From Robert Breer, *Blazes* (detail), 1961

FILM AND VIDEO

Robert Breer's *Blazes*: Animation on Fire

By Alla Gadassik Apr 3, 2018

The title of Robert Breer's film *Blazes* (1961) might refer to the breakneck speed of visual impressions that flood the screen as the reel gallops through the projector's gate. Bold, abstract figures and densely layered strokes of paint rush forward to turn the screen into a continuously morphing field of texture and color. *Blazes* feels "fast," even though it technically runs at the standard speed of twenty-four frames per second. The condensation of so many impressions into every second of screen time means that many images flicker by faster than our threshold of recognition. Some images are held for a few frames, but most appear and are replaced so quickly that the edges and hues of one shape bleed into the next, creating new, seemingly impossible compositions that exist only in the spectator's mind (film scholar Scott MacDonald calls them "retinal collages").[1] Pausing the film to search for a particularly striking and memorable image will often reveal that it doesn't actually exist on the filmstrip, or else it is markedly different from how it appears in projection. It is startling to discover that the film's rapid pulse of optical transformations was produced using just one hundred 4-by-6-inch index cards, painted by the artist and arranged into a diverse array of permutations (four thousand frames in all).

Nine stills from Robert Breer, *Blazes* (1961).

At the same time, without any consistent figures or moving characters to follow in the frame, most spectators lose the typical cues for estimating the passage of time and experience this film as either much shorter or far longer than its modest running time of three minutes. Every time I show the film, at least one spectator remarks that it lasts "forever," usually with an exasperated sigh. Since this is a reaction Breer anxiously anticipated when he showed the film at CMOA in 1970, we cannot simply ascribe it to dwindling attention spans in the digital age.[2] For any viewer unaccustomed to abstract animation, *Blazes* will feel like either a spectacular and breathtaking flight or a jarring ocular burn.

For me, "blazes" is also an apt description of the strong tactile and visual sensations I get when watching this film. The majority of the film's individual images are rendered in black pigments and gray washes, but occasionally a few strokes of bright red or golden yellow flash

on the screen to set its charcoal surface on fire. These bursts of warm, saturated color against a grayscale palette feel like flames rhythmically licking the ashes of surrounding frames. Breer amplified the effect by inserting frames consisting of negatives printed from the original images; this means that white index cards with dark strokes alternate with black cards (the negatives) with white strokes. The result is a flicker that makes the screen crackle with energy.

Robert Breer in Pittsburgh. (Photo: Michael Chikiris, 1970)

Blazes lacks the autobiographical touches that appear in many of Breer's other films, like the domestic objects and home movies he frequently used as material for his projects. Yet there is still a personal element to this abstract film, in that it speaks to an important juncture in his trajectory as an animator. Breer first began to animate in the 1950s while living in France, where his focus was on painting austere geometric abstractions. His paintings from that period feature bright, solid color fields with sharp irregular edges, arranged in overlapping compositions with borders askew. Over the next few years, he became frustrated with the stillness of a painted canvas, which seemed to ask the artist to settle on a single finished composition—to find one ideal combination of a particular set of shapes and fix it for eternity.

