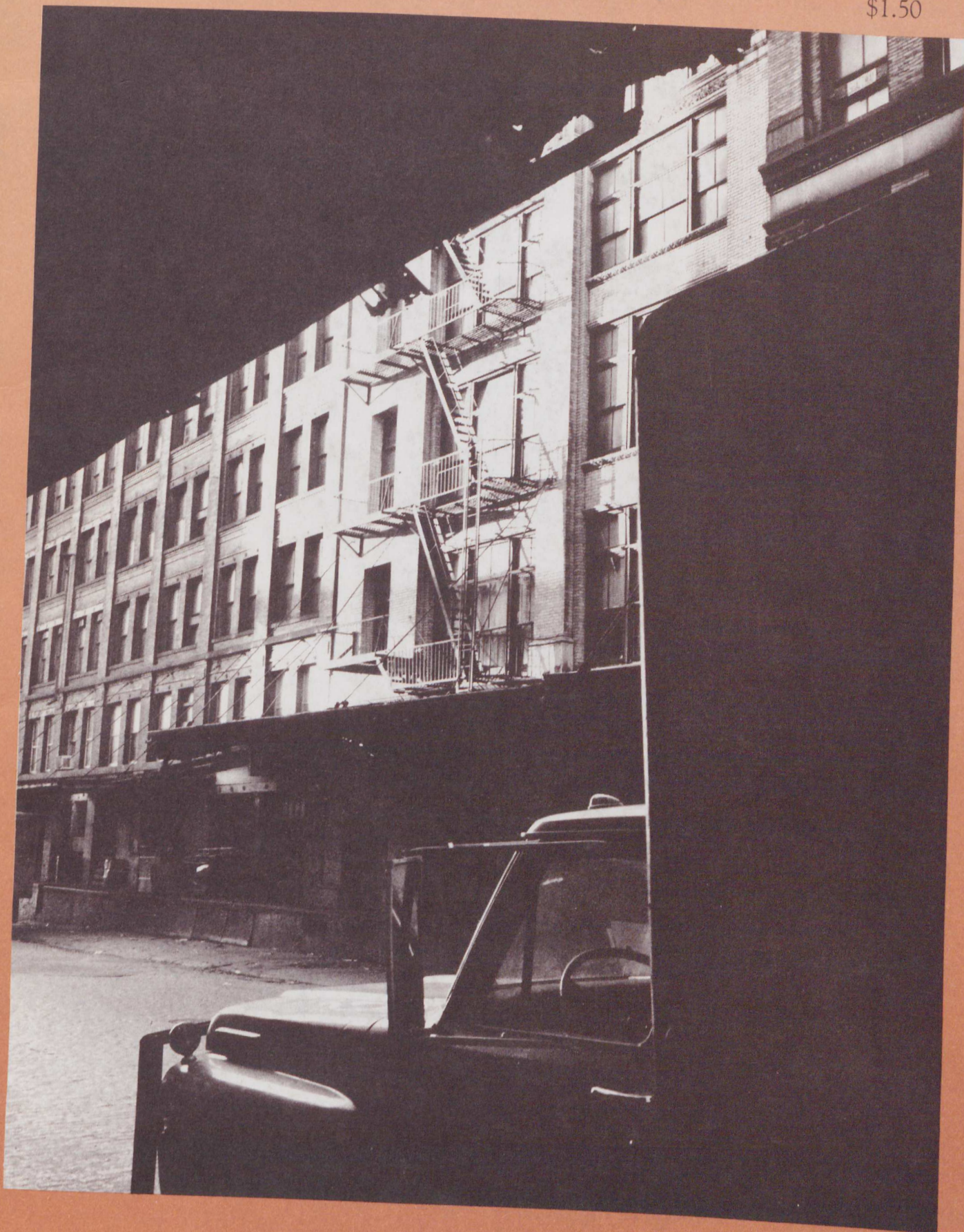


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"the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not"
Oscar Wilde



New York Skyline from 270 Bowery

Thomas Ames

Number Two

It was a long winter and we're not quite sure that Spring is truly here. But the second issue of *The Downtown Review* is here, and we are sure of a certain continuity. We are only slightly behind schedule. We expected the second issue by the end of March (the mention of the end of February in the introduction to Number One was an error that escaped into the mechanism that sets the type), so we are a few weeks behind. But we are getting better and fully expect to be on a monthly schedule as planned.

One of the reasons for the delay is the amount of copy in this issue. We are indeed gratified by the increase in the number of articles over the first issue, but just a little disappointed that we have to sacrifice some of those vintage drawings and photographs of Lower Manhattan. The next issue, though, will be a double issue, so we hope to have a little more room for images as well as words.

