Fine Arts on Film: The Hand-Painted Work of Stan Brakhage

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ABSTRACT

This paper will approach the topic of color in cinema by examining the case of the hand-painted films made by experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Specifically, I will present the example of some hand-colored pre-print elements belonging to the National Cinema Museum in Turin and preserved at the Haghefilm lab in Amsterdam in 2011. I will argue that these films challenge traditional understandings of cinema by belonging simultaneously to the realm of film and to that of the fine arts and will show the consequences of this liminal position both at a practical and a theoretical level. In particular, I will explore the challenges related to the preservation of some of these films, and will relate them to broader issues of originality, medium specificity, and philological recreation of experimental cinema practices.

KEYWORDS Cinema studies, Film preservation, Experimental cinema, Stan Brakhage, Hand-painted film, Originality

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1. What Is Cinema? Old Questions, New Answers

Starting in the early 2000s, the introduction of digital technology in the realm of cinema has rekindled scholarly interest in the ontology of the medium. Questions like "What is cinema?", which seemed to have lost their appeal for the academic world, have attracted renewed attention on the part of film theorists as soon as digital technologies started supplanting analogue ones. While some scholars have decried the end of cinema in the digital age, others have seen in the digital revolution only one of the many technological transitions that cinema has been going through since its birth. Following the need for a compass to help navigate such turbulent times, works of classical film theory such as André Bazin's famous collection of essays on the ontology of cinema have been recovered from their decades-long neglect to be reread and reinterpreted in the light of the changed technological landscape; concurrently, different disciplines have been integrated with film theory in order to provide new answers to deep-rooted questions.

As I have argued elsewhere, including the practice of film restoration and preservation in discussions over the ontology of cinema can contribute to a fuller understanding of some of the issues raised by the recent technological transition (Negri, 2016). For instance, film preservation engages issues of originality, medium specificity, and mechanical reproducibility by virtue of its being the only type of restoration in which the end-product is a copy. If it might seem arbitrary to operate a distinction between an original and a copy when dealing with an art that is based on technical reproduction, it is also true that, from a film restoration perspective, any copy of a film is an original in and of itself, insofar as any copy displays technological and historical peculiarities that render it unique. Digital technology hardly changes this; if anything, film preservation highlights some continuity from the analogue era by showing that certain technological elements cannot be reproduced regardless of whether the restoration is performed digitally or analogically (Fossati, 2018).

A particularly relevant example of this mechanism is provided by experimental cinema. By breaking the rules of mainstream narrative filmmaking in its modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, experimental cinema emphasizes the complexity of cinema's nature and the need for a broader and more flexible understanding of the medium. Because of the lack of standardization of experimental cinema practices, the preservation of experimental films can be incredibly challenging while also highlighting complexities and contradictions that are integral to cinema itself.

In this essay, I will examine the case of Stan Brakhage's hand-painted films by focusing on some film elements related to his *Spring Cycle* (1995), owned by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, Italy, and preserved at the Haghefilm film lab in Amsterdam in 2011. I will argue that Brakhage's filmmaking practice blurs the line between cinema and the fine arts, and that this hybrid nature can be best appreciated by looking at the preservation of his films. Acknowledging Brakhage's hand-painted work's liminal position affects our understanding of cinema by broadening the range of forms that the medium can assume at different stages of its existence, including the archival one.

2. Stan Brakhage's Experimental Filmmaking

When Stan Brakhage began experimenting with fully hand-painted films in the 1980s, he was already considered one of the founding fathers of American experimental cinema. According to experimental cinema scholar P. Adams Sitney, it is generally impossible to attribute the stations of evolution of avant-garde cinema to the invention of a single filmmaker, with one notable exception: the forging of the lyrical film by Stan Brakhage (Sitney, 2002, p. 155). As Sitney writes,

The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. […] In the lyrical film, as Brakhage fashioned it, the space of the trance film, that long-receding diagonal which the film-makers inherited from the Lumières, transforms itself into the flattened space of Abstract Expressionist painting. […] The film-maker working in the lyrical mode affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting for the most part its traditional use as a window into illusion. (Sitney, 2002, p. 160)

In other words, the lyrical film as conceived by Brakhage is an expression of the subjectivity of the filmmaker, who strives to reproduce on the screen his own visual perception. This idea is ripe of consequences: while initially still working in the legacy of Maya Deren, who also tried to translate subjective experience into film, Brakhage has nonetheless been pushing for a more radical reinvention of film form since his early works. A consequence of this styilistic and ontological transformation is the refusal of Renaissance perspective, embodied by the diagonal composition which had been a staple of traditional filmmaking since the Lumière brothers, in favour of a flat space that is more influenced by Abstract Expressionist painting, particularly that of

Jackson Pollock, than by narrative cinema. The screen is therefore no longer a window into an illusory world, but rather a canvas for the filmmaker's vision.

