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Brakhage and the Structuralists

Jonas Mekas

On November 4 Stan Brakhage came to New York where he presented his latest film, *The Governor*. After the film, at the Millennium, during the discussion period, Brakhage engaged himself in a lengthy denunciation of the mode of film-making known as "structural film." Film-makers such as Peter Kubelka, Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton came under a heavy attack. Since there has been some talk going around the town regarding some of Stan's remarks, I'll quote here some of his key pronouncements. The reader should be aware that these pronouncements have been excerpted from a much longer — one hour long — context.

BRAKHAGE: "We have actually accomplished along the line of the possible arts of film, an academic film-making. Oh glory be that after all this struggle, what has been accomplished is what my young poet friends were tortured nearly to death by, and almost strangled out of public existence by, when I was 18. And interestingly enough it has been accomplished actually along the lines of a movement which by the length of its public prominence should have indicated to us that that was happening. I mean, a decade for structuralism? Come on! Something's wrong."

Stan presents his conception of a "structural" film: "There was a drive emerging, in totally different ways and from different people, to put strongly, in the first place, primary place, as content, the film's being, its coming into existence and being existing, as the major subject matter; and also that a film could evolve itself, once there was an idea arrived at (either from inspiration or not) *this* would itself create that film rather than the *maker*. Maker is responsible for the initial ideology, however complicated: be it just setting the camera up and turning it on, in a particular place; be it along the line of chance operations to turn that camera on and off at certain stop watch moments; or be it along the line of devising the entire machinery which would sweep a certain series of arcs across the landscape that were in themselves compositionally balanced and enclosive (?), but after which the film-maker had nothing more than to turn that machine on and keep out of its way.

"All this would be O.K. in itself as I am not opposed to any of it for those who need it . . . except that the overwhelming continuance of that begins to . . . it begins to be clear that that is to the exclusion of more, to me, important things, that is, the possibility of film emerging through a human being that will increase sensibility or" . . . (inaudible).

JONAS (from the audience): "We know that the terms 'structural' and 'structuralists' are being used in reference to some film-makers. There have been some articles, essays. But some film-makers have denied this, they say there is no such thing, it's just that some writers are trying to impose some things upon them . . . Now, you also could be involved in a fantasy, in creating your own idea of what a structural film is . . . I think the best would be if you'd give some examples."

BRAKHAGE: "I gave one example, [Michael Snow's] *La Region Centrale*. Once the idea was evolved, ideologically set in motion, and the choice to set it in has been made, he sat down and set it in motion. There is from that point on, in that film, no possible entrance either in splice, certainly never in frame — by the film-maker. So it is a film which evolves itself from that point on. The simplest, gentlest thing one could say about it is that it's an excruciatingly lazy person's way to preceive . . . [inaudible] . . . And the more serious thing that can be said about it, is that it is absolutely preclusive of what to me are the most valuable parts of the process of creativity, that is, that process wherein the maker is called upon to work with what he or she doesn't know at every film frame's existence, whether it shall be or whether it shall not be, not as a choice of anything that can be taught academically but as an absolute urgency of individual person."

JONAS: "I know that Snow worked very closely, from the beginning to the very end, on his film, on every bit, every moment of his film. In a way, very similarly, as Peter Kubelka in *Arnulf Rainer* which also was first made on paper. What difference would you make between *Arnulf Rainer* and *La Region Centrale*?"

BRAKHAGE: "Yes . . . If it is that it evolves first on paper than let it be an art work. Long before he made the film, Michael Snow was one of the great painters of Canada. Let it be on paper where it shows at every point its own evolution and struggle of the artist . . ."

JONAS: "What about *Arnulf Rainer* in that connection?"

