of the Broadway production of *Evita*, with a number of critics comparing the play to the kind of spectacle parodied in Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1967).

**Works Cited**


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**Seeing with Experimental Eyes**

**Stan Brakhage's The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes**

*Bart Testa*

Stan Brakhage's Pittsburgh Trilogy, three films each approximately one half hour long, are regarded by many as exceptional in his large and brilliant oeuvre, which virtually defines the American experimental cinema in its lyrical, subjective dimension. The reason these films stand strikingly apart in Brakhage's oeuvre is that they are documentaries. *Eyes* (1970) focuses on the city's police; *Deux Ex* (1971) on a hospital; and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), the last and most notorious of the films, depicts with uncompromising directness several autopsies performed in Pittsburgh's city morgue. The most salient feature of *The Act of Seeing* is the film's unadorned and troubling directness. No viewing position like we gain in a conventional documentary (or fiction film, for that matter) is available in this film.

Brakhage's hand-held camera closely and intently observes coroners perform autopsies on six or seven bodies. The camera has little interest in the coroners themselves, less in their "findings" regarding the causes of death. Although there are a couple of shots showing them speaking into microphones, these merely underscore what we do not hear in this soundless film. There are no voice-over explanations, no interviews, no music, no intertitles. Nor does the montage of images develop a systematic exposition of autopsy procedure. The camera remains fixed on the bodies in medium or close-up shots, as hands and tools go about their work of measurement and then of dismemberment. No overall narrative evolves.
The Act of Seeing is therefore a very difficult film to watch. For, in addition to its inherently gruesome subject matter and unflinching directness, it seems to offer nowhere to hide from its raw literalness. We can readily imagine watching another equally explicit movie of autopsies; but very likely we will also imagine that such a film would allow us to slip behind verbal explanations of the pathologists' procedures, analyses of the cause of death, or perhaps some moral argument that necessitates showing such images. However, as Bill Nichols notes, none of these familiar viewing strategies is on offer here: "We witness what exceeds our sight and grasp. The camera gazes. It presents evidence destined to disturb. The evidence cries out for argument, some interpretative frame within which to comprehend it. Nowhere is this need more acutely felt than in a film that refuses to provide any explanatory commentary whatsoever" (81).

But if images seem to demand explanation or interpretation to be comprehended, it is conversely true that an "interpretive frame" requires images to serve the explanatory purpose of that frame. To give substance to the conventional claim made for documentaries—that they make a literal representation of a truth (even if the claim is made only by the label "documentary," "direct cinema," or "nonfiction")—documentary films need images to be evidential. But evidence of what? Of the films' arguments, Nichols says. Critics often claim that documentary film images present viewers with images of "the world." This distinguishes them from fiction films, which show aspects of "a world," one built up by the fiction. "The literalism of documentary centres around the look of things in the world as an index of meaning" (Nichols 27). When the documentarian places images into a structure of exposition, explanation or argument, the images become evidence of certain facts of the world. This is achieved by the use of voice-overs, printed titles, and/or "quasiverbal" montage constructions, any and all of which offer an interpretation or make an argument about the world witnessed by the images. "Every cut or edit," says Nichols, "is a step forward in an argument" (29).

Such submission of filmed images to argument causes the images to "speak" on behalf of that argument. Yet this subordination is a vital part of showing the world "as an index of meaning," and it engenders comprehension of what images depict. The evidential function images assume by being both visibly of the world and being subordinated to argument sustains a whole film as meaningful. In turn, that subordinate function of the images also allows the meaning of each image to come forth as a significant and understandable, if also partial, statement about the world. Ideally, in a well-made documentary there is a symmetry in the exchange of signifying relations between images and "interpretive frames," and this exchange makes showing and explanation a unity. This is the case whether the images are made to illustrate the steps of a technical process (as in, say, a medical or industrial education film) or to provide forceful evidence for a moral or political argument. The uses of images in documentary filmmaking hold in common the role of performing what, in simple summary terms, could be called acts of showing.

