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## **Mortality Saliency: Terror of death and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes***

By Martin Smith

Keywords: Stan Brakhage, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, Pittsburgh trilogy, death, body film, somatic camera, *The Blood of the Beasts*, Georges Franju

We are the highest form of life on earth, and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die.

– Don DeLillo (1985: 99)

‘Of all the things that move man,’ wrote Ernest Becker, ‘one of the principal ones is his terror of death’ (1973: 11). Stan Brakhage was moved to film for three or four days at the Allegheny County morgue in September of 1971 (Kase 2012). Brakhage shot an hour and a half of footage to produce a 31-minute film consisting of various moments from the autopsies of six or seven corpses. *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971) was the concluding chapter of Brakhage's trilogy of films centred on the public institutions of Pittsburgh, following *eyes* (1970), which concerned the police force, and *Deus ex* (1971), which was shot in a hospital. Brakhage's Pittsburgh trilogy, says Bart Testa (1998), almost defines the avant-garde tradition in America. Juan Carlos Kase (2012) – in a retrospective production history of *The Act of Seeing* drawn from Brakhage's personal correspondence and the original footage – nevertheless says that the Pittsburgh trilogy was a major departure for Brakhage who had, until that point, largely created rhetorical films centred on his own subjective experience. Kase calls the film ‘a more

immediate recording of a photographic encounter with a real-world phenomenon' (2012: 4). Brakhage wanted to remove the interpretive frameworks found in most documentaries and, in his own words, 'make all reference terminate in the film', to focus only on the 'core visual facts of the work' (Kase 2012: 4) and create film-as-document rather than a documentary with its traditional manipulations (e.g. an overarching argument). Brakhage's long-held fascination with death, a central theme in many of his films (Miller 2005), reached its apex in *The Act of Seeing* and is the driving force behind the film.

The highest form of courage, says Becker (1973), and the form which receives the most praise from others, is the courage to face death. Brakhage, in a letter to his wife, wrote of his experience of shooting *The Act of Seeing*, stating, 'I've faced something terrible here' (quoted in Kase 2012: 8). The production of the film can be seen, among other things, as an exercise for Brakhage in confronting the 'terror of death' that lies at the heart of our species, an attempt to capture, on film, 'the "worm at the core" of man's pretensions to happiness' (Becker 1973: 15). It follows, I will argue here, that *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* can be viewed as a deeply personal film. The majority of what has been written about the film, which is not a great deal, discusses Brakhage's style here in terms of distancing techniques. These distancing techniques include extreme close-up shots in which corpses become abstract shapes and colours (Elder 1998), and a lack of moralizing when compared to similar films depicting animal deaths (Testa 1998). The overall impression, in these accounts, is one of the film as being no more than a cold, objective record of factual events (Miller 2005), much in line with early films depicting simple, everyday life (Kase 2012). The statements of Stan Brakhage himself (1996, quoted in Miller 2005) concerning the production of the film, of course, cannot be taken at face value as providing 'the true meaning' of the film, but even there Brakhage contradicts himself and

provides little insight. In the following piece, I would like to draw upon the work of Ernest Becker (1973) and terror management theory to conduct a close reading of the film in the hope of complicating this accepted notion of the film as being an objective film-as-document. I would argue that the film is a first-person lament on the terror of death in the modern world and, as a result, and somewhat at odds with its nature of being a film which is notoriously hard to watch (Nichols 1991; Testa 1998; Kase 2012), *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* functions as a joyous celebration of being alive.

