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### Stan Brakhage

American, b. 1933

Artists first began to use film as a means of personal expression in the 1920s, when European painters and sculptors and others became involved with making film. A generation

The history of moving pictures began in the 1890s and the early twentieth century, when no aesthetic rules or established commercial industry existed to dilute the wonder and astonishment that pervaded the new field. In the 1920s European avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, Man Ray, Fernand Léger, Salvador Dali, and Jean Cocteau began to experiment with film as a medium for personal expression. Twenty years later this artistic energy blossomed in the United States with the works of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, James and John Whitney, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, and others; and ever since then experimental film has been extraordinarily rich and varied in this country. Much of it has had strong ties with other art forms, including Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Structuralism, as well as with the literature of the Beat Generation and performance art of the 1970s.

Stan Brakhage, a central figure in American film, began working in this medium in the early 1950s and has been extremely prolific for more than thirty years. His recognition as a major American artist was assured in January 1973, when half an issue of the influential journal *Artforum* was devoted to his work.

*Dog Star Man* is a watershed work in Brakhage's career and in the development of the American avant-garde. During the 1950s Brakhage had developed a stylistic vocabulary in which very short pieces of film were often superimposed with other images. These were sometimes further manipulated by painting, scratching, and baking. The result was rapidly shifting forms that created an almost hypnotic effect. These early, intensely crafted films, usually five to twelve minutes long, conveyed in rich textures and fleeting, lyric images fragments of Brakhage's personal life and internal experience.

Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* is many times longer than his earlier films, is far more ambitious in its mythic material, yet retains his lyric qualities. P. Adams Sitney wrote that this film "stations itself within the rhetoric of Romanticism, describes the birth of consciousness, the cycle of the seasons, man's struggle with nature, and sexual balance in the visual evocation of a fallen titan bearing the cosmic name of *Dog Star Man*."

*Dog Star Man* draws on the American avant-garde of the 1940s in its use of Brakhage himself as the protagonist, a common device in earlier psychodrama. The film also includes images of Brakhage's personal life—his children, wife, and friends—that recall his earlier lyric works. Nevertheless, *Dog Star Man* departs entirely from these influences in the visual density of its superimposed images and in the complexity of its mythic themes of man and cosmos. Its five-part structure encompasses shifts from microcosm to macrocosm, from night to dawn and midday, from winter to spring and summer; and yet, as Brakhage says, "there's a Fall the fall back to somewhere, mid-winter."

*Dog Star Man* established a precedent for a new level of aesthetic ambition and thematic scope in the American avant-garde. It is a major monument in the history of film, not only for its own accomplishments, but for the degree to which it sanctioned and inspired a new generation of personal filmmaking.

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These richly textured, fleeting films, usually five to twelve minutes long, create an almost hypnotic viewing experience. They have been compared to the lyric poetry of the Romantic writers, and they share with American Abstract Expressionist painting the impulse to transmit intensely personal material directly through the immediate experience of abstracted forms.

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Stan Brakhage

American, b. 1933

Dog Star Man, 1961-64

16mm film, color, silent

74 ~~78~~ minutes

Gift of the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust

Artists first began to use film as a means of personal expression in the 1920s, when European painters and sculptors such as Marcel Duchamp, Hans Richter, Man Ray, Fernand Leger, Oskar Fischinger, Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau and others became involved with making films. A generation later this artistic energy emerged again in the United States with the works of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, James and John Whitney, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, and others; and since the 1940s experimental film has been extraordinarily rich and varied in this country. Much of it has had strong ties with other art forms, including Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Structuralism, as well as with the literature of the Beat Generation and performance art of the 1970s.

Stan Brakhage has been a monumental figure in American cinema, beginning with his films of the early 1950s and continuing through thirty very prolific years. His recognition as a major American artist was assured in January 1973, when half an issue of the influential journal Artforum was devoted to his work.

Dog Star Man is a watershed work in Brakhage's career and in the development of the American avant-garde. It derives from his work of the 1950s when Brakhage had developed a stylistic vocabulary in which very short pieces of film were edited together, sometimes superimposed with other film images and further manipulated by painting, scratching, and baking. These richly textured, fleeting films, usually five to twelve minutes long, create an almost hypnotic viewing experience. They have been compared to the lyric poetry of the Romantic writers, and they share with American Abstract Expressionist painting the impulse to transmit intensely personal material directly through the immediate experience of abstracted forms.

Brakhage's Dog Star Man is many times longer and far more ambitious than his earlier films. It presents mythic themes in richly superimposed imagery imagery that recalls the comprehensive visions of human life in the epic Romantic poetry of William Blake and others. P. Adams Sitney has written that this film "stations itself within the rhetoric of Romanticism, describes the birth of consciousness, the cycle of the season, man's struggle with nature, and sexual balance in the visual evocation of a fallen Titan bearing the cosmic name of Dog Star Man."

Dog Star Man draws on the American avant-garde films of the 1940s in its use of the filmmaker as the protagonist. The film also recalls Brakhage's earlier lyrical works in its use of images of Brakhage's personal life, in particular his wife and children. Nevertheless, Dog Star Man departs entirely from these earlier works in the visual density of its superimposed images and in the complexity of its mythic themes of Man and cosmos. Its five-part structure, encompasses shifts from microcosm to macrocosm, from night to dawn and midday, from winter to spring and summer, climaxing with what Brakhage has called "a Fall --<sup>ff</sup>the fall back to somewhere, mid-winter."

Dog Star Man established a precedent for a new level of aesthetic ambition and thematic scope in the American avant-garde. It is a major monument in the history of film, not only for its own accomplishments, but for the degree to which it sanctioned and inspired a new generation of personal filmmaking.

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