REVIEWS

Tate Modern, *Mike Kelley: Ghost and Spirit*, installation view: *Extra Curricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #8 (Singles Mixer)*, 2004–05. Photograph by Lucy Green. © Tate Photography.

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Seeking Brakhage, Fred Camper (2023)

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In May 1966, Fred Camper wrote a ten-page programme note for the Boston area premiere of *The Art of Vision*, a four-hour film by the pioneering avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Half the MIT Film Society audience sat through the entire movie, even though Brakhage's non-narrative, visually dense, seemingly incoherent yet relentlessly repetitive imagery – projected in silence – is extremely challenging to uninitiated viewers. That so many of them stayed till the end was certainly due to Camper's exceptional efforts to guide them through the film: not only had he already viewed it five times, travelling to New York and New Haven to do so, but also he had to type his ten single-spaced pages onto stencils, pounding the mechanical keyboard hard enough to cut through the thin sheets, which would then be hand-cranked through the inked roller of a printer. By today's standards, it was an incredibly laborious task, even for a good typist. But in those days, programme notes were the bayonets wielded by front-line infantry in the 1960s assault on the moral and aesthetic values of the film establishment. Camper was in the thick of that battle. And in those days, he was only 18 years old.

America's avant-garde film movement emerged in the 1940s in the form of personal, poetic shorts. But it truly came of age in the 1960s, partly thanks to the increasing availability of 16 mm and 8 mm film equipment. The movement earned the label 'underground' after New York City police raided a screening of Jack Smith's notorious *Flaming Creatures* (1963), which featured cavorting transvestites and a glimpse of limp penises. Underground movies held the promise of sex, drugs and music.

Brakhage's *Art of Vision* did not quite fit that bill. Although emblematic of 'personal' filmmaking, it is anything but sexy. Notwithstanding shots of childbirth and close-ups of flesh, the film is too abstract to be titillating. There is no narrative, although a loose thematic arc encompasses a woodsman with an axe who struggles to climb a snowy mountain, find a tree and chop it down. Camera movement is swift; the editing is even swifter, when it is not wilfully languid. The filmstrip is often superimposed in two, three or four layers, juxtaposing shots of the woodsman with images both telescopic (of the sun and moon) and microscopic (blood vessels), whilst an anamorphic lens twists and distorts the landscape, rendering objects indistinguishable. Nothing is obvious, apart from the intensity of Brakhage's vision. The *Art of Vision* confirmed his status as the most ambitious, idiosyncratic filmmaker on the scene. By the time of his death in 2003 Brakhage had made some four hundred films, many lasting just a

few minutes, shot with 'amateur' equipment or painted directly onto the filmstrip. His freewheeling, expressionistic visual style-influenced countless experimental filmmakers.

The publication of *Seeking Brakhage*, an extensive collection of Camper's writings on Brakhage covering half a century, brings the careers of both critic and filmmaker back into focus. Born in 1933, Brakhage's formative period is the stuff of legend, fuelled partly by himself: he was an illegitimate child adopted by parents who soon divorced; as a hyperactive teenager in high school in Denver, Colorado, he and a gang of friends organized poetry and theatre events; he enrolled at Dartmouth but quickly dropped out, returning to Colorado and spending his remaining college money on filmmaking equipment; film school in San Francisco resulted in a second dropout, but there he befriended poets Kenneth Rexroth, Michael McClure and Robert Duncan. Brakhage's early short films, made with his troupe of friends, were tales of alienation and heterosexual longing, stylistically indebted to Italian neorealism. He moved temporarily to New York, where he met experimental filmmakers Maya Deren, Marie Menken and Joseph Cornell, all of whom opened his eyes to new aesthetic possibilities. Still in his mid-twenties, he not only struggled to make a living but also suffered from 'neurotic diseases' (his term) such as asthma and arthritic fingers, having been 'defeated in all searches of love'. Then, in this period of despair, he met and married Jane Collum, simultaneously renouncing the New York art scene. In 1959, he and Collum moved to Colorado, ultimately retreating to a log cabin in the Rocky Mountains, where his filmmaking centred on their marriage and raising their five children.

