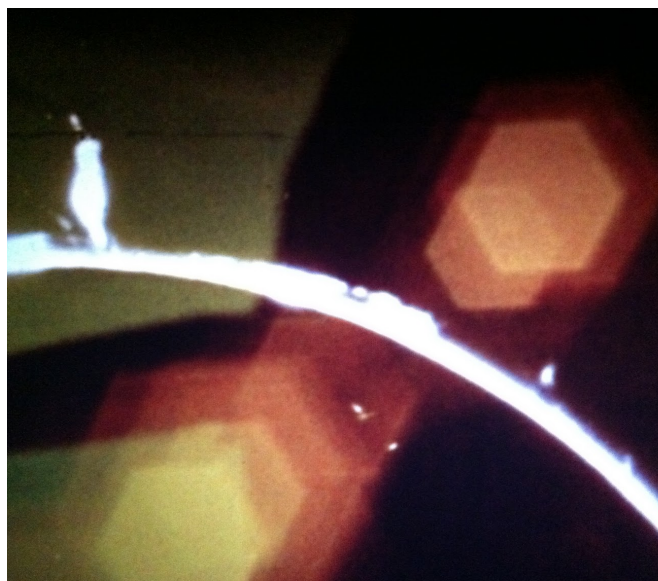
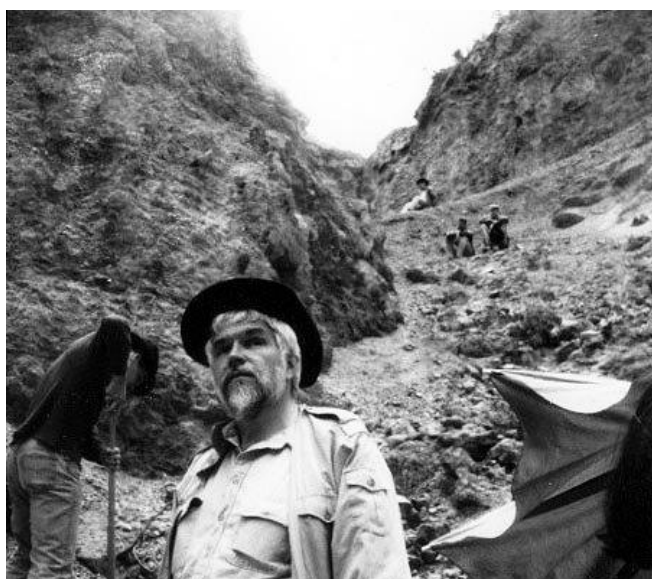




In defense of amateur

Stan Brakhage



Dog Star Man (1961-1964)

I have been making films for over 15 years now. I have contributed to many commercial films as "director", "photographer", "editor", "writer", "actor", even "grip", etcetera, and sometimes in combination of all of these. But mostly I have worked without title, in no collaboration with others. I have worked alone and at home, on films of seemingly no commercial value... 'at home' with a medium I love, making films I care for as surely as I have as a father cared for my children. As these home movies have come to be valued, have grown into a public life, I, as the maker of them, have come to be called a "professional", an "artist", and an "amateur". Of those three terms, the last one –"amateur"– is the one I am truly most honored by... even tho' it is most often used in criticism of the work I have done by those who don't understand it.

The 'professional' is always much admired in the public life of any time. He is the Don Juan whose techniques (of sex or whatever), whose conquests in terms of number, speed, duration or mathematical-whatever, whose stance for perfection (whatever can be intellectually measured to determine a competition 'winner') does dazzle any man at any time he relates to the mass of people, does count himself as of a number, and does thus have a public life: but when that man is alone, or with those few, or that one other, he loves, his admiration of Don Juan, and of all such technicians as "professors"/"professionals" are, disappears from any consciousness he may have –except, alas, his consciousness of himself... and if he is then tempted to "lord" it with those he loves, if his "home is his castle" and he "The King" thereof it, he will soon cease to have any private life whatsoever; and he may even come to be the



