This text on Brakhage was published as a monograph on the artist issued in 1995

In the famous concluding chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud posited as one condition for a thought's entry is that it meet the demands of representability. The unconscious must give verbal thoughts visual form; the primary process must translate words into images. Freud's work, which emerged from a lengthy self-analysis that he continued for the years between 1895 and 1900, furnished the first account of dreams that brought this strange and apparently irrational phenomenon within the domain of understanding structured by similar principles to those we ordinarily use to understand human behaviour. The richness of Freud's theoretical endeavour and the perennial fascination that our strange nocturnal activities exert on us combined to make the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (which appeared exactly at the turn of the century, but whose momentous thesis came to him on July 24, 1895, almost exactly five months before the Lumière brothers unrolled the first film show) one of the key events in shaping twentieth-century culture. Freud likened the mental work that produces the dream we experience as a process of translating "dream-thoughts [i.e., the latent wish that fuels the dream] into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation." *The Interpretation of Dreams* describes both the transformations that latent thoughts/wishes must undergo in order to find entry into the manifest dream and the form that the dream assumes through these processes of transformation.

Many thinkers and many artists have taken up the question of the nature of the latent thought/wish that is prior to representation. After all, it was part of Freud's purpose to understand the nature of the unconscious desire that fuelled dreams (and other human behaviours); and anyway, the desire to fathom the secret well-springs of human motivation exerts a constant lure on thinkers and artists. However, the description of his method for fathoming the latent dream that Freud proposes with his analogy to translation, as consisting of identifying the transformation principles that the dream-work employs, underestimates its actual complexity. For the dream is not an accurate translation of the original text and the actual rules one applies in making a dream translation are inevitably idiolexical, though the rules guiding the construction of any particular idiolect might be transindividual. The manifest dream does not have the same relation to the latent dream that a good translation has to its original; rather it is more like the relation that a very bad translation, one replete with mistranslations and misconstruals from which the analyst attempts to accurately reconstruct the original, has to original language text. Wherever the translation fails to make sense, one has to consider the sorts of mistakes in grammar people commonly make or identify, by means of similarities between a word that mistakenly appears in the translation and the word that should have been used, the reasons for the various erroneous constructions. Complete identification and correction of errors might even demand personal knowledge of the individual who made the translation and the reasons he or she confuses certain sorts of words. This provides a more accurate analogy to the work of analysis.

The earliest forms of artistic effort towards discovering the nature of what the dream-text or the manifest work of art elides were pattered on just such an understanding of the psychoanalytic effort to discern the effects of unconscious in the markings it makes in ordinary behaviour, parataxis, dreams, or neurotic symptoms—the effort to discover, in the disruptions of the work's form, the traces of the operation of another order more closely associated with desire. Such was the effort of surrealist artists; and we can still see it in practice in the splendid of films of Ken Jacobs, Harry Smith and Larry Jordan or the poetry of Robert Bly, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Philip Lamantia. Harry Smith, in an interview with P. Adams Sitney, set forth the grandest of the method's implications; commenting generally on the Surrealist method of automatic writing and specifically on the Exquisite Corpse, he stated: "Somebody . . . realized

that something was directing it, that it wasn't arbitrary, and that there was some kind of what you might call God. It wasn't just chance. Some kind of universal process was directing these so-called arbitrary processes . . . [B]y sortilege . . . everything would come out all right."

This effort has persisted to the very present, with a strength and vitality that has received too little acknowledgment; adaptations of the method, and commentary about its implications similar to Harry Smith's, can be found in John Cage and Steve Reich's compositions and writings. However, the effort had troubling implications, for its suggests that a work of art succeeds only where the artist's ordering grasp weakens and that a work of art concerns something which does not manifest in the actual substance of the work but which we discover only by examining traces of operation in the gaps and fissures it creates in the work's work. These implications were troubling enough that many thinkers and many artists resolved to try a different approach: they would attempt to learn something about this experience by exploring primordial forms of awareness, archaic forms of experience that have not yet been subjected to the regulation of language and culture. Because such a primordial form of awareness might operate beyond the demands of representability to which Freud had posited the manifest dream is subject, its character might more closely resemble and, therefore, give us some indication of the nature of primal experience. We see such attempts in Merleau-Ponty's examination of synaesthetic and chiasmatic forms of experience, in the psychological theories underpinning various anti-intellectualist therapies, in the aesthetics of the free jazz movement, abstract expression painting, and open-field poetics, to give only a few examples. It is also a hope that Brakhage fervently declares in the opening pages of *Metaphors on Vision*.

