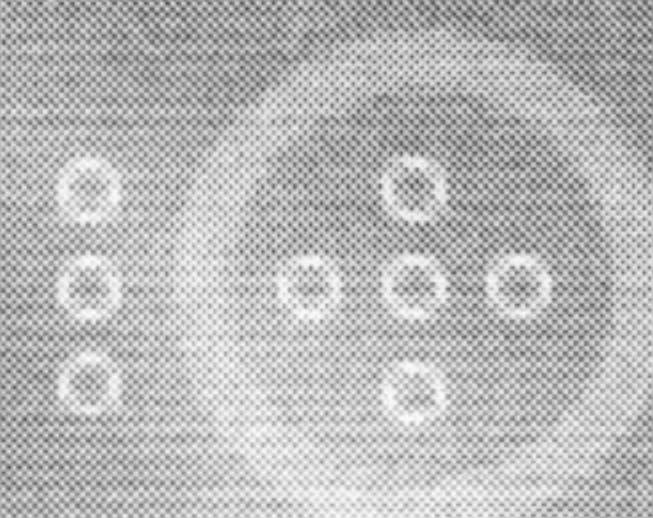


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INTERVIEW: True Independents; Brakhage and Dorsky Hash
Out the Realities of Poetic Cinema

by Ed Halter



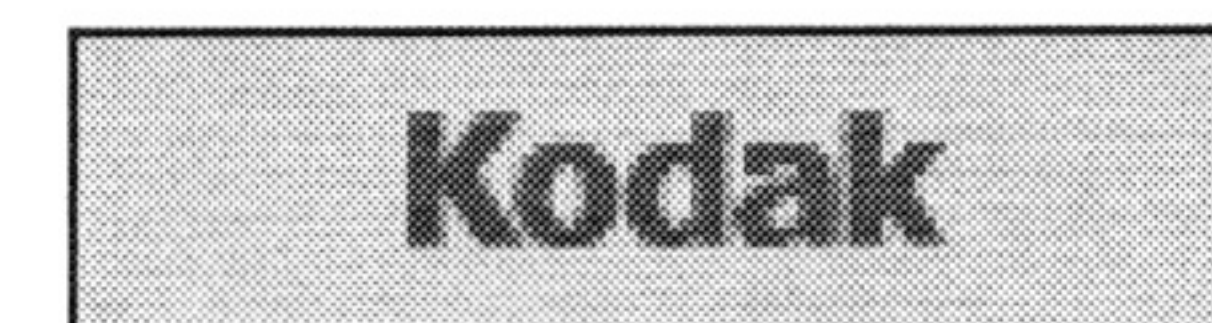
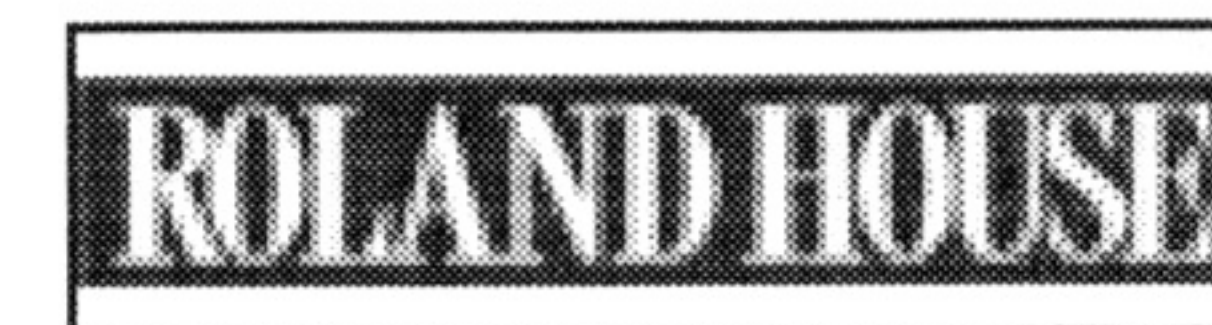
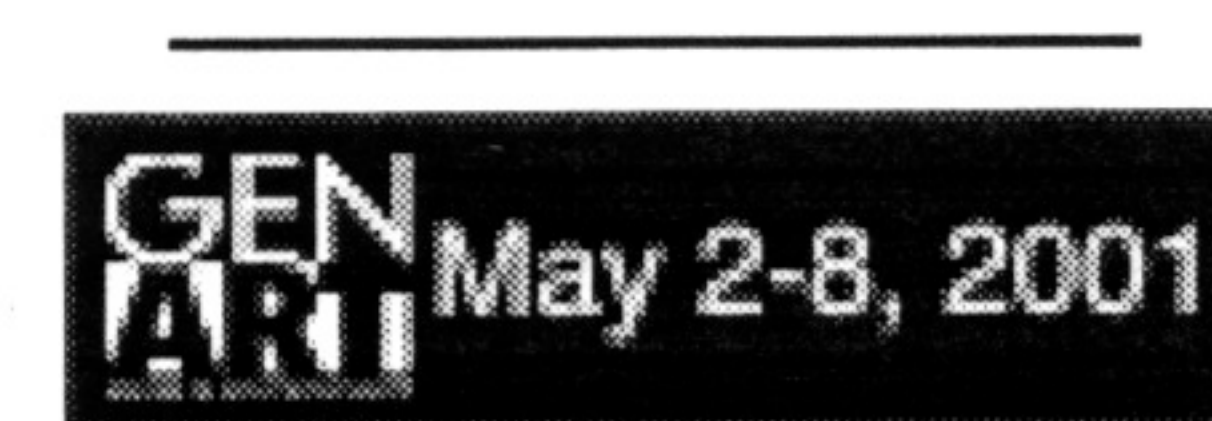
(indieWIRE/ 04.30.01) -- Despite rumors of its demise, experimental cinema continues to flourish beneath the radar of mainstream media. Devotees in New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere, have seen an upsurge in screenings at established institutions and DIY microcinemas alike, as well as increased interest from a younger generation of artists and audiences. Recently, indieWIRE had the opportunity to sit down with two of avant-garde cinema's most respected pioneers -and long-time friends -- **Stan Brakhage** and **Nathaniel Dorsky**, both in New York for back-to-back retrospectives at the **Museum of Modern Art**.