Crucially, by the early 1960s, Brakhage had forged his own visual idiom, abandoning 'psychodramas' that called upon theatrical actors and plot development, however, loose and creative. Instead, he adopted a first-person camera in which what you see on the screen is exactly what Brakhage experienced via his idiosyncratic vision – he allegedly threw away his glasses to see life uncorrected. His goal was to recover an 'untutored vision' that predated the acquisition of language, seeking to answer his own oft-quoted question: 'How many colours are there in a field of grass to a crawling baby unaware of "Green"?' (Brakhage 1963: n.pag.). He asked that we

> [i]magine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which knows each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception […]. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word'.
>
> (Brakhage 1963: n.pag.)

This pre-scriptural optic was accompanied by similarly untutored editing techniques – the resulting films were not to the liking of many. In 1961, Ernest Callenbach, the highly respected editor of *Film Quarterly*, acknowledged that 'Brakhage is probably the best known American experimental film-maker after Maya Deren', yet he judged that 'Mr. Brakhage's films are awful'. Callenbach's detailed demolition of the films quoted Pauline Kael's dismissal of Brakhage's groundbreaking *Anticipation of the Night* (1959) as 'the subtle manipulation of nothing' (1961: 47).

Throughout the 1960s, the task of following, explaining and defending Brakhage's protean artistic development fell to outsiders. Such as the youthful Fred Camper. Camper, along with P. Adams Sitney – about whom, more later – was one of the leading exponents of Brakhage's difficult work. His career as a critic ultimately took a maverick, Brakhage-like turn. After getting a bachelor's degree in physics from MIT, Camper enrolled in NYU's Cinema

Studies Department intending to write his dissertation on the filmmaker.[1] Within a few years, he was lured away by the offer of a full-time job teaching cinema studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Although he chaired the Filmmaking Department for four years, substantially raising its profile on the avant-garde scene, Camper became the object of a bitter tenure battle – which he lost, effectively ending his university career. In a retreat from academia not unlike Brakhage's withdrawal from the art scene two decades earlier, Camper went it alone, eking out a living from various ventures (including stock market speculation, which cost him his shirt), ultimately settling as a Chicago-based, freelance reviewer of films and art, notably contributing to the *Chicago Reader* for many years.

Camper's eclectic collection of writings on Brakhage is divided into three parts: short analytical and theoretical essays, written for various publications or public presentations; early programme notes (1966–81) along with later, brief reviews for the *Chicago Reader* (1989–2002) and practical chapters on projecting and viewing Brakhage's work. Of greatest historical interest is Part Two, the programme notes which reflect the immediacy of grappling with a Brakhage film for the first time. Camper's notes shepherd viewers through the *experience* of seeing a Brakhage film. Above all, they convey the conviction of a connoisseur who was still reaching out to uninitiated or sceptical viewers twenty years after he had begun proselytizing. As late as 1989, in a *Chicago Reader* review of six short films, he wrote:

> Although [Brakhage's] reputation is international, and he has lectured in Chicago many times, many have never heard of him. His films are completely unlike what most people call 'movies' […]. For many, myself included, Brakhage's work is the greatest single example of the movement often called 'experimental' or 'avant-garde' cinema. His special achievement has been the creation of an entire cinematic vocabulary of individual expression and inner vision. Using the most basic materials of cinema – light, movement, time and sound (or silence) – Brakhage has created an art in the same way that a composer would create out of pure sound or a painter out of paint.
>
> (311)

Instead of offering a wider, historical contextualization, Camper sticks to the screen, taking readers very simply through the visual effects of one of the films in the programme, *Kindering* (1987).

> In his earlier films, Brakhage tended to twist the lens rapidly, creating a sense that the seen world was rapidly and constantly being transformed by the artist's shifting consciousness. (The direction in which the image is expanded and compressed depends on which way the lens is oriented.) In *Kindering*, the lens mainly turns slowly or not at all, so that the type of distortion present in each image is relatively constant. The viewer is presented with cramped, cluttered images, images that feel utterly filled, in part with children made grotesque by the lens.
>
> (315)

We get a concise description of the technique employed, a statement of its effect and some speculation as to what the technique and imagery may 'mean'.

> [*Kindering*] seems to represent a single terrifying dream image, a sudden, awful vision. One senses the image not as a window that may be entered by an imaginative

1. Disclosure: I was an undergraduate in the Cinema Studies Department while Camper was a postgraduate student there, and our paths occasionally crossed. Furthermore, P. Adams Sitney was already teaching at NYU – his erudite lectures made a profound impact on me.

