

In this essay I will examine the relationship between focus, form, colour and spatiality in Stan Brakhage's *Roman Numeral Series* (1979-80). In discussing these films I will touch on *Text of Light* (1974), in which focus and defocus are central to the work's character, and works such as *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* (1980) where layering of the image creates a synthetic spatiality in contrast to that of the organic space of the *Roman Numeral* films. I also compare Brakhage's exploration of colour with that of Michael Snow's in *Wavelength* (1967).

An initial impulse to writing was the challenge of trying to give an account of what may be read as some of Brakhage's most ineffable works. In contrast to the films discussed by P. Adams Sitney in his book *Visionary Film* (1), many of which have identifiably extra-cinematic themes; birth, childhood, war, eschatology, and so on, the *Roman Numerals* exhibit a relatively purist concern with colour and shape, playing on the tension between image as indexical/referential, and as abstract. Brakhage's own initial description of them as "imagnostic" invokes the mystical tradition of Gnosticism, in which knowledge comes through subjective reflection, as opposed to adherence to an external set of theological doctrines (2). The myth of a transcendental divine spark or light which the gnostic must discover within himself is central to the tradition and crucial to the attainment of knowledge. There are obvious parallels here with Brakhage's ideas about closed-eye vision and the reversal of the role of the camera as a recording device: "I began to feel all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in" (3)

The retreat from a hostile outside world implied by this statement chimes with the reception of his work as expressionistic. However I am not interested in discussing Brakhage's work in this way, not least because I find the idea of Expressionism unproductive. It seems, inevitably, to lead up the blind alley of who, or what, exactly, is being expressed? (among other blind alleys). Nor am I concerned with the films as diaristic or autobiographical, however strongly they may be rooted in a family life. It's

more productive to see how the films' formal operations work towards the dissolution of a related set of antinomies; matter and form, focus and defocus, rhythm and a-rhythm, montage and continuity, contrast and sameness, monochromy and polychromy, the last of which occurs more between the films than within them, and which is thus one of the rationales for their being a series. Overarching these is the opposition between representation and abstraction (a dichotomy Brakhage refused, specifically in relation to these films: "abstract," "non-objective," "non-representational," etc. I cannot tolerate any of those terms and, in fact, had to struggle against all such historical concepts to proceed with my work") (4). This last hangs on the distinction between subject (profilmic) and apparatus, the fundamental distinction -spatial, formal, conceptual- whose dissolution is entailed in all the foregoing antinomies, and the one that characterises the vast majority of his films.

The questions raised by these antinomies are what will be examined here, as well as the role and nature of colour in time based work, and how it is different from the way colour is used in painting, a medium to which the films gesture strongly. What is the relationship between form and colour and how and why does it tend to get hierarchised? Can there be colour films which are neither abstract (Paul Sharits' *Ray Gun Virus*) nor which use colour decoratively (Oscar Fischinger's arrangements of colour patterns to music) or informationally, (as in Stephen Soderbergh's *Traffic*, where several different story strands are colour coded to help the viewer orientate themselves within the narrative) but in which colour achieves a relative independence from form and function to become a thing in itself.

The films were completed in 1979 and 1980, interspersed amongst his production of the *Duplicity* (1978-80) and *Sincerity* (1973-80) series. They all run at 18 frames per second, apart from the first, which is at 24. They were shot on Super 8, then blow-up to 16mm. This results in strikingly coarse grain, something which Brakhage explicitly explores in some of the films. However, they have the feel of 16mm, in that the image is more full-bodied and stable than it would be if seen in Super 8. At the same time as making the *Roman Numerals*, Brakhage also made a Super 8 to 16 mm blow-up of the two parts of *23rd Psalm Branch*, partly to preserve the film from disintegration but also, as he says: "because I fear the war-inclination of this society at this time once again" (5).

Compared to these epic works the *Roman Numerals* are modest in length and intimate in tone. In their painterly qualities one can also sense how they look forward to the hand-painted films of the mid 1980s onwards.

