

**Freedom of Expression:  
John Coltrane, Stan Brakhage and the American Avant-Garde, 1957-67**

**Brett Kashmere**

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in  
The Department  
of  
Film Studies**

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## ABSTRACT

Freedom of Expression:  
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Brett Kashmere

During the early 1960s American avant-garde jazz and cinema gained ascendancy in many of the same urban centres but their coterminous development has been under-recognized by jazz and film scholars alike. Despite the fact that numerous filmmakers have represented or incorporated elements of improvised jazz in their work, leaving enduring traces of influence and fruitful collaboration, a gap remains in the comparative literature. Reasons for this lack of interdisciplinary crossover may include a difference of signification between image and sound, and the perceived opposition between the open, performative spontaneity of jazz and the closed, mediated film. Inter-cutting cultural history with formal, stylistic, textual and comparative analysis, I attempt to resolve these issues by opening a “dialogue” between two leading architects of the postwar avant-garde: jazz saxophonist John Coltrane (1927-1967) and filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1933-2003), focusing on work they produced between 1957 and 1967. Some of the questions to be addressed are: How do social and cultural forces shape artistic forms? How does the improvising artist navigate between harmony and chaos? What is the relationship between improvisation and composition? How are Brakhage’s films and Coltrane’s music similar, and what do these similarities tell us about their social, political and cultural contexts?

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At the outset I wish to acknowledge my deepest gratitude to John Coltrane and Stan Brakhage for the countless hours of challenge, wonder and delight. May your restless spirits find comfort in the joy your work brings to this world every day.

Secondly, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee. I was fortunate and privileged to have Mario Falsetto as my advisor. Throughout the various stages of research, writing and re-writing he provided patient guidance, careful reading, helpful suggestions and access to prints of Brakhage films – essential to a full understanding of the intricate making. Mario's thorough knowledge and exuberant passion for the American avant-garde cinema continue to inspire students to engage and interact with this rich, living tradition.

Richard Kerr, who introduced me to the films of Stan Brakhage while I was an undergraduate student at the University of Regina, has kept me employed – in various capacities – over the course of my studies. It was in his classroom where I first saw Brakhage's *Elementary Phrases* (made in collaboration with Phil Solomon) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*. That screening – still as vivid in my mind's eye as any projection since – was a life-changing event; from that point on I have happily devoted almost all my energies to the study, exhibition and creation of experimental film. Thanks to the efforts of Richard and Mario I also had the opportunity to witness Brakhage's humour, generosity and intellect first hand. In fact, it was during his visit to Montreal in January 2001 that Richard – through the coincidence of Ken Burns' *Jazz*, which was airing the same week – first aligned Brakhage and Coltrane in my imagination.

Thank you to the third member of my committee, Charles Ellison, whose musical insights, thoughtful comments, and boundless good will made this a much stronger thesis.

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Thanks to my parents David and Dianne, and my sisters, Jodi and Stacey for their unconditional love and support.

Finally, I am forever grateful to this thesis for providing me the freedom of time and flexibility of schedule to get to know Astria Suparak, who has since become my wife.

This thesis is dedicated to my life/love and “song,” (in the Brakhagian sense), Astria.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am devoting my life to what is inappropriately called “The Experimental Film” in America, because I am an artist and, as such, am convinced that freedom of personal expression (that which is called “experiment” by those who don’t understand it) is the natural beginning of any art... (Brakhage 1963a: n.p.).

I want to broaden my outlook in order to come out with a fuller means of expression... I’ve got to keep experimenting. I feel that I’m just beginning (Coltrane with DeMichael 53).

This thesis examines parallel strategies, tendencies and techniques between two leading architects of America’s postwar avant-garde – jazz saxophonist John Coltrane and filmmaker Stan Brakhage – focusing on work produced from 1957 to 1967, a period of great creativity for both. Besides being a time of intense social conflict and upheaval, resulting in widespread cultural innovation, these years frame Coltrane’s progress as a bandleader; they also outline a remarkable and prolific interval of Brakhage’s career. Over this ten-year span Brakhage completed more than fifty films, an impressive feat considering the economic disadvantages of personal filmmaking, while Coltrane recorded enough music to fill over fifty albums!<sup>1</sup> During this time they emerged as leading experimentalists in their respective disciplines, producing complex, diverse corps of historical significance and bursting originality.

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<sup>1</sup> Coltrane’s unique contract with Impulse! Records, signed in April 1961, allowed him to record extensively. According to his producer Bob Thiele, “Coltrane’s Impulse contract was the best deal any jazz musician had received except for [Miles] Davis.” In addition, “Coltrane was given complete artistic control” (Porter 1998: 190). Unreleased Coltrane material was still being issued up to the time of this writing, even though the musician died in 1967. In conjunction with Coltrane’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Impulse! finally put out *The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording* in October 2001. The same month Fantasy Records released a “new” seven-disc compilation of music entitled *Live Trane: The European Tours* on the Pablo label.

## **Explanation of the Title**

The title “Freedom of Expression: John Coltrane, Stan Brakhage and the American Avant-Garde 1957-67” was selected for several reasons. As the epigraphic quotations suggest, both artists placed special emphasis on individual expression and experimentation. Although Coltrane and Brakhage were primarily concerned with personal exploration and discovery, their musical and filmic investigations have had widespread cultural implications. Always in search of new ways to express themselves through their mediums, they broke new ground in postwar art. By going to both artistic and emotional extremes, Coltrane and Brakhage each excited harsh criticism from the mainstream establishment for the future benefit of their fellow practitioners.

Despite their proclivity towards personal expression and experimentation, the work of Coltrane and Brakhage also reflect similar cultural symptoms of the postwar period, a point I wish to underline with the specific time frame. The call for freedom was an aspect that united postwar cultural producers across disciplines. Painters, musicians, filmmakers, dancers, poets, social philosophers and political activists all sought to disrupt the 1950’s restrictive codes of behaviour and hypocritical moralism through increased spontaneity, interaction and sensuality. Following World War II artists acted out their societal frustration through bold, energetic works. In the world of jazz, album titles like Sonny Rollins’ *Freedom Suite* (1958), Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1960) and Max Roach’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960) demonstrate the importance “freedom” had on the collective African-American psyche. Springing up in coffee houses, artists’



lofts, bookshops and libraries, “free jazz” circumvented the commercial music industry, liberated melodic improvisation from restrictive chord structures, and eliminated the hierarchies of bebop. Film experimentalists likewise sought freedom from the economic restrictions, divisions of labour, linear narrative expectations and glossy veneer of Hollywood cinema. As Jonas Mekas wrote in *The Village Voice* in February 1959, what America needs, apropos Hollywood and European art cinema, are “less perfect but more free films” (1972: 1).

The postwar desire for individual freedom was engendered by the sociocultural context of the 1950s. An increase in America’s teenage population following World War II produced a generation gap and changes in adolescent lifestyles. Youth emerged as a distinct group with a unique culture. In response to the geo-political paranoia of the 1940s and early 1950s (prompted by Cold War militarization, House of Un-American Activities Committees witch-hunting and its anti-Communist adjuncts), the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s was an era marked by freedom rides, peace marches, political rallies, sit-ins, antiwar demonstrations, student strikes, Woodstock, “Days of Rage,” art happenings and so on. The sexual revolution, the growth of student activism and the emergence of a counter-culture signalled a generational transition in lockstep with the avant-garde’s aesthetic explorations.

### **Methodology**

As a guiding assumption I believe art reveals moral, social and historical truths. The nineteenth-century modernist ideal of art for art’s sake is, unfortunately, difficult to

reproduce or apply in today's interdisciplinary, hyper-textual media environment. Therefore this thesis utilizes a multidisciplinary approach that engages the fields of cultural studies, American studies, comparative literature, film studies and jazz studies in a socio/aesthetic comparison of Brakhage's films and Coltrane's music. Inter-cutting formal, stylistic and textual analysis with cultural history I seek out contextual meanings beyond Brakhage and Coltrane's artistic discoveries.

I draw my analytical framework from different sets of interlocking literature: Recent interdisciplinary cultural studies of postwar art, music and improvisation, bringing together Daniel Belgrad, W.T. Lhamon, Dick Hebdige, Lewis MacAdams and others; two anthologies of jazz scholarship edited by Krin Gabbard, *Representing Jazz* (1995) and *Jazz Among the Discourses* (1995), which reconsider jazz outside of traditional critical models; a bounty of secondary sources, in particular P. Adams Sitney's and R. Bruce Elder's magisterial writing on Brakhage and Lewis Porter's authoritative study of Coltrane's life and music; as well as some primary documents, including the artists' own notes, lectures, interviews, aesthetic statements and publicity images (for example, album photographs).

As a model for my comparative analysis I have selected Arthur I. Miller's book, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc* (2001). Miller proposes that Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso shared similar ideas about time, space and dimension and made analogous breakthroughs even though they never met:

While it is a truism that one can always find amazing coincidences between any two people, in the case of Einstein and Picasso the similarities in their personal lives,

working lives and creativity are uncanny and documentable. The parallels between the two during their period of greatest creativity – the first decade and a half of the twentieth century – show us much more than the common points of their own thinking. They also offer glimpses into the nature of artistic and scientific creativity and how research was carried out at the *common* frontier of art and science (1, his emphasis).

Combining the tools of art history and science with a specialized knowledge of relativity theory Miller's approach is synchronic and multi-disciplinary, framing Einstein and Picasso in a complex of events at the turn of the twentieth century. His book demonstrates how individual innovation and creativity function with the shape and contours of culture, which is also a goal of this study.

### **Significance**

During the early 1960s avant-garde jazz and cinema gained ascendancy in many of the same urban centres (notably New York, San Francisco and Chicago), but their coterminous development has been under-recognized by jazz and film scholars alike. Krin Gabbard's *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (1996) is the first full-length academic publication to critically explore overlaps and intersections between jazz and cinema in American culture. In his introduction Gabbard suggests that "the myth of jazz's autonomy has served its purpose and new myths ought to be proposed. The old myths – as well as the new ones – ought to be seen as products of particular cultural moments and ideologies" (1996: 1). This sentiment reappears often in recent jazz scholarship. Advocating a dialogical approach the musicologist Gary Tomlinson asks, "Instead of repeating such Western myths of the noncontingency of artworks why not search for jazz meanings *behind* the music, in the life-shapes that gave rise to it and that continue to sustain it?" (246, his emphasis). The jazz historian Scott

DeVeaux stresses “an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as an aesthetic object and more responsive to the issues of historical particularity” (553). Following recent lines of inquiry in jazz studies over the past decade, this thesis aims to open a “dialogue” between the jazz and film avant-gardes, employing Coltrane’s music and Brakhage’s films as a specific case study.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

One reason for the lack of interdisciplinary crossover between jazz and film studies may have to do with a difference of signification between image and sound. A number of writers, including Roland Barthes, Rick Altman, Alan Williams, Jacques Attali, John Corbett and Michael Jarrett have attempted to resolve problems of musical signification.<sup>4</sup> In jazz studies this dilemma has been recently addressed with the application of “Signifyin(g),” a concept first introduced in Henry Louis Gates’ book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Signifyin(g) is, variously and at once, a theme in certain African-American literature, an “indigenous black metaphor for intertextuality” (Gates 59) and a set of rhetorical strategies for mediating between or among texts and languages regardless of type. Robert Walser’s

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” *Image, Music, Text*, translated and edited by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1982), pp. 179-89; Rick Altman, “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound,” *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 15-31; Alan Williams, “Is Sound Recording Like a Language?” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 51-66; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), especially pp. 24-33; John Corbett, “Ephemera Underscored: Writing about Free Improvisation,” *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 217-240; Michael Jarrett, “The Tenor’s Vehicle: Reading *Way Out West*,” *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 260-282.

detailed analysis of Miles Davis' 1964 recording of "My Funny Valentine" demonstrates how Signifyin(g) can be applied to musical analysis. Walser points out that Gates' theory is useful "precisely because his goal was to create the means to deal with cultural difference on its own terms, as an antidote to theoretical assimilation by more prestigious projects" (172). Gates was careful not to delimit the usefulness of his theory, admitting "the implicit premise of [his] study is that all texts Signify upon other texts" (xxiv). The theory's strength rests in its versatility and adaptability, making it a useful tool for counteracting the problems a cross-disciplinary, interracial study like this poses.

Interpreting and writing about somebody else's (in this case, African-American) culture is always difficult, which is why I favour a self-critical perspective. Drawing upon Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bruce Ferguson's creative, poetic approaches to critical practice<sup>3</sup> I hereby offer a personalized response tied to the specificity of my knowledge and academic background, and limited to a particular perspective in space and time. However, as Ferguson demonstrates, when personal subjectivity figures too prominently it shifts the critical process out-of-focus. Waxing about his relationship to the painter Eric Fischl, Ferguson articulates the parameters of "correct" critical distance, a space that allows for both intimate (close-up) and contextual (wide angle) engagement. Correct distance allows us to un-mirror the relationship between matter and language, "to make viewers suspicious of the positive account of art as a simple reflection (which is the myth

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<sup>3</sup> See Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Other Censorship," *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), pp. 225-235; Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," *ICA Documents 6: Identity* (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), pp. 44-46; Bruce Ferguson, "Camera Ready: Snapshots of Eric Fischl," *Border Crossings* 8, no. 4 (November 1989): 70-75.

of truth)” (74). Trinh T. Minh-ha gives shape to Ferguson’s correct distance through her notion of “an *interval* that neither separates nor assimilates,” (226, her emphasis) allowing for creative interpretations, new readings, intentional mis-readings, transformation, impermanence, disruptions and exceptions.

Possessing a disciplinary, cinema-specific education in film studies and film production presents a challenge in terms of how I can write about music. I emphasize that my analysis of Coltrane’s music concentrates on my *impressions* of his strategies and approaches; whenever necessary I rely on experts to fill in additional technical information. During the research process I immersed myself in jazz literature, but to counteract my lack of technical knowledge I have selected theoretical concepts that are not specific to music *or* film. Some of the ideas that I utilize in my comparative analysis include Stephen Nachmanovitch’s “all-in-one” model of spontaneous expression; Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization and Fredric Jameson’s postmodern interpretation of Shklovsky’s formalist theories; Roland Barthes’ post-structural distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” approaches to texts; and Herbert Marcuse’s theory of sublimation, which I apply to the improvisational and self-performative aspects of Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* (1964) and Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* (1961-64).

### **Research Questions**

How do social and cultural forces shape artistic forms? How does the improvising artist navigate between harmony and chaos? What is the relationship between improvisation and composition? How does one discuss improvisation with respect to Brakhage’s

filmmaking? How is meaning introduced into Coltrane's music, and how does it signify? What factors have inhibited the comparative study of avant-garde jazz and film? How are Brakhage's films and Coltrane's music similar, and what do these similarities tell us about their social, political and cultural situations?

### **Literature Review**

Despite a breadth of critical and biographical literature Brakhage and Coltrane have seldom been considered within a wider cultural-historical framework. One of the first writers to attempt such an analysis is R. Bruce Elder, whose book *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (1998) offers another model comparative approach. Stationing the filmmaker within a history of American avant-garde poetry Elder demonstrates the close relationship between Brakhage's artistic development and major aesthetic innovations of the postwar era, including Beat poetry. Lewis MacAdams' *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant-Garde* (2001), David Sterritt's *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film* (1998), Jack Sargeant's *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (1997) and Lisa Phillip's *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965* (1995) all examine the Beat influence, and intersection with, other modes of artistic practice, including jazz and film. Using the Beats as central pivots each of these books discuss jazz, the cinematic representation of jazz and jazz musicians, and the incorporation of jazz-like forms into the film vocabulary.

Besides some ineffectual attempts to group Coltrane in with a larger avant-garde zeitgeist, no equivalent comparative study exists. Elder implies one though when he suggests that Charles Olson's

idea that a work of art, composed on the spur of the moment, without its maker being immediately aware of its meanings, could afford deeper self-revelations than intellectual self-analysis could furnish, had considerable impact on the Action Painters, the Projective Poets, and the Beat poets... the Free Jazz musicians, and... Stan Brakhage (1998: 434).

While analogies between Action Painting and jazz, and Abstract Expressionism and avant-garde film have been well established,<sup>4</sup> a gap remains in the comparative literature. To my knowledge no extended comparative study of avant-garde jazz and experimental cinema exists. It is this discontinuity that I wish to address.

Lewis Porter's book, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (1998) is the most comprehensive and accurate of several Coltrane biographies; Porter, a respected scholar and a saxophonist himself, offers new research, interviews and an extensive chronology that details every known live performance of Coltrane's career. This chronology is useful for mapping crossovers between Coltrane and Brakhage during the 1950s and 1960s. Bill Cole's *John Coltrane* (1976) delves into Coltrane's spirituality, an important aspect of his life and music. Other books include C.O. Simpkins' *Coltrane: A Biography* (1975) and

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<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Kagan, "Improvisations: Notes on Jackson Pollock and the Black Contribution to American High Culture," *Arts Magazine* (March 1979): 96-99; Chad Mandeles, "Jackson Pollock and Jazz: Structural Parallels," *Arts Magazine* (October 1981): 139-141; Mona Hadler, "Jazz and the visual Arts," *Arts Magazine* (June 1983): 91-101; Mona Hadler, "Jazz and the New York School," *Representing Jazz*, edited by Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 247-259. See also Charles Boultenhouse, "Pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist Film," *Filmwise* 1 (1962): 26-27; P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially pp. 195-199.



J.C. Thomas' *Chasin' the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane* (1975); Brain Priestley's *John Coltrane* (1987); Eric Nisenson's *Ascension: John Coltrane and his Quest* (1993); and Ashley Kahn's *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (2002). Simpkins and Thomas' formal biographies include primary research but they also contain numerous factual errors and considerable mythmaking, while Nisenson works mainly from secondary sources. Kahn's *A Love Supreme* is a valuable study of the album's production, historical context and legacy. LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* (1963) and *Black Music* (1967), Ben Sidran's *Black Talk* (1971) and Frank Kofsky's *Black National and the Revolution in Music* (1970) apply sociopolitical analyses to Coltrane's work. "Coltrane on Coltrane," a short personal statement published in *Down Beat* in 1960, is a good introduction to the musicians' influences and aesthetics at a pivotal point in his artistic development.

Porter's book is also notable for the depth of its musical analysis. Zita Carno, in two landmark essays published in *Down Beat* in the fall of 1959, writes eloquently and insightfully about Coltrane's early musical style. Ekkehard Jost's *Free Jazz* (1974) offers clear technical insights into Coltrane's playing with separate chapters on his modal and avant-garde periods. In order to gain a greater technical perspective on his music I also consulted several books on improvisation. Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994), Derek Bailey's *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (1980), Stephen Nachmanovitch's *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts* (1990), and Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Improvisation and Interaction* (1996) were valuable sources of information. Berliner's

book is the most complete study on the process of jazz improvisation written to date. Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* (1998) discusses improvisation in a variety of postwar activities, including Beat poetry, bebop jazz, experimental dance and Action Painting, among others.

*Metaphors on Vision* (1963), a statement of Brakhage's aesthetics and *Brakhage Scrapbook* (1982), a collection of his letters, articles and other written statements, form a useful initiation to the filmmaker's practice and theory. Dan Clark's *Brakhage* (1966) offers the first extended critical analysis of Brakhage's work, covering every film from *Interim* (1952) to *The Art of Vision* (1961-65). P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974), a full-length study of the key figures and genres of America's avant-garde cinema between 1943 and 1978, offers an impressive Romantic interpretation of Brakhage's films up to *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967-70). Besides Sitney's influential formal and stylistic analysis a number of different perspectives and conceptual approaches have been applied to the filmmaker's work. Jerome Hill, Fred Camper and Guy Davenport wrote a number of highly subjective, idiosyncratic essays for *Film Culture* in the 1960s. Also noteworthy is Annette Michelson's 1973 article, "Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura," which employs a comparative methodology to explicate personal and formal analogies between Brakhage and the Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein. Gerald Barrett and Wendy Brabner's *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources* (1983), combines a biographical sketch, a critical survey, film descriptions and an extensive bibliography. Subsequent books have added sociopolitical considerations to the literature, including David James' *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*

(1989), Dana Polan's *Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* (1985) and Patricia Mellencamp's *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism* (1990). *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences* (2002), a special issue of the *Chicago Reader*, gathers together previously unpublished letters and statements, reprinted articles, new critical essays and full colour film strip reproductions and enlargements.

### **Outline of the Study**

This thesis has two interrelated goals: the first is to suggest parallels between Coltrane's music and Brakhage's films through a comparative formal and stylistic analysis of their various strategies, tendencies and techniques; the second is to search out the sources and meanings of these equivalences through a consideration of their social and cultural contexts. No artist creates entirely within a vacuum. As LeRoi Jones writes in his essay "Jazz and the White Critic," "The catalysts and necessity of Coltrane's music must be understood as they exist even before they are expressed as music" (1967: 19). To examine the various socio/aesthetic correlations between Coltrane and Brakhage as thoroughly as possible I have divided my study into four parts.

To establish a contextual framework I begin by devoting attention to the social and artistic forces that shaped America's postwar avant-garde. Chapter One, "Notes from Underground: The American Avant-Garde 1957-67," opens with a brief overview of key social and political facets of the American 1950s and 1960s such as the introduction of new technologies, racial strife, the rise of Black Revolutionary politics, repeated assassinations, and the Vietnam War. Interweaving cultural history and formal analysis I

examine the interrelated nexus of bebop, Beat literature, Abstract Expressionism, avant-garde film, the New American Cinema and free jazz.

Chapter Two, “Free Association: Comparing John Coltrane’s Music and Stan Brakhage’s Songs,” summarizes several of the factors motivating my comparative analysis (i.e. spirituality, experimentation, Romanticism, rhythm) while outlining the parallel trajectory of their careers from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s. Here I introduce some of the points along which we can trace a line of shared intention between the jazz and film avant-gardes. Finally, after theorizing on the idea of jazz in Brakhage’s films, I examine the development of musical strategies and spontaneous approaches in his 8mm *Songs* (1964-67).

In the third chapter, “Playing Fast, Making Strange: Spontaneity and Defamiliarization in the Work of John Coltrane and Stan Brakhage,” I deal with formal and stylistic comparisons of their styles, tendencies and techniques. Having framed Coltrane and Brakhage within a culture of deliberate speed in Chapter One I demonstrate how their accelerated compositions, defamiliarizing strategies and first person subjectivity disrupt liberal-corporate status quos. I suggest equivalencies, for instance, between the speed of Coltrane’s playing and Brakhage’s photography and editing; the use of repetition and variation as compositional strategies; and various aspects of creative deformation in three recordings of Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things” and Brakhage’s *Anticipation of the Night* (1958).