### **Brakhage and the documentary tradition**

Although Stan Brakhage was so prolific that applying easy generalizations to his work is almost impossible – Fred Camper (2002) states that Brakhage himself may well be the only person to have seen his entire output, which comes to a total of nearly four hundred films – he is still largely thought of as being a film-maker in the romantic tradition due to his celebrations of nature and the past and his lyrical, subjective film-making style, which is in stark opposition to the impersonal, homogenizing forces of realism and modernity (Miller 2005). P. Adams Sitney in his landmark study of the American avant-garde, *Visionary Film* (2002; first published 1974), places Brakhage very much on his own in his assessment of the major film-makers in the field, stating that Brakhage, in ‘the forging of the lyrical film’, is the exception to an otherwise collectively developed form ([1974] 2002: 155). In ‘lyrical film’, the film-maker is a constant presence throughout his or her film; s/he becomes the protagonist, with the camera adopting his or her viewpoint, inducing a sense of changing vision through camera movement, editing and the flattening of space akin to abstract expressionist painting, which all amounts to the impression of the film as being a person looking. Sitney describes Brakhage’s Pittsburgh trilogy as a conscious

effort to break away from ‘his excessive and frightening tendency to interiorize all that he sees’ ([1974] 2002: 388), by making subjects out of concrete establishments in an attempt to ground his vision by forcing it upon an exterior reality. Tyrus Miller points to the final scene of the film, which depicts the coroner voicing his notes into a tape recorder, as being Brakhage demonstrating to the viewer that his own position is ‘as the unmoved, unaffected recorder of the facts of light bouncing off of objects’. Miller echoes Brakhage’s remarks at a screening of the film, where he said, ‘It was nothing to be afraid of, it was only about light hitting objects and bouncing back and seeing it with your own eyes’ (2005: 190–91).

*The Act of Seeing*, says Kase (2012), privileges ‘The Event’ (Brakhage’s words) more than much of his prior work by limiting the amount of complex post-production manipulation, a feature which was previously something of a signature for Brakhage – *Dog Star Man*’s (1961–64) superimpositions being a prime example – and he labels the Pittsburgh trilogy as ‘observational films’ (Kase 2012: 4). Brakhage was attempting, according to Kase (2012), to depart from the dominant documentary tradition which dealt in matters of persuasion and argument and was perhaps best exemplified by the work of John Grierson. By this account, Brakhage aimed to return to the very first experiments in film by the Lumière brothers in order to create ‘views’ and to swap the ‘lesson’ of contemporary documentary for the ‘example’ of early film. Testa (1998) compares *The Act of Seeing* to abattoir films, such as Georges Franju’s *The Blood of the Beasts* (1949), to illustrate the point, stating that *The Act of Seeing* lacks the moral purpose and intent to provoke outrage that Franju’s film centres on.

Kase’s (2012) investigation into the production of *The Act of Seeing* makes use of Brakhage’s remarks during later public appearances as well as his personal correspondence in order to determine Brakhage’s intent with the film. However, some of Brakhage’s recollections

are contradicted by other evidence, or sometimes by other comments by Brakhage himself; in a notable example, Brakhage made a statement about the film's structure ('you see everything exactly in the order in which it was shot') and then contradicted himself the very same night ('the rearranging that occurs in the film[...] there is in fact quite a lot of it') (quoted in Kase 2012: 10). After studying the original negatives, Kase (2012) determines, using the numbers on the film strips, that much reordering had occurred, on top of the cutting of a significant amount of extra footage, and he puts Brakhage's inconsistencies down to a matter of his simply being uncomfortable sharing his methods. Brakhage employed very little post-production image manipulation, but there were several carefully chosen different film stocks used in the making of the film, which underscores the nature of the film as a mediation of the events, not the events themselves. Brakhage appeared to be constructing a film-as-document and intended for it to stand alone, without explanation, without even the interpretive framework of a reliable production history, let alone the kind of argument found in more traditional documentaries.