In these films particularly, form is always in a process of becoming: with the exception of a couple of key, but inconclusive, moments, representation is held at bay, a characteristic which distinguishes them both from obviously representational works such as the *Riddle of Lumen* (1972), but also from *Text of Light* which stays resolutely within the physiomorphic world conjured from the light refracted in a glass ashtray. In collapsing many of the aforementioned antinomies the films pose questions about some of the presuppositions we bring to bear in our routine watching of moving images. For example, in discussing these films one inevitably resorts to expressions like “out of focus”, yet such expressions are already problematic. Firstly, and most obviously (and not just in relation to Brakhage’s oeuvre) the phrase is value laden in ways which will be familiar to anyone who is familiar with experimental film. It assumes a normative and narrowly drawn understanding of vision as focused and stable. In questioning the instrumentalism of dominant cinema’s use of film technology, experimental filmmaking must involve a rejection of ostensibly technical terms which turn on unexamined, or assumed correlations between focus, clarity, objectivity and good practice/craft. Such questioning is not unique to Brakhage’s oeuvre, of course, but his work constitutes, with a few exceptions, a consistently sustained attack on the dichotomy of focus versus unfocused. The concentration on focus raises productively ambiguous questions about the place of vision in a hierarchy of the senses. The films extend the idea of vision by including the out of focus as equal, if not superior to, to the in-focus, yet in the act of defocusing there is also a denying of vision its place as a superior and faultless empirical tool. The interrogation of focus, furthermore, is crucial to Brakhage’s breaking down the distinction between objects and light formations into phenomena, a move whose aim seems to go beyond the obvious sense in which all film and photographic images are made of light, to comment on our relationship with the world we inhabit: a world we can experience as a scintillating interplay of complex optical phenomena, but which we nevertheless describe and classify as static or moving objects situated in a determinate

space and time. Defocus is also a way of liberating colour from its coextensivity with form, without completely setting it adrift so that it becomes merely decorative.

In many of the films there is a key tonality, or degree of lightness or darkness, as well as a predominant colour with varying degrees of saturation. In some of the films colour contrasts, such as green/red, are key, but in most a single hue pervades.

The first film: *I* (1979, 6') has a predominant scheme of off-white through salmon pink to deepish mid-red. A camera circles over a knot of fuzzy, reddish lines. Underneath (or beyond?) these light, caressing moves, presumably lies an unidentifiable object, but it is just as easy to see this knot as a spatial array, since it is neither enclosed by a contrasting border which would locate it in a putative space, nor does it appear to be cropped by the camera's framing. As such it has no perceptible depth but neither does it obviously lie on the picture plane. The familiar octagonal refracted image of the lens diaphragm, formed when light enters the camera directly, are rendered circular by the lack of focus, and form an integral part of the image. Could this be because the object is a light-cluster -incident light- and not an object, which would help it to harmonise with the light/lens refractions, or is it simply that defocusing blurs, literally, the distinctions between objects and light, or rather between reflected and incident light? Here are the first of the many cinematic antinomies that are dissolved in the film, between the profilmic and the apparatus, between conventionally wanted and unwanted optical phenomena.

Periodically, we see what appears to be a zoom, but into what? The idea of zooming supposes a final target detail in a predefined field, but when that field is already undefined -defocused- there is little against which to measure the zoom's progress, and thus the distinction between wide and close loses its purchase. What we have in effect is a kind of reframing, or better still, a pure cinematic movement, one that is not dependent on a pre-established profilmic which retains itself as a function of the apparatus, but a new kind of abstract movement which progresses, or evolves, the image.

In a number of the films Brakhage inserts black spacing, but in each case the function and effect of this is different. In the first film there is a run of similar looking shots in each of which the first one or two slightly overexposed frames has been retained. This overexposure is an effect of the Bolex taking a frame or two to run up to speed (and,

on a forensic note, is slightly different from the run-up frames produced by other makes of camera). Each of these frames is preceded by one frame of black, which serves to heighten by contrast the flash of the first, light frame. Thus a purposeful, precisely calculated shot (one frame of black) is placed next to an incidental effect at the beginning of a shot, something that would normally be discarded. The equal validity of both intentional and unintentional features is thereby signalled.