Colorado-based Brakhage, one of the leading proponents of "poetic cinema" since the 1950s, is considered by many to be the greatest living experimental filmmaker. In the '90s, his influential work explored a silent abstract-expressionist style of painting directly on to film. Dorsky, a Bay Area filmmaker who makes a living cutting indie films (among them some high-profile docs like "**Night Waltz: the Music of Paul Bowles**"), came to prominence in the '70s with silent non-narrative 16mm works that combine a documentarian's eye with a poet's vision. His latest works collect deeply resonant motion-picture snapshots of everyday life.

indieWIRE spoke extensively with Dorsky and Brakhage to discuss the new generation of avant-garde filmmaking, DV verses film, the relationship of the experimental scene to Indiewood and Hollywood, and the curious tale of how Dorsky's "**Variations**" may or may not -have had some unacknowledged influence on the making of "**American Beauty**."

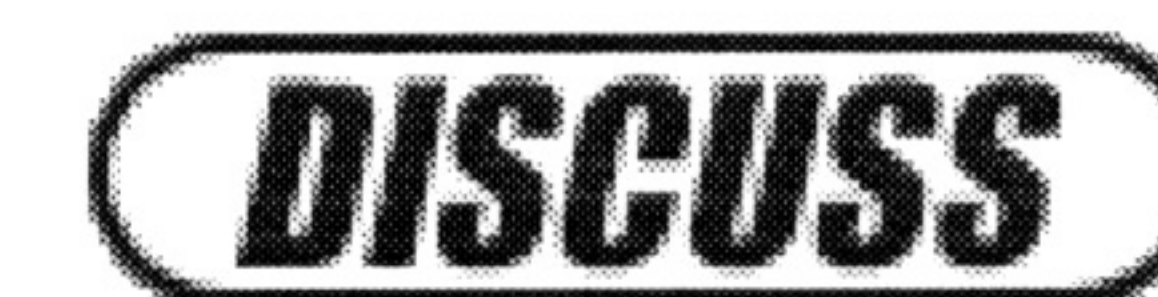
indieWIRE: You've both seen the avant-garde film world change a lot over the years. What do you see as new problems and possibilities that a younger generation of film artists now face?

