

Archiving Brakhage

Mark Toscano

Experimental Cinema

Cinéma expérimental

Cine experimental

Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) is revered as one of the great artists and innovators in cinema history, cited as a major influence and inspiration by filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, George Lucas, Werner Herzog, and Richard Linklater. Even Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of *South Park*, were students of Stan's at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where they, like so many others, fell under Brakhage's massive influence.

This article does not seek to be an introduction to or overview of the work of Stan Brakhage, especially since this has been done countless times by many others (a list of suggested reading appears at the end of this piece). It will instead focus on the variety of unusual archival problems and challenges that have emerged since the Brakhage Collection arrived at the Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles in 2004. However, a bit of background on Stan's unique approach to filmmaking and his place in film history is absolutely necessary for understanding these very problems.

(Although I will focus only on the films of Stan Brakhage, it should be understood that these issues, problems, and approaches are relevant to the work of countless other avant-garde filmmakers. In fact, the size, breadth, and diversity of Brakhage's output make him a near-perfect exemplar of the many different tribulations faced by a preservationist of experimental film work.)

Background

Stan worked in an intensely independent vein, creating a whole new language of expressive, fiercely personal cinema in the roughly 350 films he made between 1952 and his passing in March 2003. These works are predominantly 16mm, with some 8mm, Super-8mm, and even a dozen or so in 35mm. All but about 32 of these films are silent, and all were created light years away from even the remotest borders of the conventional (commercial) cinema.

Although he is widely respected and revered as one of our greatest film artists and a profound influence on filmmaking and its surrounding culture, Stan is relatively unknown to the majority of the filmgoing public. And despite Criterion's release of a 2-DVD set of 26 of Stan's films in 2003, his work is largely unfamiliar even to many hardcore film buffs, critics, and scholars.

This can (not surprisingly) be attributed largely to the perceived "difficulty" or "obscurity" of Stan's work, as well as the lack of widespread, easy access to the films, when compared to any conventionally distributed feature film. (However, note that prints of all of Stan's films are very

much in distribution, through a variety of international independents and cooperatives listed at the end of this article.)

Avant-garde or experimental cinema has generally been the obscure domain of intensely dedicated, talented, influential, and singular artists, who usually receive accolades and attention from neither the larger cinema community, nor the museum and gallery worlds. When this kind of film work *has* been seen, it has often made a huge impact on the art and culture of cinema and media, such as Bruce Conner's and Kenneth Anger's influence on the development of the music video, John Whitney's pioneering computer animation and slit-scan photography (which inspired sequences in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968]), or even Stan VanDerBeek's influence on Terry Gilliam's Monty Python collage animation.

Stan Brakhage's role in this unusual community is unquestionably as one of its greatest masters, but as another filmmaker once put it to me, "that's like saying he's the biggest ant on the anthill." I'm laboring this point a bit because I want the bizarre paradox to be clear that though experimental film is the acknowledged realm of some of the greatest and most influential film artists in the history of the medium, it is routinely ignored, unsupported, and unpatronized by the numerous larger interests that otherwise support conventional film-making or conventional art-making.

Technique

Stan is probably best known for the many films he made by painting and scratching and applying objects directly onto film. Though a tradition of direct-film work like this had certainly existed before Stan (in work by Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Harry Smith, and others), Stan added these

techniques to his already staggering arsenal of filmmaking methods in the late 1950s/early 1960s, and employed them in a totally different way than any of his worthy predecessors. He accentuated photographed footage with scratched or painted modifications (*Reflections on Black*, 1955; *Song 4*, 1966 (fig. 1); *Black Vision*, 1965); he used unusual and elaborate appliqué techniques (*Dog Star Man*, 1961-64 (fig. 2)); he taped plant matter and moth wings to film (*Mothlight*, 1963; *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1981 (fig. 3)); and he created numerous breathtaking abstract films by painting and inking on clear or black leader (*Stellar*, 1993; *Chartres Series*, 1994; *Panels for the*

Walls of Heaven, 2002). Of course, the presence of extra modifications or appliqué to the film can definitely create trouble when it comes time to print these films to new negatives.

From the early 1960s up into the 1980s, Stan also frequently incorporated a wide variety of stocks into any given film, using them thoughtfully to powerful effect. His 9-minute film *The Process* (1972) employs Kodachrome, Ektachrome, Ektachrome Commercial, black-and-white

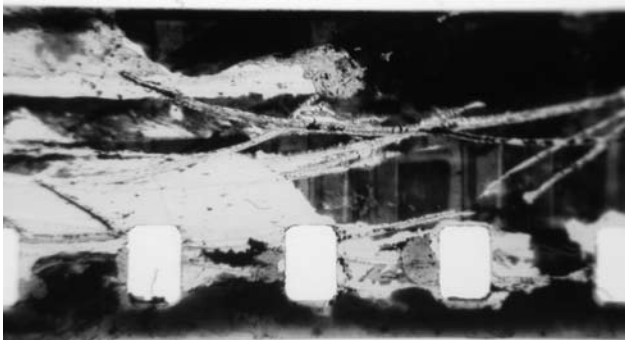


Fig.1: 8mm painted original for *Song 4* (1966).