Ironically, despite the increase in the number of articles, there were still many events that took place in the time since our last issue that we were not able to cover. A listing of some of them would only underscore our frustration. But we remain determined to do more, to respond to more, to write about more. Another reason for a double issue next time.

Correction (we've decided to print our corrections on page one): It was P. Adams Sitney, and not Jonas Mekas as stated in Anne Friedberg's article, who brought the New American Film tour to Europe in 1964-5.

R4E

Stan Brakhage's *Sincerity*, *Reels One, Two and Three*

at the Collective for Living Cinema
February 10, 1979

More than for almost any other filmmaker I can think of, a solid understanding of a Brakhage film requires repeated viewings. This seems to frustrate some film-goers. At a first screening, a new Brakhage work can roll by, shot after shot unfolding into a still greater incomprehensibility. But there is always something to hold onto, if not just the masterful rhythmic and visual sense which is always at Brakhage's command. In this regard he has no peer.

The autobiographical *Sincerity* series is perhaps the major work in Brakhage's recent output, and thus it is with some trepidation that I approach it. Frankly, I've only seen it a couple of times, but possibly the simplicity with which I must console myself (no small consolation actually) will prove to be refreshing.

The major sequence of *Reel One*, on which the meaning of the entire film turns, is that portion which shows Dartmouth College. I am moved by the very realization of the fact that Brakhage made a lonely 2,000 mile pilgrimage to a college at which he only spent six months, a place which he rejected and which has apparently all but disowned him for all the attention it has given him. No doubt Brakhage's personal ghosts are quite efficacious in their power to haunt. In Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kroger*, the artist-to-be protagonist (certainly a fictional version of Mann himself), makes a similar trip to his hometown, Luebeck, where the narrow streets and crowded row houses just stand there in indifferent silence. This is what appears to have happened in Brakhage's return to Dartmouth. There is hardly a human encounter, only stone walls, wired (cage-like) glass, roof-tops, and the occasional back of a student who presumably will graduate in the same regulated fashion in which cafeteria trays slide by on a conveyor belt. The camera repeatedly returns to a painted sign that bears a human figure whose face is the only one to *face* the camera in this portion of the film. The figure is laughing, as if mocking Brakhage's quest for something besides static disinterest.

The earlier portions of the film have led up to this kind of crisis. As the film opens, we see a series of still photographs (whose faces also stare in a deathlike stasis) which are glimpsed briefly and inconclusively, almost as if to serve as mere spectres. Images related to Brakhage's past appear and disappear quite rapidly,

generated by light qualities, rhythms, or specific details, e.g. shots of a war film precede a photo of young Brakhage holding a toy rifle. It is Brakhage's ability to use yellow flash frames and subtly interlocking rhythmic echoes which makes these sequences such a pleasure to watch; the flares and memory "flashes" are bound inexorably in the textural framework of the film. Brakhage is attempting a *mimesis* of the random flow of thought-images in the recollection process.

Eventually we get the sense of a journey (wide open fields go by as if shot from a moving auto) and there are brief, at first, mysterious shots of Dartmouth which appear as a *prolepsis* of the presumed destination. Though we cannot speak of a literal journey, there is this evocation of one as Dartmouth is "approached" both in terms of the film's structure and Brakhage's movement into or in search of his past. The past is never only a time but a place, for space is the only way to sensually experience or "picture" time and Brakhage is wonderfully aware of this.

At the close of the film a young Brakhage looks out of a window "through" a Dartmouth scene to the negative image from his first film, *Interim*. The brilliance of this moment is that Brakhage's circa 1971 experience parallels that of circa 1951. Twice in the span of 20 years, Brakhage journeyed East to encounter Dartmouth College. Once he went as a precocious teenager, who, as so many of us, vastly overvalued the first break from home which going to college represents, and the second time, he sought a meaningful image of his past. But twice he failed and both times he turned to the *same* film for an evasion of that failure, first as a therapeutic means to self-discovery and then later to find the only image from the past in which he discovered some sense of self, some sense of his having been "there." Only his self-generated images could "speak" to him across the gap of time. The fact that the image from *Interim* is in negative is a detail reminiscent of the end of *The Way To Shadow Garden*, in which the central protagonist likewise turns to an interior world represented in negative. The process of autobiography and filmmaking, past and present, time and space, have quite ingeniously collapsed here in a number of ways.