Brakhage's idea is further clarified in his own writing. In the often-cited opening of his book *Metaphors on Vision* from 1963, Brakhage explains the drive behind his filmmaking work:

Imagine 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 must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? (Brakhage, 1963, p. 30)

Here, Brakhage calls for the recuperation of the perceptual innocence of a child who has not yet entered the realm of language and is therefore able to distinguish all the colors that adults group under the linguistic label of "green". The search for this pre-linguistic innocence includes a rejection of the laws of perspective, which Brakhage sees as artificial and arbitrary. His commitment to lyrical cinema, in different ways throughout his life, is Brakhage's way to go back to that irretrievable unprejudiced vision.

In the earlier part of his career, Brakhage experimented mostly with montage, superimpositions, the splicing together of positive and negative film and the manipulation of the film stock both at the development stage and in post-production. In *Reflections on Black* (1955), for instance, the influence of Maya Deren's "trance film" is still clear, but the search for a new form that could explore more directly the dynamics of vision and consciousness starts emerging. *Reflections on Black* portrays the inner vision (or hallucination?) of a blind man. While most of the shots are quasi-naturalistic, the use of repetitions, jump-cuts, and flashes of light betray the subjective nature of the man's perception. In *Reflections on Black*, Brakhage also starts working directly on the film stock to achieve effects that the camera alone could not produce. The man's blindness is symbolized by star-shaped figures scratched directly on film so as to erase his eyes, or substitute them with a different type of metaphorical vision.

The direct intervention of the artist on film materials is key to Brakhage's poetics, as a way to both work around the limitations of the camera and leave a distinctly authorial mark on his work. From this perspective, the climax of Brakhage's research could not be other than cameraless films. After all, the lens of a camera is in itself an eye ruled by compositional logic, and color film stocks are manufactured to appeal to a taste that is already poisoned by socially-created expectations – in Brakhage's words, "that picture post card effect (salon painting) exemplified by those oh so blue skies and peachy skins" (Brakhage, 1963, p. 25).

Fig. 1. Reflections on Black (Stan Brakhage, 1955). The man's blindness is symbolized by star-shaped scratches on the film's emulsion.

The earliest and probably best-known example of this new inspiration is the cameraless film *Mothlight* (1963), a collage of organic material (leaves, seeds, flowers, insect wings) glued in-between two perforated 16mm Mylar tape strips – so that *Mothlight* is not only a cameraless film, but technically also a filmless film. Even though Brakhage replicated the experiment on 35mm with *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in 1981, this production process was too labour-intensive to become a staple of his filmmaking.

His hand-painted films, though radically different from these collage works, can be seen as embodying the same desire to portray a vision freed from the constrains of the camera, of color film emulsions, of culture in general. Brakhage had already began painting on film earlier in his career, but it was not until the late 1980s that he began making entirely hand-painted films on a regular basis. This shift in style is certainly due to practical reasons (making hand-painted films is cheaper as it leaves out the negative processing stage, it can be done without camera equipment, etc.), but the deep reason probably lies within Brakhage's later interest in what he calls "hypnagogic vision" – that is, what the eye sees when the eyelids are closed.

Hypnagogic vision is the climax of Brakhage's research on the subjectivity of perception. What is more subjective than one's vision when their eyes are closed?