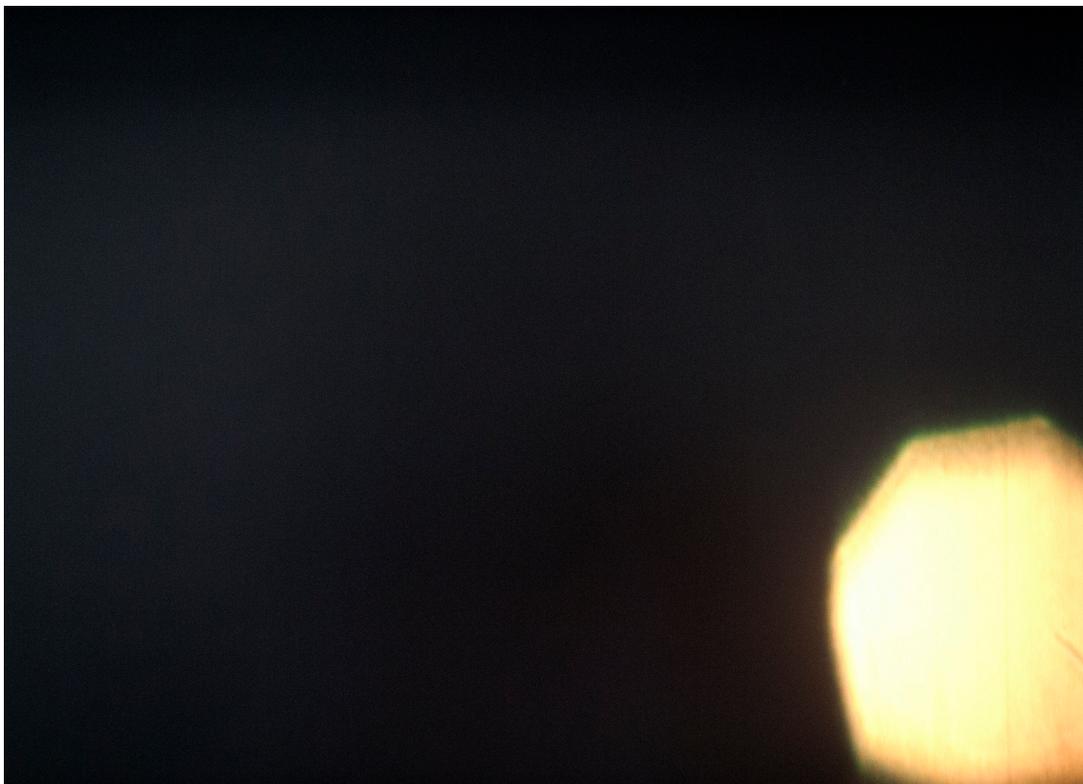
A sequence of closely similar shots follows in which editing has at least two distinct functions in different parts of the film. The cuts serve to enliven the material by imparting a rhythm to what would otherwise be a near-unvarying sequence of red forms, although even when there is little perceptible movement or difference from one shot to the next, a (jump) cut is always a reminder of the exact extent to which a shot has evolved. At the opening of the film the impression was that the camera was moving over its subject, but later on the editing creates a sense that the camera is passing through its subject, or that the subject is parting to make way for the camera.

In *II*, the second longest, film (1979, 8' 45'') there is a stronger sense of shapes held within the frame, and hence a greater separation between camera and subject. The colour is darker but less saturated, and the image has the appearance of being created from superimpositions. Prismatic light clusters move in front of each other, but it is hard to tell whether the layering of these images is due to their being superimpositions or an effect of defocusing. Things seem to come into focus but they are not distinguished, spatially or formally, from the more out of focus areas of the picture. When we say "comes into focus" what we often mean is textures sharpening, lines or edges forming out of the flux. But what if there are no edges in the frame? These comings-into-focus encourage us to read the image as being of objects in a determinate spatial relationship to each other, in other words they stimulate our reflex recourse to gestalts to fill in or anticipate what we think we are going to see. Here, however, while there is a definite sense of things resolving (into objects), we are still unable to read the whole scene as an image of objects in a space.