Don Juan himself, forever in "the hell" of the admiration of other people's public life. He will, as such, tend to always think of himself as "on display": and if he makes movies, even if only in his home, he will be known for making a great "show" of it and will imitate the trappings of the commercial cinema (usually with no success whatsoever, as he will attempt the grandiose of visual and audio with penny-whistle means); and he will buy equipment beyond any need or real joy in it (usually penny-dreadful-junk-stage-props for the 'production' of his imaginary profession... rather than for any loving re-production of the movements of his living): and his wife and/or impatient friends will be expected take his egocentric directions, to labor under his delusions, to come to "grips" for him (as laziness is usually a sign of professional egocentricity which would have some servant to follow its every aspiration with a director's chair to sit in); and his children or whomever will be expected to "grin and bear" his every pompous set-up and staged dramatics (to the expense, as usual, of any real play)... ah, well –we all do really know him, this would-be professional, who does in his imitation of "productions" give us a very real symbol of the limitations of commercial cinema without any of the accomplishments thereof that endeavor: the best we can hope for such a man is that either he goes on into commercial filmmaking and takes all such professionalism out of his home (where he might become amateur again) or else that he makes an obvious fool of himself (whereupon he becomes lovable again to those who love him).

Now, as to the term: "artist": I've come to the conclusion, after years of struggling to determine the meaning of this word, that anyone becomes an artist the instant he feels he is –perhaps even the instant he thinks he is– and that, therefore, almost everyone, some time or other in his living, is an artist. A public Artist, with capitol "A", is as much admired by many, and of as little value to an

individual life, as any professional. It is a word, in our current usage, very like the word "love". When Love is capped, it applies to Mother, Father, Sister, Brother, Wife, Children, Lover and –as also capped and usually prefaced by a "possessive" word– "your" country, "my" dog (even "yours", "love me, love my dog", etc.), "his" favorite food, "our" friend–ship, club, etc. –and, thus, the word comes to have very little public meaning... just as the word "Art" applied to craftsmanship, cleverness, or facility of any competitive kind ceases to have any special meaning what-so-ever: but both words continue to move with the deepest meaning that individual intonation can give them in the privacy of every single living utterance of each of them with personal meaning... that is the beauty of both these words –and that is why I do no more care to be called an artist, except by my friends and those who love me, than I would care to be called a lover, publicly.

"Amateur" is a word which, in the Latin, meant "lover": but today it has become a term like "Yankee" ("Amateur-Go Home"), hatched in criticism, by professionals who so little understand the value of the word or its meaning that they do honor it, and those of us who identify with it, most where they think to shame and disgrace in their usage of it.

An amateur works according to his own necessity (a Yankee-enough proclivity) and is, in that sense, "at home" anywhere he works: and if he takes pictures, he photographs what he loves or needs in some-such sense –surely a more real, and thus honorable, activity than work which is performed for some gain or other than what the work itself gives... surely more personally meaningful than work only accomplished for money, or fame, power, etc... and most assuredly more individually meaningful than commercial employment– for the true amateur, even when in consort with other amateurs, is always working alone gauging his



Dantequartet (1987)

success according to his care for the work rather than according to the accomplishments or recognitions of others. Why then have critics, teachers, and other guardians of the public life come to use the term derogatorily? Why have they come to make "amateur" mean: "inexperienced", "clumsy", "dull", or even "dangerous"? It is because an amateur is one who really lives his life—not one who simply "performs his duty"—and as such he experiences his work while he's working—rather than going to school to learn his work so he can spend the rest of his life just doing it dutifully—; and the amateur, thus, is forever learning and growing thru his work into all his living in a "clumsiness" of continual discovery that is as beautiful to see, if you have lived it and can see it, as to watch young lovers in the "clumsiness" of their lack of knowing and the joy of their continual discovery of each other, if you have ever loved and can appreciate young lovers without jealousy. Amateurs and lovers are those who look on beauty and liken themselves to it, thus say they "like it": but professionals, and especially critics, are those who feel called-upon and dutybound to profess, prove, improve, etc., and are therefore estranged from any simplicity of reception, acception, or open-ness at all unless they are over-whelmed by something. Beauty overwhelms only in the form of drama; and love overwhelms only when it has become possessive.



Dantequartet (1987)

It is The Critic in each man that does give credence to The Professional Critic's stance against The Amateur, for when any man feels ashamed of the lack of drama in his "home-movies", he does put something of his shame into his making (or his talking about the pictures he's taken) and does, thus, achieve the drama of embarrassment. And when an amateur filmmaker does feel vulnerable because of the open-ness of the love-expression he has made in photographing his wife and children he tends to shame himself for the simplicity of his vision of beauty and to begin to hide that simple sight thru a complexity of photographic tricks and staged cutenesses, to give his "home movies" a veneer, a slick and impenetrable "hide" and/or to devise filmic jokes at the expense of himself and his loved ones—as if to protect himself and his images from criticism by making them obviously foolish... as if to say: "Look, I know I'm a fool—I intend to make you laugh at me and my pictures!". Actually, this latter proclivity at its ultimate is one of the most endearing qualities of amateurism, but also, like any self-protectiveness, it prevents a deeper experiencing and knowledge of the person and his films and, indeed, of the whole amateur filmmaking medium. It makes "home movies" endearing like fat, jolly people who obscure their features in flesh and their feelings in jokes and laughter at their expense—thus protecting

