

"If you want to know what cinema is, it's Brakhage."

P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*

Stan Brakhage is arguably the greatest and best-known experimental filmmaker in the history of cinema; certainly the most prolific. The iconoclastic American from Boulder, Colo., has produced roughly 300 films over more than four decades and he continues to make films that both challenge and inspire.

Brakhage was there at the beginning, during the legendary days of the "New American Cinema" of the 1950s and '60s, a time of fervent artistic activity when underground cinema came into its own. Working alongside Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Jonas Mekas and Michael Snow, Brakhage made a stunning variety of films, everything from psychodramas to cinematic diaries to abstract expressionist films. Among his landmark works are *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), *Mothlight* (1963), *Dog Star Man* (1964), *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971) and *The Text of Light* (1974). By now, there are at least a couple of generations of filmmakers who cite him as a major influence including such diverse artists as Martin Scorsese, Olivier Assayas, Derek Jarman, Oliver Stone and Canadians Bruce Elder and Mike Hoolboom.

Faced with the daunting task of depicting such a remarkable career in a single film, it's small wonder that director Jim Shedden (who works in the contemporary art department at the Art Gallery of Ontario and previously made a 45-minute video documentary on the work of Michael Snow, *Michael Snow Up Close*) speaks most of the need to focus when he made *Brakhage*. He credits the constant prodding of executive producer Ron Mann (*Imagine the Sound, Comic Book Confidential*), a filmmaker noted for his precision in evoking an entire era through the work of an individual or small groups. Shedden also benefited from his partnership with producer Alexa-Frances Shaw (an accomplished editor who has worked with Bruce Elder), who, by Shedden's account, also acted as a co-director on *Brakhage*. The result is a tightly structured film, intricately weaving together the requisite talking heads with clips from Brakhage's films and footage of the man himself, past and present.

Shedden chose the biographical approach for *Brakhage*, but wisely has included only those events that corresponded to



*Brakhage*: Jim Shedden's excellent introduction to the work of a major American artist.

significant moments or breakthroughs in Brakhage's career. He admits that, although he originally intended to create a portrait of the artist, the biographical film kept pushing its way to the forefront. As it should. Perhaps more than any other film artist, Brakhage's every experience, thought and perception is inextricably bound within his art.

However, in *Brakhage*, Shedden creates more than a biography of a life in art. The film is a testament to a complex artistic vision, disclosing more in its visual logic about Brakhage's *modus operandi* than any weighty panel discussion permits. What impressed me most is the way this film moves. Shedden pays careful attention to the rhythms and textures evident in the various sources of footage, creating a vibrant collage which best illuminates Brakhage's universe. He uses talking heads only to introduce an idea. He then develops it visually, employing an intelligent blend of clips from television documentaries and experimental films. Particularly compelling is the footage from the films of Brakhage's friends and colleagues, Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Willie Varela and Bruce Elder. These moments provide the film with a visual lustre, and create an intimate portrait of the man and his family which both complements and reveals Brakhage's artistic sensibilities.

*Brakhage* marks the first time that the artist has consented to his films being excerpted. Shedden wisely refers to the films often and for extended periods of time, ultimately allowing them to speak for themselves. All of the major films are represented, plus others that are lesser known, yet are no less revealing. It is notable that Brakhage's silent films remain silent. The artist is adamant in his opinion on sound in the cinema. Shedden includes a clip where Brakhage declares sound to be "an aesthetic error." It is to Shedden's credit that he respects and supports this belief in this film. *Brakhage* may be the first film intended for general audiences that contains so much silence.

In the end, *Brakhage* is an excellent introduction to the work of a major American artist and to some extent to the notion of avant-garde cinema. The film was made with a particular audience in mind. There are some who have complained about the omissions—of people, events, critical discussions—but in my mind, they are asking for a completely different film. Despite its intended audience, those of us familiar with his work do gain from watching *Brakhage*. This film serves as a forceful reminder of where all considerations of the art of Stan Brakhage originate—with the man himself. ■