Résumé: Le « rêve de La Ville » est un thème qui réapparaît souvent dans l’œuvre de Brakhage. City Streaming, tourné à Toronto en 1989, se distingue de ses autres films urbains par son élan festif. Libéré du « poids de l’histoire » et de la trop grande familiarité des lieux, que l’on retrouve par exemple dans The Dead et Unconscious London Strata, Brakhage peut présenter une construction dynamique de la ville en tant qu’entité vivante, en tant que réseau d’énergie exubérante et enthousiaste semblable au flot d’électricité qui parcourt le système nerveux humain. Les tensions conceptuelles et formelles de l’œuvre (par exemple, entre les prises de vue intérieures et extérieures, entre les lieux privés et publics), ainsi que l’ironie et l’humour visuel, situent l’individu (le cinéaste) en dehors de la « ruche » qu’il observe. Il peut ainsi se « re-mémorer » son expérience du lieu pendant qu’il « chante la chanson » de La Ville.

Stan Brakhage stated very simply, in an interview given a few months before he died, “I am an American”—noting that it was in America that he had saved his films, preserved them as best he was able, and that having done so, he had then removed himself, as it were, “like a Cheshire cat.”¹ Though his final move to Canada did not mark his first lengthy stay here, and though it was also a positively motivated one (not simply a withdrawal), there remains, nonetheless, a deep and complex truth to the above statement. As has been fully expounded by Bruce Elder, Brakhage was an American individualist from the rich culture of American poetics, with a deep involvement in the works of Pound, Stein, Williams, and Olson; in contemporaries of American poetry also, including Michael McClure and Ronald Johnson; as well as in the American abstract expressionist painters. In his trilogy of films, I Take These Truths, We Hold These, and I… (USA, 1995), he even takes his arguments back to the social/political and literary roots of America in a purely Brakhagean answer to Thomas Jefferson. And, of course, in the much more immediate, experiential sense of the physical surrounds of childhood—home is home. There is no doubt that Stan Brakhage was an American, and even a patriotic one.
But he was also fond of quoting his friend, the poet Ed Dorn, who, when asked if he considered himself an “American” poet, reportedly responded with, “What!? You expect me to swear allegiance to this tiny set of rings called the Solar System?!”

Nearing the end of his life, he had also re-affirmed that, “My God is the god of Art.” For he was, above all else, an artist. An American artist, yes: but even in all of his nitty, gritty, “gutsy, crazy” digging into the biological physicality of everyday living and seeing, and in his absolute commitment to deep, appreciative responsiveness to the energies of the moment—in any given time and place—he believed, completely, that the Art was for everyone, everywhere. And as he once told me, it isn’t just about “our relationship to the Earth,” but “our connection to the stars.”

He was a man of many and complex contradictions. Many thought him a lover of Nature. And in a sense, he was. But he also considered Nature treacherous and longed for the City. The City, however, brought him a sensory overload that he often had to retreat from. Still, when Stan and I moved to Toronto, in 1989, he was looking for a new home, and found a group of filmmakers, musicians, painters and poets that re-invigorated him with hope for the kind of community of kindred spirits he always longed for—a community that cut across national boundaries, united in a world of Art and Ideas. He set up an editing table in our living room, with a projector at one end for our weekly “salons,” and entered the city, camera in hand.

Unfortunately, though there was a strong contingent that welcomed his presence, the larger social/political reality did not allow for a place for Stan Brakhage in the world of Canadian academics at that time, and so for financial reasons we were obliged to return to Colorado. But out of that brief period—a short five or six months—there arose two new films and a rich exchange of ideas that would inspire the beginnings of what eventually took the form of a posthumously published volume of collected essays, *Telling Time.* While he lived in Toronto he gave generously of himself, as he always did. And what he gave to his art, and thus once again to us, is a unique vision arising from that particular time and place—in the film, *City Streaming* (Canada/USA, 1989).

*City Streaming* stands apart, in significant ways, from earlier Brakhage visions of the City. In *The Dead* (filmed in Paris in 1958), he had been faced with the weight of all those great artists and thinkers who had come before him, and how to turn the symbols of such into a living work, as he entered the famous graveyard of Père Lachaise. The combination of rocking motions with superimposed negative and positive imagery presents intimations of ghostly presences. Even the flow of the River Seine is seen as continually coming up against solid—and cold-looking—stone. Life seems tenuous here, with glimpses of colour seen only fleetingly amongst the many imposing tributes to the now long dead.

*Other* (USA, 1980), filmed in Amsterdam two decades later, is also imbued,
as the title suggests, with a sense of separateness, of not belonging. In this brief impression of another great gathering place, the filmmaker’s first wife, Jane, is seen sitting on the inside window ledge of an older-looking hotel room, looking out upon the buildings opposite that line the city streets. And in the Pittsburgh Trilogy (USA, 1971), the filmmaker had looked at the hidden worlds of the city’s underside—the police work, the hospital rooms, the autopsy tables—in three documentations of social and personal crisis.

