BRAKHAGE'S *23rd PSALM BRANCH* INTERROGATED

Synopsis: Stan Brakhage's 23rd Psalm Branch *was first shown in 1967 as the horror of the Vietnam War was beginning to enter global consciousness. This essay asks how far this 'meditation on war' succeeds in being original and profound. It raises a number of questions that repeated viewing brings to mind without always finding definitive answers. It recognizes the brilliance of Brakhage's technique, and the remarkable feat of making such a big film in the format of standard 8mm. Its conclusion is that a full appreciation still awaits a deeper understanding of Brakhage's method of making films.*

The sections are as follows: 'Precise as eye's hell is' / A reception history / A problem film / Other analyses / What Brakhage himself said / The 8mm factor / A weakness and a strength / So how are we to appreciate 23rd Psalm Branch*?*

Length: 6000 words

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'Precise as eye's hell is!' This text is seen being written by hand at the conclusion of Part I of Stan Brakhage's *23rd Psalm Branch*, first shown in 1967, and its presence is illuminating both of the film and of the film-maker. First of all it quotes from the poet Charles Olson, a formative influence on Brakhage who initially thought of being a poet before a film-maker. Olson (1910-70) was an American poet whose 'open' poetics offered a way of breaking out of traditional, old-world poetic form. Secondly, the text is seen quickly in the film, not read as voice-over, so that the encounter is a visual rather than an aural one. Thirdly, the words in the poem which Brakhage draws on, 'In Cold Hell, In Thicket' (published 1951), read 'precise as hell is', and it is Brakhage who has specified 'eye's hell'. By the 1960s, his films having moved to exploring his inner consciousness on film, and following the formulation of his theory of 'closed-eye vision', Brakhage is locating hell in the 'optical war of nerves' that the making of *23rd Psalm Branch* became for him.

A reception history In the UK, the reputation of *23rd Psalm Branch* went before it as a passionate and dismayed response to the way the Vietnam War was impinging on Brakhage's daily living through the news on television, and since this was the first television war, in particular images of the fighting. The film, we were told, was a 'profound' statement on the war. The other notable fact about it was that it had been made on standard 8mm film, itself an eye-catching deviation from the norm for underground/avant-garde films made in 16mm, a further pushing of the boundaries. But its reputation could not be tested by seeing the film itself. It does not appear in the early catalogues, from the 1960s and 1970s, of the London Film Makers' Co-operative. This invisibility seems to have remained through the 1980s and 90s, since it could only be said to have finally surfaced in the UK with the availability of 'By Brakhage: an Anthology, Volume Two' from Criterion in 2010.

The first thing to strike the innocent eye is that this is a film not about the Vietnam war, which nowhere gets referred to in a text shown in the film, but about the Second World War, since Brakhage deploys an extensive range of newsreels and photographs from the 1930s and 40s. We only know about the Vietnam war being its context since Brakhage appears to have spoken publicly and extensively about his reaction to its reporting on television, and at least two published statements of his (see below) explain that background. However, Fred Camper, the Brakhage enthusiast, is right in calling it a 'meditation on war' since the tenor of the film generalises beyond World War II to all wars. But is it really, as Camper claims [in the booklet accompanying the dvd], "the most profound meditation on war that the cinema has given us"? In literature that palm might go to Tolstoy's 'War and Peace', and therefore the Soviet version of

the novel (1965-7) might be a candidate. Or *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, USA), or better still, *Westfront 1918* (Germany, 1930), or *The Thin Red Line* (USA, 1998) or *The Pianist* (France, Poland, Germany, UK, 2002). Or *Come and See* (USSR, 1985)? This film is particularly relevant because the narrative concerns the German occupation of Belarus, in which 628 villages were burnt to the ground and their inhabitants massacred, and is told through the eyes of the 14-year old Flyora, portrayed as being traumatized by his witnessing of these events, and unlike Brakhage not through the medium of a television screen either. Although for most Brakhage aficionados, these films may not even make it to the starting point, yet as meditations, both *Night and Fog* (France) and *Shoah* (France) should. Both films are profound not just on the Holocaust but on the death and destruction of which humans are capable. So, calling *23rd Psalm Branch* the cinema's most profound meditation on war is fraught with problems, the first of a number we encounter as we engage with the film.