BRAKHAGE: "That is a good question . . . I'll tell you

this that I am more thrilled by the script for *Arnulf Rainer* than I am by the film, having seen it now 30 or more times. The script always thrills me and the film has begun to bore me. What could I say more than that? I actually took my heart in my teeth . . . There are certainly enough people that will inform Peter Kubelka that I had shat on his film . . . I took the ultimate risk which may end our friendship by saying that the film has begun to bore me and that the script itself holds up, holds my attention on the page, laid out in that form. The score of *Arnulf Rainer* is the creative work and the film itself fails, that's what I think.

"I find a hindrance of viewing subtlety in film due to a concentration upon ideology which has made the film. And this in itself . . . this has been greeted steadily, for example, for all these years, with great enthusiasm for certain works which are tagged structuralistic . . . For me, after seeing, after 17 viewings of *Wavelength* — [to Annette Michelson] the last three of which were only prompted by your magnificent lecture — it just seems to run into the ground along the line of the idea which promoted it."

I regret here not being able to transcribe, because of the poor tape quality, the remarks made by Annette Michelson, in which she pointed out the different directions in modern arts, motivated by sensibilities different from those of Stan's. Stan refused to polemicize with Annette, dismissed her rather brusquely, and proceeded with his own rhetoric, bringing up his next point, according to which the publicity given to the "structural" film deprives other kinds of avantgarde film from getting deserved attention.

BRAKHAGE: "In fact it's come to the point that there is a lack of news that a work has been shown. I mean I have to be surprised that I roll out three hours of film during the last year and a half, and this is not even counting the Super-8mm films, which makes it more like four — and, except for Amy Taubin's notice in *The Soho Weekly News*, it virtually had no press notice whatsoever. So I have to assume if that happens to me with the degree of recognition I have, it must be devastating on young people. They roll their work out into a silence more solid today than in 1952. So where have we got? If the drive is to get film up to a level where it can be appreciated in relationship to the normal expectations of viewing the other arts, where is the new great film thing that is going on?"

JONAS: "I still believe that you are carried away by rhetorics and politics . . . How can you seriously say that the situation is the same as in 1952? I mean, your film was shown at Telluride and it is being shown here, and in Chicago, and at M.I.T. . . . Fred Camper's notes are placed on every seat . . . Can you really seriously ask from newspapers any serious appreciation of art? Amy Taubin, yes. But you are asking for more . . . We are not looking at newspapers for any serious recognition. There are other ways in which a film can grow today, going around the country and to the people that are really interested in it."

BRAKHAGE: "I am not worried for myself. It's the younger people, of totally different persuasion that are making, are involved in anything that is, that doesn't fit under the title of structuralism, can not get recognition I think largely because of the overwhelming propagandizing of this form of film-making. It's held the front stage too long. It's becoming insufferable like the Bauhaus did. Now, that does not mean that the Bauhaus is bad or that I am against form following function, or certainly significant paintings that came out of painters that came out of those ideologies. But there did come a time when it did need a rupture in some other direction and I think it is at least five years overdue, as a largely bespoken public manifestation . . . So I am making a peep."

POST SCRIPTUM: I have complicated problems with Stan's attacks on machine-made art. Am I really supposed to dismiss James Whitney's film *Lapis* only because it was designed on paper? Should I dismiss the sublime works of Harry Smith, so carefully, frame by frame, scored on paper — and Harry's film scores are certainly works of art, too! Or the works of Paul Sharits, scored frame by frame on paper? Weren't they, after all, first scored in their mind's eye?

Where does Stan think "subtlety" begins and where does it end? Put a crayon mark on that spot, Stan. Has Stan really reflected on the miraculous and mysterious ways the personality of an artist can enter a work? Or the necessity of the personality, in some works of art, at all? Or, still worse: should I just stare at Alberti's or Palladio's sketches, drawings and architectural plans? Of course, they look great. But when I stand in an Alberti building I don't admire it: I am simply in an ecstasy. And I don't even understand musical scores: but I like listening to music

performed from those scores.

Stan is a towering personality and one of the truly great artists of our day and nobody should ask him to be either very normal or very rational. It is natural for him to assume a Messianic role, when he travels, and the tone of one who's speaking *ex cathedra*. But, ironically, while he attacks the ideological and political approach to art he ends up by propagandizing and politicking.

