

In the Audience: One Man's Cinema, Another Man's Confession *An Anecdote about a Cell Phone, a Stan*

Brakhage Screening, Extra-Cinematic Sound and Experimental Cinema

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Several years ago, Stan Brakhage came to Montréal to screen a series of his films and give a few talks. He was thoughtful and spoke well about both his own movies and those of others. Most importantly, he was generous in his responses to questions posed by young filmmakers and budding scholars.

This last was most on display when he was taken to task by an audience member for not adopting Mac's iMovie in his own filmmaking practice. Despite being referred to as "you old guys" and asked if "he had even heard of the iMac," Brakhage took the time to discuss the value of new video technologies and then discussed the factors leading him to continue to work with film. His response fell, unfortunately, on at least one set of deaf ears: the student who asked the question had pulled her swim goggles back down over her eyes and returned to her knitting as soon as he began to speak. Brakhage acted like he didn't notice, and I was charmed.

Sitting in Brakhage's lecture I was reminded of how much in an experimental film depends upon the constructive tension between a perception of identifiable authorial intentions and an awareness that these intentions exist only as traces. They cannot be ignored, but they control nothing. At times, they are embedded in the film itself: Jack Smith's voice-over in *Flaming Creatures*, Kenneth Anger's ambivalent responses to the sailors in *Fireworks*. At others, they're implicit in the extremity of the experiment: Snow's zoom in *Wavelength*, Baldwin's miming of authorial voice in *Tribulations 99*. The filmmaker's presence and simultaneous absence in these films work like the magnetic field of their meaning: they exert influence,

organize insights, and, when resisted spark electricity. This is a key pleasure of the avant-garde with no analogue even in the authored art film.

I experienced the jolt of this field during the second night of screenings Brakhage organized at the Cinémathèque Québécoise, a program that concluded with *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*. After showing a series of shorter films, Brakhage introduced the morgue piece, talked about what had driven him to make it, how it fit into his work at the time, and invited people who felt uncomfortable or overwhelmed to leave at any point. The theatre went dark, the film started rolling, and the audience watched nervously and silently . . . silently, that is, until a cell-phone began to ring.

Only after the third ring did I realize that the sound was coming from my brand-new and first-ever cell phone. Hidden away in a coat pocket under my seat, it was letting me know that a call I was expecting (but had forgotten) had finally arrived. Embarrassed, I decided to play it cool. Voice mail picked up soon enough and a film-appropriate silence once again settled over the theatre. Unfortunately, my brand-new phone battery was exhausted from its brief work, and the phone, programmed to give me a helpful warning signal whenever the battery began to run low, began to beep at regular 15 second intervals.

At this point, I was trapped. I had bluffed my way through the initial call, but now I had a decision to make: do the right thing for everyone else (turn off the phone) or save face. I decided to wait it out. And so, my phone marked time for the last twenty odd minutes

of the autopsy film with the steady beat of its death-chirps.

Oddly enough Brakhage had spoken about my cell phone in his introduction. Or at least, he had spoken about the relationship between sound, silence and the cinema. Silence, he said, is never silent. If I don't put a soundtrack on my films, he said, this allows the film to exist in the sound-space of the room. He mentioned John Cage. He talked about the rhythmic sound of a running projector and its connection to the visual rhythm of his images. Then he told us to move when we were uncomfortable, to cough when we needed to, that sound was not a disruption during a screening.

I'm sure, however, that Brakhage would have liked to throw me and my cell phone in a lake. But there was electricity in that room. And in my viewing; at the time because of anxiety, but later from the strange tension between Brakhage's comments and the unexpected appearance of my phone noise. Would my phone have been out of place at a performance of John Cage's 4:33? Isn't in fact, that piece's 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence precisely about the unique quality of individual spaces and their peculiar "silences"? How then could my phone be out of place in a screening situated by Brakhage precisely in terms of Cage's experiments with environmental sound?

Friends in the theatre had figured out that the phone was mine, and I was horrified when they called me on it later; so without Brakhage's introduction, I would have probably tried to forget the whole experience. But his comments transformed my embarrassment into a question: why was the ring tone out of place? I wouldn't want to push this idea too far. I'm still persuaded that my phone was an aberration. And I'm sure that my neighbours agreed. But I'm also unsure. What counts as legitimate environmental sound when the filmmaker's practice—and discussion of that practice—explicitly embraces the unexpected?

That's the magnetic field of the author; that's the electricity it can produce, and its tough to get outside the avantgarde.