Reel Two is a comic and kind of a sunlit interlude between *Reels One* and *Three*. It doesn't deal so

much with Brakhage the film-artist (except in a mocking way) as it does with Brakhage the husband, father, and in general, simply a man who must cope with everyday practical affairs. The best way to understand the distinctive character of this film is to realize that, like in *Reel One*, the center of the film is a journey (this time by train) which can serve as a parody of its earlier counterpart. We see Brakhage somewhat overdressed in the robes of a wizard, burdened with luggage, camera, tripod etc., trying to marshal his children and paraphernalia into a van which presumably takes them all to the train station. It is Mr. and Mrs. Shaman at home. One's magical powers don't pay the phone bill and it is the fact that the film deals with a domain where no amount of artistic inspiration can aid Brakhage that provides some of the comedy of the film. Following this is a long sequence on a train with wife, kids and dog crowded into a small compartment. There are shots of Brakhage looking tired and grumpy. One shot in another part of the film shows him to be literally collapsed on a kitchen table, pixilation transforming Brakhage's dozing into a restless sleep as he twitches and turns.

Even the awareness of the passage of time, another echo of *Reel One*, is mocked. Brakhage and Jane stand in a doorway in the background arguing while through a camera trick, their children don larger and more gaudy hats in the foreground. The comic side of raising a family seems encapsulated here in a few seconds. *Reel Two* is something of a departure for Brakhage in that the comedy is so pervasive and overt. I can't think of any other Brakhage film which elicits from an audience such repeated laughter *en masse*. Usually there are just a few scattered titters or guffaws.

Numerous times Brakhage has spoken of how he would have settled for being the "Hans Christian Andersen" of cinema but that the many films he has made for his children have never quite panned out. I am guessing that some of the images from *Reel Two* are from these "children's" films—from the side of Brakhage which is a grownup child. We see his three daughters "exploring" the house as if it were a threatening jungle, stalked by three stuffed alligators. Such play and play-acting is a theme of the film, perfectly appropriate to its high-spirited nature. There are, for example, many shots of Jane romping with the family dog, here, as in other shots, the sexual undertones being of a pre-pubescent ingenuousness. Brakhage's frustrated and introspective sexuality suggested near the end of *Reel One* in the shots from *Interim* are now transformed into joyous extroversion and mischievousness. In the interview with P. Adams Sitney included in *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage asserted his desire to break the myth of the lonely, frustrated, and self-destructive artist. *Reel Two* heralds that assertion, Brakhage's quest for normalcy (if that

is the right word), which suggests Charles Olson's dictum, "loneliness is such a lie."

Jane literally "frames" *Reel Two*, that is, the film opens with images of her and closes with a moving reference. In many ways the film is a tribute to Jane, for one can surmise that she is the one whose strength has held the family together through Brakhage's various difficulties as an independent and therefore far from rich filmmaker. In the beginning of the film we see repetition after repetition of Jane walking by the camera as she emerges from what seems to be a huge crowd at a football game. The images are expressive of selecting a single mate for life from out of many other choices, an evocation of that commonplace phrase of finding *the* one. The choice has been mutual, of course, and soon we see Brakhage and Jane in a somewhat stagey enactment of a civil marriage ceremony, and in one hilarious shot, obviously satirical in the light of what follows, the couple clinks champagne glasses in front of a fire. Brakhage hasn't extricated himself from those who accepted certain bourgeois conceptions of marriage along with the subsequent disappointments and struggles.

The close of the film shows a rainbow—a vision of the hope, light, and life which presumably Brakhage's family has meant for him—despite the tribulations. The cheerfulness calls for such a direct and overflowing image (if perhaps also a bit trite). We then see a lone bird in the sky, who, through means of an obvious splice, is joined by another bird. This shot is briefly followed by a shot of Brakhage filming himself in a mirror. These final images qualify much of the film and raise a few questions in our minds. Though *Reel Two* deals with the commonplace, the mundane, that in itself is an ideal, as much of an ideal as the two birds "spliced" together in marriage. The film purports to be about Brakhage's family, but Brakhage seems aware that it is merely his own image, both in terms of the fact that the film is a self-image and also that Jane's version of the family story would be quite different. There are simply gaps which cannot be bridged no matter how much a part of other people one is.

Reel Three suggests the darker implications of the close of *Reel Two*. In discussing *The Stars are Beautiful*, Brakhage once mentioned that he thought of that film as dealing with two opposing worlds—the world of the day-to-day family affairs and the lonely world of the artist huddled over his moviescope and making his films. I have not seen *Sincerity Three* enough times to grasp it in any strong way, but I am guessing that at least in some form it is about this very opposition, the phase in Brakhage's life in which he became more involved as a filmmaker and matured as an artist, his family remaining essentially outside of this interior process.