Long stable shots are then interspersed with bursts of rapid cutting, with more dramatic changes from shot to shot than in *I*. There is a definite sense that image mutations are being produced by focus pulling, yet without the degree of out of focusness

seeming to vary, and thus also avoiding the terrible cliché of focus pulls as seen on TV wildlife programmes, when an alienated moment of disinterested formalism -free camera play- is self-consciously inserted into the stream of narrational camerawork.

At 5' 36" a bright, asymmetrical, tombstone shape sharpens momentarily in the lower right corner, dramatically coalescing out of its antithesis, a greenish fuzz in the centre of the screen. Where does this shape come from and how, given that the fuzzy shape from which it emerges remains unchanged? If this were a simple focus pull the whole shape would change, instead of which two antithetical shapes seemingly emerge from a single source which itself remains unchanged. This event throws no light on its own process: it is a challenging mystery. On the other hand such moments teach us to beware of our easy familiarity not only with the phenomenal world, but that world as mediated by the cinematic apparatus, about which we just as easily make (knowing, sophisticated) assumptions.



A clue to the above may be provided by a later sequence in which a veiled, but sharp, shape is seen through a kind of gauze. This gauze could be literally that, or it could be an out of focus foreground object. The tombstone shape could be akin to the gauze, but that would still not explain the fact that the "background" fuzzy shape remains unchanged as the tombstone shape emerges. Alternatively, the latter could be a refracted aperture light disc, as in the first film, but seen beyond an interposed object which alters

its shape.

*III* (1979, 1' 56'') is polychromatic, and the colours are mixed within the frame, not sequentially, so there are opportunities for colour overlaps to produce secondary hues. Thus colours are mixed in-camera, rather like paints are mixed on a palette or, rather, directly on the canvas. In this way there is both a subjective process -Brakhage mixes his colours by framing things in certain juxtapositions- and an objective process, in that colour mixing obeys certain chromatic laws, so that, for example, red and green overlaps produce a pale yellow. But this yellow mutates as the overlap shifts, so that there is never a fixed colour. In fact, mysteriously, a pale blue appears as if on top of the yellow, suggesting that green and dark blue primaries are also impinging into the scene. All this points to an inversion of the primary and secondary hierarchy in additive colour mixing.

Colour values are relative, as Michael Snow demonstrated in *Wavelength*, a film whose colour balance and contrast constantly shifts through the placement of colour filters in front of the camera lens, changes of film stock, and variations in light levels and colour saturation. People often mention the yellow chair, its presence out of all proportion to its significance, even when it blends into the wall behind, when a yellow filter is applied to the scene. Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is the way white is relativised. White - the colour of the loft wall, and that from which all colours derive- is shown to be wholly context- dependent, appearing as cool or warm, never neutral, even when there are off whites with which to compare it, and even, thereafter, when it appears neutral next to other seemingly neutral whites in the scene, such as the exterior signboards of Canal Street, where all the other colours fall convincingly in around a strong pale white. Eventually one's whole sense of neutrality comes adrift: what appeared to be neutral whites at one moment seem, retrospectively, to have been coloured.

The *Roman Numeral* films thus far have had a certain murky quality, albeit punctuated by bursts of brighter colour. They establish themselves tentatively, working up to a slow climax before dying away slowly in longer, darker shots. By contrast *IV* (1980, 2' 05'') bursts onto the screen, a large radiant block of brilliant golden yellow, like a field of flaming wheat, before falling back somewhat into a lower key. Eventually this turns into one of the darkest of the set, with forms half-emerging out of heavy grain in a manner which recalls Peter Gidal's *Room Film 1973* (50' 1973). Gidal's camera strategy is intended not as expressive, but aims to create a producer, as opposed to a consumer of the