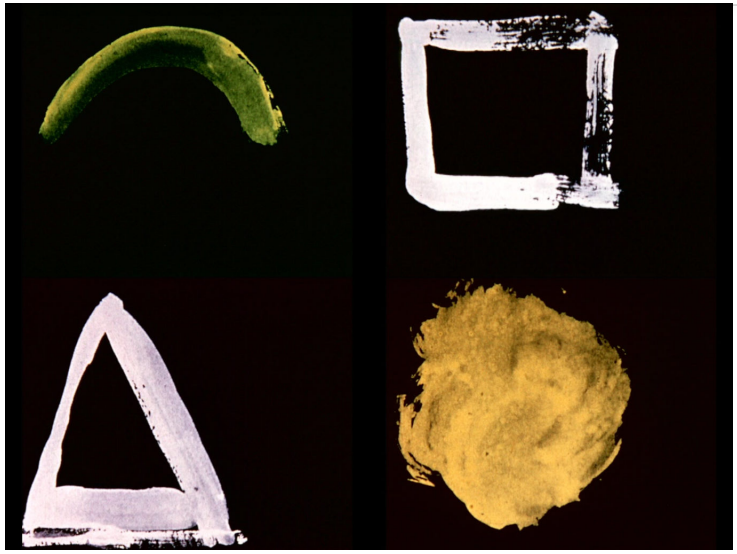
Searching for a more open approach to painting, Breer found himself turning to moving images, despite having renounced cameras in his youth (a classic case of rebelling against a camera-obsessed parent).[3] In his first few films, the *Form Phases* series (1952–56), Breer focused on animating abstract geometric cutouts, moving and rearranging them to play with the sense of depth and flatness of the film frame. Set in motion, the graphic forms that used to grace his canvases could now traverse the screen in numerous possible variations, and each variation would produce its own effect, serving as its own potential painting. These early experiments were followed by a series of collage films (*Recreation* [1956]; *Jamestown Baloos* [1957]), in which Breer expanded his materials to include found objects, newspaper headlines, and photograph clippings. He brought these together into rapid animated juxtapositions, peppered with political commentary and inside jokes.

Left: Kurt Schwitters, *Difficult* (1943). Right: Jackson Pollock, *Number 4* (1950).

By the end of the decade, however, Breer was back in his native United States, living on the East Coast in the heart of the Abstract Expressionist scene and performance art "Happenings." These postwar movements rejected many of the rigid, controlled formal qualities that defined the kind of art Breer had been making in France. Instead, they emphasized the role of spontaneity, chance, gestural expression, and bodily involvement in art-making. Whereas in Europe Breer had drawn inspiration from the meticulously constructed collages of Kurt

Schwitters and the disciplined grids of Piet Mondrian, in the United States he found himself in front of the frenzied drip paintings of Jackson Pollock and the frank, ecstatic body performances of Carolee Schneemann. It is unsurprising that this new environment had an effect on Breer's work. Some of the films he made during this period departed radically from the geometric collage-based approach he adopted in Europe in favor of playful hand-drawn sequences that explored the expressive potential of simple animated lines (*A Man and His Dog Out for Air* [1957]; *Breathing* [1963]). The artist's spontaneous gestures became increasingly integral to his work, as he sketched loose outlines and doodling strokes that pulsed with energy when projected on-screen. Once again, Breer believed that film could amplify qualities that still painting could not. Whereas Abstract Expressionist paintings created a record of movements and actions that had already happened, animated images could play out that action in present time on the screen.

In *Blazes*, these different trajectories come together for the first time. The film serves as a testament to the artist's back-and-forth transition between two artistic approaches: the controlled collages and pure geometry that inspired him in Europe, and the expressive, spontaneously generated works he encountered in the United States. Breer's film begins with a series of geometric forms (circles, triangles, squares, and lines) that are held on the screen long enough to be clearly recognized, before they are juxtaposed in rapid combinations to create an optical collage. Projected in quick succession, lines begin to pierce circles, vertical and horizontal polygons appear to crisscross one another, and hard edges are suddenly broken up by curves. These geometric shapes form the optical backbone of *Blazes*, as they are more rapidly apprehended when they flicker in front of the eye during the film's lightning-speed torrent of images.



Four stills of geometric shapes from Robert Breer, *Blazes* (1961).

Yet it is worth noticing that these shapes are painted with bold, thick strokes, without the use of carefully etched lines or paper cutouts. They look more like calligraphic signatures than pure abstract forms. There is a gestural roughness to them that Breer had toyed with previously (in *Eyewash* [1959], he began to tear his paper shapes manually rather than cut them), but never embraced to this extent. Moreover, after dominating the screen for the first few seconds, the geometric forms are quickly paired with another series of cards that feature increasingly loose and wandering strokes. In this latter type of image, the compositions are wild and dense, made with different opacities of paint, varying thicknesses of stroke, and multiple colors. Whereas the geometric frames leave most of the background blank and generate a clear figure-ground distinction, the densely painted cards turn the entire frame into a single textured tapestry.

