

Dog Star Man

(1961-1964)

A film by Stan Brakhage

Wednesday, August 4, 2010

Northwest Film Forum

Co-presented by The Sprocket Society and Third Eye Cinema

Seattle, WA

Legendary Epics Yarns and Fables. Part 2: Stan Brakhage

(Stephen E. Gebhardt and Robert Fries, 1969)

9 min. / sound / color/ 16mm

“Sometimes I think if I just shut up... For instance, I’ve been telling people I think, really, for the art of the film that sound is an aesthetic error. And maybe even so severe a one that maybe even in 20 years – if people even have a concept of film as art in 20 years that’s worth anything – there might be a general assumption...by artists of the medium that to put sound on a film was really a blind alley...

“I mean, at least it’s my theory that *if* the major consideration of film is really the visual, then the reason that sound is a blind alley is that it cuts back sight, so that at the very instance that sound is removed, or that it’s relatively silent, my theory is that it becomes more possible to see. And that at the very instance that a word comes in, it immediately becomes more difficult for whomever to *see*.

“I suddenly see more when I stop talking, for instance.

“I also get scared.

“I sometimes think that the real reason that...the movies plaster mood music and everything else all over the soundtrack is that so there’s *never* a moment of silence, because people are afraid. And with sound pouring into the ears they feel more comforted. Lullabied, in some sense.”

Born and raised in Cincinnati, OH, Stephen Gebhardt was an architecture student with an interest in urban planning who became a filmmaker while in college. He founded the University of Cincinnati Film Society in 1961, which later developed the legendary Spring Arts Festival, hosting internationally-renowned film and music artists. He taught film at the U.C. Graduate School and Antioch College (Yellow Springs, OH) and made films commercially until he moved to New York City to manage the newly-created Anthology Film Archives and to pursue a career in filmmaking.

In 1969, he made *Legendary Epic Yarns and Fables*, a series of short, single-shot, one-take interview films with prominent avant garde and underground cinema artists. He also filmed recording sessions for a monumental jazz opera (or “chronotransduction”), *Escalator Over the Hill*, developed between 1968-1972 by composer Carla Bley and poet Paul Haines, with Don Cherry, John McLaughlin, Sheila Jordan, Gato Barbieri, and others.

In 1970, Gebhardt began a 3-year relationship with John Lennon and Yoko Ono, making their films, running their attendant company, Joko Films, and managing their film archive. Among the films he shot and directed was the nationally-broadcast 1972 Madison Square Garden concert which proved to be Lennon’s last.

He directed the concert film *Ladies & Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones*, made during that band’s 1972 US tour supporting *Exile On Main Street*, which was released theatrically in 1974 to specially-prepared theaters in quadraphonic, concert volume sound.

Beginning in 1974, he developed a friendship and what he has described as “a student/mentor relationship” with Harry Smith, assisting him in the making of the epic multi-projector film, *Mahogony* (1980).

Gebhardt subsequently returned to Cincinnati to teach. His later films have included the documentaries *Bill Monroe: The Father of Bluegrass Music* (1993) and *Twenty to Life: The Life and Times of John Sinclair* (2004). He is a member of the artist collective, Musicus Media.

Other films in the *Legendary Epics Yarns and Fables* series (1969):

- Part 1: Robert Nelson
- Part 3: Peter Kubelka
- Part 4: The Kuchar Brothers

Dog Star Man

75 min. / silent / color / 16mm

Prelude (1961) 25 min.

“I realized that whatever happened within this prelude would determine what was to come; and in that sense I wanted it to be as real from the very beginning as life happening.” – Stan Brakhage

“In *Prelude* Brakhage achieves a synthesis of all his techniques. In this film of exquisite beauty the images become like words: they come back again, in little bursts, and disappear, and come back again – like in sentences – creating visual and mental impressions, experiences.” – Jonas Mekas

“*Prelude* is a declaration both of the unity of the world (and Brakhage’s lyrical feeling of identification with it) and love for woman, expressed in transcendent, cosmic terms. His images here include both microscopic and telescopic, and range from solar explosions to brief glimpses of the beloved’s body...the degree of spiritual, cosmic feeling is remarkable. Brakhage has gone further than any of his fellows whose work I have seen.” – Paul Beckley, *New York Herald Tribune*.

