turn towards abstraction, fragmentation, and a renewed spirituality that would last throughout his remaining years. The 1980s, mainly marked by the crisis of his first marriage, foresaw and prepared for this renewal with an abundance of films with particularly negative and pessimistic content, even desperate in some cases. *Tortured Dust* (1984), *Night Music* (1986), *Confession* (1986), *Kindering* (1987), *I..Dreaming* (1988), *Rage Net* (1988), and the *Faust* series are all "rooted in the events and emotions of this period".<sup>304</sup>

*The Dante Quartet* somehow embodies this whole path from despair to renewal undergone by Brakhage during that period, with its *journey* from one pole to another. This differentiates the film from the other two important series of that period, *Faust* and *Visions in Meditation*.<sup>305</sup> *Faust* is darkly pessimistic (except for *Faust 4*), being a temporary (and final) return to his much-criticised styles of psychodrama and narration; it uses actors, and a voice-over by the artist, for only the

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<sup>303</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", p. 394.

<sup>304</sup> Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 140. See also, for the same point, Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 74; and Sitney, 'Brakhage's Faustian Psychodrama', in David E. James, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), pp. 153-168; p. 153.

<sup>305</sup> *The Dante Quartet* is not considered a series, although *Hell Spit Flexion* was separately released in 1983 and was eventually incorporated into *The Dante Quartet*.

second time in Brakhage's long career.<sup>306</sup> The *Faust* series is also one of Brakhage's very few films to feature a music soundtrack. P. Adams Sitney, analysing the different peculiarities of the *Faust* series, draws a parallel between these elements and another period in Brakhage's career in which these same elements coincided with an important turn in Brakhage's art and life—namely, the end of the 1950s, with the start of his first marriage and the departure from filmic psychodrama. Considering these personal and stylistic elements, Sitney comes to regard the *Faust* series as a sort of “exorcism”.<sup>307</sup> Brakhage's desire to abandon psychodrama had first been expressed in *Metaphors on Vision*, which collected texts from the years immediately precedent and subsequent to his first marriage.<sup>308</sup> But Sitney's word choice for “exorcism” is even more appropriate if we consider that a Faust project was “haunting” Brakhage at least since 1957.<sup>309</sup>

In contradistinction to the obscurity of the *Faust* series is the renewed joy of the *Visions in Meditation* series. I use the term “joy” because the audience clearly perceives the pleasure Brakhage took in filming these North American landscapes and editing them in a purely abstract and typically “experimental” way. The shooting was performed with his usual spasmodic movements, a signature feature since the beginning of the 1960s, and edited with his equally typical fast cutting, producing intensely rhythmic and fragmentary works that almost tend towards a haptic experience, especially through the use of many different film stocks and lenses. The series is vivid and fresh in the experience it offers to the audience, as well as “traditional” in the sense of the cinematic tradition established by the New American Cinema, with all its formal features as well as thematic ones (in this case, the North American landscape and its mystical and historical elements). I shall analyse in detail the first film of this series in chapter Four.

The year 1987, when he divorced his first wife Jane, completed *The Dante Quartet* and met Marilyn, is a sort of divide in Brakhage's life and career which

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<sup>306</sup> *The Stars Are Beautiful* (1974) was the only other film by Brakhage to utilise such elements. The film also contains ambient and lip-synced sound, something entirely unique within Brakhage's filmography.

<sup>307</sup> Sitney, ‘Brakhage's Faustian Psychodrama’, p. 163.

<sup>308</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>309</sup> See Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

opened his final period as an artist. Since his second marriage in 1989, he gradually stopped photographing with the camera and devoted his artistic activity to directly hand-painting on film strips. In particular, from 1993 to 1996, his films were exclusively hand-painted. This choice was the result of many factors. First of all Marilyn, prohibited him from photographing her or their two children.<sup>310</sup> This definitely closed the period of his signature family films. It is also interesting to notice that he began to regard autobiography as “not good for film”, and regretted the “demanding” routine of filming his children because of the “psychological imposition” on them and the dangerous distortions that their childhoods suffered.<sup>311</sup> The move to hand-painting on film stock was also dictated by financial reasons, since this solution was much cheaper than photographic film.<sup>312</sup> Finally, he elaborated a sort of theoretical dogma within which to frame his choice, namely, the imperative for films to be “about nothing at all”. This theoretical formulation must be put in perspective alongside the refusal of autobiography (“far too referential”).<sup>313</sup>

Such a utopian position was maintained for a brief period before being dropped. The prohibition against referentiality ended in 1996, just prior to an operation to remove his bladder, when he found himself near Boulder Creek with a new Bolex, cheaply bought, and suddenly started filming above and beneath the surface of the water.<sup>314</sup> His mental state was an intense influence upon his aesthetic decision, as he did not think that he would survive the surgery.<sup>315</sup> The film that resulted from this return to photography was *Commingled Containers* (1996), a profoundly spiritual meditation about human finitude, focussed around the juxtaposition of the stream’s surface as the “fussiness of our daily life”,<sup>316</sup> and the inner, underground dimension of the stream, where “something spiritual” lies.<sup>317</sup> This

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<sup>310</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 87; and in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, pp. 140-141.

<sup>311</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, pp. 140-143.

<sup>312</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 114.

<sup>313</sup> For this and the previous quote, see Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 140.

<sup>314</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 43 and pp. 114-115.

<sup>315</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>316</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>317</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 121.

spirituality was conveyed mainly through abstraction, both in photographed and hand-painted examples (or in the combination of the two techniques). Brakhage, from the time of *Commingled Containers* onwards, came to frequently express such spirituality through sensations and moods, as through the peaceful acceptance of the finitude of the human condition, or the dynamic and spiritual nature of reality revealed through it. This spirituality arrived at through sensations and moods was something very clear to Brakhage, and in the period of his final films he came to speak of “God” with the special meaning he attributed to this idea:

I don't know quite what *Commingled Containers* means. It is moving. I would think every work should have something of God in it, whatever one means by “God”, so that you can say you have a sense of the presence of the divine.<sup>318</sup>

This explanation is particularly valuable because of its clarity and precision. It can also be validly applied to many films made during his final years, attesting to the increasingly explicit spirituality in his art (in content, form, title and tone) during that period. *Christ Mass Sex Dance* (1991), *Agnus Dei Kinder Synapse* (1991), *Untitled (For Marilyn)* (1992), *Chartres Series* (1994), *Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* (1997), *The Cat of the Worm's Green Realm* (1997), *The Birds of Paradise* (1999), *The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels* (1999), *The Jesus Trilogy and Coda* (2001), *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (2002), *Resurrectus Est* (2002) and *Ascension* (2002) all fit within this category.<sup>319</sup> This increased spirituality was clearly marked by the state of constant fear that Brakhage lived in since 1996, a fear for the possible return of cancer<sup>320</sup> (which, indeed, would eventually occur). But the spiritual element that clearly blossomed during those years, and imposed itself as the main theme on many of his later films, had already been an underlying trend within his oeuvre.

*The Dante Quartet* was already an explicitly spiritual work, and, as with *Commingled Containers*, its abstraction was deeply connected with the artist's

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<sup>318</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>319</sup> Sitney makes a similar remark with a more limited list of films: see Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>320</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 94.

personal life. What is particularly interesting about *The Dante Quartet*, apart from its date of completion, is Brakhage's direct assessment of it as stemming from the tradition reworked by Pound. The specific literary reference of the title, as well as its peculiar and precise structure, help in identifying the cultural origins of Brakhage's ideas about spirituality. In this sense, apart from being one of the cornerstone works of Brakhage's filmography, *The Dante Quartet* is the perfect example to verify the presence of the philosophical influences discussed above. In fact *The Dante Quartet* takes the *Commedia* as a basic inspiration for re-staging a personal crisis and subsequently overcoming it (namely, the collapse of Brakhage's first marriage), conveying to the viewer a journey towards final illumination. The film expresses the will to conquer the crisis by concluding with a vision of an ultimate heaven.

The film has a four-part structure. The first part, *Hell Itself*, is a hypnagogic or closed-eye vision of the optic feedback from Brakhage's nerves as he experiences pain from the "collapse" of his "whole life".<sup>321</sup> It is important to point out that before the awareness of a way out, represented by the second part *Hell Spit Flexion*, which would eventually force the subject to pass through the metamorphosis of the third part, *purgation*, in order to become attuned to the divine; the first, hellish part is brighter than the heavenly one. But this is a false brightness, a dangerous and distracting one. In the film, in fact, the values of brightness and darkness are partially modified: *Hell Itself* is very bright, while *Hell Spit Flexion* and *Purgation* are darker with a heavier impasto. According to Elder, this is because the brightness of the first part "threatens to distract the soul from the quest for wisdom",<sup>322</sup> while the darkness is associated with "meditative concentration and spiritual focus"<sup>323</sup> in search for the final illumination. This positive view of purgatorial darkness is connected by Elder to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>324</sup> corroborating the possibility that Brakhage intended Neoplatonic echoes. In such a reading, the purgatorial darkness would figure as the *dromena* of Eleusis. But I believe it is possible to retrace this reversal directly to Pound's and Duncan's remarks about the *Commedia*. Pound in fact commented that "hell is the state of man dominated by his passions", while Duncan

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<sup>321</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 149.

<sup>322</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", p. 429.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

described how Dante was “tempted to linger” in the “alluring and side-tracking beauty [...] of sound and image”, defining the artistic result as “art for art's sake”.<sup>325</sup> Brakhage was then applying occult-derived ideas common to his mentors.

*Hell Spit Flexion* envisions the possibility of a “way out”.<sup>326</sup> In fact, this part is framed inside a screen upon a black background, giving the idea of a distant passage out from the black place where the viewer dwells. *Hell Spit Flexion* was defined by Brakhage as “the most rhythmically exact of all my work [...] inspired by memories of an old man coughing in the night of a thin-walled ancient hotel”,<sup>327</sup> underlining the connection between the rhythm and the act of coughing up, getting rid of the pain of that moment. The hotel memory he refers to may have been a reminiscence of the hotel rooms he lived in during the separation from his first wife. Bruce Elder relates *Hell Spit Flexion* to “the transitional zone of Ante-Purgatory”<sup>328</sup> corresponding to cantos I-IX of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, following Robert Duncan’s discussion of this “sub-section” in a 1965 lecture on the *Commedia*.<sup>329</sup> The Ante-Purgatory section takes place at the base of the Purgatory mountain where souls are waiting to access the gate Dante reaches in canto IX, beyond which lies real purgation. The third part, *Purgation*, represents the transformation prior to heaven, or the metamorphosis before reaching the heavenly state of mind. The central theme of this part, according to Sitney, is the “suggestion of the passage of light”<sup>330</sup> as a sign of new beginning, formally echoed by the renewal of live-action material (some passages are painted and scratched over Billy Wilder’s *Irma la Douche*).<sup>331</sup> *Purgation* suggests also the passage of time, with its “nearly twenty fades to blackness”<sup>332</sup> and

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<sup>325</sup> See Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 129; and Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, pp. 150-151, and p. 159.

<sup>326</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 149.

<sup>327</sup> Brakhage quoted in Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 252.

<sup>328</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 395.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 437 note 3. The lecture Elder is referring to is Robert Duncan, ‘The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: Lecture given October 27, 1965, at the Dominican College of San Raphael’ (San Francisco: Open Space, 1965).

<sup>330</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 253.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

its moments of “holding a frame still”.<sup>333</sup> After this comes the fourth part’s celebration of a heavenly state of mind: *existence is song*. The title is taken from a sonnet by Rainer Maria Rilke that posits song as the primal element underlying all existence. The concept of song at this point stands very close to what Brakhage defined in the 1970s as “light”,<sup>334</sup> and a connection between Dante and Rilke was in his mind at least since 1963.<sup>335</sup>

The general scheme of *The Dante Quartet*, a descent through crisis and out into illumination, echoes the rites of Eleusis, which Tryphonopoulos identifies as the structuring principle behind *The Cantos*, or at least the principle that Pound kept in mind while initially building the poem (prior to 1945). While this scheme does not completely account for the whole of *The Cantos*, it nevertheless “remains the only embracing structural principle possessed by this enormous poem.”<sup>336</sup> The scheme that Tryphonopoulos identifies in the poem is the tripartite ritual of palingenesis employed in the Eleusis mysteries. Palingenesis is an ancient Greek term defined as the “motif of transformation” and renewal in occult thought, meaning “literally ‘backward birth’ or rebirth; a death to the old life and rebirth to a new, higher one.”<sup>337</sup> The occult circle in Kensington, where Pound carried out most of his occult apprenticeship, believed that wisdom is achieved “through a palingenetic experience.”<sup>338</sup>

The Eleusis ritual was an initiation for presenting the candidate (*mystes*) with the mystery. The mystery celebrated was that of Persephone, consisting of “a ritual descent to the underworld and a subsequent return to the world of the living”.<sup>339</sup> The first stage was the *katabasis*, the descent, followed by the *dromena*, a moment of

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<sup>333</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 429.

<sup>334</sup> “All things that are, are light”. (Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 184) This quotation, attributed to Scotus Erigena by Pound (though the attribution is, according to Elder, questionable; see Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 484 note 142), was one of the central mottoes of Pound’s *Cantos*, and was also the inspiration for Brakhage’s *The Text of Light* (1974).

<sup>335</sup> See Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

<sup>336</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 125.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

confusion in the darkness preceding the final stage, the *epopteia* or illumination.<sup>340</sup> During the illumination the divine was revealed to the candidate who entered into contact with it, becoming a god himself or discovering his latent god-like nature.<sup>341</sup> This structuring principle is also that most clearly presented in Dante's *Commedia*, according to an occult interpretation. The different moments of the original procession are not necessarily literally mimicked, but they are intended as movements in the awareness of the subject, in his sensibility or state of mind. In the description of *The Dante Quartet's* abstraction one has to resort to a parallel with states of mind in order to give an idea of the film's effect on the viewer; this being often the case with Brakhage's hand-painted abstraction. The emotional suggestiveness of the imagery was sought for by Brakhage and it is a further point derived from Pound. Pound in fact pointed out that Dante intended Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise as states of mind and not places, and this opinion was further sustained by his comment that such a view is "part of the esoteric and mystic dogma."<sup>342</sup> Brakhage then, also in this case, was adopting occult-derived ideas.

The idea of song in *existence is song* expresses an all-encompassing spiritual principle. About song, Brakhage stated:

[...] I believe in song. [...] I believe in the beauty of the singing whale; I am moved deeply at the whole range of song that wolf makes when the moon appears, or neighborhood dogs make—that they make their song, and this is the wonder of life on earth, an I in great humility wish to join this.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>341</sup> "Epotheia means the state of 'having seen' and is a general term for revelation. It is exoterically represented by *metamorphosis* or theophany. Metamorphosis exoterically expresses the moment of sudden change, the moment of revelation, the *epopteia*." (Ibid., p. 104)

<sup>342</sup> Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 128.

<sup>343</sup> Brakhage quoted by Elder in 'Brakhage: Poesis', in David E. James, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), pp. 88-106; p. 93. The example of whales and wolves was already employed by Brakhage at least since 1982, but this time with the concept of song substituted by art in general as a privileged form of communication with creation: see Brakhage, *The Test of Time*, [n.p.]; a series of radio programs Brakhage hosted in 1982, now transcribed by Brett Kashmere and available at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/TestofTime.html> (accessed 27 August 2015).

The heavenly state finally achieved at the end of *The Dante Quartet* is intended as one of communion with the rest of existence, of the overcoming of personal pains and of awakening of the self to the wonders of creation. This celebratory spirituality is the one that will indelibly mark Brakhage's final years. In the examples chosen for defining song Brakhage seems to have been influenced by Robert Duncan's *Dante Études*, wherein Duncan, seeking "intentions in Dante's intentions",<sup>344</sup> mentioned the "choral soundings" of "whales and wolves".<sup>345</sup> Everything spoke to him,<sup>346</sup> providing an answer for the poet's "ultimate need".<sup>347</sup>

As a unifying principle and as the specific activity of the heavenly, illuminated state, song overcomes the arbitrary limits of rationality. For instance, such a state resolves, in mystical terms, what Brakhage defined as "Dualities" by overcoming the "complex nature of Being".<sup>348</sup> Such a nature remains complex but at the same time allows a glimpse of being at one with the cosmos. Thus, in *existence is song*, the oppositional forces are at peace—they *sing* together, so to speak. This can be intuited by the presence of the only two clearly recognizable images in *The Dante Quartet*: the brief shots of an erupting volcano and of the moon's craters. Even if in other moments of the film it is possible to glimpse transparent images beneath the layers of paint, due to the fact that Brakhage often painted over used film, it is only in these two cases that unaltered images are meant to be part of the work. For this reason, they often appear to the viewer as quite puzzling. Sitney, for instance, explains them by speculating that the artist accesses and conveys with this work the "oceanic undifferentiated structure of the unconscious in which multiple perspectives and contradictory values coexist timelessly".<sup>349</sup> This could be partly in line with the beliefs that Brakhage discussed, except that Sitney then pushes further towards a Freudian interpretation by evoking the psychoanalytic theory of artistic creativity of Anton Ehrenzweig.<sup>350</sup> The abstraction reached by Brakhage through hand-painting

<sup>344</sup> Robert Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, ed. and with an introduction by Peter Quartermain (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2014), p. 534.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.

<sup>348</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 194.

<sup>349</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 255.

<sup>350</sup> The two studies Sitney employs for this interpretation are Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psycho-*

would, according to Sitney, “recontact both the oral and anal levels of [...] fantasy formation”,<sup>351</sup> with the oral represented by the inspiration and the anal represented by the projection/production in the artistic process.<sup>352</sup> This would explain the brief images of the erupting volcano (anal phase) and of the moon’s craters (oral phase), which could work as an unconscious explanation of such a process.

But it is possible to frame the coexistence of opposites within a different context: namely, in the tradition of Pound’s undivided light or Duncan’s variety of the one. While the coexistence of opposites in the work is clear to all of its critics, about psychological speculations one can only be sure of Brakhage’s desire for a renewal in his life, as Sitney himself points out.<sup>353</sup> An harmonious coexistence may only be possible on an intuitive and mystical level, because from the rational point of view there is no way to avoid the existence of conflicting forces in nature. But the work of art can harmonise what the rational mind separates.

In Gnostic terms, the final aim of revelation is not only a spiritual renewal or rebirth of the soul (*palingenesis*), but also communion with the divine, becoming one with divinity. The revelation is a mystery, and the celebration and contemplation of the “unity of the mystery”<sup>354</sup> becomes a function of spiritual art. As with Pound’s intentions for *The Cantos*, the audience of such work is meant to be driven towards the “great healing”, intended “to make whole”, “to join the solar and lunar parts of mankind.”<sup>355</sup> This would overcome the opposites that the mind creates, revealing “the kinship of all things.”<sup>356</sup> The ecstatic joy of such a revelation is the one carried on by

*analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953); and Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

<sup>351</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>353</sup> He makes this point about the formal basis of *The Dante Quartet* (the painting over frames of Billy Wilder’s *Irma la Douce*, see *ibid.*, pp. 253-254), and on a more general level for all the four films of the *Visions in Meditation* series (see *ibid.*, p. 347).

<sup>354</sup> Pound quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 2.

<sup>355</sup> Colin McDowell and Timothy Materer, ‘Gyre and Vortex: W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound’, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 31, Number 4 (Winter 1985), pp. 343-367; p. 358. See also Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 178 and p. 187 note 27.

<sup>356</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 124.

Pound's mystical tradition, "the tradition of the undivided light."<sup>357</sup>

Robert Duncan not only inspired Brakhage's metaphor of singing along with creation, but also followed Pound in his task of reaching unity through multiplicity and fragmentation, revealing unity within the multiplicity. According to Duncan, in the interplay of opposite, contrasting or complementary elements, dualities can be overcome, and the work of art (in Duncan's particular case, the poem) is the privileged place for such a process:

Poems then are immediate presentations of the intention of the whole [...] the great poem of all poems, a unity, and in any two of its elements or parts appearing as a duality or a mating, each part in every other having, if we could see it, its condition—its opposite or contender and its satisfaction or twin. Yet in the composite of all members we see no duality but the variety of the one.<sup>358</sup>

This passage is used by Elder to explain how opposites are synthesised in Dante's *Purgatorio* and in Brakhage's *purgation* (though this is better expressed in *existence is song*), and how both Dante and Brakhage believed that "all the momentous dualities and minute conflicts in life are really only passages in a vast cosmopoetic process tending towards unity."<sup>359</sup> Elder, then, like Sitney, does not fail to recognise in *The Dante Quartet* the urge to shape a unity out of contrasting elements. But again, as with Sitney, the occult, mystical content of the artistic traditions to which Brakhage declared allegiance is not considered when investigating the origins or the meaning of Brakhage's ideas. Even if Brakhage, for instance, once declared that "Freud's Unconscious [...] joins opposites as **ONE**, at once, in Timeless fusion",<sup>360</sup> it is still puzzling to interpret a volcano and the moon's craters as anal and oral manifestations. Brakhage often intended the term "unconscious" literally, as something that cannot be known, and hence as a concept closer to the mystical features of occult revelation than to a psychoanalytic category.

I shall now open a short parenthesis about the use of Freudian categories in

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<sup>357</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, p. 277.

<sup>358</sup> Robert Duncan, *The Collected Early Poems and Plays*, ed. and with an introduction by Peter Quartermain (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>359</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", p. 430.

<sup>360</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 202; also quoted in Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 331.

approaching Brakhage's work, and the limits of such an approach. The use of such categories is particularly common in the works of P. Adams Sitney. In the preface to the first edition of *Visionary Film*, Sitney describes his task as that of tracing the "heritage of Romanticism", which for his purposes is a mix of North American romantic poetry and Abstract Expressionism.<sup>361</sup> He claims to find such an approach "more useful and more generative of a unified view of these films and film-makers than the Freudian hermeneutics and sexual analyses".<sup>362</sup> Nevertheless, he employs Freudian categories or theories in many of his discussions of Brakhage. For instance, Sitney claims that between 1952 and 1958, Freud held a unique and special importance for Brakhage more than for "any other American avant-garde filmmaker".<sup>363</sup> Stemming from this period is Brakhage's film *Anticipation of the Night*, of which Sitney provides a Freudian reading.<sup>364</sup> Sitney goes on to declare Brakhage a "Freudian";<sup>365</sup> to frame *The Dante Quartet* in Freudian terms;<sup>366</sup> to discuss Brakhage's idea of god arrived at through antithesis alongside Freud's 'The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words';<sup>367</sup> and to somehow read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* into Brakhage's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* in his *Visions in Meditation #3: Plato's Cave*.<sup>368</sup> Sitney also undertakes a sort of psychoanalytic reading of Brakhage's lecture 'Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film' by focussing on Brakhage's reiterated use of the figure of apophysis and of fiction, which Sitney believes reflects his "anxiety" of wanting to let the audience know something he cannot tell.<sup>369</sup> In all these cases, Freudian categories function as rhetorical devices that are formally applied to the films. It is true that Brakhage did read Freud and that he mentioned him sometimes, but the symbols adopted from psychoanalysis in his films, when present, amount to a very few, isolated cases. When applied to Brakhage's work, these Freudian labels tend to normalise strange or

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<sup>361</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. xiii.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., pp. 333-334.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., pp. 341-342 and p. 344.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

complex moments, like the volcano and the moon's craters in *existence is song*. But such normalisation forces much of the films' uniqueness into external categories rather than finding ideas within the films that might elaborate or fit within Brakhage's history and his own declared *Weltanschauung*.

It may be instructive to consider a further example of how interpretations that eschew of the occult genealogy of Brakhage's artistic ideas can lead to wilful and rather odd conclusions. In *The Dante Quartet*, according to Elder, the hellish part of the film represents the fear of loneliness, of being distracted by the delusory light of a solipsistic art, while the heavenly part represents a state of joyous communion. Elder notes that the fear of loneliness is opposed to the identification of the self with a "larger matrix".<sup>370</sup> One may see this matrix as creation itself, with its immanent revelation. But Elder concludes that the mystical journey out of the "false (solipsistic) imagining",<sup>371</sup> instead of providing a passage towards communion with creation and a tension to goad the spiritual revelation, uncovers a "sense of reality as ephemeral", a desire for identification with a "transcendent Nothing".<sup>372</sup> For Elder, "[t]rue singing results [...] from allowing the self to dissolve in a greater nothingness."<sup>373</sup> In order to support such a conclusion, he quotes part of Brakhage's definition of the experience of "God-as-stillness" in the 1995 article 'Having Declared a Belief in God':

[there is] the ultimate sense of deity as all-pervasive and encompassing peace and protectiveness; but this, too, is a feeling of movement, of being so much at-

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<sup>370</sup> Elder, 'Brakhage: Poesis', pp. 88-89.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., p. 92. Elder infers this because he believes the first part is the only part of the film in which no imagery can be seen behind the layer of painting ("*Hell Itself* is the only section that lacks photographic imagery." (p. 92)). This is not actually true: at the very beginning of *Hell Itself* one can glimpse quite clearly the line of trees of a landscape, and on the right, a standing human figure. What is curious is that Sitney makes the same declaration, using the same expression ("Only *Hell Itself* lacks photographic imagery." Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 251). Nonetheless, this detail does not change the correctness of Elder's comment on the fear of solipsism, since it may also be inferred from the Brakhage's contemporaneous personal crisis as well as from his statements about *Hell Itself*.

<sup>372</sup> Elder, 'Brakhage: Poesis', p. 95.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

one with an intricacy of cosmic rhythms, with felt radiant particle/waves (as Niels Bohr would have it) in cancellation of chaos and stasis at one once forever.<sup>374</sup>

In this statement, Brakhage defined the sense of the divine as both stillness and movement, and at no point does he state a desire to “dissolve in a greater nothingness.” Furthermore, the mention of the Danish physicist is used by Elder to support his theory, because his name “stands for the idea that reality is coreless”.<sup>375</sup> In the context of Pound’s “great healing” and Duncan’s “variety of the one”, this passage appears as a fairly straightforward remark on the fragmented, antithetical, but harmonious hidden nature of reality. In fact, Niels Bohr’s coat-of-arms carried the inscription “*Contraria Sum Complementa*” (opposites are complementary),<sup>376</sup> the essence of the principle of complementarity which he introduced in Physics.

Elder’s drastic conclusion may have been encouraged by some of the statements Brakhage had made during the early 1990s, when he was pursuing the utopian goal of a cinema about nothing—as, for instance, when he described his experience of the Rothko Chapel as “an experience of *nothing*, and nothing exists”.<sup>377</sup> Such positions and ideas were difficult to apply to films he made at the time, but became particularly incoherent in light of his later developments. For this reason, probing deeper the origins of his cultural background may help to balance and put into perspective some of the more peculiar features of his films, as well as his most temperamental or ephemeral statements.

I shall conclude this chapter with a discussion of the critical work done by Elder on *The Dante Quartet* in particular, and on Brakhage’s art in general. In 2005 Elder published an extended essay on *The Dante Quartet* and the relationship between Brakhage and Dante.<sup>378</sup> This essay explicitly discusses Brakhage’s ideas in

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<sup>374</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 138. Partly quoted in Elder, ‘Brakhage: Poesis’, p. 95.

<sup>375</sup> Elder, ‘Brakhage: Poesis’, p. 96.

<sup>376</sup> See its reproduction in Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Flamingo, 1982), p. 174. The book was originally published in 1976.

<sup>377</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 162.

<sup>378</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”.

relation to medieval thought and contains many interesting examples of overlapping concerns. But what is interesting and singular about the essay is that none of the occult and spiritual elements at the root of Brakhage's cultural heritage are ever discussed. For this reason, Elder comes close to many relevant points regarding Brakhage's aesthetic, but without ever reaching conclusions that are justified in the context of Brakhage's own actual statements. In light of Elder's work, the occult philosophical beliefs subscribed to by Pound, and later highlighted by Tryphonopoulos and Surette, as well as the medieval doctrines present in Dante, as summarised by Agamben, appear all the more crucial to the understanding of Brakhage's personal belief in art as a primarily spiritual activity.

Elder concludes that the main affinity between Brakhage and Dante is in their beliefs that the ultimate function of a work of art is "to impart *energeia*";<sup>379</sup> or to either "directly through philosophical discussion or indirectly through poetic example", to consider the poem, and by extension the work of art, "as both a transformer and a transmitter of energy."<sup>380</sup> This conclusion is remarkably similar to Charles Olson's technical definition of a poem as "energy transferred from where the poet got it [...] all the way over to, the reader."<sup>381</sup> Elder, in fact, quotes this crucial statement in his essay,<sup>382</sup> and recognises the philosophical origin of Olson's statement to be Alfred North Whitehead, who, according to Elder, "has instructed us" to recognise change as reality and thus not to privilege "the permanent over the impermanent."<sup>383</sup> If this is actually an accurate summation of Brakhage's aesthetic, neither Duncan nor Dante are necessary for a critic interested in tracing the provenance of this idea, since Olson's essay in which this definition was given ('Projective Verse') has been one of the most well-known and influential within the North American tradition.<sup>384</sup>

What is clear from Brakhage's statements and the allusions in the titles of his films is that the transfer of energy was not his primary concern in the creation of his

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., p. 419.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>381</sup> Olson, *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>382</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", pp. 420-421.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p. 420.

<sup>384</sup> See Olson, *Collected Prose*, pp. 239-249.

films. Likewise, to reduce Dante's own intent in writing the *Divina Commedia* to the transfer of energy is to oversimplify the poet to the point of misreading. Given Brakhage's statements about his trance states and the Muses, as well as the inspiration he explicitly drew in the past from the works of Pound and Duncan, it would not be much of a stretch to speculate that Dante is relevant to Brakhage in part as a central figure of Pound's and Duncan's occult tradition. What this tradition offers to Brakhage is not so much, or not only, a series of operative prescriptions, but an outline of the belief in art as the place for spiritual revelation and the ineffable communion with the divine. To reduce Brakhage's aesthetic to what Elder calls Olson's "methodological" poetics<sup>385</sup> would be to completely overlook the historical origins of Brakhage's spiritual beliefs, as well as his understanding of the mystical and occult functions of art, an understanding shared with Pound and Duncan and entirely absent in Olson. Given Brakhage's constant insistence on the importance of spirituality, rather than any methodological prescriptions, in his art, it's fair to assume that for Brakhage the meaning of the art practice, its *why*, was of greater and more immediate concern than the technical methodology of the practice, its *how*.

The key to Elder's conclusion is the same concept of energy that Olson employed. Elder gives a more sophisticated background to the concept by considering it in relation to Aristotle's definitions of *dynamis* ("the unrealized potential to be a certain thing or to act in a certain way"), *energeia* ("either the full actualization of that potentiality or the movement towards that actualization"), and *entelecheia* ("the state of having reached the end of a process").<sup>386</sup> Although the concept of *energeia*, which Elder employs as an umbrella term, resembles the idea of the *pneuma*, it is used in a more scientific and modern sense, even when Elder, in one passage, recognises its hybrid status as a "spiritual principle" not "separable from the body".<sup>387</sup> The umbrella concept of *energeia* is used to move the discourse towards a scientific/philosophical doctrine of change typical of Olson and Whitehead's process philosophy, previously also featured in Elder's 1998 monograph on Brakhage. At the same time, the concept of *energeia* becomes more literal in Elder's attempt to define exactly what the work of art *actually* transmits from one subject to the other. This

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<sup>385</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", p. 421.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p. 409.

overlooks the mystery within which the arts exist, according to Brakhage, as well as the ineffable content of the revelations he claimed to experience. Furthermore, the substitution of the *pneuma* by the functions of energy discards not only a necessary cultural background but also its connections with the movements of the phantasm, and thus the possibility of the creative force providing a spiritual explanation of the relationship between human and divine, or at least an echo of such a synthesis. *Energeia* for Elder is, in fact, confined to only providing fuel for the soul.<sup>388</sup>

Elder recognises the relevance of imagination in the process of thinking as a mediating state “between sensation and intellection”, but only in the terms of the philosophy of Aristotle.<sup>389</sup> He extends his concept of *energeia* into an all-inclusive principle fuelling also the imagination, in order to identify the imagination with active representations, and eventually to equate these representations with thinking itself. *Energeia* is then considered, much as imagination is for Aristotle, as necessary for thought.<sup>390</sup> And since *energeia* is the movement of potentiality towards what it is supposed to become, what it is meant to be, again this process assumes the character of a scientific explanation of how all things become what they are supposed to be.