In any of the types of documentary just enumerated, the difficulty of watching bodies under autopsy—images that are of themselves undeniably "traumatic"—is mitigated by the process of subsuming them. To illustrate a procedure that needs to be explained, for example, or to support a moral argument, provides a ready-made position from which to comprehend what is shown. By creating such a position, which is what structures of understanding do, even traumatic images are softened by making them significant evidence within an interpretive frame. The act of showing implants images within a wider and controlling function of meaning. This implantation subordinates seeing images as literal presentations to the higher-order process of argumentation. Witnessing and seeing recede, to a greater or lesser degree, behind signification and showing.

By way of illustration, consider another piece, a video which concerns a morgue but which is entirely different in style from Brakhage's film. Peter Greenaway's Death in the Seine (1990) can even be taken to be an inverse of The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes. Its documentary source is a mortuary archive of written reports compiled between 1795 and 1801 in Paris. It deals with a sample of twenty-three reports (out of 306 extant records) composed about bodies pulled from the River Seine by two "mortuary attendants" (ancestors of modern coroners). A voice-over recites, in careful paraphrase, minute particulars from entries made for each corpse while the images display the following in strict series, repeated twenty-three times: first, a fictional tableau of actors playing the attendants drawing the bodies (also played by actors) from the river; second, stripping and washing the bodies and taking depositions from witnesses; and, last, a slowly travelling close-up tracking over the naked bodies as the voice-over sums up the findings. Even though the images are fictional constructs, they serve, in the manner common to documentaries, to substantiate the detailed paraphrases of actual historical texts in acts of showing. The matches between written descriptions and the images of bodies are quite rigorously maintained. At any rate, the actors' bodies' still nakedness possesses a strong enough semblance of witnessing for the work to have its intended effect. Naturally, viewers know, and the video frankly acknowledges, that showing literally real images is in this case impossible.

The intended argument of Death in the Seine is that the lives that ended in the river also ended inconclusively for us, the living. Our historical record cannot really, or rather, cannot fully, remember. The Parisian mortuary archive is the slendest of records and even it has many gaps and enigmas, as the voice-over gently admits. Yet these records are all we have since no other trace of these obscure, ordinary people exists and, over the six generations since 1801, no living relation of these dead could possibly have even a faint recollection of them. These are the shards of the world of the past. The detail-
of seeing with one's own eyes, which really means to grapple with how a filmmaker composes such a document of acts of seeing seriously, and to grasp its highly reflexive and implicatory form, we are obliged first to consider the fact that the film is not only a documentary but also an avant-garde documentary.

On first sight, the expression “avant-garde documentary” may seem an oxymoron. In many important respects, documentary and avant-garde filmmaking are polar opposites. But, in a sense, they share a space in the “cinema institution” by dint of not being fiction feature-film cinema; they cobrate the margins of film culture, which is dominated by fiction films. There are some important affiliations and differences that bind documentary and the avant-garde as cinematic practices. These are borne out—both theoretically and historically—and sometimes powerfully manifested through single films that are in fact avant-garde documentaries. The act of seeing with one's own eyes is one of these films that offers insight into the cinematic bonds which tie the two modes. Most importantly, both avant-garde and documentary filmmaking are founded on a deep commitment to pursuing the truth of the film image. This affords them and fundamentally distinguishes them from fiction filmmakers. In fiction films, claims to truth (when they are made at all) reside in the true story, and its true telling, not in the truth of the image.

But affiliation is not the same thing here as agreement, and in this case it marks a place of difference. I have already suggested one limited but sharp difference between Brakhage’s film and documentary practice: it arises out of the distinction between a documentary’s acts of showing and Brakhage’s (an)ethical acts of seeing. Further, Nichols has isolated a significant positive structural feature that allows us to distinguish the efforts of documentarians from the exertions of experimental filmmakers. Documentarians are committed to exposition, explanation, and argument of kinds that are shared by the socially defined “discourses of sobriety,” those recognized as serious explanations of truth, such as science, politics, and religion (Nichols 3). Documentaries’ “interpretive frames” are homologies of socially recognized, knowable, and understood meanings. Avant-garde cinema, in contrast, often pursues less socially recognized sorts of meaning; artists are drawn to subject matter that goes unaccounted by, or seems incomprehensible, mysterious, and/or forbidden to “sober discourse.” Argument and interpretations of the sober type are very often ignored by experimentalists in favor of exploratory and hence unfamiliar aesthetic, philosophical, and poetic expressions of experience, many of which are not actually assimilable to “discursive” forms at all. This is true of Brakhage’s film. It completely abandons verbal argument and other ready “interpretive frames” and deliberately focuses on what seems, in principle, to be unknowable and mysterious—the spectacle of death.

