



The Riddle of Lumen (1972)

Dance of Riddles: New by Stan Brakhage

5 Films, 1972-90

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THREE HAND-PAINTED FILMS: NIGHTMUSIC (1986); *RAGE NET* (1988); *THE GLAZE OF CATHEXIS* (1990); 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes; *THE RIDDLE OF LUMEN* (1972); 16mm, color, silent, 14 minutes; *PASSAGE THROUGH: A RITUAL* (1990); 16mm, color, sound by Philip Corner, 50 minutes.

The classical riddle was meant to be heard, of course. Its answers are contained within its questions; and on the smallest piece of itself this possibility depends upon SOUND — “utterly,” like they say... the pun its pivot. Therefore, my *Riddle of Lumen* depends upon qualities of LIGHT. All films do, of course. But with *The Riddle of Lumen*, “the hero” of the film is light/itself. It is a film I’d long wanted to make — inspired by the sense, and the specific formal possibilities, of the classical English language riddle...only one appropriate to film and, thus, as distinct from language as I could make it.

—Stan Brakhage, note for *The Riddle of Lumen*



The Riddle of Lumen (1972)

The Riddle of Lumen is made up of some two hundred shots which seemingly refuse any linear or hierarchical reading. Each shot appears to be of no more or no less importance than any other. Some shots are shorter than others, some longer; some contain movement while others are static. The idiosyncratic nature of the different shots, the different camera stocks, textures, granular composition, colors, the flash frames, flares, and variants of focus; all are apparently subsumed to a level of equality if not necessarily equanimity. The “riddle” is laid out with a poker face that claims impartiality.

While it is true that the lexicon Brakhage employs in *The Riddle of Lumen* is solely a visual one, and that he may have succeeded in making a film “as distinct from” (one needs to interject here *verbal*) “language” as he could, the space wherein the film ultimately unfolds — the viewer’s mind — cannot be pinned down as a fixed site incapable of different readings, especially the one where “language” and signs play the biggest part, narrative.

The second shot of *The Riddle of Lumen* is of a padlock. Though brief, this somewhat foggy and obscure image can define the film (if one wants it to). It is accompanied — or brought *to* the viewer — by a dramatic forward lunge of the camera, a movement of in-your-face violence seemingly out of character with the tenor of the film as a whole. The shot’s importance is not however its capacity to viscerally catapult the viewer forward, but rather the intellectual movement *back*, out of the film, that one experiences. The viewer moves from the *primarily* visual space of the film to the — as Brakhage has set it up — antithetical literary space of the title, inscribed a few just seconds before in black leader. Lock.. key.. solution... riddle — one reading (among many) of one shot (among many). While the film (and Brakhage in his note quoted above) tries to establish *light* and the textures that light reveals as its content (read: “hero”), individual shots like that of the padlock ultimately derail the rather suspect notion of a singular protagonist progressing through a non-linear and non-literary non-narrative.

Though the film is held together graphically by a tenuous network of visual associations, the film — or better yet, the images that make up the film — can never slough off the narrative(s) it/they are embedded in. Brakhage’s valiant resistance to what Hollis Frampton referred to as the “house of the word,” his dream of the

untutored eye of the child (“Imagine a world unrul’d by man-made laws of perception...”), in *The Riddle of Lumen* meet up with (and not in opposition to) an equally strong and immovable tendency for the viewer to make meaning (stories) from even the most minimal of images.



Passage Through: A Ritual (1990)

It was with a minimal number of images that Brakhage constructed *Passage Through: A Ritual*, an equally dense though vastly different film that is very ambiguous in its relationship towards light. The film was occasioned by Brakhage receiving a tape of Philip Corner’s “Through the Mysterious Barricades, Lumen (after F. Couperin)” and subsequently deciding to “set it to film.” According to Corner, the composition had been inspired by a viewing of *The Riddle of Lumen*.

Both in their number and in what they convey on a representational level, the images of *Passage Through* are sparse. Yet paradoxically it is this paucity of imagery that gives the film its strength. As in *The Riddle of Lumen*, there is a level of equality established between the images, but it is not something translatable into levels of value. Again, a delicate balance is struck between significance and insignificance. The lack of imagery on the one hand leads the viewer to be generous in its affording of value to each image, while at the same time, suspect of any such value at all. The gaps between images are pregnant spaces full of anticipation and apprehension. There is no basis for security. Each image becomes precious. Corner’s composition, instead of occupying a constant, stable position, further contributes to the feeling of groundlessness with its abstraction, its tentativeness. and even the tension between its source (a Couperin piano piece) and itself.