

# Stan Brakhage

Filmmaker

1933-2003

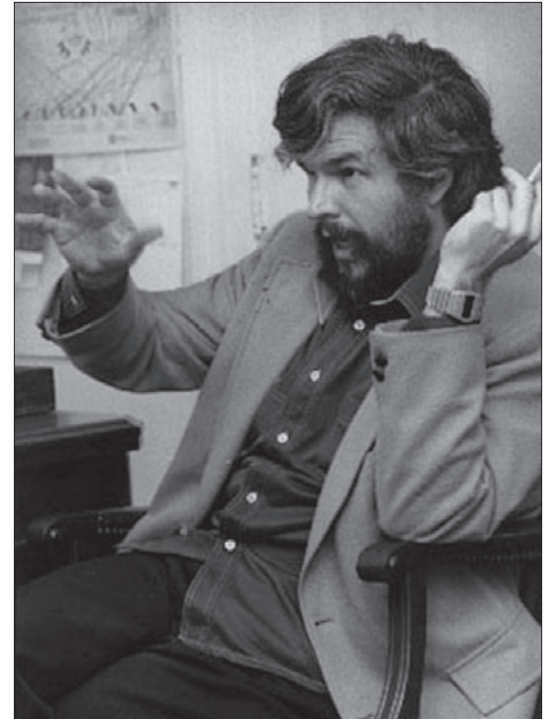
by David Conrads

He was considered the Picasso of twentieth-century experimental filmmakers. In a 50-year career of unparalleled productivity, Stan Brakhage revolutionized the field of avant-garde film. Shunning the traditional use of film as a narrative medium, he made hundreds of movies that are akin to abstract paintings that move like musical compositions. His 1964 magnum opus, *Dog Star Man*, is listed on National Film Registry of the Library of Congress as one of the most important films ever made.

Brakhage was born Robert Sanders in an orphanage in Kansas City in 1933. He was adopted two weeks later by Ludwig and Clara Brakhage, who named him James Stanley. The family moved to Denver when Brakhage was eight years old, where he attended South High School and performed on the radio as a boy soprano. His early interest in music, art, and film led to a scholarship to attend Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. He dropped out of Dartmouth after two months to make films. He made his first film, *Interim*, in 1952. Brakhage moved to New York City in 1954 and gravitated to the flourishing avant-garde art scene there. He returned to Colorado in the late 1950s, where he lived for all but the last few months of his life.

Although Brakhage disliked the term *abstract* in describing his films, he aligned himself with the abstract expressionist artists of the 1950s. His pioneering film techniques of the 1960s, including scratching on film, painting and gluing objects onto blank frames, rapid editing, swirling camera work, and deliberately out-of-focus images, put him at the forefront of the experimental film movement.

Brakhage made nearly 400 films, ranging in length from nine seconds to four hours, almost all of them silent. He was also a writer and teacher of film and film theory. In 1989 he became the first filmmaker to receive the New Hampshire-based MacDowell art colony's medal for outstanding contribution to American culture.



## Sources

Bernstein, Adam. "Stan Brakhage Dies: Artist Made More Than 350 Films." *Washington Post*, 13 March 2003.

Brakhage, Stan. *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*. Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 2001.

Moore, John. "Brakhage Discovered New Ways to Express Film as Art." *Denver Post*, 11 March 2003.

Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. London: Studio Vista, 1967.

Scott, A. O. "Stan Brakhage, Avant-Garde Filmmaker, Is Dead at 70." *New York Times*, 12 March 2003.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

© 2003

Photo: Courtesy of *The Kansas City Star*.