We see Jane and the children going about their daily business, apparently disregarding the camera.

The image "flickers" quite violently at times but still remains essentially unchanged, the motion basically uninterrupted. It is as if we are catching Brakhage in the midst of a search for some form out of a continual flux which really doesn't heed his searching. Later shots which show Brakhage at his editing bench and suspended strips of film through which the camera peers out of a window, bolster this interpretation. The ordering of the images is of course associated with the editing process; out of his image bank of unedited rolls, Brakhage must find the particular film of the moment, he must impose his own consciousness on something ultimately alien. In a grand metaphor, this process becomes a kind of vision.

One can't be sure, but the film contains a sense that Brakhage makes his films in a remote upstairs room, much as the young Hawthorne wrote in a similarly lonely room, occasionally peering down on the world below, the human world with which the artist felt he was in danger of losing contact altogether. The film does indeed contain a shot in which the camera descends a flight of stairs as if tracing Brakhage's descent into the mundane after his work is done. Also, I believe I recognize in one sequence the face of Christopher MacLaine who would most likely signify for Brakhage the dangers of intense artistic flights of fancy which soar too high, in that MacLaine, suffering from schizophrenia, ended his days in a rest home for mental patients. Incidentally, I have heard Brakhage relate the story of a visit to his household by MacLaine, during which Brakhage had to throw MacLaine out because the latter couldn't behave himself, an indication of Brakhage realizing the point at which one has to learn how to cope.

If my first surmises are correct about *Sincerity Three* then the title for Part Four, *Duplicity*, would make sense since it would imply a coming to terms with this dual vision, this dual world he has evoked. Also the first three films would show a remarkable balance containing parallel themes: Brakhage as artist/idealist (*Reel One*); man of the world/father/husband (*Reel Two*); and the painful need and heroic venture to reconcile the two Brakhages, in fact to deny the dichotomy (*Reel Three*). But frankly I still wonder where Brakhage's autobiography is heading; *Duplicity Reel Two* has been deposited at The Filmmakers' Cooperative though it has yet to receive a N.Y. premiere. However, throughout the first three reels there are many common images (absent from *Duplicity* as far as I can tell) which serve as leading motives (aspen trees, a bird pecking in the snow), perhaps signifying for Brakhage a denial of time and change altogether, that one's autobiography doesn't go anywhere in any sort of teleological sense, that it is not so much a narrative of one's periods of development, as it is simply a manifestation at every moment of who one has been all along.

John Pruitt

The Cycle

at the Public Theater,

February 13 to 18

at the Thalia February 27, 1979

Movies, whether fact or fiction, project a vision that molds the public's response to the world. Hollywood's domination of the international movie market has acted as a nurturing source for the global spread of American culture. The urban toughness of Bogart or the sassy intelligence of Hepburn are only two of the legendary envoys that have established American behavior as a model for the world. But the relations can be reversed. With the appearance of films from a neglected national cinema, Americans gain an opportunity to respond to the native expression of another people. The opening of *The Cycle* (1974) from Iran should find an audience eager for a glimpse into a nation even now being transformed by revolution. The picture deserves attention, and hopefully its screening will be followed by further features from the Middle East.

The Cycle portrays the transition that marks economic development, offering a bleak tale of passage from father to son, from the countryside to the city, from the agrarian to the industrial. The film opens to find an old man and his son walking the dusty road toward the city. After three score years the father can no longer hold down his food, so he decides to travel to the metropolitan hospital in search of a cure. The health center looms like heaven's promise, but resists every attempt to gain access to its services. The sick man struggles with bureaucrats, badgers the doctors, pleads with Allah, and finally waits beyond the gate with the lingering poor. He has come to the city to die.

Ali, the boy, submits to his father's curses, begs food, and raises money striving to provide for the old man. While the temper of the city ignores the cries of the father, it quickly shapes the character of the son. Under the pressure of the metropolis Ali sheds his provincialism. As the boy's submissive demeanor fades, he slips from under the tyrannical abuse of his father, and reaches for the pleasures promised by the modern ways. *The Cycle* follows Ali as he makes his personal pact with the forces transforming Iran.

Ali and his father sleep their first night in the street, anxious for an opportunity to earn the next day's meal. Awakening to the prospect of money they are herded into a crowded truck at dawn. Ali finds himself packed into a bare room, a needle penetrates his vein while he holds the bottle that draws his blood. Back at the hospital the old man and his son are aided by a sympathetic nurse, but the need for work lures Ali into the petty schemes surrounding the