film, that is, a self-conscious, reflexive viewer: “A film practice in which one watches oneself watching is reflexive; the act of self-perception, of consciousness per se, becomes one of the basic contexts of one’s confrontation with the work” (6). Shifts of focus and the interaction between grain and image shift the viewer into a state of constant revision of knowledge and understanding of what is being looked at as it is being looked at, and hence to engender an ongoing state of epistemological uncertainty. Gidal’s project works to displace the author into the apparatus, and hence is ideologically hostile to the idea of Brakhage’s oeuvre as a vehicle for sustaining a transcendent authorial voice, and the concomitantly adulatory spectator thereby constructed. He is also critical of the role of the image in the production of spectator consciousness: “The Structural/Materialist film must minimise the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense” (7). There are, nevertheless, moments in Brakhage’s work where, if one will detach the oeuvre as a whole from its reification of Brakhage as the subject and origin of the work, pose similar kinds of epistemological problems to the viewer through a strategy of withholding representation in such a way that the spectator must reflect not only on the conditions for knowledge, but on the assumptions they bring to bear on a given image. The foregoing should not be seen as an effort to reconcile what are two clearly opposed positions, simply to state that a given kind of film can be understood as sometimes functioning in a way which aligns it with work to which it is in principle hostile.

Perhaps the most notable event in *IV* is the projection outwards, directly towards the spectator, of an abstract shape. One seems to have been looking at the picture plane, insofar as the image doesn’t position itself back in space, yet this object now protrudes out of that place into an undefined, yet nearer space. In his book on *Psycho* Ray Durgnat reminds us of the important but usually overlooked fact that there has to be a space between the camera and the profilmic (8). The profilmic cannot come right up to the camera, as it were, and when it does occasionally come close, as in some shots in movies (the suicide shooting at the end of Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, the close-up of a woman’s ear in Bertolucci’s *Before the Revolution*, or in *Citizen Kane*, where objects in the extreme foreground lie immediately next to distant ones, collapsing the sense of comfortable distance that characterises most movie shots. The effect is disconcerting, and is akin to the discomfiture one feels when the person to whom one is talking stands a little too close. This is what happens in the middle of this fourth *Roman Numeral*. The object exists in a space which is unreadable, perhaps because it flattens the space, annihilates it, or occupies a space which was ever there, but always looked through. The sensation is

something like the effect of moving one's own fingers right up to one's face to the point where they go out of focus. They no longer seem to be spatialisable, even though they must be somewhere. Yet why should one experience a similar sensation when watching this in a film, given that the screen itself is away from one's face, in the familiar space of over there?

As the film develops the golden opening image reappears, transformed, along the margin of the frame, itself forming an incomplete frame around a gradually darkening, indistinct shape. Thus a dialectic between object and frame emerges, gold being the common element which unites the two opposing functions. Partly by virtue of the common colour link back to the work's opening shot, we are inclined to see this framing shape as the edge of a larger form which is edging into frame, rather than seeing it as frame-shaped. The shape appears successively, bearing down from above, pushing up from the bottom, squeezing the sides, while the central form remains constant. Despite the sense of the golden shape being much larger and therefore mostly off-screen, these films do not ever create a strong sense of off-screen space, perhaps because on-screen space is never adequately staked out, yet here, if anywhere, one might have expected such a thing.



There are a number of transitions in this short film, mostly confined to one section, which are impossible to classify. They are concealed, not in the way that cuts are concealed in narrative movies, through various kind of across-the-cut continuity, but through purely visual formal operations. Sometimes the screen image seems merely to shift or rapidly mutate, or there is a kind of “action cut” as the camera swings from side to side, but this is not like continuity editing, since there is no strongly apparent move within the frame that continues across the cut.

In *V* (1980, 2' 36") we see for the first time shapes which are probably generated from pro-filmic objects, in other words things which don't look like light effects, although, as always, one cannot be entirely sure. The main image is a kind of eclipse-like semicircular line which partially encloses a roundish shape in centre frame. The colour scheme is blue and yellow-green, and there are long black pauses whose colour flare-ends fall in the middle of the frame. Thus each black stretch is announced with a momentary flash of brilliant red/yellow and ends with the same, creating a kind of overhang (as opposed to an afterimage) into the next shot.