A problem film The contents of the film have been very adequately described in P Adams Sitney's 'Visionary Film: the American Avant Garde'. So far, so clear – at least to all appearances, but questions then start to intrude.

1) The scratched titles and intertitles are hard to read, even after several viewings, let alone on the first one. A second puzzle attaches to them, because in Part II, Brakhage uses either hand-scratched titles, his favoured way of giving the titles of his films, or written and filmed titles, as if there was a distinction being made. Thus we get:

1. written: Peter Kubelka's Vienna
2. scratched: My Vienna
3. written: A Tribute to Freud
4. written: Nietzsche's Lamb
5. written: East Berlin
6. scratched: coda

The distinction may be explained, if not very obviously, by the fact that 'My Vienna' is scratched because it complements 'Peter Kubelka's Vienna', the two being parts of a whole, while the coda is given a scratched title because it complements the previous five sections.

2) For the first section, we need to know that Kubelka is a significant avant-garde filmmaker, an Austrian living in Vienna and a friend of Brakhage's. Or do we? The same question applies to the presence of the poet Louis Zukofsky in Part I. And what does 'Nietzsche's Lamb' (section 4) refer to? The initial reaction is that Brakhage was an incorrigible name-dropper.

3) The newsreel footage makes a powerful impact, but my natural inclination – or is it cultural upbringing? – is to identify the events, the people and the places. This poses the question of whether we should do this at all as the information may be irrelevant. There are several images of crowds from the 1930s, but where they were and for what reason are, it could be argued, trivial questions. Yet it feels important to know that the images that have the most impact and are among the first we see are of dead bodies in the concentration camps, filmed in 1945. There are also possibly, but not certainly, images of victims of the H-bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. Is this a profundity? Or a vulgarity? If it is profound, it is because Brakhage uses these images to exemplify the human instinct to destroy and kill, to posit the existence of evil in a way that is far from being trivial because the treatment and editing of the images is so original. The only other film of the time to do something similar was Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955), a

film that is delicately aware of the difficulties of confronting the subject of the Auschwitz death camp on film yet conveys an urgency that it must be. Yet when Claude Lanzmann came to make *Shoah* (1985) he refused to use any still photographs or filmed newsreel of the events described by his interlocutors on the grounds that they formed a duplicitous, even sacrilegious record.

4) What has section 5 (East Berlin) got to do with Part II, which is titled 'To Source', as a whole? Is it there just because Brakhage was there with his camera, an example of his prolixity? Or is there a purpose in highlighting the division between the democratic West and the communist East, a division that came out of the war? If so, then Brakhage's images are too opaque, withholding any newsreel or other information to guide us to their meaning. While all the other sections give some meaning to the idea of him searching beyond the images of war for an understanding of where they come from, this particular section fails to do so.

5) Is there some religious element just beyond our grasp? 'My Vienna' has a montage of images of the crucified Jesus: this is a loaded image, but is the sequence intended to do more than reflect the human propensity for violence and cruelty?

6) What is the purpose of the title's explicit reference to the '23rd Psalm' which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd. . ."? Is the title intended to summon up for us the idea of a protecting God? This fits badly with the expression of mental agony in Part I, although it possibly but contentiously connects with a redemptive quality in Part II, in particular in section 6, the coda, showing children with sparklers.