Chapter Four, “Performing the Self: Stan Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* and John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*” is a comparative case study of these two master achievements. Aligning performance, Romanticism and autobiography, Coltrane’s album-length suite, *A Love Supreme* (1964) and Brakhage’s epic cycle, *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) synthesize and expand the artists’ deployment of spontaneous composition, formal experimentation and first person subjectivity. Using the tools of textual analysis, I demonstrate how *Dog Star Man* and *A Love Supreme* engage in the counter-cultural politics of the 1960s.

## CHAPTER 1

### NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND: THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE 1957-67

It is a different situation in America. Anyone, in any art, who perpetuates molds, who holds onto old styles of acting, or writing, or dancing, commits an immoral act: instead of freeing men, he drags them down (Mekas 1972: 27).

Negate techniques, for film, like America, has not been discovered yet, and manipulation, in the deepest possible sense of the word, traps both beyond measuring even chances. Let film be. It is something... becoming (Brakhage 1963a: n.p.).

So then it becomes a question of destroying – of destroying the planned form; it's like an escape, it's something to do; something to begin the situation (Kline in Sylvester 156).

#### Introduction

Developments in Post-World War II American art illustrate how social transformations effect cultural production. As a microcosm of American history, the years 1957 to 1967 demarcate an era of conflict and change: the coming of television, fears of communism and nuclear anxiety, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the rise of Black Nationalism all contributed to an emerging cultural style. W.T. Lhamon points out “Style and decision quickened in American life during the 1950s,” adding “The moves performers devised to remark the hopes and fears of the fifties became and remain the common culture of deliberate speed” (xi). This “deliberate speed” can be evidenced in the rhythm, energy and tension of John Coltrane’s jazz and Stan Brakhage’s films of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Speed was an important aspect of postwar aesthetics. Much of the art of this era, from Charlie Parker’s rapidly-phrased bebop lines, to Jack Kerouac’s “spontaneous bop

prosody,” to Jackson Pollock’s “Action Paintings,” to Charles Olson’s “projective verse,” reflects the increasing pace of American life following World War II. The technological revolution that swept through American homes in the 1950s, bringing with it television sets, radios, and hi-fi record players, shaped the cycle of cultural production and consumption that continues to the present day. By 1960 nearly ninety percent of American homes had at least one television. The increased accessibility and affordability of automobiles, coupled with the construction of America’s first interstate system in the 1950s, meant that more and more citizens were able to navigate public space at a quicker and quicker pace. As Lhamon observes, “Their deliberately speeding culture was how Americans accommodated themselves in the fifties to their new world” (16).

While technological innovation was accelerating American life in the 1950s and 1960s, the nation was also experiencing deep psychological fissures. Red baiting, nuclear escalation, cold war politics, repeated assassinations, and racial strife all contributed to the heightened emotional anxiety of the postwar period. At the same time, America was fast becoming a society of conformity, rational administration and collective security. Morris Dickstein claims that

America in the early fifties was something less than an open society. The dominion of Puritanism in the arts and in domestic and social relationships existed side by side with widespread intimidation in public life, in business and in the professions. Men who had spent 30 years as movie directors, union officials, or university professors disappeared from their jobs without a trace, became unpersons, a solemn warning to others (68).

Though McCarthyism and House of Un-American Activities Committee witch-hunting were in decline by the late 1950s, their anti-Communist, cold war adjuncts continued to encourage an atmosphere of suspicion and repression, emphasizing social character over

individual personality. The perceived “missile gap,” coupled with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, positioned America on the cusp of thermonuclear war, ushering in a new current of nuclear paranoia.

As the situation in Vietnam escalated through the 1960s student masses were united in their activism, while radical splinter groups such as the Weather Underground responded with acts of civil disobedience and random violence. Besides seeing a massive portion of its youth sent to Vietnam for uncertain, unspoken benefits, the American public also witnessed a devastating string of assassinations throughout the decade: John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were all victims of the decade’s turbulent political maelstrom. The murder of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963 marked America’s first televised public tragedy. The journalist David Halberstam summarizes the shift taking place with the rise of electronic technology: “The fifties were captured in black and white, most often by still photographers [and thus twice removed from everyday reality]; by contrast, the decade that followed was, more often than not, caught in living color on tape or film” (ix). The grainy 8mm Zapruder footage that was broadcast and repeated *ad infinitum* on the collective American mind/screen remains the epochs’ enduring image, a film loop made all the more memorable by its stark, unavoidable color.

As the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Dr. King in 1968, and the police killing of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969 attest, race was an extremely charged issue of conflict in the postwar years. In a controversial 1955 U.S. Supreme



Court decision, Justice Earl Warren ordered the desegregation of America's schools with all "deliberate speed"; the prospect of racial integration, however, was anathema to the American South. In 1957 U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower had to send federal troops to desegregate Little Rock Central High School. When "Freedom Rides" were organized in 1961 to test the limits of integration participants were attacked and beaten in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. When James Meredith became the first African-American student to be admitted to the University of Mississippi in 1962, campus uprisings exploded across the Southern states. As the 1960s wore on the passive-aggressive tactics espoused by Dr. King submitted to increasingly violent protest. By mid decade, militant organizations such as the Black Panthers emerged under the rallying cry of Black Power. In 1964 unplanned race riots in Chicago, Harlem and other U.S. cities, followed by even more severe riots in Watts the following year, indicated any possibility for balance between nonviolent and direct action had collapsed.

Racial tension was especially visible in the jazz community where many musicians became political spokesmen for Black Nationalism. Tired of being exploited by white club-owners and record executives on the one hand, and imitated musically by white bandleaders and musicians on the other, African-American jazz musicians sought to reclaim ownership of their expression. The development of free jazz at the turn of the 1960s, arising out of *both* aesthetic and political necessity, forms an interesting parallel with the emergence of bebop two decades earlier. LeRoi Jones notes,

The period that saw bebop develop, during and after World War II, was a very unstable time for most Americans. There was a need for radical readjustments to the demands of the postwar world. The riots throughout the country appear as

directly related to the psychology of that time as the emergence of the “new music” (1963: 210).

## **Bebop**

Bebop stands as a central reference point in the development of a spontaneous postwar aesthetic, uniting developments in literature, painting, avant-garde cinema and jazz.

Bebop developed from 1939 to 1941 in after-hours Harlem jazz clubs as a revolutionary response by young African-American musicians to the cultural appropriation and attendant economic benefit of African-American big band music and dance by the white music industry.<sup>5</sup> The alto saxophonist Charlie (Bird) Parker and the beret-topped trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie instigated and personified the bop movement by assuming a more intellectual stance than their swing counterparts. Other influential bebop musicians included the saxophonists Sonny Stitt and Dexter Gordon, the trumpeters Kenny Dorham, Fats Navarro and Miles Davis, the trombonist J.J. Johnson, the pianists Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, the drummers Max Roach, Roy Haynes and Kenny Clarke, and the bassist Charles Mingus. Stressing freedom and individuality, these musicians shifted authorial prominence from the bandleader to the soloist by downsizing the swing band of ten or more to smaller combos of four to six. Moreover the boppers placed “an emphasis on the process of creation – improvisation – rather than an emphasis on its formal end product” (Lewis 157).

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough account see Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Cf. Ira Gitler, ed., *Swing to Bop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not to Bop* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1979).

Musically, bebop was characterized by rapid tempos, complex melodies, sophisticated harmonies and irregular drum punctuations. All these factors set the music apart from the swing bands of the thirties. Belgrad points out, “In the narrower historical context, the formal differences between swing and bop embodied spontaneity’s challenge to America’s wartime corporate-liberal culture” (185). Parker’s music epitomized the challenge. Improvising over the chord changes of popular songs like George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm,” Parker performed at very fast tempos, making attempts of appropriation difficult and frustrating. This confounded listeners accustomed to the reliable dance tempos and rhythms of big band swing.

After apprenticing with Parker and Gillespie during the 1940s, Miles Davis sought to simplify bebop’s complex system of chord progressions. Working with the composer, arranger and pianist Gil Evans, Davis crafted a more restrained, muted and moodier sound, influenced by modernist composers such as Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky. By the time Coltrane joined Davis’ quintet in the mid 1950s, bebop was already codified and subsumed by a variety of new genres, including West Coast, cool and hard bop. From 1957-59, Davis and Coltrane, together with the pianist Bill Evans, began improvising over scalar modes rather than chords, creating a new style known as modal jazz.

For Coltrane “the rhythmic inner life of bop, its unending restlessness, its nervous multiplicity of phrase, shape and character... in sum, the idiom’s rich, abundant, neurotic emotionality – was becoming irrelevant” (Litweiler 89). In “Coltrane on Coltrane” the

musician refers to his insecurity with the conventional bebop rhythms: “I want to be more flexible where rhythm is concerned. I feel I have to study rhythm some more. I haven’t experimented too much with time... I put time and rhythms to one side, in the past. But I’ve got to keep experimenting” (Coltrane with De Michael 17). For Coltrane rhythmic experimentation and musical innovation were implicitly linked. However, despite his modest opinion Coltrane *was* expressing complex rhythmic ideas prior to 1960. The harpist Carlos Salzedo was an early influence on Coltrane’s fluid approach to rhythm. C.O. Simpkins notes that Coltrane owned a record of Salzedo’s *Transcriptions for Two Harps*, which he studied intensely during the mid 1950s. Like Coltrane’s unusually fast, sliding “sheets of sound,” “The music of the harp is sweeping and continuous like waves of the ocean,” (Simpkins 70). Lewis Porter writes that in the late 1950s Coltrane was already beginning to “experiment dramatically with fractured and irregular rhythms” and with polyrhythms, the use of two or more rhythms simultaneously (1998: 214). The polyrhythmic irregular phrasing of drummer Elvin Jones opened doors for enhanced rhythmic exploration with attendant melodic advances.

Coltrane looked for ways to thicken the rhythmic texture of his work... The growing rhythmic complexity of his music, his adaptation of African rhythms, and his encouragement of Elvin Jones’ polyrhythms, led by late 1965 to the elimination of strict time-keeping in his groups. In doing so, Coltrane helped create a new rhythmic basis for jazz (Porter 1998: 214).

## **The Beats: In-Between**

Tracing bebop's development, the Beat literary movement began near the end of the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> Its primary members were Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke and John Clellon Holmes, who met around Columbia University in the mid 1940s. Along the way Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Peter Orlovsky joined the circle, which further expanded to encompass the Black Mountain poets, including Robert Creeley, as well as a community of San Francisco poets, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen among them. Wildly divergent in style and subject these writers united around formal, spiritual and moral issues, including a mutual preference for individual experience and expression, a mythic outlook, mistrust of authority and a passion for jazz. Resistance, spirituality and individuality were essential characteristics of the Beat sensibility.

The end of the 1950s saw the publication of major works by the core Beat writers, including Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and *Kaddish* (1961), which featured long poems of remarkable emotional force; Burroughs' labyrinth novel *Naked Lunch* (1959); and Kerouac's stream-of-conscious prose works *On the Road* (1957), *The Subterraneans* (1958) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958).<sup>7</sup> Ginsberg was the acknowledged leader of the Beat movement up until the time of his death in 1997, and its most political writer. His

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<sup>6</sup> For in-depth perspectives on the Beat movement see John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1992); Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels and Hipsters* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Kerouac's novels were written as many as twelve years earlier than their first publications.

criticism of the American military-industrial complex often took the form of an intra-personal dialogue. "America" (1956), for example, mixes war guilt and technological anxiety ("when will we end the human war," "Your machinery is too much for me") with a complexly ironic sense of national pride ("You made me want to be a saint"). Despite the obvious personal despair ("I can't stand my own mind"), he refuses to give up hope with American democracy, ending the poem on an optimistic note. Recognizing it is time to "get right down to the job," he concludes by accepting his cultural responsibility and position when he writes, "America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (1956: 39-43).

It is believed that Ginsberg modeled "Howl" after the long, flowing saxophone lines of jazz legend Lester (Pres) Young, a frequent character in Beat literature.<sup>8</sup> Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* brims with late-night jazz-hopping and vivid descriptions of his musical heroes, from the "behatted tenorman" (a reference to Young) to the "hotrock blackbelly tenorman" to "little grandmother's alto." Combining Ginsberg's dictum, "first thought, best thought" with a zeal for improvised jazz, Kerouac developed a stream-of-conscious, bop-prosody style. In "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" he conjoins the "jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases" and the American poet William Carlos Williams' "measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech" as

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<sup>8</sup> Young served as a basis for the protagonist in John Clellon Holmes' jazz novel *The Horn* (1953); he also appears as a minor character in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Coltrane was another of Young's admirer's: "Pres was my first real influence," he writes. "The reason I liked Lester was that I could feel that line, that simplicity" (Coltrane with De Michael 17).

analogous forms of “blowing:” a method of unedited, spontaneous composition (1958: 72).

Concerns with time and rhythm punctuate Kerouac’s prose, a further sign of bebop’s influence on his writing. Throughout *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty/Neal Cassady claims to “know time” and “how to slow it up” (1957: 252). For Kerouac, to know time is to understand the mysterious, non-verbal language of jazz. Elsewhere Cassady associates his special knowledge of time with that of his jazz heroes, forming an imaginary bond between audience and performer:

Now, man, that alto man last night had IT... He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it* – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. *Time stops*. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of the bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT – (1957: 206, my emphasis.)

Compared with Ginsberg’s soulful agitprop verse, and Kerouac’s raucous cross-country ramblings, William Burroughs’ writing seems impersonal and inaccessible. This is largely by design, as many of his literary techniques attempt to recreate the non-rational, subconscious, disconnected world of dreams. One of his pioneering strategies was the cut-up technique he learned from his friend, the American painter and poet Brion Gysin in Paris in 1960. The cut-up, which Burroughs utilized in *Minutes To Go* (1960, written with Gysin, Corso and Sinclair Beiles), *The Exterminator* (1960, with Gysin) and *Nova Express* (1964), is a method of juxtaposition in which texts – both his own and

those of other writers – are cut up and pasted back together at random.<sup>9</sup> Burroughs also initiated the related “fold-in” technique, inspired by the Surrealists’ “Exquisite Corpse” game. Throughout the 1960s he and Gysin collaborated on cut-up and fold-in experiments in many media, the most significant being a series of films done in 1965. *Towers Open Fire*, *The Cut-Ups* and *Bill and Tony* were written and narrated by Burroughs and directed by the English filmmaker Antony Balch. According to *Bomb Culture* author Jeff Nuttall, Brakhage’s disjunctive, nonlinear “birth” film (which goes unnamed, but is most likely *Window Water Baby Moving* [1959]), was an influence on Balch and Burroughs while making their film cut-ups (Nuttall cited in Sargeant 171).

Stereotyped as cultural outcasts throughout the 1950s, the Beats’ socio/aesthetic influence became more discernible in the 1960s as Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs gained critical attention and mainstream visibility. Dickstein states that,

The cultural mood of the sixties sharply challenged... impersonal authority, which was cherished by journalists, critics, and social scientists. Starting with Beat poetry and fiction, subjectivity, self-display, the Romantic thrust of the ego returned to the forefront of literary expression (121).

The Beats provide a useful paradigm for mapping aesthetic crossovers amongst a broad spectrum of avant-garde artists. For example, Kerouac’s 1958 poetry album *Blues and Haikus* featured the bebop saxophonists Zoot Sims and Al Cohn. Kenneth Patchen organized readings with jazz accompaniment around the same time, including a 1959 Living Theatre engagement led by the bassist and composer Charles Mingus. The West Coast artist Wallace Berman designed album covers for bebop records, Los Angeles film

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<sup>9</sup> For more on his cut-up technique see “William Burroughs,” *Beat Writers at Work: The Paris Review*,” ed. George Plimpton (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), pp. 10-15 especially.



festival posters, and book jackets for poet friends such as Michael McClure, Robert Duncan and David Meltzer (also a jazz critic and a musician himself). Many African-American Beat poets, including Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones, A.B. Spellman, Bob Kaufman (who co-founded the Beat literary journal *Beatitude* with Ginsberg, John Kelly, and William Margolis in 1959), Ted Joans (also a visual artist) and Calvin Hernton, used jazz as both a creative and spiritual foundation, as well as a structural model.<sup>10</sup> Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's film, *Pull My Daisy* (1958) stars the Beat writers Ginsberg, Corso and Orlovsky, the French actress Delphine Seyrig, the musician David Amram and the painter Larry Rivers (who also played jazz semi-professionally), while Jonas Mekas' *Guns of the Trees* (1962) features poetic interludes by Ginsberg. By way of their multidisciplinary reach, the Beats – on both sides of the racial divide – occupied the in/visible center of the postwar American avant-garde, connecting, through association, the semi-isolated domains of jazz, literature, film and painting.

### **Abstract Expressionism**

A 1946 painting exhibition, "Homage to Jazz" – including work by William Baziotés, Byron Browne, Carl Holty, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell – indicates the influence of modern jazz on Abstract Expressionism. Within Abstract Expressionism the so-called "Action Painters," including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler and Franz Kline among others, were most akin to the Beat poets, film experimentalists, and jazz musicians in strategy and approach. Infusing their work with

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<sup>10</sup> See *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, eds. Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). See also Michael S. Harper, *Dear John. Dear Coltrane* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970).

physical presence they repurposed “the canvas as an arena in which to act, instead of a space in which to reproduce, redraw, analyze or ‘express’ a present or imagined object. Thus the canvas was no longer the support of a picture, but an event” (Rosenberg 22). Importantly, the “automatic” process that determined Action Paintings’ “allover” topography does not translate as random action without thought or intention; although performative, their painting was based on the production of finished objects, continually fluctuating between spontaneity and deliberation.

In Pollock’s breakthrough drip paintings, executed between 1947 and 1950, jazz-like elements of spontaneous composition, unframed duration, rhythmic line and tightly constructed, quickly rendered form pervade the surface. The painter Lee Krasner, Pollock’s wife, describes that while painting he “would get into grooves of listening to his jazz records – not just for days – day and night, day and night for three days running until you thought you would climb the roof... Jazz? He thought it was the only other really creative thing happening in this country” (Krasner in Du Plessix and Gray 51).<sup>11</sup> Although Pollock and Krasner moved from Manhattan’s East Village to a Long Island farmhouse in 1945, it’s fun to imagine the youthful artist returning to his 8<sup>th</sup> Street studio after days and nights “floating across the tops of cities / contemplating jazz” (Ginsberg 1956: 9), charged with the inspiration and energy to paint.

Like Ginsberg, Kerouac and other Beat writers, Pollock sought the illusion of a continuous present by imitating the expressive energy, emotion and immediacy of bebop.

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<sup>11</sup> This comment echoes the avant-garde painter, filmmaker and kinetic sculptor Len Lye’s remark that jazz is “the best popular art form we’ve got” (Horrocks 410).

Elder identifies a similar “timeless present” in Stan Brakhage’s films. Like the viewer of a Pollock canvas, “Spectators of a Brakhage film are fascinated spectators, absorbed completely in the given moment; they occupy a realm without any temporal extension, for in it everything exists in a timeless present” (1989: 279). Annette Michelson also notes this element, maintaining Brakhage was the first to achieve “the sense of a continuous present, of a filmic time which devours memory and expectation in the presentation of presentness” (37). Although impartial to jazz, Brakhage actively encouraged his comparison to Abstract Expressionism, providing an interpretive schema for his work that was free of literary associations.<sup>12</sup> This was tied to his larger project of separating visual perception from descriptive language. David Sterritt points out that, “Brakhage seeks immersion in... mystery via strategies he has developed... for baffling the intellect and cultivating a ‘knowledge foreign to language’” (135). Brakhage explains he was

strongly drawn to the Abstract Expressionists – Pollock, Rothko, Kline – because of their interior vision... To me, they were all engaged in making icons of inner picturisation, literally mapping modes of non-verbal, non-symbolic, non-numerical thought. So I got interested in consciously and unconsciously attempting to represent this (Brakhage in Ganguly 21).

Juxtaposing a frame from Brakhage’s *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961) with a reproduction of de Kooning’s “Woman with a Green and Beige Background” (1966) Sitney illustrates the material relationship between Brakhage’s flat, hand-painted surface and the compressed visual field of Abstract Expressionist painting (1979: 152). In

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<sup>12</sup> See James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994).

“Pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist Film” Charles Bouldenhouse establishes a parallel between Brakhage’s erratic hand-held camera movements and Pollock’s loose, gestural brush stroke. Kerry Brougher likewise notes that “Brakhage’s hand-held, roving camerawork dissolves the grounded, fixed camera of Hollywood productions, making the camera a fluid, mobile eye more directly related to that of the painter of abstraction” (90). The desire to deconstruct and transcend Hollywood forms and conventions such as illusionistic shooting and editing styles, deep focus and naturalistic acting, along with the influx of European artists, writers and filmmakers around the time of World War II, catalyzed American independent cinema at mid-century.

### **Avant-Garde Cinema**

The filmmaker, film organizer and avant-garde polemicist Maya Deren was one of the first in America to position experimental film as an “amateur” alternative to Hollywood, with its cumbersome technology and labour practices. She argued that only by circumventing the professional world of trained specialists, careful divisions of labour and financial motivations could a filmmaker fully realize the medium’s potential.<sup>13</sup> Her work also served as an aesthetic bridge between European Surrealism and American avant-garde cinema. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), co-directed with her husband, the Czech documentary filmmaker Alexander Hammid, was as an example for early films by Sidney Peterson, Curtis Harrington, Ian Hugo, Kenneth Anger and Brakhage.

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<sup>13</sup> See Maya Deren, “Amateur vs. Professional,” *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 45-46.

