

Brakhage and Rilke

by Jerome Hill

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Film Culture was an American [film magazine](#) started by [Adolfas Mekas](#) and his brother [Jonas Mekas](#) in 1954. Best known for exploring the [avant-garde cinema](#) in depth, it also published articles on other aspects of cinema, including Hollywood films. It is now defunct.

Brakhage may very well be planning an eleventh *Song*. I don't know. At this time there are ten and the series is already an entity. The way they came to me,—by mail, or handed me directly by Brakhage singly or in twos and threes,—made my initiation a tantalizing and increasingly rewarding experience.

The great discipline that I had learned to admire in the work of Brakhage that I already knew is only slightly reflected in the ten *Songs* of which I am writing,—his most recent work,—a series of disarmingly spontaneous eight millimeter films of conspicuous brevity.

The French have a word "egrener" that defies exact translation. The root of it is the syllable "gren" which is akin to "grain." The first meaning is "to pick grapes off a bunch, to take seeds out of their pods." A secondary definition, "to count" or "recount" has led to its most commonly used meaning: "to tell beads, as in a rosary." The *Songs* of Brakhage are strung together like a chaplet.

One follows another with a casual but nonetheless recognizable inevitability. The word "suite" (French again, from the verb "suivre",—"to follow") has some of the same overtones. The individual parts of a Bach suite, for instance, have elements in common, comply with traditional conventions, are not fixed in number; they form, in other words, a sort of garland. They neither "relate" nor "build" in the same fashion that the movements of a symphony do.

In so many ways do Brakhage's ten *Songs* as a suite recall to me the ten *Duino Elegies* of Rilke that I feel it may clarify what I want to express to dwell for a moment on the resemblances. Without making the mistake of pushing too far the comparison between two such manifestly different works, let me first point out that they are both essentially lyric in character. Lyric, as opposed to epic or dramatic poetry, is to be read in intimacy, if possible aloud; to be read often; to be learned by heart. The *Songs*, to me who am used to viewing them in small rooms in the presence of limited gatherings, are not public statements. They address the viewer personally. Each one is over almost before it has begun. They bear many re-viewings.

The films are, of course, altogether in a lighter mood than the poems. They are, after all, songs and not elegies. But the ordered balance between foreboding and joy in the first series is as sensitive and crucial as the interplay of despair and hope in the second. Both Brakhage and Rilke, moreover, play on the equivocal emotions that partake at the same time of laughter and tears. Both men express big themes through intimate imagery. Both allude to extraneous subject matter that is not and need not be explained, so powerful is its poetic overtone. Several leitmotifs run through the *Songs* like colored threads in a texture, and yet, as in the *Duino* series, each section has its own subject matter, its own mood, its own form, and even its own technique.

Like the "Elegies," the *Songs* were conceived and partially realized in an order different from the one in which they are finally presented. They are made out of the simplest elements of Brakhage's daily life. From the very onset there is Jane Brakhage; and she is present either in image or in implication throughout. She stands in relation to this series as Rilke's "Angel" does to his. We see children at play, a wedding, a love making, a birth. We see a book, a toy, an eye, a moon, a sun, a station wagon, a light. There are rows of San Francisco houses, and people, not many, but people still, who pass in the streets. Doors and windows assume enormous importance. And there is pattern,—a flowered linoleum or carpet,—a rocky cliff seen from a moving car,—the dappled foam of the sea,—a spotted dressing gown.

Only twice do the darkly felt archetypal animals appear,—the mythical beasts that preside over so many of Brakhage's films. At one time, it is turtles and crustaceans in *Song 8*—the aqueous *Song*. At another it is the powerful symbolic rhinoceros with his life-imparting horn in *Song 9*,—the Epithalamion,—and the rhino, as if by a superior order of destiny, has the shadow of a window on his flanks!

Objects, elements, images, gestures, rhythms, events.

The humanity of *Song 1* contrasts with the abstraction of *Song 2*. After the drama of *Song 5*, the serenity of *6*. *Songs 8, 9* and *10* make a three part finale where themes stated earlier in fragment are brought to fruition.

Never does Brakhage allow one to forget the medium. The fabric of cinema shows constantly like the plaster under a Giotto fresco;—light flashes, heavy grain, exposed leader, inscribed emulsion, even an occasional midframe splice. This apparent casualness has no implication of carelessness. It is vertiginous to contemplate what a small role the laboratory has played here. These dissolves and double exposures couldn't have been planned in the relaxed atmosphere of a cutting room, later to be executed by an optical technician. Each "effect" had to be made at the time of shooting. (Eight millimeter doesn't permit A and B roll printing.) Brakhage had to remember his motion and rhythm, note his footage, wind back and shoot the material he wanted superimposed directly over it.

One has the feeling that Brakhage lives with a camera in his hand, that his viewer is tantamount to his eyes,—that the stuff of his films is the course of his life.

Let us hope that the voice of conventional criticism is never raised on the subject of these delicate poems. Reputed film reviewers these days are being very patronizing on the subject of the "cult," the "in-group," the "initiated." What would happen, one wonders, if musical criticism, for instance, were assigned to untrained, complacently tone-deaf journalists?

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