“Four basic visual themes dominate *Prelude*: (1) the four elements, air, earth, fire and water; (2) the cosmos represented in the stock footage of the sun, the moon, and the stars; (3) Brakhage’s household – himself, his dog and cat, his baby, and particularly his wife’s nude body; and (4) artificial, yet purely filmic devices such as painting or scratching in film, distorting lenses, double exposure and clear leader.” – P. Adams Sitney

Part I (1962) 31 min.

“In the tradition of Ezra Pound’s Vorticism, *Part I* is a Noh drama, the exploration in minute detail of a single action and all its ramifications. The formal construction of the film, the interrelationships and significance of the images, has been woven on an extremely subtle level. Each shot appears only as an isolated piece...appreciated (as) it is understood within the context of the entire mosaic.” – P. Adams Sitney

Part II (1963) 5.5 min.

“[T]he extension of the bardic art into living film...images of life, regeneration...spring and early morning.” – P. Adams Sitney

Part III (1964) 7.5 min.

“The marriage of striving and fertility...midsummer and high noon.” – P. Adams Sitney

Part IV (1964) 6 min.

Inducted into the National Film Registry in 1992

“The fall and evening in this cycle of all history, all mankind; returning via a Fall into the generative Dream of *Prelude*. Death cast into the future by the question, ‘What is death like?’ is recognized as the lens through which we grasp the limitlessness of life.” – P. Adams Sitney

About *Dog Star Man*

From *Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Catalog* (MOMA, 1984), p. 189:

One of the major works of the experimental cinema, *Dog Star Man* is an epic visionary challenge. Structured in a prelude and four parts, Brakhage has described the film as having a seasonal/diurnal form: "While it encompasses a year and the history of man in terms of image material..., I thought it should be contained within a single day."

Working with one to four layers of images, adding other layers of direct manipulation through painting and scratching, Brakhage weaves a complex story of the mythical Dog Star Man. [Experimental film historian P. Adams] Sitney has compared the filmmaker's narrative to the philosophy and art of William Blake, and this is perhaps the most accurate and insightful parallel for the viewer to understand the levels which Brakhage intends his work to embrace. There is a progression from innocence to experience, a frugal quality to the repetition of images, and an internal contrast in the respective meanings these images take depending on the stage within which they occur.

The balance between earthly concerns in erotic visions and the spiritual quest of the Dog Star Man are intensely felt, and the alternation of Brakhage's interest in the childlike innocence of senses and the adult commingling of sexes is at once one of conflict and hopeful promise of union. *Dog Star Man* represents the distillation of Brakhage's focus on the "art of vision" and is perhaps the most compressed and articulate expression of his powerful art.

From Marilyn Brakhage, "On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music," *Vantage Point* (online magazine, Vancouver, BC), January 2008:

It was during the creation of his epic film *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), that Brakhage concurrently produced his seminal work of theoretical writing, 'Metaphors on Vision.' With *Dog Star Man*, he was striving to create a new creation myth for modern times through a transformation of the old symbolic systems that had come to seem so rigid and unchanging. The Tree of Life of the ancient myths, now seen as dead, was thus to be cut down and turned into firewood for the struggling young man's family. With multiple superimpositions, rapidly repeated zooms, negative to positive imagery, prism effects, flash frames, edge flares, cut outs, scratching and painting on the film itself, time lapses and anamorphic twists, he created a tapestry of constantly moving imagery within a phenomenological space. Images of clouds and mist, ice and snow, the sun and the moon; red flames, blue ice, and flaring film edges; man, woman and child; a beating heart and circling blood cells; the chopping of the tree and the movements of the stars: all were woven together with rapid camera movement and rapid cutting into the streaming and beating rhythms that create an overall metaphor for Life itself.