The methods proposed for reanimating primordial forms of awareness, so far as that is possible, took many forms. This interest sometimes took the form of attempts at uncovering something of primordial experience through scrutinizing forms of awareness that have intimate relations with the body. Many commentators have celebrated Brakhage's use of the hand-held camera; what few have understood is that Brakhage's interest in the hand-held camera develops out of a complex fusion of gestural and mimetic interests. As a gestural device, Brakhage's hand-held camera left in the image it produced a trace of the energy that motivated the gesture—an energy which is at once emotional and corporal, since it arises from a place where body and emotion are not yet distinguished. As a mimetic device, it was used to embody the changes that occurred within the filmmaker's manifold of consciousness, for example, the shift of attention from one subject to another, or from one form to another. Key to both significances of the hand-held camera, however, is its close tie to corporeal activities. And one key to Brakhage's interest in primordial corporal awareness, explanatory power of which becomes evident when we watch *Dog Star Man*, is the connection that Wilhelm Reich drew between the corporeal knowledge and cosmic awareness.

Over the course of his career, Brakhage's interest in primordial forms of awareness, in awareness that has close ties to the body, has become ever more radical. This transformation of interests has developed in several stages. In the first phase, Brakhage's films, and his writings, on film propose an expanded conception of vision. During this period Brakhage wrote extensively about paying heed to aspects of vision that, because we find little use for them, we ordinarily filter out of the percepts before they enter our awareness. In this period Brakhage lectured and wrote about images produced by physical stimulation of the retina (e.g., the moving colour patterns that children produce by rubbing their eyes), the transformations of the spatial and colouristic qualities of a mental image that occur in moments of intense emotion, and the possibility that humans, by acts of attention, can become aware of sights carried in wavelengths of light-energy that lie beyond the spectrum to which we ordinarily respond. And, what is most important, he attempted to embody all these forms of vision in his films. As he pointed out in December 1965, relatively early in his career, to an important gathering in Berlin:

> I have always taken seeing to be anything that comes to me in the form of an image, whether it be closed-eye vision, the dots and whirls and shapes that come when the eyes are closed and that can be see when they are open; memory, the remembering of images or the in-gathering of light in the immediacy of the eyes' opening.

This expanded conception of vision was important, but it was the effect of his including hypnagogic images ("hypnagogic" in Andrew Lang's sense, as intending images produced by physical stimulation of the retinal) that proved crucial to the subsequent development of Brakhage's work, for Brakhage frequently used handpainted forms layered over photographed images. While these superimpositions also had much to do with collage-related forms which Brakhage was developing at the time, they had the effect of transforming the screen into a field of energy that undergoes perpetual change. The idea that a visual form acts as a dynamic generator was to have crucial impact on the developments that were to take place in Brakhage's filmmaking.

After several years spent pursuing forms that could convey the dynamics of primordial awareness, Brakhage began to identify the film medium's special virtue not in orthodoxly modernist terms, but in terms of its capacity to convey what he called "moving visual thinking." The idea, as Brakhage expounded it through the later 1980s, is fabulously elusive. It seems, however, to have to do with a transitional form of awareness that exists only fleetingly and mostly without our being consciously aware of its contents. It is the form that an incipient percept possesses when the mind has not yet labelled it as belonging to a certain generic type and has not yet filled out details of its form. He describes moving visual thinking in an article in the Canadian periodical *Musicworks* 55 (Spring 1993) as a form of awareness that is close to the nervous system's actual excitement.

The idea that a visual form can convey the energy transmitted in neuronal stimulations also relates to the idea that certain kinds of visual forms are close the body. Brakhage's hand-painted films work out the means for conveying the surge of electrical energies within the body, the exchanges of electrical excitement that occur at our nerve endings and that cause experience. This is experience *in statu nascendi*, primordial awareness that hovers at the edge of awareness, awareness that has not yet developed into the visual forms of focussed attention.

As important as the hand-painted forms proved to be for the course that Brakhage's subsequent filmmaking was to take, they were not the exclusive method for conveying the effects of primordial forms of awareness. Sometimes he used live-action shots, taken through crystals, prisms and other devices for refracting light to convey the experience of light before our minds have formed it into an image of namable objects. Thus, across the *Roman Numeral Series*, the *Arabic Series*, the *Egyptian Series*, and the *Babylonian Series* Brakhage tracked primordial vision to ever greater depths in the nervous system. But most of Brakhage's photographed films, too, had a similar end. A fundamental conviction that underlies almost all of Brakhage's filmmaking is that primordial awareness preserves an archaic inscription of the body. Brakhage has made well-known proposals concerning the possibility of revitalizing a form of awareness before the child acquires the capacities to use language denotatively, to use language to map the world into differentiated existents. Such awareness is a remnant of a realm that preexists the acquisition of language and the form of the bonds between the elements of language and the imagoes that are formed in, and that reciprocally support, the processes of self-integration; it comes from a realm that exists before the construction of that form of subjectivity that depends on self-enclosing processes of differentiation and individual identification and prior to the formation of the bonds between language and the imagoes of individuality that develop in the processes of self-integration. When the effects of a work of art loosen the hold that ordinary, routinized awareness usually has on us, another form of

