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Stan Brakhage, 1933–2003

A MODERN HERO

A great and courageous artist, Stan Brakhage died at age 70 after a long illness on March 9. To call him a filmmaker scarcely does him justice. The 300-plus movies Brakhage brought into the world, more or less single-handedly, over his 50-year career provide an alternate history of motion pictures. Brakhage's vast, largely self-financed, scandalously underappreciated oeuvre has points of contact with surrealism, action painting, home movies, cinema verité, and various schools of poetry. But mainly it's the demonstration of a distinctively American heroic modernism.

Brakhage began making 16mm movies as a Denver teenager, taking as his model Jean Cocteau's metaphor-strewn film-poems and Maya Deren's psychodramas. His breakthrough came a few years later, once the consciousness behind the camera became the protagonist of his films—arguably the most subjective ever made. In his movies and his not inconsiderable writings, Brakhage took an expansive view: Seeing involved memories, inchoate fantasies, and even "closed eye" vision. Filmmaking was a means of unlearning convention. For two decades, Brakhage's intuitively shot and brilliantly edited movies focused mainly on his wife and their five children in their Rocky Mountain cabin. These were home movies raised to the zillionth power—silent and rhythmic, based on an invented language of percussive shifts in exposure or focus, multiple superimpositions, refracted light, and staccato camera moves. Toward the end of his life, Brakhage's work turned more abstract—not a term he liked—as he began painting directly on film.

Brakhage filmed the birth of his first child in *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and the Pittsburgh morgue in his harrowing *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971). He made a multilayered, self-consciously Joycean, naturally psychedelic epic about a man, himself, climbing a snowy mountain, in *Dog Star Man* (1961–64). He created a profoundly moving meditation on war in *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966), a feature-length 8mm movie that laboriously cut bits of World War II atrocity footage into the majestic onrush of the Colorado landscape; he made another masterpiece by using a clunky glass ashtray as a prism in *The Text of Light* (1974). And these are just a few.

As a personality, Brakhage was a gregarious loner with a knack for provocative hyperbole and a propensity for presenting himself as a black-clad paladin. Generous in his praise and uncompromising in his integrity, he was a touchstone for many. His death stops a seemingly endless creative flow even as it raises questions about the future of film itself. Movies, he often said, are an art "constructed from cobwebs." But as long as Brakhage lived, the awesome breadth of his accomplishments in, and dedication to, those ephemeral motion pictures seemed to forestall the medium's essential fragility. —J.H.