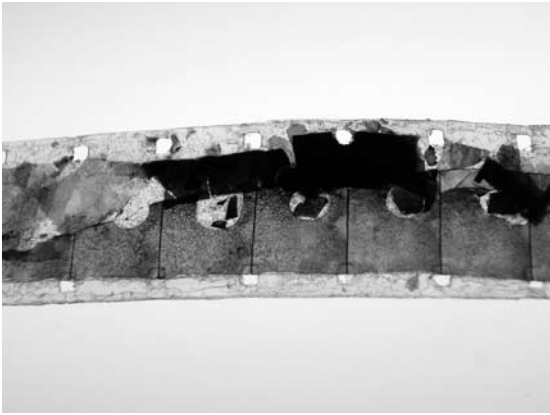


Fig. 2: Closeup of appliqué work on *Dog Star Man: Part 2* (1963) original A-roll.



Fig. 3: Original 35mm production roll for *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981).



Fig. 4: Original picture roll for *The Process* (1972).

positive, black-and-white negative, color negative, color positive, and even red plastic leader (fig. 4).

With only one known exception (*Daybreak and White Eye*, 1957), Stan never edited his originals as negative. He shot almost exclusively reversal film, and preferred to edit only in positive, so he could see what he was going to get in the resulting prints as he cut his original. Even when his lab stopped handling reversal film, Stan shot a few films in negative, then used the resulting *print off* of the camera negative as his original, leaving the actual camera negative alone. For instance, the originals for films like *The Thatch of Night* (1990) and *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* (1991) are made up of color print stock. Another way in which Stan could be very hands-on and methodical with his editing was his tendency to only edit his originals as single A-rolls, unless he wanted imagery to superimpose or dissolve. If an original is edited in A- and B-rolls or A/B/C-rolls, it's always because Stan needed to do so to achieve a certain effect. (Stan took this to an extreme with *Christ Mass Sex Dance* (1991), for which the original is in A/B/C/D/E/F-rolls!)

Stan was also incredibly economical, leaving virtually no outtakes in his collection, choosing instead to incorporate the footage he generated into films one way or another. *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972) is partially made up of diverse outtake footage that dates back over the previous 10 years, and “*He was born, he suffered, he died.*” (1974), *Skein* (1974), and *The Process* (1974) all use similar printer test footage Stan found in his lab’s trim bin on one visit there. The footage in *Sincerity* (1973) spans decades of Brakhage’s life. In preservation, the unfortunate results of this approach can be differential shrinkage, uneven fading of unstable color films, and extreme difficulties in color timing to modern stocks which are often less tolerant of this kind of wild usage of mixed films.

In many of his films beginning in the mid-to-late 1950s, Stan made use of extremely rapid montage, sometimes going as far as cement-splicing a few or even single frames at a time in a rapid succession (fig. 5). Additionally, by the late 1960s, Stan was splicing nearly all of his originals together using a method that used (usually) two frames of black leader at every cut (fig. 6), creating a much different “blinking” effect than the standard image-to-image cut. As a result of this incredibly intense assembly of his films, the originals are sometimes quite fragile.

Stan had a very close and special relationship with a single laboratory – Western Cinema Labs in Englewood, Colorado – which he used almost exclusively from his

very first film to the end of his life. Stan was lifelong friends with the lab's owner, John Newell, and considered the relationship of filmmaker to laboratory as a collaborative one. He very seriously perceived their work in processing and printing his films as one in which the lab actively made aesthetic judgments that contributed to the completion of each film. This only becomes problematic when considering that Western Cine started to experience some (now-solved) quality control issues in their color print processing in the late 1980s up to about 2003, resulting

in a very long run of mediocre prints, usually characterized by a flat, too-low contrast, brownish look. Though he acknowledged their mediocrity, Stan approved and released these prints, likely due to a combination of his faith and emotional investment in the lab, and his lack of time and resources to endure the massive undertaking of challenging the lab's substandard work and/or changing labs altogether. This means that for many color films, there are no ideal reference prints. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Stan and a few very knowledgeable scholars of his work have found the "incorrect" low-contrast prints of the painted films in particular actually to

be preferable in appearance to the correctly processed prints of more recent times. *(Note: Western Cinema owner John Newell passed away very shortly before Stan himself. The lab was purchased by Robert David and Dan Clark, who have very successfully turned what they now call The Cinema Lab into a preservation-oriented operation. They have mastered the aforementioned processing issues, reaching a high level of laboratory versatility and control, and have been working with the Academy and other archives on the preservation of Stan's and many other artists' films, with excellent results.)*



Fig. 5: Brakhage's splices in the original A-roll for *Dog Star Man: Part 2* (1963).

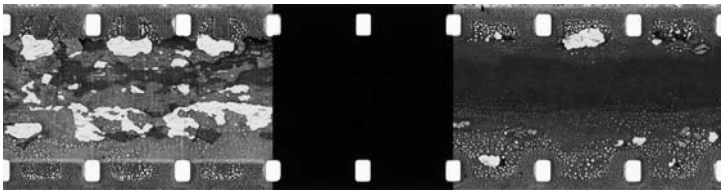


Fig. 6: Original for *Murder Psalm* (1980), showing Brakhage's method of cutting in two black frames at each splice.

Filmmaker as Preservationist

In 2004, the 56 boxes containing Stan's originals were deposited at the Academy Film Archive by Marilyn Brakhage, Stan's wife. Unlike the majority of independent filmmakers, Stan had a very clear sense of the need to archive and preserve his own films, and worked to do so as much as he could afford to. Although his printing negatives were for decades simply kept at the lab, Stan began in the 1980s to send his cut originals to Underground Vaults & Storage, the former salt mine-turned-vault in Hutchinson, Kansas.