### **Brakhage and the avant-garde**

Situating *The Act of Seeing* within the avant-garde tradition produces useful points of comparison, of similarity rather than the (still useful) difference which is produced by considering it only in terms of documentary film-making. Brakhage acknowledged a great influence from Marie Menken, whose work as cinematographer on *The Geography of the Body* (1943) features the same kind of 'literal intimacy with the flesh' (Testa 1998: 275) as *The Act of Seeing*. Both of these experimental films involve shooting in very close proximity to naked human subjects. Menken explores the bodies of living subjects, but Brakhage is able, due to the circumstances of his shoot, to push this even further. At times, he practically enters into his dead

subjects, pushing his camera almost inside a de-brained skull to see a person's eyes from within. *Geography*, according to Testa (1998: 294), is the seminal avant-garde 'body film' which many others, including *The Act of Seeing*, draw upon. The film is shot largely in extreme close-ups and through a magnifying glass, with the result often being a distortion of bodily features. This is not unlike the distortions created in *The Act of Seeing*. Though, whereas the distortions of *Geography* are created through lenses and close-ups, the distortions of the human body in *The Act of Seeing* are actual, physical distortions of bodies themselves carried out by the coroners with their instruments of dissection. The effective defamiliarization of the human body is the same, despite the very different circumstances.

The American avant-garde cinema has always been preoccupied with the naked human body and this is evidently true of both Menken's work on *Geography* and Brakhage's film, which often fixates on subjects' genitals. The two films also share another feature common to the American avant-garde: the handheld camera. Marie Menken was a pioneer of handheld camerawork and her *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945), especially, was an enormous influence on Brakhage's handheld style (Sitney [1974] 2002). As a more accurate alternative to 'handheld camera', Sitney usefully proposes the term 'the somatic camera', as it relates to the body as a whole and is more able to 'convey the identification of the mobile frame of the ultimately projected image with the movements of the filmmaker' (2008: 22). Brakhage was so enamoured with the somatic camera that it became a hallmark of his visual style.

The somatic camera, developed throughout Brakhage's earlier work, remains a key feature of *The Act of Seeing*, a factor in Fred Camper's classification of the work as 'applied Brakhage' rather than 'mainline Brakhage' in his review of Brakhage's output (2002: 69–70). The two categories are as follows: 'mainline Brakhage' represents films in which Brakhage

presents images ‘severed from previously predictable ways of knowing’ and ‘reinvents his vision by explicitly undercutting any expectations (about subject-matter, composition, rhythm, and so on) created by his previous work’ (Camper 2002: 70). ‘Applied Brakhage’, in contrast, reuses ‘some aspects of his already-established style to render an individual subject’, and this is the category into which Camper (2002: 70) places all three entries of Brakhage’s Pittsburgh trilogy. As an example of the differences between the two categories, Camper compares the ‘mainline Brakhage’ *Sirius Remembered* (1959) – citing images with ‘the quality of genuine apparitions [...] perceptual events that impinge on the viewer’s entire sensorium’ – and the ‘applied Brakhage’ *Act of Seeing*, which he describes as more of a collection of smaller narrative sequences (Camper 2002: 70–71). Despite taking the rather reductive action of dividing Brakhage’s oeuvre into two very general categories, Camper’s article deals primarily with the myriad contradictions to be found in most of Brakhage’s works:

Most of Brakhage’s films are silent? True, but their rhythms evoke music. They are ‘pure’? But they are full of little jokes, if one knows how to spot Brakhage’s humour. They are ‘transcendent’ to the point of neo-Platonism? But they include thoroughly modernist acknowledgements of their materials. They are anti-dramatic? Yes, but what about the four-part *Faust* series (1987–89)? Moreover, even his abstract works contain ‘dramatic’ moments of formal contrast and conflict that set up expectations for resolution, though a simple resolution rarely if ever comes. (Camper 2002: 71)

There is a great deal of tension in Brakhage’s films, a great many contradictions that make sweeping generalizations about his output almost impossible. There are hallmarks to many of

Brakhage's works and there are recurring themes (e.g. death), but attempting to force patterns onto his films, given the variety within his filmography, is incredibly problematic.

