

REVIEW: *By Brakhage: An Anthology*

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In the era of the laserdisc, The Criterion Collection essentially stood for an esoteric series of films released on to what many would construe as a highly exclusive home video format. In other words, to be a collector of Criterion releases in the days before DVD meant that you immediately stood out from the average movie fan, your personal collection of movies reflected an interest and devotion to the medium far beyond where most people would be willing to go, or could pay to go, even if they had the inclination. (I should also note here that I was not one of these people, as I was around ten years old when Criterion started manufacturing laserdiscs and actually thought that laserdiscs were LPs of film soundtracks for about five years after that, especially whenever I saw a rack of laserdiscs in a record store.)

However, with the widespread and ever-growing DVD format, The Criterion Collection's reputation, while still somewhat exclusive (their prices alone demand an excess of expendable income, if one is to keep up with their ever-growing catalogue), has led to another problem: an inability to determine whether or not someone, when discussing a film already released on the Criterion label, actually possesses a knowledge of the film or whether they've simply spent a weekend locked up with the disc(s), only to emerge as a slightly deceitful expert of whatever film they've chosen. Granted, with the number of films out there, it is tempting to claim expertise in as many realms of film history as possible, and to use The Criterion Collection as your crib notes is hardly an unforgivable offense.

What seems to be happening, at least in the realm of Criterion DVD reviews, is that most reviewers

are having difficulty admitting whether or not they were actually familiar with the film, and the history surrounding the film, before they sat down with the disc and its extras to review it. Or was the DVD, in fact, an introduction to a whole new world, and in turn how did this new experience reflect/affect their impression of the DVD?

I am bringing up these points because I, myself, feel a bit of trepidation writing about *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, without ever having seen a Stan Brakhage film. Hopefully, my lack of context will offer, at times, a fresh perspective on a two-disc collection that most reviewers have summarized as “brilliant,” “necessary,” and “masterful,” without ever attempting to be critical or dissect the works themselves, even though the collection consists of twenty-seven films of varying length, quality, and style, from a period of forty-seven years.

My first impression of Brakhage, based on the few photographs I had seen was that he bore a striking resemblance to Jack Horner, the Burt Reynolds' character in *Boogie Nights*. However, once I had seen *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, I decided that jokes at Brakhage's expense were probably not such a good idea, as he seemed more than capable of hurting me with his films, even from beyond the grave.

Now, having watched all of the films on the two-disc set, I can say that *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* stands out as one of the set's true masterworks. I can almost guarantee that I will never see this film again, as it deals exclusively with the graphic nature of

autopsies, and the matter-of-fact nature of the people whose job it is to dissect cadavers, in order to locate causes of death. That said, the film plays eerily like an educational classroom film, as if we are somehow supposed to be learning something from the images before us. Minus a voice-over narration track or any soundtrack whatsoever, the question remains: What could the lesson here possibly be? Live well? Die well? Take good care of your body? Don't take care of your body because the living will have their way with it once you're dead, anyhow?

The viewer rarely, if ever, sees the face of the cadavers, while only seeing the hands and the clothed crotches of the living people whose job it is to work on the dead. The first dead body we see has a massively swollen scrotum, stretched and red, but due to what? Wong Kar-Wai stated that *In The Mood For Love* was a suspense thriller disguised as a romance story; Brakhage has created a mystery (possibly a murder mystery) out of what, on the surface, appears to be an experimental documentary. Constantly, the viewer is left wondering, "How in the hell did that person die?" or, in one case, "Why is part of that person's foot missing?"

While most of the bodies come into the morgue in decent shape, others are heavily mutilated before the autopsy even begins. By the end of each autopsy, it doesn't really matter what shape the bodies were in, as every body ends up in a state beyond repair. As an exclamation point to what is already borderline unbearable for the viewer, late in the film a body appears as a literally faceless death mask. Its skull has been washed and dried out, presumably accomplished through the artificial orifice of where its face has been cut off.

Interestingly, the viewer is also made privy to the practicality of autopsies, in that one is allowed to see the cavities of torn open bodies washed out, needles drawing fluids from the insides of skulls, as well as from organs, and the clichéd, but never more startling than seen here, tagging of the toe. Only when bodies are turned over or onto their sides does one really feel the impact of death. The bodies are thoroughly stiff when turned, while the skin on the asses of the cadavers is obviously devoid of blood and lifeless, as it remains in a flattened position, pale and conforming to whatever surface it has been lying on.

The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes also reveals a trend which is frequent in Brakhage's work, or at least in my experience of watching it, which is our curiosity

about Brakhage's physical location during the making of the film. With his painted and scratched films, I imagine Brakhage as he no doubt painstakingly slaved away, while in films involving his family and/or his home, I find myself imagining the atmosphere and feelings surrounding the filmmaker as he worked with and around his loved ones. In the case of *The Act Of Seeing...*, I can't imagine Brakhage spending weeks filming cadavers, which he did, and more to the point, I can't imagine the process of editing the footage. The idea of creating a pace and a rhythm to butchered bodies, albeit as a means to an end, seems like an unenviable task, especially when one considers that the physical act of simply watching the film is difficult enough. Of note, *The Act Of Seeing...* ends in a subtly smart-ass fashion, not unlike much of Errol Morris's more ironic work. A doctor, having presumably performed an autopsy, stands alone while filling out a medical report, completely calm, as if to say, "you couldn't handle thirty minutes of this? This is my job, every single day."