This film is more self-consciously composed and measured than the preceding four, but even the sections of black spacing announce themselves as shots, not just pacing devices, through the colour flare-ends. The flares imply that the black has some kind of meaning beyond its rhythmic/pacing function. This may be nothing more than the intention to dramatise the contrast between black (colourless and lightless) and red- yellow (coloured and light). In this respect it relates to the single black frames in the first film. The sense of high contrast is continued within images, as opposed to between them. These are followed with some low-contrast sections which are very different in character from the high contrast ones. Thus low contrast imagery, which in itself would seem to be intrinsically undramatic, is dramatised by juxtaposition with the other material in the film. What is it which invites us to think of high contrast imagery as dramatic? The cut between one such image and another similarly contrasty but formally different can be dramatic, in that it draws attention to itself in its formal disruptiveness, and thus seems momentous. But could not subtle shifts in low-contrast imagery, which gain in detail what they lack in punch, be just as dramatic in their own way?

Within this film there is heterogeneity of colour and image, so that it looks more like other Brakhage works. Yet one is not eased, but plunged into this familiar territory because of the manner in which it is reintroduced, against a background of four films that have been strikingly homogeneous in colour and restricted in imagery.

*VI* (1980) is the longest at nearly twelve minutes. The colours are green and pale red: not pink, but a desaturated red. Immediately one is set to think about the relationship between hue, brightness and saturation, factors which are in turn complicated by the brightness of the projector bulb and variations in the colour temperature of white. Pinkness is a function of white being added to the mix, and is therefore, given that white is opaque, an opaque colour itself. But the whiteness in a film pink comes from the projector lamp shining through a certain density of redness, so how is a colour like pink even possible in film? Furthermore, opaque colours tend to look flat, that is, non-shiny and hence chromatically homogeneous. Yet in films, unlike graphic design images say, there is always an impurity of colour, and a certain depth at the grain level, since the film image is a composite of coloured layers in grain. In the *Roman Numeral* films the (Super 8) grain is very coarse, so that even at moments where there are large blocks of colour, the multicoloured grain structure supporting them is clearly visible as such (a reaffirmation here, at the technological level, of Brakhage's statement on the child's perception of "green" in *Metaphors on Vision*, perhaps: "How many colours are there in

a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green” ? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?” ) And of course each grain appears to contain more than one colour, in contrast to video where each coloured gun fires only a single colour, so that the image is visible as a regular grid of rgb lights in a way that the film grain structure is not. In the former, mixing takes place on the retina, but in film, and notably here, Brakhage creates a red on the screen, but which is at the same time visibly supported by complex interactions of primary colours. In video then, there is a more clear-cut distinction between the rgb on the screen and the apparent colour which is mixed in the retina, whereas in film the distinction is blurred: in a sense the eye meets the image.

This film in the series is closest to *Text of Light* -scintillating and crystalline- but more animated, with faster cutting: *Text of Light* must be Brakhage’s most leisurely work. In this *Roman Numeral* there is a more obvious sense of the camera bringing things into being, and thus a stronger existential reference back to the maker. There are things which look more obviously like night lights -shop windows, street lights, vehicles?- yet their sources remain unobvious because unrecognisable. There is also a greater presence of lens refractions, and sometimes the familiar octagon shape is the only thing on screen, set against a mid-black field of grain.

In becoming detached from its source -the presence of the sun is usually evident to some degree when these light rings appear- the octagon takes on a curious status. It is epiphenomenal, yet here, in isolation from its cause, it becomes phenomenal in the sense of primary, or sole: its metaphysical status changes but its physical state does not. The lens refraction image is abstract yet recognisable, indexical, yet transient.