It is Unconscious London Strata (USA, 1982) that Brakhage identified as being most closely related to City Streaming, having called the latter film “a companion piece” to his earlier study. But it remains, still, a companion piece with important differences. He referred to Unconscious London Strata as a “reconstruction of the mind’s eye at the borders of the unconscious,” saying that “some visual song of all of England’s history began to move through this material,” creating a metaphor of mind through analogy to a musical form as memory manifested on film as “rounds...within rounds.” Filming London, Brakhage had to avoid the emotional impact of well-known tourist sites by transforming the culturally deep and old into something new—in keeping with his imperatives, as always, to “make it new” and to “make it true.” To see London “newly” was a particular challenge, perhaps an impossibility, and so to “make it true” he also included a consideration of how his preconceptions—based partly on the art of painters such as Turner, Monet, and Whistler— Influenced how he would see the city. The film, therefore, reflects, in part, upon this process, and upon the weightiness of history—all of that history that we bring to the city, and it to us. Out of an impressionistic abstraction of colours and forms, we are rhythmically presented, then, with a gradually emerging recognition of London and what London might mean to us.

But when he approaches Toronto, the weight of history has lifted. Like Unconscious London Strata, City Streaming is a memory piece—streams of thought pieced together after the experiential fact. But the engagement with history that informs the earlier work is replaced in the Toronto film with a new sense of immediacy—with a sense of the city as a vibrant, living entity (colour plates 1,2,3). The images presented are directly perceived as being of more easily recognizable, “nameable” things. The rhythms reflect the familiar pulse of everyday life. And windows, that in the film Other had looked out upon the city of Amsterdam from the inside of a lonely hotel room, now function as active conduits for the interrelated energies of interior and exterior spaces.

Twentieth century art began with a heightened awareness of movement, of dynamism—quickly becoming concerned with the developing technologies of the modern world (at first, largely in celebration, later often in distrust, or even condemnation). Yet, in Brakhage’s oeuvre, a specific engagement with technology is rare. Indeed, his quest has been to plumb the depths of the organic nature of our being, and through a deeper awareness of our own interior processes to more meaningfully engage with the larger world in a way that ordinarily is under-
mined by a reductive, technological society that orders and controls. But ironically, it is within the trappings of technology that he finds his rhythms for *City Streaming*, with images of electrical/mechanical invention giving the film its particular form of dynamic vitality and energy. “No ideas but in things,” William Carlos Williams had said. And in *City Streaming* the things and the ideas become absolutely at one, as if in a Jamesian “stream of consciousness” that is electrically charged.

Analogous to his observation that nineteenth century poetry reflects the rhythms of horses’ hoof beats in the street, Brakhage’s insight here was to identify contemporary city rhythms with the rhythms of the subway (the subway—the underground—that, by implication, mysteriously pumps relentlessly on, like the heartbeat of “the beast” itself.) The film begins with the flashing pulses of images through the window of a train entering an underground station. Clearly evoking flashes of memory, this immediately sets up an essential identification not only between filmmaker and the world around him—between subject and object—but between subject, object and the visceral response of the viewer.

The rhythmical forms of the first three of Brakhage’s Vancouver Island films—*A Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea* (Canada/USA, 1991), *The Mammals of Victoria* (Canada/USA, 1994), and *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (Canada/USA, 2000)—offer an interesting comparison to *City Streaming*. In those works, it is images of ocean that present metaphors of mind, and evoke the rhythms of such—the gentle ebbs and flows of the sea, the play of light, the looming, deepening darkness, or suggested dark depths beneath the surface. In Toronto, in addition to the subway, it is wires—electrical wires, cables—that become a major motif, creating a nervous system analogy, and forming the basis of his complex elaboration of visual rhythms. At times, these wires “become” the lines of a television screen, and the social world outside is thus brought inside to a more personal, interior space. And the camera moves through this space, these rooms, at all angles—the camera at times caresses, lingering, it seems, on familiar objects.

About halfway through the film, a flickering effect begins, paralleling the image of the shuttering of the fan seen moving within the apartment (colour plate 1). The editing rhythms quicken, as if energized by the electrical wires and connecting cables of the city (actually, the neighbourhood of Bloor West Village, connected to the city centre by the subway line.) The summer streets are bright and full of human activity, the film now becoming a rapidly tumultuous stream of remembered glimpses, seemingly lifting one’s experience “out of time”—while interior shots include characters in a costume drama on the television screen, who, with a single momentary gesture as if into the room, simultaneously create a humourous parallel to, and comment upon, the interpersonal drama apparently being played out there.