Stan also made protection copies of his films whenever possible, to ensure their safety and longevity. He was very careful when it came to printing his originals, frequently electing to make reversal masters, internegatives, or interpositives (as the case may be) to protect the originals themselves from unnecessary wear due to frequent printing. Even for his 8mm *Songs* (1964-1969), Stan made double-rank 16mm/8mm reversal masters for making additional 8mm prints without overusing his precious originals.

Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) est universellement reconnu comme l'un des maîtres incontestables du cinéma expérimental. Son influence, bien au-delà des frontières du cinéma qu'il a si brillamment pratiqué, s'étend à des cinéastes aussi divers que Scorsese, Herzog, Lucas et Linklater. En 2004, Marilyn Brakhage, l'épouse du cinéaste, déposa à l'Academy Film Archive de Los Angeles 56 cartons contenant les matériaux d'origine des œuvres du cinéaste; l'auteur de cet article est l'archiviste responsable de l'inventaire et de la restauration de ce précieux dépôt.

Dans une note préliminaire, Mark Toscano fait remarquer que ses considérations sur la conservation et la restauration des films de Brakhage sont valables également pour la conservation et la restauration du cinéma expérimental en général, d'autant plus que la diversité et l'ampleur de l'œuvre du cinéaste en font un cas exemplaire.

Stan Brakhage a réalisé quelque 350 films entre 1952 et 2003. La plupart sont en 16mm; certains en 8mm ou Super 8mm; et une douzaine en 35mm. À l'exception de 32 titres, tous sont muets.

Sur le plan technique, l'apport le plus original de Brakhage a consisté à peindre directement sur la pellicule, à l'égratigner également et à y poser des objets trouvés. Bien que certains cinéastes, Len Lye et McLaren notamment, aient poursuivi des expériences semblables avant lui, Brakhage les intégra à son incroyable arsenal de cinéaste avec une originalité certaine. Ainsi, il modifia le contenu photographique en l'égratignant ou en l'altérant en y dessinant; il développa une technique savante d'«appliqués»; il colla sur la pellicule des éléments floraux ou des ailes de papillons; et il peignit sur de l'amorce noire ou transparente. Autant d'approches qui compliquent les choses au moment de tirer de nouveaux négatifs des films en question...

Du début des années 60 jusque dans les années 80, Brakhage utilisa délibérément divers types de pellicule à l'intérieur d'un même film, en en tirant des effets saisissants. Ainsi *The Process*, un film de 9 minutes de 1972, utilise du Kodachrome,

One of the more extreme examples may be *Dog Star Man*, a film which contains numerous instances of extended, heavy physical modification, including painting and elaborate taped-on appliqués. Concerned that the repeated printing of these original rolls would lead to their inevitable damage or destruction, Stan optically duped the original printing rolls to low-contrast Ektachrome Commercial (ECO, 7252) stock. He then removed all of the manipulated sections from the originals themselves, and spliced in those sections from the ECO dupes, so the originals could continue to be printed without risking damaging the film. The bits taken out were saved in a separate can and vaulted.

Although Stan's concerned and thoughtful preservation of his own films has meant the salvation of some titles, unreliable film stocks have rendered much of this hard work ruined. Most of Stan's reversal masters made in the 1970s were done on the aforementioned ECO, a notoriously unstable reversal stock that has shown major color fading to a thin, chalky blue. Faded ECO can usually not be satisfactorily corrected in conventional color timing, meaning the masters are either useless, or only employable if digital restoration is undertaken.

Preserving Brakhage

The only way to fully understand the individual problems and needs for each title was to begin a complete, detailed inspection of all the original elements, which number in the thousands. A cursory inspection of the materials could leave subtle problems undetected (such as the small chemical crystal forms that appear on the Super-8mm original for the film @ (1979)). Additionally, a close inspection for each element allows the compilation of a detailed report of the state of each original or master, with footage counts documenting problems or questions and their precise locations.

As there weren't specific, pre-determined priorities for preservation, new ones had to be established as inspection progressed. Some initial focus was put on older films, and a few films that no longer had useable internegatives. It was through this method that more concise, accurate priorities could be established, sometimes conflicting with our suppositions. For instance, some of the most troublesome films are those of the mid-1970s, while the early 1950s work is incredibly stable. Also, a whole selection of mid-1990s painted films were discovered to exist only as printing negatives, which sent them to the top of the preservation list.

As the inspection process progressed, common problems became apparent. Color fading, differential shrinkage, and variously problematic or confusing elements are not unusual. It also became quite clear that the films needed to be evaluated and their respective preservations/restorations planned with a vivid understanding of Stan's working practices and ethos, and in collaboration with the advice, anecdotes, and analyses of close friends, scholars, and fellow filmmakers.

Careful inspections began to reveal that sometimes Stan made particular choices in the assembly and printing of his originals that are not immediately obvious or intuitive. The film "*He was born, he suffered, he died.*" was printed in 1974 on an optical printer, which seemed particularly

de l'Ektachrome, de l'Ektachrome commercial, du positif noir et blanc, du négatif noir et blanc, du positif couleur, du négatif couleur et même de l'amorce rouge !