In contrast, the final aim of the synthesis present in medieval love poetry was to elevate the subject in the direction of the divine as well as to reveal how the subject has something of the divine in its own nature. For this reason, the synthesis of psychology, medicine, theology, cosmogony, and other fields, re-evaluated the role of the imagination, and this re-evaluation reached its maturity through commentaries *on* Aristotle. Elder confuses the phantasm of Aristotle with phantasy in the common sense of “imagination”. The phantasm is an impression for enabling many faculties which, according to Aristotle, include imagination, memory, dreams and language.<sup>391</sup> So, indeed, Aristotle maintains that “man can understand nothing without phantasms”, not because they constitute whims or fancies but because they are sensual impressions re-elaborated by the mind.<sup>392</sup>

Among the differences Elder points out between Brakhage and Dante the

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., p. 441 note 37.

<sup>391</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

central one, defined as an “anomaly” from which all other anomalies derive, is the “withdrawal into pure subjectivity”.<sup>393</sup> The work of art for Brakhage, or for Duncan, would then, according to Elder, tend naturally towards a “solipsistic idealism” resulting in “a purely ideal construct of their own subjectivity.”<sup>394</sup> This for Elder is not only in contrast with Dante’s idea of art, but it is also clearly something negative for any work of art. The opulent Latin terminology that Elder employs, such as “*ingressus mentis*” for the inwardness of Brakhage and Duncan, which is set in opposition to “*regressus mentis*”, the outwardness of Dante,<sup>395</sup> does not hide his preference for the parts of the *Commedia* that deal with philosophical and theological speculations, and in particular with the “passages of scholastic discourse on many disputed questions.”<sup>396</sup> The real and primary nature of the *Divina Commedia* is, for Elder, its status as a “compendious work”, an “anthology of poetic forms and philosophical ideas”, the “encyclopedic character” of which would have been the primal inspiration for Pound in composing his own “poetic compendium”: *The Cantos*.<sup>397</sup> With these two works as predecessors and inspirations, Elder starts his own “compendious work”:

Following Pound, I was motivated by Dante’s universalizing vision to undertake *The Book of All the Dead*. Like Pound’s *Cantos*, my film anthology can be “read” as a meditation on the multiple worlds of discourse contained within the *Commedia*; as a modernization of its summalike survey of diverse modes of thought and means of knowing; and more concretely, as a projection of its dazzlingly complex homage to poets of earlier ages rendered through imitations of their styles (which I read as embodiments of their way of thinking).<sup>398</sup>

*The Book of All the Dead* (1978-1996) is a cycle, roughly 42 hours long, of all the films made by Elder between the end of the 1970s and the mid-1990s. The work can certainly be “read” as a book, since it is a vast “assemblage of fragments,

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<sup>393</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 417.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., p. 417.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

intertexts, and wide-ranging appropriations” that, because of its “erudition”, indeed threatens “to exhaust a dedicated viewer”.<sup>399</sup> The detailed description Elder gives of this impossible “epic of total redaction”,<sup>400</sup> and the fact that he aligns his project with the *Commedia* and of *The Cantos*, betrays the ultimate dependency of his critical work upon his own preferences and inclinations, instead of pursuing with an open investigative attitude the personal aesthetics of Brakhage, or for that matter Pound and Duncan. The anomaly of such a situation, which reveals more about the author of the essay than of the subjects of it, is again outlined by Elder himself when he rightly points out how this “encyclopedic impulse” is “antithetical” to “Brakhage’s thought and vision.”<sup>401</sup>

The point about Brakhage’s and Duncan’s subjectivity is nevertheless unclear, since in another passage Elder summarises the ultimate “purpose of a poem” for Dante as “the direct communication of inwardness”—the very tendency he sees, and faults, in Brakhage.<sup>402</sup> So in this case Brakhage’s “*ingressus mentis*” applies to Dante as well. Furthermore, the grand “anomaly” of subjectivity that Elder detects in Brakhage and Duncan would make perfect sense if seen against the cultural background of the medieval love poetry as recovered by Pound. But the inspiration that Brakhage and Duncan found in Dante’s work is dismissed as a failure from the start due to the opposition of their *ingressus mentis* with Dante’s *regressus mentis*:

In attempting to recreate Dante’s Book of the Universe, Duncan and Brakhage end up producing a purely ideal construct of their own subjectivity. The result for both is a radically subjective oeuvre celebrating the triumph of their own imaginations. The intense inwardness of their aesthetic faith helps to explain Brakhage’s conflicted response to the common assumption that cinema is essentially a photographic medium. He finds that his experience of things hardly accords with their outward appearance, of which merely the illuminated

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<sup>399</sup> Bart Testa, ‘Dante and Cinema: Film across a Chasm’, in James Miller, ed., *Dante & The Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression* (Waterloo, CA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 367-393; p. 382.

<sup>400</sup> Testa, ‘Dante and Cinema: Film across a Chasm’, p. 383.

<sup>401</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 399.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

surfaces are captured by photography.<sup>403</sup>

Apart from the fact that from this contention a reader is meant to logically conclude that a more apt attempt in recreating Dante's "Book of the Universe" would be Elder's own *The Book of All the Dead*, it is precisely in the celebration of subjectivity that Brakhage's and Duncan's attempts come close to the core intent of Dante's art. In this celebration, going against Aquinas but following Averroes, the phantasm which produces the imagination through the sensible impression of the love process is the "copula" of "the *individual* and the unique possible intellect",<sup>404</sup> and through it the phantasm is also the connection at the "vertex of the individual soul" between "individual and universal, corporeal and incorporeal",<sup>405</sup> making the subject "suddenly conscious of the reality of the *nous*, of mind, *apart from any man's individual mind*".<sup>406</sup> That is to say, according to the philosophical tradition that Pound revived, through subjectivity the active intellect, the divine, the eternal state of mind can be revealed. And it is possible to stretch the argument to interpret in this new light Brakhage's paradoxical statement that the truer he is to his "own particularities of being" (in this case, his individual mind and how it "copulates" with the active intellect), the more he becomes "clear to everyone else" (through the experience of the active intellect).<sup>407</sup> In fact, Elder forgets Pound's lesson regarding the *Divina Commedia* as first of all the presentation of a series of "states" of the author.<sup>408</sup> And this, in turn, echoes Pound's definition of gods as eternal states of mind. Even if others recognise their own experiences within these states, they nevertheless derive from the personal spiritual experience of the author, from his "direct communication of inwardness."

In Elder's insistence on the primacy of the subjective imagination to Brakhage's and Duncan's work, there is always the lingering possibility that Elder

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>404</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 83. Emphasis mine.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>406</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 44; quoted also in Ronald Bush, 'La Filosofica Famiglia: Cavalcanti, Avicenna, and the "Form" of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*', in *Textual Practice*, Volume 24, Issue 4 (2010), pp. 669-705; p. 671. Emphasis mine.

<sup>407</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 47.

<sup>408</sup> See Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 128.

conceives imagination in common terms, as the simple invention of phantasies, reveries and whims. This possibility overlooks Pound's specific insistence on the reality of the spiritual experiences which the artist attempts to transmit and to elicit in the recipient through art, which he particularly emphasised in relation to the *Commedia*.<sup>409</sup> Brakhage likewise insisted on the physiological origin of his films, a physiology that he considered to be the physical reflection of movements of the spirit. Elder's possible demotion of Brakhage's and Duncan's spiritual experiences to the common imagination also aligns Elder with Sitney against the reality of these experiences. Such an interpretation ignores Brakhage's direct statements in opposition to it, as, for instance, when he noted that Sitney "and many others are still trying" to see him "as an imaginative film maker, as an inventor of fantasies or metaphors",<sup>410</sup> since they need "to keep the outside and the inside separate".<sup>411</sup> This intuition of Brakhage is confirmed when, in a note, Elder lists another "fundamental reason" marking a difference between *The Dante Quartet* and *The Book of All the Dead*, as well as a difference between his artistic ideas and those of Brakhage: namely, while for Brakhage it is possible to directly transmit the *energeia* to the receiver through rhythmic techniques, for Elder, T.S. Eliot and Dante (Elder suspects) *energeia* can only be *indirectly* elicited in the receiver through images and/or words as media.<sup>412</sup> As Elder summarises in another passage, what the poet can achieve exclusively "through the mediation of allegorical words and symbolic images", Brakhage can achieve "without detouring through the products of *energeia*".<sup>413</sup> If the medieval love poetry of Dante is used to put these elements into perspective, it might become clear that the breathing and hearing (in the sense of the uttered poem and the heard words), as well as the seeing (in the sense of the viewer of a work of art), can be "an influence from pneuma to pneuma".<sup>414</sup> Here it is possible to find the root of Brakhage's idea of a direct effect stemming from the work of art. The mind and the world, the internal and the external, the visible and the

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<sup>409</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>410</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 188.

<sup>411</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 93.

<sup>412</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", pp. 443-444 note 57.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>414</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 105.

invisible are indeed kept separated in Elder's and Sitney's readings. On the contrary, Brakhage's art, Pound's work, Duncan's poetry, and the *pneumo-phantasmology* described by Agamben, were attempts to overcome these divisions.<sup>415</sup>

In this chapter I have given the coherence of a quasi-system to some odd spiritual beliefs held by Brakhage in relation to art. This by retracing the historical origins of such ideas and outlining the more theoretical and general points sustaining this system. In the next chapter I shall discuss other aspects concerning Brakhage's spiritual imperative orbiting around how the corporeality of the world was considered as an integral part of his spiritual quest. This encounter constitutes a mutual dependency of spirit and matter, in a perspective that finds in the body, in sex, in science, and in somatic rhythms, further confirmations, and occasions of articulation, of Brakhage's spiritual quest.

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<sup>415</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 108.

### 3 – THE CORPOREALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE

The spiritual imperative that Brakhage derived from Pound is not separated from the physical world even if its ultimate aim is spiritual revelation. On the contrary, the physical world becomes a fundamental passage in the process towards revelation. Many stances of Brakhage in relation to the corporeality of the world were in fact affected by, or came to be functional to, his occult-derived spiritual quest. In this chapter, I shall discuss some aspects of the materiality and corporeality in Brakhage, such as science, sex, the body, and rhythm as a sensory device, within the perspective of his spiritual ideas, highlighting how the former were influenced by the latter, and how then the former became also the places, vessels, and confirmations of spiritual manifestations. The body, for instance, played a crucial role in Brakhage's art, from his filming and hand-painting techniques, to the rapid movements of his eyes imitated by the camera, to the subjects of many of his films—but what has not yet discussed is his allegiance to a spiritual view of reality that relies heavily upon the materiality of the world. The same situation is that of how *pneumophantasmology* was rooted in the medical theory of the pneuma. Within that synthesis, the body was not only the instrument of spiritual revelation, but it became also its place, and an integral part of the process. Similarly, in Brakhage, many body-related phenomena, such as entoptic and peripheral visual phenomena, or his moving visual thinking, were not only considered in order to explore and document our perception, but also, and this is the aspect relevant for this dissertation, as “doors” to, and empirical proofs of, the ineffable and divine nature of the world. This is an important and not yet investigated feature of Brakhage's far-reaching spiritual quest: the fact that the physical world becomes not only a functional part of spirituality, but is also necessary for it.

The chapter starts with outlining the stance of Pound's tradition towards the physical world and science as the background to Brakhage's conception of such matters. Brakhage's own stances will be then analysed with a special attention to their theoretical origins and implications, ranging from science, sex, the body, and rhythm. Their debts to the occult tradition reworked by Pound will be central. The

discussion about the value of sex will be coupled with a parenthesis about love, which even if it is not a strictly “material” phenomenon, it is nonetheless deeply connected with sex and with the underlying idea that our world corresponds and is conjoined with the cosmic and divine ones. After this part, and before discussing the topics of the body and of rhythm, a long section will analyse in detail some films in order to illustrate how actually Brakhage articulated such positions in particularly meaningful ways.

As Agamben outlined, in *pneumophantasmology* the matter of the world was deeply intertwined with spiritual processes. This philosophy of the union of matter and spirit set as its goal the achievement of human contact with an ineffable divine. The Roman Catholic church’s basic problem with this system was in its view of the relationship between body and soul, as church authorities believed the connection had to remain a complete mystery for humans. If the *pneuma* could be a medium between body and soul, the implication was that direct contact with the divine was possible through the body. Many of the aspects of medieval philosophy discussed by Agamben came to be regarded by the church as heresy. Pound recognised the heretical aspect of this philosophical tradition, and for him it came to constitute a value in and of itself; in the opening of one of his most esoteric essays, significantly titled ‘Cavalcanti’, he stressed how the eponymous poet’s ideas were unorthodox for the period he lived, expressing his admiration for them. Even if, in *Donna mi prega*, Cavalcanti did “not definitely proclaim any heresy”,<sup>416</sup> he nevertheless demonstrated a good familiarity with what in the Florence of 1290 would have been “dangerous thinking”.<sup>417</sup> Brakhage was of the opinion that the poetic correspondence between Guido Orlandi and Cavalcanti, which would culminate in the latter’s *Donna mi prega*, was the “cornerstone of any contemporary *equation* of Romantic Love”,<sup>418</sup> a term that in Brakhage’s use gathered all the echoes of the medieval philosophy of love, including the work of Cavalcanti and Dante. Brakhage quoted the first line of *Donna mi prega*, “A lady asks me...”, to refer to his soon-to-be-wife Marilyn when she asked him if she seemed silly because of how her ordinary and ordered life was

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<sup>416</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 149.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>418</sup> See Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 57.

disrupted by his courting her.<sup>419</sup> It is clear from this anecdote and from Brakhage's references in writings and interviews how familiar he was with Pound's work: Cavalcanti, in fact, was not common reading by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century beyond the sphere of those deeply familiar with Pound.

Cavalcanti faced difficulties in his times due to the familiarity he showed with ideas of "*natural demonstration* and the proof by experience",<sup>420</sup> ideas which Pound traced back to Averroes and Avicenna's commentaries on Aristotle.<sup>421</sup> The University of Paris banned the teaching of Aristotle in 1213<sup>422</sup> also because the proof by experience could open, in a Neoplatonic reading sustained by what Agamben termed *pneumophantasmology*, the door to an explicit connection between matter and spirit. Pound regarded this heretical, mystical connection as crucial to both life and art, and he attempted to explain the system of thought underlying the connection in modern, neo-scientific terminology, as "the aesthetic or interactive vasomotor magnetism in relation to the consciousness".<sup>423</sup> This definition, though Pound regarded it as somewhat reductive, still allows a glimpse of what Pound felt he could not directly utter: the experience of the divine. The physical world was reassessed through such a system of thought as functional and often necessary for the achievement of spiritual revelation. Pound expressed this position in a variety of ways, e.g. "it is always this world that matters most";<sup>424</sup> "the fall into matter it is not necessarily a bad thing";<sup>425</sup> the body is the "perfect instrument of the increasing intelligence";<sup>426</sup> there is wisdom in opposing an "idiotic asceticism and a belief that the body is evil".<sup>427</sup>

Pound strongly opposed any views that conceived of the physical world in merely mechanical, needs-based ways. This was consistent with the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which was opposed to a materialistic

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<sup>419</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>420</sup> See Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 158.

<sup>421</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>422</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>424</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 163.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157 note 42.

<sup>426</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 152.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

and techno-quantitative world (as a consequence of the industrial revolution), but was not at all hostile to the field of science. On the contrary, many occultists believed they could find theoretical allies as a result of “science’s discovery of radiation and the nonparticulate nature of quantum physics [...]”<sup>428</sup> Occultists hailed scientific discoveries, such as the discovery of radium, as confirmations of their theories of a universe composed of radiant forces that influenced and intersected with one another and moved through all the planes of reality. What they did reject was an exclusively pragmatic view of the world in which the existence of what is beyond human knowledge or measurement is categorically denied. Pound himself was an enthusiast of the properties of radio-activity and electricity, and he used these scientific properties to explain that “the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radio-activity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying.”<sup>429</sup> Tryphonopoulos comments that

behind these statements lies Pound’s familiarity with the occult collapse of the distinctions between matter and spirit (*hyle* and *nous*) [...].<sup>430</sup>

The concepts of energy and radiation, attractions and repulsions, could be easily adapted metaphorically to the emotional sphere, and hence to art and spirituality. For Pound, making such conceptual connections was not only intended to impart more dignity and legitimacy to occult thought, but also to stress the proximity and interdependency of spirituality with the material realm. Indeed, for Pound the two realms became so inherently intertwined that “much of what passes for scientific materialism [...] is a consequence of his understanding of occultism.”<sup>431</sup> Also, while

<sup>428</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 13.

<sup>429</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 49. The same passage is quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 131 (without the “and” before the last word); and in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 200. Note, further to this point: “The Art of Poetry consists in combining these ‘essential to thought’, these dynamic particles, *si licet*, this radium, with that melody of words which shall most draw the emotions of the hearer toward accord with their import, and with that ‘form’ which shall most delight the intellect.” (Pound, *Selected Prose*, p. 330; part of this same passage is also quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, pp. 131-132, but is incorrectly cited as p. 360 of Pound’s text)

<sup>430</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 132.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186 note 19.

Pound's statements about energy in art might seem to corroborate Elder's idea of the work of art as primarily a transmitter of energy,<sup>432</sup> for both Pound and Brakhage this energy was not intended an end in itself, but as a proof of, and a vessel for, something *beyond*.

Occultism aspired to ultimately represent the missing link between science and religion, with spirituality pertaining to those aspects of human experience that science could not explain, such as emotions, beauty or sacred drives. It attempted to enclose all these aspects, from scientific facts to personal psychic and spiritual experiences, within an organic system, thereby providing an *in-clusive* model for understanding the universe. The possibility for the subject to directly experience the divine, the definition of the divine as a state of mind, and the idea that the material level of existence is not independent or separated from the spiritual one, all contribute to a view of reality organised in various degrees but ultimately unified. The occult belief that "the individual is a little cosmos"<sup>433</sup> can be both a consequence of and a necessary condition for those believing in a "single realm modulating from material or 'hylic' thickness through mental or psychic attenuation to spiritual or noumenal reality."<sup>434</sup>

Much like Pound, Brakhage had a great interest in science. Already by the end of the 1950s, many science texts started to become deeply important to him, and he also subscribed to *Scientific American* for "several years."<sup>435</sup> He became a friend to and did some work for George Gamow, a physicist at the University of Colorado, and through him met with "a number of scientists".<sup>436</sup> As was already evident by the time of *Dog Star Man*, the Brakhage film containing the most explicit scientific images, he never isolated these scientific interests from his spiritual ideas. So, for instance, in describing the Muses as external and mysterious forces possessing him and thus making him an instrument while under a trance, Brakhage attempted to explain them according to what "the people" he knew "in the sciences" had told him:

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<sup>432</sup> See Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking".

<sup>433</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 136.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>435</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 70.

<sup>436</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

“that there are well over a hundred dimensions.”<sup>437</sup> Similarly, when he was trying to define the essence of the divine, Brakhage mentioned physicist Niels Bohr.<sup>438</sup> For Brakhage, science and spirituality were complementary knowledges, much as Pound and the occult movements had theorised. And, much like them, Brakhage used scientific notions to explain rather than to reject spiritual issues.

Alongside scientific interests, Brakhage and Pound also agreed on the spiritual significance of sex. Both artists regarded sex as the most positive and intense physical experience, not only because of the immediate pleasure coming from such activity but also for the possibility that this activity, when practised in a “noble” way, so to speak, can involve sensations that go well beyond the material realm, even while deeply rooted in such a dimension. Contiguous with their emphasis upon revelatory experience, sex for them was an activity in which the union of spiritual with scientific notions, the passage from matter into the domain of spirit, could come immediately clear into everyday perception. Brakhage, Pound, and other artists following in Pound’s philosophical lineage, like Duncan, had an idea of sex as a spiritually elevating activity. It served for them as one more crucial ring binding the materiality of the world to the major possible spiritual heights to which humanity could aspire.

During the Eleusis rite, the *hieros gamos*, divine marriage, was performed as a symbolic sexual act representing fertility. It is “literally a ‘backward birth’ for the male partner who synecdochically re-enters the womb of his partner.”<sup>439</sup> Pound believed the *hieros gamos* to be not a metaphorical representation, but a *real* sexual act. As a result, the general “erotic interpretation” he attributed “to the esoteric tradition [... was] very much his own”,<sup>440</sup> and “plainly contrary” to the ideas of the mainstream Kensington occult circles.<sup>441</sup> Duncan also, maintained, as a result of Pound’s influence, that in the Eleusis rite an actual “carnal knowledge”, a real “sexual union”, is performed in order to experience the union of “visible and

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<sup>437</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>438</sup> See Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 138.

<sup>439</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>441</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 142.

invisible”.<sup>442</sup> In fact he, just like Pound and Brakhage, believed that sex is “a connection, a relation, with the universe”.<sup>443</sup>

Pound adopted the classical esoteric juxtaposition of the sexes found in opposite and complementary principles such as “positive and negative,” “North and South,” “sun and moon,” or “whatever terms of whatever cult or science you prefer to substitute.”<sup>444</sup> He felt the sexual interaction of these poles would generate illumination. To take one example of such illumination from Pound’s self-declared lineage, he regarded the chivalric love of the troubadours as a superior way of achieving a wisdom opposed to asceticism. In asceticism the subject produces within himself, through “infinite trouble and expense”, the second pole necessary to achieve the charge for registering beauty, while in the chivalric path “the charged surface is produced between the predominant natural poles of two human mechanisms.”<sup>445</sup> Pound’s answer to his own central question of whether “this ‘chivalric love,’ [...] take[s] on mediumistic properties” was obviously positive.<sup>446</sup> In fact, while for Pound the coitus “is the mysterium”,<sup>447</sup> “the *pecten cteis* is the gate of wisdom”.<sup>448</sup> It would appear from such a model of corporeal spirituality that Pound believed this type of revelation to be only available to heterosexual men. Though Pound did not offer further clarification on this point, it is certain that the phallocentrism he expressed in many other contexts was decidedly in contrast “with mainstream occult attitudes, [...] which were] distinctly gynocentric”.<sup>449</sup>

While in the early stages of his career, and particularly in *Dog Star Man*, Brakhage adopted a similar mystical juxtaposition of the sexes—in which the man, the dog and the sun were set in opposition to the woman, the cat and the moon<sup>450</sup>—he never explicitly aligned himself with Pound’s extreme phallocentrism. In fact,

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<sup>442</sup> See Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, p. 107.

<sup>443</sup> See Duncan in Peters and Trachtenberg, ‘A Conversation with Robert Duncan’ (1998), p. 112.

<sup>444</sup> See Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 93.

<sup>445</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>446</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> See Pound, *Selected Prose*, p. 70.

<sup>448</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 56; and Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 120. The *pecten cteis* is the female genitalia.

<sup>449</sup> See Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, pp. 148 and 149.

<sup>450</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 69.

Brakhage visualised his Muse(s) as female. At the same time, he felt that each artist perceives the Muse in a different way, and he noted that “[m]any women have men as Muses and that seems reasonable to me.”<sup>451</sup> Brakhage saw the male and female categories primarily in mythical and mystical terms, as embodiments of complementary cosmic forces.<sup>452</sup>

In Brakhage’s view, sex requires performers for whom the biological specificity of male and female cannot be neglected. More than socially-determined roles, Brakhage regarded genders as forces that everyone has within him/her-self in different proportions (wherein a male would naturally have more “maleness” on account of his inner biology, but would necessarily also have some proportion of “femaleness”). The dichotomy between male and female was considered not simply physical (mechanical) but also cosmic. What Brakhage was looking for with this division was a physiological and biological ground upon which the connection to divinity, and its resultant aesthetic creations, could be built.

While Brakhage did not adopt Pound’s phallocentrism *in toto*, his belief that biology, and gender in particular, set inherent guidelines upon the spirituality channelled through the body has tended to mark his work as specifically male. Brakhage has been, and still is to some extent, considered a prototype of the “white patriarch”<sup>453</sup> due to his family films that celebrated the nuclear family during his first marriage. David E. James also claimed that “[a]n assertive and unqualified heterosexuality lay at the core of Brakhage’s cinema.”<sup>454</sup> The term “assertive” might imply that Brakhage didactically insisted upon heterosexuality as the correct or necessary form that love should take, but even as he presented his own subjective experience of heterosexuality and his cosmic views of gendered complementarity, he accepted and even embraced a multiplicity of genders and sexual orientations in both his films and his friendships.

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<sup>451</sup> Brakhage in a 1990 video interview conducted by Marilynne Mason, now in Brakhage, *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, Disc One.

<sup>452</sup> The personification of a creative force, corresponding also to the state of mind (trance) in which Brakhage works, follows Pound’s theory that a god is a state of mind and that myths are metaphors (personifications) of psychic experiences.

<sup>453</sup> James, ‘Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature’, p. 14.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

Among the many explicit depictions of sexual acts in Brakhage's films, one of the most intense is in the third reel, or third part, of *Lovemaking* (1968). This film, divided into four parts, explores different occasions of physical love. The first part depicts the heterosexual love of a couple, the second the disinterested and random sexual acts of dogs, the third a homosexual couple having sex, and the last a group of children of different ages as they play nude, candidly unaware of prurient interests. As Ara Osterweil has pointed out, the third part, dedicated to homosexual love, is both the most explicit and the most moving for the audience. This part tends to be the most interesting to viewers because of the author's evident personal involvement in shooting "the most corporeally engaged" of the four reels.<sup>455</sup> To give an idea of the intensity of this part, it is worth remembering that three of the foremost experimental film-makers who depicted homosexual love in their films during this period—namely, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and Jack Smith—claimed to be literally "IN LOVE" with this part of Brakhage's film.<sup>456</sup> Such a treatment of homosexual physical love as "the most intensely erotic"<sup>457</sup> of all the kinds of physical love depicted in *Lovemaking* stands in stark contrast with the image James gives of Brakhage, and it appears even more so when considered alongside the films which inspired it. *Lovemaking* was, in fact, made as a response to Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1965), which in turn was a reply to Brakhage's *Loving* (1957) and *Cat's Cradle* (1959), where Schneemann and her husband James Tenney appeared as performers of sexual acts. These two early films by Brakhage have been criticised for reflecting patriarchal assumptions and "mid-century tropes",<sup>458</sup> for the clichéd heteronormativity they depict; though they also nourished, according to Schneemann, an unspoken, platonic erotic relationship between Brakhage and his then best friend Tenney.<sup>459</sup> Following Brakhage's creative quarrel with Schneemann over the taboos maintained in those earlier films, *Lovemaking* came to represent for Brakhage a renewal in the body's vision through what for him was a transgressive depiction of male sexuality.

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<sup>455</sup> See Osterweil, 2014 p. 116.

<sup>456</sup> See Anger quoted in Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 108.

<sup>457</sup> Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 116.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106. See also pp. 104-105.

<sup>459</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 156.

While David E. James attempts to prove Brakhage's patriarchal homophobia by citing Brakhage's chagrin from 1963, that "Many of my friends who had been waiting for me to transform into a homosexual were bitterly disappointed [...] A married artist was an incomprehensible thing to many friends"<sup>460</sup>—and James even imputes an unconscious process within Brakhage's psyche, by claiming a possible "influence of his adoptive father's homosexuality on the formation of Brakhage's sexual identity"<sup>461</sup>—James wilfully overlooks an important early statement by Brakhage against patriarchy and phallocentrism. The passage is from the programmatic opening of *Metaphors on Vision*. In outlining a way of experiencing the world outside society's conventions through a renewal of vision, the judgement on our age, "which lives in fear of total annihilation", is totally negative:

It is a time haunted by sexual sterility yet almost universally incapable of perceiving the phallic nature of every destructive manifestation of itself.<sup>462</sup>

The greed and predation in society is set in contrast with the creative force of sex, as sexual sterility is coupled with a specifically phallic destructiveness. The meaning of this passage is particularly clear, while the programmatic nature of the first part of *Metaphors on Vision* may find confirmation over the course of the rest of Brakhage's career. The personal and subjective individualism crucial to Brakhage's aesthetics and his celebrations of the creative and vital energy of sex through his specific bodily organs have indeed inflected his work as particularly male, though without necessarily confining him to Pound's extreme phallocentrism. Brakhage's mystical approach to gender and sexuality may not be unproblematic, but its undogmatic and dynamic adaptability, open to the positions and critiques of friends and colleagues, does not map comfortably onto any socially conservative stance, such as homophobia or sexism. The question remains as to whether his views completely transcended their patriarchal origins, given their continued insistence on biological determinations of spirituality and aesthetics to at least some extent, but it

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<sup>460</sup> Brakhage quoted in James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', p. 14.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]. Note that the same passage is partially quoted in James, 'Introduction: Stan Brakhage, The Activity of His Nature', p. 8.

is clear at least that Brakhage's views were decidedly more complex and dynamic than some of his critics have posited.

Similarly and in connection to sex, Brakhage and Pound both believed that love "is not a desire but a divine attraction that helps stimulate our spiritual development."<sup>463</sup> Pound found confirmation of this idea through a philosophical investigation of the love poetry of Provence and Tuscany that battled "to maintain a link between divine Love and passion."<sup>464</sup> According to Elder, Brakhage was also "committed to the modern proposition that ardent sexual desire is among the highest forms of love".<sup>465</sup> In a 1995 article, beginning with a quotation from Cavalcanti's most famous poem, Brakhage asked if it is still possible nowadays to hope for a form of love that can also be a form of "spiritual worship".<sup>466</sup> For Pound and for Brakhage, the kind of refined Love they advocated could become "interpretive of the divine order" by stimulating an "interpretation of the cosmos by feeling".<sup>467</sup> Robert Duncan reinforced this idea by believing that "[s]exuality is your boundary with the universe and with the person you touch."<sup>468</sup> This boundary is "a connection, a relation, with the universe, a more important connection than any merely reproductive process could be."<sup>469</sup> Such beliefs go hand-in-hand with Brakhage's "sense of the body that identifies [...] with the cosmos",<sup>470</sup> with a direct correspondence between the *macro-* with the *micro-*, so to speak. Another figure in Pound's artistic lineage, Ronald Johnson, held a similar position about the connection of body and cosmos in believing that brains "were made to communicate with the universe", a remark he made during a 1997 conversation with Brakhage.<sup>471</sup> Brakhage, Duncan and Johnson were all echoing Pound in recovering the "ancient hypothesis that the little cosmos

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<sup>463</sup> See Bush, 'La Filosofica Famiglia', p. 680.

<sup>464</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 676.

<sup>465</sup> Elder, "Moving Visual Thinking", p. 433.

<sup>466</sup> See Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 54.

<sup>467</sup> See Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 94.