Other important filmmakers to emerge during this formative period include Marie Menken, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, Robert Breer, Bruce Baillie, Stan Vanderbeek, Bruce Conner, Jonas Mekas and Shirley Clarke. Menken was an early pioneer of the first person strain that exploded during the late 1950s. Portions of her *Notebook* (1962), a compilation of material dating back to the late-40s, predate Brakhage's first person films. Jacobs' *Blonde Cobra* (1962) and *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-63) are wild, gritty improvisations featuring whimsical performances by Jack Smith, while Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), photographed by Jacobs on expired film stock, combines camp humour, visual spectacle and sexual display. Influenced by the abstract animation of European avant-gardists Hans Richter, Viking Egging, Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye, Breer developed a single-frame technique that modulates live action and hand-drawn forms. Baillie was an early practitioner of lyrical cinema, positioning the filmmaker as a subjective first-person presence. Stan Vanderbeek, who also studied painting and calligraphy at Black Mountain College, was one of the pioneers of "cybernetic" or "expanded" cinema, a subgenre of avant-garde film initiated by John and James Whitney in the late 1940s. Alternately, his film *Science Friction* (1959), a satire of America's race to space, exemplifies the found footage genre more commonly associated with Bruce Conner, though their collage techniques differ considerably.

Well-known on the West Coast for his collage sculptures before turning to film assemblage, Conner emerged in the 1960s as a major avant-garde filmmaker. His films *A Movie* (1958), *Cosmic Ray* (1961), and *Report* (1963-67) – a deconstruction of John F. Kennedy's assassination – appeared during the initial emergence and explosive expansion

of the post-Maya Deren underground film movement. *A Movie* is a montage of found materials culled from various sources including war documentaries, nudie films, old westerns and disaster footage, assembled in a rapid collage to Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. It premiered in 1958 on the opening night of Conner's second show of assemblage sculptures at the East/West Gallery in Fillmore, California. The fact that *A Movie* was included in a sculptural exhibition is significant, because at that time art museums and galleries did not commonly screen films. In 1958 this novel use of public art space played a major role in the fusion of art and film audiences that would determine the future success of underground cinema.

Following the more freewheeling artist-run galleries of the late 1950s and early 1960s, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art and Minneapolis' Walker Art Center were among the first American museums to introduce film into their regular programming. The MoMA started collecting and distributing "archival" films in the mid-30s, but didn't begin exhibiting films as art until the 1960s. In 1970 the Whitney staged New York's first major exhibit of video art and launched a New American Filmmakers Series, devoted to independent, non-commercial cinema. Meanwhile, the American Federation of Art's traveling exhibition, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, first held at the MoMA in May 1976, crystallized film's place in American art museums. As the catalogue states, the exhibition was developed "out of a desire to increase understanding of the art of the film, and particularly that branch of filmmaking that is concerned with the use of the medium as a vehicle for personal expression" (Van Dyke 9).

With the integration of cinema into fine arts institutions in the United States, the gap between conventional, modernist categories of “art” and “film” began to close and a new hybrid vocabulary was created, manifested in the “artist film” and “video art.”<sup>14</sup> Beginning in the 1960s artists working in traditional mediums such as painting, photography and sculpture started to make their first audio-visual works, including Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Carolee Schneemann, Hollis Frampton, Dan Graham, Paul Sharits and others. As a result the late 1960s and early 1970s saw an increased dematerialization of the art object, de-emphasizing the importance of the medium in art making.<sup>15</sup> Informed by Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Earth Art, Body Art, and other ephemeral art practices, the accent shifted from the self-contained object to process, performance and language. This trend can be considered as a reaction against the modernist purism of critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg on the one hand, and the commodification of art on the other. Due to factors unique to the medium, film emerged as a perfect vehicle for realizing this project. Mechanically reproducible and therefore less marketable as a commodity, film is also difficult to view at home because of its material fragility and expensive, specialized technological apparatus. Uniquely, film can also contain numerous art forms at once, such as painting, sculpture, performance, music and photography.

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<sup>14</sup> Although it falls outside the range of this essay, it’s important to note that video art emerged in the late 1960s with the development of Sony’s Portapak, the first camera-recorder combination priced at a level accessible to individuals and independent organizations.

<sup>15</sup> See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

The artist-run gallery became an important site for multidisciplinary crossovers during the 1950s and 1960s and its continued vitality remains one of the most significant Beat legacies. Many of the Beat movement's seminal events took place in artist-run spaces. The 6 Gallery in San Francisco was the site of Ginsberg's famous first reading of "Howl" in 1955. Ginsberg was joined that night by the poets Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Robert Lowell and Kenneth Rexroth; Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were among those in attendance. Ferus, a West Coast gallery co-founded by the critic Walter Hopps and the artist Ed Kienholz in Los Angeles in 1957, exhibited multidisciplinary artists such as Conner, Walter Berman, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol. The same year New York's Brata Gallery and Circle in the Square hosted the first jazz/poetry performances organized by Kerouac and the musician David Amram.

### **The New American Cinema**

Bruce Conner was characteristic of the West Coast art/film synergy, wit and sensibility that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the same time, Jonas Mekas was emerging as a representative figure of the East Coast avant-garde film community. In addition to pioneering a unique style of longer-form diary filmmaking, he founded and co-edited *Film Culture*, the first American journal dedicated solely to the coverage of independent cinema; spearheaded the Film-makers' Co-operative, the Film-makers' Cinematheque and Anthology Film Archives in New York; wrote a regular column,



“Movie Journal” for the New York arts weekly, *The Village Voice*; and likely co-authored the term “New American Cinema” in 1960.<sup>16</sup>

An auxiliary development of the American avant-garde cinema, the New American Cinema Group included twenty-three independent filmmakers brought together by Mekas and Lewis Allen. Their manifesto emphasized personal expression, the rejection of censorship and “the abolishment of ‘the Budget myth’” (Mekas et al. 81-82). Rather than a cohesive collective the New American Cinema was a multidisciplinary group of New York-based artists who organized around issues of cooperation, exhibition and distribution. The lasting quality of its members’ films – including John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1958), Frank and Leslie’s *Pull My Daisy*, Lionel Rogosin’s *Come Back, Africa* (1959), Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyers, and Joseph Strick’s *Savage Eye* (1959), and Shirley Clarke’s *The Connection* (1961), an adaptation of Jack Gelber’s controversial 1958 Living Theatre production – demonstrate the strength and diversity of American independent filmmaking at the end of the 1950s.

The film critic Ken Kelman identifies two necessities underlying the New American Cinema. The first, he writes, “is an aesthetic need, born of the exhaustion of film form by mid-century.” The second is, simply and most importantly, “the need for freedom in an increasingly restrictive world” (1967: 23-24). These comments support Mekas’ belief that what America really needed, apropos Hollywood and European art cinema, were “less perfect but more free films” (1972: 1). The pursuit of personal and

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<sup>16</sup> See “The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group,” rpt. *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970): 81-82.

financial freedom that united independent filmmakers in the 1950s finds an echo within the frustrations and motivations that sparked the free jazz movement a decade later.

In addition to its economic and social affinities with free jazz, early American independent cinema – from the fractured, experimental narratives of the New American Cinema, to the cinema vérité movement in documentary film, to the first person films of Mekas, Marie Menken, Brakhage and others – exhibited a notably Beat attitude and style.<sup>17</sup> Shirley Clarke is possibly the most tangible link between Beat culture, jazz and avant-garde cinema. Many of her films feature jazz as a subject itself, a study of the surrounding milieu, or on the accompanying soundtrack. *Bridges-Go-Round* (1959), a short, kinetic kaleidoscope of New York bridges, includes a jazz guitar score by Teo Macero.<sup>18</sup> *The Connection*, a feature-length mock documentary about low-life junkies waiting to score, features real-life jazz artists Jackie McLean and Freddie Redd, who composed the film's soundtrack. *The Cool World* (1963), scored by Max Waldon with Dizzy Gillespie and Yusef Lateef, documents the fictional life of a Harlem teen-ager. *Ornette: Made in America* (1986) is an unconventional portrait of the alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman, a leading architect of the free jazz movement; *Ornette* also stars the cut-up pioneers William Burroughs and Brion Gysin.

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<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive list of Beat-affiliated films see Ray Carney, "Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film," *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*, ed. Lisa Phillips (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art and Flammarion, 1995): 190-213.

<sup>18</sup> A second version of the film features an electronic music score. Macero, by the way, produced many seminal jazz albums during this period, including *Mingus Ah Um* (Charles Mingus, 1959), *Time Out* (Dave Brubeck, 1959), *Kind of Blue* (Miles Davis, 1959), *Sketches of Spain* (Miles Davis, 1960), *Miles Smiles* (Miles Davis, 1966), *In a Silent Way* (Miles Davis, 1969), and *Bitches Brew* (Miles Davis, 1969).

## Free Jazz

Coleman released his landmark record, *Free Jazz* in 1961. The album, a double group improvisation featuring eight musicians, was paradigmatic for breaking from the traditional jazz structure of a stated theme followed by individual solos; and for expanding the intimate group size – usually four or five – particular to most bebop and post-bop jazz combos. In the wider cultural context *Free Jazz* marked one of the first conscious attempts to connect developments in jazz with the greater avant-garde movement: the original gatefold cover for *Free Jazz* featured a reproduction of Pollock's "White Light" (1954). Like Brakhage, Coleman was inevitably drawn to Pollock as a source of artistic confirmation and inspiration.

The pianists Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra, the saxophonists Albert Ayler, Eric Dolphy, Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp, the trumpeter Don Cherry, the drummers Ed Blackwell, Billy Higgins and Sonny Murray and the bassists Scott LaFaro and Charlie Haden were among the early innovators of the free jazz style. Free jazz (also referred to as "the new music," "the new thing" and "The New Black Music") is characterized by collective, rather than solo improvisation; a more explosive force of emotion; increased atonality; free rhythm; and liberation from the regimen of bar measures and time signatures. Although the term "free jazz" refers to a form in which all conventional pre-planning is supposedly set aside, black writers and jazz critics quickly adopted it as a metaphor for the black situation.<sup>19</sup> In the language of 1960s social philosophy, harmonic

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<sup>19</sup> See especially LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Black Music* (New York: Morrow, 1967; reprinted New York: Da Capo, 1998). See also Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da

freedom for jazz equated to symbolic freedom for African-American citizens. Some jazz experimentalists, such as the college-educated writer and saxophonist Shepp, were prepared for the increased political responsibility. Others like Coleman and Coltrane were uncomfortable with the role even though their music occasionally betrayed their ambivalent politics. While Coltrane was cautious about imbedding his music with allegorical subtexts (unlike Shepp, whose 1965 album *Fire Music* included the spoken word piece, “Malcolm, Malcolm – Semper Malcolm”), compositions such as “Alabama,” recorded in 1961 to honor the four young girls killed in a Birmingham church bombing, and the 1966 recording “Reverend King,” indicate the saxophonist’s empathy for the black situation.

The historian and critic Frank Kofsky was one of the few writers to question Coltrane on his political viewpoints. When asked about the correlation between Black Nationalism and free jazz during a 1966 interview, Coltrane recalled being impressed by a Malcolm X lecture he attended, agreeing that music “does express just what *is* happening” (Coltrane in Woideck 133). Other commentators have drawn a purely musical connection between Coltrane’s music and the jazz avant-garde. Ekkehard Jost traces the development of free jazz back to Coltrane’s involvement with modal improvisation. One album in particular marked Coltrane’s transition from mainstream acceptability to avant-garde extremism, the forceful *Ascension*.

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Capo, 1971); Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970).

At approximately forty minutes, *Ascension* was one of Coltrane's longest, most ambitious recordings. Inspired by Coleman's *Free Jazz*, *Ascension* is a large group improvisation featuring Coltrane's regular band (drummer Elvin Jones, pianist McCoy Tyner and bassist Jimmy Garrison) augmented by an interesting mix of hard boppers (trumpeter Hubbard, who also played on *Free Jazz*); free jazz innovators (tenors Shepp and Sanders, alto Marion Brown and trumpeter Dewey Johnson); and conservatory-trained musicians (alto John Tchicai and bassist Art Davis). Coltrane's encouragement of daring younger musicians was one of his unsung legacies; although all of the artists that performed on *Ascension* possessed strong musical pedigree and fresh approaches, most were relatively unknown outside the New York avant-garde jazz/loft scene. Despite his late arrival and immature death in 1967, Coltrane's contribution to the development of free jazz cannot be overstated. John Litweiler notes, "The new music might have stayed longer on the periphery of the jazz scene except for the personality, energy, and integrity of John Coltrane. [Unlike Coleman, Coltrane] thrived on endless public activity, and he willingly became the leading jazz revolutionary" (80).

Chaotic and indistinct on the surface, a closer listening of *Ascension* reveals a simple organizational design: individual solos based on a few chords alternate with ensemble passages, "the latter mandated to climax as crescendos in which the wind instruments freely blow" (Giddins 487). The simultaneous pairing of individual and collective improvisation creates a dense texture that partially conceals the solo performances. While the unbridled, raw emotion that such a structure encourages is *Ascension's* defining feature, as Jost points out, "this very intensity may obscure the fact

that in the piece are thoroughly traditional elements” (86). This goes for the format as well as the individual passages. For example, the atonal squeaks, growls and honks that distinguish Coltrane’s performance on *Ascension* from previous albums also obscure his reliance on themes, formulas and pet phrases. Moreover, his attempt to navigate between chaos and discipline while playing at a nearly indistinguishable pace (over two hundred beats per minute) indicates a social dimension. The desire to create patterns within fleeting and ephemeral structures was a common tendency in postwar art. As we will see in chapters three and four, the “speeding improvisation and deliberate planning” that unified American avant-garde art in the 1950s and 1960s was “inevitably starting to represent the megapolitan, geographic, and demographic development of the postwar period” (Lhamon 7).

### **Summary**

It is no accident that the two decades following World War II coincide with the most creative cultural period in American history. Art underwent massive renovations after the war, manifesting in a twenty-year period of sustained innovation and experimentation. The effects of this transformation invaded every corner of artistic production. Traces of the postwar cultural renewal can be found in the bebop of Parker, Gillespie, Monk, Davis and Bud Powell; the Abstract Expressionism of Pollock, de Kooning, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Krasner and Kline; the drawings of Cy Twombly; the projective verse of Olson and the Black Mountain poets; the spontaneous poetics of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Creeley, McClure, and LeRoi Jones; the assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg; the happenings of Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenberg and Jim Dine; the

photography of Robert Frank; the choreography of Merce Cunningham; the music of John Cage; the free jazz of Coleman, Taylor, Ayler and Coltrane; the films of Cassavetes, Clarke, Brakhage and Conner; the Living Theatre of Judith Malina and Julian Beck; and so on. The emerging aesthetic common to these and other artists during the 1950s and 1960s was an “all-in-one” model of spontaneous expression: “conception, composition, practice, and performance” as one circular motion or action (Nachmanovitch, 6). The cultural attitude expressed in the art of spontaneity was largely determined by a combination of speed, gesture, improvisation and unconscious action. As these new, more urgent forms of personal expression fought to disrupt the status quo of American corporate liberalism and “its techniques of information- and impression-management” (Hebdige 351), spontaneity became not only a guiding formal principle but also a way to absorb, interpret and reshape social phenomena.

In *The Culture of Spontaneity* Belgrad claims “A will to explore and record the spontaneous creative act characterized the most significant developments in American art and literature after World War II.” Furthermore, “The social significance of spontaneity can be appreciated only if this aesthetic practice is understood as a crucial site of cultural work” (1). A common ambition to contest mainstream values by circumventing scientific rationality and organizational integration, twin elements of the American technocracy,<sup>20</sup> can be clearly delineated in the avant-garde art of this period. Forgoing pre-planned actions and structures for the energy of the moment and direct experience, these artists

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore Roszak defines the “technocracy” as “that society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts who, in turn, justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge” (8).

pushed spontaneity and improvisation to the center of public consciousness. In this context the boppers speeding experiments can be read as both a retaliation to the cooption of jazz by white musicians, club owners and record executives, as well as a reflection of racial tensions, class conflict and urban expansion, to name a few issues.

It was this intersection of social forces and artistic necessity that led formal innovators such as Coltrane and Brakhage to craft the most political work of their careers. Coltrane's deliberate embrace of free jazz principles, embodied most forcefully in albums like *Ascension*, *Meditations* (1966) and *Interstellar Space* (1967) had political as well as aesthetic resonances. These albums reflect Coltrane's "search for an order that could encompass the disorder of his times" (Schott 358). And though Brakhage was often criticized for failing to address sociopolitical issues, he considered all of his films "political in the broadest sense of the term... for better or worse from the conditioning of my times and from my rebellions against those conditionings" (Brakhage in Ganguly 22-23). The disappointment and despair he expresses over the Vietnam War in *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1966-67), which I discuss in the next chapter, echoes the antiestablishment sentiments expressed in other art of the time, including Pollock's drip paintings, Burroughs' paranoid cut-up experiments, Ginsberg's politicized poetry and Coleman's abandonment of chord structures.



## CHAPTER 2

### FREE ASSOCIATION: COMPARING JOHN COLTRANE'S MUSIC AND STAN BRAKHAGE'S SONGS

I think that music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human being itself, does express just what *is* happening. I feel it expresses the whole thing – the whole of human experience at the particular time that it is being expressed (Coltrane quoted in Kofsky 1998: 433).

I do deeply believe that music is *not* abstract, that it's just another way of thinking. And that there are patterns which are expressed through music, which do reflect directly whatever most blunt political troubles or world crises we're either trying to survive or are perhaps trapped in (Brakhage 1982b: n.p.).

#### Introduction

John Coltrane and Stan Brakhage never met, nor did they share many common interests.

They came from different racial and social backgrounds, lived nearly two thousand miles apart,<sup>21</sup> and were exposed to different influences. It's unlikely Coltrane had any contact with American avant-garde filmmakers or the New American Cinema, despite his physical proximity. Conversely, Brakhage expressed little interest in jazz.<sup>22</sup> However,

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<sup>21</sup> Brakhage settled in the mountains above Denver in 1959, where he lived until 1986. While Coltrane spent most of the 1960s in New York, maintaining a rigorous international tour schedule, this geographical difference is less important than it would seem. Despite living in semi-isolation, three thousand miles above sea level, Brakhage travelled and lectured extensively, maintaining a strong public presence and an interest in the urban environment. *The Wonder Ring* (1955), a six-minute study of New York's now demolished Third Avenue elevated railway, reveals a wondrous, ecstatic vision of the city, while his Pittsburgh trilogy, including *eyes* (1971), *Deus Ex* (1971), and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), displays a cold, surgical view that magnifies fissures of 1960s urban development.

<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, R. Bruce Elder, a filmmaker, writer and friend of Brakhage recalls Brakhage was impressed by a clandestine live recording of Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" that Elder once sent him. Discussion with the author, February 8, 2003.

examining each artist through the lens of the other's life and work may well allow new meanings to emerge.

### **Associative Factors**

Born less than seven years apart<sup>23</sup> Brakhage and Coltrane's careers developed along a parallel trajectory, with both achieving early success in the mid 1950s. By the age of twenty-two Brakhage was an emerging star of New York's lively underground film scene thanks to a handful of remarkable films, including *Desistfilm* (1954), *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954), *Reflections on Black* (1955) and *The Wonder Ring* (in collaboration with Joseph Cornell). Before turning thirty Coltrane toured as a sideman with bandleaders Dizzy Gillespie (from 1949 to 1951), Johnny Hodges (in 1954) and Miles Davis (variously from 1955-57), gaining critical notice and notoriety<sup>24</sup> for his work with Davis' New York-based quintet. While Brakhage was reaching artistic maturation with *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) and *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), Coltrane was coming into his own on the breakthrough album, *Giant Steps* (1959) and Davis' groundbreaking record, *Kind of Blue* (1959). Both Brakhage and Coltrane completed major works in 1964: Brakhage's well-travelled epic cycle *Dog Star Man* (started in 1961) is part of the National Film Registry, and Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* is his best-selling and best-known album. These artistic overlaps, occurring almost in tandem,

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<sup>23</sup> John Coltrane was born September 23, 1926 in Hamlet, North Carolina; he died July 17, 1967 in Huntington, Long Island. Stan Brakhage was born January 14, 1933 in Kansas City, Missouri; he died March 9, 2003 in Victoria, British Columbia.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Coltrane's negative critical reception by the jazz establishment during this period see Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* (New York Pathfinder, 1998), pp. 272-78.

demonstrate how innovation and creativity function within the shape and contours of culture.

Another factor inviting comparison is the role spirituality played in the aesthetic manifestation of their emotional and corporeal energies. The musician and scholar David Such notes that, “the powerful physical energy with which Coltrane infused his performances... is congruent with his mutual interest in developing inner strength” (1992: 123). Coltrane’s “spiritual awakening,” documented in his liner notes for *A Love Supreme*, was a defining aspect of his life and music.<sup>25</sup> As song and album titles like “The Blessing” (1957), “The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost” (1965), “Dear Lord” (1965), *Meditations* (1965), *Ascension* (1965) and *Om* (1965) imply, his music embodied the struggle to articulate a universal spiritual message (Porter 1999: 259). Brakhage’s religious belief, crystallized in film titles like *The Jesus Trilogy and Coda* (2001) and *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (2002), can be traced to his aesthetic credo *Metaphors on Vision*, in which he summarizes his artistic concerns as “birth, sex, death, and the search for God” (1963a: n.p.). Like Coltrane, who claimed a belief in all religions, Brakhage was careful not to restrict his spiritual affiliation, stating

My god is existence. My god is manifest in everything; not through power but through being, through a willingness to dance with life and existence. All religions, however different, grant preeminently to man the power of the will. So that is my idea of ‘the powers that be’ ... open and willing, the will of the dancer (1968: 28).

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<sup>25</sup> See John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, Impulse GRD-155, liner notes. Coltrane writes: “During the year 1957, I experienced by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD” (1964: n.p.).

Their Romantic combination of skilful execution, formal inventiveness, visionary imagination and restless experimentation, reveals, finally, a common creative approach. Coltrane developed his signature “sheets-of-sound,” three-on-one chord technique in the mid 1950s before co-initiating a reductive, modal style of improvisation on albums such as *Milestones* (Miles Davis, 1958) and *Kind of Blue*. As a bandleader Coltrane was simultaneously moving in an opposite direction, developing a complex system of chord substitutions on *Giant Steps*. As he wrote in *Down Beat* in 1960, “I’ve got to keep experimenting. I feel that I’m just beginning. I have part of what I’m looking for in my grasp, but not all” (Coltrane with De Michael 53). In the 1960s his music became increasingly atonal, dissonant and polyrhythmic, beginning with his large collective improvisation, *Ascension* and continuing with albums like *Om*, *Meditations*, and *Interstellar Space* (1967), a series of duets with the drummer Rashied Ali. Coltrane was also obsessed with musical instruments; fluent on alto, tenor and soprano saxophones, at home he experimented with the harp, the flute, and even the bagpipes! He studied music from all over the world, prompting the introduction of non-European instruments and exotic and unusual scales into his repertoire:

I want to cover as many forms of music as I can put into a jazz context and play on my instruments. I like Eastern music... Spanish content, as well as other exotic-flavored music. In these approaches there’s something I can draw on (Coltrane with De Michael 53).