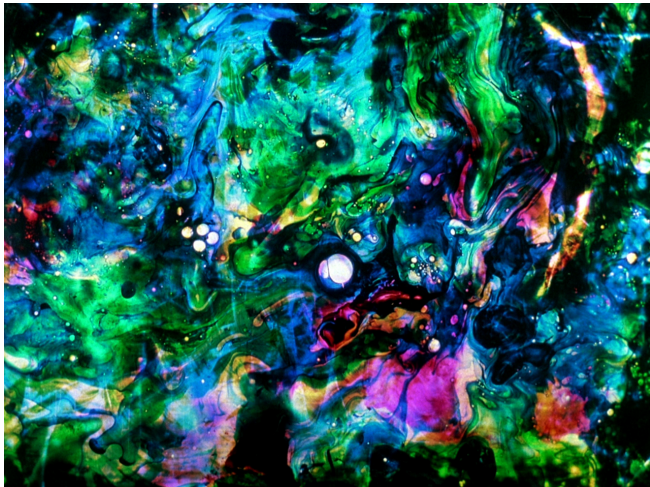


themselves from the in-depth involvement with others: and, then too, the amateur film does often beg for attention in ways that impose upon any viewer, force him to a hypocritical "kindness", and preclude any real attention... like the stutterer who can hold a roomful of people to a constrained silence as he struggles to come to speech. Yet the stutterer is very often worth waiting for and attending carefully precisely because his speech-difficulty can tend to make him think twice before struggling with utterance and can condition him to speak only when he has something absolutely necessary to say... he will obviously never 'profess' and is, thus, automatically a lover of spoken language.

I suggest the conscious cultivation of an honest pride in all "neurotics" (rather than any therapy which would imply the ideal of some "normalcy" or other) and in the "neurotic" medium of "home-movie" making (rather than any professorial tutoring which might set a goal of some norm of filmmaking). I would like to see "fat" films carry their own weight of meaning and stuttery montages reflect the meaningfulness of repetition, the acts of mis-take as integral steps in motion picture taking. Mistakes in filming, like Freudian "slips" in language, "puns" and the like, very often contain the meaning that was covered-up thru error as well as the reason for erring. When mother-in-law is "accidentally" superimposed over images of the family dog, a pride in one's own wit (rather than self-conscious embarrassment) can free both filmmaker and his medium thru recognition of delightful confession and inform him and his mother-in-law of a relationship that could, as always, change for the better if both are capable of facing the truth... besides, when such a super-imposition as that is treated as a meaningless joke or embarrassing mistake, the derogatory suggestion is the only one noticed ("Well... is that what you think of me-ha! ha! ha!," mother-in-law will say) and never the positive aspects (such as the amateur's affection for his

dog, for instance). As we are all much conditioned by language, many technical errors refer to the name of the technique via visual/language "puns" (as, for instance, a man may take a picture of his wife "over-exposed" when she was wearing a dress with a neck-line he considered too low) and even pictures that depend primarily upon referential words for their full meaning (as, I'm convinced, most amateurs tend to photograph a tree on the far left of the film frame with an even arrangement of rocks and bushes extending horizontally from left to right to approximate the look of the word "Tree"). I find these references to language constrictive filmmaking (as most movie pans are left-to-right because of the habit pattern of reading) as finally rather obscure from a visual standpoint: but one must be aware of them in order to break the habit of them: and awareness actually begins in some taking pride in the accomplishments of these linguistic visions. And some filmmakers will enjoy these word-oriented pictures (that I find "constricting") and make them consciously: but either way, shame will never end a habit or make it a conscious virtue; but it will, rather, obscure the process and pot-bind its roots beyond any possibilities of growth.