<sup>468</sup> Duncan in Peters and Trachtenberg, 'A Conversation with Robert Duncan' (1998), p. 111.

<sup>469</sup> Duncan in *ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>470</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 79.

<sup>471</sup> See Stan Brakhage and Ronald Johnson, 'Another Way of Looking at the Universe', in *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences, Chicago Review*, Volume 47/48 (Volume 47:4, Winter 2001; Volume 48:1, Spring 2002), pp. 31-37; p. 31.

‘corresponds’ to the greater”,<sup>472</sup> which for Pound constituted “the central theme of the troubadours”.<sup>473</sup>

Some examples of how such beliefs manifest themselves in Brakhage’s work might help to elucidate their importance for him beyond his private spiritual life. Such elements can be recognised in many of his films. I have chosen as examples those in which I believe one or more of these elements are central, and thus more evident and meaningful. The films contain articulations of the points discussed in different ways. By presenting such different works from different periods, a continuous, underlying presence in Brakhage’s work of these points is suggested as part of a wider spiritual quest. Unfortunately it proved impossible within the space to include detailed analysis of further titles.

In *Stellar* (1993), a completely hand-painted short silent film considered one of Brakhage’s minor works, the film-maker evokes, through abstract paintings, nebulae, galaxies and star systems. This technique of painting directly on film was usually employed by Brakhage to convey peripheral visual phenomena or inner perceptions, which he termed “moving visual thinking”. But in this case, it is instead employed to explicitly suggest something outside the body and incommensurably distant. The viewer’s perception bounces continuously between the recognition of the imagery as a minute mixture of different dyes or a net of neural connections, and as majestic scenes of distant galaxies.

After a flash of white and three seconds of blackness, the film begins with still images emerging for a few seconds before fading back into blackness. Such brief, hand-painted abstract images set the tone of overall ambiguity for the work: the images bear a striking resemblance to astronomic photographs of nebulae and constellations but are charged with enough outlandish colours to avoid direct realism. After these brief images, a cascade of colourful debris quickly follows at a sustained pace against the deep blackness. Such movement, typical of many Brakhage works in which visual elements appear to enter the frame from the top and disappear at the bottom, gives both the impression of descending, as the visual debris seems to be “falling down”, and the illusion of ascending to the viewer in relation to it. This

<sup>472</sup> Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 94.

<sup>473</sup> See Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 151.

ascension is intentionally connected with the outer space imagery suggested by the paintings and the film's title. The colours of this frantic and hypnotic cascade cover more or less the entire spectrum, varying randomly from warm tones like reddish and orange hues, to colder moments of blues and teals, and then again to brilliant violets or luminous, acid greens. All the painting in the film is covered with white round spots of varying sizes, giving the illusion of nearby or distant stars. Sometimes one of these colourful blotches, instead of disappearing, swallowed by the vertical movement, is held in suspension for a second or two while the cascade continues uninterrupted around it; and then the blotch begins to quickly fade and disappear, leaving a sort of after-image in its wake. Such after-image effects as occur when one stares at a strong source of light are likewise reflective of the physical experience of observing certain celestial bodies. The brightness and vividness of the hues employed are further dramatically boosted by the dominant dark tones in the film's background. The film strongly suggests a darkness characteristic of night-time conducive to the observation of astronomical objects. The film ends with a large, dark greenish blotch, clearly resembling a nebula, held still behind the hand-painted cascade as it slowly moves backward into blackness, creating a strong sense of infinite distance. When the cascade suddenly disappears, the dark greenish nebula is completely visible for a fraction of a second before finally being devoured by a sudden flash of white light that envelopes the entire visual field. When this too disappears, the screen remains black for a second before being substituted by a completely white frame, which constitutes the film's final image. The film's ambiguity lies in the varying assumptions it suggests, that the light and colour might variously represent objects or feelings passing or momentarily still against the darkness, and that the little cosmos of the subject's mind might correspond to the vast cosmos beyond the earth. The resemblance of the film's imagery with something organic and microscopic, possibly sustained by the viewer's personal awareness that Brakhage usually employed such imagery to represent inner visual phenomena, is subtly associated with the celestial bodies they visually suggest. Such polarisation, suspended in a continuous state of undecidability, establishes a dynamic identity between micro and macro, human and cosmic, organic and inorganic realms.

A different example of Brakhage's work in which the physical world, and the

body in particular, is directly associated with the cosmic realm is *The Stars Are Beautiful* (1974). This unique film features, for the first and only time in Brakhage's career, synchronous sound for a few select scenes and a voice-over of the film-maker reading a text from 1967. The text is a collection of 37 brief entries transcribed each morning by Jane Brakhage from Stan Brakhage's dictation. During night-time hours, over a period of several months, Stan Brakhage formulated, partly from dreams, brief definitions of the cosmos mainly involving the elements of sky, stars, sun and moon. The entries as Jane Brakhage transcribed them were also later published in 1982 as a sort of prose poem independent from the film.<sup>474</sup> In these entries, the association of the earthly world and the cosmos is not only aesthetically suggested as it would be in *Stellar*, but was clearly and directly stated; for instance,

- 2) The stars are entirely in the eyes of those who look at the sky. [...]
- 4) The stars are optical nerve endings of the eye which the universe is.
- 10) It is a furry animal. The stars are silver hairs.
- 13) The sky is the dead decaying body of God; the stars are glittering maggots.
- 16) The sky is a lens of air magnifying a single atom of itself.
- 18) [...] The sun is the ejaculation of the penis in the vagina of the universe. The stars are the sperm searching for the eggs of moons.
- 19) The universe is part of a vast brain, the stars the firing of brain cells [...].
- 20) The stars are trembling silver strings of everyone's brains. [...]
- 22) The sky is the low-water beach on which are left phosphorescent plankton which will grow to be enormous beasts.<sup>475</sup>

It is clear in these examples how the body is used as a metaphor in describing astronomical objects. In entry 18 sex is also explicitly described as an activity with

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<sup>474</sup> See Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, pp. 138-141.

<sup>475</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, pp. 138-139.

cosmic resonances, with a similar fertility principle applied to the cosmos in entry 22. When the sun is mentioned in the former entry, the moon appears as a sort of complementary element necessary for a balanced completeness, exemplifying Brakhage's idea of mystical dualities mirrored by the male and the female of earthly physiology. The moon is mentioned with the sun, but always *after* it, in entries 18, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30. In general, a correspondence of micro and macro is established by suggesting that the cosmos is a sort of larger version of the human body or other organisms, within which life exists and mirrors itself. As such, this belief is identical to the occult tenet "As above, so below", and carries on the mystical tradition that passed through Pound on down to the present day.

While the film *The Stars Are Beautiful* thus necessarily involves "cosmic" themes through its voice-over, no pictures of celestial bodies are shown, but rather an alternation of sets of shots from the daily life of the Brakhage family. There are first shots of a sort of ritual, filmed inside the house, in which one of the Brakhage children, surrounded by brothers and sisters, holds a chicken while their mother Jane cuts the outer feathers of the animal's wings with scissors. This scene has an enigmatic synchronous soundtrack in which the people involved barely speak, and when they do they don't say anything relevant to their actions. This sequence is frequently interrupted by abstract photographed stills, in which the objects filmed are too close to be in focus or recognizable, and by still lives from the interior of the Brakhage house, or outdoor images of trees. This intercutting of still shots occurs through almost the full length of the film, and generally when the scene of the chicken is not shown (and there is no synchronous sound), Brakhage reads the text entries in voice-over. Towards the end of the film, shots of a new scene are intermittently presented: presumably in the Brakhage house's backyard, the children are shown playing, again with synchronous sound. The distance between what we see in the film and the text that Brakhage reads in voice-over, is best explained by his will to establish a relationship, if not an identity, between the cosmic and the everyday worlds. This is similar to Brakhage's strategy in *Dog Star Man*, in which the prevailing astronomical imagery of the film is offset by sequences focussed on the body and on the daily life of a family, as a result of Brakhage's stated attempt to

“bring [the work] down to earth”.<sup>476</sup> In the case of *The Stars Are Beautiful*, the cosmic counterpart is provided by the text, while the family life and close-ups of domestic scenes and living beings provide an earthly, even if oblique, complement.

The 1997 film *Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind* clearly echoes in its title entries from *The Stars Are Beautiful* which Brakhage had formulated 30 years before. The film, considered a sort of sequel to *Dog Star Man* because of the mythological theme of the eponymous tree, explicitly spells out in its title its theme of the cosmos reflected by humanity. In contrast with *Dog Star Man*, however, it does not include directly symbolical images, instead expressing itself in a more abstract way. The general rhythm of the film oscillates between sudden accelerations and relatively calm passages, almost like intermissions. This irregular rhythm mimics a sort of epileptic succession of electrical surges. The electrical theme is clearly hinted at by brief shots of electrical towers and by the frenetic, pulse-like succession of images concentrated on the theme of light phenomena abstracted through the camera lens. The film, which in general does not have strong colours, mixes hand-painted passages created with different techniques and with different effects; glimpses of landscapes; shots of natural elements briefly flashing among passages of chemical reactions on the filmstrip; and abstract imagery obtained through photographic means. This visual concert alternatively suggests microscopic organic elements, wide-open spaces, electricity, peripheral visual phenomena, and the graininess of the film as a stand-in for the brain’s electrical background noise. Brakhage associated in this film the material fibre of the world with inner physiological processes, presenting organic and inorganic, micro and macro, as correspondent states. Liquid-like, vegetable-like, cell-like, and tissues-like shapes are mixed, suggesting a sort of cosmic organism of which humans are but one part. Often it is difficult to define such shapes as very small or very big: the sense of proportions in the course of the admixture is somehow lost.

In one of the most sustained segments of the film, a liquid surface in a flat shot from above, with tones varying from a dominant greyish to dark blue with some dirty green, oscillates in small perturbations of the surface with no specific direction. Possibly a pond or a lake, the liquid is dirty with dust-like detritus on the surface.

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<sup>476</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 75.

The consistency of the liquid is curious, as it seems thicker than water, and its slow perturbations suggest a gelatinous substance. As the surface slowly moves in unpredictable contractions and expansions, an off-screen bright light, possibly the sun, creates sparkling star-like, almost blinding reflections, that by appearing and disappearing, multiplying and suddenly dissolving, seem to dance on this jelly-like surface, resembling a shiny, unstable star dust. This shot is sustained much longer than any other in the film, for almost one continuous minute over a 17-minute film, because it incorporates so many themes of the film at once: the correspondence of inorganic with organic matter (as the surface indeed resembles an organic membrane over which nervous electric activity manifests itself), of body with cosmos (through the aforementioned organic membrane with the constellation-like reflections), the convergence of nearness and distance, of inner and outer, of liquid, solid and electrical states, of darkness and light, and of movement and stillness (as the hypnotic ripples of the surface also seem to repeat, unmoving in any specific direction both physically and conceptually). One cannot be certain when analysing abstract images thematically, but the title of the film, taken alongside Brakhage's other works and consistent statements of beliefs and influences, certainly suggest particular themes as underlying intentions.

The most famous of Brakhage's "cosmic" films, and the one that more clearly contains the points discussed in this chapter, is undoubtedly *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964). The film is structured into a total of five parts: a prelude plus four numbered parts. Brakhage tried to gather as many myths and symbolic references as he could into this feature-length film. The general structure assumes a symbolic meaning both in its five total sections as well as within its four numbered parts. *Prelude* was created as a dream containing closed-eye vision, and it works as a sort of premonitory dream of and for the whole work; *Part I* is the exploration of a single action in all its ramifications, as derived from Pound's descriptions of *Noh* drama, and introduces in the film the two-steps-forward-and-one-backward movement, one of the conceptual and aesthetic cornerstones of the film; *Part II* is autobiographical, with the "dog star man", both the character and the film-maker, envisioned in infancy through the face of Brakhage's daughter, in a sort of backwards metamorphosis; *Part III* is a sexual daydream involving a male and a female body, representing the dog

star man and his partner as well as more generally the very concepts of male and female; and *Part IV* is the conclusion of the struggle of the man to chop down a tree, when the task is abandoned and the man can finally rest symbolically on “Cassiopeia’s chair” as a sort of cosmic validation of the whole endeavour.<sup>477</sup>

*Prelude* serves as an overture for the film. It starts with a long, sustained, very dark reddish obscurity, upon which shadows move, until flashes begin to suggest a mystical genesis of sight from out of cave-like darkness. The first “proper” shots are too close and out of focus to be recognisable; and then images from an urban environment, streets, houses shot from a moving car, become superimposed beneath, suggesting an emergence of clearer visual perceptions from out of a kind of unstable magma. The closed eyes of the eponymous character are shown intermittently, suggesting a cinematic reverse shot, so that the flashes and abstractions adopt the meaning of the character letting the outside in and at the same time projecting the inside out. Then a series of brief shots, some of them increasingly recognisable, are presented through fast cutting and superimposition upon one another, emulating the cascade of visual inputs once the process of vision starts. The result appears quite chaotic, and it forces the audience to struggle in recognising the world presented to them, a struggle which puts the viewer in a position of identifying with the dog star man, seen in intermittent close ups of eyes undergoing the same process. The sensation is that of a struggle to see through a device, the eye and/or the camera, which appears as not yet completely accustomed to performing such a function. As with the case of a newborn child’s sight, described in *Metaphors on Vision*, the viewer of this *Prelude* must see in a new way and with new eyes, and as a result the images seem themselves to be of a new world. Within these frantic passages, Brakhage’s abstract hand-painting on film makes its debut, representing to the audience the projections of the brain’s and eye’s activities upon the external world. The outside and the inside are clearly combined and treated as a unique and inextricable phenomenon.

At this point in the *Prelude* some hints of narrative appear among the rapid flow of images. In various fragments, a bearded man is shown in snow-covered woods. As this scene becomes clear, shots of solar flares begin to be intercut with it.

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<sup>477</sup> See Brakhage in Sitney, *Visionary Film*, pp. 191-192.

The eponymous character is gradually introduced in all “his” features: the dog (as close shots of dog fur are held on screen for longer periods and become recognisable), the bearded man, and the star (in the form of bursts of light). Just after this the dog star man’s counterpart is introduced: in rapid succession one may glimpse a woman and the moon. The film continues to mix these elements: particularly, the solar flares multiply, and very close shots of male and female genitalia are added to the rapid intercutting. Shortly after, among images of celestial bodies and hand-painted abstract short passages, the first shots of microscopic imagery, of apparently operating organic tissues, are introduced. The vasomotor internal actions of bodies, presumably involved in sexual activity, are then paired with images of cosmic phenomena, as the projections of inner imagery are superimposed upon them. Towards the end of the *Prelude*, a shot of a snow-covered ground filmed from above and swinging forwards and backwards, introduces the paradigm of movement from the whole work, that “two steps forward, one step backward”<sup>478</sup> which will be the main visual theme of *Part I*. In the final sequence of the *Prelude*, the bearded man in the snow-covered woods is clearly visible, wandering around, and chopping down a tree with an axe. As Brakhage stated, *Prelude* is “a created dream for the work that follows”, and for him the dreaming just prior to waking up “structures the following day.”<sup>479</sup> Dreams from the final stage of sleep, moreover, are the ones most likely to produce hypnagogic imagery, coinciding with Brakhage’s inaugural employment of his henceforth signature hand-painting on film. *Prelude* thus presents and informs all the elements and themes, both mythological and technical, that the rest of the work will contain and expand upon.

In *Part I* the pace is much slower than in the *Prelude*, apart from some isolated passages. This part follows the actions of the bearded man in the woods as he climbs, walks, and cuts down a tree, always accompanied by his dog, in all possible variations of angle, pace, composition, perspective, distance, and in-camera effects. The winter mood is dominant in the many shots of snow covering the woods, and in the general pale, desaturated colours throughout this part, tending towards greyish hues. Almost all the shots in which the man is present are either highly desaturated, completely in black and white, or presented in photographic negative. In

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<sup>478</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>479</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 190.

line with the wintery theme of death and repose, the tree is revealed as lifeless in the aftermath of a fire in the woods, with black trunks and branches still emitting smoke. The last image in *Part I* is of a thin vein, cutting horizontally across the screen as well as across an unidentified organic tissue, within which what presumably blood is visible, flowing onwards and then a little backwards before flowing onwards again. This represents physically, and as a sort of natural law that deeply affects the eponymous character (and, by association, the viewer and humanity in general), the film's signature movement of two steps forward and one backward.

*Part II* starts by reprising the theme of the preceding part: the man climbing in the snow is seen in photographic negative. This establishes him again as the subject, as well as announcing a sort of journey within him, inside him and inside his past. The main imagery of *Part II* consists of abstract hand-painting superimposed on shots of a newborn baby's face. The hand-painting, which often limits clear views of the baby, works as a sort of cerebral stratification through which the viewer must sort and dig in order to access the memory. As Brakhage has stated, the baby represents the dog star man in the past. The baby throughout *Dog Star Man* represents variously the dog star man's past or the daughter of the man and the woman, depending on the context, or at times even both, given Brakhage's mystical belief in maleness and femaleness residing within each being in different proportions. So not only past and present are intertwined, but also the sexual genders, as recurs more directly within *Part III*. In *Part II* the rhythm is once again fast, and the presence of each shot is fairly short, with extensive use of superimposed abstract hand-painting over recognisable images. In the final minutes, the man returns intercut with shots of the woman, again anticipating the sexual congress of the film's subsequent part.

*Part III* is what Brakhage defined as a sexual daydream. In the fast pace of this part, there are three sorts of images: very close details of male and female human bodies, particularly genitalia; hand-painted abstractions superimposed; and wet viscera glittering under electrical lights. Special attention is given in this part to the sexual attributes of the two bodies. For Brakhage, this part of the film was intended not only to commingle male and female bodies, but also to ultimately blur the distinction between complementary genders:

Female images are trying to become male and have not succeeded and the males are trying to become female and have not succeeded. [...] [P]enises replace breast in flashes of images; then a penis will jut through the eyes; or male hair will suddenly move across the whole scape of the female body.<sup>480</sup>

The opposite occurs when the male body is “tortured by a proclivity to female imagery” and the male’s lips are “suddenly transformed into a vagina.”<sup>481</sup> Finally each body locates its own dimension, and the male and the female are separated. It is important to stress that this separation takes place in order to prepare for ultimate unification: “male and female become separate so that they can come together.”<sup>482</sup> That esoteric principle of complementarity that Brakhage attributed to sexual gender is visualised in this part of the film. It is through the union of the complementary poles that Brakhage believed the spiritual revelation could be achieved, stimulated by a sense of becoming whole or complete. The separation of the sexes dramatised by Brakhage, expressed through an intensely subjective point of view, not only represents Brakhage’s own search for identity, but also stands as a visual manifestation of Brakhage’s faith in the mystical polarisation of natural and spiritual forces.

Osterweil observes in the first part of *Lovemaking* a situation similar to what Brakhage described in *Part III* of *Dog Star Man*. In the first part of the former film, Paul Sharits and his then-wife Frances were filmed while having sex. In that depiction of sexual acts between a man and a woman, the predominance of close-ups likewise made it “difficult to distinguish between male and female flesh, so entwined are the bodies”.<sup>483</sup> In the film, the sexes were so thoroughly fused that they seemed to collapse upon one another. Osterweil views this film as exemplary of a trend she sees in Brakhage’s career which reached its peak at the beginning of the 1970s, where, as a reaction to the visionary style that culminated in *Dog Star Man*, he became concerned with instead achieving a state of cinematic objectivity and detachment, especially in relation to the body. But what for Osterweil appears as a “battery of defamiliarizing [technical] effects” producing a critique to “heteronormative

<sup>480</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>481</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*

<sup>482</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>483</sup> Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 114.

institutions”<sup>484</sup> by blurring the boundaries between the sexes, in light of Brakhage’s spiritual quest it becomes not so opposed to *Dog Star Man*’s mythopoeic concerns, but as contiguous with his occult-derived views of genders intertwined and shaped into wholeness, reflecting his sense of intrinsic unity between inside and outside, male and female, subjective and objective, earthly and cosmic, in the revelatory marriage of complementary forces.

In the concluding part of *Dog Star Man, Part IV*, the man awakens with difficulty from the dream of *Part III*. He again appears in the woods struggling to complete his task of chopping down a tree, while after-images from *Part III* are fleetingly superimposed. There are many layers of superimposition throughout this part: body details, solar flares, dog parts, hand-painted abstractions. All the major images from the previous parts are re-presented at a fast pace, enriched with multiple superimpositions (up to four images superimposed at once). It is also possible to recognise shots of a childbirth which are otherwise absent from the rest of the film. Landscapes of mountains covered in trees and infused with a kind of halo interrupt the close-up shots that predominate in the rest of the film. Potentially symbolic and mythical elements—e.g., solar flares, the moon, stars in the night sky, fire, a baby, trees, the mountains—are presented in complex sequences with frequent superimposition and continuous succession. The pace towards the end increases dramatically, an impression also reinforced by the complex layering of superimpositions. In the midst of this, the man seems to fall down from the mountain that he struggled so much to climb, rolling and screaming as he goes. These shots of the man and some brief images of a sunset give a sense of a cathartic conclusion. This is followed by a short sequence of abstract coloured frames flickering and rapidly dissolving one into the other, progressively slowing down until arriving at blackness, recalling in reverse order the opening of *Prelude*.

The famous images of the heart pumping and of blood flowing through veins were taken with the collaboration of a friend, Igor Gamow. The son of physicist George Gamow, this friend of Brakhage’s had access to scientific test subjects, and helped Brakhage to photograph them. This connection was the origin of the image of a bat’s wing, which was so thin that the blood could be viewed moving through the

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<sup>484</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

veins. Igor Gamow also wore a real sheep's heart like a glove in the film, because it resembled a human heart and could give the impression of blood pumping when moved from the inside. The only scientific images in the film that Brakhage did not produce himself were the "high-altitude observatory images of solar flares."<sup>485</sup> Other astronomical images, a crucial part of the film's imagery and meaning, were obtained through simple and clever expedients:

There is a lot of astronomy in the film. Someone (an amateur who had done a lot of stop-motion photography of clouds and stars) gave me a couple of Rube-Goldberg-like boxes that allowed you to set your camera to make time-lapse material. That's my time-lapsed photography of the stars in the film. The moon was photographed through a child's telescope—just jammed up into the lens, and opening up and photographing, with a lot of luck.<sup>486</sup>

The three sets of images that in the film tend to be the most meaningful and remembered by audiences and critics—the stars, the naked bodies, and the internal organs—were all obtained through cheap means, so that the cosmic mythological meaning of the work was, so to speak, "home made". This is a further, subtler instance of the encounter between micro and macro, where everyday means are employed to produce and address a cosmological content. The correspondence between the human bodies and the cosmos was established through human biology and astronomical imagery, as in the case of

the collage of scientific cinematography of solar flares (representing the macrocosmic dimension of existence), images of blood cells pushed first in one direction then the other, and a pumping heart (which represents the microanthropic dimension of existence). The collage of the solar flares and of the human circulatory system draws the macrocosmic and the microanthropic dimensions of existence into an equivalence and so suggests that the same forces that animate the universe sustain the lives of human beings.<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>486</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, pp. 75.

<sup>487</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 144.

The principle that the same forces animate all the universe, including humanity, and that the little cosmos of the human body corresponds to the greater one, is a belief with ancient roots nurtured throughout the centuries by occult disciples. As with Pound's use of scientific concepts and vocabulary, the identifiable scientific imagery in the film—namely, the astronomical and internal bodily functions—does not function as an alternative to or contradiction of the film's esoteric meanings, but on the contrary works at the service of these meanings, as their confirmation. Brakhage deployed the rational and materialist perspectives of scientific theories and subjects to confirm his own spiritual beliefs, just as Pound and the occult circles with which he was involved did before him.

Another important aspect of the spirituality Brakhage shared with Pound—and a consequence of a basically gnostic view of spirituality, in which personal encounters between each subject and the divine is the ultimate goal—is that revelation for them is accessible through quotidian, earthly life. For this reason, in *Dog Star Man* the representations of the couple with the baby, of the family, assume an important role, beyond reinforcing strictly heterosexual social values. As Brakhage explained,

[...] the main thing, to me, was to get the film down to earth, to daily living, so that's why you have all the images of the man and the woman and the baby at the hearth. That's what the wood is going to be chopped up *for*: to burn in the fireplace and warm that baby.<sup>488</sup>

*Dog Star Man* becomes, then, a particularly relevant example of Brakhage's spiritual quest, as it features or manifests so many themes in common with the occult philosophical tradition while laying the groundwork for many projects Brakhage would extend and continue throughout the rest of his career. Within this single work, an identity is established between micro and macro realms; materialist scientific knowledge is employed in the service of spiritual theories; the body is featured as the primary form of identity for human beings, and at the same time it is used to correspond to, or commune with, the cosmos; male and female genders are depicted as complementary mystical poles rather than as socially-constructed categories; the

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<sup>488</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 75.

sexual interaction of bodies represents a spiritually elevating activity that can possibly bring them closer to a sense of cosmic unity; and the superimposition of visual phenomena, combined with hand-painted abstraction, reflects internal nervous activity through which the external world is perceived, embodying further proof of the inextricable relationship between internal and external, self and other, visible and invisible, subjective and objective, spiritual and material. The film constitutes then a particularly pregnant example for the presence and articulation of the ideas discussed so far.

### 3.1 – The messy vessel: the body

The body manifests itself in Brakhage's art in many ways. It can be "the source of art"<sup>489</sup> as subject or object, its temple, so to speak, or it may be expressed through another body, that of the film itself. The physicality of the cinematic medium was for instance respected by Brakhage as a physiology all its own. So, for instance, in *Metaphors on Vision* he described in a poetic way the experiments he was doing with the film from quite early in his career:

Light, lens concentrated, either burns negative film to a chemical crisp which, when lab washed, exhibits the blackened pattern of its ruin or, reversal film, scratches the emulsion to eventually bleed it white.<sup>490</sup>

He was interested in bringing to the familiar level of the body the strange phenomena present in the chemistry of film, bestowing it with a special status in an intimate and somehow spiritual bond with human beings. Thus the body became for Brakhage not only a metaphor or the subject/object of his art, but also a way to understand and interpret his artistic medium in relation to the cosmos. The physicality of something that he could touch and deeply experience, like his own body, became a key to understanding and interpreting realities otherwise alien to him. He regarded the ineffable phenomena of spirituality in much the same way,

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<sup>489</sup> See Wees, *Light Moving in Time*, p. 91.

<sup>490</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

bringing them closer to a human, daily reality than they typically appeared without diminishing their unique aspects or sacredness. In this sense, many of the traces of *pneumophantasmology* present in Pound are very close to Brakhage's beliefs and aesthetics. All the chemical and technical experimentations made with the material qualities of film, constituting some of Brakhage's signature features as an artist, can also be seen in light of this corporeal spirituality: not only were they means of finding new ways to express visual phenomena, but they also brought the technique of the medium closer to the human and to the quest for revelation. Other technical devices, such as, for instance, "the shaky, hand-held camera, the hand-made visual form, the visible, hand-made splice, [...] the swirl of movement within the image", were employed not only to create a film "as a sort of biogram"—that is, to register "the response of the nervous system"<sup>491</sup>—but also to allow the film to register the process of itself, a biogram of how it came to be made that way.

In Brakhage's very early career, the bodies displayed were still characters who would refer back to traumatic experiences in the author's psyche. His first psychodrama phase employed the body quite conventionally, albeit within a surreal dramatic framework. In Brakhage's later work, the body tended to be presented as something that expressed its own uniqueness without imposed dramatic or representational functions, whether through subjective documents of his family life, as in *Window Water Baby Moving*, or in attempts to be as objective as possible, as in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, where the bodies are deceased and thus assume the status of objects. The impingement of the world onto the human visual apparatus was yet another way for the body to constitute a source of art for Brakhage. As William Wees has brilliantly discussed,<sup>492</sup> peripheral visual phenomena came to be central in Brakhage's cinema in an attempt to document emotional experiences as they actually manifested themselves inside his body. These phenomena amounted to not only the simple perception of external inputs, but also to the representation of the visual feedback of such inputs, through many technical devices, beginning with the hand-painting of film strips. So, for instance, in *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961) the images of Jane giving birth to their second daughter are superimposed with scratches and hand-painted frames, meant to represent what

<sup>491</sup> See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 371.

<sup>492</sup> See Wees, *Light Moving in Time*.

Brakhage perceived during those moments in his mind's eye.

The photographed and hand-painted abstractions from the end of the 1970s culminated in a visual process designed by Brakhage to exactly convey his inner visual and nervous activity, which he called “moving visual thinking”. This process became particularly crucial to his work in the 1980s and 1990s. “Moving visual thinking” may never have been fully defined as a process, but it can be described as an attempt to convey on the film the electric, and thus light-like, activity of the nervous system and of the brain, once a percept has entered the mind/body through a variety of channels, but before such input is rationally elaborated by the brain as a word, definition, thought, or image. It is an attempt to bypass all that the brain has learned since birth by trying to focus on the raw activity of the body in response to external signals and stimuli. In describing “moving visual thinking”, Elder, utilising a similar definition, writes of “thought’s *materia prima*”.<sup>493</sup> According to Brakhage, the excitement of the perceptual apparatus can be conveyed only through cinema because of the electrical/luminous nature of such excitations that makes them visually translatable, and because they are in continuous motion. It was through this encounter of technical and human sensibilities that the artist can channel and express the divine forces he perceived, in order to convey such experiences to others and make the work of art a device inducing spiritual revelation.

In *pneumophantasmology*, the body is also crucial in the creative process of art and of the spiritual process towards elevation. In yet another echo of the medieval tradition that considers poetry as “dictated by inspiring love”,<sup>494</sup> Brakhage identified “creativity” with breathing, “as the name ‘inspiration’ implies”.<sup>495</sup> Elder frames this point alongside the primary importance that Olson granted to the body, and he remarks that the poet went “as far as to relate breath [...] to the phallus.”<sup>496</sup> This connection is not so astonishing when considered in light of the *pneuma* doctrine Agamben summarised, for which this vital pneumatic breath animates, among many other things, also the phallus.<sup>497</sup> These ideas were reinforced and confirmed by

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<sup>493</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 448.

<sup>494</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 103.

<sup>495</sup> See Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 79.

<sup>496</sup> See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 370.

<sup>497</sup> This connection between breath and phallus, is also analogously present in the philosophical

Olson, since his seminal essay 'Projective Verse' indeed resonates with pneumatism as well as with Pound's discussions about the physiological origins and effects of poetry. For Olson, verse is dependent upon the specificities of breath and breathing, both for its creation and for its appreciation,<sup>498</sup> registering in each case the vital "pressures" of the breath itself.<sup>499</sup> Olson came even closer to the pneuma doctrine when he implied that the breath of the verse involves the poet's and listener's heart,<sup>500</sup> and when he explicitly referred to the "double meaning" of the term "breath" in Latin:<sup>501</sup> *spiritus*, which means "both breath and spirit."<sup>502</sup> Furthermore, in light of his own connection with Pound's philosophical tradition, Olson also connected such a physiological understanding of poetic creation with sexual activities:

Olson believed that the body provides, in the lungs, the physical machinery of poetic inspiration and poetic aspiration but [...] he also maintained that orality, at the same time, is also profoundly sexual/phallic.<sup>503</sup>

In other words, the "somatic relation with nature" that Olson advocated also involved "sexual energies" as a necessary part of generating knowledge of nature.<sup>504</sup> For Brakhage, this was as further confirmation that he was on the right track in granting to physiology such a relevant role in his knowledge of the invisible world. Olson in this instance worked as a reinforcement and further articulation of ideas Brakhage had already encountered in Pound.