A variety of conflicting interpretations of *The Act of Seeing* by different commenters demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the film. As previously mentioned, many commenters attest to how difficult the film is to watch because of its graphic imagery (Nichols 1991; Testa 1998; Kase 2012), but there is a consensus which agrees that Brakhage's intent with the way in which the film was shot was to create distance between the viewer and the subjects. Tyrus Miller (2005) describes Brakhage's apparent apathy concerning his subjects, taking Brakhage at his word, despite his inconsistent accounts, that he was merely filming 'light hitting objects and bouncing back' (Miller 2005: 191). For R. Bruce Elder (1998), the close-ups in *The Act of Seeing* are one of many distancing devices employed by Brakhage which transform horrific images of death and physical destruction into abstract colour compositions. In contrast, Joan Hawkins (2000), breaking from the consensus in her look at 'the horrific avant-garde', states that the film is 'clearly designed to break the audience's aesthetic distance' (Hawkins 2000: 6), while Testa (1998: 269) discusses the film's 'unadorned and troubling directness'. It is in the nature of avant-garde film to force the spectator to question their responses to what is presented to them and to question traditional modes of interpretation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Brakhage's film should produce such inconsistent responses. *The Act of Seeing* asks very personal questions of its spectators, about how they are to receive such images, and, naturally, the answers it gets are prone to vary from person to person.

### **The terror of death**

Tyrus Miller (2005: 191) describes the apathetic quality of *The Act of Seeing* as apathy in the face of the result of death – the corpse – rather than apathy in the face of the natural, inescapable force of death. Miller employs the quote from Brakhage about the film being merely ‘light hitting objects and bouncing back and seeing it with your own eyes’, to demonstrate this apathy and how Brakhage positions himself as the ‘unmoved, unaffected recorder of light bouncing off of objects’ (Miller 2005: 189). Should this be the case, it would fit with Sogyal Rinpoche’s assessment of western attitudes towards death criticized in his *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (2002: 7–8). One attitude is a denial or terror of death; the other, which Brakhage would seem to be adopting by Miller’s account, is apathy: ‘People often make the mistake of being frivolous about death and think, “Oh well, death happens to everybody. It’s not a big deal, it’s natural. I’ll be fine”’ (Rinpoche 2002: 7-8). Death, in the West, means nothing other than annihilation and loss, and Brakhage’s apathy, following Miller’s interpretation, is an attempt to trivialize death, to reduce it only to a series of physical objects rather than a force or an inevitable state of being. However, as I will discuss shortly, *The Act of Seeing*, especially through the ways in which the images are manifested using the somatic camera, could not be further from a document of apathy. Another possible explanation of Brakhage’s intent with the film, following the interpretations of the film as confrontational and immediate (Hawkins 2000; Testa 1998), is that Brakhage wanted to confront death to specifically test his fear of it, to face up to ‘the terror of death’. This idea has its grounding in basic human psychology and appears to be a much more persuasive argument regarding the level on which the film is operating.

Terror management theory, as a field within the motivation science discipline, investigates how human beings deal with this terrible knowledge that we will one day die, what Becker calls our paradox, our ‘terrifying dilemma’:

[Man] has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. (Becker 1973: 26)

Much empirical research supports the notion that self-esteem and cultural beliefs, such as the belief that life is meaningful, are terror management strategies (Solomon and Lawlor 2011). The cultural artefacts of afterlife myths serve as a ‘de-deathification’ of death (Yalom 2008), and as a species we distance ourselves from corporeal, animalistic activities such as sex and eating using constructs such as romantic love and table manners (Greenberg et al. 2008). Such corporeal aspects of our existence remind us that we are animals, like any other, and that, like any other animal, we must die; this death-reminder is termed, in terror management theory, ‘mortality salience’ (Greenberg et al. 2008). *The Act of Seeing* is destined to be a work of mortality salience, and judging from Brakhage’s comments to his wife – ‘I’ve faced something terrible here’ (quoted in Kase 2012: 8) – the production of the film had this effect on him.