Stan Brakhage: Well, I just think it's like that in any art. First of all, let me say, I'm not so bold as to say film **is** an art, but that at least we have proven that a great many people are dedicated to trying to make it so, and even compelled to trying to make it so. And also, films that are 100 years old, like those of **Melies** and the **Lumiere** brothers, are showing more and more every year, which is also a hopeful sign. Having said that, I'd say that to the extent to which we are a hopeful art, the young people that are coming along are responding both for and against their predecessors in the normal ways. Some people are kicking against structuralism and trying to do something different. Some people are still kicking against my aesthetics or that of my generation or **Kenneth Anger's**. So there's always that kind of fuss, usually among artists with some degree of respect, because we all know that we're related to each other, and that we're making a tree here in human history that has its lineage. Some people actually like to hang a little way off of any kind of branch, and hope the branch will grow out to them.



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That's what I said about **Godard**, for example, when I introduced him at **Telluride**. He made me think of a **Magritte** painting with his oeuvre hanging just a little off the tree of arts.

Nathaniel Dorsky: I think we're actually in a very difficult position. When I first went to avant-garde film, they were shown at midnight at the **Bleecker Street Cinema**. The first time that I saw Stan, he was premiering "**Dog Star Man**" at midnight, in front of 40 people. You were really dealing with "edge" then, dealing with something that could go anywhere. But then this kind of film became accepted, and film departments began to hire people, and then everyone who was a genuine renegade began to teach. So students came upon this stuff in the context of an academic machine -- stuff that completely came out a deep sense of anarchy, and then became slightly institutionalized. I never had that experience. I think I would find that really deadly.

Brakhage: There are far fewer places to show than there were in the '60s and early '70s. I can only solidly name about five continuously running venues. Now there's some other groups that are specialized in one way or another, there's a lot of people devoted to the documentary, let's say, or something like that. But in terms of the kinds of venue that my generation had, there's very little. There's very little public showing. There are, on the other hand, colleges that tend to come back to the subject again and again and there are some rentals that come through, but those, alas, don't easily reach down to the new makers. So the new makers are suffering from a lack of public exposure, very much as when I started, and a lack of any critical writing. In fact, except for **Fred Camper** [of the **Chicago Reader**], I don't know any untrapped critic that's free in the country at the moment!

iW: What do you mean by "untrapped"?


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"Here's the miracle -- despite the closing of film labs all over the country, despite the fact that many people think film almost doesn't exist anymore, despite everything having gone back socially to about where it was in the late '40s or early '50s, there are more young people who are more purely dedicated to film as an art than in the '60s at its height."

Brakhage: That they're trapped in a venue that tells them what they can and cannot do. Hoberman is very brave to write about independent film at all because the **Village Voice** doesn't really care to have him do that. Some people write books like **David James** or **Bruce Elder** in Canada, but these again have historical context and they don't go out like the news. You don't have anything comparable to **Jonas [Mekas']** weekly column in the Village Voice [in the '60s and '70s]. So the young people, one, they have very few venues, two, they have very little critical attention, and three, the expenses are incredible. They are enormous. For nine dollars, I used to be able to get a roll of Kodakrome processed and back. Now it costs me somewhere between \$120 and \$140 for two minutes and forty-five seconds. One is really astonished that young people can survive under those stresses. But they do. In fact -- and here's the miracle -- despite the closing of film labs all over the country, despite the fact that many people think film almost doesn't exist anymore except 'in the movies', despite everything having gone back socially to about where it was in the late '40s or early '50s, there are more young people who are more purely dedicated to film as an art many times over than in the '60s at its height. Most of them are unknown. I could give you a string of names and people would not know who they were.

iW: Who are some of the younger filmmakers that you like?