These two graphic tendencies—the more austere geometric frames and the more unruly, loosely painted frames—collide in the rapid flow of the film. The scratches and smears of the dense images optically fill the blank spaces around the geometric forms, endowing them with

texture and depth. The latter, in turn, cut through the crowded field of the busy painted surfaces to add definition and volume. For Breer, the effect created by combining two seemingly incompatible graphic approaches was a discovery he would pursue in most of his subsequent work. "Things in strenuous opposition to each other give off sparks," he said in one interview. "I like violent energy coming off the screen. I think it's temperamental."[4] Perhaps this is yet another possible interpretation of the film's title: the energy of oppositional images creates a spark that lights the screen ablaze.

Four busy, layered stills from Robert Breer, *Blazes* (1961).

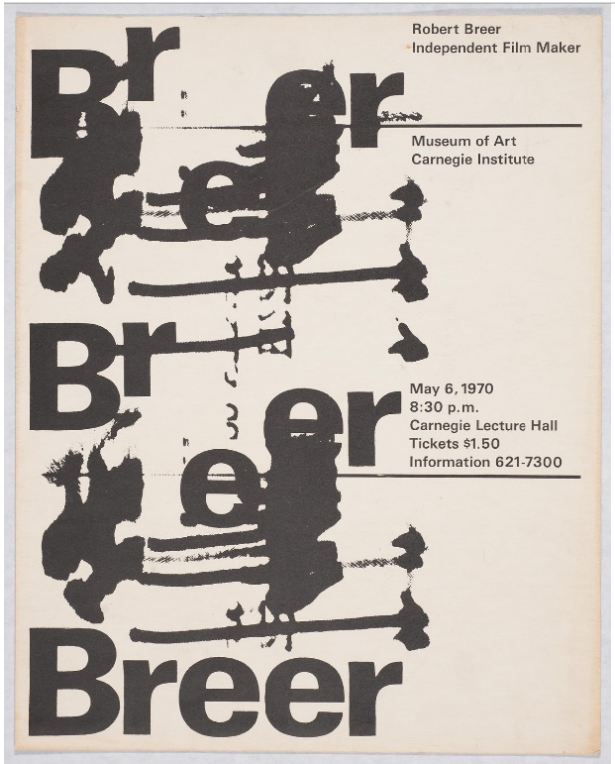
Blazes sets up a collision between order and chance. In principle, there is a highly organized and planned dimension to the film, since it was made with a finite series of painted index cards, creating a collage out of recurring images. At the same time, Breer inserted unpredictability into the equation by mixing the cards and alternating their order as they recur in the film. This is something he would continue to do in many of his later index-card films. Describing his preparation for *Blazes* at a guest talk he gave at CMOA in 1970, Breer said:

> I wanted [the cards] to relate to each other, not only in sequence, but as a family because when I made the film, I shuffled them like a deck of cards, and they would have to relate to each other in every possible way. This was…kind of a metaphor for the film, as a way of foreseeing the collision of all these different images.[5]

"Foreseeing the collision" of different images is really the essence of an animator's work. Animating a sequence means producing hundreds of frames different enough from one another that they generate movement on the screen, yet similar enough to form a fluid connection and thereby create the illusion of something moving, rather than a chaotic barrage. *Blazes* adopts this logic of animation, but propels it to an extreme. The frames are so distinct from one another that any illusion of fluidity is gone, and the piece is on the verge of disintegrating into visual chaos (it probably feels that way to some viewers). As Breer told the audience at CMOA:

> [In] the sophistication of animation you'll get away from this, because the usual intention is to make a flow between them, but…I'm very perverse so I decided to rupture this flow; instead of making a smooth transition for each 24th of a second, I thought I would try to break it up.[6]

Remarkably, the film doesn't break or disintegrate. There are enough affinities among the colors, textures, and shapes of the disparate images to create a sense of rhythm and pulsing continuity, showing how far animation can push the visual gap between the frames and still generate an effect of continuous movement. Moreover, as the same frames reappear in new variations, they become more familiar and provide visual anchors for following the transformations on-screen.