À une exception près (*Daybreak and White Eye*, 1957), Brakhage ne monta jamais à partir du négatif d'origine. Il tournait presque exclusivement en réversible et délibérément montait à partir du positif. Durant les années 50 il expérimenta fréquemment un montage très rapide, reliant avec de la colle des fragments de deux ou trois cadres – voire même d'un seul cadre ! Il était par ailleurs très économe, ne laissant derrière lui que très peu de chutes, les images non utilisées étant ultérieurement intégrées à un nouveau film.

Enfin, Brakhage ne travailla jamais qu'avec un seul laboratoire, Western Cinema Labs de Englewood au Colorado, même durant les années où ce laboratoire connut (fin des années 80, jusqu'en 2003) des problèmes d'étalonnage qui produisirent des copies peu contrastées et brunâtres. (Ces problèmes ont été résolus depuis lors et sous le nom de Cinema Lab, le laboratoire se spécialise désormais, avec succès, dans des travaux de restauration).

Stan Brakhage était très conscient de la nécessité de sauvegarder son travail : dans la mesure du possible, il tirait des copies de protection de ses films, parfois des internégatifs ou des interpositifs et, à partir des années 80, entreposait ses originaux dans un entrepôt de conservation du Kansas. Si certains films ont pu ainsi être sauvés, plusieurs autres sont néanmoins dans un piteux état du fait de la mauvaise qualité de la pellicule utilisée – la ECO inversible, une pellicule notoirement instable.

La seule façon d'attaquer un tel travail de conservation fut donc de procéder à un examen détaillé de tous les éléments originaux – plusieurs milliers – constituant le dépôt. Une liste de priorités fut aussi constituée qui privilégie les films plus anciens ou ceux pour lesquels aucun élément de protection n'existe. À mesure que progressait ce travail, les problèmes les plus fréquents furent identifiés : effacement des couleurs, divers degrés de rétrécissement, confusion

unusual. Some research and test printing revealed that Stan had done so because at that time Western Cine's only wet-gate printer was an optical one, and he needed the wet gate to diminish the effects of the wear and tear on his original material, which had been rescued from a lab trim bin. The film was preserved in the same way, to maintain the appearance Stan had chosen for the film, even if his choice was more of a practical one. (As part of the preservation, an additional negative was produced on a wet-gate contact printer, to help preserve the appearance and integrity of the original.)

Another extremely important part of the preservation of Stan's film work up through the 1970s is the search for any reversal prints struck directly from his originals before he had made an internegative. Not only do these prints often provide a more reliable reference for how the prints of films from this period should ideally look, but in some cases they have stood in as the best surviving material when, for instance, an original has become unusable due to color fading. Reversal prints have turned up in the collections of archives, distributors, friends, and private collectors, and they have been invaluable to the preservations of films such as *Sexual Meditation: Open Field* (1972), *Cat's Cradle* (1959), *The Horseman, the Woman and the Moth* (1968), *Two: Creeley/McClure* (1965), and *Mothlight* (1963), to name only a few.

I should now say that I have made no mention of the specific use of digital picture restoration, because at this point there are no plans to employ any such techniques, unless they are somehow absolutely necessary. Because Stan's films are so physical, so tactile, and so very filmic, it was decided that an important step in preserving the integrity of his work and his legacy would be to keep the films in pure celluloid as much as possible while film printing can still be done. This decision was made with the full support of Marilyn Brakhage and many of Stan's friends and collaborators, and is utterly consistent with Stan's own perspective on his film work.

Case Studies

The variety of unique difficulties in the preservation of Brakhage's films can be quite project-specific. However, I have found that a number of projects so far have seemed to me reasonably emblematic of the various problems present in the whole collection. It therefore seems that the best way to describe some of these issues is to conclude with a series of case studies which can illustrate specific problems in detail.

The Riddle of Lumen (1972, 13 min., color)

This is one of Brakhage's acknowledged masterworks, and a personal favorite of Stan's as well. Constructed from over 10 years' worth of unused material, this film combines numerous color and black-and-white stocks with many different properties of color, light, and contrast in a mix that printed beautifully to reversal print stock, but confounded his lab's attempts to come up with a satisfactory internegative in 1972. Stan is reported to have been somewhat unhappy with the prints from this internegative, but decided to accept it nonetheless, as reversal printing had been discontinued at his lab. Also, Stan had by this time

dans les éléments, etc. – sans parler des choix mystérieux pratiqués par le cinéaste parmi ses éléments! Enfin, on a tenté de retrouver les inversibles des années 50 à 70, tirés directement des originaux, avant que Brakhage n'ait fait tirer d'inter-négatifs ; souvent ces éléments ont mieux vieilli et ils constituent une référence plus fiable.

Fait important à signaler, étant donné la nature même des films de Stan Brakhage et dans le respect de son approche du cinéma, il a été décidé, après consultation avec Marilyn Brakhage, des amis et des collaborateurs, que le travail de restauration se ferait sur pellicule, sans recours aux techniques numériques.

L'auteur s'arrête ici pour présenter, de façon détaillée, sept cas particulièrement exemplaires du travail de restauration en cours.

embraced the role of internegatives as stand-ins for his originals in order to protect them and make the production of prints easier and cheaper.