### **Modern death in Allegheny County morgue**

As county coroner Dr Cyril Wecht and his colleagues wheel in the first of the corpses to be examined and measured with cheap plastic rulers, there is a distinct focus on the physicality of the body – its weight, its coldness, its status as an object – and, particularly, those parts of the body which were once associated with the height of physical sensation (the hands, the penis) which are in death rendered dumb. A short sequence of a coroner pressing on a corpse’s torso demonstrates a rippling effect under the skin of the stomach as liquefied organs shift under

pressure. A shot of the first corpse being rolled onto its side reveals signs of defecation, dark stains around the anus and legs that indicate the common post-death expulsion of excrement. Sex, eating and defecation are defining themes of the initial examinations and, should that not be sufficient to induce mortality salience by making us confront our status as animals, the coroners later unpack the corpses' innards and dismantle the ribcages in scenes reminiscent of a local butcher's shop. There is no escaping our animal nature while watching this film, though it is not merely a depiction of grotesque acts committed upon corpses; there is a process, a ritual, an administrative function to the horrors. The film depicts the autopsy process seemingly in its entirety, from the arrival of a new corpse to recording the final report. To call *The Act of Seeing* a film about death and leave it there would be to overlook Brakhage's status as a romantic filmmaker and to miss the inherent critique of modernity that lurks beneath the surface of his images of death. *The Act of Seeing* is very much a film about *modern* death.

Brakhage's attention to the physical nature of human beings, to the touching of the corpses as well as the spaces within the corpses post-unpacking, banishes considerations of the spiritual and leaves only the horror of the rational. The pursuit of knowledge became paramount after the Enlightenment as old-world superstition was cast aside, and there is no more concrete example of the annihilation of spirituality than can be found in the literal dismantling of human beings to find a cause of death. Once the calling of the Church, explanations for death are now in the hands of science, and the scientists must dig into the flesh itself for answers. They must remove all that can be removed and complete the necessary paperwork. Brakhage's camera witnesses the brain being removed and the footage is sped up to emphasize the frantic pulling and hacking actions which eventually free the body of all that could have been described as the body's personality. The body is opened up and hollowed out. In perhaps the most affecting shots

of the film, Brakhage's camera hides behind a white-coated coroner and catches glimpses of a woman beyond, laid out like an empty suitcase with her mouth open in horror, her eyes veiled by the coroner who shifts and threatens to reveal them. At 24 minutes and 25 seconds, an emptied man with his open torso and his open skull is pulled onto a gurney and in the coroners' struggle with his weight he almost seems to be resisting. It is almost a moment of black comedy, a desperate joke in the face of fear, to see such movement after seeing him robbed of everything that made him functional as a human being. The film's basic chronological ordering of events presents us with corpses which are progressively taken apart and taken from for the duration of the film. The film begins with dead people and ends with meat. The shots following the empty man's protest depict his internal organs being placed on a table, weighed and cut with what looks like a kitchen knife. The human body in the modern world is a commodity. The process of autopsy is the inevitable end result of this thinking. Death truly is not the end; the end is butchery and administrative procedure.

Testa's (1998) assessment of *The Act of Seeing* as lacking the moralizing and provocative intent of *The Blood of the Beasts*, Georges Franju's abattoir film, seems somewhat misjudged (or at least not applicable) when the film is viewed as a treatise on modernity. Franju presents images of the abattoir and makes a moral argument about the treatment of animals, which is often interpreted as an allegory for the human slaughter of the Holocaust (Sloniowski 1998; Testa 1998; Lowenstein 2005). Max Weber's critique of modernity described the process of rationalization of the world as one which replaces mysticism with mastery and involves the 'disenchantment' of nature, the intellectualization of society turning nature itself into nothing more than raw material for industry (Allen 2004). Life is increasingly dominated by rational thought and bureaucracy; there is no escaping the 'iron cage' of modernity, and the logical

conclusion of this process of rationalization was the Holocaust (Turner 1992). Jeannette Sloniowski (1998) believes that while there are allusions to the Holocaust in Franju's film, it is a film that resists classification. The same can be said of *The Act of Seeing* due to its documentary aspects paired with a refusal of a traditional documentary-interpretative framework, and therefore, while the mode of address is very different, *The Blood of the Beasts* can be seen as a precursor to Brakhage's film which presents its own critique of the 'iron cage'.