> mind but as a barrier, a filled world with its own inner logic of space and seeing that denies the artist, and us, admission. Brakhage's alienation from the children – who are, not insignificantly, his grandchildren – is clear. But also we have a vision of American suburban childhood in general – as a backyard horror, a prison that denies imaginative freedom.
>
> (315)

Although Camper's prose is occasionally hyperbolic, he always retained more circumspection – and greater analytical insight – than Jonas Mekas, the 'patron saint' of experimental filmmaking, whose dithyrambic columns in New York's *Village Voice* were enormously influential in the 1960s and 1970s. Camper's argument was simple, straightforward and practical.

Enter P. Adams Sitney, who wrote the introduction to this volume. Sitney was an even earlier advocate of Brakhage, yet one who took a different route. He, too, was a youthful prodigy, having been just a teenager in 1961, when he launched and edited *Filmwise*, the mimeographed magazine of the New Haven Film Society, whose first issue was devoted to Brakhage. The very next year, Sitney was invited to join the editorial board of *Film Culture*, a leading independent-film review. Like Camper, Sitney's early writing on Brakhage was heavily indebted to the filmmaker's input, and in 1963, Sitney edited *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage's seminal statement on his own work. Unlike Camper, however, Sitney navigated his way through a series of distinguished teaching jobs that led to a tenured position at Princeton. Also, and more important, Sitney injected his own, extensive scholarship into his analyses of Brakhage's work, setting it in the context of modernist poetics, aesthetics and philosophy, always based on, yet extending beyond, the filmmaker's own ideas. Even as a young man, Sitney held forth like an old sage, stroking a long, reddish, Methuselah-like beard and delivering lectures that were thrilling in their erudition. He remains Brakhage's finest exegete, as well as the author of the canonical history of American avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film*.

Given their mutual admiration – it was Camper who invited Sitney to write the introduction to *Seeking Brakhage* – Sitney's introduction takes surprisingly strong issue with Camper's writings. It underscores the differences in their respective analyses, rather than exploring the rationale behind Camper's personal approach. Sitney advances his own 'mode of critical hermeneutics' (2023: 8), which entail solidly grounded demonstrations of the impact of poets Charles Olson and Robert Duncan on Brakhage, even as he acknowledges Camper's strength: '[E]ven more than Brakhage himself, [Camper] placed his trust in what he could see. And he could see, and feel intensely, a great deal' (2023: 9). But Sitney dwells on his own objection to Camper's commitment to finding a 'transcending unity of the internal oppositions' within Brakhage's films. Sitney's contribution will engage specialists, whereas non-specialists – to whom much of Camper's writing was addressed – may be puzzled by a dense, closely argued introduction that challenges the theoretical foundations of the book it presents.

This clash partly reflects the divergence in the two critics' careers. By 1986, approaching age 40, some 25 years after he became enthralled by the entire avant-garde film movement, Camper experienced what might be deemed a mid-life crisis. He published a controversial article titled 'The end of avant-garde film' in *The Millennium Film Journal*, in which he argued that few great new film-makers had emerged on the scene since 1966 – mediocrity henceforth reigned, he claimed. To oversimplify his lengthy argument, Camper blamed 'institutionalization' for the death of the movement. Universities and art schools, by setting