Brakhage’s idiosyncratic experimental films of the late 1950s and 1960s match Coltrane’s eclectic, individual musical expressions. By developing an impressive array of strategies and techniques for affecting a personal cinema (including fluid handheld

camera movements, rapid, unpredictable editing rhythms, superimposition and the use of abstract imagery) Brakhage severed cinema from its industrial ties by conceptualizing the filmmaker as an individual artist. Foremost among his innovations was the development of the first person camera, illustrated in films such as *Daybreak and Whiteye* (1957), *Anticipation of the Night* and *Window Water Baby Moving*. In contrast to the psychodrama, a mode that dominated early American avant-garde cinema, this technique posited the filmmaker as a conscious subjective presence. Like Coltrane, Brakhage displayed extensive technical virtuosity, photographing in 16mm, 8mm and Super 8. He was also a leading contributor to the development of direct (camera-less) cinema; besides painting on 16mm, 35mm and 70mm film stocks, he “scratched, dyed, baked, and otherwise directly intervened on the ‘sovereignty’ of the photographic” (Arthur 1995: 70). In *Mothlight* (1963) he effaced the frame’s threshold entirely by attaching moth wings, leaves and crystals to strips of clear film. His hand-painted films have subsequently extended this line of approach in multiple directions.

### **Stan Brakhage and the Idea of Jazz**

As I have outlined above, numerous factors invite comparative analysis of John Coltrane’s music and Stan Brakhage’s films. Perhaps the most transparent is Brakhage’s appreciation for music, which served as an inspiration for both his “photographic aesthetics” and his “actual editing orders” even as his “creative philosophies” were becoming “silently-orientated” (1979: 130). While early films like *Interim* (1952, soundtrack by James Tenney) and *In-Between* (1955, with music by John Cage) confirm

Brakhage's lifelong interest in experimental music and sound,<sup>26</sup> most of his films since 1955 were finished without soundtracks.<sup>27</sup> However, despite his embrace of silent film Brakhage has written and lectured at length about the relationship between music and his own work, stressing that "Of all the arts, music is closest to film" (Brakhage in Ganguly 22).

Film and music are continuity arts; they appeal each to one sense, very related, the shifting tones of sound harmonies in music is similar to coloration in film which I very early on regarded as intrinsically melodic, and ought to be answerable to each other in some kind of melodic schema. *The bottom line, I would say, is that both arts are dependent upon rhythm.* One reason, for example, that film does not translate well to video from my viewpoint is that video is like a gel. In a video transcription of a film the rhythmic aspect is deadened. *It's like asking a jazz drummer to riff on a bag of jello.* It has no cohesion (Brakhage in Higgins, Lopes and Connick 58, my emphasis).

Brakhage's comments bring his film work and jazz into closer association. As time-based, (primarily) non-literary modes of expression, both jazz and experimental film depend on rhythm for unity, development and coherence.<sup>28</sup> Since the emergence of an international avant-garde cinema in the 1920s, artists have stressed film's rhythmic

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that Brakhage was a talented child pianist and boy soprano, once performing on a national radio broadcast. Later he and the composer James Tenney studied together with John Cage and Edgar Varèse for two brief periods in 1954.

<sup>27</sup> In 1988 Brakhage explained his avoidance of sound as such: "My standard for sound, which was necessary for an integral sound, were so high and the work I was doing with vision was outstripping any ability to create a sound that would go with or in relationship in any way to these images. I was not in a position to collaborate, even though I knew many electronic composers, musique concrete composers, those areas seeming to be a rich corollary for vision in film. I just didn't happen to live in tangent to any of them so that I could work with sound in collaboration. So I discovered simultaneously with several other people in the world who were having the same dilemma, that there is no reason why film has to have a soundtrack. [...] So without being against the sound possibility, I just realized that film could be silent and much freed up" (1988: n.p.).

<sup>28</sup> Although difficult to characterize, Daniel Belgrad usefully describes rhythm as "time... experienced through the body" (192).

feature. The French filmmaker and critic Germaine Dulac maintains, “the expression of a [cinematic] movement depends on its rhythm” (47). “By film I mean visual rhythm, realized photographically,” writes the German-American artist and filmmaker Hans Richter. Abstract film, he continues, “gives memory nothing to hang on. At the mercy of ‘feeling,’ reduced to going with the rhythm according to the successive rise and fall of the breath and the heartbeat, we are given a sense of what feeling and perceiving really is: a process – movement” (22). Richter’s conflation of bodily rhythms (breath/heartbeat) with cinema’s inherent pulse also permeates Brakhage’s writing. “Over the years, I have come to believe that every machine people invent is nothing more than an extension of their innards. The base rhythm of film – 24 frames per second – is sort of centered in its pulse to our brain waves” (Brakhage in Ganguly 21). The Austrian experimentalist Peter Kubelka believes that, “very few filmmakers... have departed making films from this feeling of the basic rhythm, these twenty-four impulses on the screen” (Kubelka in Mekas 1970; rpt. 2000: 291).

Rhythm has long united film and jazz artists. Len Lye’s *N. or N.W.* (1937, music by Fats Waller, Bob Howard and Benny Goodman), Harry Smith’s *Film No. 3* (1949, music by Dizzy Gillespie), Otto Preminger’s *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959, music by Duke Ellington), Hy Hirsh’s *Chasse des Touches* (1959, music by Thelonious Monk) and John Whitney’s *Catalog* (1961, music by Ornette Coleman) borrowed rhythmic cues directly from the jazz compositions they were synchronized to. As Michael Friend observes, “These films demonstrate a great affinity with the experimentalism of the modern jazz that was so frequently recruited to serve as a score” (Friend in Moritz, 7). Smith, who

spent much of the 1950s hanging out with Gillespie, Monk and Charlie Parker,<sup>29</sup> was known to project his films onto the walls of San Francisco jazz clubs “as a kind of ‘light show’” while bands performed. William Moritz reports that using a multi-speed projector “Smith could modulate the images to fit the jazz improvisations” (6). Films that display similar interaction include *Begone Dull Care* (1949), a collaboration between the animators Evelyn Lambart and Norman McLaren and the pianist Oscar Peterson; John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1958, scored by Charles Mingus); Michael Snow’s *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964, with music by Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Gary Peacock and Sonny Murray); and Joyce Wieland’s *Watersark* (1964-65, soundtrack by Carla Bley, Mike Mantler and Ray Jessel), and *Peggy’s Blue Skylight* (1964-66, scored by Paul Bley). Approximating bebop or free jazz phrasings, these films exhibit asymmetrical, fractured and syncopated rhythms.

Rhythm is considered by musicians, scholars, critics and enthusiasts alike to be the irreducible *sine qua non* of jazz. “In all the stylistic developments of jazz a capacity for rhythmic growth has been fundamental,” states the critic Martin Williams (1970; rpt. 1983: 7). Writing on improvisation the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner notes that, “Perhaps the most fundamental approach to improvisation emphasizes rhythm, commonly known in the jazz community as time or time-feel.” In the course of his research, which included interviews with over a hundred musicians, Berliner finds that effective improvisers commonly “display strong rhythmic momentum” (147). LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), a prominent African-American playwright and poet, emphasizes

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<sup>29</sup> This according to the biography posted on the Harry Smith Archives website, available at [http://www.harrysmitharchives.com/1\\_bio/index.html](http://www.harrysmitharchives.com/1_bio/index.html)



that, “Rhythmic diversity and freedom were really the valuable legacies [of bebop]” (1967; rpt. 1998: 75).

The very name bebop comes from an attempt to reproduce the new rhythms that had engendered the music... The very jaggedness and abruptness of the melodic fabric itself suggest the boppers’ seemingly endless need for deliberate and agitated rhythmic contrast... There seems to be an endless changing of direction; stops and starts; variations of impetus; a ‘jaggedness’ that reaches out of the rhythmic base of the music” (Jones 1967; rpt. 1998: 74).

Stan Brakhage’s oscillation between closely-knit, symmetrical rhythms, and unbalanced, broken, “jagged” rhythms in films such as *Loving* (1957), *Sirius Remembered* (1959) and *Window Water Baby Moving* reveals a similar rhythmic virtuosity. At times he approximates Coltrane’s polyrhythmic approach by combining two or more rhythms simultaneously (usually through multiple superimposition, such as in *Dog Star Man*, which creates counterpoint).

Brakhage was not directly influenced by jazz, but the impact of Beat-era poetry on his aesthetic development is worth noting in this context. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he formed relationships with poets like Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan and Michael McClure in San Francisco, as well as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg and others elsewhere. Their ideas, techniques and encouragement had a discernible impact on Brakhage’s films, which approximates the influence of bebop on Beat literature. McClure identifies Creeley’s interest in jazz as a potential source of Brakhage’s improvisation. As McClure states, “I don’t think Stan follows jazz and Creeley has followed jazz, and through Creeley, Stan is inheriting a sense of jazz improvisation which neatly accompanies his sense of Pollock-like improvisation” (McClure and Anker 173). Creeley, whose long prose work, *Island* was written while

listening to Bud Powell, John Coltrane (admired by Creeley for his “dissonance and fragmentation”) and Billie Holiday (Belgrad 217, 307n), forms a key associational pivot between Brakhage and Coltrane.

### **The Comparative Analysis of Avant-Garde Jazz and Film**

There are several points along which we can trace a line of shared intention between the jazz and film avant-gardes. Across the late 1950s and 1960s jazz and film experimentalists both sought to free themselves of dominant “horizontal” structures. In jazz the term horizontal refers to an improvisational structure built upon the functional harmony of a given tune, while in cinema horizontal refers to the narrative arrangement of shots and sequences. By substituting the horizontal with a “vertical” structure, musicians and filmmakers alike were initially freed from the restraints of linear development.<sup>30</sup> Describing the jazz pianist Carla Bley’s album *Escalator Over the Hill* (1968-71), Richard Cook and Brian Morton conclude that “it is more closely related to the non-linear, associative cinema of avant-garde film-makers Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas (at whose Cinematheque some of the sessions were recorded) than to any musical parallel” (142). However, as Charles Ellison points out, it should be emphasized that jazz musicians mainly strove for *omni-directional* development of musical statements:

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the cinematic distinction between horizontal and vertical development see “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler,” *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Film Culture, 1970; rpt. Cooper Square Press, 2000), 178-179. Reference is to the reprinted version. For more on modal jazz, see Barry Dean Kernfeld, “Adderley, Coltrane and Davis at the Twilight of Bebop: The Search for Melodic Coherence,” Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1981; John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958* (New York: Da Capo, 1984): 105-28.

Vertical structures such as those applied on Coltrane's *Giant Steps* initially compelled improvisers to play sequential melodic phrases of compromised spontaneous character that outlined the chords. Modal systems such as Miles Davis' "So What" (1959) and Coltrane's "Impressions" (1961) provided significant latitude for melodic development in that there were fewer clearly defined harmonic destinations to negotiate. Compositions such as Coltrane's "Om" and "Kulu Se Mama" (1965) whose harmonic base, or more precisely put, "frequency base" allowed for omni-directional development of musical narrative. The story emerges from a particular feeling, emotion or vibration. The movement was circular, simultaneously moving up, down, in and out.<sup>31</sup>

The apparent opposition between the open, performative spontaneity of jazz and the closed, mediated film complicates any comparative analysis between the two media. But as the historian Peter Steinberger points out, contrary to popular opinion "modern jazz is a rule-governed enterprise, based upon strict formal principles that govern virtually everything that happens in performance" (130). The trumpeter and bandleader Wynton Marsalis emphasizes that "Jazz is not just, 'Well man, this is what I feel like playing.' It's a very structured thing that requires a lot of thought and study" (Marsalis in Berliner 63). The musician and theorist Derek Bailey writes that "there is no musical activity which requires greater skill and devotion, preparation, training and commitment" than improvisation (xii). Like filmmaking, jazz is a discipline that requires a thorough technical understanding. Before acquiring the skills necessary to improvise intimate knowledge of the instrument and composition are essential.

Then how does one discuss improvisation with respect to filmmaking? Although improvisation is often used in film analysis to delineate a particular acting method, David Sterritt uses the term "improvised camera dances" to invoke the spirited physical impulse

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Ellison, discussion with the author, June 29, 2004.

of Brakhage's shooting technique. In this sense his filmmaking *can* be thought of as a performative art subject to coincidence and chance.<sup>32</sup> But this notion takes for granted the discipline and precision of his shooting style, in part determined by financial necessity. Brakhage's photography was consciously controlled *and* open to chance, which he refers to in his defence of *Anticipation of the Night* (1958):

I remember my first lecture at the New School [in New York City] when I spoke of creating a film 'spontaneously.' My perhaps misuse of that word communicated the inappropriate idea that I, without mind or feeling, arbitrarily blundered my way with a constantly running camera through whatever scenes presented themselves. No one seemed to understand that which I had taken most for granted, that all my histories both passive and active, with strongest release of feeling I was capable of possessing such feeling in the given moment, were the motivation for the gesture, the as spontaneous as possible gesture, of the film (1962: 72).

Like the Beat writers, Action Painters and jazz improvisers, Brakhage concentrates meaning in the individual spontaneous act, where the artist, free from logistical constraints and rational consciousness, is both agent and site of interpretation.

Meanwhile, his technical facility, "playful, compulsive experimentation," disciplined work habits and concentrated attention to structure, complete Stephen Nachmanovitch's "all-in-one" uninterrupted sequence of conception, composition, practice and performance (73).

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<sup>32</sup> I prefer to use the term "performance" as Dick Hebdige does, to describe "the execution of an artwork in any given medium." Hebdige writes, "Everything assembled here under the rubric of performance is directly, not just metaphorically, applicable to the creation, for instance, of a visual art work [including films and photographs] or a written composition" (342-43).

### **Reading Jazz in Brakhage's *Songs***

Poetry is one appropriate formal analogy for Brakhage's films; clearly, music is another. Consider, for instance, all of Brakhage's musical or sound-inspired titles: the lost film *Silent Sound Sense Stars Subotnik and Sender* (1962), *Songs 1-30* (1964-67), *Hymn to Her* (1974), *Airs* (1976), *Night Music* (1986), *Loud Visual Noises* (1986), *First hymn to the Night Novalis* (1994), *Self Song/Death Song* (1997) and so on. As he acknowledges, "I came to sense [early on] that film is a very kindred art to music" (1992: 58). And when asked, after forty years of filmmaking, what he considered most important Brakhage responded, "That I believe in song. That's what I wanted to do and I did it quite selfishly, out of my own need to come through to a voice that is comparable to song... song... is the wonder of life on earth, and I in great humility wish to join this" (Brakhage in Ganguly 23). His concept of song is rooted in an emotional connection with nature and the expression of daily life's internal rhythms, which he saw as fundamental to the creative process.

The inspiration Brakhage derived from song led him to study and build upon structures initiated in experimental music (such as those of John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Olivier Messiaen). Gerald Barrett and Wendy Brabner point out that "Brakhage thinks of his editing rhythms in musical terms, and he has remarked that he likens the splice marks to the clicking of organ keys, which musicians have learned to incorporate in their performance" (28). With his silent 30-part 8mm *Songs* Brakhage aspired to achieve a musical analogue by employing techniques such as counterpoint and theme-and-variation. As a result, several critics have employed musical

comparisons to describe the film cycle, which the title obviously encourages. Jerome Hill writes, “With Brakhage’s eight-millimeter *Song Series*, shot and edited with a deceptively simple informal spontaneity... [c]inema reveals itself at last as capable of being an expression comparable with lyric poetry and chamber music” (1966: 9). David Curtis suggests, “The irregular, non-repetitive rhythmic structures that Brakhage uses in the *Songs* show Messiaen’s influence, and the pairs of black frames may well represent the minimal unit, the importance of which is stressed in Messiaen’s rhythmic theories” (112). David James notes that Brakhage “preferred to use the word ‘arranged’ or ‘composed’ rather than ‘edited’” to describe his production method for the *Songs* (1981: 41, 43n).

The *Songs* reveal changes that were taking place in Brakhage’s working process resulting from the theft of his 16mm filmmaking equipment early in 1964. Unable to afford the replacement costs, he settled for an inexpensive 8mm home movie camera and splicer; the lightness of the camera and the simplicity of its effects (i.e. multiple exposure, single framing, slow motion) coupled with the near-impossibility of cutting and splicing the smaller, more brittle film stock, transferred emphasis away from emulating preconceived musical patterns and towards the focused uncertainty of musical improvisation. Because of the size and fragility of 8mm film stock, editing posed particular problems. His solution was to incorporate the post-production process into his actual photography, which eliminated the impulse for complex structures or expensive lab work. As David Sterritt explains,

His shift to 8-mm in the thirty *Songs* led him to replace many of his elaborate editing practices with more extensive in-camera editing and, one gathers, to place

more trust in his ability to wrest final-form footage from the activity of shooting itself. In many cases he came to see editing as closer to *selection* than to *creation* (199, his emphasis).

Composing a film in-camera requires practice, increased planning, interaction and anticipation as well as a greater potential for accidents or mistakes (which Brakhage preferred to tag “mis-takes”). In the *Songs* his in-camera editing exemplifies the spontaneous composition and irregular structural patterns of improvised jazz. David James explains that, “by the late 1960s, Brakhage’s control over the camera and especially over single framing was so supple that the editing process became largely a matter of selection” (1982: 41). Brakhage acknowledged this shift in attention, stating “There is an energy in the amount of shooting which editing again can leak out for you. What’s interesting to me is the energy of immediacy... Editing is always an afterthought” (Brakhage cited in Sterritt 200).<sup>33</sup>

By transferring energy *away* from the editing process Brakhage imbues his photography with greater excitement (witnessed in the wavering handheld camera, the sudden stops and starts, the soft focus) and emotional affect, which nicely coincides with the primary source of material: his family. The *Songs* document aspects of his daily life on an intimate scale. In loving, three-minute portrait films of his wife reading (*Song 1*), his daughters at play (*Song 4*), and the birth of his fifth child (*Song 5*), Brakhage’s presence (his breath/heartbeat) is visualized at the edges of the trembling frame.

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<sup>33</sup> This quote comes from a Film-makers’ Cooperative catalogue description for *The Text of Light* (1974), which was started several years after the *Songs*. I think the statement applies to the *Songs* just as well.

Employing the body's undulation as a source of his filmmaking, he inscribes the act of creation with the energy of the moment.

By organizing the *Songs* musically, emphasizing aleatory composition over pre-determined form, Brakhage infused his work with newfound immediacy, a performative aspect and the possibility of chance. The resulting attitude "is one of freedom... of the need for a more spontaneous and direct relationship between what is seen (or felt) and what is portrayed" (Dwoskin 152). This is further reflected in Brakhage's choice of subject matter, which wasn't limited to his family life. Sitney explains that, "In 1966, out of confusion about the Vietnam war and the American reaction to it, which he had to deal with in the question periods following his lectures on various campuses, Brakhage began to meditate on the nature of war" (1979: 210). *Song 23: 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1966-67) was his response to the situation in Vietnam. The longest film in the Song series, the 85-minute, two-part *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* inter-cuts archival footage of World War II filmed from a television monitor, text (including excerpts from Louis Zukofsky's poem, "A"), black and solid colored frames, and "home movies" of Brakhage's family and travel. Recognizable video lines mark the war footage, denoting the influx of technology as a source of home, as well as societal, tension. Other sections impose a Ben Day dot pattern over the images, making them difficult and sometimes impossible to distinguish.

The pull between showing and withholding information modulates the film's uneven rhythm. The Vietnam War is itself notably absent from the film, a lack Brakhage never fully compensates for. By avoiding any direct, visual confrontation with the reality



of Vietnam he creates a uniquely personal (and psychological) reaction to War, highlighted by footage of his own tortured writing (such as “I can’t go on”) and Freud’s Viennese home. Meanwhile the physiological stress produced by flicker effects (alteration of light and dark frames) and visible splice lines assault the viewer. An anti-war statement that is at once individual and universal, representational and abstract, confrontational and evasive, *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* connects Brakhage’s work with other postwar avant-garde movements, including free jazz, Abstract Expressionism and Beat literature.

### **Summary**

What are the factors that invite us to link Stan Brakhage and John Coltrane? Both were propelled by the will to experiment freely with individual form and style, which ultimately launched an autonomous postwar American avant-garde. As Brice Curiger remarks, “The twentieth century has clearly become the laboratory of the individual, of individual opportunities and abysses. The role of the artist by its very nature endows experiment with exemplary significance” (3). The similarities in Brakhage and Coltrane’s personal development, their spiritual and corporeal energies, their coterminous artistic discoveries, and their protean output remind us that sensitive artists do not create within personal bubbles. Social and political forces affect citizens in perceptible ways; Brakhage’s *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* and Coltrane’s “Alabama” are cases in point. The overlaps, crossovers and convergences of cultural practice allow us to make associations regardless of race, class, religion or region.

Although Brakhage was not directly influenced by jazz, the impact of bebop-inspired Beat, Black Mountain and projective poets like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Kenneth Patchen and Michael McClure, and the experimental music of composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, James Tenney and Olivier Messiaen on Brakhage's thinking imply a musical aesthetic in his work. Early in his career he found inspiration in experimental music and sound, utilizing musical analogues such as theme-and-variation and counterpoint to both organize and legitimize his filmmaking. Then, after making a switch from 16mm to 8mm filmmaking in the mid 1960s, he began to apply stochastic techniques to his actual shooting process. The result was a method that favored aleatory composition over predetermined forms, infusing his work with newfound immediacy, a performative aspect and the possibility of chance.

Whether consciously or not, I believe Brakhage's films, especially his 30-part 8mm *Song* cycle embody the spontaneous composition and irregular structural patterns of improvised jazz. In this sense the *Songs can* be thought of as a corollary to jazz music. Making this associative leap and reading jazz *into* Brakhage's *Songs*, helps us to understand the similarities that developed between his films and Coltrane's music beginning in the mid 1950s. Moreover, these similarities point to inherent parallels between experimental film and jazz.