Brakhage's "physiological conception of vision",<sup>505</sup> beyond informing his aesthetic choices, became also a tool to theoretically justify those choices. He came to elaborate an aesthetic and philosophical dichotomy between a geometric mode of

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connection between breath and consciousness discussed by William James, an important member of Pound's circle. Elder discusses James in this respect in relation to Pound and Brakhage, even if he is a less likely vessel for such ideas in Brakhage (see *ibid.*, p. 371).

<sup>498</sup> See Olson, *Collected Prose*, p. 239.

<sup>499</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>500</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>501</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>502</sup> See Allen and Friedlander in *ibid.*, p. 427 note 245.

<sup>503</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 382.

<sup>504</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

expression and a physiological one. While he felt that the latter would be intrinsic and proper to the human body, he regarded the former as a conceptual invention of a rationalistic culture. He described these two approaches as “two pictorial extremes of human thought process”, naming one “Meat-ineffable” and the other “The Geometric”.<sup>506</sup> He saw geometric representations as “inventions of human thought”<sup>507</sup> which eventually lead to “geometries of thinking.”<sup>508</sup> This way of thinking (“Geometrical Thought”) is outside the nature of human beings, since it is “inferred”, as opposed to “meat energies” which are expressed and originally “move in waves, as pulse”.<sup>509</sup> This distinction is here important because Brakhage saw the constricting forces of “Geometrical Thought” as sterile in regard to his spiritual quest. The divine he had in mind could not be experienced of manifest itself outside of its dynamic, fragmented and contradictory nature, requiring a corresponding “attuning” of the subject to such nature. Again the little cosmos corresponds to the greater one, and one’s own little cosmos is her body.

Even if in nature “straight lines” could exist, humans could not perceive them because “we are too viscous to receive them as such”.<sup>510</sup> To exemplify this final point, it is useful to report an example that Brakhage used in conversation with Philip Taaffe, when he sketched a cube (hand-drawn but with straight lines) to demonstrate how at school they teach that it is possible to “achieve depth”.<sup>511</sup> This simple cube was for Brakhage “a dream, a human dream”, because “it does not exist in nature.”<sup>512</sup> Brakhage claimed that what the human brain actually processes when thinking of a three-dimensional representation of a cube is closer to a second drawing that Brakhage made: a cube traced with very “wonky” lines, with “loose, cellular, mucous, jellied lines.”<sup>513</sup> Brakhage was here attempting to depict not the content of

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<sup>506</sup> See Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 70. The capital letters were to stress that these two options are general ways of thinking. He also specified that there should be “no ‘the’ before ‘Meat-’ inasmuch as raw cells are such a diversity of impulse as to defy hierarchy.” (Ibid.)

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>509</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>510</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>511</sup> See Brakhage in Taaffe, *Composite Nature*, p. 93.

<sup>512</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*

<sup>513</sup> See Brakhage in *ibid.*

thought (as, of course, humans are capable of imagining and visualising perfectly straight lines), but rather the way information is physically processed and stored by the human body. He was trying to highlight the physicality and physiology of a process that is usually considered to be abstract, divorced from the visceral realm. In this somewhat utopian manner, he was attempting to materialise abstraction itself. From the brain's electrical excitement, then, he believed that art arises, along with everything else:

All Human expression (including Art) has to be based on bio-logic: traditionally that basis-of-inspiration has centered itself on the human biological *reception* of impulse from the external world.<sup>514</sup>

With the example of the cube, Brakhage wanted to illustrate how the body *actually* perceives something, and not how a tutored and trained mind adjusts and synthesises such perceptions. He found that painting on film was particularly suitable into conveying such “untutored” bodily perceptions. His hand-painting on film, which first emerged in *Dog Star Man*, began primarily as a means of transmitting those peripheral visual phenomena, to which Wees refers, that constitute the major exclusions from the dominant human way of seeing:

I started painting on film primarily to create a corollary of what I could see with my closed-eye vision or hypnagogic vision because there was no way I could get the camera inside my head or create a photographic equivalent of those shapes streaming across my closed eyes [...].<sup>515</sup>

Brakhage regarded as the core of the visual and creative process elements that the prevailing culture identifies as negligible or disposable by-products of that process. And this core is located in (and constituted by) the materiality of the world closest to each viewer: the physiology of the body itself. The only form he felt that such activities could be tentatively registered in was abstract imagery. The absence of recognisable geometric forms in abstraction, as well as the natural resemblance of abstract form to organic matter, allows the registration of such images to be as

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<sup>514</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>515</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 147.

faithful as possible to the original source and to its own substance: internal bodily activities. Indeed, the best way in which perceptual processes could reveal themselves would be through exactly such abstraction:

[...] the only reasonably “real” external manifestations of inner nervous receptivity-of-impulse might, ironically, be found in the arts we call “abstract”; for these, at least, suggest the un-idealized meat means (source of all our Consciousness) in direct express.<sup>516</sup>

Organic abstraction, which became a signature feature of Brakhage’s art, represented an attempt to be as faithful as possible to reality—and specifically, to a reality centrally concerned with the most intimate knowledge of the subject’s specific body. From this attempt at an honest, unmediated and profound knowledge of perceptual bodily processes—or, indeed, of each physiological reaction of the body to the world—came Brakhage’s famous claim to be a documentarist. That documentation extended also to the spiritual heights to which bodily experiences could drive the subject, being then transmitted via the work of art or directly experienced through different means. But the reality Brakhage was living in, a reality containing and synthesising spirituality, scientific objectivity, and intuitive physicality, was also meant to mirror the organic abstraction employed to convey it. One attempt to define the formal aspects of such a reality in a general but useful way is Elder’s outline of Brakhage’s positioning of the artist within the world. To do so, Elder resorts to what he calls “Open Form”, the basic understanding of reality for Duncan and Olson.<sup>517</sup> This system constitutes a sort of intuitive/scientific model for the relationship between the artist (and, by extension, the work of art) and reality. In Elder’s description, the body emerges as the main instrument of the system in a somewhat technical version of the spiritual process rooted in *pneumophantasmology*.

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<sup>516</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 74.

<sup>517</sup> Elder probably intends his Open Form movement to partly coincide with “The New American Poetry” gathered by Donald M. Allen in his classic anthology of the same name, though Brakhage was mainly close to the members of only two of the five groups into which the collection is divided—namely, the Black Mountain College group and the San Francisco Renaissance group: see Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

The Open Form poet conceives of the poet existing in a field (q.v.) of energies, and the essential task of Open Form poets as opening themselves up as much as possible to that circumambient field—to feeling that field’s changing dynamics in his/her body and nerve endings. The open form method of composition allows the compositional process to be constantly effected by changes in the dynamic conditions of the poet’s circumambient field. Accordingly, an open form poem is constantly changing, and each change instills new life and fresh energy into the poem.<sup>518</sup>

According to this model, reality (the field) is thus a net of energies. These forces are continuously in motion. Subjects are agglomerates of energies concentrated into a single point, and the particular ability of the (good) artist depends on his or her sensitivity towards this field. The artist perceives the movements, frequencies, intensities and qualities of these forces and transfers them into a work of art. He or she transmutes them through the material of the medium. As in Olson’s concept of projective verse, energy transmission constitutes the base of such an open form. The work, whether a poem or a film, is continuously and suddenly changing because it is a registration and transmission of the internal and subjective changes in and of the artist. It is evident how such a system is compatible with the spiritual tradition already described. I shall discuss in the following chapter how the resulting formal fragmentation of such art, as a consequence of its endless sudden changes, does not only conform to a desire to be aligned with the dynamic nature of reality, but it is also the result, at least in Brakhage, of a formal imperative regarding the nature of revelation, mirrored in poetry by paratactic *vers libre*. Given Elder’s preference for the reality-as-change principle underlying Olson’s views, he assesses Brakhage’s work as a further articulation of such an open form movement. Even if in Elder’s overview the ultimate aim of the work of art is to register external reality’s changes upon the subject, this model is useful here to illustrate upon which kind of reality Brakhage’s spirituality was integrated, and his idea of the body built.

Since the authors mentioned by Elder were heavily influenced by Pound, it might be tempting to establish an identity between this system and *pneumophantasmology*. However, lacking any spiritual or ineffable elements, the

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<sup>518</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 464.

movement that Elder posits neglects key features of its artists' aesthetics, and depends too heavily upon technical and almost scientific explication. This model certainly does not exhaust for instance Duncan's art, or for that matter Brakhage's, when compared with their own aesthetic statements. On the other hand, the technical aspects of *pneumophantasmology* are undoubtedly far from contemporary sensibilities, buried under a thick layer of ancient philosophical debates and forgotten doctrines despite their piecemeal recovery by Pound and other occultists. Given an inaccessibility to original sources in Pound's philosophical lineage, Brakhage found for instance in Olson's guidelines a confirmation and a "vocabulary for what he had already discovered as his essential concerns".<sup>519</sup> Elder's account is thus useful primarily in understanding the general position of the body for the artist in Brakhage's aesthetic, and not as a complete account of that aesthetic, given the absence of the spiritual aspiration of his art, its ultimate goal, in Elder's account. What in Elder's model of creative production are sudden changes and energies are in Brakhage's aesthetic statements perceptions, nervous excitations and emotions. The body is not only the instrument for "catching" them, but also serves as their vessel, without which they would not exist. Furthermore, the body itself provides for Brakhage the "blueprint" for their visualisation. Such corporeal experiences are manifestations of an ineffable divine, as well as something pushing the subject towards a divine state, and thus the body, and by extension the physical world, becomes the location of spirituality itself.

The preference for so-called organic over geometric forms marks also an important theoretical distinction for Brakhage from the more conservative aspects of Pound's ideology. Elder discusses T.E. Hulme's theories on the same distinction between these two kinds of forms, because of his influence on Vorticism, and thus on Pound and, consequently, on Brakhage. In Hulme's distinction "between 'vital' (*i.e.*, Romantic) art and 'geometrical' (*i.e.*, Classical) art", he (and Pound) favoured "forms that possess the shapely elegance of human thought" over "the messiness and confusion of the natural world".<sup>520</sup> This preference goes beyond a simple formal choice, since it is intended as an expression of a precise perspective on reality. Brakhage in fact went further in his opposition to geometrical shapes by associating

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<sup>519</sup> See James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 41.

<sup>520</sup> See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 73.

them with imposed rules and schemata that serve to limit free perception. As the opening paragraphs of *Metaphors on Vision* famously show, Brakhage regarded language itself as such an imposition. Given that education is required for the acquisition and facility in language use, Brakhage viewed it as quintessentially opposed to his ideal of naturally “untutored” vision. Similarly, he viewed narrative as analogous to language, since narrative constitutes a sort of “grammar” of the visual, as I will discuss in further detail in the subsequent chapter. Brakhage believed that by being faithful to the throbs and impulses of the body, the subject can be truthful to the world, allowing access to that divine state which is both movement and stillness, unity and fragmentation, ineffable but certainly perceivable; and, conversely, by not being “honest” towards the nature of the body, the subject surrenders to an inhumane, destructive mode of thought. As Brakhage described it, the

[...] Human Mind has fashioned its Ideal in despite and despising of its self’s pulp of animal being—an ordering at the expense of cell’s self...a bureaucracy of...a veritable fascism of...sense’s sense of self. Language is but an offspring of this mode-of-thought, for all words are but signs evolved from, and implicit in, the geometries of thinking.<sup>521</sup>

Here, again, Brakhage was employing the body as a tool for understanding the world. His disagreement with Hulme’s theories, and the corollary ideas that prized geometrical, authoritarian, and phallogocentric ideals (including ones that Pound ultimately espoused), was directly related to Brakhage’s apprising of “untutored” vision, and the concomitant “untutored” idea of spiritual revelation, above all else. Such distinctions between what might seem only formal ideals are particularly helpful in detaching Brakhage from the worst aspects of a tradition from which he otherwise took so much. Eva Hesse explains the influence of Wyndham Lewis and Hulme on Pound in relation to a philosophy of space, as opposed to a philosophy of time, where the geometric serves as an expression of a hierarchical view of reality.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 71.

<sup>522</sup> For this and the following considerations see Eva Hesse, *Ezra Pound: Metodo e Follia*, translated into Italian by Renato Pedio, (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1983), pp. 50-53. Originally published in German as Eva Hesse, *Ezra Pound: Von Sinn und Wahnsinn* (München: Kindler Verlag GmbH, 1978). I am referring here to the Italian edition of the book, since an

In *Time and Western Man* (1927), Lewis attacked the process philosophy of Bergson and others as a menace to a hierarchical structure of power. The political consequences of this philosophy of time, according to Lewis, would be a revolutionary egalitarianism attempting to establish mass democracy, as opposed to the aristocratic or class-structured society desired by Lewis. In accordance with these ideas, and in contrast with his former mentor Bergson, Hulme, in his *Speculations* (1924), hailed the geometric spirit as the quintessential embodiment of reactionary conservatism. Brakhage, while ostensibly apolitical, indirectly condemned such social and economic views through the aesthetic distinction he made between the geometric and the organic, and in wholeheartedly favouring the “messiness” of nature.

The abstraction Brakhage forged was thus non-geometric not only because for formal, aesthetic reasons but also for conceptual ones. It extended to his views of other artists as well: while he expressed little interest in the European geometric abstraction of Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian, he deeply appreciated American Abstract Expressionism.<sup>523</sup> This preference was due to what Brakhage saw as the effort, in the latter movement, to represent inner bodily experiences, an effort Brakhage likewise felt necessary since at least his early apprenticeship, and that culminated in his “moving visual thinking” process:

[...] in those days (we’re talking 1957-58, maybe until 1959), I began to be aware that a lot of what was called abstract expressionism was rooted in closed-eye vision, and I began consciously searching my own closed eyes for forms, shapes, areas [...].<sup>524</sup>

Brakhage referred insistently to the body in many ways, not only as a practical source of artistic inspiration, but also with a sharp awareness of the theoretical consequences of body-centred aesthetics. The unruly, personal, and mysterious features of his gnostic spiritual revelations are maintained by and connected to his aesthetic and theoretical positions. Giving the relevance of the body

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English translation of this study does not yet exist.

<sup>523</sup> See Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 56.

<sup>524</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*

in Pound's occult ideas as well as in *pneumophantasmology*, with its role as the place of the manifestation and reception of divine influences, the unmediated knowledge/experience of it Brakhage was pursuing, was functional to the project of being able to truly perceive such influences. In this sense his stances towards the body are relevant to his spiritual quest.

### 3.2 – Existence is rhythm

Brakhage's spiritual and scientific understanding of a reality composed of emotions, experiences, inputs and outputs, excitations, energies, invisible forces, complementary polarities, lights, dances, and songs, manifests itself aesthetically in waves, vibrations, radiations, pulses, surges, ripples, beats, and flows. What all these features have in common materially is the ability to manifesting themselves through different kinds of rhythm. Rhythm, as a common attribute of every type of movement in the cosmos, becomes for Brakhage a crucial element linking bodily, astronomical, emotional, natural, spiritual, and artistic phenomena. It becomes, in a sense, a sort of secret, "untutored" language through which all the elements of creation influence, communicate, and differ from one another, and through which their similarities and congruence become recognisable. Thus rhythm becomes a privileged way in which the spiritual potential of things manifests itself and can be perceived by humans. This in turn becomes central for artistic expression. The various elements that Brakhage saw as all-encompassing cosmic forces tending towards an ultimate unity, such as light, song, and dance, all manifest themselves through rhythmic vibrations, waves, or movements. Brakhage found in rhythm a common thread linking art and life, materiality and spirituality. He viewed it as crucial to his cinematic work, not only because his films often tend to abstraction, causing rhythm to become one of the most prominent and perceivable features, but also because, in his opinion, it is as central an aspect in the cinematic medium as it is in music. For Brakhage cinema is visual music and a film is literally "rhythmed light".<sup>525</sup> Since Brakhage's idea of rhythm has a "somatic basis",<sup>526</sup> his idea of music is an "equivalent of the mind's

<sup>525</sup> See Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 148.

<sup>526</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 276.

moving”.<sup>527</sup> In fact, the movements of the mind, the nerves’ electrical rhythm or what he called “one’s own physiological song”,<sup>528</sup> are where he looked for the rhythms that he in turn transferred into his films. Through such a process he hoped that his editing “relates to the physiology of everyone”.<sup>529</sup> He attempted also to formulate a technical explanation as to why rhythm becomes so important in visually expressing the mind’s movements:

I think the mind’s eye’s electrical output to the backsides of its optic nerves does express itself in rhythm shifts [...].<sup>530</sup>

*The Dante Quartet* can serve as a useful example of Brakhage’s “rhythm shifts” and their intended reflection of inner phenomena, specifically in the film’s second part, *Hell Spit Flexion*. In this way they can properly convey spiritual meaning to the viewer. As I have already discussed, *Hell Spit Flexion* was inspired by Brakhage’s memory of hearing a man coughing through the walls of a hotel, a situation that, due to the period in which it occurred and the overall stated meaning of *The Dante Quartet*, came to epitomise for Brakhage his growing distance from his first wife. Brakhage stressed that the rhythmic qualities of *Hell Spit Flexion* mimic the act of coughing, and that the film reflects the physical act of trying to get rid of pain and torment. *Hell Spit Flexion* is the shortest part of *The Dante Quartet*, roughly 40 seconds; a first version appeared in 1983 as a stand-alone film, before being slightly modified and becoming the darkest part of *The Dante Quartet*. Its hand-painted moments were almost entirely created atop a print of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981). Together with *purgation*, *Hell Spit Flexion* constitutes the transit of the subject from hell to heaven, and, more precisely, it is the part in which for the first time the subject becomes aware of a possible way out. For this reason, the picture space of *Hell Spit Flexion* and *purgation* is re-framed inside a smaller frame within which images are contained. While in the latter part, the window within the frame is the same width as the frame but shorter in its height, giving a panoramic

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<sup>527</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 18.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>530</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 134.

proportion, in the former part the window has the same shape and proportions as the frame (4:3) but with curved edges and a picture space only one-fourth of the frame's area. Its central positioning increases the sense of distance between the viewer and what is intended to appear beyond a threshold. The blackness of the thick frame, as well as the predominant blackness of the images seen within the window, make *Hell Spit Flexion* the darkest part of *The Dante Quartet*.

*Hell Spit Flexion* begins with very quick and rhythmically irregular shards of images flashing within the small central window. The first flash is of a filmed, abstract green blur, while the second is of painted, or scratched, dots over the thin green silhouette of vegetable stems. This is followed by very brief similar images giving the sense of a quick, momentary visual noise disturbing the quiet of the blackness, like a person clearing his throat being disturbed or interrupted. Darker bits of images with a green dominant hue appear fleetingly. All these bits of flashed images are divided by relatively long moments of total blackness. The window lightens up slightly during a couple of quick pans of the camera over to what seems to be grass, but with such a speed that the result remains abstract, and the only clearly perceivable elements are the intense green and the violent movements forwards and backwards. A short series of abstract, sometimes photographed, images begin to appear, among which the first clearly perceivable non-green one is shown, in yellow/orange shadows. Many bits of images then follow one another, mixing filmed abstract effects with hand-paintings. The frenetic rhythm is marked by a stroboscopic-like effect obtained by always having an almost imperceptible black frame between each image and the next. The dark, leaf-like green continues to be the dominant colour, apart from black. After a further cascade of machine-gun-like bits, the central rectangle becomes completely filled by a light peacock blue, slightly changing to ultramarine, azure, or light cobalt hues, each time traversed by light waves. This is the most sustained image in *Hell Spit Flexion*, and it stands out because it fills the whole window with a plain still colour, with the exception of its delicate tone variations. The blue rectangle returning for an instant after disappearing, before giving way to what seems to be the green profile of a spherical object hanging from over the top side of the rectangle. The impression is of a distant planet in front of a strong source of light, even though it may also be a common

object filmed in extreme close-up. The only visible object is the green profile casting equally green lens reflections. Again hand-paintings with dust-like dots, or scratches, appear before an enigmatic white, small, out-of-focus light hanging in the blackness for a brief moment. Four brief flashes of flowing hand-paintings, over the thin profiles of small vegetation against a pervasive blackness, appear divided by relatively long black pauses, again giving the sense of sudden, quick and violent spasms disturbing the calm of the blackness. Then the final, sustained sequence of hand-painting over *The Garden of Earthly Delights* print, pours in with its frenetic pace, reinforced by the crusty, static-like bits of coloured fragments over the still dominant blackness.

The detritus-like bits dominating the film might suggest the idea of mucus traces over an internal, dark tissue like the walls of the throat. And the rhythm of the film comes to serve as a kind of protagonist, since the irregular but quick succession of images gives an almost annoying, insistent sense of coughing in the attempt to get rid of such sediments. In this sense, the value of the hand-painted images in the film is the reverse of their usual function, since they appear here as something the subject wishes to go away and not to contemplate. Their insistent return in this highly somatic piece creates a disturbing sensation of anxiety, like sudden spasms of coughing. The apparently short duration of *Hell Spit Flexion* might likewise correspond to the duration of a long attack of intense coughing, when, for instance, there may be something stuck in the throat. Furthermore, the long, central pause of the light blue passage may reflect a moment of apnoea caused by intense coughing. Moments of apnoea, which also occur in, for instance, asthma attacks, are known to sometimes affect the vision of the subject, generating an impression of clear colours. Brakhage, indeed, used to suffer from asthma in his youth, and he has elsewhere associated the whiteness of the tree in *Dog Star Man* with this affliction.

The rhythm of *Hell Spit Flexion* becomes, then, the expression of a bodily act, inspired by a specific episode in the life of Brakhage and related to his personal situation during that period. The act of spasmodically getting rid of something through repeated attempts is not only indicative of the act of coughing, but it assumes other resonances in light of his personal life and, more importantly, it assumes a potentially universal meaning when considered as part of *The Dante Quartet*. In the

context of the complete film, it represents part of the process of struggling towards elevation and spiritual illumination, where, in the moment right after the hellish state of mind, the possibility of a still-distant way out is recognised, and purgation is required to achieve that end. The rhythm is therefor primarily somatic, and clearly perceivable and experiential as such by the audience, but it becomes also a fundamental step within a spiritual process that necessarily passes through the corporeality of the world and expresses itself in rhythmical shifts.

A further property of rhythm observable in Brakhage's work is that of immediately associating sound with moving images, since both sound and light travel in the form of waves. To Brakhage this association of sound and moving images was natural, not only because of their inherent connection in cinema, but also because similar positions were held by the *pneumophantasmology* tradition Pound and his poetic descendants subscribed to. Such a tradition, in fact, considered sight equally relevant to sound, since the process of falling in love—regarded as the process through which the love that elevates the spirit is accessible—is mainly sparked by “the glances of lovers” which are “an influence from *pneuma* to *pneuma*”.<sup>531</sup> It is again through that medieval *milieu* that this idea came to Brakhage via Pound and Duncan. The way in which a textual work of art can physically affect the subject was defined by Duncan as “textual dynamics”, a concept which is, according to Elder, directly derived from Dante:

Duncan [...] believed that Dante was interested not only in the allegorical production of meanings but also in “textual dynamics” (what a text *does* rather than what it says). [...] Duncan understood Dante to mean [...] that the sound of a poem, in its original language, the unique interplay of its metres, rhymes, alliterations, enjambments, caesuras, and so forth, is capable of generating poetic meaning apart from the translatable significance of its words.<sup>532</sup>

This idea of rhythm as a physical, universal vibratory device was crucial to Dante and Duncan, considering particularly Dante's aversion to linguistic

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<sup>531</sup> See Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 105.

<sup>532</sup> Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 405.

translation.<sup>533</sup> Also Brakhage was of the idea that “poetry can't be translated”,<sup>534</sup> referring to the unavoidable loss of rhythmic and musical qualities in a translation from the original language to another.

Given the primacy accorded to rhythm in such a philosophy, establishing an analogy between poetic rhythm and “rhythmed light” was quite natural to Brakhage. Duncan referred to the physically ecstatic potential of this feature in the work of art not only when he argued against the loss of meaning intrinsic to translation, but particularly when he described the verbal constructions of certain poems as “more potent than opium” and “psychedelic drugs”.<sup>535</sup> Pound, likewise, warned about the incomplete appreciation of Dante’s greatness on the part of those who do not know Italian, due to its essential rhythmic qualities.<sup>536</sup> In relating the rhythms of music and poetry, Pound theorised that

the time-interval between succeeding sounds *must* affect the human ear, and not only the ear but the absolute physics of the matter. The question of where one wave-node meets another, of where it banks against the course of another wave to strengthen or weaken its action, must be considered.<sup>537</sup>

Pound further insisted on the importance of the effect of a work of art on the physiology and (consequently) the spirituality of its audience, echoing the concerns of medieval love poetry in transferring influences “from pneuma to pneuma.” In fact, for Pound all the technical devices of all the arts are ultimately reducible to rhythm. For him, music was “pure rhythm”,<sup>538</sup> and his belief in an “absolute rhythm”<sup>539</sup> came

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<sup>533</sup> See Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p. 152 and Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking”, p. 405. They quote the same Dante's passage.

<sup>534</sup> See Brakhage, *The Test of Time*, [n.p.]; a series of radio programs Brakhage hosted in 1982, now transcribed by Brett Kashmere and available at <http://www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage/TestofTime.html> (accessed 27 August 2015).

<sup>535</sup> See Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*, p. 57.

<sup>536</sup> See Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 154.

<sup>537</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>538</sup> See Pound in David Anderson, *Pound's Cavalcanti: An Edition of the Translation, Notes and Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 18. See also Pound quoted in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 197.

<sup>539</sup> See Pound, *Literary Essays*, p. 9. See also Pound in Anderson, *Pound's Cavalcanti*, p. 18; and

from the certainty that the rhythm of a poem “corresponds to emotion” and that it is the duty of the poet to make sure this correspondence is as exact as possible in respect of the “emotion which surrounds the thought expressed.”<sup>540</sup> This exactitude in art and its subsequent effect on the subject manifests what cannot be uttered, revealing the ineffable through an intersection of maker and receiver, physiology and cosmos. For both Brakhage and Pound, their respective arts aspired ultimately to a sort of universal music, not limited to any specific medium.

Olson’s theory of projective verse likewise provided a clear, technical guideline in articulating Brakhage’s wish for his rhythms to reach others. Olson famously defined a poem as “energy transferred from where the poet got it [...], by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.”<sup>541</sup> As previously discussed, this technical outline is the conclusion Elder reaches in his long essay about the artistic and spiritual influence of Dante on Brakhage.<sup>542</sup> Such a formulation is indeed quite useful in describing Brakhage’s position in respect of the actual functioning of the work of art, but it does not encompass Brakhage’s ultimate aspiration for such a work, namely, that of inspiring spiritual revelation. For Brakhage the aim of art is “to leave people free, but *to move* them, to affect them.”<sup>543</sup> Similarly, in Pound the form of a poem is an *active* pattern that the artist applies in order to “set things in motion.”<sup>544</sup> These ideas were either reinforced or mediated for Brakhage by Duncan’s textual dynamics, since they concern “what a text *does* rather than what it says”.<sup>545</sup>

It would be almost impossible to label, or even recognise, all the rhythms Brakhage employed in his work, or even sometimes within a single film. Even if it is possible to draw general analogies with musical forms, such as Peter Mudie attempted to do in establishing that “frozen frames become sustained notes; superimpositions establish chords; pacing/interchange form arpeggios; alterations of

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Pound quoted in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 196.

<sup>540</sup> See Pound in Anderson, *Pound’s Cavalcanti*, p. 19. See also Pound quoted in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 197.

<sup>541</sup> Olson, *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>542</sup> See Elder, ““Moving Visual Thinking””.

<sup>543</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 118.

<sup>544</sup> See Pound quoted in Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 19 note 3.

<sup>545</sup> Elder, ““Moving Visual Thinking””, p. 405.

hue become change in pitch, tone or volume”,<sup>546</sup> these would be so intertwined with one another and different depending upon each subjective viewer and viewing that rhythmic analysis would be unclear at best and inaccurate at worst. What nonetheless remains is a clear sensation of a musical structure, possibly close to a combination of fugues, but idiosyncratic in its articulation. This would be the result of rhythm derived from Brakhage’s own particular body. The seductive mystery of the films where such rhythmic construction appears most visible, namely, the hand-painted abstract ones, is doubled by the difficulties viewers experience in recognising and articulating their experiences of those rhythmic effects.

Elder tried to illustrate this difficulty in identifying Brakhage’s rhythms by framing their features against the background of Pound’s paratactic *vers libre*. The difficulty of articulating or isolating the rhythmic structures would, according to Elder, be a consequence of their eschewing “the repetition of elements of equal measure”, of their taking “their inspiration from the movements of nature” which are “free and unequal in length”, and finally of their “lack of a dominant tactus.”<sup>547</sup> Brakhage, too, when trying to describe the different rhythms he mixed in the films, did not arrive at any clearer articulation of the matter. For instance, in attempting to tentatively describe the various rhythms present in a non-abstract film, *Deus Ex* (1971), he noted,

By rhythmic recognition I mean that I was hand holding the camera and all the movements at the edge of the frame where my camera jiggles with my breathing and my heart and my steps and my movements are all of one set of rhythms, that’s dividing with three sets of rhythms. The second set of rhythms is the movement of the people within the picture. The third set of rhythms are the moments where I change shots. So here are three rhythm sources and they must work together so that I can look at all three of them at once, they make an articulation that seems right for the objects that the light was bouncing off of when I’m photographing.<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Peter Mudie, ‘It Within Itself: Mimetic Fissures in Brakhage’s Object Collage/Time Paintings’, paper delivered at the conference ‘New Approaches to Stan Brakhage’, Birkbeck University, London, 7 March 2015.

<sup>547</sup> See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 68.

<sup>548</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage at the Millennium*, pp. 7-8.

Brakhage's rhythms are clearly perceivable, often pleasurable, and match the emotional tone of each specific film, but at the same time they can be hardly labelled or fitted within the common rhythmic categories of music, poetry, or even cinema itself, except in an extremely generalised way. Brakhage believed, in accordance with his philosophical positions and cultural influences, that this was due to the rhythms coming from the inner and outer natural world.

Art for Brakhage was a practical way of conveying spirituality to other people, and at the same time remained an inherent part of the physical world in which the spiritual manifested itself. The corporeality of the world is particularly relevant to Brakhage's spirituality—a corporeality that is not merely an end in itself but that is always a specific part of a larger organism which includes all aspects of reality. The physicality of the world, like the body, becomes prominent especially because it is the primal and privileged way of feeling or perceiving the depths of the cosmos. For that reason, Brakhage strove to learn and articulate through art how the body perceives and how the world external to, yet still connected with, the body impinges upon it. The body is thus not only a metaphor for the relationship of the artist with the whole cosmos, but the privileged place for the artist to experience, understand, and articulate such a relationship. Within such a philosophical system, the sexual act is what overcomes the barriers between sensations and emotions, between physicality and spirituality, in a revelatory relationship with other beings which, at the same time, acts as a connection with the entire cosmos. Brakhage's view of the body as a miniature cosmos reflecting the heavens, and the consequent correspondence of micro and macro, reflects his desire for revelations guiding the subject closer to a sense of completeness. Brakhage thus located truth in "bio-logic", in the organic life of "Meat-ineffable" as opposed to the rigidities of geometrical forms and thinking, with their restricting hierarchical structures that, in his opinion, penetrate the subject corporeally.