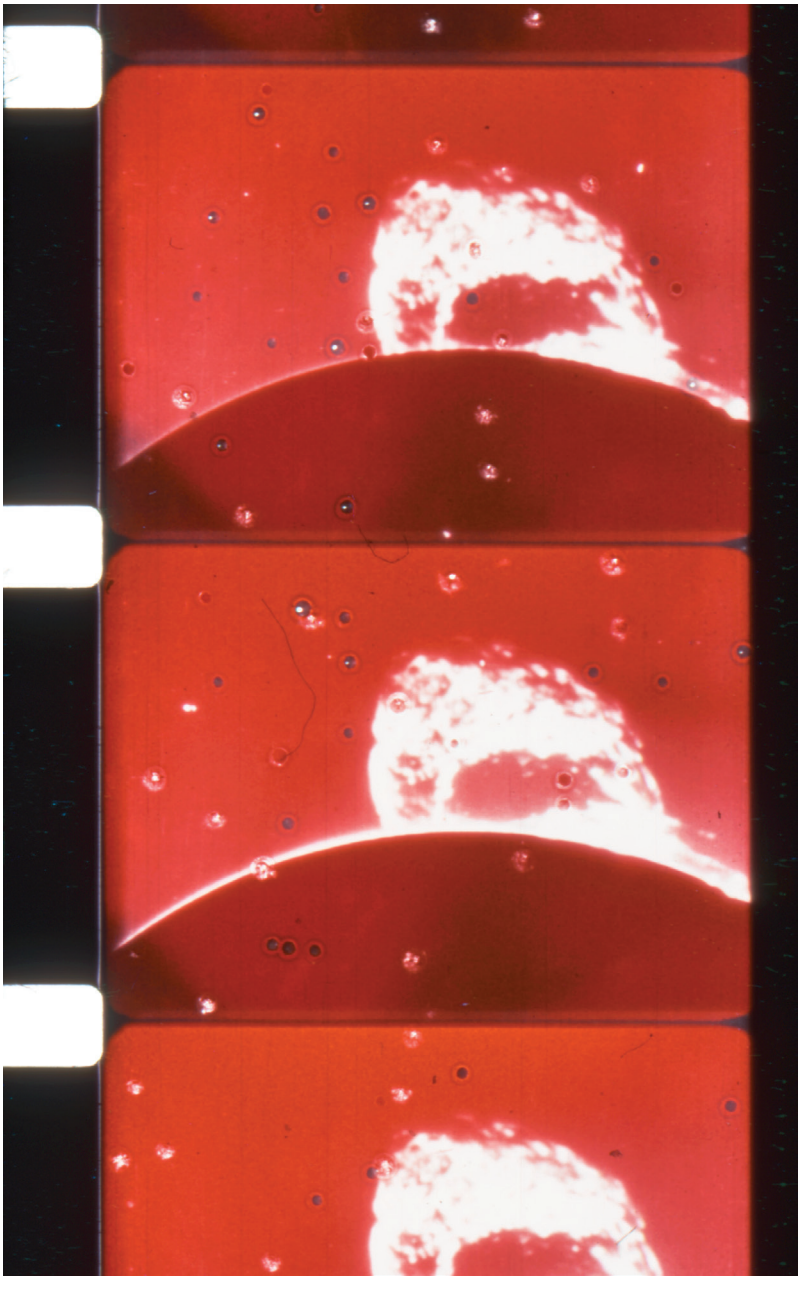
up film departments, had academicized a creative impetus rooted in an anti-establishment stance, in a radical rejection of prevailing assumptions. Students' easy access to facilities and their need to get passing grades undermined the movement's early, heroic ambitions for 'achievements on a grand scale' (Camper 1986: n.pag.). Camper's broadside was perhaps not surprising, coming from someone who found himself outside academia, yet it is hard not to think of a now-famous article on 'Death and the mid-life crisis' published by Elliott Jaques in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1965.[2] Jacques claimed that artistic personalities reach a critical threshold at age 35 or so, due to a number of psychological and biological factors yet inevitably triggered by the confrontation with death and destructive principles. Prior to that moment, artistic expression is marked by the idealism and optimism of youth; subsequent to it, a creative career either comes to an end or else significantly changes in content and quality. Perhaps intimations of mortality prompted Camper's disillusionment with the perceived failure of his earlier, idealistic aspirations; whatever the case, he made his disenchantment with the institutionalized generation very public even as he continued to defend the 'heroic' generation, notably the mature work of Brakhage. This latter had stormed through his own midlife crises – child raising, sexual meditations, eventual divorce and remarriage – with a prolific stream of movies that increasingly relied on hand-painted, abstract imagery. This enabled Camper, who was moving away from avant-garde film towards the fine arts in general, to continue to update his engagement with Brakhage's work, keeping in regular touch with the filmmaker by phone and letter as he published the articles and delivered the lectures reprinted in this volume. Their introductory register is almost certainly what prompted Sitney, in his critique, to concentrate on a few of Camper's more ambitious arguments, which sought to offer deeper insight into the oeuvre. Yet Sitney's discussion of Camper's attempts to discover a unified aesthetic behind Brakhage's multifarious work overlooks the true contribution of this volume even as it indirectly points to two paradoxes.

The first paradox is that, although most of Camper's texts were aimed at a general audience, this book is clearly a specialist publication. *Seeking Brakhage* is not to be read straight through, for the arguments are too repetitive and the texts too event-specific; nor it is a Brakhage primer, for it is neither comprehensive nor systematic enough. Instead, it is a handy user's manual, offering insights into how to view and grasp individual films, from those early mimeographed programme notes to the liner text for the first DVD edition of Brakhage's movies, issued by Criterion in 2003.