As this was a film for which Marilyn Brakhage no longer had a useable internegative, it was prioritized for inspection. Although in excellent physical condition, the original turned out to have five shots that were on now-faded early 1970s Eastman color print stock. The fading was way too serious to be compensated for in timing, so it was clear that another source had to be found for those five shots. *The Riddle of Lumen* came right at a time in Stan's filmmaking when he would only make reversal prints as part of the answer printing process. Once timing was approved, he would make an internegative from which all further prints would come. Thankfully, the Museum of Modern Art had acquired a print directly from Stan years ago that turned out to be his original reversal answer print. MoMA sent the print, and it turned out to be an unfaded reversal print struck directly from the original and in very good condition.

I wound through the original and reversal print together, also checking continuity with a print from the old internegative. Everything matched, and I created a guide sheet that indicated where the shots in the original were to be blocked out, and where the replacement shots from the reversal print were to be inserted. This would have to be done optically, as the A-wind reversal print would otherwise not print correctly with the B-wind original. Dave Tucker at Triage Motion Picture Services performed the printing job on their optical wet-gate printer, creating two negatives (one for preservation, one for printing). Dave also printed the hand-scratched titles in a separate pass with a dry-gate printing head, as the wet-gate would have incorrectly softened the appearance of Stan's characteristic titles. Because of the extremely diverse nature of both stocks and imagery in the film, there was a good deal of fine-tuning necessary in the answer-printing process, to get the colors as close as possible to what we saw in the reversal print. After four answer prints, the timing seemed about as close as it could get. This was much closer than the old internegative ever got, but not identical to the reversal print, something which is a more-or-less impossible task due to the very different properties and responsiveness of internegative and color print stocks. However, the look of the new prints seemed to match the reversal print more closely, making the results noticeably superior in quality to prints from the old internegative, which are very flat with murky color and too-low contrast.

This issue of having an original with a handful of color-faded shots has turned out to be a somewhat common one. Other films such as *Sincerity*, *The Process*, and *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970) all have this problem. In the absence of a reversal print as a secondary source for faded shots, we are only able to use the existing internegative. In this case, most likely we would make interpositive sections off the existing internegative, and B-roll them in printing with the original to create new preservation negatives. Reversal prints are obviously the preferred option, as they save a generation and also tend to match the original reversal more closely in density, color, and general appearance.

Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) es universalmente reconocido como uno de los maestros indiscutibles del cine experimental. Su influencia se extiende, mucho más allá de las fronteras de ese cine que ha sabido practicar de manera formidable, a cineastas tan distintos como Scorsese, Herzog, Lucas y Linklater. En 2004, Marilyn Brakhage, la esposa del cineasta, depositó en el Academy Film Archive de Los Angeles 56 cajas con materiales originales relacionados con las obras de Brakhage. Mark Toscano, el autor del presente artículo es el archivero responsable del inventario y restauración de este valioso depósito.

En una nota previa, Toscano observa que sus consideraciones sobre la conservación y restauración de las películas de Brakhage son aplicables a la conservación y restauración del cine experimental en general, pues la diversidad y amplitud de la obra del cineasta la convierten en un caso ejemplar.

Stan Brakhage realizó alrededor de 350 películas entre 1952 y 2003. La mayoría son de 16 mm, algunas en 8 mm o en Super 8; una docena en 35 mm. Salvo 32 películas, las demás son mudas.

Desde el punto de vista técnico, el aporte más original de Brakhage ha sido pintar directamente la película, incluso rasguñarla o pegar «objets trouvés» (objetos encontrados o casuales). Aunque otros cineastas (recordemos, por ejemplo, a Len Lye y McLaren) hayan emprendido experimentos semejantes antes que él, Brakhage los adaptó con indiscutible originalidad a su increíble arsenal de cineasta. De esta manera, modificó el contenido fotográfico con rasguños o modificándolo con dibujos; desarrolló una hábil técnica de «apliques»; pegó sobre la película elementos florales o alas de mariposas y pintó sobre cabos de película negros o transparentes. Son éstos múltiples enfoques que complican el trabajo en el momento de sacar nuevos negativos de este tipo de películas.

Desde el comienzo de los años 60 hasta los 80, Brakhage utilizó deliberadamente distintos tipos de película en el mismo film, obteniendo así efectos desconcertantes. En *The*

Cat's Cradle (1959, 6 min., color)

This is another acclaimed piece from Brakhage, representing a major turning point in his use of complex, rapid montage. Because of the extremely heavy editing in this piece, the original reversal roll is quite worn (*fig. 7*), having become scratched and damaged as it has fallen apart in printing, probably on multiple occasions. Another major problem with

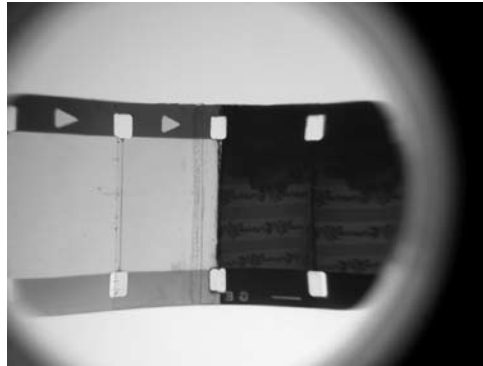


Fig. 7: Closeup of the original for *Cat's Cradle* (1959), showing surface wear and poor tape repair of a broken splice.

this original is that the color has completely faded to a deep red. Thankfully, this is the only film Stan shot on a Gevaert color reversal stock, which, based on the inspection of other *Cat's Cradle* elements, was apparently extremely unstable and began to fade even just 10-15 years after the film was made.