Brakhage's attitude toward science follows naturally from this spiritual stance toward the corporeality of the world. Brakhage viewed scientific knowledge or scientific data, such as photographic images, mystically, searching for its spiritual aspect or potentiality. Much as the occultism in Pound's time interpreted scientific

discoveries as confirmations of mystical theories, Brakhage understood science in combination with his personalised and syncretic *Weltanschauung*. For this reason, scientific elements coexist in his work with spiritual and mystical ones. Such a fusion of science and spirituality dates back to at least medieval *pneumophantasmology*, as described by Agamben. Brakhage still looked to the physical world with an “innocent” or “untutored” eye, always in search of the wondrous as a sign of and vessel for the spiritual.

Brakhage’s focus on corporeality further led him to identify the body as the source of art, and to search for a “language” common to all the world’s dimensions and forces. Rhythm became for Brakhage that element common to art, life, matter and spirit, recognisable as light, sound, movement, form, vibration, cycles, atomic and subatomic matter, bodily functions and acts, and cosmic forces. As I have pointed out, the multitude of rhythms considered under such a perspective are difficult, if not impossible, to definitively catalogue, though, in the highly somatic and idiosyncratic rhythms Brakhage employed in his work, it is nonetheless possible to clearly, and physically, perceive them. Given the primacy of rhythm in Brakhage’s work and philosophy as the medium through which spiritual revelation may be expressed or inspired, rhythm may further offer a clue to the form of Brakhage’s vision of ultimate cosmic unity, or paradise.

#### 4 – THE FORM OF PARADISE

This chapter discusses how, as a consequence of what discussed in previous chapters, Brakhage's spiritual quest articulates and manifests itself. Fragmentation is then identified as a strategy to which he was naturally predisposed, and that was later employed to theoretically and formally shape discourses and imageries that would suggest or create the prerequisite for spiritual revelation. This produced a view of reality as fragmentary and contradictory, an indeterminacy and "confusion" that, as we have already seen, was the necessary condition to access the mystical unity with the cosmos. Fragmentation is so pervasive among Brakhage's techniques and in his thinking, that in the first part of the chapter an introduction is provided to generally assess the concept within his art. Physiological reasons for fragmentation will be discussed along philosophical ones. This will highlight a tendency of the artist to give back a sense of reality as complex, contradictory, and indeterminate. This was the necessary condition for his liberatory and "anarchic" spirituality. This also brought Brakhage closer to the philosophy of Romanticism. The second part of the chapter shows how Brakhage's fragmentation was akin to the literary parataxis of figures such as Pound, and employed in the same ways: to bring the work closer to the dynamism of a spiritual reality, and conveying spiritual revelation itself. In the third part of the chapter, Brakhage's aversion to language grammar and to narrative are put in the perspective of his spiritual project as forces antithetical to his sense of the sacred, and thus threatening it. His critiques of grammar and narration are then discussed for the first time as also dependant upon his sense of the sacred and as relevant parts of his spiritual quest. The last part of the chapter works as a sort of appendix in which Brakhage's tendency to look for the sacred in common and everyday situations and objects, is seen as a formal resource derived again from Pound's occult tradition, in which the divine is experienced through the quotidian.

Fragmentation is a distinctive trait of Brakhage's cinema, as well as of his theoretical positions. It is a very important concept that has many articulations as well as many consequences. Here I shall give a very general introduction of its

presence and relevance in Brakhage, according with the scope of this dissertation. In this chapter it will in fact be assessed as the theoretical and practical form in which we can think of, articulate, and communicate, the ineffable Brakhage was pursuing through his art. Since the beginning of his career Brakhage employed a quick pace in his editing, which by the turn of the 1960s was already becoming one of his signature techniques. This, coupled with the discarding of narrative elements, produced a cascade of rapid images that gave viewers a heightened sense of fragmentation. This sense was, indeed, accurate, because the viewer was presented with actual fragments of images, bodies, landscapes, abstract hand-paintings and unidentifiable shards. The subjects of the films were presented in bits and pieces, with a pace that made it difficult for eyes unused to seeing such films to grasp anything more than fragments. Already by 1964, the New American Cinema's main spokesman, Jonas Mekas, described this tendency as follows:

The camera now picks up glimpses, fragments of objects and people, and creates fleeting impressions, of both objects and actions, in the manner of action painters. A new spiritualized reality of motion and light is created on the screen, as in the work of Brakhage [...].<sup>549</sup>

Interestingly, Mekas immediately associated this technical trend with an increased “spiritualization of the image” (in fact, this was the title of his article). But while many complained of headaches after watching some of Brakhage's films, for others the films were still too slow because their vision had adapted to the demands of avant-garde films.<sup>550</sup> Mekas concluded that what the New American Cinema needed was “an audience that is willing to educate, to expand their eyes. A new cinema needs new eyes to see it.”<sup>551</sup> Mekas mainly credited Brakhage for such an expansion of vision.

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<sup>549</sup> Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier Books, 1972), p. 144.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119. Discussing audience members for whom the single-frame technique was still too slow, Mekas simply commented that “Brakhage has done his work” (p. 157). Three years later, in 1967, he noticed when screening Brakhage's films that no one lamented single frames any more, and that such a technique appeared normal since their eyes had been trained (pp. 295-296).

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Brakhage's somatic art, as I discussed in the previous chapter, requires the fragmentation of the visual material, as well as of the visual experience of the audience. I shall frame such fragmentation in a similar way to Mekas, as a sort of "spiritualization", though not only of the image but also of the visual experience, and I shall discuss it as another key feature of the film-maker's spiritual quest. Fragmentation, for Brakhage, was the form in which the spiritual imperative was necessarily manifested and experienced in the work of art; indeed, it was also the intrinsic form of the cosmic unity, the paradise, he sought, as well as the technique through which something common and familiar—an experience, a situation, an emotion, a percept, or an object—was transfigured into a spiritual vehicle, to be ultimately appreciated in an ineffable state of mind. What could ultimately "extract" the spiritual potential from otherwise daily situations and images.

Two instances of how fragmentation has been assessed in Brakhage's critical literature are directly relevant to the topic of his spiritual quest: the first because it is possibly the most unexpected and original interpretation of Brakhage's technique, and still demonstrates how his fragmentation is pointing beyond itself and towards the ineffable; and the second because it discusses fragmentation as a crucial part of a strategy to make meaning exclusively through the film medium, and conducive to spiritual revelation. The first discussion is by Fredric Jameson, who considers the abstraction of the Modernist fragment, to which Brakhage's fragmentation is ascribed, and its incompleteness, as analogous to the abstraction and incompleteness of money within the business of finance capital. The fragment is regarded as an incompleteness that implicitly refers to something else, something missing. What is interesting, apart from the singular choice by Jameson of Brakhage as an example, is his identification of fragmentation as a distinctive feature of the film-maker's aesthetics, as well as the description of its peculiar characteristics:

This could be described, in analogy with music, as a deployment of quarter tones, of analytic segments of the image that are somehow visually incomplete to eyes still trained for and habituated to our Western visual languages: something like an art of the phoneme rather than of the morpheme or the syllable [...] the will to confront us with the structurally incomplete, which however dialectically affirms its constitutive relationship with an absence, with

something else that is not given and perhaps never can be.<sup>552</sup>

Jameson finds musical and linguistic analogies apt in describing Brakhage's art, and he comments on the same feature Mekas stressed more than thirty years earlier: that the common eye needs to be trained, sensitised, in order to appreciate Brakhage's cinema, implying a radical (conceptual, theoretical and practical) difference between the common, "Western" way of seeing and that conveyed in Brakhage's films. Moreover, Jameson detects in Brakhage's use of fragmentation an incompleteness, a sense of directing the "attention elsewhere, beyond" the work of art; though Jameson cannot articulate it, in Brakhage's aesthetic statements this "elsewhere" was defined as the spiritual dimension towards which the fragmentation directs the viewer, a dimension which would exhaust the function of the work of art as a vessel to it, and thus, in a way, abolish it.<sup>553</sup> In the absence of knowledge of Brakhage's statements or of the philosophical traditions he drew from, Jameson accurately registers many of Brakhage's effects without being able to frame them in the vocabulary which would have been familiar to the film-maker. Thus, for instance, Jameson notes that Brakhage's rapid editing provokes "estrangement and bewilderment",<sup>554</sup> and this effect would be, in strictly occult terms, analogous to the phase of confusion of the *dromena*, the descent into darkness, immediately preceding illumination. Jameson detects these effects even if he views them from an entirely different perspective. Indeed, such processes are perceivable to Jameson just on a purely sensual basis, which does fit squarely with Brakhage's precise intention.

A second instance of how Brakhage's fragmentation has been critically assessed is the work of Rebecca A. Sheehan, who sees the film-maker as at the centre of a recent debate about overcoming theory within Film Studies.<sup>555</sup> Brakhage's cinema constitutes for Sheehan the chief example of how films "philosophize" by offering "a model for thought that replicates the autonomy of linguistic meaning".<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 24, Number 1 (Autumn 1997), pp. 246-265; p. 263.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>555</sup> See Rebecca A. Sheehan, 'Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday', in *Screen*, Volume 53, Issue 2 (2012), pp. 118-135.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

This “model for thought”, representing an actual replacement of theories expressed through language, would be built, according to Sheehan, through “a repeated engagement with the ordinary or the common; his employment of the fragment; and his subsequent investment in the immediacy of the present”.<sup>557</sup> Sheehan traces this potential of Brakhage’s cinema back to the poetic fragment and the notion of “means as meaning” espoused by many of his poetic influences.<sup>558</sup> This new model of meaning emerges as embodied in “the provisional and the fluid”, opposed to the false sense of completeness resulting from providing “a map that takes us ‘from A to B’”, by instead “showing us how to accept that neither such a map nor absolute clarity are required”.<sup>559</sup> The resulting model of meaning, which Sheehan terms “nomadic”, is the openness of the artwork that Brakhage sought in his art, embodying his ideas of reality as manifestly complex.<sup>560</sup> In light of Brakhage’s spiritual quest, the deep meaning of the “discourse” conducted by Brakhage’s films, following the three aspects Sheehan highlights (engagement with the ordinary, employment of the fragment, and investment in immediacy), is to be found in revelation; or, in other words, those three aspects are functional to his spiritual quest. Thus the ordinary, the everyday, is transformed through fragmentation, forcing the receiver of the work of art to confront a continuous present which embodies and accepts reality as complex and incomplete, or ineffable and mysterious.

It is important to point out here that fragmentatio did not immediately become a function of Brakhage’s spiritual quest, and it was not originally pursued for that reason. Its spiritual import emerged gradually for Brakhage, becoming functional to his spiritual beliefs in many ways, but his use of the technique was originally pursued due to the physiological specificity of the film-maker, and in particular of his eyes. Medically, Brakhage’s eyes did not allow for a typical visual experience of the world. Apart from having “bad astigmatism” and having his right eye “always adrift” and not focussing well (he had “to really struggle to come to focus”, and in fact many of his films present out-of-focus images),<sup>561</sup> the possible cause to his propensity for a

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-119.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., pp. 119-120.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>561</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 46.

fragmented view of the world was revealed to him during a visit to an optician:

One time, an optician, on looking into my eyes, said, “Well, by your eyes, physically, you shouldn’t even be able to see that chart on the wall, let alone read it. But, on the other hand, I have never seen a human eye with more rapid saccadic movements. What you must be doing is rapidly scanning and putting this picture together in your head.”<sup>562</sup>

According to the optician, Brakhage’s way of perceiving an object was to rapidly pick up bits of the image and then let his mind compose them into a coherent whole. This is exactly the way that many of his films are constructed, as Mekas already highlighted in 1964. Saccades are “rapid and intermittent jumps of eye position” unconsciously made by the eyes several times each second in order to scan an object to gain a fixed and complete image of it.<sup>563</sup> In general, the very act of seeing can be described as “a sequence of discrete ‘snapshots’”, something very close to a film.<sup>564</sup> But if the movements are too rapid, the action of synthesis of such fragments by the mind is impeded, and a means of vision comes to constitute a vision in itself, as Brakhage’s borderline visual experiences might suggest. After reporting the optician episode, Brakhage immediately speculated about a parallel with poetry, in which poets with similar physical “deficiencies” would come to exploit such a limit in order to produce great art.<sup>565</sup>

There is also a philosophical reason why Brakhage found fragmentation so congenial. In 1990 Brakhage argued that a too simple truth “is bound to be a lie, considering the complex nature of Being”, and that “[t]he Paradoxical” is “a way to get at Complex Truth.”<sup>566</sup> He clearly declared his belief in a reality that accepts

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<sup>562</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>563</sup> Vicky Bruce, Patrick R. Green, and Mark A. Georgeson, *Visual Perception: Physiology, Psychology, Ecology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>565</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 47. Brakhage mentioned Robert Creeley and Larry Eigner as examples.

<sup>566</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 194. The complete passage is also quoted in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, pp. 227-228. Brakhage was referring to metaphors and puns, but the idea of reality as complex and paradoxical went beyond his reflections on literary devices.

dualities and contradictions, and where metaphors, fragmentations and puns are valid ways of resolving such dualities and accounting for the paradoxical, “complex nature of Being.”<sup>567</sup> This idea of multiplicity as a distinctive and ultimate character of reality was one of the cornerstones of Romantic philosophy, a movement to which Brakhage declared himself a lifelong advocate. In German Romanticism, in fact, an ultimate definition of reality is deemed impossible, but at the same time this impossibility is regarded as rich with possibility. In a discussion of Novalis, Andrew Bowie quotes a useful definition of indeterminacy to clarify this point:

indeterminacy consists, not in the rejection of meaning, but rather in the claim that there is always more than one acceptable way of assigning meanings to utterances.<sup>568</sup>

Novalis himself programmatically wrote that “[i]f the character of a given problem is its insolubility, then we solve the problem by representing its insolubility”;<sup>569</sup> while Friedrich Schlegel, another poet/philosopher like Novalis, considered it a “[m]assive mistake, that only *One* definition is possible of every concept”.<sup>570</sup> In literary works, to which the German Romantics were mainly referring, the way of celebrating the world’s indeterminacy is represented by the fragmentation. Texts would be structured as a series of fragments with the formal aim of mirroring the structure of reality itself. Likewise, Brakhage considered the incompleteness resulting from the openness of the work of art, as part of the literary epic’s form.<sup>571</sup> The Romantics’ view of reality was an holistic one, a perspective Schlegel further elaborated when he wrote that “[a] real single phenomenon is completely determined

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<sup>567</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 194.

<sup>568</sup> Malpas quoted in Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>569</sup> Novalis quoted in *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>570</sup> Andrew Bowie, ‘Romantic Philosophy and Religion’, in Nicholas Saul, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 175-190; p. 175.

<sup>571</sup> See Jim Shedden in Stan Brakhage and Ronald Johnson, ‘Another Way of Looking at the Universe’, in *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences, Chicago Review*, Volume 47/48 (Volume 47:4, Winter 2001; Volume 48:1, Spring 2002), pp. 31-37; p. 32.

and explained via *the context of the whole world* to which it belongs”.<sup>572</sup> And for Novalis, “truths can only be understood holistically, because meaning is depending upon ever-shifting contexts”.<sup>573</sup> This holistic perspective brought the Romantics to focus upon language and music as systems in which every element—a letter, a note—takes on meaning only in relation to all the others. The multiplicity of the world could also be expressed at the level of grammar, as in the case of Friedrich Hölderlin’s use of parataxis. But the representational aspect of literature was considered as limiting, and this was one of the reasons for which philosophy was judged inadequate to convey ultimate truths. The questioning of representation was fundamental for a theory of language that was growing in that period,<sup>574</sup> and for further developments of abstraction within the visual arts and in music. Novalis, for instance, defined music as “obscure and incomprehensible”, something “like a waking dream”.<sup>575</sup> Bowie concludes that Novalis went so far as to explicitly prefigure “later conceptions of non-representational art”.<sup>576</sup> It is easy to understand why Brakhage was so fascinated by such positions, and why his own statements echo these views.

In order to articulate what for Novalis was the insolubility of the world, due to its indeterminacy, Brakhage employed the fragmentation of the image and relied exclusively upon his intuition for its creation. His creative process in a state of trance was based entirely upon intuition, a feature so distinctive to his art, and so uniquely devoid of those clear and precise definitions that the Romantics and later Sheehan deemed not only impossible but inherently inadequate, as to lead avant-garde film historian A.L. Rees to term Brakhage’s method “intuitionism”.<sup>577</sup> Even when Brakhage spoke of the formal coherence of the work, he only tentatively managed to describe his working method while more generally resorting to broader descriptions of feelings and ideas. The struggle to impart rhythm and harmony to fragmented

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<sup>572</sup> Schlegel quoted in Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, p. 67.

<sup>573</sup> Bowie, *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>574</sup> For Romantic theories of language, see *ibid.*

<sup>575</sup> Novalis quoted in Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 31.

<sup>576</sup> Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, p. 68.

<sup>577</sup> Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, p. 73.

material is evidently, for Brakhage, in the service of a visual experience structured to express a much deeper, ineffable harmony:

Something needs something else, and I'm searching, searching, searching, and suddenly, *there's* something that seems to *be* what's needed there, so I try to put it there, and it doesn't have the right rhythm. So then I go back and search and search and find another thing that seems like it should be there, and this one also has the right rhythm—but not the right color; it doesn't work with the melody of color that the sequence has set up. I go on searching, searching, searching, and finally all of *these* things are satisfied, but it looks like a *tree* where we haven't introduced it. More searching. You can truly go mad. And then suddenly you might find fifteen things in a row that just go together perfectly. And here's the hard part: you're holding in mind also, for a year or at least for many months, certain formal imperatives that have to be accounted for before you end, in order for the work to be entirely cohesive.<sup>578</sup>

In Brakhage's description the difficulty of this way of proceeding is evident, as well as his inability to explain how, in the end, the works were produced with the rhythmic beauty that so many viewers had been able to sensually perceive. There is no formula, yet neither is it possible to describe this process as determined by chance or mathematical operations, as Eric Smigel, a scholar with a musical background, tries to when he terms Brakhage's compositional methods "stochastic procedures".<sup>579</sup> This is more inaccurate than the film-maker's descriptions, no matter how vague or unclear they may be, since Brakhage articulates that there is a rhythmic drive, an intuitive one, even if it is impossible to identify it. Similar to the *vers libre* which Pound composed "by the ear", Brakhage somehow managed to compose "by the eye". The distinction between intuition and irrational, chance operations is fundamental in understanding Brakhage's work and aesthetics, and the distinction echoes the concerns of Romanticism, often labelled as irrational:

[Friedrich] Schelling's view of intuition is in fact anything but irrationalist. He

<sup>578</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 101.

<sup>579</sup> Eric Smigel, 'Metaphors on Vision: James Tenney and Stan Brakhage, 1951-1964', in *American Music*, Volume 30, Number 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 61-100; p. 85.

actually sees art as a way of rationally coming to terms with those ‘intuitive’ aspects of ourselves which cannot be rendered into complete discursivity. This gives art a vital political function, in that it is to communicate both abstract ‘ideas of reason’ and ways of coming to terms with sensuousness in universally accessible forms [...].<sup>580</sup>

The example of Schelling sets up a clear distinction between intuitive and irrationalist aesthetics. This is also a crucial distinction for the spirituality of Brakhage and Pound, which attempted to articulate something ineffable while escaping rational formulations. The sensuous experience of the divine, the revelatory state of mind, is something beyond rationality but not irrational. Likewise, the fact that the revelatory state exists outside of rationality is not a valid reason for an otherwise rational subject to discard or ignore it. Both Pound and Brakhage were faced with undeniable experiences of spiritual revelation, but were also forced to confront the difficulties of grasping those experiences, let alone communicating them.

There is another concept derived from Romanticism that Brakhage explicitly adopted to resolve reality’s multiplicities and keep together or harmonise fragmented, discontinuous, and often contradictory states: John Keats’s negative capability. In a 1992 interview Brakhage responded to the question “What would you expect of your audience?” by saying

[...] I would hope, if I had a wand, I would touch them with Keats’s negative capability, “to live in appreciation of mystery without any irritable reaching after fact or logic ... ” I’m paraphrasing here.<sup>581</sup>

In 1997 he also connected the concept of negative capability with the romantic openness of the work of art,<sup>582</sup> while Charles Olson qualified the term as the

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<sup>580</sup> Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, p. 251.

<sup>581</sup> Brakhage in Higgins, Lopes, and Connick, ‘Grisled Roots’, p. 62. Keats wrote that such a state is achieved “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (John Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats: Revised Edition*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 60.)

<sup>582</sup> “[...] that openendedness [*sic*] that begins with Romanticism without that being dependent upon stitching things along the line of fact and logic.” (Brakhage in Brakhage and Johnson, ‘Another

ability to stay “in the condition of things”, in a “continuous” reality as opposed to “the rigidities of the discrete”.<sup>583</sup> Fred Camper argues that Brakhage’s films try “to see beyond the oppositions they contain” by maintaining them and “at the same time imagining a state beyond all dualities”.<sup>584</sup> Sitney also comes close to such a position when he writes that, for the film-maker, “dialectical uneasiness is a source of strength”, even if for him this has a different meaning (*i.e.*, the formal opposition of consciousness and nature) than that which Brakhage refers to above.<sup>585</sup> The process described by Camper of seeing beyond oppositions, and his noticing that “the use of contradictions by religious artists to express the ineffable has a long history”,<sup>586</sup> come closest to my reading of such a quality as functional and integral to Brakhage’s spiritual quest, which is paralleled by the effect Pound intended for his *Cantos*: to produce a healing in the sense of making whole, “to join the solar and lunar parts of mankind”.<sup>587</sup>

Peter Liebrechts also employed the concept of negative capability to describe Pound’s use of ambiguity,<sup>588</sup> a feature which, in turn, may have been a consequence of the prohibition, in occult traditions, of directly speaking of the arcanum. Furthermore, this ambiguity, or “openness” as Brakhage termed it, was part of the cultural and conceptual framework that Pound built from what Liebrechts acknowledges as a “Neoplatonic tradition”. That cultural and conceptual framework “was flexible and malleable enough” in order for Pound to be able to express his “often consciously vague, and never systematized religio-philosophical worldview without ever being forced to become too explicit.”<sup>589</sup> The openness of Brakhage’s cultural and conceptual framework was similar to Pound’s, though Brakhage was never ambiguous about his experience of epiphanies (and in fact even Pound was not quite as ambiguous as Liebrechts describes), and tried to be as clear as possible about

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Way of Looking at the Universe’, p. 36)

<sup>583</sup> Olson, *Collected Prose*, p. 120.

<sup>584</sup> Camper, ‘Brakhage’s Contradictions’, p. 96.

<sup>585</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 209; also quoted in Camper, ‘Brakhage’s Contradictions’, p. 92.

<sup>586</sup> Camper, ‘Brakhage’s Contradictions’, p. 95.

<sup>587</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 187 note 27.

<sup>588</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 11-12.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the content of such experiences, albeit with frequently inarticulate results.

Brakhage's term "aesthetic ecology", formulated during the 1990s, is a prime example of such an attempt to articulate his experience of epiphanies through a concept close to Keats's negative capability. While the concept was never wholly defined, it surfaced during the 1990s in interviews and conversations as a way of suggesting a type of balance, or, indeed, even "more than balance".<sup>590</sup> In this formulation, all the elements of the work of art must be balanced or integrated within the work. They must coexist even when they contrast with one another, and whether they are accidental or undesired. The openness of the work would then allow it to contain this kind of tension and contradiction without collapsing. So the aim of aesthetic ecology, representing always his final intent for each work,<sup>591</sup> involved both the process of creation and the existence of the work in the world, intended as its interaction with "everything else."<sup>592</sup> For instance, in the relationship between subjects, aesthetic ecology would serve to mediate, nourishing, as he believed that only art could, that empathetic process which for Brakhage was at the base of inter-subjective communication. Thus, "the integrity or the ecology of a work of art can override the intrinsic differences between each of us."<sup>593</sup>

Negative capability for Brakhage is then a "special ability of strong artists" addressed to overcome the law of non-contradiction in classical logic, since it

adapts the artist to the all-to-frequently denied perplexity induced by the realization that reality is inherently contradictory; negative capability, then, enables the artist to tolerate reality's antithetical character.<sup>594</sup>

This ability was for Brakhage "a valuable antidote to our culture's tendency towards rationalization",<sup>595</sup> and as such, it pertains to what is outside and beyond the rational, which is not irrational but rationally ineffable. Negative capability would then also be the way through which antitheses are harmonised, just as, in more occult

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<sup>590</sup> Brakhage in Taaffe, *Composite Nature*, p. 137.

<sup>591</sup> See Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 144.

<sup>592</sup> Brakhage in Taaffe, *Composite Nature*, p. 137.

<sup>593</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 152.

<sup>594</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 228.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

terms, Pound struggled to reach unity, or Duncan referred to the “variety of the one”.<sup>596</sup> The intent behind this harmonising effort is not to erase the complex, fragmented, open nature of reality upon which it is applied, but to overcome the divisions between seemingly autonomous aspects, illustrated rather clearly in Brakhage’s struggle with his disparate, fragmented materials during the editing process. Such a glimpse of a possible unity from consistently fragmented elements is a crucial part of the revelation addressed by his art.

A short, less than three minute, abstract, hand-painted film from 1994 was directly inspired by a prose-like poem by Novalis. The film is here interesting for establishing an apparent structure that is then revealed as ephemeral, thus articulating the coexistence and interplay of predictability and openness. The work is then aligned with the contradictory and dynamic nature of reality as part of the process to reveal the spiritual potential of such a reality. The title, *From: First Hymn to the Night—Novalis*, is quite self-descriptive: it declares the title and author of the poem that inspired the work, as well as the fact that the film draws from it only little pieces. The film contains text pieces of the poem, hand-scratched onto the film by Brakhage. The selection of text fragments utilised by Brakhage is significant for two reasons: first, because such a selection does not obey grammatical rules, but as with the rest of the film’s methodology it is based upon fragmentation; and secondly, because the words have a distinctively mystical resonance (as well as a cosmic one), giving the film, and the kind of reality it envisions, a markedly spiritual tone.<sup>597</sup>

The film establishes a structure, though that structure undermines its direct apprehension by the viewer. Sixteen text fragments, hand-scratched over black film, are followed by sixteen passages of abstract hand-painting. Each text fragment, as well as each hand-painted passage, varies in length: the hand-painting passages vary

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<sup>596</sup> Duncan, *The Collected Early Poems and Plays*, p. 11.

<sup>597</sup> The following text fragments appear in the film: “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.” (Stan Brakhage, description of *From: First Hymn to the Night—Novalis* on the Canyon Cinema online catalogue, <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=367>; accessed 29/01/2016)

from fourteen seconds to a fraction of a second, a flash. This unpredictability in the film's structure, its irregularity, while immediately identifiable as an organising principle by the viewer, disappoints any attempt to anticipate what will come next, or how quickly it will pass. While this effect may give the impression of a chaotic disorder, it was intended to force the coexistence of two seemingly opposing principles—namely, a “soft”, partial structuring, and a renewed unpredictability at each combination of passages. The film is, in a sense, entirely composed of such coexisting oppositions: for instance, the written words combined with the totally abstract passages; the white words scrawled over the black background, in turn contrasted with extraordinary explosions of different colours; the illusion of movement contradicted by the single-frame technique; the words hand-carved frame-by-frame, resulting in shaky, irregular outlines, flickering and moving continuously, and remaining on the screen for just a few moments, thus confounding comprehension of material evidently intended to be read; and the juxtaposition of sometimes smooth passage from image to writing parts, with at other times sharp cuts from one to the other.

Given the difficulties of apprehending the film's structure and textual referents, what strikes the viewer most clearly in the film is the wondrous painting work, which appears even more valuable because of the intermittent access that the film grants to it. The abstract painted passages constitute a virtual catalogue of different techniques and levels of intricacy in passages downright frantic in their pace. Each passage employs one or more different painting techniques and painting substances, so that each one is different in its intricacy as well as in the sensation conveyed to the viewer. There are brighter and darker passages, passages where one or more paint layers are visibly and minutely cracked, others where the colours are more liquid or transparent, others where the paint is so thick as to give the impression of a heavy crust. Often two filmstrips are superimposed, nearly overwhelming the visual experience. Sometimes the colours seem to be scratched into the black background, or seen through it, or blotched, or dripped upon it from a distance. The illusion of direction in the visual flow is not always that of ascension, as commonly occurs in Brakhage's hand-painted single-frame works. Often the marks left by the paintbrush or putty-knife contradict the directional impression,

creating an illusion of movement different from that created by object placement on consecutive frames. As with the paradoxical multiplicity of reality described by Novalis, one can hardly *make* sense, in the common sense, out of this visual experience; instead, one is asked to accept its overwhelming beauty and complexity, its paradoxes, and hold them together through negative capability.

#### 4.1 – The freedom of paradise

Brakhage's fragmentation of cinematic materials might best be understood in the context of Brakhage's poetic influences, corresponding to their use of the technical device parataxis. In discussing this literary technique, I shall extend the meaning of the term to encompass not only the placing together of sentences, clauses or phrases without a conjunctive word, but also the placing together of concepts, images or other disparate materials without overt links to smooth over or prepare the transitions from one moment to the next. This kind of paratactic technique, both in its grammatical function and in its extended conceptual use, was commonly employed by the poets that Brakhage named as inspirations and mentors, and it offers a clear precedent for the abrupt jumps between fragmented materials in Brakhage's films. As described above, Brakhage had a vision of reality as contradictory and fragmented, and this was also his view of the spiritual experience. So this technique was meant to align the work with reality, and at the same time it elicited spiritual revelation in the viewer.

Beyond marking a further affinity between Brakhage's cinema and poetry, parataxis also serves to highlight Brakhage's distance from the more prosaic concerns of narrative cinema. In Brakhage's films, the visual fragmentation, through its sudden paratactic leaps, leaves no room for simple identification with character or story, thwarting any potential identification by the viewer, or forcing such identification to renew itself at each new moment, in a continuous present. This was intentionally designed to affect the viewer's sense of self, as Brakhage expressly pursued a "poetic cinema where you can live in the continuous present and can

always have an infinite number of possibilities.”<sup>598</sup> The description Elder gives of his open form movement can be useful here to elucidate Brakhage’s intention for his films’ viewers, when he writes that “[w]e must open ourselves to the throb of life that every moment of experience conveys.”<sup>599</sup> Fragmentation for Brakhage thus exceeds the limits of a simple technique, embodying rather a world-view with the aim of not only disrupting existing norms, but also, as Fleming highlights in discussing Pound’s and Eisenstein’s use of the ideogram, of approaching an “unmediated relation” with the world, and a “direct treatment” of reality.<sup>600</sup>

Gerald Bruns, in an essay about Adorno and literature, further elaborates upon the meaning of parataxis, attributing to it connotations of a philosophical anarchism as they might manifest in avant-garde experimentation:

[...] the idea that paratactic form displaces the writing subject onto language is one of modernism’s most venerable doctrines, incarnated perhaps most perfectly in many of the writings of Gertrude Stein [...]. The idea presupposes (that is, opposes) the thesis [...] that the subject is constituted by the logical form of the proposition: the ability to say “I” and to recognize oneself as such is entailed in the power of the predicate. [...] But the dissociation of fragmentary writing—the juxtaposition or, as Adorno might put it, the constellation as against the interconnection of phrases—deprives the subject of a place to present itself. There is no starting point, endpoint, or any standpoint in between. [...] the point is that parataxis is outside the logical and cognitive “phrase regimens” on which identity depends, so nothing follows from the *I think*, just as nothing makes it possible.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 59.