The second paradox arises from the endemic, intractable difficulty of writing about non-narrative, non-dramatic films: if there is no 'boy-meets-girl' thread to follow, then demonstrating a given interpretation often calls for the detailed description of more-or-less complex or abstract sequences. Readers already familiar with the film can use these passages as a memory prompt, but the eyes of readers who have not yet seen the film inevitably glaze over – such passages rarely strike the mind's eye. In many cases, the 'introductory' aim of much writing on avant-garde film only succeeds if the reader has already experienced the film in question. No critic, as far as I know, has effectively solved this problem.

The final section of *Seeking Brakhage* shifts to a more practical level, including a chapter on how the movies should be projected, plus a discussion of the aesthetic impact not just of different prints (which may vary in tint) but even of the colour-temperature of projection bulbs. Typical is Camper's discussion of setting the frame line when projecting *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966–67), a multi-reel film made in the finicky

2. Recently, Susanne Schmidt has convincingly argued that the concept of 'midlife crisis' was popularized not by Jaques but by the feminist movement in the 1970s, notably through Gail Sheehy's best-seller, *Passages* (1976). See Schmidt (2018).



Stan Brakhage, *The Art of Vision*, 1965. Courtesy of the Estate of Stan Brakhage and Fred Camper at https://www.fredcamper.com.

home-movie format of 8 mm. Trivial, one may think, yet indicative of the degree of attentiveness required, and also enlightening of the way Brakhage himself addressed such problems. Indeed, although Camper never dwells on biographical details, he reports the filmmaker's opinions on various matters (such as the best projection speeds), adding a distinctly Boswellian value to these essays. While such issues may seem superannuated in our digital age, the historical guidelines they provide will someday prove essential for a grasp of the experience of seeing Brakhage in the celluloid medium in which he worked.

Brakhage's movies remain hard to see outside of academic institutions and specialized film clubs. Although Criterion released a selection of his films on two Blu-Ray discs – with Camper's blessing – the visual experience is hardly the same. In the old days, you had to go to a darkened theatre, sit among an audience and decide – when bored or befuddled – to get up and leave. Now you can watch a few minutes on a small screen at home and simply flick the switch at the first sign of restlessness. All writers on Brakhage have underscored the importance of the visual rhythm of his editing, which includes not just swift and superimposed juxtaposition of images, but also insertions of black, white or coloured leader that often interrupt the imagery: the screen goes 'blank'. Not only do such sequences intensify the retinal experience, but they also pace the film. Indeed, the rhythm of a Brakhage movie is more than just visual, it arises from bodily frequencies; his films breathe in an organic way, despite their mechanical reproduction. Taking the time to adopt his respiration, to go with the sometimes-torrential flow of his imagery, is one of the prerequisites for fully experiencing Brakhage's films.

In the early 1970s, I had the good luck to view a wide range of Brakhage's films in what was called the 'Invisible Cinema' at Anthology Film Archives on New York's Lower East side. The theatre was completely clad in black velvet, and the seats had curved hoods above the head and blinders on the side, so that once the lights went down the blackness was total. The audience around you, like the theatre, became invisible. Only the image projected on the luminous white rectangle would register on the retina. The effect was one of weightlessness. I always made a point of arriving early to get my favourite seat in the middle of the fourth row, where the image entirely filled my visual field. But the intensity of Brakhage's movies, as distinct from all others screened at Anthology, made me feel nauseous and headachy. I soon learned to move several rows back, resolving the issue even as I discovered just how *physical* the rhythms, the flashes, the colours and the unfocused or anamorphic images truly are. The effect can be transformative in so far as the 'meaning' conveyed by his visionary movies is not just pre-linguistic, but it is essentially corporeal. Which is why viewing conditions remain so crucial.

Stan Brakhage was out to change the way we experience the art of the movies and, ultimately, life. Fred Camper, like others, was out to change the world by advocating this fundamentally new perception of it. The world has certainly changed, although not because of the films and not quite the way we envisaged. Yet a trace of Camper's original – and never fully abandoned – struggle for a radically transformed vision can be gleaned from this historically significant volume of reports from the battlefield.

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