A reason why works like The act of seeing—in which an experimental filmmaker enters the domain of the “literal” film image—is of uncommon
critical interest is that it exposes the affinities and differences between documentary and avant-garde film. What formal tactics can redeem such a film to meaning? In light of this question, we need to consider the question of why Brakhage made such a film. Frampton’s suggestion that Brakhage’s camera in the morgue is our collective eye is amplified by P. Adams Sitney, perhaps Brakhage’s most insightful critic. Sitney suggests that after a dozen years of intensely subjective filmmaking Brakhage was responding to a felt danger of solipsism and that making the “Pittsburgh Trilogy” allowed him the relief of turning his lens on what we hold in common (421). Most of Brakhage’s films do turn on an extremely private vision and concentrate on natural, domestic, erotic, and childhood themes. In taking up distinctly urban and public material—the police, a hospital, a morgue—Brakhage embraced a distinct and realistic style because it was suited to the casting of his film-eye upon shared dimensions of experience. Indeed, all three films of the Pittsburgh Trilogy do concern “public seeing”: *Eyes casts* city police as the means we use to watch over our public lives; *Deus Ex* depicts the hospital as the house of the protective and curing medical gaze; and the coroner’s look, as Frampton suggests, is the last collective gaze we cast upon ourselves, our bodies in death.

However, Brakhage himself entertains no deep distinction between subjective, expressionist modes and realist, public modes of filmmaking. Quite the contrary, he insists that all films are, at least ideally, documents of vision and so all films are really documentaries, albeit in a much expanded sense. All his filmmaking has been devoted to realizing this ideal. Like certain philosophers of perception, notably the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Brakhage conceives vision to be a whole-body experience, or the experience of “the body in the world” (see Sobchack 89–92). 

Emotions, imaginings, dreams, the pulse of the heart, and the “sparking of the synapses” are all registered in acts of vision.

The connection of vision to the body, Brakhage explains, is why he uses a hand-held, often shaking or trembling camera, unusual lenses, painted-on film footage, complex superimpositions, eccentric exposures and focusing, disjunctive cutting rhythms—and why he usually makes silent (and emphatically wordless) films. All these techniques manifest his attempt to come closer to a mimesis of holistic-corporeal acts of seeing. Even when they may appear abstract (for example, as in his painted films, such as *The Dante Quartet*, 1987), Brakhage still takes his films to be reportage of acts of seeing. “Pictures”—clear, recognizable film images—are just a special case of vision and not its definitive form. The different stylistic moments in his filmmaking are, therefore, to be accounted for by the themes that attracted him and the states of emotion or mind that gave rise to his films. The idea of a public seeing can and should remain highly pertinent, but *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* should not be taken as thematically anomalous within his filmmak-

ing, even though the style of the film and its affinity with documentary cinema must still be regarded as exceptional in his oeuvre.

If we reach back further into his career, we uncover another such seemingly anomalous work, one through which Brakhage actually discovered the lineaments of his mature style. As a young filmmaker in the 1950s, he was commissioned by Joseph Cornell, the American surrealist, to make a film document of New York’s Third Avenue “EL” (elevated train) just prior to its demolition. The resulting *The Wonder Ring* (1955) is the film in which Brakhage decisively shifted from the black and white psychodramas (acted films involving hermetic subjective states played out in front of the camera) that had previously dominated his filmmaking to a cinema of “direct seeing” characterized by rapid hand-held camera movement, vivid color, and rhythmically assertive, disjunctive editing. Although associated with subjectivism, that style’s inspiration was the desire to capture the peculiar light, movement, and vibration of an elevated part of a quintessential public and urban subject, the New York subway. In a fascinating paradox, *The Wonder Ring* is a city documentary that drew Brakhage outside himself (the realm of psychodrama) and led him into his mature style.

