

Eaton, New York
January 26, 1972

Dear Stan,

Had I but world enough and time, I should right now be ex-cogitating a rigorous critical essay under the title: "The Act of Seeing THE ACT OF SEEING WITH ONE'S OWN EYES with one's own eyes." But 'time enough' would extend analysis beyond the bounds of this particular work, into films very much earlier (I see surfacing concerns implicit at least as far back as WEDLOCK HOUSE: AN INTERCOURSE, for instance, or NIGHTCATS) and also forward into work that you are doing (already, in my greedy imagination) years from now.

And then 'world enough' must take me sprawling past the edges of the most strenuously finite belles-lettres into...what? Well, naturally, I've gotta use WORDS when I talk to you; but I think the answer to that question is: "into film". Let me, if I am able, explain how I feel that.

A friend said to me once that the great natural poem about anything was its name. The lyricism of that statement is not altogether insipid: for any process within the passionate weather of the beholding intellect is surely as much a "thing" as is a boot or a pie. From that vantage, if I may be pardoned a jump-cut, FINNEGANS WAKE is also a "name"...for something which has no other name.

A difficulty seems to arise (Could any poet agree with me?) from within language itself. Like a soap-bubble, it is most iridescent and tense at its bursting-point, that is, at the extreme limit of its elastic acceptance of the inspiration that formed it in the first place. But the bubble of language bursts in extreme slow-motion. I recall a puzzlement from 2400 years ago: Aristotle, turned henhouse robber, attempts to deal precisely, in words, with the embryology of the chicken.

That was something poor old 'Arry saw with his own eyes, and the result of his effort to 'describe' it (presumably he wasn't trying for art) amounts to a major cultural disaster. He needed, at the least, a draughtsman's skill. And isn't it curious that the Greeks, who took such pride in illusions, in encaustic fruit that could charm birds from the trees, couldn't spare one calorie to document! Their plastic "art" was aimed, like Voodoo dolls, at manipulating the universe; the tasks of investigation and discovery were left to 'mere prose'.

Long dissolve to: Andreas Vesalius.

After centuries of perfervid disputation, a single man dissected the corpses of dead paupers and hanged murderers. We still live with his drawings' offspring. Vesalius saw with his own eyes, and most assuredly they were scarcely ours: for instance, his drawing of a womb looks so like a penis that the resemblance has drawn comment ever since.

Vesalius' drawings surpass Aristotle's abstract prose in their capacity to include, tersely. (When it comes to, containment, to comprehension in that word's ancient sense, all our arts' bubbles tremble with the colors of infinity.) But something still is not IN these drawings: I mean the utter particularity that draws our sensibilities to photographic images.

The fair Greek probably believed entirely that he found All Chickens inside his every egg, just as he saw all triangles in each. And the man of the Renaissance was a scientist, which is to say that he was given to deriving curves from as few points as possible, whereas the curves (and axes as well) of art must coalesce as luminous knots in a web that is all the discoverable qualities of all the things of the world. (The web weaves ourselves into itself.)

A second long dissolve, then, to Stan Brakhage, entering, with his camera, one of the forbidden, terrific locations of our culture, the autopsy room. It is a place wherein, inversely, life is cherished, for it exists to affirm that no one of us may die without our knowing exactly why. All of us, in the person of the coroner, must see that, for ourselves, with our own eyes. It is a room full of appalling particular intimacies, the last ditch of individuation. Here our vague nightmare of mortality acquires the names and faces of others.

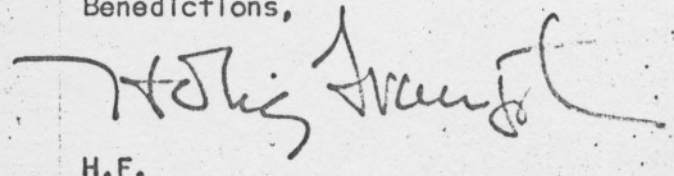
This last is a process that requires a witness; and what "idea" may finally have inserted itself into the sensible world we can still scarcely guess, for the camera would seem the perfect Eidetic Witness, staring with perfect compassion where we can scarcely bear to glance.

What was to be done in that room, Stan? and then, later, with the footage? I think it must have been mostly to stand aside; to "clear out", as much as possible, with the baggage of your own expectations, even, as to what a work of art must look like; and to see, with your own eyes, what coherence might arise within a universe for which you could decree only the boundaries.

Well now. Earlier on I said that THE ACT OF SEEING WITH ONE'S OWN EYES leads directly back into film. Now the reason seems quite simple: this film is the first completely clear enunciation (to my hearing) of the "family" name of a process within thought that may have other "given" names. But they are not to be sought in (even) the most illuminated palaver. Decades ago, Ezra Pound wrote that the most intense criticism is in new composition.

I think this new work merits intense criticism; and that is what we shall all of us, willy-nilly, have to undertake.

Benedictions,



H.F.

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