

*This was written as a program note for my film Et resurrectus est. It was printed in a monograph, titled First Light edited, and largely written, by Robert Haller, for a program he curated, also called First Light, which included Et resurrectus est.*

### **On Picture (for Stan Brakhage): Note on *Et resurrectus est*.**

Whence this resurrection? The closing images of the predecessor film, *Burying the Dead (into the Light)* make it clear—not from the realm of darkness, but from the realm whose luminosity renders all things obscure.

Nonetheless *The Book of All the Dead* as a whole is a *nekkia*, though the Underworld it offers is not, as Homer's is, and as Dante's at first is, a voyage to a city of terrible night. But it is a trip to the land of shades, to the unreal city inhabited by those who were once women and men ("*omo già fui*").

Imagine all things made to be nothing. What would then be left? Not a pure negativity, but an indeterminateness that retains a measure of positivity. A present absence. Is this absence, this nothing, an imaginative projection? An external absolute? Be-ing itself, anterior to all beings? It is not possible to determine. This much only we know: though there is in this universal nothing, no (individual) thing at all, this nothing is not without be-ing. Though indefinite, it nonetheless is. It is not thought. It summons no words; indeed deranges discourse. For it disturbs, like a miscreant that threatens to return, particularized, anywhere and everywhere. This nothing is not weightless; to the contrary, as a fluidity of forces, as an atmospheric pressure, it exerts pressure everywhere, and always differently.

But if the underworld is a world not of things, but what is anterior to anything definite, why use images, which, after all, are representations of definite things? Because an image's ontology bears evidence, through a sort of inversion, of be-ing's ontogenetic capacities. For an image comes into evidence as the double of object in the very act of the object's withdrawing—this is the very meaning of representation. An image is the appearance that an object leaves behind as it departs.

The tendency to think of words and images as essentially alike since both belong to the genus of representations has pernicious effects. An image differs from a word (at least most words) insofar as it refers through resemblance, and resemblance confers on the referring object a density of its own. The unique phenomenology of resemblance is evidence in those occasional moments when words' reference is achieved through its likeness to what it represents, in those occasional moments we call "onomatopoeia." In instances of onomatopoeia, the referring tokens thicken with the presence of the (absent) other they represent—we say "the murmuring brook" and the word "murmuring" takes on a gravity, a weightiness, a substantiality profoundly different from that of the noun it qualifies. This substantiality arrests the mind, makes it take the referring item as an object in and for itself.

An image is like an onomatopoeic construction in possessing the substantiality of be-ing. An image is not a transparency that our mind passes through on the way to apprehending the object it refers to. An image is actually the double of the object, the appearance that an actual being leaves behind as it departs—the ghost of departed objects one might say (pace Bishop Berkeley). In creating its own double, which it highlights through the *kenosis* of its withdrawing, an object indicates the ontogenesis of its own be-ing. It does this through the image, for an image presents, through a process of inversion, an archaeology of particular existents.

Every image, then, speaks of origins, of beginnings, of an *arche* that is too luminous to be apprehended. Every image is an evidence of fecundity. For every image belongs to another order entirely different than that to which ordinary existents belong. Husserl is correct to point

out that all conscious acts involve consciousness of something. What then can we make of this awareness which is not of anything definite, anything concrete, anything that definitely is? It is not really consciousness of something, but simply the awareness that nothing also is, the awareness that nothing is not without being. As it is on the side of object, so is the side of the subject—just as there is no distinguishable noematic object, so there is no definite noetic subject. There is, in fact, only a universality of a noetic process anterior not just to the formation of a definite subject but even to the division between subject and object.

In order to acknowledge its primacy, let us call that awareness which is anterior not just to the formation of a definite subject but even to the division between subject and object, “thinking.” All thinking is a revelation of a transcendent be-ing, and is, in its ownmost be-ing, itself a transcendence of the given (as an object of awareness). I claim that, insofar as an image is a leaving of be-ing, any form of awareness that takes an image as its object (and most forms of awareness do) shares something of thinking’s essential nature; hence the dimension of transcendence pertains to all images.

Because an image belongs to a transcendent order, it can seem so terrible. But there is more to its *terribilit a*: because the image reveals the substantiality, the weightiness of nothing, it reminds us that the other side of be-ing is not non-existence. It terrifies us with the prospect that seems to have haunted so the vast majority of pre-modern people (and which Dante’s *Commedia* allegorizes), that our passing out of existence will not be an utter annihilation. Images, as the leavings of beings, testify that to pass beyond is not really to go out of existence, that everything that is really is forever, that for be-ing there is no endgame. Film’s character as midden speaks to this condition.