Brakhage: People might know about **Jen Reeves**. **Phil Solomon**, of course, he's beginning to be pretty well known. **Mary Beth Reed**. The problem with naming any names at all is that every one of these names is kind of symbolic of a host of people. There's not much point of going into a whole list unless you can do it thoroughly. So, you know, these people plug on. There's five other people that were students -- but I regard as artists -- in Boulder alone. There's an enormous number in San Francisco that are constantly being shown through the auspices of **Steve Anker** [of the **San Francisco Cinematheque**], but you have to remember that that's the only outlet they have other than those that they might create on the spot themselves or in their exchanges with each other. For instance, one of the spots where things can get shown is my Sunday salon in Boulder Colorado, which has between 15 and 30 people that faithfully attend. It just runs every Sunday free to the public, and I'm sure there are other such places. **James Herbert** has told me that there are such venues in Athens Georgia, for example. And I'm sure they exist here and there throughout the country.

iW: There are more film festivals now, as well.

Brakhage: Yes, but the film festivals throw in poetic or short or independent films like a tokenism -- like an also-ran -- and the kinds of audiences that most festivals have can be very antagonistic: that this film that they don't understand is delaying their getting to their feature that they came to see. The only people that have

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beaten that syndrome are the Telluride people. Gradually they've developed an audience that's respectful of the independent film as well as the features they're showing. But they also have people trapped up a box canyon and they show a lot of classics and very odd things and they don't tell anybody anything what they're going to show until they've already bought they're ticket and they've gotten there.

Dorsky: I don't know what it would be like to be 20-years-old now -- would I buy a Bolex and start shooting film, or would I buy Final Cut Pro and a DV camera? I don't know. I know that I like the alchemy of this thing that you have to load in the dark, expose to light, and process. I just shot an industrial on DV and edited it on some kind of computer system quickly and I made enough money to work on my own films. But you know, I look at this thing on a monitor, and it's wonderful as information, but it's not touching what I want to touch. When I'm with my Bolex, all the time people go, "Can you still buy film for those?" or "My father used to have one of those." I feel I'm working now with a precious thing, like I'm a jeweler working with silver or gold. Stan mentioned something this weekend, at one of his shows, that part of the art for him was the fear of intruding upon the blank state. But on video, there's really not much of an intrusion, because you can just tape and erase. With a roll of film, you know, it's so expensive, that when you're going push the button, it's an existential decision.

Brakhage: The video maker doesn't easily face a blank page. Because the videomaker can run it either any way, this way or the other way and erase it if they don't like it and so on. So you have very few that have the artistry of, say, **George Kuchar** -- very few. It's too cheap and too easy. Whereas, automatically, if something costs so much and is so precious, you really have to shoot it well in order to do so. It tends it to be compound, like a jewel.

iW: But that also brings up another point. In some ways, in using outdated technologies and an older mode of filming, your works are more ultra-traditionalist than avant-garde. Do you think the term "avant-garde" suits the work being made today? For example, Stan, I've noticed that you continue to use the term "independent" in a rather narrower, pre-'90s fashion.

Brakhage: In Telluride, I argued bitterly with **Robert Wise** -- which is of course utterly ridiculous on both our parts - about his usurpation of the word "independent." I said, "My god, you've got everything else, you've all the money, you've got all the attention, you've got all the press, and everything. And you also want to be called 'independent'?" But what he meant, very simply, was that they went to the banks for their money, rather than the studio system. Whereas what we mean is someone who makes something because they're compelled to, has no strings attached to anybody or anything else, and that's what we always meant by independent. I've come to like the term "poetic film." Now there are dangers in it.

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Poetry is a totally different art than film. But it separates what my contemporaries and I do from the Hollywood movie, in a way that doesn't assume that one is greater than the other. Novelists and poets have existed side by side forever. The Hollywood movies are more like novels, and the kinds of films I make are more like poems.

Dorsky: Sometimes they call it hand-made film, or personal film. I think the main thing, like Stan said, is the difference between a novel and poem. A novel is a third-person form. You know, it's a form with characters that have problems that interrelate, all the world's a stage, and so forth, whereas poetry is more an individual person invoking existence itself -- through art, taking you into corners that can't quite be touched with language. And so, I think to me what personal film is -- or what independent film is -- is that: it's first person film as opposed to let's say this other indie stuff, which is really just variations on third person film.