The preservation of this film was at first quite worrying, as

every other master element was inspected and found to have various problems. In the mid-1970s, to preserve the film somewhat before it had totally faded, Stan made an ECO master to keep as a substitute original. As previously mentioned, ECO has a terrible tendency to fade blue, so this element has become totally useless as well. Even if it hadn't faded, it would still be less than desirable as a source, as it had been printed dry from the original after some fading and physical damage had taken place, so scratching, dirt, and numerous tape splices are garishly printed through. Surprisingly, three internegatives were found as well, possibly Stan's response to a realization that his original was no longer useable by the mid-1970s. One internegative was made in the early 1970s from the original, one was made in the early 1980s from the ECO master, and a third was actually a CRI (color reversal internegative) made from the first internegative. Disregarding the second internegative as clearly worthless and the CRI as unsatisfactory in terms of quality and generation loss, only the original internegative was a barely acceptable preservation source. However, the original had already faded a bit by the time this negative was made.

Enter the 1969 reversal print. In the late 1960s, Stan had made arrangements to distribute some of his films with Films Incorporated, and he struck a number of reversal prints for the occasion. The films never really rented, and the prints were acquired by Robert A. Harris, who eventually deposited them at the Academy. The print of *Cat's Cradle* produced in 1969 for Films Inc. turned out to be in very good physical condition, with no splices or serious scratching. More importantly, it was on the very sturdy and quite beautiful Eastman Reversal II print stock (7387), and had even been struck from the original before fading or damage had occurred. The print was prepped, cleaned, and sent to the lab, where new negatives were printed from it. The results are beautiful,

Process (9 min, de 1972) recurre a Kodachrome, Ektachrome, Ektachrome comercial, positivo blanco y negro, negativo blanco y negro, positivo de color, negativo de color y hasta cabos de películas rojos.

Excepto en el caso de *Daybreak and White Eye* (1957), Brakhage no montó jamás a partir de un original negativo. Rodaba casi exclusivamente en reversible y realizaba el montaje deliberadamente a partir del positivo. En los años 50 experimentó a menudo un montaje muy rápido, pegando con cola fragmentos de dos o tres encuadres, o hasta de uno solo. Por otra parte, como era muy austero, dejaba muy pocos retazos que volvía a usar en otras películas.

Brakhage trabajó siempre con un solo laboratorio, Western Cinema Labs de Englewood (Colorado), incluso en las épocas en que el laboratorio tuvo problemas de calibrado que produjeron copias poco contrastadas y oscuras. Estos problemas han sido resueltos y actualmente el laboratorio se especializa con éxito, bajo el nombre de Cinema Lab, en trabajos de restauración.

Stan Brakhage era muy consciente de la exigencia de salvaguardar su obra: en lo posible, sacaba copias de protección de sus películas, a veces internegativos o interpositivos y, a partir de los años 80, depositaba sus originales en un depósito de conservación en Kansas. De esta manera se han podido salvar algunas de sus películas; en cambio, otras se encuentran en un estado penoso por la mala calidad del film empleado (ECO inversible, notoriamente inestable).

La única manera de emprender una labor de conservación ha sido, pues, la de examinar detalladamente todos los elementos originales (varios miles) que formaban el depósito. Se estableció así una lista de prioridades que privilegia las películas más antiguas y las que carecen en absoluto de elementos protectores. A medida que el trabajo fue avanzando, se han identificado los problemas más reiterados: desaparición de los colores, encogimientos irregulares de las cintas, confusión entre los elementos, etc., sin olvidar las misteriosas elecciones de materiales

showing a subtlety of color and sharpness that have been missing from prints of the film for over three decades.

Skein (1978, 6 min., color)

Skein presents a particularly unique problem, in the unexpected makeup of its originals. It consists of an A-roll of color dissolves and a B-roll which has been painted by hand. The B-roll is in excellent condition, with no paint flaking or cracking, and should not present any problem in printing. However, the A-roll is faded ECO. Unusually, this A-roll is made from an earlier set of A/B/C/D production rolls. Stan had designed the film so he could have four layers of superimposition and dissolve in his final A-roll, which would then be further combined with painted imagery in his B-roll. As with most of Stan's multi-roll originals from the 1970s and earlier, there is also a reversal master made from the final A/B rolls, also on ECO and also faded beyond use. Finally, there is an internegative, which seems to be made from the A/B rolls.

The A-roll, with its faded ECO color, is not useable for preservation, nor is the faded reversal master. Two possible solutions have been devised, which will both be undertaken, as they represent differing and equally compromised solutions to the problem of this film's preservation. The easiest and most obvious one is to use the internegative as a *de facto* original, as it is the best surviving conformed element. Though not ideal, this would probably produce reasonable results, but would have to be printed to an interpositive and a subsequent internegative, likely losing a certain amount of detail, especially in the painted imagery.

The other option we've devised would be to go back to the original A/B/C/D production rolls that produced the now-faded A-roll. We have the timing sheets, and can easily re-print them to create a new A-roll. As the ECO stock Stan used no longer exists, they would instead likely be printed to an internegative, and then perhaps to a low-contrast print or intermediate stock, to mimic the lower contrast of ECO stock. If this substitute A-roll matched well enough, it could be printed with the hand-painted B-roll to create a new preservation negative.