Cornell was not alone at the time in being an American artist with a surrealist lineage involved in making urban avant-garde documentary work. Indeed, Brakhage’s emergent style owed much to New York painter-filmmaker Marie Menken’s wordless silent films of the 1940s and ’50s, an influence he enthusiastically acknowledged (Brakhage, “Menken”). These likewise involve a hand-held moving camera, intense color, and a strong emphasis on acts of seeing. Menken also made several stunning avant-garde city documentaries in this mode, notably *Go, Go, Go* (1964). But her signal work, and the historic connector between the history of avant-garde documentaries and *The Act of Seeing*, is her collaboration with her husband, Willard Maas, and poet George Barker, *Geography of the Body* (1943), one of the most famous of all American experimental films.

Menken shot this film, which moves about and probes several naked bodies in extreme close-up, through a magnifying glass that so enlarges the images that they are barely recognizable. The transforming effect of magnification on the body (and of the voice-over text on the images) in *Geography of the Body* is a strong cinematic instance of surrealist “seeing as” in which the literal and the imaginative become combined into a sort of hallucination (Krauss 60). The human body in this film is also surrealist in another, transgressive way. By entering the most secret spaces of the body, the camera crosses into a culturally forbidden, literal intimacy with the flesh. Considered as a whole, *Geography of the Body* is not precisely an avant-garde documentary. However, Menken’s close-up literalism of the body connects the film to other features of surrealist documentary films such as Luis Buñuel’s *Las Hurdes* (*Land without Bread*, 1932) and Georges Franju’s *Le sang des bêtes*
(Blood of the Beasts, 1949) in overturning the humanism and optimism of the documentary mainstream—that is, the prevailing "sober discourse"—and in making us see what is forbidden to sight. It is this entrance into forbidden realms of seeing—especially seeing the flesh—that joins Geography of the Body to surrealist documentary.

Geography virtually invented the avant-garde "body film," which later drew a number of important filmmakers (see Elder). Blood of the Beasts invented the "abattoir film," in which documentary abattoir passages (or whole films) serve to augment (or make) moral arguments. Another direction taken by "body films" is less rhetorically metaphorical than either mode and leads to films that dwell, contemplatively, on the flesh under duress. There are many examples, but Brakhage's The Act of Seeing is the major work in this lineage.

Both the "body film" and the "abattoir film" arise from surrealism. Despite its reputation for fantastic imagery, surrealism was no less drawn to literal documentary images and, we might say, to acts of looking for the shock, disturbance, and imaginative effects literal images can have. This tendency developed strongly in the period of surrealism's geographical dispersion during and after World War II and then developed further in the American and European avant-gardes of the 1950s and '60s. But we need to distinguish The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes alike from both the abattoir and the body film, as well as from surrealism. These are pertinent, orienting "sources"—historical antecedents of the film—but they do not explain the film itself any more than the departures from conventional documentary films I discussed above can explain it, although some contrasts can be drawn.

The abattoir film is driven by a moral purpose and it is this purpose that leads to forbidden imagery. The intention is to liberate a repressed pathos, to expose what is taken for granted but usually ignored: the fact that animals are meat. Its moral purpose is to tear the veil from this ignored knowledge, and abattoir imagery passes through an outrage that cannot but make the viewer uncomfortable. The moral end is to sensitize us to a hidden inhumanity that is actually commonplace. Now, such a meeting of the viewer and the appalling image cannot be undertaken by a filmmaker lightly. Morality here is a solemn obligation, and it also serves as the means to comprehension, for the danger such strong imagery presents is callous sensationalism.

The solemnity of The Act of Seeing is the first formal feature that impresses a viewer. But it is a solemnity without the familiar moralism of a film like Franju's or other documentaries that show flesh under duress. The reason is soon apparent. This is not a film about how human, or animal, bodies are abused or disrespected under autopsy; on the contrary, the dismemberment by the coroner is treated in this film as a serious and respectful, if also mysterious, ritual. Nonetheless, when the film also strips the viewer of the type of moral comprehension we may find in Franju, one faces traumatic imagery unarm access interpretively.