Cinema, like jazz, is time-based. Both are characterized by time, space and rhythm; film is nothing more than music plus light. Even when projected silent, film has an inherent pulse of twenty-four beats a second that engenders a haptic effect. Film

audiences, too, have voices, are part of the celluloid's unfurling act, and often make their opinions felt, either through yawns, guffaws, commentary or gasps of amazement. Conversely, music has a visual element; the memorable, visceral physicality of live performance, in concert with album photographs, publicity stills, instantaneous televisual coverage, and archival film and video footage, produces an imaginary/image that is retained in the mind's-eye, providing listeners with a visual referent.

Avant-garde jazz and film are primarily non-linear and non-language based mediums. Eschewing horizontal structures for circular or vertical ones, modal and free jazz musicians and experimental filmmakers likewise freed themselves from the restraints of linear organization in the second half of the twentieth century. Circumventing the technocratic structures of scientific rationality, organizational integration and technical mastery these filmmakers and musicians were rewarded with greater artistic, individual and economic freedom.

## CHAPTER 3

### PLAYING FAST, MAKING STRANGE: SPONTANEITY AND DEFAMILIARIZATION IN THE WORK OF JOHN COLTRANE AND STAN BRAKHAGE

Sometime I thought I was making music through the wrong end of a magnifying glass (Coltrane in Hentoff 1976: 210).

At an extremely intensive moment, I can see from the inside out and the outside in (Brakhage in Sitney 1970: 225).

#### Introduction

In *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc* (2001) the historian Arthur I. Miller implies all of twentieth-century culture, including both art and science, began new ways of conceiving time and space. He proposes that what Albert Einstein's theory of relativity did for physics in 1905 was analogous to what Pablo Picasso's Cubism did for painting in 1907. And furthermore, what set these two apart from their colleagues in science and art, respectively, was the willingness of both men to tackle the full consequences of the newest ideas of time, space and dimension. As Miller writes,

The parallels between the two... show us much more than the common points of their own thinking. They also offer glimpses into the nature of artistic and scientific creativity and of how research was carried out at the *common* frontier of art and science (1, his emphasis).

Fredric Jameson, in his critical account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism asks, perhaps in anticipation of Miller's project, what is the relationship between synchronic methods and "the realities of time and history itself?" (x). My method for comparing Coltrane's music and Brakhage's films is based on a similar question. By framing these

artists in a complex of events existing in a limited time period, I seek out meanings beyond their artistic discoveries, in the life-shapes that gave rise to them. Once we get past how they went about developing their innovative techniques we can begin to understand why they arrived at the discoveries they did.

Like Einstein and Picasso a half-century prior, Brakhage and Coltrane were at the leading edge of time-space exploration from the mid 1950s through the late 1960s.<sup>34</sup> Coltrane's lengthy live recordings of "My Favorite Things," performed regularly between 1961 and 1967, parallel the temporal expansion of Brakhage's work beginning with the 70-minute *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and its four-and-a-half hour unfolded version, *The Art of Vision* (1961-65). While Coltrane was distending his solos to over an hour in some performances, Brakhage was one of the first avant-garde filmmakers to make feature-length work. *The Art of Vision* goes further, separating and reassembling *Dog Star Man*'s four superimposed roles into a single-track compendium of marathon length. These expanded durations tested not only their audiences' endurance but the artists' own stamina, creative (and financial) resources as well.

It is impossible to make direct correlations between the expanded durations of "My Favorite Things," *Dog Star Man* and *The Art of Vision* because of the time limitations of a long-play record, and because so much of Coltrane's music was performed live. It is possible, though, to evaluate shared intentions as well as the effects of those intentions. Coltrane and Brakhage were similar in their ability to transgress

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<sup>34</sup> As an aside, Lewis Porter claims that Coltrane "found Einstein's profound mixture of science and mysticism especially inspiring" (1998: 259).

accepted and expected limits, to break new ground, and to unearth new forms of artistic expression. The tendency to make previously known or recognizable images or musical phrases seem strange through repetition and variation or by accelerating the rate of composition is consistent throughout their work. Brakhage's fast, gestural camerawork and rapid editing in lyrical films like *Loving* (1957) and *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) correlates to the blistering "sheets of sound" technique Coltrane developed alongside Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk in the late 1950s. Playing fast and making strange, both artists blurred the distinctive space between individual shots and notes, respectively, while inscribing their own personal traces. Likewise, Coltrane's "Chasin' the Trane" (1961) and Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered* (1959) experiment with repetition and variation as compositional tactics, developing short ideas at length. Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" (1961) and Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) offer similar examples of "creative deformation," utilizing repetition, abstraction and fragmentation to estrange figurative subject matter.

**Playing Fast, Making Strange:  
Coltrane's Sheets of Sound and Brakhage's Lyrical Films**

The term "defamiliarization," which is sometimes translated as "making strange" or simply "estrangement," was coined by the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky in the 1920s to honour the process of disrupting conventional forms of literary presentation and thus habitual forms of literary experience – in his words, "to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of the perception process" (12). In literature defamiliarization comes from deviations in syntax,

grammar, narrative or point of view. Despite its literary beginnings the principle of defamiliarization is applicable to the non-literary arts as well.

For instance, defamiliarization has a tradition in jazz dating back to the 1940s when mainstream compositions like George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" (1930) were translated to the bebop idiom. As Chad Mandeles points out, "popular songs like 'All the Things You Are' [1939], 'How High the Moon' (1940), and 'Cherokee' (1938) gave form directly to be-bop melodies like Parker's 'Bird of Paradise' (1947), 'Ornithology' (1945), and 'Ko Ko' (1945), respectively" (139). Furthermore, "By the 1960s the way was open for the inspiring treatment of show tunes: Richard Rogers' 'My Favorite Things' (1959), for example, often provided a vehicle for the improvisatory skills of John Coltrane in both live performances and studio recording" (139-40). I will analyze Coltrane's various defamiliarizing treatments of "My Favorite Things" later in the chapter. First I will examine his "sheets of sound" technique.

The term "sheets of sound" was likely coined in 1958 by the music critic Ira Gitler.<sup>35</sup> It has since become critical shorthand for the rush and simultaneity of notes that regularly erupted from Coltrane's saxophone in the late 1950s, when he seemed bent on exploring the chords he was confronting from every possible angle at once. He describes his strategy in *Down Beat* in 1960: "About this time, I was trying for a sweeping sound. I started experimenting because I was striving for more individual development. I even tried long, rapid lines that Ira Gitler termed 'sheets of sound' at the time" (Coltrane with

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<sup>35</sup> See Ira Gitler, "Trane on the Track," *Down Beat* (October 16, 1958): 16-17. This is generally accepted as the first usage of the term "sheets of sound."

DeMichael 53). The technique of superimposing or stacking chords is especially evident in his solos with Davis and Monk in the late 1950s.

“If I Were a Bell” and “Countdown,” a concise, two-and-a-half minute étude released on Coltrane’s *Giant Steps* (1960), clearly illustrate his “sheets of sound” technique at the height and end of its usage. “If I Were a Bell,” recorded by the Miles Davis sextet on September 9, 1958 features Davis on trumpet, Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Julian “Cannonball” Adderley on alto saxophone, Bill Evans on piano, Paul Chambers on bass and Jimmy Cobb on drums. Around the same time, Abstract Expressionism and the Beat movement gained international recognition, art happenings were developing, John Cassavetes’ actors were “improvising” *Shadows* (1958), Robert Frank published *The Americans* (1959) in English for the first time and Brakhage was completing *Anticipation of the Night*. The number of unemployed Americans exceeded five million, tension grew in the South over the desegregation of schools, and the United States launched its first satellite into space. Technology, spurred by post-industrial innovation and economic prosperity, was speeding up American life. “Finding strategies to cope with consumer electronics united all branches of culture in the fifties,” W.T. Lhamon writes. “As Hollywood explored new structural responses to the wired home, so radio, literature, foreign films, painting, and jazz all experimented creatively with style” (23).

Coltrane’s solo on “If I Were a Bell” begins approximately three minutes in. Almost the entire passage is constructed in sixteenth notes, which means he plays double-



time (the tempo of this recording is the quarter note equals 216 beats per minute). James Lincoln Collier describes how in the mid-to-late 1950s Coltrane was “compelled to place an odd number of notes over an even number of beats [which] forced him into irregular patterns that departed widely from the basic beat” (1978: 483-84). In certain sections of “If I Were a Bell” he detours from the 4/4 time signature, integrating groups of five, seven and nine note clusters with the usual compound units of two, four, six and eight (Simpkins 75-76). In “Coltrane on Coltrane” he admits to thinking “in groups of notes, not one note at a time” (53). Zita Carno, one of Coltrane’s most sensitive and insightful early listeners, points out “the notes he plays cease to be mere notes and fuse into a continuous flow of pure sound” (11). This elision of individual notes in Coltrane’s solos is analogous to Brakhage’s plastic treatment of individual frames, which I will discuss later.

Despite the amazing clarity with which Coltrane is able to navigate through densely organized chords, his “sheets of sound” interrupt “readerly” passivity, forcing the listener to take note of his creative manipulations.<sup>36</sup> His solo on “If I Were a Bell,” for instance, sounds strange because of its irregular rhythm, which places groups of notes on accents to emphasize strong beats and long, uneven lines (similar to glissandos) in-between. As he admits, “Sometimes what I was doing clashed harmonically with the piano – especially if the pianist wasn’t familiar with what I was doing” (Coltrane with DeMichael 53). In other words, the “sheets of sound” undermine organic unity, linear development and stylistic transparency, values of the classic text as outlined by Roland

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<sup>36</sup> For more on the distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” texts, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

Barthes. Playing fast and “making strange” Coltrane creates textual disruptions that the active listener (and his fellow musicians) must acknowledge and negotiate. By the time Coltrane ends his solo around the six minute mark the theme has been so trampled, built up and forgotten that the tune becomes less a harmonic group effort than a vehicle for one musician’s experimentation with rhythm. At less than three minutes his solo also demonstrates the temporal restrictions of bebop improvisation and interaction, a limitation he began to deconstruct during his transition from sideman to bandleader in the late 1950s.

Porter notes that, “By 1959 Coltrane used the ‘sheets of sound’ more sparingly” (1998: 133). The last noteworthy examples of the technique can be found on “Syeeda’s Song Flute” and “Mr. P.C.,” from his *Giant Steps* album. However, unlike his solos with Davis and Monk from the late 1950s, Coltrane does not stack chords in any manner on *Giant Steps*. The tempo and harmonic rhythm are too fast and the chord changes too frequent to employ the “stacking” technique. The accelerated tempos and subsequent shift in style at this juncture of Coltrane’s career indicates not only his passion for experimentation and new ways of playing, but also his musical virtuosity and mental and creative keenness. For example, his deviation from bebop performance procedures, which began with the asymmetrical “sheets of sound” technique, takes a new direction on “Countdown.”

Recorded on May 4, 1959, only half a year after “If I Were a Bell” (and 16 months after the launching of Explorer I, the U.S.’s first earth satellite) “Countdown” features Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Tommy Flanagan on piano, Paul Chambers on

bass, and Art Taylor on drums. Also part of Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, "Countdown" signals a transition between his "sheets of sound" phase and his foray into free or post-bop territory. Further, "Countdown" demonstrates how broad sociocultural currents and economic pressures filter into artistic production. Richard Turner writes,

The musical revolution that John Coltrane initiated with *Giant Steps* must be viewed as part of, or at least in the context of, the Black Revolution, which began to demand nationwide attention in 1960. For just as Trane was seeking to free jazz of the confusing laws of bebop, blacks throughout the nation were seeking to free themselves of the racially oppressive laws of white America (9).

Turner's implication, that the civil rights and Black Power movements find their echo in postwar jazz, is noteworthy. On *Giant Steps* Coltrane enacts a drama of resistance and deliverance, a metaphorical subversion of musical convention in tune with the social drama of the 1960s.

Musically *Giant Steps* constituted both a dismantling of bebop traditions and a musical cul-de-sac; the exhaustion of chord changes reveals Coltrane's reliance on formulas, patterns and contrived structures to sustain his breakneck pace. On "Countdown" he plays at an extremely fast tempo; over three hundred beats per minute. James Lincoln Collier points out that, "Sometimes [Coltrane] was playing at speeds approaching a thousand notes a minute, not an impossible speed for a classically trained pianist, but unusual in jazz" (1978: 483-84). Following Art Taylor's introductory drum solo, Coltrane launches directly into his improvisation with only Taylor backing. The piano and bass enter midway through Coltrane's solo, subsequently propelling him towards the theme. In other words, the usual bebop procedure of a theme, briefly stated, followed by solo improvisations, elaborated at length, is completely reversed and

compacted here. By pinning the theme at the end and pushing the solos to the front Coltrane deviates from traditional jazz structure, impelling the curious listener to work his or her back through the piece to re-hear what Coltrane was doing earlier. This readerly activation highlights an important aspect of Viktor Shklovsky's theory: that is, by defamiliarizing ordinary things or forms, the artist may force the reader into a prolonger, active engagement with the work of art. As Victor Erlich, a scholar of Russian Formalism puts it, "The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our vision" (177). In this case Coltrane's creative deformation imbues our *listening* with agency.

Like Coltrane's solos, Brakhage's films became increasingly fast in the late 1950s, beginning with what P. Adams Sitney designated Brakhage's lyrical cinema. It is worth quoting Sitney's entire description:

The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a man looking. As viewers we see this man's intense experience of seeing. In the lyrical film, the space of the trance film, that long receding diagonal which the film-makers inherited from the Lumierès, transforms itself into the flattened space of Abstract Expressionist painting. In that field of vision, depth and vanishing point become possible, but exceptional options. Through superimposition, several perspectives can occupy the space at one time... Finally, the film-maker working in the lyrical mode affirms the actual flatness and whiteness of the screen, rejecting for the most part its traditional use as a window into illusion (1979: 142).

The twin black and white films *Daybreak and Whiteye* (released together in 1957) represent a bridge between Brakhage's early psychodramas and his more mature lyric films. In *Daybreak* a woman gets up, dresses, wanders through New York's West Side

and ends at a bridge, perhaps to commit suicide. In *Whiteye* an unseen protagonist (only his hand is evident) restlessly scans across a winter landscape from behind a window, transposing the subjective viewpoint from an on-screen character to the person operating the camera. Furthermore, *Daybreak and Whiteye* reveal the development of an individual style that foregrounds the hand-held camera as an outward extension of the filmmaker's body. Moving away from the inner psychology of *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954), *Flesh of Morning* (1956) and *Reflections on Black* (1955), Brakhage's lyrical cinema embodies Charles Olson's concept of proprioception (which Olson described as "the soul in action") by utilizing his own body as an instrument. Gerald Barrett and Wendy Brabner explain that, "The total freedom of the hand-held camera gives Brakhage great subtlety in the use of speed of movement, line of direction and repetition, and becomes part of the vocabulary of subjective perception" (27). *Daybreak and Whiteye*'s fractured, jump-cut montage, meanwhile, anticipate Brakhage's *Songs* (1964-67), with all the editing done in camera.

Expanding on *Daybreak and Whiteye*'s first-person perspective and jagged architecture, *Loving* (1957) features Brakhage's friends, the composer James Tenney and the artist-filmmaker Carolee Schneeman having sex outdoors. Conflating lovemaking with nature this five-minute colour film rapidly inter-cuts sexual footage and sweeping, gestural close-ups of foliage, leaves and branches. Sitney notes that "In *Loving* the editing is faster than anything Brakhage had done before; there are chains of shots, two, three, four and five frames long, and often as many as twenty of them form one complex movement" (1979: 143). Shot in an allover, handheld style in tight close-up, and edited to

create the illusion of a continuously unfolding present, the film skillfully constructs a single perceptual space from two distinct image sources.

Through rapid camera movement, unintelligible framing, superimposition, abridged shot lengths and inverted imagery (shots placed upside down or backwards), Brakhage's lyrical films diverge from an indexical relationship to the real world, emphasizing the tactile sensation of experience. As Parker Tyler observes, "despite its obvious subject... [*Loving*] manages to be personal, spontaneous, and noteworthy because it sustains the fundamental attitude of *inventing* with its directly photographed nature" (1971: 183). In juxtaposition, figurative images of human bodies and forest flora are suddenly defamiliarized, fusing into a brief memory-object of lovemaking. The emphasis on physical immediacy, ecstatic experience and thematic organization in lyrical films like *Loving* and *Window Water Baby Moving* can be seen as a major deviation from, or modification of, the prevailing artistic norm within the American avant-garde cinema, namely the narrative trance film.

Completed two years later *Window Water Baby Moving* documents the birth of Stan and Jane Brakhage's first child, exhibiting an array of strategies for making strange a common (though spectacular) life event. In *Window Water Baby Moving* Brakhage reconstructs, rearranges and aestheticizes the act of childbirth, in the process allowing us to see childbirth in a beautiful, nonlinear way. As the literary scholar Robert Stacy points out, "the artist familiarizes by defamiliarizing, in the sense that, if successful, he brings to our recognition a new or different or more striking vision; he renews our familiarity, or

even refamiliarizes us, with some more or less ordinary facet of reality” (49). In his close analysis of *Window Water Baby Moving*, James Peterson notes how the film “uses the facts of childbirth only as starting points, as elements of a composition, for a total form expressing a complete human experience” (57). In Brakhage’s film these “facts,” reordered, repeated and shuffled back and forth in time, become synecdochic for the entire nine-month procedure.

Employing a fresh approach to what has (since) become ordinary science film or trite home movie material, Brakhage makes the familiar appear original, heightening our awareness of the uniqueness of childbirth. This heightened awareness in turn produces a sense of wonder, inciting new and surprising reactions. As the film and video curator Astria Suparak explains,

Once while screening *Window Water Baby Moving* I was incensed by what sounded like a juvenile mockery of the gorgeous birthing sequence, coming from somewhere in the audience... When the lights went up, I discovered the source: a beefy Texan had passed out, dry-heaved and urinated on himself during the film! (Kashmere and Suparak: n.p.).

Suparak’s testimony confirms that perception is always an adventure. Audience expectations and filmmakers’ intentions seldom, if ever, meet. The space between is imagination, revealing another strength of Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization; it applies not only to the process of artistic creation, but to the process of perception as well.

### **Repetition as Composition: “Chasin’ the Trane” and *Sirius Remembered***

At the beginning of his study of Coltrane’s early musical style, the jazz scholar Barry Kernfield uncovers a contradiction in the saxophonist’s critical reception, which he distills to a single question: Is Coltrane a “Clichéd reproducer, or [an] inexhaustible creator?” (1983: 7). The first assessment, led by conservative, middle-aged critics such as Whitney Baillet, John Tynan, Ira Gitler and Leonard Feather, was overwhelmingly negative, describing Coltrane’s music as “a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend” (40). Meanwhile, younger African-American reviewers, including Zita Carno and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and the white critic Frank Kofsky, recognized in Coltrane’s sound an original approach to traditional bebop clichés. From these assessments Kernfield determines, on the basis of his own close musical analysis, that “there are at least two Coltranes, the mechanical formulaic and the imaginative motivic soloist” (1983: 59).<sup>37</sup> While scholars such as Lewis Porter have questioned this restrictive dichotomy, one aspect of Kernfield’s conclusion bears further investigation: the implicit suggestion that repetition is an uncreative and unimaginative formal gesture. As he states, “An analysis of Coltrane’s uses of repetition to achieve melodic coherence will demonstrate the existence between unimaginative and creative restatement during this period” (1983: 7).

Repetition and variation were recurring tropes in postwar American art and literature, appearing in the mass-produced Pop Art of Andy Warhol; the Minimalist sculpture of Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre; the minimal music of

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<sup>37</sup> The term “motivic” refers to the recurrence of a short, distinctive melodic figure or motif.



Steve Reich, Teddy Riley and Philip Glass; the modern dance of Lucinda Child; the flicker films of Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits; the lyrical films of Stan Brakhage; novels such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1962) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972); the poetry of Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Michael Harper and others. In "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," James Snead demonstrates why repetition can be considered a characteristic aspect of African-American music, dance and language. Snead singles out jazz improvisation as an area for analysis, pointing out that, "Without the organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since an improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat" (221). To demonstrate the complex form that repetition takes in jazz he cites the interaction between Coltrane and his drummer, Elvin Jones:

One of the most perfect exemplars of this kind of improvisation is John Coltrane, whose mastery of melody and rhythm was so complete that he and Elvin Jones... often traded roles, Coltrane making rhythmic as well as melodic statements and "cutting" away from the initial mode of the playing (221, 230n).

Implying a cinematic analogy (the "cutaway"), Snead introduces the concept of crosscutting to jazz improvisation. The cut in jazz performance "is the unexpectedness with which the soloist will depart from the 'head' or theme and from its normal harmonic sequence or the drummer from the tune's accepted and familiar primary beat." The cut is thus "an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (Snead 220). Coltrane's "Chasin' the Trane," a twelve-bar blues recorded live at New York's Village Vanguard in November 2, 1961 demonstrates Snead's concept. Featuring Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Elvin Jones on drums (the pianist McCoy Tyner

is notably absent), “Chasin’ the Trane” is a sixteen-minute endurance test, packed with “wrong notes,” awkward phrasings, overtones, squeals, honks and other curious vocalisms.