The artificial "tricks" with which amateurs tend to hide their real feelings do, like "mis-takes," tend to contain-thru method the very truth they were effected to conceal; and they are, in fact, consciously contrived puns or metaphors. I, personally, do very much care for the whole area of technical innovation in filmmaking: and I am very often accused of being too "tricky" in my motion picture making. It is certainly a proclivity I am conscious of: and I only run the personal risk of taking too great a pride in technical trickery. To counteract this danger to my own growth, I make it a point never to contrive a "trick," an effect, or a technical virtuosity, but only permit myself to arrive at a filmic innovation when it arises from the felt needs of the film itself in the making and as an absolute necessity of realizing my emotions



Night Music (1986)

in the act of motion picture making. I try very hard to be honest with myself about this; and I can usually discipline myself most clearly by making all technical explorations the direct expression of acts of seeing (rather than making an image to-be-seen). For instance, when I photographed the births of my children I saw that with their first intakes of breath their whole bodies were suffused with rainbowing colors from head to toe: but the film stock always recorded only the spread of reddish blotches across the surface of the skin: and so, by the time I had photographed the birth of my third child and in each occasion seen this incredible phenomenon, I felt compelled to paint some approximation of it directly on the surface of the 16mm film and superimposed, as it were, over the photographed images of birth. As I had no way to prove whether this vision of skin rainbows at birth was a hallucination of mine or an extent reality too subtle for photographic recording, I felt free while editing this third birth film to also paint, on each 16mm frame at a time, all the visions of my mind's eye and to inter-cut with the birth pictures some images I had remembered while watching the birth-some pictures of a Greek temple, polar bears, and flamingos (from a previous film of mine)... images which had, of course, no real existence at the time of the birth except in my "imagination" (a word from the Greek meaning: "image birth") but were, all the



Eyemyth (1967)

same, seen by me as surely as was the birth of the baby (were, in fact, given-birth-to-by me in an interior act of mimetic magic as old as the recorded history of Man).

All of which brings us to the question of symbolism and subject matter in "home-movie" making. When an amateur photographs scenes of a trip he's taking, a party or other special occasion, and especially when he's photographing his children, he's primarily seeking a hold on time and, as such, is ultimately attempting to defeat death. The entire act of motion picture making, thus, can be considered as an exteriorization of the process of memory. "Hollywood", sometimes known as "the dream factory", makes ritualistic-dramas in celebration of mass memory –very like the rituals of tribal people– and wishfulthinking movies which seek to control the national destiny... as sure as primitive tribes throw water on the ground to bring rain... and they make "social" or "serious" dramas, at great commercial risk to the industry, as a corporate act of "sacrifice" –not unlike the practices of self-torture priests undergo in order to "appease the gods": and the whole commercial industry has created a pseudo church whose "god" is "mass psychology" and whose anthropomorphism consists of praying to ("Buy this-NOW!"), and preying upon (polling, etc.) "the-greatest-number-of-people" as if, thereby,



the human destiny were predictable and/or could be controlled thru mimicry. But the amateur photographs the persons, places, and objects of his love and the events of his happiness and personal importance in a gesture that can act directly and solely according to the needs of memory. He does not have to invent a god of memory, as does the professional: nor does the amateur have to appease any personification of God in his making. He is free, if he but accept the responsibility of his freedom, to work as the spirit of his god, or his memory, or his particular needs, move him. It is for this reason that I believe any art of the cinema must inevitably arise from the amateur, "home-movie" making medium. And I believe that the so-called "commercial", or ritual, cinema must inevitably take its cues from the films of amateurs rather than, as is too often the case these days, the other way round.

I now work equally in 8 and 16 millimeter making mostly silent films (and am even making a 35mm film at home); I am guided primarily in all creative dimensions by the spirit of the home in which I'm living, by my own very living room. I have bought some 8 and 16mm films which sit alongside books and LP records on my library shelf and I have sold many of my 8mm films to both private homes and public libraries –thus bypassing the theatrical limitations of film viewing entirely... thus creating a circumstance wherein films may be lived-with and studied in depth–returned-to again and again like poetry and recorded music.

I am currently working on a long "home-movie" war film in 8mm: I discovered that the television set was as crucial a part of my living-therefore working-room as the walls of it and its various other furnishings, and that T.V. could present me with as necessary an involvement as the activities of my children: ergo, I finally had to deal with its primary impulse at present –The War– as surely, as an amateur, as I would with any and every

important occasion of our living. I carry a camera (usually 8mm) with me on almost every trip away from the house (even to the grocery store) and thus become camera-laden 'tourist' of my own immediate environment as well as in those distant places I travel to –(many 8mm cameras fit easily into a coat pocket or purse and are, thus, no more of a burden than a transistorized radio)... and I call these home and travel movies "SONGS", as they are to me the recorded visual music of my inner and exterior life –the "fixed" melodies of, the filmic memory of, my living.

1971

Essential Brakhage. Selected writings by Stan Brakhage.
New York, McPherson & Company, 2001.