The Act of Seeing also has a moral purpose, however, and Brakhage insists that we travel toward it through a series of very disturbing images. Brakhage times and paces the shots, and frames sequences, so none remains long enough or repeats often enough to desensitize the viewer. We are never allowed to get used to the film's imagery, to watch it as part of a procedural routine, and so not see it. The act of seeing, its shock and troubling power, is constantly renewed. Indeed, the images are so relentlessly literal and, in the main, so clearly shot that all there seem to be in this film are successive acts of seeing, and seeing this. And this seeing is itself, Brakhage seems to imply, the film's moral end.

There are three basic compositional devices (with combinations and variants of these at work) the film uses to produce this effect: I have above called solemnity: veiling, juxtaposition, and camera movement. In my analysis each of them is set within an opposition and signified through difference and frequency: veiling/veiling; like imagery/unlike imagery (in juxtaposition); static camera/moving camera, respectively.

Veiling is the most consistent, isolatable, and readily explicable device, and provides The Act of Seeing with its most obvious structural accents. Veiling further involves the film's important color patterns, which develop into a red/white antinomy and a seen/not seen opposition that is critical to the re-
newed acts of seeing the film maintains. Unveiling is weighted by permitting us to see, veiling preventing us. The veiling device arises from two types of “found” images: the covering of bodies with white cloths, and the blockage of screen space by parts of the coroners’ white lab coats. Brakhage usually shoots both cloths and coats in tight close-up, so that white often fills all of the image field. Bodies are seldom shown being uncovered, but sustained shots are devoted to the coroners covering bodies with white sheets. When this white fills the screen, it marks the transition from seen to not-seen.

My analysis divides the film into ten sections, taking the major breaks as marked by long veiling or withdrawals of the camera. These ten sections are:

1. Prelude: measuring and moving bodies
2. Measuring; outside the body; the gestural close-ups
3. Blood samples, stripping the bodies, moving bodies
4. The skull/eye sockets; the first opened torso
5. The face; the second opened torso
6. Torsos; the dimmed light; water and blood
7. The short body-parts montage; the man with the mop
8. Cutting open the thorax
9. The long body-parts montage; the old man’s face
10. Coda: the coroner and the tape recorder

The opening shot shows fabric in close-up, then cuts to a series of shots showing hands testing parts of the body for flexibility and taking measurements of exterior parts with a small white plastic ruler. Brakhage then cuts to a (belated) establishing long shot of a whole body (from slightly above and behind the head) and then a medium shot including the body and the hips of a coroner. This latter composition sets the manner of shooting the morgue workers: they are represented by synecdoche—their hands, arms, and hips—almost never their faces. The series of shots of measurement then resume, followed by another long shot; then a covering of the body, ending with white cloths that fill the screen. A short transitional montage follows: medium shots of bodies being moved on gurneys, and from them onto tables; more measuring; then a series of close-ups of an eye, a hand, a toe. A pattern of visual repetition, in effect a doubling back bracketed by major accentual interruptions—most emphatically cuts to white cloths (veiling)—is established early in the film. Camera movement thus far has been used only for some very slight reframing. However, movement within the frame and medium long shots serve as variations and rhythmic markers within usually static images. This same pattern is repeated in the next two expanded sections, which also concern measurement and again include shots of hands (including hands wrapped in plastic bags), feet, a toe, an eye.

The film, then, has opened with a double-panel of similar segments (“Prelude” and “Measuring and Moving Bodies”) where the static camera stays on the outside of the body and extremities, especially hands, feet, and eyes—body-features associated with the personal. Because the images of these bodily features have long been culturally coded, through painting especially, as “gestural” icons expressive of personality, even when stillled in death they suggest a person, a subject. They are, however, juxtaposed with shots of measurement and moving bodies that show them to be inert, lifeless and, in several shots, in rigor mortis. These signs of human gesture, or the personal, will not return until the penultimate segment of the film.