Obliterating his previous “sheets of sound” technique and foreshadowing his later duets with Rashied Ali, “Chasin’ the Trane” is a singular number in the Coltrane canon. The critic Gary Giddins describes it as “one of those crucial performances in which we can hear the subversion of a sensibility and a yearning for new worlds” (476). Repetitious, rhythmic, spontaneous and searching, the piece has no real beginning or end. “The performance is all middle, an immense tide, a transition” (Giddins 480). Dissatisfied with the rules and conventions of bebop – chords, the chorus structure, the tempered scale – Coltrane sought to destroy the genre entirely. Abandoning the formal organization of theme and individual solos, on “Chasin’ the Trane” he and Jones riff on compact phrases for the duration of the piece, trading off lead (melody) and accompaniment (rhythm) roles. Their interplay exemplifies what Snead calls the “cut” in the jazz improvisation. The result is an exciting, delirious race towards “the elusive grail of total expressiveness (Giddins 479)

Martin Williams, writing about “Chasin’ the Trane” and “Impressions” (also released on Coltrane’s 1961 *Live at the Village Vanguard* album) notes,

Both performances show that changes were taking place in Coltrane’s music. The knowledgeable vertical player had become a horizontal, linear improviser. Little melodic phrases, motives if you will, are not so much developed and resolved as

they are repeated over and over. Coltrane's approach had become frankly incantatory (1982: 228).<sup>38</sup>

Recalling the "anti-jazz" attacks of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Williams regards Coltrane's use of repetition negatively, as incantation without progression. I see it differently. "Chasin' the Trane" was a sketch, an experiment worked out in public, which saw fruition in two of Coltrane's later masterpieces: *A Love Supreme* and *Interstellar Space* (1967). Moreover, in his performance he uses repetition daringly and *creatively* by turning the phase over and making it new each time, taking it beyond what it had been, disrupting audience expectations. Giddins also considers "Chasin' the Trane" differently than Williams. "In pushing jazz orthodoxies to but not through the wall," he writes, "Coltrane employs everything he has learned in order to challenge the validity of what he has already mastered... As a jazz insider, his metamorphosis had uniquely populist implications" (Giddins 479). These comments evoke Trinh T. Minh-ha's claim that the assumptions of specialized knowledge need to be constantly scrutinized and counteracted. "The waning of the hegemonic professional ethos is a necessary condition for the emergence of new relationships and complex forms of repressive subjectivities," she writes (227).

Let us return to Snead's notion of the "cut" in black culture for a moment.

Apropos the illusions of control and progress in European culture he writes that

Black culture, in the 'cut,' builds 'accidents' into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Parker Tyler's comments regarding Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered*, which "plainly takes up the spatial metaphor by viewing an unmoved corpse of a dog in a field... the result (which might have been lyric or symphonic) being in my opinion a monotonously overexpanded rhythmic cycle of film shots on a strictly limited theme" (1972: 204-05).

'cut' attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself (220, his emphasis).

Coltrane builds mistakes into "Chasin' the Trane" through his rejection of bebop phrasing and chord structures, just as Brakhage does in the *Songs* (1964-67) with his abandonment of preconceived editing structures. In a sense both artists create dialogical systems by signifying on and distorting their own formal antecedents. As Henry Louis Gates' writes, "Signifyin(g) represents... an engagement with preceding texts so as to 'create a space' for ones' own" (124). There is nothing to say an artist cannot reshape the tropes of his or her previous "texts," tropes that are themselves part of a received tradition. As we see in the case of Williams' attack on "Chasin' the Trane" (or Tynan's "anti-jazz" denigration of Coltrane's music) critics attempt to create closures by favoring one form over another. But experimental artists such as Coltrane and Brakhage are not content with repeating themselves, or the aesthetic consistency of the "movements" in which they are placed. They are less concerned with quoting from or referencing the histories of jazz and cinema, respectively, than they were with expanding and renegotiating their own artistic vocabularies.

Then what does Coltrane's uses of repetition signify? Among other things, his use of repetition reflects the centrality of the fiery and compelling African American preacher in the African American cultural mosaic. It is a continuation of the African Americans' tendency to repeat phrases or short narrative expositions for emphasis. The tension-release aspects of repetition used in this manner effectively fuels the developing story.

If we apply the trope to his own identity – a closed self in primal flux – we can recognize repetition in the context of his numerous addictions: heroin (which he beat in 1957), drinking, smoking, sweets, he was even addicted to finding the perfect mouthpiece. To be addicted is to be caught in a certain type of repetition. Similarly I consider “Chasin’ the Trane” as a symbolic *existential* repetition – a spiral that Coltrane could not get out of. It was a vortex that pulled him closer to the harmonic freedom and open structure of free jazz, splintering apart his “classic quartet” in the process. Repetition is also a sign of the strength of his musical convictions and obsessions. As Giddins points out, “The more Coltrane limits himself... the more he seeks” (479).

Coltrane’s motivic exploration of a compact phrase without horizontal development or climax is musically equivalent to parataxis, a literary term used to describe the absence of relative or dependent clauses. Parataxis can be considered an important aspect of free jazz, which emphasizes group rather than solo improvisation while effacing the distinction between lead and accompaniment roles. Rather than a chain of individual solos backed by a rhythm section, free jazz conceives improvisation as a coterminous performance with greater interaction and equality among the musicians. This attitude was reflective of the times, and was in keeping with Coltrane’s evolving social consciousness. It is apparent musically in “Chasin’ the Trane” as well, with the emphasis on interpersonal dialogue between saxophonist and drummer.

Coltrane’s repetition and variation of short melodic phrases at length in “Chasin’ the Trane” is similarly evident in Brakhage’s lyrical cinema, especially *Sirius*

*Remembered*. Before examining his use of repetition I will briefly discuss Gertrude Stein's influence on Brakhage, whose admiration for Stein is well known. Stein's writing pushed language to the limits, often verging into literal nonsense. She treated words as objects, carefully ignoring or defying the connection between language and meaning, continually undercutting expectations about order, coherence and associations. Like Brakhage she saw consciousness as unique to each individual, as an ongoing stream, a perceptual present. And like Coltrane's phrases and Brakhage's shots, Stein's individual words defy orderly, hierarchical, rule-based organization and logical development, creating a non-linear flow of personal expression. Her use of repetition is also well known and "depends on the principle that no two elements in a literary work, even repeated elements, are ever phenomenologically identical; when an element occurs the second time it is different because it follows a previous appearance" (Elder 1998: 212). Therefore, something as simple as "A rose is a rose is a rose" abounds with possible meanings (for example, "A rose" = "arose" = "arrows" = "Eros"). As Brakhage writes,

the greatest influence [Stein] had on *Sirius Remembered* was by way of my realization that there is no repetition; that, every time a word is 'repeated,' it is a new word by virtue of what word precedes it and follows it, etc. This freed me to 'repeat' the same kind of movements... Gertrude Stein gave me the courage to let images recur in this fashion and in such a manner that there was no sense of repetition (Brakhage in Sitney 1970: 212).

Shot and edited after the completion of *Window Water Baby Moving*, *Sirius Remembered* is a lyrical meditation on the death and decomposition of the Brakhage family dog (named Sirius). Brakhage explains that he took song as the "source of inspiration for the rhythm structure" of the film, almost linking it with jazz in the process (1982: 250). He states "the structure that was dominating rhythmically would be like

jazz... no, not jazz... it would be like song, simple song, plain song – plainsong, that's what it is clearly – Gregorian chant!" (Brakhage in Sitney 1970: 212). Despite his reversal of opinion, *Sirius Remembered* does exhibit similarities to jazz music. At eleven minutes, it corresponds to the average album length of a jazz composition; it's organized according to a theme, modulating among a series of repeated patterns; and it has a swinging rhythm.

Visually the film features horizontal panning shots of the animal's decaying corpse as it lays in a field (with the camera literally swung over and across the body, as if to propel it back into motion); and vertical pans of the trees and sky of different lengths and velocities of movement, shot during the four seasons. These camera movements are often so quick as to blur and abstract the subject matter. In addition to generating the silent film's rhythmic pulse, these opposing back-and-forth camera movements cause visual tension, obscuring our ability to "make sense" of the image. This formal tactic dovetails with the aims of defamiliarization, to refresh perception and recast the familiar in an original light. Through repetition and counterpoint (achieved through inter-cutting stilled close-ups of the dog's disfigured face) we are able to complete the picture in our mind's eye, to see it "fresh," so to speak. Later, shots panning left and right, up and down are superimposed to create a polyphonous rhythm. Sitney notes, "The second half of the film elaborates an intricate harmonics as the two layers of fugue-like rhythms play against one another" (1979: 154). This point in the film evokes the contrasting rhythmic interplay of Coltrane and Jones on "Chasin' the Trane."

Sitney describes *Sirius Remembered* as “Formally... the densest of his films in the repetitive, Steinian style of *Anticipation of the Night*” (1979: 153). Elder underlines two primary features of Stein’s modernism that Brakhage makes use of: “The first is her use of simplified constructions to throw form into relief... Second... [is the recognition that we] experience every new repetition as novel, if only because it presents itself as belonging to a new moment of presence” (1998: 214-15). As with “Chasin’ the Trane,” *Sirius Remembered* features a deceptively simple, almost childlike form, which gains complexity and intensity as the duration unfolds. Indeed, duration is a key element of both works, allowing the aural and visual motifs to function almost algorithmically. By means of creative repetition “Chasin’ the Trane” and *Sirius Remembered* become constantly re-generating compositions. In these two pieces audiences are challenged by the continual, ingenious diversity of ways in which Coltrane and Brakhage refuse to use sound and image according to convention.

### **Creative Deformation in “My Favourite Things” and *Anticipation of the Night***

Reviewing “My Favorite Things” as it evolved through Coltrane’s career reveals a number of defamiliarizing strategies besides acceleration and repetition. Because the song remained in the musician’s repertoire until the time of his death in 1967 numerous live performances of the composition exist. I will compare three recordings of the song: the original fourteen minute studio recording, released on Coltrane’s 1961 album *My Favorite Things*; a fifty-six minute version released on *Live in Japan* in 1966; and his final live performance of the composition, a thirty-five minute version recorded in April 1967 and released in October 2001 on *The Olatunji Concert*.



Coltrane's first recording of "My Favorite Things" occurred on October 21, 1960, and features McCoy Tyner on piano, Steve Davis on bass and Elvin Jones on drums. The introduction of this popular Broadway show tune into the band's repertoire coincided with Coltrane's deployment of the soprano saxophone. In fact, the song provided a perfect modal conduit for his soprano playing while catering to his group's strengths.

The repetitive patterns of the piano and bass on the simplified modal structure creates a feeling of organized stasis, while the extremely active soprano and drums create the opposite effect, of change and a sense of searching. It is a creative tension Coltrane would use over and over (Porter 1998: 183).

Split into minor and major parts, the AAA'B architecture gave Coltrane two opportunities to improvise, rather than one, which was still the standard. Meanwhile, the reduced two-chord structure provided ample space and time for developing the song's familiar theme and melody. This openness of the waltz form combined with the excitement of a new instrument, a new quartet and a new improvisatory vehicle infuses his playing with inspiration and lyricism, playfulness and buoyancy. Notice, for instance, the long, swirling lines that seem to build up endlessly during his final solo before he returns to a final re-statement of the theme.

Not surprisingly, "My Favorite Things" became a popular signature theme amongst Coltrane's fans and band alike, and was performed regularly throughout the 1960s. The jazz scholar and musicologist Ingrid Monson, writing on irony and parody in jazz improvisation notices a possible level of irony and inversion in the original studio recording. She writes that, "In 1960 – a year of tremendous escalation in the civil rights movement and a time of growing politicization in the jazz community – Coltrane quite

possibly looked upon the lyrics with an ironic eye” (1994: 283). She makes specific reference to the prevalence of “white” things in the lyrics: “girls in white dresses, snowflakes on eyelashes, silver white winters, cream-colored ponies.” It is likely that the song lyrics were printed on the sheet music Coltrane brought in for the recording session. And whether intentional or not, his performance does retrospectively call to mind the popular film version of *The Sound of Music* (1966), starring Julia Andrews. The fact that African-American improvisational musicians were inter-culturally borrowing a sweet, innocent European-American children’s song at a time of racial unrest does suggest dual intentions. As Monson points out, Coltrane’s version “turns a musical theatre tune upside down by playing with it, transforming it, and turning it into a vehicle for expressing an African-American-based sensibility in such a way that even many non African-Americans prefer it to the original” (1994: 298).

It is interesting and perhaps not accidental that as political tensions escalated in the 1960s Coltrane’s treatment of “My Favorite Things” became longer, less melodic and more dissonant. John Litweiler implies a political dimension to Coltrane’s lengthy improvisations: “His cyclical structures of the 1960s are the cycles of his inner life; that is why he needed to play long solos,” Litweiler writes. “They move us so urgently because in hearing him, we recognize our own struggles against complacency, against fears, ever into life’s unknowns” (103). This observation is applicable to Coltrane’s defamiliarizing treatment of “My Favorite Things.” As Coltrane wrote *less than a month* before his first recording of the song, “I’ve found that you’ve got to look back at the old things and see them in a new light” (Coltrane with DeMichael 53). In Don DeMichael’s

article “John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer their Critics,” published in *Down Beat* in April 1962, Coltrane hints at what was to come: “when I’m playing, there are certain things I try to get done... By the time we finish, the song is spread out over a pretty long time. It’s not planned that way; it just happens. The performances get longer and longer. It’s sort of growing that way” (Coltrane in DeMichael 16).

Coltrane’s twenty-to-thirty minute compositions were considered groundbreaking in the early 1960s. Notably, he was also one of the first jazz musicians to break out of the three to five minute confines of solo improvisation. Fellow avant-garde tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp acknowledges the legacy that Coltrane’s extended solos provided subsequent generations of African-American improvisers:

That was his breakthrough, the concept that the imperatives of conception might make it necessary to improvise at great length. I don’t mean he proved that a thirty- or forty-minute solo is necessarily better than a three-minute one. He did prove, however, that it was possible to create thirty or forty minutes of uninterrupted, continually building, continually original and imaginative music. And in the process, Coltrane also showed the rest of us we had to have the stamina – in terms of imagination and physical preparedness – to sustain those long flights (Shepp in Hentoff 1996: 623).

The hour-long performance of “My Favorite Things” that was recorded during his 1966 Japanese Tour features Coltrane on soprano saxophone, Pharaoh Sanders on tenor saxophone, Alice Coltrane on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Rashied Ali on drums. Besides breaking from the linear AAA’B organization of the original, this recording demonstrates the vastly different approaches of drummers Ali and Jones. Whereas Jones kept steady time even while sustaining multiple, simultaneous rhythms, Ali plays off the beat, peppering the music with colourful accents and asymmetrical phrases. Garrison’s

playing also became more irregular and uneven following Jones' departure. After his protracted introductory solo the band enters to a rousing applause. Coltrane (the saxophonist) runs through a few variations on the theme then proceeds to explore the upper register of his horn, punctuated by some low, earthy notes. Throughout his solo segments of the melody are reintroduced in varying orders, played with, transformed and reshaped before being submerged in a progression of newly emergent sounds and ideas. However, despite being thoroughly elongated, deformed and defamiliarized, the song always maintains the distinctive character of "My Favorite Things."

The version of "My Favorite Things" performed during Coltrane's "Olatunji Concert" on April 23, 1967 is far more dissonant, dense and tense than either the studio recording or the Japanese performance. Recorded just three months before his death, the track includes the same line-up as above, with the addition of Algie DeWitt on Batá drum and possibly Jumma Santos on percussion. At thirty-five minutes it is just over half the length of the Japanese recording. This relative compactness leaves less space for the personal experimentation and development we find on previous performances; instead, individual voices are blended together into a colossal group expression that encompasses band and audience members (who are often heard screaming their approval). Rather than stretching out time, the Olatunji recording condenses the minor and major parts into an unrelenting, claustrophobic flow, taking it even further from the original song than the hour-long performances. So buried under furious waves of free improvisation are the theme and source that they become nearly indistinguishable. On this record more than any other, Coltrane's playing goes beyond notes and figuration, exchanging his inventory

of musical patterns, formulas and pet phrases for a glossary of honks, shrieks, growls and other deep-rooted, primal vocalizations. As a whole, the performance is analogous to an out-of-focus close-up; we may know what it is, but the contours are too blurred, the grain too pronounced, to identify the signs clearly.

*Anticipation of the Night* provides the most decisive examples of “creative deformation” in Brakhage’s work up until that time, expanding upon and intensifying several of the tropes found in *Whiteye*, *Loving*, *Window Water Baby Moving*, *Sirius Remembered* and his other lyrical films. The cutting is at times faster than in the aforementioned films, and the perspective is increasingly partial and fragmented. The camera movements, meanwhile, are even more rapid, swirling, jittery and ecstatic. At forty-one minutes it was also his longest film to date, and features an astonishing range of imagery and photographic approaches.

*Anticipation of the Night* illustrates the sophistication and complexity of Brakhage’s editing technique as it evolved through the late 1950s. He explains “I was hyperediting the film, that is, pitching more of the forming into the editing process than any film I had made up to that time.” (Brakhage in Sitney 1970: 202). Sitney claims the editing in *Anticipation of the Night* “challenges the integrity of the shot as the primary unit of cinema” (1979: 144), creating a parallel between Brakhage’s elision of the shot and Coltrane’s challenging the integrity of a single note. To continue the musical metaphor Stephen Dwoskin compares film editing to the work of composer, writing that “Each frame is like a note, each combination of frames is like a chord” (124). Like

Coltrane blurring notes into an almost indiscernible stream, Brakhage elides shots with a combination of plastic cutting and gestural camerawork, sometimes combining several disconnected spaces into a single unit. His image-clusters are a visual equivalent of Coltrane's sheets of sound.

Also worth nothing is the way Brakhage creates rhythmic texture and complexity in another approximation of Coltrane's interplay with his drummers Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali. In the film's opening sequence, he opposes slow and fast rhythms by juxtaposing fast moving lights at night with static shots of a "shadow man" (himself). The colliding of slow and quick movements (often worked into the camera gesture itself) is similar to how Coltrane superimposes double- and quadruple-time phrases over the steady beat of his rhythm section. Using selective focus, rapid camera gestures and fast motion photography – shots of a spinning amusement park ride seem to fly at us – Brakhage approximates a child's ecstatic experience of vision.

Coltrane's original "My Favorite Things" and Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* signify the cohesion of a personal style and a yearning for elongated structures. They are transitional compositions, testing out and honing the strategies and techniques that coalesce in their later work. Moreover, their successful realization provided each artist with the confidence to continually experiment with irregular rhythms, repetition, fragmentation, abstraction, and longer forms. As we will see in the next chapter, Coltrane's four-part *A Love Supreme* (1964) and Brakhage's epic cycle *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) encapsulate and extend the artists' deployment of defamiliarization,

spontaneity and first person subjectivity, aligning improvisation with autobiographical subject matter.

### Summary

The strategies of spontaneity and defamiliarization developed by Coltrane and Brakhage over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s reveal close stylistic parallels and shared artistic assumptions. What are the meaning and significance of their similar approaches? Furthermore, what do they reveal about the social conditions surrounding their creation? I assert that defamiliarization is not an empty formal concept outside the real historical context as some critics have claimed. The shifting, uneven velocity of compositions like “If I Were a Bell,” “Countdown,” “Chasin’ the Trane,” “My Favorite Things,” and films such as *Loving*, *Sirius Remembered* and *Anticipation of the Night* can be read in/as response to the accelerated pace of life and the Cold War anxiety that shaped and constrained the American mind in the 1950s. Although it is clear their innovations were purely artistic, as Daniel Belgrad points out, in the late 1950s and 1960s “even avant-garde artists felt the tidal pull of politics, as the broadening political spectrum held forth the promise of immediate social relevance” (259).

Brakhage claimed that, “The later half of the Sixties was a horror for me to live through, one of the worst periods of my life. A lot of this was clearly orchestrated by people in power to subvert and undermine what was a true beginning at its beginning” (quoted in Higgins, Lopes and Garcia 64). We see this beginning at play in his work of the previous decade. The socio-political realities of the mid 1950s and to the mid 1960s

were a springboard for Brakhage's confrontation of societal norms. Anti-authoritarian in nature and individual in spirit, films such as *Flesh of Morning*, *Loving*, *Window Water Baby Moving* and *Thigh Lyne Lyre Triangular* (1961) subvert conservative social taboos with their aesthetic depictions of masturbation, sexual intercourse and childbirth. By challenging the normative perspective derived from the *Quattrocentro*, *Anticipation of the Night* presents an even greater threat to the Western construction of reality and rational control; in this film he offers a new way of seeing the world that is uniquely personal, disconnected, irrational, occasionally out-of-focus and often speeding.

While it is clear Coltrane did not record "Countdown" because the United States launched the Explorer satellite into space the previous year,<sup>39</sup> the formal estrangement of his "sheets of sound" technique, his hyper-repetitive 1961 performance of "Chasin' the Trane" and his later, expanded performances of "My Favorite Things" do signify on aspects of a nation divided by war, repeated assassinations, and political and racial strife. By "making strange" their material, in the process violating conservative norms and organizational status quos, both Coltrane and Brakhage reclaim, in the words of Fredric Jameson, "a way of restoring conscious experience, of breaking through deadening and mechanical habits of conduct... and allowing us to be reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror" (51).

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<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, Coltrane *did* record a song titled "Satellite," a variation on "How High the Moon," in 1960.



## CHAPTER 4

### PERFORMING THE SELF: STAN BRAKHAGE'S *DOG STAR MAN* AND JOHN COLTRANE'S *A LOVE SUPREME*

It's a reflection of the universe. Like having life in miniature. You just take a situation in life or an emotion you know and put it into music. You take a scene you've seen, for instance, and put it to music (Coltrane in DeMichael 52).

I took images as I could, according to feeling. So that as I've trained myself to hold this camera so that it will reflect the trembling or the feeling of any part of the body; so that it is an extension, so that this becomes a thing to ingather the light... (Brakhage 1963a: n.p.).

#### Introduction

In addition to being visionary creators and peerless innovators, John Coltrane and Stan Brakhage were both dedicated practitioners. Their drive to discover new ways of hearing and seeing, new possibilities of feeling, and new forms of expression are manifested in their rigorous training. Coltrane's daily practice ritual, during which he would rehearse method books such as Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (1947), began at 9 a.m. and ended at 4:30 p.m. At night he would sometimes practice silently, "just running his fingers over the keys" (Hentoff 1976: 212). Likewise, Brakhage would often wander through his home all day with an empty film camera, working out the control of his gestures and suppleness of movement. These obsessive routines combined with their passion for endless experimentation readied Brakhage and Coltrane for two of their greatest achievements: the epic film, *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) and the devotional album, *A Love Supreme* (1964).

Completed at the end of 1964, *A Love Supreme* and *Dog Star Man* share a similarity of form and purpose. Both were made during periods of artistic and personal transition; both are structured as four-part suites, employing several shared gestures (personal inscription, superimposition, theme-and-variation motifs); both transform personal subject matter to communicate universal messages; and both have autobiographical and Romantic underpinnings.