<sup>599</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 465. The final aim of parataxis for Olson was to confront the reader with “not the thing’s ‘class,’ any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself”. (See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 383; and Olson, *Collected Prose*, p. 158)

<sup>600</sup> Fleming, ‘The Ideogram in Pound and Eisenstein’, p. 93.

<sup>601</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, ‘On the Conundrum of Form and Material in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory’, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 66, Issue 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 225-235; p. 229. Among other examples of poets who employ parataxis, Bruns mentions Pound, Zukofsky, and Olson (p. 228).

In this radical questioning of accepted assumptions, the ego of the I is counteracted, the audience (be it reader or viewer) is locked in a continuous present, and the linear unfolding of time, with its relations of before and after, is cancelled. All these features apply to many of Brakhage's films mainly through the fragmentation of the visual experience and the rearrangement of the fragments according to different imperatives, such as, for instance, somatic rhythms. More importantly, these features become the necessary prerequisites for eliciting in the viewer that displacement which leads to the ecstatic moment of spiritual revelation.<sup>602</sup> The viewer in such a process would also experience harmony, through negative capability, with opposing tendencies, such as, for instance, the author's self-referentiality. For Brakhage, the paradoxical tension between strong individualism and the tendency to dissolve the subject through a unifying parataxis was quite intense.

In Bruns's view, paratactic texts performed a sort of semantic anarchism by disrupting the predetermined value and use of words and letters. For instance, Stein's heavily paratactical writings unhooked "words from events, people, and objects".<sup>603</sup> Similarly, Brakhage aspired to "a freeing of each image (as her [Stein's] each-and-every word) to its un-owned self-life within the continuities (rather than context) of the work."<sup>604</sup> Stein's technique, as Bruns stresses, also forced the reader into a continuous present. Such a relation to time is often the case in paratactic poetry, and nearly all the poetry that Brakhage praised employed parataxis. For Olson, whose poetry regularly leapt across centuries (as did those of Pound and Duncan), places and ideas from one line to the next, "[e]very moment of life is an attempt to come to life";<sup>605</sup> while Duncan, in formulating his poetics, argued two points of direct relevance to Brakhage's art: a paratactic aesthetic technique frees the particular from the universal, and overcharges meaning to express a complex truth.

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<sup>602</sup> The etymology of the originally spiritual term "ecstasy" comes from the Greek for "standing outside oneself".

<sup>603</sup> Ulla Dydo in Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, ed. and with an introduction by Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 568. Also quoted in Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 326.

<sup>604</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 201.

<sup>605</sup> Olson quoted in Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 465.

[T]he phrase within its line, the adjoining pulse in silence, the new phrase—each part is a thing in itself; the junctures not binding but freeing the elements of configuration so that they participate in more than one figure .... [The poet] strives not for a disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures, so that words are freed, having bounds out of bounds.<sup>606</sup>

For Duncan, the disruption and accumulation of multiple levels of meaning, building up to a constellation so complex that it begins to evaporate meaning itself, frees the artwork and, in turn, its audience. Likewise, Brakhage praised an accumulation of meanings, and for him this constituted the specific power of a poem: to present “multiple layers of meaning so interlocked with each other that you could say *that* is the most exact and complete meaning that we can manage with language.”<sup>607</sup> This was the same result Brakhage was trying to reach with images, first through superimpositions and then with rapid fragmentation. This wondrous confusion of meanings displaces the viewer, whose spontaneous act of identification comes into conflict with the paratactic form of the material, producing a “discontinuous sense of the self”.<sup>608</sup> This discontinuity presents the subject with the possibility of continuously regenerating itself, in a continuous present. A further consequence of such paratactic discontinuity would be an internal undermining of the author’s ostensible values in artworks apparently conditioned by the author’s point of view. As Elder summarises,

The self who identifies with the broken unity dies and is replaced by a new self with every shift in direction. The sense that the self dies and is reborn continually is the deepest implication of Pound’s paratactical forms—as it is of Stein’s use of repetition with difference. [...] Such a self has neither a past nor a future, however. Hence, the time of the continually altering self is the continuous “now.”<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*, p. 300.

<sup>607</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 71.

<sup>608</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, pp. 451-452.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Esoterically, the death and rebirth of the self is the literal meaning of palingenesis. The moment of palingenesis is the moment of revelation, a moment in which all elements “make sense” as a result of pursuing unity through fragmentation. The fragmentation that Brakhage always practiced became an important device at the service of his spiritual quest of eliciting revelation through the work of art.

In poetry, the path to the employment of paratactical technique was prepared by Pound’s adoption of the *vers libre* form, and his efforts “to break the pentameter”.<sup>610</sup> Brakhage’s first experience with poetic parataxis was certainly through Pound, and even if the poet remained for Brakhage the main authority on “composition by ear”, Elder mentions another possible precedent: Gerard Manley Hopkins. This Victorian poet was the first to adopt “qualitative rather than quantitative metres”<sup>611</sup> in his language; while in Germany, in the previous generation, Hölderlin’s late works and fragments offered a further hint of paratactic possibilities. Hopkins took inspiration from the alliterative qualities of medieval verse, a form to which Pound was also very familiar with. Brakhage knew of Hopkins’s work through the first chapter of his friend Donald Sutherland’s 1971 study, *On, Romanticism*. Sutherland, to whom Brakhage dedicated his film *Burial Path* (1978) on the occasion of his death, centres his chapter around the figure of Hopkins, noting that

[...] it was an idiosyncrasy of his [Hopkins’s] mind to push everything to its logical extreme and take pleasure in a paradoxical result.<sup>612</sup>

Besides other paratactic precedents, which could have encouraged Brakhage’s use of the technique of fragmentation, the shadow that Pound’s work casts on subsequent artists, as well as his pervasive use of such a technique, confirms his

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<sup>610</sup> “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave” (Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 518).

<sup>611</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 490 note 204.

<sup>612</sup> Donald Sutherland, *On, Romanticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 11. Sutherland was also an expert on Gertrude Stein, and in the 1957 first edition of *Stanzas in Meditation*, published by Yale University Press, he wrote the introduction (see Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, p. 325) which Brakhage read. In fact, Brakhage mentioned his use of Sutherland’s explanations of Stein’s technique (presumably from that introduction) in his ‘Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film’; see Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 198.

figure as Brakhage's main point of reference. Among the many reasons why Pound set out to free his poetry from pentameter rhythm and to achieve his compositional method "by the phrase",<sup>613</sup> one of the most important was the one at the core of Surette's and Tryphonopoulos's studies: to achieve a poetry that could induce revelation in its audience. About this desire of Pound's, Elder comments that

Pound hoped that paratactical constructions would release an exciting force, that the interaction of the elements brought into proximity would produce an impulse that would incite the reader's mind to an epiphany.<sup>614</sup>

Alongside this desired epiphanic effect, parataxis also had the function of aligning the poem with what the poet believed to be reality, with its flux-like fragmentation, of inducing revelation and simultaneously reproducing the conditions which would allow access to such a state. And the content of the epiphanic, paradisiacal state itself came to be viewed by Pound as likewise fragmented and paratactic. Throughout *The Cantos* Pound offers descriptions of such conditions:

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel

but spezzato apparently

it exists only in fragments unexpected excellent sausage,

the smell of mint, for example<sup>615</sup>

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel

but is jagged,

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<sup>613</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 357, quoting Duncan.

<sup>614</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 210.

<sup>615</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 438; "spezzato" is Italian for, in this case, "discontinuous". Mint is one "of the hieratic herbs related to the vision of paradise." (Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Volume II (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 378)

For a flash,

for an hour<sup>616</sup>

“non sempre” (in the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Convivio)

or as above stated “jagged”<sup>617</sup>

In the crisp air,

the discontinuous gods<sup>618</sup>

According to Pound, it is possible to access paradise only momentarily, in a discontinuous way, when one’s sensibility is properly disposed to enter it thanks to the “proper lightning”, “fitfully and by instants.”<sup>619</sup> Such a disposition is induced, or built, by the fragmentary but harmonic structure of the work of art, and based upon common, everyday experiences (such as, in Pound’s examples, the smell of mint or the taste of sausage) transfigured in a continuous present. Likewise, for Brakhage, “the flickering quality of theophany”<sup>620</sup> is what the viewers are meant to experience through the frantic cascade of images. Pound almost seems to write about Brakhage’s cinema when he described his own “flickering” paratactic technique:

[...] I occasionally cause the reader “suddenly to see” or that I snap out a remark ... “that reveals the whole subject from a new angle”. That being the point of the writing. That being the reason for presenting first one facet and then

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<sup>616</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 620.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid., p. 626; “non sempre” is Italian for “not always”.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>619</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 295.

<sup>620</sup> Kevin Oderman, *Ezra Pound and the Erotic Medium* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 127. Note also that “[i]n this life, Pound concedes, there is no permanent residence in the visionary world. [...] the flickering quality is always the same (the basis in experience, one expects).” (Ibid.)

another [...].<sup>621</sup>

In 2001, Brakhage stated that one of his major poetic inspirations at that moment was Ronald Johnson, comparing his relevance with that of Pound.<sup>622</sup> Johnson, indeed, was greatly indebted to Pound, and particularly to his paratactic technique. Pound's influence was crucial for what Ross Hair terms Johnson's "collage praxis", which attempts to make synchronicity—synonymous, in his use, with what I term the continuous present—"a tangible experience for poet and reader alike."<sup>623</sup> Discussing Pound's influence on Johnson, Hair summarises Pound's poetic method:

Using disjunction, parataxis, truncation, fragmentation, and polyvalence, Pound presents his Luminous Details without discursive bridges. [...] Pound's method establishes relations between different elements (images, voices, quotations, languages, and other cantos), presenting his details contiguously, letting them accrue in the reader's mind. [...] Pound's method emphasizes "relation" over "connection" [...].<sup>624</sup>

Even as Brakhage declared the centre of his poetic attention to have moved to Ronald Johnson, these fundamental features of Pound's poetry were carried over and continued; the multiplicity of inputs and meanings were amassed in the work of art, coexisting in the mind of the reader/viewer via negative capability, and expressed in a necessarily fragmented form. And, just as these fundamental features in Pound's poetry were shared by other poets whom Brakhage admired, so too Brakhage's own work reflected the features of his influences. Following Hair's description of Pound's technique, the technical means employed by Brakhage, the paradoxical and intricate relationships he established between dichotomous states and the compression of different kinds of fragments, aesthetic and theoretical, while always obeying his own idiosyncratic, intuitive sense of harmony, were all intended to accrue in the viewer's mind, to inspire a state of revelation, where all is vertiginously and momentarily

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<sup>621</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 51.

<sup>622</sup> Brakhage, 'Chicago Review Article', pp. 38-39.

<sup>623</sup> Hair, *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry*, p. 62.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

grasped at once.

A short parenthesis is necessary regarding Brakhage's attempt to align himself with this poetic tradition by also adopting a heavily paratactic form in his prose. His desire to be a poet before deciding to become a film-maker left traces in his writing style of a consistently paratactic, poetical tone. All his texts, in different degrees of intensity and with the exception of interviews and conversations, are written in some sort of paratactic structure.<sup>625</sup> The technique was also employed for many of his films' titles. Brakhage was acutely aware of this, and, contrary to his physical disposition towards visual fragmentation, he admitted that this was a predetermined choice:

I deck my prose with whatever puns come my way, aiming at deliberate ambiguity, hoping thereby to create a disbelief in the rigidity of any linguistic statement, knowing only poetry immortal enough to escape the rigorous belief in any one word-world as a sense-killing finality.<sup>626</sup>

His prose thus markedly tends towards poetry, as he believed that, with the important exception of poetry, "language is a damnation of human sensibility",<sup>627</sup> since through its constricting hierarchical ordering and search for precise and univocal meaning, it sacrifices the complexities and contradictoriness of reality. In his puns, as in his fragmented cinematic style, negative capability holds contradictory meanings in balance when, as Sheehan notes, the film-maker's "puns often find within a word or phrase a thesis and its antithesis, one meaning and its opposite."<sup>628</sup>

Composed in the same period as his article 'Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film', *Visions in Meditation* (1989-1990) is a series of four films of about the same length, from material shot during car trips around the United States

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<sup>625</sup> Elder briefly analyses of one of Brakhage's most extremely paratactic texts, which is so discontinuous as to be nearly incomprehensible: 'S.A. #1'; see Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 187. For the complete text, see Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>626</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]; reprinted in Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 29.

<sup>627</sup> Brakhage in Brakhage and Johnson, 'Another Way of Looking at the Universe', p. 36.

<sup>628</sup> Sheehan, 'Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter', p. 124.

and Canada. It derives its title from Stein's work *Stanzas in Meditation*, and constitutes one of the major works at the beginning of Brakhage's final period of activity. The series, completely composed of camera effects and editing (*i.e.*, without hand-painting or other non-photographic techniques), is a meditation upon mostly landscapes and, in some cases, particularly meaningful places to Brakhage. *Visions in Meditation #1* appears as the most abstract of the series, having, for instance, no subtitle to signal a possible theme for the viewer.<sup>629</sup> Given no external referents other than the title's allusion to Stein's experimental text, the visual fragmentation of the first film in this series is prominently on display, exhibiting Brakhage's ability to create revelatory and open experiences out of disparate landscapes, objects, technical effects and other disparate or contradictory materials, all fragmented and linked by organic rhythms difficult to define or articulate. This example is particularly relevant here to highlight how its pervasive and prominent use of the fragmentation technique, inspired in this instance by the work of Stein, marks also an important distinction of the film-maker's project with that of the writer. This difference is the spiritual aspiration of Brakhage's quest, that in this way becomes even more evident. The film is in fact formally constructed around those paratactic strategies central for its literary inspiration, but it maintains a marked spiritual tendency. This is the aspect relevant here: Brakhage's systematic use of meaning-confusing techniques is not exhausted by their most immediate effects, but it is also a device to propose an unmediated experience with the contradictory and dynamic essence of reality and of the ineffable divine. In this sense such displacing techniques come to be functional to his spiritual quest.

The material for the series was filmed during four car trips Brakhage took with his second wife, Marilyn, in April, May and August 1988, and March 1989.<sup>630</sup> During the final trip, driving throughout New England and Western Canada, the material for the first film of the series was shot.<sup>631</sup> The work does not have a predetermined theme or a clear structure. Superficially, it could appear as a simple series of shots of landscapes, spaces and objects randomly gathered. What is

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<sup>629</sup> The other three films in the series are *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde* (1989), *Visions in Meditation #3: Plato's Cave* (1990), and *Visions in Meditation #4: D. H. Lawrence* (1990).

<sup>630</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>631</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 228.

photographed is in fact not interesting or noteworthy in itself. They are actually pretty average subjects in their visual interest or originality. The camera and editing works make them fascinating inasmuch as they suggest questions to the viewer (such as if they are for instance memories, or what particular secret or meaning they can possibly conceal). Brakhage in this way does not transfigure the real, but he extracts, exposes, the wondrous that was already in the real, its spiritual dimension. The rhythms are complex, constantly varying, always restless, but almost never frantic as in other Brakhage's films, except for only very brief passages. The two dominant colours are green and light blue, both usually pale and greyish. Almost all the colours in the film are generally pale or de-saturated; the images tend to have soft tones, due to the film's underexposure.

When the subjects filmed by the camera are recognisable, the image is always disturbed by technical effects, such as a shaky camera, sudden and irregular movements, a heavy film grain texture, an out-of-focus lens, overexposure or underexposure of the film, flashes of light, or the presentation of the image upside down or reversed. In his writings, Brakhage particularly highlighted how the film regularly employed what he defined as "soft-focus"<sup>632</sup> (which might more commonly be deemed out-of-focus), resulting in a blurred imagery that shifts the attention directly to the technical apparatus, the viewer's struggle to see, and the uncertainty of the world depicted. Different degrees of light exposure are also employed, often within the same shot. The environments shown are extremely varied, and appear in seemingly no geographic or chronological order: snow-covered or ice-covered landscapes, sunny, green fields, the ocean, mountains, indoor ambience, close-ups of vegetation, and urban settings. The images defy the viewer to interpret them biographically, as a memory of a day, of a trip, of a life, and in a way challenge the viewer to try to establish connections among them. This impossible task seems to suggest the possibility that the world depicted, and by extension reality itself, is a non-linear multiplicity of elements: images of the world, and depicting the world, are never at rest, and it is as if the world itself, both in the film and in the reality the film implies, cannot arrive at a set definition. All is flowing, moving, no image is complete or fixed. On the other hand, the lack of clear connections, narrative or

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<sup>632</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage at the Millennium*, p. 112.

otherwise, between the images focusses the attention upon other constants in the film —namely, the technical effects specific to the film medium as they trace out the technical apparatus's process of fixing these very images. This, in turn, refers back to the specificity of the viewer's perceptual apparatus, to the very act of seeing and thus of perceiving the world. Images explicitly suggesting memory, such as old photographs, are mixed with shots of common objects or spaces, suggesting attempts at apprehending the world, through estrangement-generating, idiosyncratic technical effects. There is constant ambiguity between the image as the simple carrier of its content, and the act of creating and perceiving such an image; likewise, there is ambiguity between seeing the image as artificial and as tracing the presence of artifice. The film attempts to grasp and present cinematic images as both subjective impressions of the body and of the mind, and as a physical object in itself, subject to a technical apparatus. The undecidability of these two somewhat contradictory statuses is presented without choosing between them, without the necessity of a coherent definition.

Throughout the film the viewer's attention is directed towards some shots which seem to bear more meaning than others in the course of the whole work. This is accomplished through their repetition, or through relatively higher definition or clarity in how the shot was constructed, with, for instance, a single, clear element sustained for several seconds at a time. The most recurrent shot in the film is that of turbulent waters flowing. It is impossible to determine whether they are from a river, the sea or a waterfall, or possibly from each of these, or if they are from the same place, or what slowly eroding material is present on the surface, whether semi-melted, fragmented ice, foam, or some other semi-solid particulate. Such recurrent images are presented through a very grainy, pale mint green tint, which makes the clear apprehension of these images difficult. The graininess of the film, which Brakhage often employed to connect the image with the body's physiology, suggests the possibility that the semi-solid material over the waters, precariously balanced upon the instability of a moving liquid, is metaphor for memories "fixed" over the gelatinous and slippery matter of the brain. But even if certain shots are more poetically suggestive than others, they are interwoven with the rest of the film's fabric in order to achieve a "democratic landscape", where all the elements presented

in the film may “coexist in a nonhierarchical equality of presence—a weave of light experienced as rhythms of mind”.<sup>633</sup> Brakhage, even when recognising the greater prominence of certain images in the film, like that of the flowing waters, nevertheless insisted upon his effort to completely balance all the elements within the film:

And while the waters seem very much the same they are not at all if you watch what they’re related to on either side and what they are themselves and what they’re doing. Each time they occur something slightly different happens or in some cases largely different happens [...] the drive is [...] that all these shots, including those that repeat a lot and those that repeat a little, and those that don’t repeat [...] have to exist within the structure in an equality.<sup>634</sup>

Brakhage made this effort in order to be faithful to Stein’s semantic strategies “to free words from reference and allow [...] them to exist, each with a life of its own, within the jostling of all the words across the length of the poem.”<sup>635</sup> In this way, the idiosyncratic filming of the subjects, the resultant shots’ illusion of being testimonies of an event and memories of a subject perceived through the cinematic apparatus, are contradicted by, and coexist with, what Bruns described as the depriving of a place or space for the subject, with “no starting point, endpoint, or any standpoint in between.”<sup>636</sup> The challenge of this film is to reach a balance between the felt presence of the author, the individualism implied by his arbitrary creation of the work (even when his authority is deflected via the trance state and the inspiration of the Muse), and the evaporation of the subject produced by the form of the work.

In the film, images are disconnected from a common visual grammar and often also from the meaning their content would normally tend to suggest. Their ostensible meanings are disrupted by the fragmentation of the visual material and by the technical treatment of it, in favour of such a fragmentation itself becoming, then, a meaning in itself. Such a fragmentation is also emphasised by a further device that

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<sup>633</sup> Marilyn Brakhage, ‘Some Notes on the Selection of Titles For By Brakhage: An Anthology, Volume Two’, in the booklet accompanying Stan Brakhage, *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, pp. 46-58; p. 48. The expression “democratic landscape” is presented as a quotation from Stan Brakhage.

<sup>634</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage at the Millennium*, p. 115.

<sup>635</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 151.

<sup>636</sup> Bruns, ‘On the Conundrum of Form and Material in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory’, p. 229.

interrupts a smooth appreciation of the filmic illusion of movement: many cuts between images are prolonged by adding a couple of black frames, giving the impression of an eye blink between the two shots. This type of cut is not uncommon for Brakhage, though sometimes white instead of black frames are employed, and it creates a concrete physical effect for the viewer, further directing the attention to the film apparatus itself.<sup>637</sup> In this film, just as Stein had defeated “the traditions of descriptive writing” through her texts, Brakhage tried to free his films “from descriptive or referential imitations.”<sup>638</sup>

In a sense, the fragments presented appear as random percepts of a perceptual apparatus, like cinema or the author himself. And they partly do serve this function, as one aspect necessary for creating the general sense of indeterminacy and openness. But such “freed” images do not become decoration, a mere amusement for an idle eye; they are always on the verge of producing meaning, of suggesting something coherent. But this meaning, achieved through the means of their perception, remains undefined, suspended. The viewer is made to feel intuitions, sensations, but never certainties. Brakhage described his major problem in the composition of the film as balancing the film’s final image of a young boy playing in a park. Such a boy, or what Brakhage significantly termed “what could be called a little boy”<sup>639</sup> (the boy playing *is* indeed a boy playing, but such an expression by Brakhage stresses once again the intended non-referential status of the cinematic image within this work), needed to be balanced enough with the framed picture of a baby that first appeared as the second image in the film, as well as with “a number of other things along the way that are really indescribable, so that he does not dominate the film so that one would say, ‘Well this is the point of the film.’”<sup>640</sup> Brakhage did not want the film to have a point, not because the film does not have one, but because its “point” must remain open, undetermined, un-locatable, and existent only in the relationships among all the elements of the film, in its continuum, and within the

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<sup>637</sup> There is no hand-painting on the film, but the film-maker’s sense of corporeality is always acutely perceivable through camera movements, zoom variations, focus shifts, and other technical effects. The act of visual perception becomes a quite physical, often demanding, activity.

<sup>638</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 199.

<sup>639</sup> Brakhage, *Brakhage at the Millennium*, p. 115.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*

interstices between its oppositions.<sup>641</sup> This indeterminacy as part of a continuum, this fragmentation aspiring to internal harmony and balance, was further intended to open up the possibility for ineffable spiritual revelation.

One of the most unavoidably meaningful shots of the film, along with the framed photographs, the flowing waters, or the boy at the end, is the opening image. Different shots of the facade of a white, wooden church come and go through quick superimpositions with a totally white screen four times, before the heavily reddish, grainy image of a framed picture of an infant is briefly shown. This image of the church, as with the other repeated images, does not appear to be a random, common image, but suggests to the viewer an image given or deserving special attention, because of the function it has in respect of the whole film. Brakhage, in fact, described the role of such a shot in an enigmatic passage:

When this series opens with an image of a white building “whited out,” it is not necessary to know the source of this photograph. [...] The original cluster-of-shapes generated by this photographed church ought to cause (through shape shifts throughout) some sense of The Sacred. Each viewer, left free of *my* church-as-such ought to be able to build each his/her cathedral of the imagination free of architecture altogether. [...] It is simply a complex spiritual matter of author *and* reader, or filmmaker and viewer [...].<sup>642</sup>

Even if the idea the reader draws from such a description is not well defined, one can nevertheless apprehend that it is intended to generally address the viewer’s speculations. For instance, it is clear that Brakhage associates the “effect”, and thus the aspiration, of the film as producing in the viewer a “sense of The Sacred”; that the work tries to move the viewer towards a sense of the sacred without imposing on the viewer a predetermined kind of spirituality; that spirituality as such is suggested but left free, as also the intended final result, the spiritual revelation, must be open,

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<sup>641</sup> In this context, it is worth recalling the passage in which Brakhage, via Stein’s inspiration, stated his “solution” to the risks of a drift towards an empty, decorative abstraction, or the dullness of an illustrative image: “My answer is (as inspired by hers) a freeing of each image (as her each-and-every word) to its un-owned self-life within the continuities (rather than context) of her work.” (Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 201)

<sup>642</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, pp. 201-202.

undetermined, “free of architecture”; that this eliciting of a free spiritual revelation depends upon a personal, specific, idiosyncratic relationship of the film-maker with the viewer, and of the viewer with the film; and that the tensions between the reality of the “Source” of the film, the world, the artist’s spiritual experience, and the act of creation, must always be balanced and coexist with the intrinsic artificiality of the medium. Stein’s work is relevant as the inspiration of a formal strategy for the disruption of immediate, literal, referential meaning. The “abstract mental landscapes that do not cohere”<sup>643</sup> of *Stanzas in Meditation* do not imply a “beyond”, a sense of the sacred. This is the main difference with Brakhage’s work, where vague referential clues and stratifications of possible meanings, suggest something “beyond”, a mystical unity beyond the fragmentation which conveys spiritual revelation; the momentary and ineffable sense of grasping the harmony of all those apparently random images dancing in the visual and rhythmic vortex of the film.

One further aspect enhancing the meditative and spiritual tone of the film is the almost total absence of human figures in the images of landscapes, objects and spaces. John Pruitt points out this distinctive presence of emptiness in the film, and characterises it as one of its major, unifying visual motifs, suggesting that “the title of the series plays on the notion of mystical visions in a desert of wilderness”, and noting, as a further confirmation of this notion, the fact that the whole series opens with image of the white church.<sup>644</sup> The intended spiritual revelation here is thus conveyed by the synchronicity of places, events, objects, spaces, acts, and effects, all equally located in a continuum without any hierarchical or external structuring. The intended sense of wholeness perceived by the viewer is then accompanied by the sudden sense of grasping at once all these diverse and various elements, of being a part of such a continuum, of achieving unity and harmony through fragmentation, and of enjoying this multiform complexity held together by a pre-existent, inherent, or suggested negative capability.

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<sup>643</sup> Ulla Dydo in Stein, *A Stein Reader*, p. 568.

<sup>644</sup> John Pruitt, ‘Stan Brakhage and the Long Reach of Maya Deren’s Poetics of Film’, in Erik Steinhoff, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences, Chicago Review*, Volume 47/48 (Volume 47:4, Winter 2001; Volume 48:1, Spring 2002), pp. 116-132; p. 128.

## 4.2 – Hellish structures

Throughout his career Brakhage criticised what he believed to be the forces “naturally” antithetical to his sense of the sacred and his spiritual quest. He was particularly severe against two connected devices: language and narrative. This opposition proves not only how his spiritual quest was important to him, but also how it was generative of liberating stances towards mental and social constricting forces. I shall use the general term “language” both for being immediately clear, and because it was the term Brakhage himself employed. Nevertheless, what he meant with it was grammar, the order and structures of our verbal expressions, as well as the univocal meaning of words, impeding that stratification of meanings for a single term he advocated. Brakhage’s aversion to language, except for its use for instance in poetry, developed during his formative years, at which time he began to draw analogies between avant-garde cinema and poetry and between commercial, narrative cinema and descriptive prose language. But this critical stance toward a particular use of language, and its theoretical and practical consequences, was not exclusive to Brakhage within his artistic circle; narrative, prose, or even language in general also assumed for many poets and artists an antagonistic role in their aesthetic and theoretical choices. Brakhage believed from fairly early in his career that linguistic acculturation is a process which entails, among a host of psychic and physical constrictions, also the “constriction of the freedom of sight”.<sup>645</sup> He maintained that this process would also constrict “the free flow of memory”, and that the “catastrophic shift in the psyche” a child undergoes, courtesy of linguistic acculturation, accounts for the loss of infantile memories from roughly the fourth year of age onwards.<sup>646</sup> Brakhage believed that language was at the centre of this process of loss and degeneracy, with its ordering and hierarchical logic shaping the human mind in a constrictive way.

Brakhage’s project of freeing the eye so that it must “not respond to the name of everything” but that it “must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception”, as well as his desire to convey through his films the

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<sup>645</sup> MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>646</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 80.

possibility of a world prior to “[in the] beginning was the word”,<sup>647</sup> is incompatible with language as long as language is structurally predetermined by a grammar, a logical superstructure prescribing “correct” and “incorrect” uses, options, and cases, in turn implying the extension of these distinctions as properties beyond language and as inherent in the world. For Brakhage, then, it was natural that such linguistic norms would extend also to human experience of the world, and in particular to visual experience. Brakhage’s understanding of grammar as a constrictive device for verbal expression extended also to film grammar and technique, as he believed that

the codes of lightning, colour temperature, exposure, and camera-handling that characterize Hollywood cinema are similarly repressive [...].<sup>648</sup>

These technical norms were developed in order to guarantee maximum intelligibility and the smooth functioning of another code, a visual super-code in the case of cinema: the narrative. Narrative embodies in film the exact same function as grammar in descriptive language, and carries with it the same implicit limitations. The hierarchies entailed by perspective and causality (the organisation of space and organisation of time within the film, respectively) are a consequence of their compliance with the imperatives of the narrative. In fact, the idea of language’s grammar as the primal device through which meaning is made is particularly strong in advocates of narrative in film such as David Bordwell.

The model posited by Bordwell and fellow advocates of narrative is that of an active viewer applying natural mental schemata to understand the meaning of a film; and since such schemata are believed to be naturally, and not socially, predisposed to understand narrative phenomena, or “narrativised” experiences, such an approach, supported by cognitive theories, presents narrative as a primal and natural fact not only for cinema but also for any medium for understanding and experiencing the world. The extent to which this view is indebted to discursive language and to its grammar is attested by Bordwell, the chief advocate of such a tradition, who argues that by “[r]eading the Theory pick hits of the 1970s and 1980s, you wouldn’t know that Chomskyan, not Saussurean, linguistics was revolutionizing the study of

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<sup>647</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]. Reprinted in Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 12.