Other analyses Almost as much as any other Brakhage film, *23rd Psalm Branch* has drawn critics to seek to explicate its power [see the note at the end of this essay for a list of these]. But is it necessary to have undergone an initiation course before one can begin to write about Brakhage's work? There is something refreshing about approaching the film without preconceptions, unlike, say, Bruce Elder who creates a scholarly cloud around the film, carefully identifying the quote, "Take back Beethoven's 9th, then", as from Thomas Mann's 'Dr Faustus', elucidating some of the biblical scholarship on the 23rd Psalm, and pinpointing the Olson quote at the end of part I. Brakhage as a modernist artist presents in as rigorous a form as you could wish the challenge of Modernism: to engage with it you need a new mindset, not necessarily rejecting all previous culture but emphatically re-interpreting it. To give an example, a masterpiece like Ezra Pound's 'Cantos' uses his gift for poetry to re-vision the whole world, culturally, politically and economically. He does not just rail against usury (powerfully in Canto 45) but he takes the economic theories of CH Douglas, among others, as 'right', despite Douglas being now a footnote in economic history. To engage with the Cantos therefore requires both an understanding of usury (valuable in itself) and of Douglas's writings (not valuable).

Brakhage held Pound in the highest regard, and will have seen no obstacle in referring to (for example) the modernist poets Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky in his film as giving meaning and authenticity to the work he was making. On the other hand, this risks creating bafflement verging on impatience in the viewer because of the tyranny it can entail: "You will only engage with what I am making on my terms." The result risks incommunicability, a disconnection between maker and viewer/reader, the ultimate terror for a work of art in that, no matter how well it is made, it fails to find an audience. *23rd Psalm Branch*, for all its virtues, treads perilously close to this line.

Much more fruitful for an appreciation of the film is something like the acute analysis Bruce Elder makes, amidst his cloud of words, of the oppositions in the film: between past and present, between personal space and distant space, between home and war, between the frames

painted by hand and historical footage. To this list can be added the polarity between the significance of the subjective against 'historical objectivity'. P Adams Sitney's description in 'Visionary Film' likewise has its feet very firmly on the ground, and not only illuminates the context of the film's making but also uses his own close encounter with the film (which he has seen over a hundred times) to make some compelling points about it. Also, reading Sitney and Elder is a reminder that Brakhage is an American filmmaker and that for the European viewer the cultural references in the film are more strange than they would be to an American.

On the other hand, Brakhage was no isolationist when it came to culture. Sitney makes reference to the fact that at the time of making *23rd Psalm Branch*, he was reading both Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' and the Roman historian Tacitus. This is startling: how could those two authors (joined at the hip, Tacitus being such an exemplar for Gibbon), who made such a virtue of cool detachment and had such a gift for laser-beam judgement on big historical events and on people, serve as congenial to an artist like Brakhage with a strongly subjective view of the world and an inclination for passionate confrontation with the subjects of his films? Yet, he deserves more credit than this. *23rd Psalm Branch* makes sense if seen as an engagement with the 'crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind' (Gibbon's description of history) and in fact the way he absorbs the onslaught of images of destruction by counterpointing it with the images of home is Brakhage's own stepping back from folly and misfortune.

But how far did Brakhage engage with history as a chronicle? A British viewer will find it puzzling that in his use of newsreel images Brakhage has no compunction about juxtaposing film of Churchill with film of Hitler as if no particular distinction was to be made between the two men. While the film has in the past been available to tenacious aficionados for study on an editing table, its arrival on dvd allows a viewer who is more isolated from the editing suite to scroll through the newsreels examining their contents more closely, trying to go beyond the impact created when they are viewed at 24fps. While this decelerated viewing is not how the film should be watched, since it turns the motion of cinema into the stillness of the photograph, is that a clue to how the close-ups of world leaders should be viewed? Brakhage is making a generalised statement about the link between powerful individuals and crowds. The fact that we have the means to unpick the newsreels in an attempt to identify more precisely what historical moment is being portrayed risks undermining the import of the film by posing the question – unanswered – whether he's making a moral equivalence between Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler and Mussolini, or between the crowds listening to Mussolini haranguing them from the balcony and crowds lining the route at a New York tickertape parade, and the crowds at a British royal wedding.