It was coincident with this making, then, that he would write:

Imagine an eye unrul'd 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 must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green"? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.' [Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision" (*Film Comment* no. 30, 1963).]

Stan Brakhage on *Dog Star Man*

Condensed from interviews with Brakhage, as quoted in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (second ed.), pp. 174-178, 193. Sitney notes, "Brakhage's paraphrase suggests at times a narrative consistency which is not apparent in the film, while he omits other obvious connections." Ellipses are in the published text.

The man climbs the mountain out of winter and night into the dawn, up through spring and early morning to midsummer and high noon, to where he chops down the tree... There's a Fall – and the fall back to somewhere, midwinter.

I thought of *Dog Star Man* as seasonally structured that way; but also while it encompasses a year and the history of man in terms of image material (e.g. trees become architecture for a whole history of religious monuments or violence becomes the development of war), I thought it should be contained within a single day.

I wanted *Prelude* to be a created dream for the work that follows rather than Surrealism which takes its inspiration from dream; I stayed close to the practical use of dream material... One thing I knew for sure (from my own dreaming) was that what one dreams just before waking structures the following day... Since *Prelude* was based on dream vision as I remembered it, it had to include 'closed-eye vision.'

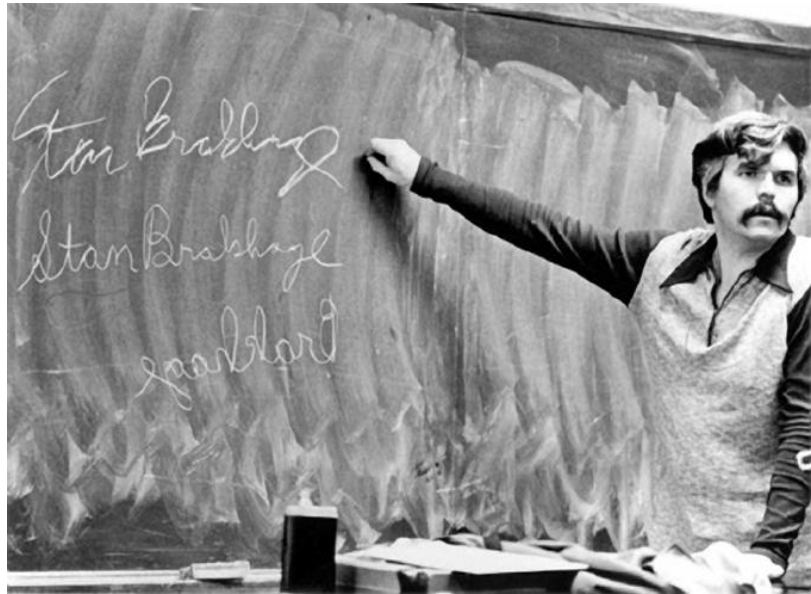
In the tradition of Ezra Pound's vorticism, *Part One* is a Noh drama, the exploration in minute detail of a single action and all its ramifications. [Brakhage described the basic action of this section as 'the two steps forward, one step backward' motion of the hero, which he related to the forward-backward motion of blood in the capillary system, the image of that part.]

The heart has stopped in *Part One*, and, while we see an increasingly black and white image [of the man] that climbs up the mountain, there is a negative image of the Dog Star Man that is absolutely fallen at that instant.

I had no idea what would happen in *Part Two*, except that it would be in some sense autobiographical; but I knew that the heart must start again in *Part Three*; and that it would be a sexual daydream, or that level of yearning, that would start the heart again.