The corpses in *The Act of Seeing* are real people who had real lives and real deaths, but the film foregrounds its own artificiality through the use of white and the previously mentioned wide range of film stock used to present us with subjects trapped inside an 'iron cage', the technological cage of film-making and projection. Images of whiteness and flatness are a recurring feature of *The Act of Seeing*, perhaps the best example being the previously mentioned woman lying emptied on a table with the white coat of the coroner shifting back and forth in the foreground. Sitney describes an emphasis on the flatness and whiteness of the projection screen on which the film plays as a key feature of lyrical film-making, to '[reject] for the most part its traditional use as a window into illusion' ([1974] 2002: 160). After cutaways to other corpses, Brakhage returns to the horrified, emptied woman. She is at first veiled, the coroner's white coat filling the frame, his head and hands not in shot. We see only her open mouth. The coroner then moves to the left of the screen and reveals some of what was concealed of the woman in the earlier shot: the top of her head is hollowed out, her skull partially removed, and her eyes are hidden beneath the skin which has been peeled down over her face. The image flashes white for a moment due to Brakhage editing in-camera. These flashes are common in this sequence, which at first shows a hint of emotion (the trace of horror in the dead woman's mouth) before emphasizing the illusion of that emotion. These flashes emphasize the film's status as an image

projected on a screen and the revelation of the woman's de-brained skull presents evidence of her unquestionable lack of emotion. The woman is not horrified. She has no means by which she can be horrified. The horror on her face is an accident of how her mouth has fallen, nothing more. It is an illusion, just as the film itself is an illusion of reality. The whiteness of the flashes and the coroner's coat leave the projection screen with vast areas which remain a projection screen without colour to cover it. The screen becomes visible and the technological artifice of film is revealed. Every corpse in the film is, therefore, part of this system, a result of the technology that projects its image.

The flashes resulting from Brakhage's in-camera editing emphasize the whiteness of the screen and thus the technological trappings of what is being seen, its status as a film, but they also add to the effect created by the somatic camera, namely that the film is the product of one person whose physical being is almost inhabited by the camera: a lyrical film. These flashes occur throughout, but a good example of their use is when we (and Brakhage) are shown the horrified woman with her emptied skull who is at first obscured and then revealed by the coroner. The flashes occur after moments of seeing, but another flash occurs as the coroner veils the woman by standing in front of the camera. The flashes have something of the effect of seeing Brakhage blinking. When it gets too much, there is a flash and a cut to something else. When Brakhage looks through his camera at the horrified woman, waiting for the swaying coroner in the foreground to reveal her, there is a flash on a cut indicating in-camera editing, but we return to the coroner to the exact same shooting position in the next shot. This creates an impression of not wanting to look, of trying to look away and being unable to; Brakhage turns his camera off, then turns it back on again on the same subject a moment later. The camera shakes in the close-ups of this and of other sequences. Camera-shake is a common result of handheld work, but

Brakhage's somatic camera does not just shake, it trembles. In this way, the body which is the most visible in *The Act of Seeing* is Brakhage's own. It is a film which deals in affect, not only in its relationship to the spectator through its status as a work of mortality salience, but also as a document of the filming experience. Brakhage states,

I barely made it as it was through it, gripping the camera more fervently than I ever had before or since in my lifetime[...] um, if they brought any children in, which they usually did, I don't think I could've made it. (Brakhage 1996)

The *Eyes* of the film's title are not those of the viewers, but of Brakhage himself.

### **The joy of *The Act of Seeing***

The trembling somatic camera attests to Brakhage's 'terror management' in the face of death, through the 'blinking' of the editing and the flash frames and through the constant tension provided by the urge, of Brakhage, to look away. The film is a critique of modernity, of the place death has been granted in the modern world (administrative, impersonal). Echoing Franju's moralizing in *Blood of the Beasts*, Brakhage presents the act of autopsy in all of its hideous reality in order to emphasize how far we have fallen. Brakhage does not do this in a traditional documentary form with explanation and narration but allows the images to speak for themselves: 'This is what they are doing to us.' Brakhage does not use a traditional documentary framework; the film is constructed from a very specific point of view: it is constructed from the point of view of someone who is afraid. Its camera trembles and hides behind the coroners, leaping back when

it gets too close, and the absence of a soundtrack provides room in which to think, to breathe, to hear one's own breath and consider what happens when the breathing stops.