The concept of the self-reliant Romantic artist, operating free from convention outside the boundaries of mainstream culture binds Brakhage and Coltrane together. Brakhage writes, "*Of necessity, I become instrument for the passage of inner vision, through all my sensibilities, into its external form...* In other words, I am principally concerned with revelation" (1963b: 99, his emphasis). As Coltrane contends, "There are always new sounds to imagine, new feelings to get at... we have to keep on cleaning the mirror" (Coltrane in Hentoff 1966: n.p.). Several commentators have identified Coltrane's quest for a personal voice as one of the defining features of his music. Lewis Porter states that Coltrane used music "to express profound spiritual moods" (1985: 53). In this sense, "He was breaking new ground emotionally in jazz... Certainly his music is, at the least, intense, urgent, and fiercely passionate" (Porter 1998: 139).

In the context of the 1960s post-industrial technocracy, this kind of raw, honest spiritual expression was considered revolutionary in some circles. While military-industrial power structures attempted to maintain a Cold War pretense of national consensus and collective security, left wing intellectuals like Norman Mailer, Herbert

Marcuse, Paul Goodman, Norman Brown, Theodore Roszak, LeRoi Jones, Ishmael Reed, Albert Murray, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis and Mari Evans sought to negate conservative control by championing the counter-culture. The literary critic Lionel Trilling's rehabilitation of Romanticism in the 1960s was part of this increased politicization of postwar culture. Trilling's criticism was a primary source for the post-revolutionary skepticism in which the key terms were irony, paradox, ambiguity and complexity. His ideology was strongly committed to the ideal of individual imagination, such as that found in the Romanticism of Coleridge and Shelley. As Christopher Brookeman points out, "For Trilling, Romanticism provided a guarantee of both individual perception and diversity" (116). In his cultural criticism, Romanticism is one of the primary inspirations for a doctrine that seeks "to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in autonomy of perception and judgment" (1980: iv-v).

Liberation was an important catchphrase in the culture debates of that era. In Herbert Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* (1969) the former Frankfurt School social philosopher describes and analyses twentieth-century modernism, the counter-culture of the 1960s and certain aspects of African-American culture, including jazz. The main quality that links these three movements and enables them to constitute the basis of a revolutionary liberating culture is the degree to which they seek a "desublimation of culture."

Non-objective, abstract painting and sculpture, stream-of-consciousness and formalist literature, twelve-tone composition, blues and jazz: these are not merely new modes of perception reorienting and intensifying the old ones; they rather

dissolve the very structure of perception in order to make room – for what?  
(Marcuse 38).

In Marcuse's paradigm, "for what?" is the unfamiliar, the impermanent, the temporary, the spontaneous. The postwar American avant-garde's formal experimentation and improvisational ethic is therefore not just another inevitable chapter of art history. Rather these artists attempt to disrupt "the medium of experience imposed by the established society" that has coalesced "into a self-sufficient, closed, 'automatic' system" (Marcuse 39). His theory of liberation – freedom within sensible limits – is based on the potential of "libidinal rationality," which we can also think of as "deliberate speed" or "serious play." As Theodore Roszak points out, "With both Marcuse and [Norman] Brown... we return to the mainstream of the rich German Romantic tradition" (93). This brings us back to Brakhage and Coltrane, whose work embodies the Romantic characteristics of individuality, myth and spiritual inspiration.

### **In a Romantic Mode: Brakhage's *Dog Star Man***

The films of Stan Brakhage re-present a vision of the world not unlike those of the Romantic poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge and especially William Blake. As Gerald Barrett and Wendy Brabner remark, "Brakhage's cinema is a romantic celebration of the self's unrestricted confrontation with the universe and everything it contains" (26). Paul Arthur writes that Brakhage is, "for better or for worse, among the last remnants of a great Romantic tradition in art whose overarching quest has been the fusion of nature and consciousness, the inscription and re-presentation through vision of what is simply and phenomenally present" (1995: 69). Parallels between Brakhage and Romanticism also form the basis for P. Adams Sitney's masterful interpretation of his

work and subsequent readings.<sup>40</sup> Most Romantic evaluations focus on the mythopoeic aspects of Brakhage's epic films, *Dog Star Man* and *The Art of Vision* (1961-65), and the personal subjectivity of lyrical films such as *Sirius Remembered* (1959), *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) and *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959). The Romantic characteristics that echo throughout these films include freedom of individual expression, unhindered imagination, and a dialectic of human consciousness and nature. Romantic themes such as the transcendental quest and the apocalyptic sublime also surface. Finally, the Romantic spirit, emphasizing imagination over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition over rationality, is renewed by Brakhage's cinematic re-creation of "closed-eye vision," the activity of seeing with eyes closed.

*Dog Star Man* marks a turn in Brakhage's work towards mythopoeia – the creation of new, in this case personal, myth – which Sitney conceives as a continuous transition:

*Dog Star Man* elaborates in mythic, almost systematic terms, the world-view of the lyrical films. More than any other work of the American avant-garde film, it stations itself within the rhetoric of Romanticism, describing the birth of consciousness, the cycle of the seasons, man's struggle with nature, and sexual balance in the visual evocation of a fallen titan bearing the cosmic name of the Dog Star Man (1979: 173).

Brakhage was at an individual crossroads when he began shooting *Dog Star Man* in 1960. It is no accident that this personal, highly emotive film coincided with important developments in his life. In 1957 he married Jane Collom and after several years of shuttling between Colorado, New York and New Jersey they finally settled in the

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<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, David James, "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson," *Film Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1982): 35-42.

mountains above Denver during the winter of 1959. It was at this time that Brakhage began making *Dog Star Man*, his longest, most ambitious film to date. From 1959 to 1965 his wife, Jane gave birth to five children, and as Barrett and Brabner write, Brakhage “found himself in a constant struggle between working on his films and taking on enough commercial assignments to support his family” (19). How do major life events and family pressures affect a sensitive, intuitive filmmaker’s artistic practice? I argue that Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man* constitutes an expression of personal angst, a lamentation over his difficult working situation, and a euphoric breakthrough coupled with a new beginning. It is the logical continuation of his earlier film, *Anticipation of the Night*, which set the terms of his artistic identity.

However, rather than positioning himself as an unseen, first-person protagonist, *Dog Star Man* casts Brakhage in a starring role, as the long-haired, bearded woodsman (accompanied only by his loyal dog – Sirius’ replacement) who must provide for his family by climbing a mountain in the dead of winter to chop down a tree. Stretched out over a *Prelude* (1961) and four parts, this simple, metaphorical action becomes the narrative through-line, providing a source of structure and identification. By centring Brakhage as both creator and protagonist of his personal drama, *Dog Star Man* demonstrates that alienation is perhaps a preferable state of being for the spiritually inclined modern artist. As Morse Peckham notes, “the dynamic power of Romanticism is precisely alienation from one’s culture and one’s society” (243).<sup>41</sup> The idea of alienation has an interesting double-edge in the context of *Dog Star Man*, as it marks Brakhage’s

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Herbert Marcuse’s comment, “Artsitic alienation is sublimation” (1995: 86).

retreat from civilization beginning in the late 1950s. This withdrawal was partially motivated by financial circumstance, partially by his wife's desire for a rural life, and partially by his own frustrations with America's marginal treatment of its artists.

Like *A Love Supreme*, *Dog Star Man* incorporates themes and motifs that repeat and vary throughout the four sections. In order to distinguish the sections as unique entities, each part represents a different stage in the narrative (the initial journey, a memory of his child's birth – equivalent to back-story, a sexual daydream, and the final tree cutting), in increasing visual densities (*Part I* has a single image layer, *Part II* has two superimposed roles, *Part III* has three and *Part IV* has four). Consistent to all four parts are frequent shots of Brakhage climbing the mountain, which are themselves varied in a number of different ways, including changes in camera angle, composition, film stock, exposure and frame rate, and the reversal of negative and positive images. The dynamic of the film comes from the modulation of closely-knit forms and vague, asymmetrical ones. (The structure for *Dog Star Man* was originally modelled, in part, on John Cage's "chance operations," which was later abandoned as an organizational principle). Through various permutations of colour, shape, texture and rhythm, Brakhage renders cosmic vision into material form, originating "from a context that is at once biological and quasi-metaphysical" (James 1982: 37).

The vividness and diversity of Brakhage's imagery, which incorporates narrative photorealism, found medical footage, positive and negative roles, camera and lens flares, punched holes, visible splice-lines, hand-painting, time lapse, slow motion and

microphotography, etc., corresponds to a child's fresh perspective; while the complex organization of his experience according to principles of "moving visual thinking"<sup>42</sup> reveals the presence of the artist as a mediator of vision. It is clear when looking at *Dog Star Man* that Brakhage was a filmmaker possessed by the very *idea* of film. In his discussions he makes no doubt about his desire: "I am now trying to find out what it is that film can do that's purely film. I really wish to open myself to that difference" (Brakhage in Ganguly 22). The will to unearth new forms of cinematic expression is typical of Brakhage's visionary mode of artistic creation.

In *Dog Star Man* there is a heightened tension between the representational and the abstract – similar to Coltrane's later live recordings of "My Favorite Things," where the things we recognize and understand are buried beneath layers of dissonance, repetition and fragmentation. On the one hand, in *Dog Star Man* there are images one can easily name and describe, such as a long-haired woodsman, a snowy mountain landscape, fir trees, a full moon, or a woman's naked torso; on the other hand, the use of anamorphic lenses distort shapes and depth, while over- and under-exposure veil the original images, making them appear less familiar. Throughout the film Brakhage employs stylistic devices such as these to foreground his own presence, while in turn disrupting the closed surface of the text, much like Coltrane does when he plays his saxophone "too fast."

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<sup>42</sup> Brakhage describes moving visual thinking as "a streaming of shapes that aren't nameable – a vast visual 'song' of the cells expressing their internal life" (Brakhage in Ganguly 21).



To these defamiliarizing techniques Brakhage adds the element of superimposition, which further complicates time and space. Evoking the language of Viktor Shklovsky and Russian Formalism, Jonas Mekas writes that

The cinema of superimpositions is created by people whose perception – has been expanded, intensified... Their images are loaded with double and triple superimpositions. Things must happen fast, many things. Lines, colors, figures, one on top of another, combinations and possibilities, to keep the eye working. All this is too much for an untrained eye, but there is no end to how much a quick eye can see (1972: 158).

*Dog Star Man*'s visual complexity results largely from Brakhage's use of multiple layering. Up to four layers of images are combined, sometimes merging and sometimes retaining their separate identities, giving the impression of polyphonic music. The film's sense of excess is located in this very multiplicity; it resists focusing on a single body or moment but rather seeks to embrace the universe and everything it contains.

As with *Loving*, *Sirius Remembered* and *Anticipation of the Night*, velocity of camera movement, single-frame photography (fast motion) and rapid editing orders, are important aspects of *Dog Star Man*'s rhythmic texture. Barrett and Brabner explain that,

On first viewing of nearly all of his films... the speed of the continuities, juxtapositions, and repetitions prevents an audience from retaining and subsequently analyzing the content of the individual images and their interrelationships, initially leaving a sense of an unmediated experience (36).

In *Dog Star Man* this visceral tempo creates the impression of a continuous, timeless present, akin to the physical immediacy of improvised music. While describing the film David Ehrenstein notes that, "If an analogy must be drawn, only a musical one would be appropriate" (35, 37). I consider John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* an appropriate analogy. First of all, the album utilizes a nearly identical form and many similar

techniques, including personal inscription, theme-and-variation, motivic ties between sections and superimposition. Secondly, like Brakhage's film, the Romantic concern with self-identity provides a narrative basis for Coltrane's signature album.

### **Spiritualized: Coltrane's *A Love Supreme***

Recorded during a period of artistic and personal transition, *A Love Supreme* coincides with Coltrane's spiritual development. The autobiographical four-part suite utilizes inscriptive strategies to centre Coltrane at the album's emotional core. Taken together, *A Love Supreme's* title, liner notes, artwork, album photograph and music create a portrait of the artist as an aspiring saint. "Not long before his death Coltrane was asked what he hoped to be ten years from that time," James Lincoln Collier writes. "He replied he wanted to be a saint" (1978: 492). As John Corbett notes in his study of free improvisation,

Music is not antisemantic or nonsemantic. It fluctuates between *meaning nothing*, *meaning something*, and *being interpreted as meaning something*. One result of this is a certain exchangeability with other signifying systems such as color, shape, smell, and... language" (Corbett 221, his emphasis).

Album covers are another way in which music signifies meaning; they "*add* to that which is present (are, therefore, accessories appended to music), and they *replace* that which is not present (i.e. the musician's image)" (Jarrett 164, his emphasis). In the case of *A Love Supreme*, it is nearly impossible to separate Coltrane's music from the personality of the creator; having sold millions of copies worldwide, this album cover has become one of the most circulated images in jazz history.

Coltrane's longtime producer, Bob Thiele photographed the front cover to *A Love Supreme* during a recording session with Duke Ellington. In contrast to the formal lensing of a studio portrait, this snapshot has an uncontrived, off-guard, slice of life quality. Naturally intense, serious and focused: this is how the artist looks when he doesn't know he's being looked at. With his head cocked forward, gaze directed into the off-frame abyss, the image accentuates Coltrane's status as a deeply spiritual individual. Conversely his loosened collar and jacket – the musician's professional attire – communicate a relaxed, casual appearance. He doesn't need to put on a costume, or an air, nor does he mug for the camera like the jazz trumpeters Louis Armstrong or Dizzy Gillespie often did. Rather, he appears confident and down-to-earth, if vaguely perplexed, his craned neck a sign of what LeRoi Jones has described as Coltrane's heavy spirit.<sup>43</sup>

Lost in thought, a shade melancholic, absorbed (perhaps) by extramusical forces such as the Vietnam War, political division and racial strife - who was John Coltrane on the day this snapshot was taken, September 26, 1962? Was he the soft-spoken, hardworking musician who rehearsed scales six-and-a-half hours a day, the steadfast bandleader and composer, the devoted husband and father? Or was he "the hotrock blackbelly tenorman *Mad* of American back-alley go-music" (to transpose a phrasing from Jack Kerouac about Lester Young), the endlessly creative artistic visionary, the spiritual beacon who inspired Black Nationalist politicians, avant-garde poets, painters and jazzmen alike, as well as a San Francisco church in his honour? The answer, of course,

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<sup>43</sup> The dedication to LeRoi Jones' *Black Music* reads, "For John Coltrane, the heaviest spirit" (1968: n.p).

lies somewhere in-between these hasty composite sketches. Following in the larger-than-life tradition of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Sun Ra, Coltrane was both a practiced musician of this universe and a self-created cultural icon, a duplicity that underpins *A Love Supreme*.

In the photograph he is situated against an unspecific back alley or other miscellaneous urban-industrial locale (the round metal piping in the background appears to be a railing for a loading dock). This uncertainty of place and absence of ornament focuses our attention on the subject rather than the context. Shot from a low, canted angle, off the hip, in Spartan black and white,<sup>44</sup> the intimacy and setting together conjure a reserved atmosphere (which further compliments/complicates the album's religious overtones). Meanwhile, the shallow focal plane and heightened contrast draw our attention to Coltrane's visage, the area around his eyes and forehead in particular, which represents the image's brightest tonal range. His left eye, highlighted by hard light, is nearly centred within the square 12.5" frame. Approximating nature's Golden Mean, this composition gives the portrait an uncanny balance, an otherworldly presence.

Comparison between the album cover and the source photograph provides further insights.<sup>45</sup> The picture cropping is especially significant: in terms of its mise-en-scene, the re-framing shifts Coltrane's profile from medium shot to medium close-up while

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<sup>44</sup> *A Love Supreme* was the first Impulse! release that didn't feature the label's signature black and orange album spine.

<sup>45</sup> The original (now creased and wrinkled) photograph is used as the cover image for Ashley Kahn's *A Love Supreme: The Making of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (2002). The snapshot, as well as the handwriting on its reverse, are reproduced on page 148 of the book.

eliminating a blurry figure (probably his bass player Jimmy Garrison) from the foreground. The negative space around his head is darkened and foreshortened, eliminating distracting details and sharpening the area of focus. At roughly a foot square (the dimensions of an LP jacket) it is a striking image: no wonder Coltrane is remembered as much for his quiet intensity as his lyrical saxophone lines. When jazz albums are reissued their cover images are often replaced but for over forty years this image has remained relatively unchanged. The first CD reissue of *A Love Supreme*, released in 1986, featured the same photograph with tighter cropping, different lettering and a splash of orange. Subsequent reissues, however, have reverted to the original black and white album design. Compared to the reissue and other albums featuring the artist's likeness, the original *A Love Supreme* has an authentic intensity, culminating in an aura that serves Coltrane's stated aim: to someday become a saint.

Although key to his spiritual identity, Porter considers *A Love Supreme* "significant on musical grounds alone, for in this piece Coltrane improvises with extraordinary compositional clarity, using a minimum of extraneous notes; and he introduces an effective technique for spontaneously translating words to music" (1985: 600). Recorded in December 1964,<sup>46</sup> *A Love Supreme* was an album several years in the making. Ekkehard Jost writes that, "Musically, *A Love Supreme* is the consummate product of an assimilation process in which Coltrane sums up five years of musical

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<sup>46</sup> *A Love Supreme* involved two recording sessions, held December 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1964 at Van Gelder Recording Studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp and bassist Art Davis joined Coltrane's quartet for the second session. However, none of the material from that session was used on the original album. Alternative takes of "Acknowledgment" featuring all six musicians were released for the first time on the "Deluxe Edition" of *A Love Supreme* (Impulse! 314-589-945-2, 2002).

experiences and perceptions. As such it achieves a synthesis of the most varied formal principles” (32-33). The musician John Schott points out, “The recording of *A Love Supreme* in December of 1964 inaugurated a year in which the suite or extended composition was Coltrane’s preferred vehicle” (359).

The four-part suite spans thirty-three minutes and locates the “classic quartet” (Coltrane, Garrison, McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones) at the height of their collaboration. After three years of performing together on a near-nightly basis the group had reached its creative and telepathic peak. This is evident in the concise, nearly seamless construction of the improvised composition. Even with my limited musical sophistication I can identify the album’s interlocking design and motivic ties. Part 1, “Acknowledgement,” functions as a prelude, setting up the opening theme; the contrasting melodic line (which features a four-note phasing of the album title) later supplies the theme for Part 3. After repeating and varying the “Love Supreme” phrase at length near the conclusion of “Acknowledgement,” Coltrane does something novel, and stunning: he actually chants the words, reciting them nineteen times. This assured, subtly significant gesture inscribes Coltrane as both author *and* subject of the piece while signaling a transitional pause (a calm) before the more tumultuous middle sections. In Part 2, “Resolution,” the suite gains tension and momentum. Here Coltrane’s playing stretches out, his lines become longer and more swirling, his tone more restive and robust. A rowdy drum solo introduces Part 3, “Pursuance.” Coltrane returns quoting the theme from the opening section before giving way to Tyner’s up-tempo piano solo. The stepped up pace of Part 3 climaxes with a wild, tour-de-force solo by Coltrane, during which his playing becomes

faster, freer, and more expressive, even joyful. Part 4, “Psalm,” begins with a long, unaccompanied bass solo, followed by Coltrane’s solemn, soulful, note-by-note recitation of the poem (also titled “A Love Supreme”) printed inside the album’s gatefold cover.<sup>47</sup>

Each of *A Love Supreme*’s four parts relates a different mood (contrition, aspiration, exuberance and devotion), which correlate to the stages of Coltrane’s recovery from drug addiction and spiritual rebirth. This kind of personal storytelling, confirmed and encouraged by his heartfelt liner notes and poem, is rare for a medium that usually works to free itself of narrative associations. *A Love Supreme* also introduces the first instance of chanting in his music, which further personalizes the album. By overdubbing his own voice to create a choral echo, Coltrane’s repetitive mantra resonates with profound religious conviction. Overdubbing is used to similar effect at the very end of the “Psalm” section, when we hear what sounds like a second saxophone join Coltrane. The overdubbed saxophone enters immediately after the last line of the poem, the recurring “Thank-You God” phrase followed by a final “Amen,” which sets up the closing flourish. The arrival of the double saxophone, in sync with the drum rolls and cymbal crashes, functions almost like the cathartic, call-and-response formula of southern Baptist preachers and soul singers like James Brown.

Addressing the social aspects of *A Love Supreme*, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), states that, “So much is made of Trane’s link with Malcolm in the sixties, because those periods are when art of that kind does emerge. You have social upsurges, and for every

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<sup>47</sup> For a thorough analysis and transcriptions of “Psalm” see Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 244-49.

social upsurge, there's an artistic upsurge that corresponds with that" (Baraka in Rowland and Abrams 2001). Archie Shepp asserts, "When *A Love Supreme* was released, people weren't singing 'Mercy, Mercy' anymore. Then, people were marching in Selma [Alabama, under national guard protection]. Then, Malcolm X was preaching in the temple" (Shepp in Kahn 160). The summer of 1964 saw violent race riots in Harlem and other New York and New Jersey ghettos, which surely captured Coltrane's attention. Meanwhile, the album's December recording and January release coincided with further eruptions in the civil rights movement, the Berkeley Free Speech movement, and "a step-up in the assertive nature of black protest" (Kahn 160). Less than two months after *A Love Supreme* hit retail shelves Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem.

Ashley Kahn also observes that *A Love Supreme* arrived at the midpoint of the 1960s, an age of Eastern religion, "flower power," and new spirituality (xvi). Zen Buddhism, for example, was popular amongst contemporary Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, who sought personal clarity in the flash of *satori*. At the same time the nonconformist hippie movement was sublimating sensuous aesthetics (i.e. long hair) and sexual liberation into a political sensibility. With its unifying message of individual compassion, spirituality and humility, *A Love Supreme* distilled the decade's themes of universal love and spiritual consciousness.

### **Summary**

Morse Peckham writes that, "Romanticism is an exceedingly rich and various way of thinking, the virtues of which to my mind, are still being explored" (243). By examining



*Dog Star Man* and *A Love Supreme* in this context, I have attempted to isolate the central core of the artists' likeness while at the same time revealing the self-construction of their visionary identities.

Brakhage's self-conscious engagement with the Romantic tradition sustains the "Sense as Muse" in his creative process. The act of seeing, so pertinent to all of Brakhage's work, is developed in *Dog Star Man* as a complex process of filtering, manipulating, recovering and imagining. In this film personal inspiration is combined with elements of spontaneous composition and formal innovation to produce new manifestations of hypnagogic consciousness. By rendering inner vision into tangible form Brakhage reverses the meditative process into a process of materialization. With *Dog Star Man* he transforms metaphysical experience into sublime variations of shape, colour and rhythm.