A poster advertising Robert Breer's 1970 appearance at Carnegie Museum of Art.

If we slow down the film, we can find many relationships between certain pairs of frames that suggest deliberate decisions. In other words, there are connections among the cards, even if the loose family resemblances that Breer spoke of are not immediately apparent during projection. For example, a bright circle on a blank background is placed next to a densely painted background with an empty circle at the center. This creates an interesting reversal of depth cues: the center and the periphery are suddenly inverted, as if a protruding sun suddenly became a black hole in the middle of the screen. Elsewhere, a thinly drawn curve is followed by a thicker painted curve with the same dimensions, which is in turn followed by a horizontal line. The combined effect evokes a mountain that expands and flattens; this sequence returns several times in the film. My analogies for these moments are subjective, of course, since the film actively resists any figurative interpretation. The point is that Breer seems to have arranged many visual connections, even if he allowed a degree of randomness. Shuffling his painted index cards before filming them meant that the animator, like the spectator, could enjoy some element of surprise in discovering the eventual sequences. But the initial design of the cards, the selection of which shuffled permutations to shoot, and the editing process—all these stages organized the chance encounters into a carefully structured film.

Breer first turned to animation out of a desire to evade the frozen stillness of a canvas and to explore a more flexible and open approach to painting. *Blazes*, however, takes the same step with regard to animation itself. A classically animated film might show movement, but it is a prescribed, unidirectional movement. If a scene requires a character to toss a ball, then one frame will show her arm slowly moving away from her torso, the next frame will move that arm slightly farther away, the following frames will gradually work their way toward the wind-up, and so forth. The overall sequence moves, but each individual frame is destined to stay in its own place; the order of images is frozen, just like the lines and shapes in a painted composition. By working with a prescribed set of cards but reusing those cards in numerous permutations, Breer opened up what could have been just a single sequence (a single four-second run of all one hundred cards in succession) into a multitude of sequences, each producing different effects based on the order of the cards and the length of time each card appears. In this way, *Blazes* frees each image from its one fixed destiny and allows it to return again and again to play new roles.

Blazes rebels against another convention of classic animation, which is the emphasis on showing a linear progression of movement. Film, of course, always runs in one direction from beginning to end (in this, I'd argue, painting has the advantage). Animated films carry an even greater burden to maintain linearity, since sequences usually need to be carefully choreographed from the first character pose to the last. *Blazes* runs in one direction like any film, but within the film itself the individual images refuse a linear procession and are reincarnated in new pairings. For Breer, this non-linearity held philosophical importance because it refuted the idea that time (and life as we experience it) proceeds inexorably from beginning to end. The cyclical permutations and reversals in *Blazes* suggest, as Breer put it,

"that time doesn't move forward, that things are going, but sideways, obliquely, down, and backward, not necessarily ahead."[7]

Topics: Film and Video

Endnotes

1. Scott MacDonald, "Robert Breer," in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 16. ↵
2. "Lecture by Independent Filmmaker Robert Breer," May 6, 1970, audio recording and transcript, Department of Film and Video Archive, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. ↵
3. MacDonald, "Robert Breer," 19. ↵
4. Breer in Sandy Moore, *Robert Breer* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1980), 9. ↵
5. "Lecture by Independent Filmmaker Robert Breer," May 6, 1970. ↵
6. Ibid. ↵
7. MacDonald, "Robert Breer," 34. ↵