I always think the word avant-garde is like what you call the person you live with, but aren't married to. It shows in a way that the concept isn't slotted, like the word 'indie.' "Indie" has become a ridiculous word. It's like **Nixon** using the word "revolution." It's just become insulting. I make a living editing, as my bread and butter. And people I know will get so excited and say 'I got into **Sundance!**' To me it's horrifying. Narrative film seems very clogged up, with almost no exceptions. It has no openness for me. I go to any narrative film, in recent years, and with almost every one, the lobby is more interesting than the film. Getting out of my car and walking to the theater is much more interesting, because at least I am alive in the present moment. These films are assuming a form, which is no longer really valid this moment in the human psyche. It's a decayed form, which people are variously bending and twisting in very chic ways to look new, but the more freedom you take with it, the more old and tired it seems. But the avant-garde has the same problem. So much new avant-garde cinema is excessively graphic, or excessively formal. A lot of it is one-dimensional, just like the features, no different. The percentage of great features being made, and the percentage of great avant-garde film being made is the same, you know, small.

iW: With so many avant-garde filmmakers being students of an earlier generation, and in many ways emulating the past rather than breaking new ground, do you think there's danger of the work stagnating, becoming too academic?

Dorsky: Personally, I'm very respectful of lineage. All the art I love throughout world history is very respectful of lineage. Any composer you love, you know exactly three or four or five composers that lead up to what they accomplished. It's sort of like a tree of life growing. They use an expression in Buddhism about this, because the teachings of enlightenment are passed on over 2000 years. But if these teachings were the only subject, then true enlightenment would not be

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passed. For the enlightenment to be passed, each new person must,- and they always use this metaphor, "rebake the bread." So yes, my own filmmaking is very much based on both avant-garde and narrative film. But I think I'm trying to take it towards a place which touches my own deep sense of mystery and by that I mean to what degree my psyche is healed or edified by a certain kind of form which may be very different from, say, Stan's. So I think it can be both traditional and new. Maybe the only reason why it seems more decadent now, both in narrative and avant-garde, is because there is so much avant-garde film, and when there was less out there, it was less apparent that something was being safe within a genre. Many an avant-garde film I see is very nice, but I do view it as genre film.

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iW: I know exactly what you mean. You see a film, and you think, that's in the Warhol genre, or that's the Brakhage genre, or the Maya Deren genre, and so forth.

Dorsky: But the thing is, I think that the filmmakers we really love are also genre filmmakers. A friend said to me that the centuries react to each other -- in other words, one century is excessively formal, one century is excessively emotive, et cetera. So we have, let's say, the 1700s with **Mozart** which were very formal, and the 1800s with the Romantics, and the 1900s, which is more formal again. But then in each of those, there are people who out of the mire of imbalances, and in doing so, create balance. They're still of that century, but they don't buy into the imbalance of the century. So in filmmaking, there's a way you can be of your time, but not buy into the imbalances of your time.

iW: Well, to get back to the relationship of indies to the avant-garde -- yesterday, Nick, when I saw your film "Variations," from 1998, I was shocked to see a very familiar-looking scene involving a plastic shopping bag floating around in the wind in a city street. It looked exactly like the scene in "American Beauty," except you documented

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something real. Was there a connection?

Brakhage: The famous bag! They had to work wind machines to try to get that bag to do the same thing for Nick.

Dorsky: I have not seen the film "American Beauty," and some people have told me that I shouldn't. When I made "Variations," I included a scene with a plastic bag, which I almost didn't use, because the image is similar to what has been used by many avant-garde filmmakers in the past - even back to "**Symphony of a City**" in the '20s, but I was walking on the sidewalk and there was this thing happening, it was very magical, and I shot it, and the light was perfect and I took a really good shot. I thought, well even though this is really kind of an avant-garde cliché, I would use it because the shot had so much psychological depth to it.

iW: **Jem Cohen has a similar bag sequence in "Lost Book Found," from 1996, which is also a city film.**

Dorsky: Yeah you can't help it;- it's like one of the characters of the city. So anyway, then "Variations" came out [in the 1998 **New York Film Festival**] and **Stephen Holden** in the Times wrote a review of the festival's avant-garde showcase. I think it called something like 'Avant-garde film: Heavenly and Harrowing,' and the opening part was about "Variations." It said something like, "Is there a cinematic image more beautiful than a plastic bag circling around on the pavement in the wind? Not in the case of Nathaniel Dorsky's 'Variations,' one of many shots expressing the evanescence and ineffability of life," et cetera. So that came out, and four days later, I get this telephone call from a woman, and she says, "Hello, I'm calling from **Dreamworks**. I represent the director of 'American Beauty.' He read about your film in the **New York Times**, and he would like to see it." So I said, "What is American Beauty?" At this point, the film was maybe at the beginning of post-production. She says "Oh, it's a love story." I said, "Why do you want to see it?" She said, "The director read about it and thought it might be very interesting." So I said, you can rent it from **Canyon Cinema**.