While it is unlikely that Coltrane conceived his work in Romantic terms, *A Love Supreme* demonstrates several characteristics of the Romantic tradition. The album's extraordinary personalism, the self-revelation of his liner notes and poem, the new experiments with chanting, overdubbing and translating words into music, even the intensely wrought cover photograph combine to signify an original, individual vision. And although *A Love Supreme* was executed in a suburban New Jersey recording studio it burns with the concentrated energy of a live performance. The crystallization of the Classic Quartet's spontaneous group dynamic adds a plurality of force to the album, demonstrating Trilling's concept of democratic pluralism: "A position that affirm[s] the

value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty (1979: 141).

Romanticism unites Coltrane and Brakhage with the revolutionary politics of the 1960s. Roszak writes the dissenting counter-culture “is grounded in an intensive examination of the self, of the buried wealth of personal consciousness” (62). *A Love Supreme* and *Dog Star Man* are artworks that resist mediation by intellect, opting for the politics of the nervous system and physical liberation through improvised expression. Their rhythms are impulsive, personal and bodily. Their forms are layered, superimposed, modulated and transitional, rotating around the imaginary axis of a timeless present. Their velocities are deliberately uneven, creating a paradox of discontent and peacefulness. In their pursuit of artistic freedom both Coltrane and Brakhage exceeded the limits of objective consciousness, scientific rationality, technical mastery and pre-planned structures by delving *inside* the self, plumbing their own psychoanalytic depths. *A Love Supreme* and *Dog Star Man* find their reflection in the social forces that gave rise and response to them. In terms of cultural importance they go beyond notes.

## CONCLUSION

I began to feel that all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in. I had the concept of everything radiating out of me, and that the more personal or egocentric I would become, the deeper I would reach and the more I could touch those universal concerns that would involve all man (Brakhage in Sitney 1970: 229).

I think the main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe. That's what music is to me – it's just another way of saying this is a big, beautiful universe we live in, that's been given to us, and here's an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is. That's what I would like to do (Coltrane in DeMichael 52).

On April 12, 2003, I attended a Stan Brakhage Memorial Benefit concert featuring the experimental rock pioneers Sonic Youth (Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore, Jim O'Rourke, Lee Ranaldo, Steve Shelley) with additional percussion by Tim Barnes. The event was held at New York's famous experimental film venue, Anthology Film Archives.

Brakhage had passed away the previous month in Victoria, British Columbia and all proceeds from the concert were used to assist in the coverage of his substantial medical expenses. The program was an intimate, predominantly instrumental "chamber concert" performed to an assortment of Brakhage films including *Scenes from Under Childhood: Section 1* (1967), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981), *The Dead* (1960), *The Wonder Ring* (1955), *Dog Star Man, Part II* (1960), *Birds of Paradise* (1999), and *Cat's Cradle* (1959). The concert inspired the following reflections on improvisation, performance, film, music and writing while providing a new perspective on the objectives of this study.

My first observation is that improvising musicians and experimental filmmakers *are* similar creators; their time-based, (usually) non-verbal expressions give shape and rhythm to inner landscapes that emanate out of the body. Over the years this similarity of expression has fostered a rich back-and-forth dialogue between jazz and film artists. John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959), Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* (1961), John Whitney's *Catalog* (1961) and Michael Snow's *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964) demonstrate the affinity between vanguard filmmakers and modern jazz. Meanwhile, Harry Smith's improvised projections, presented alongside bebop artists of the 1950s, Len Lye's collaborations with jazz groups at New York's Five Spot in the mid 1950s, and Joyce Wieland's mixed media presentations featuring free jazz musicians in the 1960s, find their echo in recent screenings of silent experimental films with improvised soundtracks. For instance, in the last few years Brakhage's film *The Text of Light* (1974) has been presented numerous times with live musical accompaniment by Lee Ranaldo, guitarist Alan Licht, turntablist Christian Marclay, DJ Olive and drummer William Hooker. Chicago's Boxhead Ensemble (a rotating line-up of musicians that currently includes Michael Krassner, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Scott Tuma and Jim White) improvises soundtracks for silent experimental films by the likes of Phil Solomon, Paula Froehl, David Gatten, Jem Cohen, Julie Murray, Barbara Meter and others. Light hitting canvas reflecting physiological pulses onto bodies and out of instruments: is this not "moving visual thinking?"

Secondly, when it comes to improvisation and performance, structures reinforce but intentions blur. As W.T. Lhamon points out, "Performance is always at least slightly

different from its plan, map, or orchestration” (218). Improvisation is abundantly imperfect, full of “missed” and/or “wrong” notes. Performances are constructed on the edge of failure, decisions are being made right now about it, possibilities are crystallizing out of memory, lights are going on. In need of a framework, improvisation often slips into the same ruts and alleys, re-tracing familiar grooves. Ambivalent and unfixed, repetition can be positive, though; it’s also the risk of working ideas out in public night after night. The difference between musical improvisation and improvised notation (stream-of-conscious writing and filmmaking are still closed forms) is that there’s permanence with the latter (keeping in mind that sound can also be recorded). Misspellings, missed exposures, missed notes: all these so-called mis-takes are not really such at all (speaking now like a damaged record, skipping: Broken music?) Do expectations play a part of (experiencing) improvised performance? As John Corbett points out, “Improvisation is music to be played... it requires a different kind of listening in which the listener is active, a *participant observer* of sorts, much like the writerly reader, the ‘writing aloud’ reader that Barthes idealizes” (233).

“Writing aloud,” this study has attempted to unearth parallels between Stan Brakhage’s films and John Coltrane’s jazz at the socio/aesthetic level. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that draws from cultural studies, history, theory, comparative literature, textual analysis, film and jazz studies, I believe this project is itself best thought of as an experiment, an improvisation. “Consider everything as an experiment,” as John Cage was fond of saying. Therefore, my conclusions are tentative and contingent, tied to a particular perspective in time and space.

During the past two-and-a-half years my research has taken me in many fascinating directions, opening new paths of discovery, presenting unique challenges and more than one or two roadblocks. Over the course of this project I feel my knowledge and understanding of Brakhage's films, Coltrane's music and American history has deepened. I have also come to see the interrelatedness of art, culture, politics, social issues, history and theory. I also agree with Arthur I. Miller's assertion that one can always find amazing connections between any two people if one tries hard enough. Nonetheless, I strongly believe that Brakhage and Coltrane's personalities, spiritual energies and creative discoveries *were* alike, were not coincidental, incidental or accidental.

Coltrane sought to break free of the conventions of the language of jazz, to create his own musical syntax. Through techniques such as his "sheets of sound," the introduction of polyrhythms, motivic development and hyper-repetition, ironic deformation, the translation of words into notes, and the deployment of other vocalisms, including shrieks and growls, he created a personal vocabulary devoid of bebop tropes. Brakhage's highly intuitive, gestural shooting (based on his acceptance of the body as an instrument), his use of abstract imagery and defamiliarizing strategies such as multiple superimposition, over- and under-exposure, and hand-painting, and his rapid, irregular editing rhythms, likewise generated a personal cinema separate from the traditional, industrial model. Meanwhile, the parallel development of a religious sensibility in Brakhage and Coltrane's art, their tremendous physical and emotional energies and their

powerful originality, combined with the absence of humour in their work (i.e. the lack of quotation and reference), the tendency to repeat and vary short ideas at length, the yearning for extended forms, the abandonment of horizontal structures, and the variety of attack and design reveal several common points in their thinking.

Moreover, the work of Brakhage and Coltrane demonstrates how cultural, political and social conflict conspires with personal factors and artistic innovation to generate new forms of individual expression. Although they came from different social and racial backgrounds, were exposed to different influences, and had vastly different interests, over their careers they developed comparative creative methods. This aspect can be partially explained when we consider Brakhage's lifelong passion for music, which served as an inspiration for both his "photographic aesthetics" and his "actual editing orders" even as his "creative philosophies" were becoming "silently-orientated" (1979: 130); as well as the impact of Beat poetry (itself influenced by jazz) on his artistic development. We must also keep in mind that Coltrane and Brakhage were working during the most creative cultural period in American history. Art underwent massive renovations after the war, manifesting in a twenty-year period of sustained innovation and experimentation. The effects of this transformation invaded every corner of artistic production. The serious play and deliberate speed that recur throughout avant-garde art of the 1950s and 1960s reflect the shifts in postwar consciousness, the surges of black culture, the rise of new consumer technologies and the antiauthoritarian, counter-cultural protest against conservative hegemony. Subsequently, some of Coltrane and Brakhage's work, such as the composition "Alabama" (1961) and the film *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1966-

67) contain clear allusions to sociopolitical issues. Other socio/aesthetic relationships can only be inferred.

The comparative study of jazz and cinema remains a wide-open field of inquiry. In recent jazz studies, scholars such as Krin Gabbard, John Corbett, Ingrid Monson, Scott DeVeaux, Mona Hadler and Michael Jarrett have demonstrated that the myths of individual genius and artistic autonomy can be questioned and counteracted even while honouring unique creations and discoveries. Part of my aim in this study was to suggest analogies between the evolution of artistic forms and social changes. Not in the sense that one mirrors the other, but rather in how they magnify, refocus, alter and refract one another. Just as “One thought can produce millions of vibrations” (Coltrane 164: n.p.), coupling two kindred artists under a single lens can illuminate myriad reflections.



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## DISCOGRAPHY

### **Selected Albums By John Coltrane\***

Titles are selected according to year of production (including all albums recorded between 1957 and 1967) and/or reference within this thesis. Compilations, collections and box sets are usually not listed. All are the most recent compact disc editions.

*The Art of John Coltrane* (1958, Blue Note CDO 799175)

*Ascension* (1965, Impulse! 314-543-413-2)

*The Avant-Guard* (With Don Cherry, 1960, Atlantic 90041-2)

*Bahia* (1958, Original Jazz Classics OJC 415)

*Ballads* (1962, Impulse! MCAD 5885)

*Black Pearls* (1958, Original Jazz Classics OJC 352)

*Blue Train* (1957, Blue Note CDP 7460952)

*Bye Bye Blackbird* (1962, Original Jazz Classics 681)

*Cattin' with Coltrane and Quinichette* (With Paul Quinichette, 1957, Original Jazz Classic OJC 460)

*Coltrane* (1957, Original Jazz Classics OJC 020)

*Coltrane Live at Birdland* (1963, Impulse! MCAD 33109)

*Coltrane Plays the Blues* (1960, Atlantic 1382-2)

*Coltrane's Sound* (1960, Rhino 75588)

*Coltranetime* (1958, Blue Note CDP 784461)

*Coltrane Jazz* (1959, Rhino 79891)

*The Complete Africa/Brass Sessions* (1961, Impulse! 21682)

*Crescent* (1964, Impulse! IMPD-200)

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\* From Richard Cook and Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* (1996), with some variations.

*Dakar* (1957, Original Jazz Classics OJC 393)

*Dear Old Stockholm* (1963-65, Impulse! GRD-123)

*Duke Ellington and John Coltrane* (With Duke Ellington, 1962, Impulse! IMPD-166)

*The European Tour* (1962, Pablo Live 2308222)

*Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye* (1962, Natasha NI-4003)

*Expression* (1967, Impulse! MCA 254646)

*First Meditations* 1965, Impulse! GRP 11182)

*Giant Steps* (1958, Rhino 75203)

*Impressions* (1962-63, Impulse! 314-543-416-2)

*Interstellar Space* (1967, Impulse! 314-543-415-2)

*John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman* (1963, Impulse! GRD-157)

*John Coltrane and the Jazz Giants* (1956-58, Prestige 60104)

*The John Coltrane Quartet Plays* (1965, Impulse! IMPD-214, 1997)

*Kulu Sé Mama* (1965, Impulse! 314-543-412-2)

*Live at Birdland and the Half Note* (1962-65, Cool & Blue C&B CD 101)

*Live at the Village Vanguard* (1961, Impulse! MCAD 39136)

*Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* (1966, Impulse! 254647)

*Live at the Village Vanguard: The Master Takes* (1961, Impulse IMPD-251)

*Live in Japan* (1967, Impulse! 254647, 4CD)

*Live in Seattle* (1965, Impulse! GRD-2-146)

*Live Trane: The European Tours* (1961-63, Pablo 4433, 7CD)

*A Love Supreme (Deluxe Edition)* (1964, Impulse 314-589-945-2, 2CD; the second disc includes alternative takes of "Resolution" and "Acknowledgement," as well as the only live recording of the suite)

*Love Supreme: Juan-les-Pins Jazz Festival, Antibes, July 26-27, 1965* (1965, Giants of Jazz [Italy] 53068)

*Lush Life* (1957-58, Original Jazz Classics OJC 131)

*The Major Works of John Coltrane* (1965, Impulse! GRD 21132, 2CD; includes Editions I and II of *Ascension*, plus “Om,” “Kulu Sé Mama,” and “Selflessness”)

*Meditations* (1966, Impulse! IMPD-199)

*My Favorite Things* (1961, Rhino 75204)

*New Thing at Newport* (1965, Impulse! GRD 105)

*The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording* (1967, Impulse! 314-589-120-2)

*Olé Coltrane* (1961, Atlantic 1373-2)

*Om* (1965, Impulse! MCAD 39139)

*The Paris Concert* (1962, Original Jazz Classics OJC 781)

*Settin' the Pace* (1958, Original Jazz Classics OJC 078)

*Soultrane* (1958, Original Jazz Classics OJC 021)

*The Standard Coltrane* (1958, Original Jazz Classics 246)

*The Stardust Session* (1958, Prestige 60104)

*Stellar Regions* (1967, Impulse! IMP 11692)

*Sun Ship* (1965, Impulse! IMP 11672)

*Traneing In* (1957, Original Jazz Classics OJC 131)

*Transition* (1965, Impulse! GRP 11242)

*Wheelin' and Dealin'* (1957, Original Jazz Classics OJC 672)

### **Other Albums Cited**

Ayler, Albert. *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1965, ESP 1016)

Bley, Carla. *Escalator Over the Hill* (1968-71, JCOA/ECM 839 310 2, 2CD)

Brubeck, Dave. *Time Out* (1959, Columbia 460611-2)

Coleman, Ornette. *Free Jazz* (1961, Atlantic 1364 -2)

Davis, Miles. *Bitches Brew* (1969, Columbia 460602, 2CD)

\_\_\_\_\_. *In a Silent Way* (1969, Columbia 450982)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Kind of Blue* (1959, Columbia/Legacy CK64935)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Milestones* (Sony 65359, 1997)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Miles Davis with John Coltrane: The Complete Columbia Recordings* (1955-61, Columbia/Legacy C6K 6583, 6CD)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Miles Smiles* (1966, Columbia 471004)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sketches of Spain* (1960, Columbia 460604)

Mingus, Charles. *Mingus Ah Um* (1959, Columbia 450436)

Roach, Max. *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960, Candid CCD 79002)

Rollins, Sonny. *The Freedom Suite* (1958, Original Jazz Classics OJC 067)

Shepp, Archie. *Fire Music* (1965, Impulse IMPD-158)

## FILMOGRAPHY

### **Selected Films by Stan Brakhage\***

Titles are selected according to year of production (including all films produced between 1957 and 1967) and/or reference within this thesis. Films are silent and 16mm unless otherwise noted.

*The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971, 33 minutes, colour)

*Airs* (1976, 18 minutes, colour, Super-8mm; reissued in 1978 in 16mm)

*Anticipation of the Night* (1958, 41 minutes, colour)

*The Art of Vision* (1961-65, 240 minutes, colour; derived from *Dog Star Man*)

*Birds of Paradise* (1999, 3 minutes, colour)

*Black Vision* (1965, 3 minutes, b&w)

*Blue Moses* (1962, 11 minutes, b&w, sound)

*Cat's Cradle* (1959, 8 minutes, colour)

*Daybreak and Whiteye* (1957, 10 minutes, b&w)

*The Dead* (1960, 11 minutes, colour)

*Desistfilm* (1954, 7 minutes, b&w, sound)

*Deus Ex* (1971, 33 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man* (1961-64, 78 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man: Part I* (1962, 31 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man: Part II* (1963, 6 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man: Part III* (1964, 8 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man: Part IV* (1964, 7 minutes, colour)

*Dog Star Man: Prelude* (1961, 26 minutes, colour)

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\* From R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* (1998), with some variations.

*Eye Myth* (1967, 9 seconds, colour, 35mm; released in 16mm in 1972)

*eyes* (1971, 36 minutes, colour)

*Films by Stan Brakhage: An Avant-Garde Home Movie* (1961, 4 minutes, colour)

*Fire of Waters* (1965, 7 minutes, b&w, sound)

*First hymn to the Night Novalis* (1994, 3 minutes at 18 frames per second, colour)

*Flesh of Morning* (1956, 22 minutes, b&w; reissued with new soundtrack in 1985)

*The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1980, 32 minutes, colour; issued in both 35mm and 16mm)

*Hymn to Her* (1974, 3 minutes, colour)

*Interim* (1952, 25 minutes, b&w, sound, music by James Tenney)

*The Jesus Trilogy and Coda* (2001, 20 minutes, colour)

*Last hymn to the Night* (1997, 25 minutes, colour)

*Loud Visual Noises* (1987, 3 minutes, colour; music compilation by Joel Haertling)

*Loving* (1957, 5 minutes, colour)

*Mothlight* (1963, 4 minutes, colour)

*Night Music* (1986, 30 seconds, colour)

*Oh Life – A Woe Story – The Test News* (1963, 6 minutes, b&w)

*Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (2002, 35 minutes, colour)

*Pasht* (1965, 6 minutes, colour)

*Reflections on Black* (1955, 12 minutes, b&w, sound)

*Scenes from Under Childhood: Section No. 1* (1967, 25 minutes, colour; until the late 1970s a sound version of this section was in distribution; it is now available in both sound and silent versions)

*Self Song/Death Song* (1997, 3 minutes, colour)

*Silent Sound Sense Stars Subotnik Sender* (1962, 2 minutes, b&w; lost)

*Sirius Remembered* (1957, 11 minutes, colour)

*Songs #1-30* (1964-1967, colour, 8mm; *Songs 1-7* and *Songs 8-14* were issued in 1980 in 16mm; *Song 15: 15 Song Traits* was reissued in 1981 in 16mm; *Songs 16-22* were reissued in 1983 in 16mm; *Songs 24-26* were reissued in 1987 in 16mm; *My Mountain Song 27* was reissued in 1987 in 16mm; *Song 27 (Part II) Rivers* was reissued in 1988 in 16mm; *Songs 28 and 29* were reissued in 1985 in 16mm; *Song 30: American 30's Song* was released in 1966 in 16mm)

*The Text of Light* (1971, 70 minutes, colour)

*Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961, 7 minutes, colour)

*The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954, 11 minutes, b&w, sound)

*Three Films (Blue White, Blood's Tone, and Vein)* (1965, 9 minutes, colour)

*23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1966-67, 67 minutes, colour, 8mm; film comprises Parts I, II and Coda; Part I was reissued in 1979 in 16mm; Part II and Coda were reissued in 1980 in 16mm)

*Two: Creeley/McClure* (1965, 4 minutes, colour)

*Unconscious London Strata* (1981, 23 minutes, colour)

*Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959, 11 minutes, b&w)

*Window Water Baby Moving* (1959, 13 minutes, colour)

*The Wonder Ring* (With Joseph Cornell, 1955, 6 minutes, colour)



## Other Films Cited

- Balch, Antony. *Bill and Tony* (1972, 5 minutes, colour, sound; written and narrated by Williams S. Burroughs)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Cut-Ups* (1966, 19 minutes, b&w, sound; written and narrated by William S. Burroughs)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Towers Open Fire* (1963, 10 minutes, b&w, sound; written and narrated by Williams S. Burroughs)
- Cassavetes, John. *Shadows* (1957-59, 87 minutes, b&w, music by Charles Mingus and Shafi Hadi)
- Clarke, Shirley. *Bridges-Go-Round* (1959, 4 minutes, b&w, music by Teo Macero)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Connection* (1961, 100 minutes, b&w, music by Freddie Redd)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Cool World* (1963, 100 minutes, b&w, music by Max Waldron)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ornette: Made in America* (1986, 85 minutes, colour, music by Ornette Coleman)
- Conner, Bruce. *A Movie* (1958, 12 minutes, b&w, sound)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cosmic Ray* (1961, 4 minutes, b&w, music by Ray Charles)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Report* (1963-67, 13 minutes, b&w, sound)
- Frank, Robert and Alfred Leslie. *Pull My Daisy* (1959, 28 minutes, b&w, music by David Amram)
- Hirsh, Hy. *Chasse des Touches* (1959, 4 minutes, colour, music by Thelonious Monk)
- Jacobs, Ken. *Blonde Cobra* (1962, 30 minutes, b&w and colour, sound with live radio)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-63, 15 minutes, colour, sound)
- Lye, Len. *N. or N.W.* (1937, 7 minutes, b&w, music by Fats Waller, Bob Howard and Benny Goodman)
- Maddow, Ben, Sidney Meyers, and Joseph Strick. *The Savage Eye* (1959, 68 minutes, b&w, sound)
- McLaren, Norman and Evelyn Lambart. *Begone Dull Care* (1949, 8 minutes, colour, released in 16mm and 35mm, music by Oscar Peterson)

- Menken, Marie. *Notebook* (1962, 10 minutes, colour)
- Preminger, Otto. *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959, 160 minutes, b&w, music by Duke Ellington)
- Rogosin, Lionel. *Come Back, Africa* (1959, 83 minutes, colour, sound)
- Smith, Harry. *No. 3* (1949, 4 minutes, colour, music by Dizzy Gillespie)
- Smith, Jack. *Flaming Creatures* (1963, 45 minutes, b&w, sound)
- Snow, Michael. *New York Ear and Eye Control* (1964, 34 minutes, b&w, music by Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Gary Peacock and Sonny Murray)
- Vanderbeek, Stan. *Science Friction* (1959, 9 minutes, colour, sound)
- Whitney, John. *Catalog* (1961, 7 minutes, colour, music by Ornette Coleman)
- Wieland, Joyce. *Peggy's Blue Skylight* (1964-66, 11 minutes, b&w, 8mm, music by Paul Bley; blown up to 16mm in 1986, re-edited and printed on colour stock)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Water Sark* (1964-65, 14 minutes, colour, 8mm, soundtrack by Carla Bley, Mike Mantler and Ray Jessel; blown up to 16mm)