An image also reveals the origins of time. A particular existent reveals itself only in the mode of presentational immediacy (in the vernacular, not the Whiteheadian sense). But an image always speaks of what has departed and what is yet to come — it speaks of the departed because it is appearance that is left after the object has departed, and it speaks of the future because every image summons what it might become: the tablets are forever about to slip from the pressure of Moses’ right elbow (or not to slip—we do not know which, for the future *is* unknowable). The ontology of the future, like the ontology of the image, is that of pressure, a force, an atmosphere, exerted by something that has no be-ing; it is that of absent presence. Images shatter the consolidated presence of focal awareness and, by animating thinking, introduce the realms of the “has been” and the “yet to be” into our spiritual life. Images, by their association with thinking, introduce the Otherness of what has been and what is yet to be into consciousness; but they do so not as something that is, but as pressure emanating in that which has no existence.

Every image, because it speaks of origins, of beginnings, of an *arche* that is too luminous to be apprehended, and because it is an evidence of fecundity, has a proper association with nakedness. But the relation of imagery’s essential character with the nude body is more profound than this. Nudity makes us aware of the wisdom of modesty, which has its ground in the fact that our being is refractory to the light of analytic reason and available only to the super-rational understanding of the care human being willing solicits (a solicitation nudity renders more compelling). Nudity teaches us that our ordinary metaphorical system of historically-based rumination that privileges light over darkness is wrong: the strange intimacy of darkness that relates us to something we cannot apprehend makes darkness higher than light. Nudity flees the light, as be-ing slips away from the light of reason. Like nudity, be-ing seeks darkness as the condition for revealing itself. What is revealed by the modesty that nudity desires is that the Other is constituted in mystery; and just as every image of a nude person discloses the essential nature of imagery by its concern with fecundity, so every image of a nude discloses the nature of imagery, for the subject of every image withdraws into the modesty of non-disclosure even while it assigns to a double the role of disclosure. The image of the

nude, like every image, compresses the absence of what it depicts into a material force apprehensible by a sensibility.

A image of a nude body informs us, too, that our being is not external, and so is not apprehensible by the senses either. The image of a nude person offers paradigmatic proof of the non-reciprocal character of relation that obtains not just between representation and its object but even between visibility and being—proof that just as objects give us knowledge of representations, representations do not afford knowledge of objects, so too, while be-ing produces visibility, visibility affords no understanding of be-ing (since the object withdraws from representation, just as be-ing withdraws from visibility). That the frankness and explicitness of nudity conceal be-ing confirms that mystery is essential to the constitution of the Other's alterity.

A nude implores us to caress; but a caress acknowledges that we cannot close the divide across which the Other resides. In caressing, or in imagining caressing, we acknowledge that erotic relations are not really reciprocal relations as our sense of justice would have us believe. Caresses tell us that *eros* is bound into an unintelligible, unfathomable condition (and so a condition that cannot be reduced to signification), for they tell us that our most profound, most creative ("self-making") relationships are to a being that not only is totally separate, but belongs to a different realm altogether. They tell us, then, that we are most deeply linked to what withdraws from us.

So profound is the gulf that separates us from the beings with which we form our most profound and most intimate relationships that our be-ing and that of the be-ing which, in soliciting us creates us, belong to different orders of time. The status of the image makes this known to us as well, for, just as the image elicits expectation, so awareness the Other (an awareness that, like all sensory experience belongs wholly to the immediate present) solicits a longing to give care that belongs wholly to the future. This longing is evoked not simply by the Other's voluptuousness (though it may be); rather the longing arises from all that separates me from the Other. The Other, speaking to me, in the present but from the future, constitutes the ground of time as process. What delights us in the erotic relation, and in the caress, is the tension, and so anticipation involved in sensing a relation sufficiently deep to constitute our identity, yet not reducible to an identity.

But this is also the pathos of *eros*. For just as the image arouses a desire that it can never satisfy (insofar as it can never allow us to enter into and become a part of the world it depicts), so too the Other elicits a dream of merging that can never be made real. The future cannot be made present.

We long to caress a nude not to establish with him or her a reciprocal relation, but to acknowledge the alterity of the other is not absolute. A caress acknowledges that, even though the Other withdraws, what the Other's otherness (alterity) leaves behind is not nothingness *simpliciter*. It leaves behind a palpable absence (indeed, the image of the nude makes evident the extraordinary palpability of what has withdrawn into absence) that is hope, that is time, that is the very essence of alterity—the absence of representation that transcends re-presentation. Be-ing is at once exposed and hidden to *eros*, just as one withdraws from a caress even in the act of giving oneself to it. A caress explores be-ing—as that which remains elusive, that which cannot be grasped, that which cannot be reduced to reciprocity. A caress acknowledges that the goal of desire, the desire to make two flesh one, cannot be achieved; but it also reveals that *eros* has a higher goal, that belongs to the realm of mystery.

In these ways, an image belongs to the realm of the caress; and it is no poorer a thing than is a caress. An image, like a caress, reminds us that what is seen is never what shows itself. Both revel in the power of withdrawal to make present, and to make the present in its relation to the past and future. This power to bind is a potential for the truths we call religion.