Kase discusses how *The Act of Seeing* was a departure in its lack of subjectivity, and quotes Brakhage to advance the claim that the film is about 'the core visual facts of the work' (2012: 4). However, many of the visual facts of the work include elements of Brakhage's somatic camera, in-camera editing and emphasis on the whiteness of the projection screen, not simply the actions of the coroners. These elements belie the film's supposed objectivity as a film-as-document. Documents are an instrument of modern life. The coroners deal in documents, in labels and cold description, in systematic deconstructions of all that constitutes human life. *The Act of Seeing* is a film about emotion, about affect more specifically, about the vague but overwhelming terror that comes from being reminded of one's own mortality and animal nature. Brakhage's camera zooms and shakes in a handful of moments during the film (at 30 minutes, 33 seconds, for example, overlooking a man lying emptied on a table), echoing the camerawork of *Sirius Remembered*, which Camper describes as presenting 'genuine apparitions' (2002: 69). There is an attempt to resurrect Sirius with the swooping camerawork, an effort to restore the liveliness of the dead dog, and this is echoed during Brakhage's zooms and swoops in *The Act of Seeing*. In both, the action makes the subject's death all the more definite and unchangeable. Coming late in the film, the moment at 30 minutes and 33 seconds when Brakhage attempts to reanimate an emptied corpse can be seen as utterly futile, almost blackly comic, in the same way as the coroner's struggle with the heavy corpse at 24 minutes and 25 seconds. Such moments of desperate humour can be seen as terror management in action.

Becker asserts that 'the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation' (1973: 17), and work in the field

of terror management theory has built upon Becker's work to further outline how human beings live with this innate fear (Greenberg et al. 2013; Yalom 2008; Solomon and Lawlor 2011). *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* is a work of mortality salience, a reminder of one's own death, for Brakhage in the production and for a spectator in the viewing, and it is built upon a critique of the instrumental rationalization which has transformed our world into Weber's 'iron cage' of modernity. Brakhage's romanticism shines through in his uncontrollable horror at the sight of Godless procedure and mundane, administrative butchery, and while the film is a difficult one to watch, its function as a reminder of certain death cannot help but produce extreme affective responses. To complicate Becker's (1973: 26) account of humans as torn apart by their awareness of their 'towering majesty' over the rest of the animal kingdom and their foreknowledge of their own death, Irvin Yalom (2008), in his *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*, expresses the joy of mortality salience and, inadvertently, the joy which can be found in *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*:

Keep in mind the advantage of remaining aware of death, of hugging its shadow to you. Such awareness can integrate the darkness with your spark of life and enhance your life while you still have it. The way to value life, the way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost. (Yalom 2008: 147)

### **Contributor's details**

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### **Suggested pull quotes**

*The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* functions as a joyous celebration of being alive.

'It was nothing to be afraid of, it was only about light hitting objects and bouncing back and seeing it with your own eyes.' (Miller 2005: 190–91)

[Brakhage] practically enters into his dead subjects, pushing his camera almost inside a de-brained skull to see a person's eyes from within.

A shot of the first corpse being rolled onto its side reveals signs of defecation, dark stains around the anus and legs that indicate the common post-death expulsion of excrement.

*The Act of Seeing* is very much a film about *modern* death.

Once the calling of the Church, explanations for death are now in the hands of science, and the scientists must dig into the flesh itself for answers. They must remove all that can be removed and complete the necessary paperwork.

Death truly is not the end; the end is butchery and administrative procedure.

Camera-shake is a common result of handheld work, but Brakhage's somatic camera does not just shake, it trembles.

Brakhage does not use a traditional documentary framework; the film is constructed from a very specific point of view: it is constructed from the point of view of someone who is afraid.