By Brakhage: An Anthology is divided into four periods of the filmmaker's career. Five films, beginning with *Desistfilm* in 1954 and ending with *Motblight* in 1963, showcase Brakhage's beginnings as an experimental filmmaker. The standout of this period is *Window Water Baby Moving*, a film about pregnancy and birth, culminating in a montage sequence of the birth of one of Brakhage's own children, intercut with several images of bald (newborn) and shaved (his wife's) vaginas, as well as the smooth surface of Brakhage's formerly pregnant wife's stomach. The film reflects a larger consistency about Brakhage at his best, which is that whenever the filmmaker is desperately attempting to physicalize that which he does not understand, these mysteries inevitably become more mysterious. Of course, *Window Water...* also deals explicitly with two of Brakhage's lifelong obsessions: the relationship between birth and death, and the impossibility of comprehending death while still alive.

In other films from this earliest period of Brakhage's career, the director displays an editorial virtuosity which would become the norm in his subsequent work. However, films such as *Wedlock House: An Intercourse*, as well as *Desistfilm*, remind the viewer that in some instances, the audacity of experimentation needs the resistance of a narrative context from which to emerge. Otherwise, experimentation can simply appear as fragmented nonsense. That said, I have no doubt that even these early films, in which Brakhage is clearly refining his craft, are porous enough to have brilliance or profundity projected upon them by anyone willing to

look long and hard enough.

Besides *The Act Of Seeing...*, three other examples of Brakhage's work from the early 1970s are included, two of which remain highly original and endure to this day. *Eye Myth* is an eleven-second painted film which briefly reveals people that were filmed on a city street. The contrast between Brakhage's painstakingly painted film and the people being filmed in the actual world, creates an effect that I wish Brakhage would have attempted to achieve more often in his painted films. In many cases, contrast is exactly what makes Brakhage's work dynamic and exciting, whether it is the contrast between sound and image, or the contrast between the filmmaker's isolated techniques and his work in the outside world. In an overall sense, there is a rough division between all of his work on the two-disc set: the contrast between documenting what goes on behind a human being's eyes (thoughts, emotions, feelings), and what is going on of interest in the world beyond one's eyes (as he documents repeatedly in his non-painted films).

Fifteen films, more than half of the entire anthology, document Brakhage's work from 1986 to 2001 (he died in March of 2003). During this period, Brakhage moved heavily into his unique style of painting on film, with limited success. The best films of this period are *Nightmusic*, *Dark Tower*, and *Delicacies Of Modern Horror Synapse*. *Nightmusic*, painted on IMAX film stock, is one of the few films that obviously suffers from not being projected in its original format (Brakhage's epic *Dog Star Man*, mostly because of its duration, also suffers from not being projected on film in a darkened theatre). Only thirty seconds in length, the film creates an effect which I'll call a "light of God" effect. Light shines through and off of the film, creating amazing results. Brakhage used this technique repeatedly, most notably in *Untitled (For Marilyn)*, *Delicacies Of...* and *Dark Tower*. *Delicacies Of Modern Horror Synapse* also creates a textured density in which Brakhage finally accomplishes what he repeatedly attempted throughout his career: he effectively conveys feelings by painting on film. The process for making this film, which is explained in the DVD's supplementary material, is what presumably led Brakhage to succeed where he had failed in the past.

Stellar starts off incredibly, due largely to pacing and content that is unlike Brakhage's other works on the disc. It quickly dissolves into the frenetic pace common in Brakhage's other painted films. The film was meant to be Brakhage's interpretation of the cosmos, capturing the effects of interstellar images via paint on celluloid. After a few brilliant seconds, I found myself wishing

that Brakhage had actively attempted to transcend the natural flickering of film at 24 frames-per-second, and made the pace of his painted films more distinctly his own. It's as if the stylistic techniques of his painted films were determined by the mechanics of projection, and not his own willed process. Granted, Brakhage's style in the painted films draws attention to and reconfigures the mechanics of projected film, which a viewer rarely thinks about. However, after a few of these films, I think it's safe to say that we get Brakhage's point about mechanics, relating to the production and presentation of art.

As one moves through the supplements on *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, one notices that Brakhage is introducing himself as a person, even as he introduces us to his work. Based solely upon footage of Brakhage speaking and reading onscreen, as well as the audio-only captures in which he "remarks" on each and every film included in the set, he comes across as extremely amicable, thoughtful, unpretentious, and genuinely interested in getting at something new and original in his work. Based on the disc's supplementary material, a strong sense is given that Brakhage, sadly, knew that this two-disc set would be his legacy. Consequently, he wanted to offer as many clues as possible about his life's work. Unless Criterion or another company decides to release a follow-up collection, for many viewers, these twenty-seven films will define Stan Brakhage as a filmmaker. It's an impressive collection.