It's funny, because my good friend Jerome said, don't send it to them, they're gonna want to rip you off. And I said, no, maybe I'll get a job shooting a montage for them. The point is, I don't really know what happened. But, as I said, it's not an original idea, you know, people have shown me versions of the script which mention the plastic bag. The script may have been done years ago. So I think it might have just been a coincidence. But the weekend it opened, I got six phone calls from people around the country telling me, "they ripped you off." In the midst of this, I called Stan up and said, "What should I do about this Stan?"

Brakhage: I said, "Don't worry about it. It's not a bad movie." When you want to worry about it is when they rip you off and make a bad movie or sell some product

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that's disgusting. We've all had a lot of that. But if someone makes a decent movie that's the way it should go. Poetry inspires the novelists and the novelists sometimes include a little poem at the front of the book or before every chapter and vice versa. Great novels have caused poems to come into existence.

Dorsky: Have you heard Stan's "**Superman**" story before? He happens to know that the birth sequence in "Superman" is based completely on [his 1974 film] "Text of Light." He knows because they rented it three times when they were making the movie. It looks very similar. But he wasn't upset. He says to me, "You know, when I was a fat little kid running around Denver in my 'Superman cape,' if I ever thought that my films would affect a 'Superman' feature, I would have been really proud!"

Brakhage: And there are a lot of students that have come through me who are now working in Hollywood movies. The most wonderful ones in a way are the **South Park** people, [**Trey Parker** and **Matt Stone**]. Those are former students of mine, and Stanley is an homage to me. Which I'm very happy about!

iW: So given the circumstances we've been discussing -- a greater number of experimental filmmakers, a higher price for materials, a scarcity of exhibition spaces -- what do you think is the future for the form, given those parameters?

Brakhage: I tell you I just am not good at prophesy!

iW: What would you hope for then?

Brakhage: What I'd hope for is just continuance. I would hope that there were more people that loved it, who were looking at it -- that some of them could put their money where their eyes are. Although one has to acknowledge that Jonas [Mekas, director of **Anthology Film Archives**] manages to hold on. At the **University of Colorado**, we fight for film, and we're driven to video occasionally, but while the whole staff maybe doesn't agree on anything aesthetically, they struggle together, and they stick with film. So we're attracting people who love film.

iW: Is this more a preservationist issue you're talking about, preserving the avant-garde of for future generations?

Dorsky: Yes. But the main thing that I find sad is that: I like all kinds of cinema. Not that many people are pan-cinematic. I wish that someday people realized the brilliance of what's going on here. Like Stan's films shown at **MoMA** this weekend. Compared to what's going on in features, there's no question in my mind that what's going on here is far superior. For people to see a film like Stan's and not understand that it's 40 times greater than anything that's ever come out of

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Sundance, to not understand that, is frustrating. During Stan's films, I heard someone in the audience go, "You people are just looking at garbage!" and slams up his seat and walks out.

iW: Here at the MoMA shows?

Dorsky: Yeah, and then maybe an hour later someone gets up and goes "they call that art?" and slams the door, while a very beautiful film was on the screen. So what I'm intrigued by is that now, everyone from our bourgeois smug position feels so superior. My only hope is that sometime, either through preservation, or whatever, the isolated areas of deep, deep accomplishment within the American avant-garde are seen and are understood. I don't know what it will take.

Brakhage: I wish that we could have a renaissance that it would be on DV, brought to a point that it really can be an approximate of film, a very close approximate, but be cheap, so people can have it in their homes. Then the great novels of film will flourish, and the independent little films will flourish, side by side. And that's my wish.

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