Ah, yes, Stan says something else, besides politics. He says he has seen *Arnulf Rainer* 30 times and *Wavelength* 17 times. Now, he says, they bore him. He tells something about his likes and dislikes. Now I'll tell you something about my likes and dislikes: I think that both films are as sublime as anything Stan has produced. But then, I haven't seen *Wavelength* 17 times, and *Arnulf Rainer* I have seen properly only about 10 times.

And this brings me to a very curious problem. I have been saying, and so did Stan and my other avantgarde film companions — for years now we have been stressing the point of repeated viewings. The avantgarde film, like a piece of music or a good poem, we said, grows with repeated viewings. It can be really appreciated only after many viewings. And now, here is Stan, saying that it was all O.K. for 28 or 29 viewings. But with the 30th viewing *Arnulf Rainer* fell to pieces . . . There is a possibility — and our daily life supports such a possibility — that too much of something is simply too much. No matter how good is the soup, the farm hand, after eating it 29 times, throws the spoon on the table and says: "Come on! Something's wrong!" The problem may be that Stan shouldn't have looked at *Wavelength* so many times. He simple over-ate . . . We may need to approach art with more subtlety — using Stan's favorite word — than that. In any case, this matter of repeated viewings has a problem attached to itself.

Do you want to hear more about my problems? Here it is. This summer I visited Italy, with Peter Kubelka. And he took me to a place where there are two old families still making a red wine called *canaiola*. It was the wine that Michelangelo used to drink, and, of course, it took Kubelka to discover what Michelangelo drank and who's still making his wine. In any case, the wine was fantastic. But what we found almost still more fantastic was the fact that these two Italian families, despite all the temptations of making money with more popular wines, stuck to this wine that practically nobody buys from them. Year after year, century after century, they followed exactly the same procedures of making *canaiola* and preserved this wine for posterity. "Ah, yes," we said, "Paradise is not yet lost! There is always somebody somewhere preserving the good thing." Now, this wine is a masterpiece, and the only way it survived is by the humility of the people who carried its tradition from century to century, not putting their own personalities into it at all, not introducing any "creativity" into it but simply *imitating* the old *canaiola* in the best and

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Brakhage: "I am making a peep."

Bruce Weiler

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purest sense of that word, *imitation*. Would Stan put down these two families as mechanical, non-creative? And what about Thomas a Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ*, the whole idea? . . . So there you are . . . Michael Snow's machines and his films cause me more problems, raise more questions than they do to Stan. I don't find the matter that simple, the matter of human spirit and its manifestations.

But ah, Stan will say: I said, and you quoted me yourself, that I do not really object to these films: I only peep against them taking all the attention! And so here I have a third problem. Being an archivist and a scribbler, and sitting right behind Anthology's library, I see most of what's being written on film, and I get programs and I see what's being shown. I have certainly seen those articles on structural film, few as such articles exist: but, my God, they are all on Hollywood! And so I'd be very pleased to receive some clippings of structural "propaganda" regarding the avantgarde film. I haven't seen it and I obviously have a serious problem of really understanding what Stan is talking about.

And now, I'll "take my heart in my teeth" and end up my questionings with the following entry into my diaries made on June 10, 1976:

The only way one can take Brakhage, when one listens to him, to what he says, and how he behaves — is to constantly keep Brakhage the Film-maker superimposed over what he says. Otherwise he doesn't make any sense. Silly, pompous, bombastic, often insulting. His work must be superimposed over it all in order to understand him and . . . forgive him.

Kubelka is just what he says. He lives what he says. His work is ideal and his life is ideal. They go parallel. But Brakhage's work goes one way, his life, his words another. I don't think one can really understand Brakhage, much of it makes no sense and has no sense. It can be taken only as something extra to his work — like in those moviehouses where you get a plate or a coffee grinder or something, when you buy a ticket. So that you get your money's worth and it's O.K. ●