It is important to remark that this kind of vision is different from imagination or fantasy; rather, it is a fully perceptual experience, free from any referent in the world outside of the seeing subject. It is pure color, the closest an adult can get to the "unprejudiced eye" of the child who has not yet learned that the grass is green. No cameras or color film stocks can possibly reproduce those images; only the hand of the artist himself can. In an interview, Brakhage himself links hypnagogic vision with painting, specifically Abstract Expressionist art. He said:

Somewhere after beginning to give attention to what I see when my eyes are closed, I recognised pattern likeness to Jackson Pollock's interwoven whirls of paint, and then I realised that I had seen it before […]. It began very quickly to touch some childhood memories. (Smith, 2017, p. 42)

From this excerpt, the connection between hypnagogic vision, abstract painting, and childhood perceptual innocence is clear. Only the direct intervention of the artist on the film strip can replicate what the artist sees in the most unmediated manner. Painting alone, however, is not enough as it lacks one key feature of perceptual experience: movement. For this reason, the film strip is more than a canvas, but is rather an object that fulfils its purpose only when projected.

Fig. 2. Spring Cycle (Stan Brakhage, 1995). Pre-print materials. Courtesy of Daniela Currò.

3. *Spring Cycle* (1995) and the Issue of Originality

From a production perspective, the 16mm film strips hand-painted by Brakhage can be considered pre-print materials – that is, film elements that are not supposed to be projected but are needed to produce the projection print. Unlike what usually happens with traditional narrative cinema, though, the processing of these films is rather complex and can be considered as part of the making of the film itself. An example of this complexity is provided by the instructions that Brakhage wrote to Sam Bush, lab technician and frequent collaborator of Brakhage, with regards to the printing process to be used for the 1998 hand-painted film *The Birds of Paradise*:

I want it ... printed thus: superimpose loops #1 and 2, then superimpose loops #2 and 3, then superimpose loops #1 and 3 ... (take each loop around long enough so that the MOBIUS effect of #1 and #2 has occurred at least once – i.e. each flipped once in the printing: you can also go into the frames of #1 and/or #2 [diagram here] as you, say, run the MOEBIUS loops through a 2nd or 3rd time. Then I'd like a brief (1 minute and a half minute) interlude where loops #1 and #2 superimposition and loops #2 and #3 supers are bi-packed, all; then, finally breaking open into a non-orange negative section of the above bi-pack on non-orange negative and finally loops #1and #3 superimposition on non-orange negative... P.S. DON'T frame-IN on the single perf #1 and #3 combination and/or on #3 at all in the print – i.e. let it be a kind of exact refrain in all this.

From this description, included in a private correspondence between Marylin Brakhage and Luca Giuliani (former head of the archive of the National Film Museum in Turin), it is clear that the hand-painted materials represent just one of the stages of the production of the finished film, and that Brakhage exerted complete control over every single step of the workflow. Given the enormous difference between the hand-printed strips and the finished product, which element constitutes the "original" film by Brakhage? The answer is not easy.

Mark Toscano has worked on several preservation projects of experimental films at the Academy Film Archive, including films by Brakhage. In his essay "Archiving Brakhage", Toscano goes over the artist's

working habits in order to map possible preservation strategies for such complex productions. For instance, he describes Brakhage's habit of editing directly on the positive print, leaving the camera negative alone – if there even was a camera negative, given Brakhage's preference for reversal film. In this case, Toscano writes, the edited positive is the artist's original. (Toscano, 2006: 15) In this case, originality is placed in the author's idea of the finished work. The camera negative, which would normally be considered the best source element for a restoration, is only a necessary step to fulfil the author's creation, but it is not an original in itself. This is an example of how experimental cinema can diverge from traditional narrative filmmaking both in its practices and in its restoration processes, due to the frequent presence of an individual author and to the creative freedom governing every step of a film's making. As we will see shortly, the case of hand-painted films complicates this already complex scenario.

From this account, it is clear that originality in cinema is a manifold concept that shifts depending on the perspective adopted, and in turn influences the broader issue of the nature of cinema as a medium. This complexity emerges more clearly in film restoration, where it is necessary to define what is meant by "original" before undertaking the restoration project. For instance, a film might have been released in different versions, each of them "original" in its own right. The case of experimental films is even more complex since, as we have seen, there are many stages to the production of a film, each of them unorthodox compared to those of traditional narrative filmmaking and therefore revelatory of the artist's creativity and artistic vision.