The pattern of veiling becomes more emphatic as the film progresses into the third section. Now, the coroners penetrate the bodies for the first time, first to extract blood samples; then follows the removal of clothing, and there are a few shots of opened bodies, although these are largely veiled from view by lab coats and are seen at the rear of the frame. Camera movement (panning shots) comes into play now in a short series of moving the bodies, seen in medium long shot. Then the section ends as a veiling of the whole image—white lab coats closing most of the frame—which slides into a split frame, when we briefly see cut-open bodies in part of the image, the white coats filling the rest.
But the first major collision (juxtaposition) of imagery occurs between the third and fourth sections. The latter begins in medium close-up, revealing a chrome circular surgical saw cutting into a skull. In a series of long-take static close-ups, the brain is removed and the camera then moves slowly to enter the skull cavity and briefly look through the eye sockets from behind. Brakhage then veils the scene with a series of shots of clothes and coats, but returns to renewed work on the open skull followed by an extreme close-up of scissors cutting what is soon recognizable as a rib cage. He cuts to a shot showing the internal organs exposed and beginning to be removed—all in extreme close-up. Then the camera withdraws.

The first emphatic camera movement of the film is that of the camera’s entrance into the skull cavity; the second is the withdrawal ending the section. Since Brakhage is shooting with a hand-held camera, there are frequent slight movements, and he reframes slightly or pans to follow the gurneys. But generally the shots are uniformly steady and brief, the cutting carrying the rhythm, so that these two moving-camera shots gain noteworthy expressive force as a strong response to the most traumatic sights. In this section, these two camera movements occur at points of penetration of the body: the first, involving the skull, uses forward movement answered by white-veiling shots; the second, the exposed and evacuated torso, is answered by the camera’s emphatic withdrawal.

This concluding withdrawal is, in turn, juxtaposed with a repeat of the head procedure in the next section, the fifth. This time the procedure is taken from its start: the coroner’s hand forcibly peels the back of the entire scalp over the face to expose the naked skull. Then comes a series of quick, extreme close-ups of cutting, followed by a medium shot of the body entirely opened, the organs already removed, and the flesh peeled all the way back. This in turn is followed by a series of white clothes and coats, and the covering of the body. The alternations/ opposings in the three registers proposed here—veiling, juxtaposition, and camera movement—generate the formal pattern of the rest of the film, although, as I shall explain, the patterning undergoes variations. But we have already entered far enough into the fabric of the film so that the differences between it and surrealism, the abattoir film, and the body film can be made evident.

As I suggested above in connection with surrealist aesthetics, the abattoir film shows us the unseeable because of a cultural forbiddeness, a gruesomeness that transgresses codes of decorum that concern animal bodies. But the abattoir film is often redeemed from simple outrage, as is Frampton’s, by a moral purpose that converts disturbing surrealist “seeing as” into humane allegory. By pointing up our everyday inhumanity as carnivores, the documentary spectacle of animal slaughter readily becomes an allegory of human slaughter. Whatever the provocations films like Blood of the Beasts initially produced, their absorption into the “sober discourses” was swift. The body film is similarly given to allegorization, the body in such films being given over to either positive or negative mythification.

The collision of the body and abattoir film in The Act of Seeing transforms each, turning them away from allegory, for a reason exemplified by the skull segment described above. In this sequence we are involved in the act of seeing that with which we see—the eyes and the brain, whose cavity, always a hidden place, the camera now penetrates. This is a supremely strange, literal confrontation between our act of seeing and the body’s means of seeing. For Brakhage, for whom vision is so importantly corporeal, the image he has taken here is the literal image of his artistic imagining: the seat within the body of vision itself.

Why Brakhage chose to place this most disturbing sequence near the start of the film is apparent. For it is here that he inscribes in the toughest and most cruelly intimate way one could imagine the common fact of our common seeing and makes it literally public. Our shock here when the camera approaches the eyes from behind is the shock of a horrible recognition. It is especially emphatic when in the act of watching any film that we do literally see (or even more richly, imagine ourselves to see) from that mysteriously infinite and imaginary zone behind our eyes. Brakhage’s film makes us visit that very place, in an act of seeing now become a literal, unimaginable vacancy. Many critics have said there is no way to “show death” in a film (see, for example, Russell), but The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes compels us, through this penetration into the physical site of vision, to confront this universal and final vacuity of death. “Showing death” in the sense the critics mean scarcely matters anymore when there is no seeing. And what we see here is death of the means of seeing.