<sup>648</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 412.

language”.<sup>649</sup> Bordwell refers to the syntax theories of Chomsky, such as the ‘Generative Grammar’ and ‘Chomsky Hierarchy’. It bears mentioning, though, that some of the same “Theory pick hits” that Bordwell disparages, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, had already attacked Chomskyan linguistics in the 1980s for reasons close to Brakhage’s critical stance:

One that becomes two, then of the two that become four. . . Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree. Even a discipline as “advanced” as linguistics retains the root-tree as its fundamental image, and thus remains wedded to classical reflection (for example, Chomsky and his grammatical trees, which begin at a point S and proceed by dichotomy).<sup>650</sup>

Even when linguistics claims to confine itself to what is explicit and to make no presuppositions about language, it is still in the sphere of a discourse implying particular modes of assemblage and types of social power. Chomsky’s grammaticality, the categorical S symbol that dominates every sentence, is more fundamentally a marker of power than a syntactic marker: you will construct grammatically correct sentences, you will divide each statement into a noun phrase and a verb phrase (first dichotomy . . . )<sup>651</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari developed this critique while elaborating the concept of the rhizome in opposition to the hierarchical, tree-like model of thought. The “types of social power” embedded in this Chomskyan “grammaticality”, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are hierarchical forms of power. These same values are those identified by Ara Osterweil as resisted by a certain avant-garde cinema in which Brakhage took part.<sup>652</sup> The dichotomous progression of excluding possibilities in Chomsky’s model is the same one described by Phil Solomon in relation to narrative in film, and quoted by Brakhage to elucidate the constricting force of narrative form:

When you see the first shot, very often you have a sense of infinite possibility;

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<sup>649</sup> David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York/London: Routledge, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>650</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated and with a foreword by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>652</sup> See Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema*, p. 11.

by the time the filmmaker has given you his/her second shot, your possibilities have been reduced to half. A fifth of the way through the movie, you're on a treadmill that leads in an inevitable direction. And that is the limitation of narrative drama.<sup>653</sup>

The necessities of narrative, as well as those expressed by the “types of social power” implied by linguistic grammar, are incompatible with the very nature of Brakhage’s cinema.<sup>654</sup> Consequently, Bordwell’s model is quite difficult to apply to cinema utilising anything other than story-telling styles, or narrative meaning-making structures. This is demonstrated by the failed attempt made by James Peterson to theorise Brakhage in narrative terms; as well as, conversely, by the much more convincing approach of Taberham, who looked for cognitive theories that would accommodate Brakhage’s positions, instead of forcing such positions within a predetermined theoretical grid.<sup>655</sup> Both critics begin from the same background, but the relative rigidity of Peterson’s approach precludes real attention paid to Brakhage’s non-narrative organic forms. For Peterson, human perception is “fundamentally a search for structures”,<sup>656</sup> which implies the projection of such mental structures upon external reality. As a result of this, Peterson concludes that “we cannot help but perceive objects as embedded in space, related in time and linked causally.”<sup>657</sup> These perceptions happen to be the main features of narrative

<sup>653</sup> Solomon quoted by Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 59.

<sup>654</sup> As Brakhage himself admitted, his films occasionally came close to narrative, most famously in the *Faust* series, made immediately before the *Visions in Meditation* series and its complete opposition to narrative. In such cases in which Brakhage employed a certain degree of narrative, as in some early, formative works, the level of its effect upon the form is always quite “low” and contained, and the works obey primarily the typical imperatives of his art. They never resemble the sort of “hard” narrative structuring of Hollywood commercial cinema, nor even the weak, relatively open narrative of some mainstream *auteurs*, such as, for instance, Michelangelo Antonioni. Apart from the rare moments in which Brakhage resorted to narrative form, the examples are too sporadic to constitute a trend that can contradict the rest of his massive oeuvre, or the amount and intensity of his statements against the form. Finally, such occasional adoption of narrative could also be framed within his ceaseless tendency towards experimentation.

<sup>655</sup> See Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*; Taberham, ‘Bottom-Up Processing’; and my Literature Review in chapter One.

<sup>656</sup> Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, p. 17.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

which Peterson elevates to core, natural and necessary, and not simply possible, features of human experience of the world. The central device for this model is the innate mental *schema* which

is a pattern, an orderly configuration into which experience is sorted so that it might be better managed.<sup>658</sup>

From this striving for better management, Peterson intends to offer with his “theory of spectatorship” a “how-to manual” that can instruct viewers in “how to understand” an avant-garde film.<sup>659</sup> It is obvious how far these principles are from not only Brakhage’s aesthetic intents, but also from the very paradigm of reality from which his art derived, and which his art implies. While what is employed by a subject in experiencing a Brakhage film or a narrative one may be the same (the senses plus the mind), the same set of *schemata* are not employed in the viewing processes. The idea of a mental *schema* working through narrative clues and guesses, expectations and surprises cannot work in the open experience of a Brakhage film since it is contrary to the very nature of its being. In fact, Brakhage insisted on an experience, not an understanding or a reading, of his works, and what he tried to elicit was a perception prior to the threshold of a process of rational understanding. The indeterminacy, the experiences of an “untutored eye”, as well as the ineffable, unruled, and subjective spiritual revelation, cannot be exhausted by a “how-to manual”. Moreover, a process of giving meaning to the visual material of Brakhage’s films is unnecessary, since, as Sheehan argued, they represent an autonomous model for thought in which means *are* the meaning.<sup>660</sup>

According to Peterson, narrative film gives a clear overall structure/meaning at the expense of the details. An avant-garde film gives the details without giving a coherent (predetermined) meaning, which is then left to the viewer to formulate and to decide. In narrative films the end is of paramount importance, and since it is generally predetermined, everything is presented in a teleological way. Peterson compares the importance of details over meaning in the avant-garde film to that of

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>660</sup> Sheehan, ‘Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter’, pp. 118-119.

poetry, but doesn't pursue the analogy any further.<sup>661</sup> The desire to present in poetry (at least in the poetry Brakhage admired) and in film a "continuous present" to generate a perception of the world as un-ruled as possible, materialised in "an infinite number of possibilities",<sup>662</sup> is not considered viable or even possible in the constricting categorisations of Peterson. The fragmentation produced by such devices as the rapid montage and by the absence of a narrative structure, resulting in a visual fragmentation, is for Peterson "not a goal in itself [...]; it is the by-product of a representational system that is dominated by specific types of metonymy and metaphor [...]."<sup>663</sup> This significantly reduces the value of fragmentation to a formal by-product. Yet for Brakhage, fragmentation of materials, alongside their paratactic admixture, had a profound meaning, conveying no less than "the complex nature of Being",<sup>664</sup> as well as the ineffable revelation to which his art was directed.

Throughout his life, Brakhage railed against non-poetic uses of language and against narrative form, because his way of experiencing and understanding reality was completely in contrast with the one for which such language and narrative were intended. Brakhage's rejection of these norms was not only a formal and aesthetic opposition, but was also a philosophical one, a clash of two world-views. A major part in this clash was played by his beliefs about spirituality and art, as his spiritual quest was based upon an ineffable experience, impossible to know or articulate but nonetheless real and transmittable. Furthermore, the fragmented form of such an experience, the ephemeral access to it, and the discontinuous means through which sporadic moments could be achieved, are, again, in plain contrast with the totalising, eschatological, teleological imperatives (what Brakhage would have summarised as closure of the work of art) of the narrative form. The closed form is preeminent in narrative even when narrative tries to enrich its language with more complex, fragmented or discontinuous, forms, since they still have to ultimately obey the story-telling imperative, to be interpreted in a certain way in order for a story to be told. The type of continuous present that Brakhage strove for, where no temporal linear development of before and after can be established, and the experience is

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<sup>661</sup> Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, p. 50.

<sup>662</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 59.

<sup>663</sup> Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>664</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 194.

continuously renewing itself and referring back to the perceptual renewal of the recipient (viewer, reader or listener), is incompatible with narrative, where the self-perception of the viewer is cancelled through an absorption into an illusory identification with the situations, the characters, and the subjective, perspectival point of view of the formal construction of the image. And the attention Brakhage focussed upon the everyday, apparently anonymous and “boring” details of daily life in his search for an immanent and ineffable wonder is incompatible with narration, in which the exceptional, the special, and the unusual constitute the *raison d’être* of the story. Thus, in short, literally all of narrative’s necessarily predetermined and prescriptive elements are in fundamental opposition to the deeper beliefs that moved Brakhage in his artistic endeavour. It is thus possible to frame fragmentation as the form through which we can access the spiritual “meaning” of Brakhage’s film, as well as the proper form through which his ineffable divine is manifested to us. For this reason his opposition to the constricting forms of grammar and narration can be seen as part of his spiritual quest.

According to Gerald Bruns’s reconstruction, the “formal anarchism” produced through paratactic strategies is particularly evident in avant-garde art of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>665</sup> the years of Brakhage’s apprenticeship and early career, and in the contemporaneous or earlier work of literary figures in Brakhage’s pantheon, especially Pound, Stein, Duncan, and Olson.<sup>666</sup> It was especially in the 1950s and 1960s, as Daniel Kane stresses about North American art, that “[p]oetry and film were being fused as a counter to prevailing narrative modes”.<sup>667</sup> Narrative modes were restrictive for avant-garde artists particularly due to their representational and organisational aspects, which dictated the treatment of space and time, respectively. Cinematic narrative, indeed, requires these two elements: the photographic reproduction of subject and place, and the organisation of moments into a causal order, to determine the meaning of the cinematic image, what it represents, and the film’s sequence of events. Already by the second quarter of the twentieth century, this precise logic reached a very intense level of sophistication, up to the point of

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<sup>665</sup> Bruns, ‘On the Conundrum of Form and Material’, p. 231.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-229.

<sup>667</sup> Kane, *We Saw the Light*, p. 16.

becoming the main organising principle of narrative films. Brakhage was not alone in perceiving such imperatives as constricting in their imposition of a specific external logic. As Sean Cubitt explains, in a manner very much akin to Brakhage's statements against narrative, that

[n]arrative offers only tyranny to the spectator. The linear plot, the sequential ordering, the patterning of causes and effects, determine how an audience is to respond, and infects even the composition of individual shots, so that we are guided by framing, focus and compositions towards perceiving that, and only that, which is of primary importance to narration: a gesture, a prop.<sup>668</sup>

Cubitt refers to the "grammar" of the film technique, its representational and organising aspects. The tyranny which guides the technical choices and forces the attention of the spectator is what Brakhage lamented as the reduction of possibilities in a film, paraphrasing Phil Solomon. What is ultimately at stake is the risk that "TV, cinema and advertising could command our attention and our constructions of meaning",<sup>669</sup> and that the praxis of the narrative can become the training ground for the grand "narrative" of history, of personal life, of real events. How narrative codes can penetrate everyday life, which constitutes the microcosmos of the social macrocosmos, and how the fiction of narrative logic can infect reality, was again intuitively perceived by Brakhage when, late in his career, he realised "how people in their daily living imitate the narrative-dramatic materials that infiltrate their lives through the radio, TV, newspapers and, certainly, the movies", poetically naming such a situation "historical flypaper".<sup>670</sup> As Pound had to break the pentameter in order to formally free his poetry from constricting forces, and unleash its potential for eliciting revelation, for the same reasons Brakhage had to achieve an open and disjunctive temporality in his films, and free their imagery from referentiality and perspective.

In narration, time is organised and regulated by the causal principle that governs the unfolding of events. This principle is what Elder defines as the *post hoc*

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<sup>668</sup> Sean Cubitt in Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, p. xi.

<sup>669</sup> Sean Cubitt in *ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>670</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, 'Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview', p. 141.

*ergo propter hoc* principle.<sup>671</sup> It can be translated literally as “after this, therefore because of this”: since an event is followed by another, the latter is caused by the former. Since narrative, in order to exist, must follow the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* principle, there are two consequences: the first is the drive towards an end in displaying events and narrative cues within a story (the simple *meaning* of a story is often to come to an end, such as the moral), and the second is the progressive reduction of possibilities during the unfolding of the story, as stressed by Brakhage. A revealing argument about the former consequence was made by Agamben in an essay about the history contained in modern images in the cinema of Guy Debord.<sup>672</sup> In “modern times”, images are something “mobile”, charged with movement, and they constitute “the very element of historical experience”, “charged with history.”<sup>673</sup> The narrativity contained in the images of TV, advertising and cinema, represents a history related with religion, a “messianic history”, characterised as “a history of salvation: something must be saved”, as well as “a final history, an eschatological history, in which something must be completed, judged.”<sup>674</sup> These aspects are characteristic of the majority of stories seen in films. The obsession with the predetermined and final meaning of a story corresponds with a sense of fatalism. This is what Malcolm Le Grice, in expressing a similar point to that of Agamben, characterises as the main ideological consequence of narrative:

A fundamental characteristic of the narrative form in cinema is the inevitability of its fictional resolution. The outcome of the plot is predetermined and the plot carries its primary significance in the relationship of action to the ultimate resolution. The form of a narrative text itself, in the predetermination of its resolution, is intrinsically fatalistic in form. The viewers’ subjective relationship to this form is in this respect always fatalistic.<sup>675</sup>

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<sup>671</sup> Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, p. 1.

<sup>672</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetitions: On Guy Debord’s Films’, in Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 313-319.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>675</sup> Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, p. 244.

Le Grice implies the possibility that the viewer may extend such a fatalism from the artwork into his/her relationship with the real world and real events, just as Brakhage speculated about spectators reproducing narrative schemata in their daily lives. The teleological character of narrative form also imposes closure, against which Brakhage posited a structural openness and indeterminacy, derived, according to him, from the multiplicity of Romanticism:

Drama is always set up to come to the end [...]. Everything is designed like an equation, to come to the end. Now, if you think about it, that is not true in the history of painting or music or poetry. These forms are ever more open and open-ended, especially as we come into full-blown romanticism.<sup>676</sup>

Le Grice's outline of narrative ideology likewise detects in narrative spectatorship a hopeless impotency of the subject towards the world, as the narrative events are typically completely independent from the viewing subject, mysteriously predetermined, and they force the viewer into emotional identification with specific outcomes. This same ideological effect is ascribed by Agamben to the media, and in particular to the news, in which a fact is given "without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless."<sup>677</sup> On the contrary, Agamben continues, the restoration of "the possibility of what was" is implied in its repetition, which "is not the return of the identical".<sup>678</sup> Repetition would break the flow of narrative which needs to be smooth in order to not interrupt the immersion of the subject in the story, and would give the subject an occasion to reflect upon what is recounted and how, and to determine the subject's relation to such a "tale". Agamben argues that Guy Debord's films, in utilising repetition as their core technique, open "up a zone of undecidability between the real and the possible."<sup>679</sup> Debord's repetition restores "the possibility of what was, renders it possible anew".<sup>680</sup>

It is in much this sense that Brakhage was interested in repetition, and was first alerted to its possibilities through the work of Gertrude Stein. The fascination he

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<sup>676</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>677</sup> Agamben, 'Difference and Repetitions', p. 316.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., pp. 315-316.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

had for the work of Stein was primarily due to the freedom-generating value of her writing strategies, which included repetition. The realisation that there is “no repetition”, and that every time something is repeated it is “new”, freed him to repeat in his films, for instance, “the same kind of movements.”<sup>681</sup> In his 1990 lecture about Stein,<sup>682</sup> Brakhage remarked about how she had taught him “that there is no such imaginable entity as an exactitude of repetition.”<sup>683</sup> So repetition, in this respect, is a particular kind of fragmentation, employed in order to demonstrate that there is no repetition at all; that each new instance is different from the one before it by way of the different conditions of its reception and the different conditions of the subject experiencing it. The device of repetition is the one in which this palingenetic process of placing the viewer in a continuum of presents is more evident and clear, in contrast for instance with films that adopted other, more undetermined, means to achieve the same results, such as for instance somatic, idiosyncratic varieties of rhythms. Although repetition is present in many Brakhage’s films,<sup>684</sup> the first one in which it constituted the central element, becoming the means as meaning of the work in which this ideas was for the first time consciously deployed, is *Sirius Remembered* (1959). A close look at this film will reveal how, already in 1959, Brakhage was trying to reach those effects that will become functional to his spiritual quest, demonstrating once more how the marked spirituality of his later career ultimately affirmed itself as a confluence of many previous thematic and formal trends. As for the case of *Visions in Meditation #1*, also in *Sirius Remembered* a formal strategy of Stein is employed in a work which is ultimately emotional and spiritual, both aspects absent from Stein’s work.

*Sirius Remembered* was occasioned by a period when Brakhage was living with his first wife, Jane, in Princeton, New Jersey. Their dog had been run over and

<sup>681</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

<sup>682</sup> Brakhage, ‘Gertrude Stein: Meditative Literature and Film’, in Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, pp. 194-202.

<sup>683</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>684</sup> As in, for instance, *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), *Made Manifest* (1980), *Tortured Dust* (1984), and *A Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991), among many others. See Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition*, pp. 255, 295, 419, and p. 507 note 389. See also Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 171.

killed by a car, and the ground was frozen, making it impossible to bury the animal. It was instead laid down in the woods close to their house, and eventually Brakhage decided to start filming the dog's corpse.<sup>685</sup> The film was made in a state of trance, and there were already certain elements in it which would find their ultimate place in *Dog Star Man*—Sirius being, in fact, the “Dog Star.”<sup>686</sup> Brakhage recognised right away the influence of Stein in his valuation of repetition in the film, the notion that “there is no repetition”, and that “every time a word is ‘repeated’ it is a new word by virtue of what word precedes it and follows it, etc.”<sup>687</sup> This also underscores the extent to which he was thinking of a parallel between poetry and film, considering, in this case, a cinematic shot as a word, or a superimposition as the multiplicity of meanings of a single word within a poem.<sup>688</sup> Such techniques, which include also a parataxis-like fragmentation of the visual material, were in this film utilised under a trance in the explicit attempt to revive the dog.<sup>689</sup> This spiritual aspiration of the film assumes a “physical” form, both within the content and editing of the film and in the title as it is shown at the beginning of the film: a white, hand-scratched, flickering and shaking writing over black leader, divided in two parts. The first part is the word “Sirius”, after which appears the rest of the title, divided into “RE” on the upper half of the frame, and “membered” in the lower half. Thus from the title screen, the film utilises fragmentation, a dissection of the dog's members (as in the title's words), to be later “re-membered”, put together again as in reviving it, due to repetition (“RE”).

The film opens with a series of shots from a medium distance of a dog's dead body in the autumn vegetation of a clearing in the woods. The shots move gently from left to right or vice versa, but always keeping the body at the centre of the screen, and are taken from a medium distance from behind some tall, thin, branches. There is a suggestion that the camera is somehow spying on the body, and of oscillating while doing so, due to the camera's insistent and repeated movements.

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<sup>685</sup> For a discussion of these circumstances, see Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, pp. 61, 69, and 70.

<sup>686</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, pp. 69-70. Another element the two films have in common is the white tree, which in *Dog Star Man* is the tree the protagonist tries to chop down.

<sup>687</sup> Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.].

<sup>688</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 74.

<sup>689</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 69.

The shots start then to become shorter while the oscillating movements slightly accelerate. As the shots grow shorter, they mix rhythmically with a different shot of the body, brighter in full daylight, still and from above. This shot is then sustained for a moment before the camera pans vertically over autumnal trees and up to the sky, as though mimicking the passage of the dog's spirit ascending into the sky. Then the point of view from above the body again returns, with a movement approaching down towards it. A series of horizontal and vertical movements alternate between pans over the corpse and over dead branches. Details, such as the eye of the animal, begin to appear in flashes, underlined by a different, brighter light. The camera is rarely still, and shots are sustained for rarely more than one or two seconds. Sometimes shots begin from the body and then move away from it, as if running away from the macabre spectacle. Then the pace accelerates slightly, as the camera moves horizontally and diagonally from details of the body towards the environment, or vice versa. It is as though the camera dissects the animal, in its capture of quick details of the eye, the mouth, the paws, the fur, the belly, often enriched with an incipient slight camera movement before cutting to subsequent details. Many images and movements are repeated rhythmically, in irregular, almost musical "phrases". Still details intersect with quick, close movements, resulting in abstraction. A long series of still details precedes a longer series of abstract movements before a "resting" shot of leafless tree branches against the blue sky, sustained for roughly four seconds. Then the dance of details with similar movements and shots resumes, mixed with movements towards the environment or exclusively focussed on the decaying environment. The amount of details, which initially seemed like simple visual information, becomes confused, and it is ultimately unclear if certain images have been previously shown. The rhythm of the visual fragmentation contributes to a sense of doubt and, paradoxically, beauty, in spite of the macabre subject.

At one-third of the way through the film, the image of the entire corpse covered in snow appears, slowly emerging from a superimposition. It is sustained for roughly four seconds, introducing the change in the season from autumn to winter. Then the body and its details are filmed again, with similar angles and movements as before, but this time it is hard to distinguish the body from the ground and surrounding vegetation, since the thick layer of snow confounds shapes and masses.

Horizontal, vertical, diagonal, circular, and even spiral-like movements of the camera are alternated from the point of view of a standing human figure. Flashes of white disturb the vision of the corpse surrounded by snow, then no longer covered, revealing a fur that seems to have somehow regained its original vitality. More abstract movements, too close or too quick to allow for recognisable images, are mixed with the body re-covered in snow, thus returning to what might be considered the “past” of the film. Fur visible through melted snow is then alternated with images of the body completely covered in snow. A few seconds of whiteness precedes shots of leafless branches against a pale sky, with the camera then “falling down” vertically until it settles upon the corpse on the ground, with again no trace of snow, as if it is still back in autumn. After a series of movements upon details of dog parts, the body is shown much more decomposed than before, and from this it is clear that spring has arrived. Pans and oscillations over the corpse, or to and from the environment, are edited together with details of the body’s decomposition. The movements are more marked and complex, with zigzag trajectories, and the succession of images quicken as the camera becomes more restless. Superimpositions between shots begin to be used more regularly, and a pan over the corpse covered in snow returns, before the still-intact dog’s eye from autumn is superimposed over the now heavily decomposed corpse. The white fangs stick out from the black mass of the snout. Shots from different seasons and with different movements are superimposed. In one of these, the fangs are filmed while the camera trembles, giving an impression of the snout moving and growling. The eye is then superimposed as though staring the audience. The same trembling effect of the snout is then applied to the paws. The entire corpse is then filmed from fairly close proximity, with the four paws curled up as though frozen in the act of running, before a sudden, rapid lateral movement of the camera pans towards the woods. As soon as the body leaves the frame, the shot begins again from the beginning, giving an impression of the body running away from the screen. The vertical movement from the dog to the sky, panning up a tree, is then repeated five times, reinforcing the idea of ascension after death. The intensity of edits and close-up shots decreases towards the end with the intricate repetition of shots and movements from earlier in the film.

As this synopsis hopefully makes clear, and as Brakhage himself stated, this

is “a very visceral, physical film”,<sup>690</sup> based upon movement and its repetition(s). The film presents close-ups of the features of the dog’s body most associated with life, such as the eye, the mouth, and the paws. The dog’s corpse is presented from all possible angles (including even upside down), seen through all the possible somatic camera movements which are so characteristic of that period of Brakhage’s career, and superimposed or flashed onscreen, throughout three different seasons. All of these shots and their manner of being edited together reflect the film-maker’s wish to revive or awaken the dog by, for instance, moving it, pushing the corpse slightly as one might instinctively try to do in the presence of a newly discovered unmoving body. But in this case the “pushing” is performed with the camera’s movements, imitated with sight rather than physical touch. The act of seeing here is thus tentatively made to express tactile abilities. The result is that the dog sometimes seems to dance, to move again, to be revived through visual perception of its decaying corpse.

One further note must be added regarding an element of the film which a synopsis cannot quite reveal: although the subject is undeniably macabre, it never actually appears disgusting, since Brakhage’s treatment of the visual material through the camera and the editing never indulges in fetishising details regarding physical death; on the contrary, through the film’s focus upon kinetic and repetitive features, a precise sensation is imparted of the film-maker’s attempt to spiritually revive the dog, or channel its essence towards the sky.

The film tries, by insistently returning to the corpse, in different seasons but with same or similar angles and movements, to restore the possibility of what was—namely, to bring life back into the dog, or even to go back to when the dog was alive. This revivification is the meaning Agamben assigned to the repetition in the cinema of Debord. Agamben was not discussing Stein or referring to Brakhage’s cinema, yet like these artists he began from the assumption that repetition “is not the return of the identical”, but that the novelty of each repeated instance brings with it “the possibility of what was.”<sup>691</sup> Agamben explains that to repeat something is to make it

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<sup>690</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*

<sup>691</sup> Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetitions’, pp. 315-316. Agamben claims that he draws this idea from the four great “thinkers of repetition in modernity”—namely, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze.

possible again, and in defining this ability, which he deems paradoxical, he illustrates the connection between repetition and memory: memory cannot actually bring the subject back to what once was, but it can restore the possibilities of the past. This, in turn, aligns memory with cinema, since both “transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real”, and the cinematic use of repetition “opens up a zone of undecidability between the real and the possible.”<sup>692</sup>

In *Sirius Remembered*, the viewer is faced with uncertainties generated by fragmentation and repetition: it becomes unclear whether the same shot has been repeated, if it is filmed again in the same way, if subsequent shots were filmed in chronology or reversed, if there is an overt connection between the shots, or if there is something the viewer is meant to understand about them. The constant doubt and confusion within which the viewer is placed ultimately highlights the technical treatment of the materials *per se*, allowing the film-maker’s attempt to revive the dog to become the centre of attention, with his obsessive return to the same places, the same movements, and the same shots as though he was unable to let go of the whole situation. The film-maker’s wish for the dog’s revival thus becomes the subject of the film, drawing the viewer into emotional involvement and sympathy with the film-maker. It further clarifies his spiritual stance towards death, with his ultimately clear attempt to instil life into the corpse, as though wanting to go back in time or suggesting a life after death through film, or with in the tentative ascension of the dog’s spirit up towards the skies. A repetitive fragmentation becomes the form of this cinematic spiritual rite.

Concerning the organisation of space, Brakhage praised the flatness of the early cinema sketches of Georges Méliès due to their resistance to perspective, “carrying on the tradition of Siennese painting”<sup>693</sup> in opposition to the Renaissance and the Florentine schools.<sup>694</sup> For Brakhage, film is a flat surface (“I’m paying homage in every way I can to that flatness”),<sup>695</sup> and it must remain so. Combined

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>693</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 102. See also, for the same remark, Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 73.

<sup>694</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 73.

<sup>695</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 102.

with his categorical refusal of geometric forms, this constituted the basic elements towards respecting the specificity of the cinematic medium. For Brakhage, such specificity contradicted the use of perspective, which in the narrative form corresponds to the organisation of space, though it is also related to the organisation of time, because, as Michael Snow once remarked, “events *take place*”.<sup>696</sup>

Brakhage’s valuation of flatness as a form of respect to the surface and specificity of the medium likely derived from his first contacts with Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s. A comment by Rosalind Krauss regarding a statement by Abstract Expressionist painter Willem De Kooning clearly elucidates perspective’s dependency upon narrative form:

Perspective is the visual correlate of causality that one thing follows the next in space according to rule ... perspective space carried with it the meaning of narrative: a succession of events leading up to and away from this moment; and within that temporal succession—given as a spatial analogue—was secreted the “meaning” of both that space and those events.<sup>697</sup>

Stephen Heath predicts that, as long as cinema is “grounded in the photograph”, it will embody “monocular perspective” through “the positioning of the spectator-subject in an identification with the camera as the point of a sure and centrally embracing view”.<sup>698</sup> Perspective is thus not only necessary for narrative, but it also constitutes a predetermined, structured, and ordered way of seeing against which the “untutored eye” theorised by Brakhage is opposed. In perspective’s hierarchical ordering of distances, dimensions and positions, the same kinds of social power exposed by Deleuze and Guattari in the tree-like logic of linguistic grammar are reiterated.

Perspective is, indeed, embedded in the dominant culture as an act of possession. According to Wees, perspective is “an aggressive and proprietary attitude toward nature and the world in general”<sup>699</sup> because it tends to mould the subject’s

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<sup>696</sup> Snow quoted in Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 19.

<sup>697</sup> Krauss quoted in *ibid.*, p. 71 note 26.

<sup>698</sup> Heath, *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>699</sup> Wees, *Light Moving in Time*, p. 46.

experience of the world via certain precise rules. It is, in other words, “a graph applied to the eye for the purpose of mechanizing vision and thus mind”.<sup>700</sup> But where this graph is recognised, there is “truth” for the spectator,<sup>701</sup> and consequently the “seen” is transformed into “scene” and “space becomes place.”<sup>702</sup>

For Brakhage, the intrinsic qualities of film make it resistant “to either a grid or an otherwise geometric representation of depth.”<sup>703</sup> Thus, even in his photographed films, there is always a subtle, paradoxical tension between what is represented and the very material through which it is presented, especially in the unconcealed traces of the technical process (such as, for instance, the retained or emphasised scratchiness or graininess of the film). Such a tension sometimes even becomes the main theme of the film itself, as in, for instance, the *Roman Numeral* series with its abstract photography.<sup>704</sup> The primacy of flatness is most evident in the hand-painted abstract films, where the painted surface is first of all a flat, painted surface, before acquiring or referring back to any other meaning. But as Brakhage noted, of the photographed films no less than for the hand-painted ones, “[f]ilm is essentially a shadow play.”<sup>705</sup>

In a passage that seems to describe Brakhage’s cinema, Cubitt links Abstract Expressionism to a resistance to the constrictions of narrative and to the illusion of depth of perspective:

[...] the escape from narrative’s linearity and consequent control over perception must also imply liberation from the ostensible content of images. The spectator is no longer constrained to see only what has been placed there for seeing. Instead, the eye wanders over the screen as it wanders over the all-over canvases of Pollock or Newman, freed of the obligation to obey the constructions of perspective or storytelling.<sup>706</sup>

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<sup>700</sup> José Arguelles quoted in *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>701</sup> W.M. Irvin quoted in Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, p. 30.

<sup>702</sup> Heath, *ibid.*, p. 37 and p. 36, respectively.

<sup>703</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 73.

<sup>704</sup> See Hamlyn, ‘The *Roman Numeral Series*’.

<sup>705</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, p. 73.

<sup>706</sup> Cubitt in Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, p. xi.

When Brakhage photographed landscapes and spaces, as he often did, exploiting somewhat the illusion of depth in cinema, he always counterbalanced it with elements which would reveal such an illusion. Usually this counterbalancing intervention involved technical effects. Common, for instance, was his visual emphasis upon film grain, or his many movements and focus shifts reaffirming the presence of the author and the technical apparatus itself. Even when present and necessary to the work, the illusion of reality in cinema was never encouraged but always problematised. If time is usually presented and conceived as a continuous present in his films, space is never an easy place to gaze upon, and it is almost always both representational and presentational, as the space of the film frame (the actual surface of the film). His resistance to the narrative exploitation of cinematic techniques, and to narrative as an ordering and constricting organising principle in general, is necessary and functional to his spiritual quest. The ineffable spiritual revelation exceeds common experiences and cannot be subordinated to their rules, such as those of narrative or of language. For this reason, Brakhage had to elaborate a new way of expressing the ineffable, based upon examples by those who had already done so in other media, such as Pound. It is not possible to determine whether the opposition to narrative, typical of the 1960s New American Cinema, was a direct inspiration for the formation of his peculiar spiritual imperative; or if, on the contrary, the imperative necessitated the opposition to narrative; or, again, if the two developments followed independent paths within Brakhage's life and mind. What is clear is that the stances and features sustaining his opposition to narrative and language ultimately came to be functional to his spiritual quest, much as they had done for the major inspirational figures of his art.

#### 4.3 – The sacredness of the kitchen table

The dimension of the everyday, of the common details of routine life, was of paramount importance for Brakhage's cinema. He again mentioned Stein as a crucial figure who taught him to treasure the quotidian, while he had previously credited both Stein and film-maker Marie Menken for directing his attention towards "the

material of my daily living”.<sup>707</sup> But the importance of the everyday in looking for the spiritual was already present in Pound. Many of his films are based upon common and apparently anonymous daily and domestic occasions, though it is important to acknowledge that he considered his works “rooted in daily living rather than in the events that home movies tend to celebrate.”<sup>708</sup> His cinema was, thus, a search for the spiritual into the common rather than a celebration of special instances. The value of the everyday in Brakhage’s cinema is not only confirmed by the film-maker’s works and statements, but also by Pound’s discussions of the everyday in relation to spiritual revelation. What Brakhage attempted through the incorporation of daily domestic facts in his films was a rediscovery of the everyday, the common, the familiar, as something rich in spiritual meaning, integral to life itself.