The moment at which the man is seen both climbing and fallen is recapitulated in a way at the beginning of *Part Two*... I reintroduced the man climbing both in negative and positive, superimposed. I had some sense that these twin aspects of the Dog Star Man could be moving as if in memory... I realized that the man, in his fall and his climb in negative and positive, was split asunder and related either to himself as a baby (those first six weeks...in which a baby's face goes through a transition from that period we call infancy to babyhood; ...the lines of the face fill out what might be called a first mask or a personality, a cohesiveness which occurs in the facial structure or control of the face over those first six weeks) and/or to his child.

The whole idea of the baby's face achieving a solidity, or the first period of birth would relate metaphorically to spring, the springing into *per-son*... At the end of *Part Two* a balance is achieved when the images return to the Dog Star Man in his fall. It was very important to me, too, that the tripod legs



would show in the distance so that there is always some sense that this is a film-maker being filmed... In no sense is it engaging or pulling in, precisely because in the plot level of the film the Dog Star Man is being engaged with his own childhood by his child...

The images return to the Dog Star Man in his fall, in his jumps back down the earth, or his imagined fall. He's seen finally flat on his back on a rock ledge and the figure of the woman is collaged in.

Part Three has a 'His, Her, and Heart' roll... Female images are trying to become male and have not succeeded... In the 'Her' roll you see mounds of moving flesh that separate distinguishably into a woman's image, but then become very tortured by attempts to transform into male. It's very Breugelesque in a way; penises replace breasts in flashes of images; then a penis will jut through the eyes; or male hair will suddenly move across the whole scape of the female's body... At some point this ceases and this flesh becomes definitely woman. Then on the 'His' roll...you have the opposite occurring: a male mound of flesh which keeps being tortured by a proclivity to female imagery; so that, for instance, the lips are suddenly transformed into the vagina. Finally the male form becomes distinct. Then, of course, these two dance together as they are superimposed on each other; you get this mound of male-female flesh which pulls apart variously and superimposes upon itself in these mixtures of Breugelesque discoveries, so to speak, or distortions. Finally toward the end, the male and female become separate so that they can come together.

Part Four begins with that man on the ledge as we found him at the end of *Part Two*. He rises up and shakes off the sexual daydream and becomes involved in shaking off every reason he might have for chopping that tree... Finally, if looked at carefully, there is really no relevant, definite, specific reason given for that Dog Star Man to chop the tree as he does at the end of *Part Four*... Finally the whole concept of the woodcutter gets tossed into the sky... The axe is lifted up and the figure cuts to Cassiopeia's chair, which I suppose you can say is finally what Dog Star Man sits down into in the sky... The whole film flares out in obvious cuts which relate to the burning out and changes of subtly colored leader to the beginning of the *Prelude*.

...I always kept the growth of *Dog Star Man* consonant with the changes in our living. I never let an idea impose itself to the expense of actually being where I was when I was working on the film. I never built, or permitted any ivory tower to get built around myself so that I could pursue the original idea of *Dog Star Man* to the expense of keeping that work from changing in detail according to the life we were living.

...Really when I had the sense of being finished with the work was when the four and one-half hour work [*The Art of Vision* (1965)] got a title separate from the 75 minute *Dog Star Man* composite. That happened when I visited the Kellys. We looked at all that material in that order I had given it. The morning after we had seen the whole thing, Kelly said at breakfast: 'It seems to me you ought to read a life of Johann Sebastian Bach.' We took another couple sips of coffee, and I thought 'Uh-huh, well, that would be a good thing to do.' Then suddenly he came out with: 'Well, to get that sense of form whereby a whole work can exist in the center of another work, or spiral out into pieces in another work, as in Baroque music, and that second arrangement be another piece entirely.' I said: 'Well, you mean like – but that isn't exactly what happens in *The Art of the Fugue*, but something like that.' Suddenly he came out with: 'Why don't you call it *The Art of Vision*?' Immediately that seemed to me a completely perfect thing to do.