As there is no simple solution with zero compromise (is there ever?), it makes sense to try both possibilities in an attempt to preserve the film as thoroughly as possible in the absence of a fully useable original.

Two: Creeley/McClure (1965, 3 min., color)

This film was made by A/B/C-rolling black-and-white reversal rolls to a color reversal master with an overall tone added. Stan then only ever printed the film from this reversal master, confirming it to be the functioning original for the film. The reversal master is also unfaded and in excellent condition, and seemed like it would be a nice simple dupe to make new negatives.

While the reversal prints Stan had made from this color master matched pretty identically, negative stocks don't respond in nearly the same way. The key problem is that anytime the imagery of the film changes exposure (and it does so frequently and wildly), the overall tone corrupts, going too magenta, too green, and many hues in between. Two negatives were attempted with different light changes built in,

empleados por el artista. Por último, se emprendido la búsqueda de los invertibles de los años 50 a los 70, tomados directamente de los originales, antes de que Brakhage sacara de ellos internegativos; a menudo se trata de materiales que han envejecido menos y representan una referencia más confiable.

Queda por señalar un hecho importante: dada la naturaleza de las películas de Stan Brakhage, y para respetar su manera de abordar el cine, se ha decidido, tras haber consultado a Marilyn Brakhage, amigos y colaboradores, que el trabajo de restauración se haría sobre película, sin recurrir a técnicas digitales.

El autor concluye presentando detalladamente siete casos particularmente ejemplares de la labor de restauración en curso.

but they were never able to produce balanced, consistent prints. A third negative was made on stock that had been pre-flashed, and with careful timing this finally solved the problem. Printing black-and-white on color stock has always been a problem; in this case the black-and-white was intended to have a certain tone to it, but the constancy of the tone in relation to the underlying monochrome imagery was confusing the negative stock. Flashing helped control the color and contrast of the resulting new prints, more than had ever been managed with Brakhage's old internegative.

Sartre's Nausea (1962, 4 min., b/w) and *Black Vision* (1965, 3 min., b/w)

A few major discoveries have been made in the collection, including that of three films that Stan had made for public television in 1962, unseen since their original broadcast. Stan was commissioned to create three short film segments to be incorporated into a nationally broadcast program on existential philosophy called "Self Encounter". The only film of the three seemingly to have a title, *Sartre's Nausea*, was later revisited by Stan and made into a separate film called *Black Vision*, which he actually put into distribution.

As he had a habit of saving everything, the originals for *Sartre's Nausea* were still intact. Most surprisingly, the original raw camera negative for this project survived, uncut. It turns out that Stan had shot three rolls of black-and-white camera negative for the commission, but not liking to edit in negative, he printed the rolls and then edited the print as his original. His completed A- and B-rolls for *Sartre's Nausea* were used to make a reversal print of the finished film, which was then broadcast. Three years later, Stan revisited this reversal print, rearranging, inking, and scratching it to create the film *Black Vision*. In other words, the original for *Black Vision* is a scratched, inked, and re-edited reversal print made from print-stock A- and B-rolls made from original camera negative.

Despite its differences, I was able to use the *Black Vision* original as a reference to determine how the *Sartre's Nausea* rolls were printed to make the finished film. Using these notes, Cinema Lab printed a new negative and projection prints, and the film was preserved. Additionally, as the unedited camera rolls represent a nearly unique example of Stan's raw footage-gathering for a project, they were preserved to print and fine grain master as well.

The Wonder Ring (1955, 6 min., color) and *Gnir Rednow* (1955/1970s, 6 min., color)

This is not so much an example of a technical challenge, but of a discovery that contradicts a widely held belief about two films that came from Stan's collaboration with legendary artist Joseph Cornell. This example demonstrates the power and role of the physical film elements themselves as valuable but frequently neglected primary documents.

This story is a famous anecdote told in pretty much every biographical piece on Cornell (and Brakhage, for that matter). In 1955, Stan was 22 years old and living in New York City. Cornell had wanted to make a film about the soon-to-be-dismantled Third Avenue El, and Parker Tyler suggested

he ask Stan to shoot it. Cornell sent Stan a token for the EI and a few rolls of Kodachrome, and Stan proceeded to make a film that would turn out to be a major milestone for him, essentially freeing him from the “need” to work with narrative. He made *The Wonder Ring*, a beautiful, personal film that explored the light, dark, color, and movement of the trains. Upon showing it to Cornell, the artist disliked it, supposedly because he was expecting something a little more traditionally observant and documentarian. At this point, the classic telling of the story becomes inaccurate, not helped by the fact that Stan himself seems to be the source of its apocryphal conclusion. Unhappy with the film, Cornell is said to have re-edited it, rendering most of the imagery upside-down. He then returned the film to Stan years later, with only a few pieces not incorporated, saying it could be projected upside-down, rightside-up, and/or flopped (four different configurations in all). The film was named *Gnir Rednow*, given to Stan to keep, and put into distribution with his other work.



Figs. 8a and 8b: Closeups of differing cement splices by Stan Brakhage (left, in *The Wonder Ring* (1955) and Joseph Cornell (right, in *Gnir Rednow* (1955/70s).