These newsreel clips are used in Part I, but Brakhage also unearths a much more potent piece of footage for inclusion in the 'My Vienna' section of part II: images of his family in Denver are interrupted, corrupted almost, by newsreel of Hitler and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain at the time of the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938. Hitler had no intention of honouring this, but Chamberlain was his dupe – his appeasement of Hitler on this occasion has been understood by historians as folly, implicating Britain into a partial responsibility for unstabling the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that were about to be ridden through Eastern Europe. Following its appearance, Brakhage then reverts to images of his children again, only to switch back to newsreel of urban warfare (in Vienna?), then of concentration camp images done as horizontal flashes, and then culminating in the succession of crucifixion paintings. What is the impact of this sequence? Is it to contrast images of peace that

are domestic and private with images of the powerful that are public, and that lead to destruction and death? Are we to connect the two, to say that the capacity for war is inherent in human beings, even in their Edenic state? An answer is withheld, Brakhage being content merely to make the juxtaposition and thus pose the question.

What Brakhage himself said When he made *23rd Psalm Branch* not just the Vietnam War was building to a crescendo – the Tet offensive, the bombing of Cambodia and the fall of Saigon were yet to come – the rage against the war was beginning to build on campuses back home. Radical students were a natural audience for Brakhage and the film expresses Brakhage's own spontaneous rage against war. 'The Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964-1980 ' [McPherson & Co., New York 1982] reproduces a letter from him to Jonas Mekas of 1967 about his research for the film, particularly photographed material, but also the written record as well. He discerns a correspondence between the hippie movement of the 1960s and what he calls the 'Wanderlust' movement among the young in late-1920s Germany, so clearly the social upheavals he was encountering as a context for his own film-making were impinging on his thinking as much as the war was.

This personal background comes across vividly in an article he published in the Los Angeles Free Press on 3 February 1967 [www.making-light-of-it.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/23rd-psalm-branch.html], two months before the premiere of the film at the film-makers' Cinematheque in New York on 22 April 1967 (where Brakhage gave a lecture as well). The article is entitled 'Hypnagogically Seeing America,' 'hypnagogic' being a favoured word of his, literally 'sleep-induced' but defined by Brakhage as 'being aware of the apparatus of sight in your own consciousness' – and related to the aesthetics of 'closed-eye vision' he expounded in 'Metaphors on Vision' published in 1963: the eyes may be closed, but retinal images are still visible and, as well, the mind is constantly processing images welling up in it, whether historical or autobiographical. Hence the regular use of microdot patterns through the film as a way of representing what he is seeing behind his eyes. This brings him to elaborate what he sees as the risk of television, that the brain of the viewer is in the TV set, "a tendency that soon makes him feel as if what he's watching had always been stored in his memory banks", and because the TV news at the time were so full of reporting from the Vietnam War, Brakhage feels himself confounded by the fact that the pictures of war were coming from inside himself. However, for the film, he did not shoot television images for incorporation in it, possibly for technical reasons because television shot on cine film would not work in the way he was seeking, but it is equally possible – and more interesting – that he used newsreel as a way of giving some historical perspective (in the Gibbonian manner) to his feelings. Also, by intensifying it by using single frames, he could give it the urgency he was looking for, and create the 'optic war of nerves' he was experiencing in his own living room. As he puts it, "TELEVISION dumped the implication of monstrous war guilt into my living room." From all this, his radical advice is that the spectator must "sharpen the eyes" and "become aware of one's own inner-eye workings".

The dvd itself has a simple statement of Brakhage's on the film: "A study of war, created in the imagination in the wake of newsreel death and destruction." Cryptically, the dvd adds that when it was released in 1978 on 16mm, Brakhage was feeling "the war inclination of this society . . . once again". This vague statement may refer to the continuing tensions of the Cold War, with Brakhage feeling that it could escalate into death and destruction again at that moment.

In the article for the LA Free Press, his position is that of the pacifist, against all exercise of violence in pursuit of political, or indeed any ends. Hence his mistrust of all political leaders, democratic or totalitarian, and his fear of the power of crowds, whether formalized in rallies or even at a wedding in a British cathedral, or anarchic on the streets. It is important therefore in reaching an appreciation of *23rd Psalm Branch*'s qualities to understand its pacifist position.