The juxtaposition of red and green is notably strong, and it produces something like new colours. One sees the source colours, and at the same time the colours produced by the interaction of those sources. The whole experience is somehow one in which colour borders and definitions are superseded by something like new colours which don’t fit onto the colour wheel. It’s akin to the experience in music of a work like Morton Feldman’s long composition for piano *Triadic Memories*, in which the sustain pedal is held down continuously, producing slowly decaying clusters of adjacent notes which mingle to produce new kinds of unpitched-sounding sounds, even as they are initiated out of pitched ones.

At the end of the first part of *Psycho*, as Marion Crane's car sinks into the swamp, there is a fade to black. Ray Durnat points out: "The *speed of fade* and the *time length* of the black reminds us that movies aren't moving *pictures* only: structurally, they're time-based *graphics* (like a black screen), some of which aren't pictures at all" (10)

The single black frames and prolonged spacings which appeared in the first and fifth *Roman Numeral* films respectively, appear again here, now in blocks of four or five frames, separating long sections of pale imagery. There is a consistency about the way Brakhage uses these black spacings in the films to increase the contrast, and hence the impact of shot changes, but also to put some variety and dynamism into what could otherwise become overly homogeneous material. Yet there are also differences in the effect and meaning of the blacks in each case. In the first film a black "flash", or a moment of darkness, emphasises the adjacent flash frame of the following shot, whereas in the fifth film the blacks may be understood as shots: this is implied by the colour burst at the beginning and end of each one. In the sixth film black is more like a momentary interruption to the flow, the briefest pause, separating a sequence of continuous imagery, turning it into quasi-disconnected shots, removing the montage, as it were.

The grain is coarser in this film than in the others, so that the aforementioned effect of "single" colours emerging out of fields of boldly pointillist, multicoloured grain is reiterated even more strongly. Furthermore, because of the grain's mobility, and hence the surface's relative autonomy, camera movements appear as animators of kinetic events: they make the grain dance rather than seeming to pass across objects as in conventional pans.

*VII* (1980, 4' 45") begins with what appears at first to be a TV roll bar, but it soon becomes apparent it is not: it's movements are too discontinuous. It's actually a black bar on a white ground whose position shifts arbitrarily, yet there is surely a comment on TV here. Brakhage's dislike of both broadcast TV and Video as a medium have nevertheless inspired some of his best films, including *23rd Psalm Branch* (1966-7) and *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* (1991), with its extraordinary ghostly TV textures and images in negative, overlaid with looped, hand painted material. In the Roman film the comment seems to be more on the violence of the electronic process by which the TV image is constructed and disseminated, a disruptive, arrhythmic electronic emission.

The colour scheme is further extended to include green/orange, gold, blue, white and black, and there are lens refractions in which all of these colours are simultaneously present. The black sections get longer throughout the series, and here, as in *VI*, they have colour flare-ends of red-yellow, but cutting to blue, so that the red-yellows impinge on the blue shots and become quasi-attached to them, without becoming detached from the black. There are also shots with strongly contrasted colour and black areas, such that one's eye conjures complementary-coloured images in the black part of the frame.

Diminishing the size of a camera lens's aperture extends the depth of field -the spatial axis between the lens and infinity- so that "stopping down" brings things into focus that were out when the aperture was wide open. Stopping down concomitantly darkens the image as progressively less light reaches the film. Brakhage makes repeated use of these principles, creating fades to near-black from out of focus beginnings, so that shots come tantalisingly into focus just as they fade away. One says "fades to black", but in fact the device as used here is not really a way of fading, more a strategy for shifting emphasis within the image, in effect altering the hierarchy of elements within the scene, or "leading the eye around", to borrow a phrase from painting. Darker areas, of course, are the first to go, and highlights the last, so that at a certain point in a given shot, the image will shift from being a variegated, multicoloured field, to a dark, modulated one with a constellation of soft highlights.

A key image in this film is steam, although, like the epiphenomenal lens-refractions in the sixth film, it is detached from its source, so that it functions abstractly, but also as a kind of veil of something that is itself obscure. Given this obscurity, the veil comes to function less as a veil and more as a translucent texture overlaying a coloured ground, but without us ever losing the sense of it being interposed between us and the veiled scene.