Knowing the story well, I was first surprised to discover two separate originals for *The Wonder Ring* and *Gnir Rednow*. Even more unexpected was the discovery that both were made up entirely of camera-original Kodachrome, with the splices in the latter clearly made by Cornell on a different cement splicer (figs. 8a & 8b). A subsequent study of prints made it absolutely clear that *the films shared not one single shot between them*. *Gnir Rednow* was in fact made up of the outtakes of *The Wonder Ring*. It's amazing to consider that no one had ever questioned the old story, despite the fact that these two films have often been shown together at screenings, and that it took an examination of the originals to point out what really happened.

“He was born, he suffered, he died.” (1974, 75 min., color)

This final case study will look at another project that represents the kind of compromise that can present itself in preserving Brakhage's work, and much avant-garde work in general. As mentioned earlier, this film is comprised of some Ektachrome color dissolves found by Stan in Western Cine's trim bin, as well as several short sequences of scratched and chemically treated (probably bleached) black leader. Also mentioned above was the decision to print the film on an optical wet-gate printer, in keeping with the manner in which Stan originally printed the film in 1974. What seemed like a simple project turned out to be a little more complex, at least ethically if not technically.

In the handful of sections of this film in which Stan bleached the black leader, apparently a few chemical remnants from this process had remained on the film for the 31 years prior to my inspection of it. Over those three decades, this minute residue had continued to bleach small areas of the black leader, probably quite slowly over the course of many years. In 2005, a new internegative was made from the original, and

answer-printed. A side-by-side inspection of the new print and an old one showed that the chemically treated sections had evolved slightly over time, with new bleached-away spots (fig. 9) that hadn't been present in the original 1974 internegative, making for a bit of a quandary.

On one hand, these changes made a few sections of the film look different from what Stan had originally created. To preserve the film in this form would be a slight compromise, allowing these new flare spots to now become part of the film. The only other option was to preserve the film from the old 1974 internegative. However, this also presented a few compromises. Using the internegative as a source would mean more grain and less detail, something that would be especially noticeable in the hand-scratched sections, which are quite vivid and fine. Additionally, the internegative had a mistimed section, where a color field that was intended to be purple was actually an olive-green color.

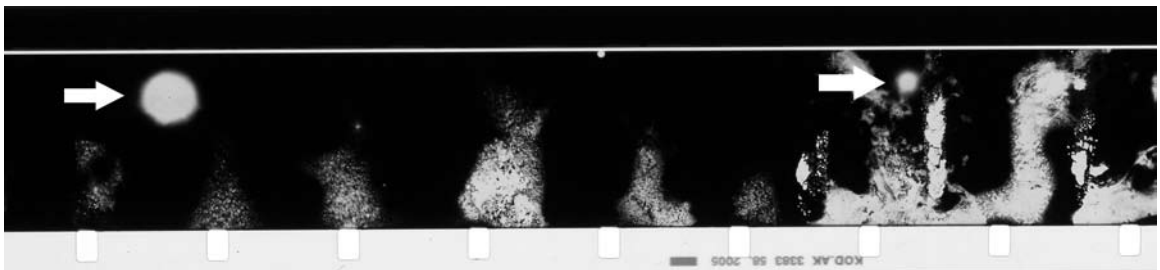


Fig. 9: "He was born, he suffered, he died." (1974): flares that have gradually developed on the original since 1974 are indicated with arrows.

What finally convinced us to use the original as-is was the feeling that Stan would have wanted his powerful, direct imagery to remain as striking as he had intended, and the decision, informed by numerous viewings of both prints, that the new artifacts didn't change the essential character of the film. Underlying this, however, was a sense that Stan would have been interested and perhaps even excited at the idea that one of his films, which he often referred to as his "children", had continued to live its own life long after he had released it into the world. We don't have Stan to ask anymore, but we have to proceed with an awareness of his methods, personality, and concerns to preserve his legacy faithfully and in the proper spirit.

Further References

There are numerous publications by and about Stan Brakhage, but I will single out the following for being particularly enlightening (and available, as of this writing):

Brakhage, Stan, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking* (Kingston: McPherson & Company, 2001)

Chicago Review, Spring 2002, No. 47:4 & 48:1

James, David, ed., *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Wide Angle Books, 2005)

MacDonald, Scott, *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews With Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)

Sitney, P. Adams, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Online, a key reference for information on Brakhage (including a complete filmography), has for many years been Fred Camper's website: <http://www.fredcamper.com/>

Stan's films are all available for rental and purchase in 16mm, with some titles in 8mm, Super-8mm, and 35mm. The following organizations are distributors of Stan's work, and Marilyn Brakhage is diligent about keeping them supplied with good prints:

Canyon Cinema (San Francisco) www.canyoncinema.com

Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (Toronto) www.cfmddc.org

The Film-Makers' Cooperative (New York)
www.film-makerscoop.com

Light Cone (Paris) www.lightcone.org

Lux (London) www.lux.org.uk

Mistral Japan (Tokyo) www.mistral-japan.co.jp

Although the only way to really see Brakhage's work properly is on film, some of the films are available on home video:

Anticipation of the Night (Re:Voir)

Brakhage Eyes (Mistral Japan, multiple volumes)

by Brakhage: An Anthology (Criterion)

Dog Star Man (Re:Voir)

Dog Star Man (Mistral Japan)

Hand-Painted Films (Re:Voir)

Love Songs (Mistral Japan)

In the Mirror of Maya Deren (Zeitgeist) [Includes *Water for Maya* (2000)]

Brakhage (Zeitgeist) [Jim Shedden's documentary about Stan includes numerous clips]