When Brakhage returns to the skull procedure, now witnessed from the start, the effect is compounded: pulling the face over the skull radically denies the face. It is a final negation of personality that comes before the skull is penetrated. But we see it here later, and, in a sense, it is the image of Frampton’s “last stand of individualization,” the face. What we saw moments before in the skull was death’s end of the paradox of what is at once common to us all and ours alone, the contents of our skulls. What we see now is something else over and done with—for we see the end of a unique personality’s sign, the face literally effaced in death. This supremely gruesome long take of the face-peeling is followed by rapid shots of cutting into the lower body and the proleptic shot of the evacuated torso.

The next section continues with work on the torso of a woman, beginning with a cut of the skin and then, elliptically, shots of the inner cavity exposed. The dimming of light as Brakhage closes the lens aperture of his camera shifts color values, slowly pulses, and picks up the dark blood reds. Brakhage then cuts to the whites of coats and clothes. This segment develops the accentual juxtaposition between white and red, as the body now emphati-
cally becomes flesh. Another body is now opened up, more quickly, followed by a segment of water being pumped into the corpse, and then shots of a draining pump outlet, pulsing red and white liquid. It is followed by white coats and cloths again, as the bodies are moved out. In this sixth section, the literal assumes some aspect of the liturgical. The effect is not symbolic, but a sign of respect and a softening underscored by the gentle pulsing rhythm of the segment. This effect is then amplified in the next passage when the camera, in a series of shots, moves emphatically among the covered and exposed bodies in a reddish light, as if this were the film’s ending. However, like the withdrawal of the camera noted above, this moving-camera passage, although longer, is another segment-marker. It is followed by an extended passage of preparing another body, a repise of the earlier measuring segment. Instead of ending, the film seems to be beginning again.

Brakhage then, in section seven, develops a montage of body parts and open bodies, using the first extended rapid cutting pattern of the film. He intercuts shots of covering, bodies being moved and lifted, coroners talking into microphones, viscera, and cutting. There are then more shots of body parts and the coroners’ hands taking samples of organs, slicing and weighing them. This long montage ends with a cut to a medium shot of an attendant dressed in luminous white with a mop, one of the few shots in which we see a living person’s face. This montage is remarkable for the use of static-camera close-ups that show the liquidity of body organs, how they quiver and reflect the light, their reddish colors. Brakhage brings his cutting into a strangely intimate relation with these visual aspects, and it is tempting (and appropriate) to call the section an awestruck song to the inner flesh.

The next, eighth, section begins with a long-expected (and dreaded) shot that Brakhage has withheld, a major vertical incision into the torso opening the whole thorax. This shot is a prelude to the last major section of the film, an accelerating montage that juxtaposes shots of an open body: very red, extreme close-up shots of cutting inside the torso; organs; shots of an old man’s fingers, ears, eye, all seeming pale grey to the point of whiteness. There follows a quick interruption of a blank white shot, then a montage of the same elements begins again and speeds up—until suddenly the camera careers toward the floor. This is the last major camera movement of the film, and a conspicuous physical response on the part of the filmmaker.

The next shot begins a series of fast zooms—the only ones in the film, and a strong variation of the opposition between moving and static camera that otherwise informs the film. These shots show the body’s removed parts, figured almost like a landscape (Geography of the Body radically revised) with liquids making the flesh glisten with light. The camera comes so close here that the body no longer appears as a recognizable human form, but merely as a series of enigmatic shapes. Then, there is a cut to a held shot of an old man’s face and, finally, to a door closing. But for a brief coda, the film is over.

This last montage, the longest single segment, and the film’s most stylistically assertive, is also a recapitulation, accelerating most of the stylistic motifs discussed above. But it drops veiling. In its place appear the near-white shots of the old man who recuperates the personal-gestural pathos of the dead from the start of the film and the filmmaker’s own literal fall almost to the floor with his camera. When we return to the old man, we see his grey-white face, and the last veiling in white. It is the final memorial of personality amid this montage of the flesh itself.