The 8mm factor Astonishing as it seems now, the film was made in standard 8mm, combining 8mm camera film and newsreel footage reduced from 16mm to 8mm. Since the two parts come to over an hour, and since editing in that gauge is even more pernickety than normal – not to mention the challenge of scratching titles in a tiny frame and of creating the microdot patterns – the physical task must have been immense even as it contributed to the heroic aura with which Brakhage surrounded himself. When he scratches towards the end of Part I 'I can't go on,' the first thing to note is that he does go on, and the second thing is to wonder whether he is referring to the physical task or the difficulties of the subject matter. Doubtless, we should interpret it as the latter rather than the former, but the technical challenge of making such a film in standard 8mm is in the background, and Sitney's judgement that it "may well be the most complex film ever constructed in 8mm" is likely to be right.

The foray into 8mm was caused by the theft of his 16mm camera in 1964. What must have been a heart-breaking event Brakhage redeems by choosing to make films in the less expensive format of 8mm, a financial necessity turned into an artistic virtue by the originality and luminosity of the sequence of *30 Songs* that result, *23rd Psalm Branch* being number 23. The lightness and portability of the 8mm camera allowed him to continue to experiment fruitfully with finding a means to realise the mobility of his vision. Unfortunately as he revels in a sunny, Edenic vision of family life, there blows into his sitting-room a blizzard of images from Vietnam, cold and biting. The war in Vietnam is beginning to balloon in horrifying ways: by 1966/67, the US bombing of North Vietnam is in process of escalation, and the US Army is taking over from that of the South Vietnamese. Both factors meant a much more direct engagement by US forces, with a consequent increase in news and television coverage. In a sense Brakhage found himself bombed back from revelling in his domestic world to the grim reality of human folly and viciousness.

A weakness and a strength An obstacle to admiring the film has to be set on one side. While several of the texts (excerpts from the letter to his wife Jane, the snatches from the Zukofsky poems) work as fragments, delicately balanced between legibility and elusiveness, the film is ill-served by his scratched letters: it is very difficult to read the texts unless you have been informed beforehand what they say. Even then, to know that one of these intertitles reads, "Take back Beethoven's 9th, then, he said" is to be presented with a further puzzle. It can be satisfactorily resolved by concluding it means that the paean to universal brotherhood in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the Choral, sounds hollow, when there can be these levels of death and destruction. But dissatisfaction then seeps back: why "he said"? The answer is that Brakhage is referring to Thomas Mann's novel 'Dr Faustus': 'he' is Adrian Leverkühn, the composer who makes a pact with the Devil. On the death through illness of his beloved nephew, the event seems inexplicable except that Leverkühn explains it fantastically by the daemonic powers within himself so that he shouts at the Devil, "Take him, monster!" And to his friend Zeitblom he says, "I will take it back" – and elucidates the 'it' as the "good and noble" Ninth Symphony. This exegesis feels quite extraneous to the film, taking it into territory that is

occupied by Mann's large novel. As a tactic it risks being self-defeating, so that the sum of both film and novel is diminished rather than enhanced.

Even more pedantically, the two puns in the film serve only to irritate. The title contains within itself a reference to the fact that this is *Song 23*, and makes verbal play on the '23rd Psalm' and a palm branch, an obscure link seemingly made playfully, but in truth obscurely and inappropriately. The second pun is in the title of the fourth section of Part II, 'Nietzsche's Lamb', Brakhage turning the name of performance artist [Hermann] Nitsch, whose skinned lamb is shown, into that of the philosopher [Friedrich] Nietzsche, in whose German Romantik philosophy it could be argued that the death and destruction of World War II found some of its roots. There is no visual argument or commentary to illuminate Nietzsche's role, and as a title it feels purely obfuscatory.