In the case of hand-painted films the problem is even more complicated, as shown by the film elements related to *Spring Cycle*, a 16mm hand-painted film that Brakhage made in 1995 and sold to the National Film Museum in Turin in 1997. When the Museum decided to undertake a preservation project on *Spring Cycle* in 2011, it was necessary to understand exactly what the original printing process was and, concurrently, what was the nature of the elements in their possession. The materials conserved at the Museum consisted of four film cans with one short hand-painted fragment in each can. The title on one of the cans was *Spring Cycle*, while the other three had "Mobius" written on them.

An email correspondence with Marylin Brakhage clarified that "Mobius" was not a title, but rather a reference to the artist's technique. Brakhage used to tape film strips in the shape of a mobius loop, which is a loop with a half-twist in it, to be printed successively on the same film stock in a series of superimpositions. This is confirmed by the writing on the label on one of the film cans, reading "'SPRING CYCLE' loops A+B/ mobius B,C+ D". As Mrs. Brakhage recalls, "After receiving a print back from the lab, made from his painted film, from directions such as these, Stan would then make final edits and that, then, would serve as the original work from which an internegative would be made for further printing." The printing and editing stage are therefore integral part of the production process, and are controlled by the artist as much as the hand-painting on blank film. Brakhage himself was very clear on this. In his description of *Spring Cycle*, he wrote: "Note: I am the sole author of this film: Sam Bush of Western Cine Service, Denver, is a paid employee; and I've added the credit, at end, simply to fairly praise his workmanship". This shows how Brakhage considered the lab work to be part of the making of the film, a film of which he was the only author.

If, as Mrs. Brakhage writes, originality in this case should be attributed to the internegative made after printing the hand-painted strips according to Brakhage's instructions, what is to be made of the hand-painted strips themselves? Are they only pre-print elements like any other? The answer to these questions depends on the perspective we decide to adopt. If the focus is on the finished work, the film that is going to be projected as the author meant, then the hand-painted fragments are only one stage on the path towards the screen. However, this answer is clearly unsatisfactory; how can a work hand-painted by the artist himself not be considered an original? A different answer is possible, although it requires a shift in perspective from a conception of film as a series of images projected on a screen to one of film as an archival object. This new perspective would bring cinema closer to the fine arts, where a work is considered unique and irreproducible by virtue of its being the direct product of an authorial effort. In fact, Brakhage's hand-painted films cannot be mechanically reproduced in any way, as all their nature is indissolubly tied to their physical characteristics, including the materiality of their colors.

The National Cinema Museum preserved the moebius loops that Brakhage made in the production process of *Spring Cycle* at the Haghefilm lab in Amsterdam in 2011. Despite their status as pre-print materials, these film strips have been preserved as they were found – that is, without being superimposed one to the other as Brakhage indicated in his note to Sam Bush. Each of them was both scanned in HD resolution and photochemically duplicated on 16mm film stock using a Matibo Debrie contact printer with no wet gate, in order not to damage the original paint. The decision to preserve the loops in their original form testifies to the original status of these objects, which can be considered

works of art in and of themselves regardless of their use as pre-print materials in Brakhage's making of *Spring Cycle*. Nonetheless, the outcome of this preservation, as it happens with any preservation work, is nothing but a reproduction. In the case of experimental cinema, because of the artist's direct intervention on the film strip, this paradox is more apparent; still, it is a paradox that informs any preservation work and shows cinema's own paradoxical nature as a medium based on mechanical reproducibility, and yet made of objects that are unique and, in many ways, irreproducible.

The example of Brakhage's *Spring Cycle* shows how any restoration of these materials, be it analogue or digital, is bound to produce a ghost of the original, with which it would share no more than its disembodied appearance. Rather than lamenting the loss of the object in reproduction, though, this scenario highlights the multifaceted nature of cinema, that cannot be reduced to one aspect or the other, but is rather the product of the interaction of different drives, materials, experiences, archival artifacts. At the same time, it shows some aspects of continuity between the analogue and the digital realm, insofar as, in both cases, the outcome of a preservation work shares only some features with its source material. If Brakhage's hand-painted work can be considered as fine arts on film, it is because some aspects of cinema can be likened to painting, including the uniqueness of some of the objects that can be found in archives. This perspective could open up new exhibition strategies, closer to those of the fine arts, which would highlight the value of the objects while teaching a new history of cinema where the film would no longer be only a story, but also a work of art not dissimilar from a painting.

4. Conflict of interest declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this essay.

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7. Short biography of the author

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