Stan Brakhage on Theory, Intent, and “Talent”

Excerpted from an audio recording of an interview with Stan Brakhage by Pauline Kael, circa 1962 (misattributed as “1964?”), preserved by the Anthology Film Archives. The full surviving recording is available online as an MP3 at <http://www.ubu.com/sound/brakhage.html>

Pauline Kael: I see what you’re getting at. And I think you talk your films brilliantly. The question is whether this comes across on film.

Stan Brakhage: Well the problem is here that, no, I’m really not a very good talker. But I have the advantage that most people don’t have: I see my films many, many times.

PK: But this could be a disadvantage, because you may think that other people can see in them what you wanted to put there.

SB: I’m not concerned with what other people see there. See, I’m not making them for other people.

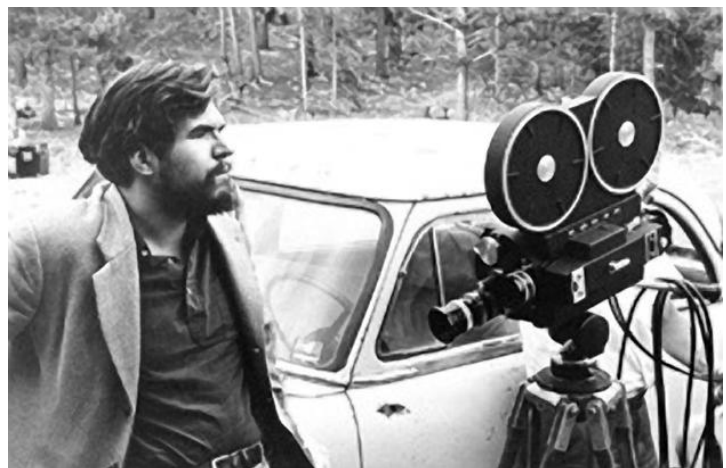
PK: Well, this is always a tricky question in the arts, isn’t it? [*SB: ...Not tricky for me...*] I have heard you described by another filmmaker as a ‘genius without talent.’ And do you see what he meant? You are obviously an *immensely* creative person with an immense fund of theories about the films, some of them *very* exciting. But the question is whether you have the talent to put this in your own work.

SB: ‘Talent’ is something that arises in my life, usually, when I’m making a commercial work, and I can draw immense salaries making commercial works and this is supposed to be in this society the proof of ‘talent.’ So I, too, will lay it out on the table at this moment and let it go at that. In my *own* work, talent is not something that is a concern.

I’m very anxious for instance with my children, when they are ‘un’-talented, to give them 8mm cameras and begin teaching them enough of the mechanics so they can start searching and making films of their own. Will there be any way to equate, to decide who is more ‘talented,’ themselves or myself in this sort of a situation? Now if you mean ‘as an artist am I talented,’ I mean, I don’t know how you’re going to evaluate this either. I am learned, I have studied, I am dedicated...

PK: (*Interrupting*) ...Well let’s say...could you do this with your children?

SB: Well no, the art process is something different. What the children would do their cameras would not be an art process. Maybe what I’m doing isn’t either. What’s wonderful is when this question dissolves and vanishes altogether, as in a case like Simon Rodia and his towers [*in Watts, Los Angeles*]. Is he an artist? How will Herr Professor categorize those towers? Will they be put in this card catalog drawer or that one, or how can the vultures earn their living off of it? I’m not concerned with ‘talent’ in any of these senses, or whether it’s a work of ‘art’ or not. Simon Rodia made great, immense beauty out of his own particular necessity. He’s an ideal to me in this sense and, in a way, all of us that work, we may be more or less involved with the public for other reasons, for feelings of responsibility, or that we have something that’s needed. And these are distractions in relationship to the work.



About Stan Brakhage

“I am an amateur filmmaker. I make home movies.”

Stan Brakhage, interview with Pauline Kael circa 1962, Anthology Film Archives.

“Stan Brakhage, 37, a husky hypochondriac who lives with his wife and five children in a log cabin in Colorado, has radically rewritten movie grammar. By fragmenting his films into frames, Brakhage has established the frame in cinema as equivalent to the note in music; whereupon he proceeds to make films with frames the way a composer makes music with notes.”

