

Proposal 7

Visionary Film and the "World's Body:" Stan Brakhage and Theopoetic

Amos Wilder's 1964 article "Art and Theological Meaning" describes the necessity of openness to what he calls, drawing on filmmaker Jean Cocteau as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the "secular transcendence" or "lay mystery" in modern culture. "If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular" (Wilder 1964, 407-8). Art, for Wilder, provides the opportunity for just such a transcendence-in-immanence, for the work of the artist is enmeshed in the "primordial givens" of human sensation and desire — phenomena already containing the seed of transcendence. In *Theopoetic* (1976), Wilder again draws attention to the ability of the arts to immerse the subject in a "heightened awareness of the elements of perception," uniquely disclosing the "wonder of what is immediately presented to consciousness in touch, sight, and sound" (Wilder 1976, 4). For Wilder, a robust "aesthetic" must always be rooted in what he calls the "World's Body," a phrase taken from the poet John Crowe Ransom — in embodied, sensory engagement with the real world in its wondrous complexity (Wilder 1957, 261-8).

As an example of art which engages with the World's Body in the mode of mythopoeisis, wonder and the "primordial givens" of aisthesis, I propose consideration of the work of prolific American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1933-2003). Brakhage scratched, painted, hand-processed, and experimented in every conceivable way with celluloid in order to give the film-viewer a new set of eyes — eyes transfixed and transformed by beautiful, lyrical explosions of light and colour. The rapidly moving shapes and figures of his most abstract works approximate what he called "closed-eye vision" — what we see on the inside of our eyelids when we shut them tight. Brakhage's experimental films offer the possibility of a world that "shimmers" with mystery, beauty and wonder.

Brakhage's "representational" films explore autobiographical images of birth, childhood, nature, sex, and being-in-the-world with a prelapsarian naivete; his more abstract creations penetrate beyond natural forms to cascades of light and colour. In his films, the "visionary" (Sitney, 2002) possibilities of the filmic medium are pushed to the very limit — without actors, script, soundtrack, what is left is pure light.

For Wilder, "heightened awareness" of the world through art opens onto apocalypse, the realm of theopoetic exploration — an unveiling of transcendence where myth and imagination are surer guides than scientific or "existential" theologizing. An important implication of theopoetics is thus that the "sublime, unbaptized sensuous imaginative talents and works" of artists are necessary in order to prophetically "ferment" theology (Wilder 1964, 413); openness to art's baptismal immersion in the 'secular' world of aisthesis prevents docetism, the ministrations of "a spurious and phantom Christ (410) Brakhage's filmic visions may perplex and frustrate. Yet what I see in Brakhage's films is the possibility of a new way of seeing — in Wilder's terms, an apocalyptic eye, that 'lifts the veil' on the World's Body in order for us to see the "glory and freshness" in each created form.