In *IX*, the final film in the series (1980, 2' 19"), black spacing comes to dominate even more (11). The film has a "hot spot" at its centre, as if it has been re-filmed using a crude back projection system. Focus-pulls are deployed extensively, notably to change the shape of clusters of star-like highlights, which morph into horizontal bar shapes and back again, hence motion and mutation are achieved through focus pulling. An alternative approach to such cinematically created movement, that is, movement as the

product of camera strategies, not pro-filmic movement, is rigorously elaborated in Wilhelm and Birgit Hein's film *Structural Studies* (1970). Where the Brakhage films are restless and animated, the Hein's is cool and methodical. It may be compared, in its taxonomical rigour, to the photographic work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who photograph industrial buildings in a meticulously uniform manner. This is not to say that their work is not also about the apparatus in important ways, but there is a settled equilibrium in their pictures between the apparatus and its subject which in Brakhage's films is always precarious and unstable.

This brings me back to my starting point, which was to see Brakhage's films as interesting for the ideas that are raised through the operations of the apparatus, as opposed to discussing them in terms of the way they deliver Brakhage as the "existential subject of the work", to borrow a phrase from Malcolm LeGrice (12). This second approach seems ultimately futile and unproductive, because either the work is seen as heading into an ineffable realm where nothing can be said about it, or, if seen as a reflection of its maker, leads backwards into untenable metaphysical ideas about soul, origin and genius, whence discussion is displaced into vague, ahistorical notions about oneness/affinity with nature and so on, none of which gets at what makes these films work on their spectators as films. What, in other words, makes them successful as art and amenable to critical analysis.

What is most interesting about this body of work is how it can make us rethink a number of assumptions we bring to viewing film. About focus and defocus and its role in the creation of representations, but also representations of what? About space: what kinds of space does out-of-focusness create, and what happens to those spaces when focus is pulled/aperture closed or opened? Concomitantly, what happens to form/space dichotomies, when space becomes form and forms are dispersed into fields of colour? What about the opposition between blackness and image, where blackness can be image and image, if one includes colour flashes as such, becomes spacing, or a modified kind of pause? These kinds of formal/conceptual issues are at the heart of this series of films, and are what distinguish them from the more widely discussed mythopoeic body of work, where many of the formal innovations for which Brakhage is rightly acknowledged are nevertheless working in the service of larger, often non-cinematic ideas. In the *Roman*

*Numeral Series*, these innovations function as ends in themselves, so that the films' themes are neither existential nor mythopoeic, but formal/philosophical. This is also what distinguishes them just as clearly from the hand-painted films which followed soon after, where the camera is abandoned, and thus where the problematic indexical and iconic connections to an evasive yet evident profilmic, are severed.

Footnotes.

1. Sitney, P.Adams: *Visionary Film*, Oxford University Press, second edition, 1979.
2. Brakhage dropped "imagnostic" in favour of "deja vue" after the fourth film in the series.
3. Brakhage, Stan: Introductory interview to the essay *Metaphors on Vision*, in *Film Culture* no. 30, Autumn 1963, cited by Sitney, op cit, page 147.
4. Brakhage, Stan: London Filmmakers' Co-op Distribution Catalogue notes, LFMC, 1993, page 11.
5. Brakhage, Stan: Canyon Cinema Distribution Catalogue notes.
6. Gidal, Peter: *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film* in Peter Gidal (ed): *Structural Film Anthology*, 2nd edition, London: British Film Institute, page 10.
7. Gidal, ibid, page 2.
8. Durgnat, Ray: *A Long Hard Look at Psycho*. London: British Film Institute, 2003.
9. Brakhage, Stan: *Metaphors on Vision*, in *Film Culture* 30, Autumn 1963.
10. Durgnat, ibid, page 153, Durgnat's italics.
11. In researching this essay I have, for various reasons, not seen the eighth film in the series, so a discussion of it is omitted.
12. LeGrice, Malcolm: *The Truly Modern: Prototypes for the Non-Linear*, paper delivered at the Conference on *The Future of Experimental Film*, held at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, England, 4-6 July, 2003.