There are brief images of Brakhage himself and suggestions of the presence
of an “other,” as the camera makes its way through the rooms of the apartment—turning the rooms in multiple directions, at times almost as if driven by the fan itself—leading, then, through the windows and out into the streets again in a repeating interweaving of public and private spaces. The shots revealing the filmmaker as he films serve several functions. On one level, they are a simple autobiographical gesture, an inclusion of himself, physically, within the scene, as a part of his larger, ongoing autobiographical project. As images within a mirror, they also serve to re-state that “this is a construct, made by me.” The “me” in this respect is of additional significance in City Streaming in that it says, further, that the work was made “by me, and no other,” not as “expression,” but as fact—as a fact of individuality and originality of person. And finally, these images separate the self from the world, and ultimately, the viewer from the film. Framed in wood, like the windows of the apartment, the mirror becomes a window of a different sort. Its images represent, or present to us, those moments of self-awareness when the mind reflects back upon its own processes, when one feels separated and alone. They are the framed and contained images of the self within the larger containment of the private spaces, the self that ultimately is connected only tenuously to the larger social network of energies, but which, through this very process of self-awareness is able, then, to reflect back and to form this “visual music,” as Brakhage called it—“to ‘sing’ The City as remembered from daily living.”

Through his long and deep involvement with music and poetry, Brakhage clearly experienced the fundamental principle of art as rhythm—biological and perceptual rhythms, from which, he might have argued, arise all of our possibilities of knowing. Quoting Charles Olson, he would often repeat, “of rhythm is image/of image is knowing/of knowing there is/a construct.” Expounding upon this statement in his essay, “About Time,” Brakhage illuminates the aesthetic sensibility and process that is implied here. “Of rhythm is image,” suggests the mind’s flowing: of always moving, transformational imagery. Of that imaging, then, is all of our knowing—not “knowledge,” but a process of “knowing,” also in movement, in constant transformation, and reflective of the sensed world as we are sensing it. And through that process of knowing there arises, then, a con-struct, which word he emphasizes as being essentially verb-like as well, as “an ‘end tempo’ in [the] rhythm pattern—and one with metaphorical bounce....” He writes,

... the rhythm of “construct” (as Olson has it) reverses Time...so that an end (or “full Stop”) can be thought of as that which causes the reader to imagine Time moving backwards to an end which is a beginning which never was nor ever could be—or some full-circle of ever rhythming thinking centered on “construct.” In film terminology one would say that there is a splice between “con” and “struct” so powerful it achieves the fullest possible effect of Eisensteinian montage.
*City Streaming* clearly exemplifies these principles in its evocation, through the elements of formal construction, of a particular quality of mind, resulting in a work that is neither an objective document of the city (nor anything so partial as an attempted document of the filmmaker’s consciousness), nor simply an “expression” of the filmmaker’s state of being at the time. Rather, it is the creation of a “paradigm,” as he might have put it, a parallel world that ultimately transcends the expression/documentation dichotomy, existing, I would suggest, as a form of revelation or insight.

*City Streaming* is about energy. And, as always with Brakhage, it is about light—light which manifests as quotidian objects, rivers of light, half-remembered glimpses perhaps, streamings of the mind, ending, then, on a gently vibrating, undefined shimmering of whiteness. It moves through the city rhythms of the larger social reality, inner city workings, the gathering of “the tribe,” into the personal details of home and self, and out the window again, as light unites it all and provides the energy of the ongoing pulse. The relatively stable shots of the shadowy, mysterious male figure, the mechanic, working with some sort of equipment in a very partially lit room, contrast with the ephemerality of personal experience—the glimpse of sun-lit hair, the red flowers, these suggestions of a personal love story (one of countless such stories within the whole of the referenced society, and yet also absolutely individual and particular). The filmmaker is, in a sense, swept away, lifted outside himself, into the rhythms of the city. But ultimately, he finds himself again, as always, in the act of making—making manifest “the truths of moving visual thinking.”

That being said, however, it should also be noted that Stan Brakhage himself considered the term “act of making” to be oxymoronic, claiming that, “There is no ‘act’ of making. There is only blind faith in the rhythms, the rhythming’s eventual envisionment.” Likewise, he asked, “How can ‘creative’ be a ‘process’? It is, rather, the enduring of chaos.” And he stated further that, “The art work defines a paradigm of the experienced chaos of everyday life while being in itself a construct quite distinct from it.”

The manifestation of these constructs, the formal organization of these essential rhythms, includes elaborately woven elements of repetition. But these are also, of course, repetitions in the Steinian sense, repetitions that are always a beginning-again, each occurrence creating its own multiplicity of reverberations, breathing life into works that aspire to the experience of a “continuous present.” For that was what Brakhage ultimately asked of us: that we be more fully present, and open ourselves to the possibilities of sight and to seeing deeply. For, as much as he may have experienced chaos (which I’m sure he did), he also celebrated—every day—the infinite variability of vision, of individuality, and of life.
NOTES
7. Ibid., 76.
8. Ibid., 76.
9. Ibid., 78.

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