Recaptulating the idea of veiling, the door closes emphatically, solemnly, on this space. The morgue we see in this film is not coextensive with life. That is, it does not extend outward to the everyday but folds inward; analogously, the film is not an allegory that reaches beyond itself, but is about this. Part of the solemnity of The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes is that this is a special space of transformation: universal, for we all die, but also a space with a decided threshold. The film has transformed that space by seeing it—in the most literal, documentary fashion—from a secret, forbidden zone into a space where the body at once ceases to be human in our usual sense, yet remains compellingly human in ways that cannot be escaped or destroyed.

The last segment consists of shots showing a coroner speaking into a microphone. There are no bodies around him; we have passed to our side, the living side, of the threshold. Brakhage begins with a medium long shot, then follows with close-ups of his face, hand, chin, hips. Then the man goes to turn off the tape recorder and the film ends. We have no notion of his words, of course, since this segment is also silent, but by now the troubling refusal of the film to speak, as a documentary “should,” to explain its images, no longer bothers us. Viewers are relieved to have arrived here. Is the coroner a stand-in for Brakhage, another recorder of the dead? Probably he is that, but he is also an ideal stand-in for everyone, as Frampton’s interpretation avows; the readily imagined precision of what he is saying, his professional seriousness, and his bent stance all make him the embodiment of Nichols’s and Frampton’s figure of the witness in this film. In fact, as a coroner, that is exactly what he is—every day he goes to work, pure collective witness to death.

Notes

1. For a full theorization on this issue, see Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” Quarterly Review of Film Studies 9, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 283–300.

2. Brakhage’s position has often been considered eccentric. However, in addition to Sobchack’s study, recent histories of “visuality” in modern culture have also emphasized what Martin Jay terms “the return of the body” in Downstate Eyes: The

3. Nichols poses experimental filmmakers negatively—i.e., that they refuse the "referentiality" of the film image—and he applies this to Brakhage, implying that his films should be approached as purely formal constructs (81). However, Brakhage's could also be construed as the uncompromised pursuit of the film image as "indexical sign," to use one of Nichols's (and other film theorists') favorite terms, and one that they mistakenly use as a synonym for images that are directly referential or "realistic." In the philosopher C. S. Pierce's semiotics, from where the term comes, indexical signs prescribe nothing necessary about "realistic" pictures, but only the direct effect of the referent's registration. Examples include a bullet hole in a wall or a medical symptom registered on the surface of the body. Brakhage's whole-body account of filmmaking and vision conforms more closely to Piercean indexes than does the more familiar realistic "picture"—image. Cinema verité's hand-and-eye stylistics, dependent upon the immediate responsiveness of the filmmaker to events as they unfold, partake of indexicality in Brakhage's sense as much as they do referentiality in Nicholas's sense—as in the case where the film powerfully registers a death with the camera's violent fall when its operator was shot down in a famous sequence of Pablo Guzman's The Battle of Chile (1974–79), to use Nicholas's own example (Nichols 84). Brakhage's style of filmmaking is a radical pursuit of the further implications of this indexicality.

4. Further examples might include the fiction films of Dusan Makavejev, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the late-surrealist work of Arrabal, and many documentary films, especially those made in protest against violence and environmental degradation. In addition, a whole exploitation documentary genre of "forbidden footage" arose with Mondo Cane (1963). This genre is possessed of uncommon amoral sensationalism which continues today. Mikita Brottman, in "Carnalizing the Taboo: The Mondo Film and the Opened Body," CineAction 38 (1995): 25–37, discusses this genre at length, emphasizing the most recent manifestations.

5. Once the allegorization of the abattoir and the body film is achieved, either by cultural appropriation and/or further filmmaking, the surrealist force of shock or outrage is dissipated. The films in question more or less comfortably assume a place in the "sober discourses" though not always without retaining some of their original poetic idiosyncracy. Bruce Elder’s schema amply describes the allegorization in most "body films," which he terms mythification. As an example of an actual conjuncture, the appropriation of Franju’s film doubtless prepared for the possibility that Alain Resnais could marry Holocaust footage and a "sober discourse" (indeed a powerful one by a Holocaust survivor) with his Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog, 1955). The political and aesthetic importance of Resnais’s film to documentary cinema in this respect can never be overestimated.

Works Cited