The everyday was also viewed as something inherently fragmented. Sheehan, for instance, in discussing Brakhage’s film *The Dead* (1960), notes that it

envisions thought as grounded in the collection of fragments of everyday life, the album that permits meanderings rather than progressions, concerned less with the discovery of a unifying theory (an answer to what Death is) than with the permission of locating meaning autonomously as a constellation between various points that can be replaced or rejoined.<sup>709</sup>

Sheehan focusses on the kind of meaning-making logic implied by the presentation of the “fragments of everyday life”, a logic that would embody a meandering among different points rather than a chain of causality. For Brakhage, too, everyday occasions as materials for and subjects/objects of his films offered the potential for a rediscovery of the source of the wonder and richness of life. This was also in contrast with the dominant culture of the spectacular and dramatic, which always proposes situations out of the ordinary.

For Brakhage, the “boredom” of routine, daily life, if lived with the correct disposition and perceived with the proper sensibility necessary for the reception of spiritual understanding, could offer endless opportunities for revelatory joy. He declared, for instance, that he lived most of his daily life at the kitchen table, and that

<sup>707</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 198; and Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, p. 91, respectively.

<sup>708</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 145.

<sup>709</sup> Sheehan, ‘Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Renewed Encounter’, p. 133.

people who feel frustrated and “dissatisfied with their lives”<sup>710</sup> generally do not attribute enough value or attention to such experience. He argued that the kitchen table has actually a “potential for a high-adrenaline life, or at least for a high sense of living” when perceived with the proper disposition.<sup>711</sup> Conversely, boredom could be useful in sensitising the subject to the perception of the subtleties of reality,<sup>712</sup> not only preparing a path towards revelation, expanding of sight and training perception itself. Discussions about concentrating upon the kitchen table are not so outlandish coming from someone who made a film about a forest of light by shooting light through a glass ashtray in an office (*The Text of Light* (1974)), or who looked for desert landscapes upon the surface of a table, in *Desert* (1976). The “drive”, as Brakhage described it, was “to expose what people ordinarily consider the boring, overlooked, uninteresting”,<sup>713</sup> and to demonstrate how even, and especially, within this daily mundaneness there is the possibility for celebrating the mystery and wonder of creation.

This ability to catch the immanence of the world is something that Brakhage wished to be recovered, since he was of the same opinion as Pound in believing that something has been lost through the ages: the ability to perceive the spiritual and its immanence in the world. As Tryphonopoulos summarised, by paraphrasing Pound, “the loss of mystery has reduced the collective consciousness of Europe to atheism, making it incapable of experiencing the *theos*”.<sup>714</sup> For Pound, as for Brakhage, the process of revelation began from the everyday, often from nature, and was an ability intrinsic to human beings and a sensibility that should be kept trained.

Pound described, in a 1927 letter to his father, the general scheme of *The Cantos*, following the tripartite scheme of the Eleusis ritual present also in Dante’s

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<sup>710</sup> Brakhage in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 109.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> “[...] what you *do* with boredom. You sink into it; you begin to be aware of the slight subtleties that are left in the gray field. The only thing that can be done with the dull civilization we are now having is to be fascinated by the *endless* riches of variance within the dullest, grayest field.” (Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 86)

<sup>713</sup> Brakhage in *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>714</sup> Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 2. Pound addressed Europe with such remarks, but the sense of the loss of a spiritual ability is extended to all the Western world, as it is also, implicitly, in Brakhage.

*Commedia* and particularly evident in Brakhage's *The Dante Quartet*. For the third and final moment of this formal scheme, the moment of revelation, Pound posits "the 'magic moment' or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into 'divine or permanent world'. Gods etc."<sup>715</sup> It is via the "quotidien", through the kitchen table, so to speak, that the "Gods etc." can be accessed. Pound's poetry is consequently rife with common elements, often natural ones, such as the mint or the sausage cited from *The Cantos* earlier, to signal the direction towards the divine state of mind.

In Pound's work, common or natural elements are always referenced with an eye to mythology, anthropology and the history of religions, whereas for Brakhage such common elements do not usually bear such historical meanings. Carroll Terrell quotes a letter from Pound to his father in relation to the "pine needles" present in Canto CII, which were burned in religious ceremonies by the Himalayas's Nakhi peoples.<sup>716</sup> Pound believed that such ceremonies "derive from the same spiritual essence as do similar ceremonies performed by various occult and alchemical sects in the West".<sup>717</sup> The ceremonial acts both aimed to reach illumination, or, as Pound described it two verses later, "they want to burst out of the universe".<sup>718</sup> Through an everyday natural object such as simple pine needles, it is possible to perform a ritual capable of reaching the divine, and hence "bust[ing] thru from quotidian". Furthermore, Canto CII is a perfect example of a highly paratactic writing style, in which many fragments are gathered in order to occasion a sudden revelation in the reader.<sup>719</sup>

Brakhage, in addition to gathering contents from everyday domestic life, enriched his spiritual quest via opposition to constricting devices such as the narrative form or linguistic grammar. For him, the loss of the ability to perceive the sacred would constitute not only a loss in itself, but presented real dangers at a social and psychological level. The dangers stressed by Agamben about the contemporary

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<sup>715</sup> Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound to his Parents: Letters 1895-1929*, eds. Mary De Rachewiltz, A. David Moody, and Joanna Moody (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 625.

<sup>716</sup> See Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 730.

<sup>717</sup> Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Volume II, p. 661.

<sup>718</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 731.

<sup>719</sup> For a detailed discussion of Canto CII, see Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, pp. 353-361.

image, created according to narrative necessities and tending to distort relationships between the subject and the past or future through dependency upon drama, were all clear to Brakhage, who directly linked them to his need to focus on the everyday as a pathway to the spiritual:

I believe if we don't really focus on where we live, then great dangers arise in human psychology, one of which is to live in a past that is utterly falsified by human thinking and project into a future that is utterly impossible. Or we get bored and need drama. So trying to stop the overwhelming influence of drama in film, I began to concentrate on the wonders that are under and on either side of our noses—more specifically the greatest movie in town if only we would look at it.<sup>720</sup>

Fragmentation is the main device through which Brakhage transformed apparently normal visual material into something that could disrupt common cultural assumptions, and sensitise the viewer towards spiritual revelation. This is particularly easy to notice in the photographed films, where the viewer has the clear sensation, and knowledge, that something has been filmed. But this is more complicated in the abstract hand-painted works, where the everyday materials are filtered through the “moving visual thinking” process, and presented as the “simple” excitement of the viewer's physiology. In order to clearly articulate the relation between the hand-painted abstractions and the everyday, it is useful to quote Brakhage giving one of the most precise accounts of how such works were created. An apparently everyday, dull object such as a salad on a table becomes transfigured into something wondrous through the cinematic process. The wondrous, spiritual potential of an object is somehow *extracted* from the viewer's common visual perceptions of it. Inner electrical activity when the world impinges upon physiology—the very act of perceiving—is tentatively visualised through abstract means by starting from a common percept of everyday life.

The salad is on the table, every ruffled edge of lettuce crisp with the glitter of its own being-at-one with water and/or overlay of oil. Musically such crispness can translate pizzicato, or into some slow uncoil of overall (say oboe) curl of tone,

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<sup>720</sup> Brakhage in Ganguly, ‘Stan Brakhage: The 60th Birthday Interview’, p. 145.

some tome [sic] of green punctuated by drum, and so on, or it can just be distorted by dream—the limp-lettuce nightmare, crack and timbre reverberation in phosphor glint of cathected leafage, soforth. Were I to paint the plein-air abstraction of this (as I do) onto a strip of film, my whim would be to absorb what could be seen of such lettuce, its surrounds of table and all, the very room, and then to allow into my consideration the movements of such absorption—the shifts of eye in contemplation, the electrical discharges of synaptic thought, the “translations,” as it were, from optic imprint to memorabilis. For color (“magic markers,” dyes, india inks) I choose greens, yes, but vein them with yellows and ruffled shadow-black, applying isopropyl alcohol on a twisted pointed kleenex to thin dye lines, smudge the tones or (with alcohol flicked from a thumbed toothbrush) create circles to dab into partial-circle-curves or (with weakened, spit-diluted alcohol) do manage filigrees midst mixes of conglomerate color. Sometimes varieties of tone are marked directly upon the transparent “palette” (or clip-board which holds the film strip) so that I can then make toned puddles of alcohol to dip the film into, feathering the shapes with quick twists of the wrist, pressing the film so that the dyes collect as edges to half-dried shapes, and so on. More often than not the alcohol is used to erase an entire frame or collection of frames which have, so it seems, come to naught. There is very little of “lettuce” left after all this, but when successful, the truths of moving visual thinking are made manifest along a strip of film.<sup>721</sup>

Brakhage follows this with a description of the “painting” of the table. It is interesting how he immediately resorts to musical analogies to describe the sensations given to him by the colours, forms, and corporeality of the lettuce. This description highlights the artisan-like nature of his cinema, as well as the highly intuitive action upon which his creative process was based. His original intuition was not always trusted, as his description of erasing entire passages with alcohol makes clear, revealing the struggle implied in the process to remain in the correct state of concentration (or trance). He also states that, beyond concentrating upon the image itself or the object, he concentrated upon including in the work also the act of seeing itself, via the eyes’ movements, the electrical action of the synapses, and the passage from visual percept to memory. As he admits, by the end of the process “very little” of the lettuce remains, but instead the subject’s entire relationship with the world, via

<sup>721</sup> Brakhage, *Telling Time*, pp. 78-79.

the mundane lettuce as its spiritual vessel, leaves its traces on the film-strip.

To illustrate Brakhage's transfiguration of everyday materials, it is worth discussing some specific films as examples, particularly from among his photographed films, where the action of visual fragmentation performed by the filmmaker upon everyday objects is most in evidence. In the first example, *Desert* (1976), an abstract result is achieved from a precise biographical occurrence, somewhat similar in its logic to *Visions in Meditation #1*. The biographical episode was exploited in order to create a work that presents the ordinary world in extraordinary terms. The other two examples form a sort of complementary couple. The first, *I...Dreaming* (1988), is one of Brakhage's pessimistic films from the 1980s, created during his marital crisis with his first wife. Possibly one of Brakhage's saddest films, and unique for its use of techniques he otherwise reviled, it drifts towards an almost dramatic staging of his sadness, utilising unusual music and the extended use of descriptive language. In this film, the everyday is used and treated with Brakhage's usual technical devices, to achieve a negative state of mind. *I... Dreaming* is then contrasted by a third example, *Star Garden* (1974), where the everyday is soberly employed to build a positive state of mind, and encourage a spiritual stance towards ordinary life.

Thinking that Riverside, California, was in the desert, Brakhage, having the occasion to go there, planned to shoot a desert film; and, having realised his mistake once he arrived, he decided to "look" for the desert on his motel room table.<sup>722</sup> The resulting film was simply titled *Desert*. The main imagery of the film was composed of extreme close-ups of a surface, upon which some occasional shadows move, on the verge of abstraction, as they are hardly recognisable. The film is largely based upon textures, upon the graininess and the blurring of images. The details become abstract landscapes and confuse micro and macro spaces: what must have been filmed very close nevertheless suggests something immense and distant. Chromatically the film orbits mainly around warm tones such as orange, red, yellow, and the yellowish light brown typical of desert sands. An almost constant out-of-focus blur covers everything with a sort of heat haze, while strong lights occasionally

<sup>722</sup> Fred Camper, 'About the Films: Volume Two', in the booklet accompanying Stan Brakhage, *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, pp. 62-75; p. 66.

blur the image, giving the impression of being dazzled by the sun. Some actual landscapes from Riverside are intercut to reveal, and further strengthen, the visual pun of the film's mise en scène. The illusory nature of the situation is added to and doubles the intrinsic illusory nature of the cinematic image itself. It is a film with a slow pace in comparison with Brakhage's usual rhythms; but in contrast with this, images often tremble so as to stress a contained vibrancy, corresponding to an abundance of solar energy of very hot areas, with the slow rhythms of human life such places necessitate. The camera, often fixed, gazes upon empty spaces and landscapes, abstract or real, with detachment. Indeterminacy is established, as in *Visions in Meditation #1*, through incomplete meanings articulated through fragmented sequences, but in a somewhat more detached way. The only constant element is the heat, in its blurring and distortion of the images, in its colours and its symbols, like the sun or palms. A landscape of possible blurred meditations and meanings is opened up, something that, as in the effect of strong heat upon the mind, the viewer cannot catch in sharp focus. In *Desert* Brakhage put to use the banal occasion of a working trip, and a common object such as an hotel table, to observe and reveal the spiritual potential within the everyday through beauty and indeterminacy, with the addition of a visual pun.

In *I...Dreaming*, the main character of the film, Brakhage himself, is seen alone in his house, restless, having trouble sleeping, and tormented in his daily actions. He contemplates the void of life. The camera documents a domestic environment, scanning over common objects of seemingly no importance. The scarcely illuminated flat, as well as the whole film, is shown through a pale green filter. The sense of loneliness is palpable in this profoundly disconsolate work. The loneliness of Brakhage is literally staged. Unusual fixed camera shots, giving a painful sense of restraint and impotence in the context of Brakhage's aesthetics, are filmed in an equally unusual sharp focus. Brakhage is presented as an old man, and the camera records his shadow or some body details as he performs anonymous and everyday actions, such as walking around the house, getting up from the bed, laying down on it, undressing, opening a small mail package, and picking his toe. Other series of recurrent images include empty indoor and, rarely, outdoor spaces, and small children, Brakhage's grandchildren, playing in fast motion on the carpet of the

living room with cushions. The fast motion play of the children, as well as the old man's slow movements coming and going from the frame, suggest the passage of a repetitive, depressing, dull time. A rare but recurrent outdoor image is that of a landscape overshadowed by dark, cloudy, ominous weather; hollow, and far from the film-maker, it is shot from a small terrace with a clearly visible white picket fence in the low part of the frame, marking physically the film-maker's separation from it. The geometries of the empty house's spaces are often contrasted by the framing of the shots, often presenting straight vertical lines as diagonals.

The two most unusual devices employed by Brakhage are the soundtrack and the words scratched onto the film. The soundtrack, by Joel Hartling, is a collage of pieces of old popular songs by Stephen Foster, where a soprano is singing in a slow, sentimental way accompanied by a piano. This quiet soundtrack of reassembled songs has been linked together by notes or passages common from one song to the next, giving the distinct sensation of a song being interrupted and then followed by new verses, leaving a familiar though estranging effect. The singing is interrupted, irregular, discontinuous. The music enhances the atmosphere of depression and solitude which is palpable throughout the whole film. Words are scratched over the film, often associated with the soundtrack lyrics, in different areas over the images, with different angles and dimensions. Often the words feature descriptive language, explicitly describing the feelings of the film-maker/character. This descriptive language, combined with a recourse to something akin to drama, a sort of narrative with Brakhage as the main character, and sound, all mark a sort of momentary adoption of devices Brakhage always criticised, in order to stress the pessimism of the work and point the attention to the dull, "unhallowed", sterile life described in it.

The carved, white, shaky words also serve to stress how such stable, sharp-focussed images are empty, an illusion proper to film's nature, in a disconsolate, fatalistic way, contrary to the open multiplicity of *Visions in Meditation #1* with its similar questioning of filmic artifice. Some of the most descriptive and meaningful words scratched onto the film include "SIGH", "THE DARK VOID", "fear", "fill the dark VOID", "COLD", "unhallowed", "LONGING", "sad".<sup>723</sup> The words describe

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<sup>723</sup> The complete series of words which appear during the film are "SIGH", "kiss for kiss", "night loving", "THE DARK VOID", "lured by dreaming", "SWEET spirit IS love", "fear", "sigh", "Pleasures", "fill the dark VOID", "STARLIGHT IN SILENCE", "like a tear", "bright visions",

the mood of Brakhage and of the whole film, and sometimes they are taken straight from the sung verses occurring simultaneously on the film's soundtrack, also an utterly unique device within his oeuvre. Sometimes the white scratching over still shots begins, as if forming other words, but then fails to finish, and scattered scribbles dance and disappear across the image. In some shots movements are likewise attempted: they seem to start but then are immediately interrupted by the fixed camera shots, wherein something else may be moving slowly, such as Brakhage himself. Such "failures" add a sense of misery to the whole work, and are associated with the failures of this depressed character. The general sense of failure expressed by the situation of the man, by his loneliness, by the words' meaning, by the failed formation of some of the words, by the movements attempted and then interrupted inside and outside the screen, by the interrupted verses of the soundtrack, and by the kind of language used and drama staged, direct the audience to the final aim of the work: to elicit a negative state of mind, a sort of dark revelation of spiritual loneliness, caused by a loss of spirituality, further emphasised by the word "unhallowed", and the solitary appearances of "un" and "WAITING" toward the end.

In order to understand what Brakhage felt was lost in that period, and which he subsequently found again at the start of his second marriage, it can be useful to compare *I...Dreaming with Star Garden*, where a "regular", positive, revelation is sought through the interstices of everyday life, documenting a happy, domestic, timeless day in the life of the Brakhage family. *Star Garden* is a domestic film of the sacredness of commonly overlooked details, where Pound's "Gods etc." suddenly "bust thru from quotidien" via small miracles glimpsed from Brakhage's *actual* kitchen table. The star of the title is the sun, associated with the film's projector, making the world visible.<sup>724</sup> The film intends for the audience to see it and the external world anew. *Star Garden* is a particularly sober work: no eccentric technical effects are employed, only an accurate framing of the shots, a gentle varying of some exposures, and very simple editing. The pace is equally calm, with plenty of time

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"COLD", "unhallowed", "un", "TRUE", "COLD", "unhallowed", "my heart", "WAITING", "LONGING", "sick", "sore", "sad", and "WAITING".

<sup>724</sup> Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage*, p. 226. Already in the early 1960s Brakhage associated "the rhythms of change in the beam of illumination" produced by the projector, with "a spiritual experience." (Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, [n.p.]).

given to the viewer to absorb and meditate upon each shot by experiencing the full spectrum of sensations suggested by each one.

The film starts with the moon, followed by an out-of-focus image of a little spider walking over a wall. Solarised images of the interior of Brakhage's house, similar to a still life, are introduced. A stop-motion sequence of a solarised sun moving over a pink screen introduces time-lapse shots of light "moving" over the house's interiors, and radically changing the audience's emotional perception of them. Such light variations are due to both the camera and the sun outside the space. This establishes a correspondence between sunlight and the cinematic apparatus. Sometimes there are larger shots of empty rooms, but usually the film is filled with details of bodies, objects, furniture, and various domestic detritus. The film then continues with such common details of the house, or of people in the house performing everyday actions, filmed with particularly suggestive lights, so that even the dripping tap of the sink becomes an image of moving beauty signalling the passage of a quiet, peaceful time. Details of a room, empty or peopled, or of a body moving, always seem to willingly avoid the main "action" which is taking place seemingly nearby but elsewhere. These might be described as something like a series of "wrong" shots where nothing happens, even if sometimes there are clues that something is happening nearby, directing the viewer's attention to usually overlooked details where the real sense of life might be found. There are also a few outdoor shots of the family, as well as some shots of nature—grass and flowers shaken by the wind, some clouds scattered over a sunny sky. To the common, the anonymous, a new level of emotional intensity is then granted, intended to produce in the viewer a new disposition toward his/her environment.

Even if the film is constructed as the presentation of a single day, from morning to evening, emphasised by the movements of the sun's light and by the moon coming out again in the last shot, the series of fragments does not always imply the passage of time. On the contrary, everything is suspended, eternal in its immanence. The absence of sound helps the viewer to concentrate upon the visual experience, as is customary in Brakhage, but in this case it helps also to create a distance between the viewer and the actual situations of the family depicted. This distance increases the sense of immanence by creating a tension between what is

sometimes perceived as an idyllic situation, both aesthetically and personally,<sup>725</sup> and the constant awareness that such a situation is extremely common, showing nothing special. This in turn focusses attention upon the way in which the world is seen, the viewer's disposition in catching glimpses of immanent sacredness, and on the fact that such a beauty is always there, always present for the viewer to catch, like an eternal state of mind anyone can actually access.

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<sup>725</sup> Brakhage, in fact, described the film as depicting "One of those days I would not trade for anything under heaven." (Brakhage quoting by heart the sculptor (and Pound's friend) Constantin Brancusi, in *ibid.*, p. 227).

## 5 - CONCLUSION

“[...] a kind of ancient science and spiritual philosophy that has not been surpassed, had we but the eyes and ears to penetrate its encodings and secrets.”<sup>726</sup>

It is not easy to discuss in an objective way spiritual matters and beliefs when they are not organised into precise dogmas derived from, for instance, a religious institution. Stan Brakhage’s spirituality was profoundly personal and acutely idiosyncratic. It was, from an institutional point of view, certainly unorthodox, undogmatic and dynamic depending on particular moments in his life and work. While he was sensitive to a sort of empathetic human warmth, a sense of communion occasioned by church services,<sup>727</sup> he nevertheless admitted that he never found “a church or community” properly “attuned” to his “own sensibilities”.<sup>728</sup> An organised religion, for Brakhage, could not contain or exhaust his ineffable and pervasive sense of, and quest for, the sacred. But beyond the film-maker’s personal idiosyncrasies and sometime puzzling pronouncements in print and interviews, his spirituality found ideal and fertile ground in the tradition represented by Pound and other artists in Pound’s declared lineage. Even if Brakhage’s naturally rebellious mind-set was sometimes in contrast with Pound’s extreme syncretism, and even more so with Pound’s consequent deviant political ideology, he nonetheless cherrypicked from the poet’s barely defined but potent sense of the sacred. From these beliefs, spread throughout the community of artists he knew and learned from during his apprenticeship as a film-maker and whom he remained devoted to throughout his life, Brakhage thus shaped his idea of art and its relevance to his life.

I have tried to reach a sufficient objectivity not only by discussing the content of Brakhage’s beliefs concerning art and the divine, but also by giving to such ideas the coherence of a semi-system by focussing upon their genealogy, traced by Pound,

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<sup>726</sup> Ronald Johnson’s definition of myth, quoted in Hair, *Ronald Johnson’s Modernist Collage Poetry*, p. 14.

<sup>727</sup> Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 112.

<sup>728</sup> Brakhage in interview with Higgins, Lopes, and Connick, ‘Grisled Roots’, p. 57.

and by retracing their historical origins. I have concentrated upon Brakhage's ideas about spirituality and art, and after pointing out how he was exposed to and influenced by the ideas of figures such as Pound and Duncan, I have outlined which, among the more mystical and occult-derived ideas, had penetrated into the mind of the film-maker to constitute the nucleus of his beliefs. This frame, against which I have discussed some of his apparently odd statements and practices, gives back a coherence otherwise unlikely, which I have termed in the title Brakhage's spiritual imperative, but also indicated as his spiritual quest. To put such a spiritual imperative in the perspective of the occult tradition elucidated by Pound, not only acknowledges the autonomy of a specific and crucial aspect of the film-maker's art, but it also opens up a new and unexplored line of investigation on the relation of his art to his life. I have begun to explore this new horizon in chapter Four, where typical features of his work—e.g. fragmentation, the continuous present-ness of his cinema, the incorporation of everyday life, and the theoretical and formal opposition to language and narration—have been revealed as functional, or attuned, to the perspective of his spiritual imperative.

Many of Brakhage's friends, mentors and colleagues, among whom Pound's example was central, believed that Pound had recovered something valuable from the past. Through a sense of recovering and revivifying diverse materials to suit present needs, even the categories of old and new were somehow conflated in Pound's appropriations from ancient lore. In fact, Pound himself specified that the deepest concern for his art was "just revelation irrespective of newness or oldness."<sup>729</sup> Guy Davenport further noticed how the result of such a perspective was a poetry "very new and very old at once."<sup>730</sup> Through Pound's work and the work of New American Poets guided by Pound's influence, ancient notions were adopted and adapted to modern situations. In light of self-declared influences from Pound and his poetic descendants, it is not strange, then, that Brakhage should feel close to past figures such as Dante or Cavalcanti, and that in discussing his art it is possible to find points of commonality with ancient doctrines.

As a result of retracing in chapter Two some of the historical philosophies and beliefs uncovered by Pound, certain features of Brakhage's art—e.g. its somatic

<sup>729</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 51.

<sup>730</sup> Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination*, p. 166.

tendencies, the value placed on the body in the process of creating art, its stances towards science, sex, and love, rhythm and fragmentation as crucial practical and theoretical devices, and Brakhage's aversion to constricting systems such as language and narration—may be seen as being in complete accordance with, or even specific articulations of, the spiritual imperative that Brakhage synthesised from Pound's philosophical tradition. For instance fragmentation had many repercussions and functions within Brakhage's aesthetics, not least to be the form through which the divine is articulated. This fragmentation in turn was originated by Brakhage's focus onto the body, and the resulting somatic art.

The general sense one may draw from the trajectory I have elucidated is that of a sort of sacred call for art felt by Brakhage and others attached to the same tradition. Brakhage, in fact, employed the expression "sacred calling" and characterised it as going "back to the dawn of time", stating his awareness of being somehow part of an ancient tradition.<sup>731</sup> This is also corroborated by a paraphrase that Brakhage drew from a very interesting and scarcely known letter by Pound. Such a transmission of ideas not only points out once more the profound familiarity that the film-maker had with the poet's work, but it also addresses a central point of their shared beliefs in a quite straightforward way. During a 1997 interview, Brakhage quoted by heart a definition of religion as "the popularization of the arts."<sup>732</sup> Pound's original expression was: "Religion, oh, just another of those numerous failures resulting from attempting to popularize art."<sup>733</sup> Regardless of Brakhage's liberties

<sup>731</sup> Brakhage in conversation with Taaffe, *Composite Nature*, p. 146.

<sup>732</sup> Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 112.

<sup>733</sup> Pound in a 1907 letter to Mary Moore, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), p. 77. Mary Moore is not to be confused with the Modernist poet Marianne Moore; Pound heard of the latter for the first time in 1918, while the former had been the dedicatee of the 1909 edition of his book *Personae* (see Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, p. 311 and p. 108). It is not certain where or when Brakhage read this quote from Pound; most likely it was from Carpenter's 1988 biography, though one might be tempted to speculate that it was relayed by his friend (and former student of Pound), Hollis Frampton, who quoted a somewhat similar statement in 1977 (see Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, p. 261). The latter possibility, however, is unlikely, since the phrase Frampton quoted in his book, while on a similar topic, does not correspond to either Pound's original letter to Mary Moore or Pound's reiteration of the phrase in a letter addressed to William Carlos Williams later the same year (see Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 130). Even though

with textual accuracy, the two quotes share the sense that art can be not only superior to religion, the sphere within which spirituality most often tends to be articulated, but art could also be a more complete and arcane version of religion.

Brakhage felt that religion was justified only insofar as it could produce a sort of “comfort” when “you gather together with others”.<sup>734</sup> He referred to this human comfort as the social utility of religion. Religion provided also a handy metaphorical terminology to explain the spirituality of art, through terms like “meditation” and “prayer” used in titles and in his writings and interviews. Much the way that Brakhage discussed the spiritual use of the work of art, or spiritual worship towards another person, for Pound religion was likewise useful as an analogy to explain the deepest meanings of art, including its occult function:

The work of art (religiously) is a door or a lift permitting a man to enter, or hoisting him mentally into, a zone of activity, and out of fugg [sic] and inertia.<sup>735</sup>

The way in which Pound drastically judged religions in relation to art—a judgement attractive for Brakhage—was derived from occult doctrines that considered religions “as popular, profane, or corrupted institutionalizations of the ineffable illuminations experienced by their founders”.<sup>736</sup> When Pound rephrased his own statement about religion as a popularisation of the arts in a letter to William Carlos Williams, he further explained his assertion by specifying that “it is only now and then that religion rises to the dignity of art”.<sup>737</sup> Brakhage, too, was convinced of

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Brakhage simply paraphrased the core idea of Pound’s statement, it is clear that he had read Pound’s original letter, as he introduced the paraphrase with details absent from Frampton’s text, such the time of the letter’s composition, Pound’s age when he wrote it, and the relationship between Pound and Mary Moore (see Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 112). Brakhage’s version of the letter’s history was slightly imprecise—he erroneously stated that Pound’s statement about religion had been the cause of the split between the young Pound and his then girlfriend— but the otherwise correct details would suggest that Carpenter’s biography had been Brakhage’s source.

<sup>734</sup> Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, p. 112.

<sup>735</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 190. See also Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 87.

<sup>736</sup> Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 15.

<sup>737</sup> Pound quoted in *ibid.*, p. 130.

the superiority of art over religion, of the uniqueness of art in articulating spiritual tendencies commonly associated with religion, and of the importance and seriousness of the consequent sacred call for artists which had its roots in an ancient past. Thus the importance of investigating his spirituality in relation to his art.

From these convictions came an important consequence for Brakhage, a consequence which likewise applied to the poets Brakhage considered his main influences. Charles Boer, writing about Robert Duncan, stressed how Pound and Hilda Doolittle, as Duncan's primary forebears, even when they were not writing about the gods, felt that the gods were always "there guiding the mind, focussing the eye, limning the voice."<sup>738</sup> This was the case also for Brakhage, who credited his own creativity to Muses and gods and a host of mythical creatures, even when the subjects of his work had ostensibly nothing to do with divinity. Boer points to what was crucial for Pound and Doolittle, just as it was for Duncan, Johnson, and, in the final analysis, for Brakhage as well:

Their generation must now begin to seem puzzling, if not altogether archaic, to younger readers, who are, shall we say, more flattened-out? I mean, Duncan and company *really* took the Gods seriously, not just as mythological decoration, not just as classical nostalgia, and least of all as symbols or poetic bric-a-brac. They *believed*.<sup>739</sup>

Brakhage's spiritual imperative originated from a personal tendency towards the sacred, and it was further articulated, structured and nurtured by the artists he chose as guiding figures. The stances he assumed throughout his career towards film grammar, narration, language, the body, science, institutional religions and everyday life, were all derived from, or variously connected with, the original, open spiritual attitude the poets he admired most drew from an occult philosophical tradition. The solemnity of Brakhage's tone when he spoke of art, and of the sacred, arcane call attached to it, testifies to the dignity that these beliefs were accorded in his mind. Within the context of such a perspective, statements such as the following no longer appear as simply eccentric or as religious holdovers, but as logical consequences of

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<sup>738</sup> Boer quoted in Hair, *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry*, p. 13.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

the philosophical tradition from which he drew his inspirations:

I would think every work should have something of God in it, whatever one means by “God,” so that you can say you have a sense of the presence of the divine. And I think I share that just very normally with artists of all kinds.<sup>740</sup>

In Brakhage’s intentions, art exceeds its commonly perceived boundaries, becoming a sort of cosmic activity connecting the human with the divine, and expressing a precise view of reality as a whole. A work of art such as a film is then designed to move the viewer towards spiritual meditation, and eventually towards a spiritual revelation, without defining such a phenomenon or experience; it is intended to point the viewer towards what is outside and beyond the rational, which is not simply irrational but rationally ineffable. For Brakhage, his meditative films exist within the interstices between spiritual and physical, inner and outer, meaning and meaninglessness, real and artificial, the visible and the invisible. They stand on the verge of such opposing tensions, obeying a restless harmonising force intended to effectively open the viewer to a profound and momentous overcoming of reality’s contradictions. All the aspects that Brakhage discussed, whether directly or indirectly inspired by his predecessors and mentors, whether simply confirming the filmmaker’s prior intuitions or whether discussed or explained in divergent ways in the critical literature devoted to Brakhage, indicate what was for Brakhage a continuous and underlying spiritual quest—his spiritual imperative.

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<sup>740</sup> Brakhage in interview with MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4*, p. 117.

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