In the context of the whole film these are small quibbles. To compensate for them, all of Brakhage's skill as a cameraman, as an editor, and in this particular film as a montagist of existing material, is on display. The pulse of the film is definite. The 'argument' between the private space and the public newsreels is sustained throughout Part I and the overall balance between the apocalypse of Part I and the more reflective Part II has all the quality of musical balance found in classical chamber music, such as fast/slow, light/sombre, harmonious/dissonant.

So how are we to appreciate *23rd Psalm Branch*? The film is now over 40 to 50 years old. The first wave of reaction registered the impact of the horrors it depicted; the second wave has been one of exegesis of its references; the third wave, where we are now, needs to recognise the passage of time in which the horrors of the Vietnam War have receded (to be replaced by other horrors) and secondly, to absorb the cultural references and assess them as a means of appreciation rather than an end in themselves.

To quote Ezra Pound, Brakhage's favoured poet: "Tching prayed on the mountain and/wrote MAKE IT NEW/on his bath tub" (Canto 53). So, how do you make *23rd Psalm Branch* new?

One starting point would be to pick up Marilyn Brakhage's brief but illuminating essay, 'Rhythms of vision in Stan Brakhage's *City Streaming*', where she explains that Brakhage, for all his connection to nature whether on this planet or in the stars, was drawn to making films about the city (*The Dead*, Paris 1958, *Pittsburgh Trilogy*, 1971, *Unconscious London Strata*, 1982 and *City Streaming*, Toronto 1989). To this list could certainly be added his key short film from the 1950s, *The Wonder Ring* about the elevated railway in New York, and also *23rd Psalm Branch*, with its portrait of Vienna, darkened by twilight and by night, and by its past.

How far is the film enhanced by its two parts? Part I, it could be argued, can and should stand on its own, its subject being self-sufficient. That is not true of Part II, which on its own feels random and discursive: 'Kubelka's Vienna' and 'My Vienna' make a natural pair, but why bring in Nitsch/Nietzsche, why bring in Freud? And what is the connection between Vienna and East Berlin? The answer lies in the range of Brakhage's vision, both literal and metaphorical. 'East Berlin' is included because filming its lights at night naturally extends his obsession with 'hypnagogic' seeing. Secondly, the 'Tribute to Freud' is appropriate because he is indissolubly associated with Vienna, his writing has an immense bearing on Brakhage's own inward camera vision, and it is a reminder that Freud escaped Vienna because of the rising tide of anti-Semitism at the time that led to the murderous conclusion lamented in the first half of the film. Unlike the reference to Mann's 'Dr Faustus', this is a cultural connection we can make for ourselves. The film further benefits from its two halves because Part I on its own is a 'protest film' in the spirit

of the protest songs current in the 1960s; adding Part II lends it balance and detachment, and gives it much more depth. As a result the film more easily transcends its immediate time of the USA in the 1960s.

Brakhage is a prolix film-maker, or does he just seem prolix? If this film is purely making a statement about the viciousness of war and the mental corruption that images of war can cause, then it takes a long while to do it. On the other hand, Brakhage's visual technique is capable of being so luminous and arresting, luminous in its individual frames and arresting in their sequencing, that the result is not prolix. Film is not stating but showing, and needs to be watched in that way. In fact, his montage does not so much sequence images as cluster them so that they produce a series of 'starbursts'. This clustering may be used to create a new idea, but it is also used to create patterns and pools of colour, not as decoration but to reproduce the optical war of nerves he was experiencing. This use of montage is deeply unfamiliar: it is as opposite as possible to montage in narrative used to inform, direct and tease – even misdirect – the viewer, and opposite too to documentary techniques of assembling a film where the aim is very much to inform and educate. Brakhage's montage may have its roots in Eisenstein's theorizing about assembling meaning in images, but it is a long way from the intellectualism of Eisenstein's ideas. Instead, he strikes out in a quite new direction by using constant movement: with the camera, whether used with deliberation or moving rapidly so that the image is blurred; making a virtue of the handheld camera which imparts an unsteadiness to the image, as if it were an extension of his nervous system, wired and hyperactive; on top of this deploying montage to lend an animated quality to the whole by the use of rapid cutting and 'micro-editing'.