“Art of Light and Lunacy: The New Underground Films,” *Time* magazine, February 17, 1967.

“I personally think that the three greatest tasks for film in the 20th century are (1) To make the epic, that is, to tell the tales of the tribes of the world. (2) To keep it personal, because only in the eccentricities of our personal lives do we have any chance at the truth. (3) To do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious.”

Stan Brakhage, “Telluride Gold: Brakhage meets Tarkovsky,” *Rolling Stock* (Boulder, CO), no. 6 (1983), p. 11-14. <http://bit.ly/cI7Ksm>

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Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1933, Brakhage moved to Denver, Colorado at the age of six. He sang as a boy soprano soloist, dreamed of being a poet, and graduated from South High School in 1951 with a scholarship to Dartmouth. After one semester, he left to pursue a life in the Arts, returning to Denver to make his first film in 1952.

As a young man, Brakhage lived in San Francisco and New York associating with many other poets, musicians, painters and filmmakers, including Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, John Cage, Edgard Varese, Joseph Cornell, Maya Deren and Marie Menken. A youthful ‘poet-with-a-camera,’ Brakhage soon emerged as a significant film artist, evolving an entirely new form of first person, lyrical cinema.

Brakhage married Jane Collom in 1957, and from the early ‘60s they lived in Rollinsville, Colorado, making films and raising their five children. Brakhage also continued to travel around the country and abroad becoming a leading figure of the American avant-garde film movement. He lived in Boulder from 1986, and in 2002 moved to Canada with his second wife, Marilyn, and their two children.

Before his death in March, 2003, Brakhage had completed more than 350 films, ranging from the psycho-dramatic works of the early 1950s to autobiographical lyrics, mythological epics, ‘documents,’ and metaphorical film ‘poems’ — variously employing his uniquely developed hand-held camera and rapid editing techniques, multiple superimpositions, collages, photographic abstractions, and elaborate hand-painting applied directly to the surface of the film. A deeply personal filmmaker, Brakhage’s great project was to explore the nature of light and all forms of vision — while encompassing a vast range of subject matter. He frequently referred to his works as ‘visual music’ or ‘moving visual thinking.’ The majority of his films are intentionally silent.

Brakhage taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and as Distinguished Professor of Film Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The recipient of three Honorary Degrees and numerous prestigious awards, he lectured extensively on filmmaking and the Arts, and is the author of 11 books — including his seminal 1963 work, *Metaphors On Vision*, and his more recent series of essays, *Telling Time*.

Marilyn Brakhage, December 2007  
Victoria, BC Canada



## Additional Resources and Reading

The Brakhage Center for the Research and Study of Creative Experimental Cinema/Media, University of Colorado, Boulder. <http://www.colorado.edu/FilmStudies/brakhage/center.shtml>

The Stan Brakhage Collection, Library of the University of Colorado, Boulder. His personal papers, correspondence, and archives. <http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/accessservices/brakhage.htm>

### By Stan Brakhage

*Metaphors on Vision* (Film Culture, 1963). Originally published as a special issue of the journal, *Film Culture* (no. 30, Fall 1963). A second edition was published in 1976 by Anthology Film Archives.

*A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book* (Frontier Press, 1971)

*The Brakhage Lectures: Georges Melies, David Wark Griffith, Carl Theodore Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein* (The Good Lion / School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1972) Archived online at

<http://www.ubu.com/historical/brakhage/>

Robert A. Haller, ed. *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964-1980*. (Documentext, 1982)

*Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (Documentext, 1991. Second edition, 2001.)

Bruce R. McPherson, ed. *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking by Stan Brakhage*. (Kingston, 2001) This anthology draws mainly on Brakhage's earlier books.

*Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker* (Documentext, 2003)

PennSound: Stan Brakhage. MP3 audio of interviews and seminars, and a link to related audio at the UbuWeb archive. <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Brakhage.php>

### About Stan Brakhage

P. Adams Sitney. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Third edition, Oxford University Press, 2002. Originally published 1974. Second edition, 1979.)

David E. James, ed. *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*. (Temple Univ. Press, 2005) Essays, etc.

*Stan Brakhage: Correspondences*. Special double-issue of *Chicago Review* (vol. 47 no. 4 and vol. 48 no. 1, Winter 2001-Spring 2002)

Marilyn Brakhage. "On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music." *Vantage Point: Critical Discourse About*

*Media Arts* (January 2008). <http://vantagepointmagazine.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/on-stan-brakhage-and-visual-music/> The end notes for this article can be found at:

<http://vantagepointmagazine.wordpress.com/2008/01/17/notes-to-on-stan-brakhage-and-visual-music/>

*Bibliography: Stan Brakhage*. Avant-garde, Underground, and Experimental Cinema: A Selected Bibliography/Videography of Materials in the UC Berkeley Library.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/avantbib.html#brakhage>

Gerald R. Barrett & Wendy Braber. *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources*. (G.K. Hall, 1983)

### DVDs

*By Brakhage: An Anthology* (The Criterion Collection). *Volume 1* (2003), 2xDVD and book, with audio and video extras. *Volume 2* (2010), 3xDVD and book, with numerous video and audio extras. Also available together on BluRay as a single package (2010).

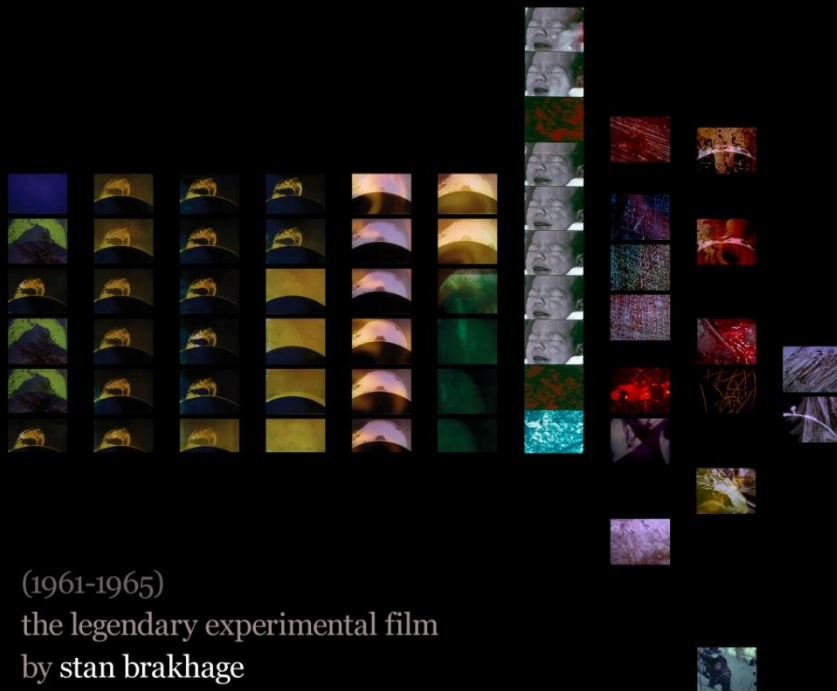
*Brakhage* (Jim Shedden, 1998). An excellent documentary. The DVD edition, which is still available, includes the Gebhardt film shown this evening as well as *Brakhage on Film* (1965), a short documentary by Arnold Gassan and Carlos Seegmiller.

*Program notes compiled by Spencer Sundell.*



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# dog star man



(1961-1965)  
the legendary experimental film  
by stan brakhage

wednesday, august 4, 2010  
northwest film forum

8:00 pm

original 16mm format, brand new print  
plus: a short interview film from 1969

co-presented by the sprocket society and third eye cinema, seattle, wa