Is it as a result a formless film or does it just seem formless? While a first encounter may give the impression that, despite its separation into parts and into sub-sections, it lacks form, closer study reveals how much Brakhage was trying to shape a narrative, and make it profound. Essentially, his style uses an additive and cumulative process to 'mould' the film, in distinct contrast to the way Kubelka 'carved' his films by stripping away the inessential.

What has been only lightly touched on in writing on the film are its religious references. The film's title signals, albeit with the utmost reticence, that the "Lord is my shepherd . . . He leadeth me beside the still waters", and "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". Bruce Elder's scholarly excavations on Psalm 23 import far too much into Brakhage's reference to this psalm. As already touched on, its pacifist tone feels closest in spirit to Quakerism, an abhorrence of war and a wish to have nothing to do with the guilt it brings. This adds an extra layer to the footage of his children used in the film. This is not just an affirmation of the personal and the familial in opposition to the brutalities of power, but an echo of the judgement expressed in the gospel: "for of such [i.e. little children] is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

A further point is the inclusion, in the section 'My Vienna', of the montage of crucifixion images, presumably filmed in some of the Viennese churches Brakhage encountered. While there are two other historical images in the film (drawn figures in what appears to be a cave painting, and a battle image from a Greek vase), the montage of the images of the crucified Christ and their insertion as a climax to this sequence, urban warfare/concentration camps/horizontal flashes/crucifixions, makes a commonplace but still potent point about the way Christ's crucifixion took on the suffering of the world. On the other hand, in no way does Brakhage appear to touch on any idea of redemption.

Or does he? The final section marked 'coda' is the chief area of critical contention about the way we receive the film. Camper describes it as combining wonder and terror. Sitney, without

reservations because he continues to make the point in the third edition of his 'Visionary Film', takes a view of this coda as a "disquieting metaphor for the undefeatable impulse to war in the human spirit. . . A group of children play and dance in the woods at night waving burning sparklers. . . The terrible associations of the sparkler dance with the Nazi Walpurgisnacht [i.e. nightmare] arise. . ." The film, he claims, culminates in a "discovery of the seeds of war in the pastoral vision".

This is misconceived, and the misconception stems from the connection of the sparkler dance with *Walpurgisnacht*, for it makes the image symbolic and associative when the content of the image can be understood very simply, that is to say as being sufficient on its own. That content is of children and the Brakhage's donkey engaged in a film-animated dance, rhythmed by the trace of sparkler light on the surface of the frame. This is not a dance of death but a dance of light, as simple and reassuring an image as one could wish. If there are any metaphors to be read into it, it is surely that this is an image of Eden, of heaven even. The film therefore ends on a sentimental note, but its sentimentalism seems justified and redemptive in a way that helps to connect the viewer with his or her everyday experience. Brakhage's films do benefit from previous study of his methods, his intentions and his interests, but we can also pay him the compliment of coming to the films without foreknowledge and preconception.

Is *23rd Psalm Branch*, in Camper's words, "one of Brakhage's very greatest films"? The physical achievement of making the film is certainly remarkable, and its originality indisputable, but to view it, even now, is to be confronted with a host of questions about intentions and even meanings which inhibit the viewer from subscribing to this verdict. Even now, over forty years after its making, we need to understand better the way his films work before we can reach a truer appreciation of this particular film.

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[**A note on sources**: I have had only limited access to these: Fred Camper writes briefly in the booklet accompanying the dvd (but I have not been able to access his essay in Film Culture from 1967): P Adams Sitney covers the film well in his 'Visionary Film'; Bruce Elder writes about the film at length in his 'The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson'(1998). A more concise treatment is to be found in his 'Intertext'. I have not been able to see essays by William Wees and Wanda Bershens. To this list of eminent scholars of Brakhage's work, I should add the refreshing quality of a Brakhage virgin's approach to the film in Jonathan Henderson's review of it posted online on 6 February 2011 (www.cinelogue.com/reviews).]