awareness emerges, from within the traces that mark any visual or verbal form, which belongs to a realm that exists before individuation. A force arises from an archaic inscription upon the body, or perhaps (as Brakhage sometimes suggests) native to the body, and it rends the fabric of language by dismantling the imagoes that support the illusion of individual and self-enclosed subjectivity; and if the rend is opened wide enough, another form of experiences emerges through it, a form of experience that belongs to realm that exists before the self-isolating features of the process of individuation and separation develop. This is the profound truth embodied in Brakhage's well-known assertion that the more deeply that an artist delves into the primordial layers of individual being, the more universal (i.e., transindividual) his or her art becomes.

This sort of awareness does not recognize individuality, temporality or spatiality; that is why Brakhage's forms put such a premium on spatio-temporal immediacy. It is pre-linguistic and so from a time prior to that when the bond between language and perception were forged; this is the profound truth conveyed by Brakhage's equally familiar claims for the possibility of developing a visual art the forms of which are separate from those of language. Such awareness is synaesthetic, so the visual forms that it produces engender tactile effects; the highly textured close-ups of Brakhage's photographed films and the swirling twines of colour of his hand-painted films provide fine examples. Because such experience arises from the energy exchanges that occur within the dynamic body, its material form closely resembles that of kinaesthesia; the momentum of Brakhage's cutting and hand-held camerawork and the visual dynamics of his hand-painted films suggest this surge and force of the form of experience.

Such experience registers in visual or verbal forms not as content, but as a principle of animation; that is, it feels like a pressure towards movement and rhythm. As rhythmic, it articulates representations and discourse even as it invades and ruptures them. It acts through the medium's material, not through narrative or representation; it works to pulverize rigid forms structured by the laws of representation and propositional language, and so to convert energy bound into a system back into a mobile form, free to roam everywhere across the surfaces of the body and of the artistic products that convey such corporeal lability. It precedes evidence, conditions of representation, spatiality (all the forms of which reflect the demand to maintain the distinction between "me" and "you," by refining and extending the range of the prior distinction between "me" and "not-me") and temporality (which demands acknowledging the distinction that infants do not make, between mental images of objects, people and events and the actual objects, people and events those images represent). Indeed, most tropes that occur with any frequency in Brakhage's *oeuvre* derive from such primordial awareness: this is true of the forms based on the idea of gestation—that in early films such as *Thighline/Lyre/Triangular* and *Dog Star Man*, in later films such as *Stellar*, and in writings such as the article that appeared in *Musicworks* 55—forms such as those based, and sometimes even representing, cellular splitting and doubling; layered forms, such as those created by the superimposition of loops in his most recent hand-painted films; the fragmentation of forms, and the subsequent reincorporation of these fragments within a more provisional unity by softening the boundaries around the various fragments and incorporating all the fragments within a single luminous mass or, more frequently, a pair of luminous masses such as those that appear in *The Mammals of Victoria*, for example; the animated play of sundered forms; the coordination of effulgent events, whose epiphanic character is conveyed primarily by their elliptic manner of their presentation; and above all, the presentation of space as luminous colour.

The second form Brakhage has formulated for this interest bears directly on questions around representability, and especially questions concerning what it is that is represented in a poem or in any work of art. The modernists' answers to such questions rested on the sharp distinction they drew between poetic (or artistic) language and ordinary language. Their conception of the distinction between the two sorts of language rested on the notion that the

network of relations into which a term of ordinary language is incorporated when it becomes an element in a poem transforms the ordinary language term almost completely, giving it an almost entirely new meaning that depends primarily on it relation with other elements in the poem and only secondarily, if at all, on its ordinary language significance. One could offer analogous comments about the way a photographed object changes and becomes imbued with new meaning when it becomes an element in a film; and many have applied just such an understanding of poetic meaning to Brakhage's films. In fact, while Brakhage's films do involve a distinction between poetic language and ordinary language, it is not exactly this form of it, but a revision that the open-field poets introduced, that has the greatest relevance to Brakhage's creative methods. A decisive contribution to twentieth century poetics of the open-form poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Michael McClure (poets in whom Brakhage has a deep interest) was to recast this distinction, so that it turned on the matter of the language's force. Brakhage and the projective poets cast meaning as active force—they conceive meaning as depending on the effects of words, on what words do, rather than what they refer to. The key theorist of projective verse, Charles Olson, stated the idea in his renowned manifesto, "Projective Poetry," a text from which Brakhage has often quoted, when he characterized a poem as "a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" and as "an energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself, all the way over to, [*sic*] the reader." This view of the nature of meaning makes the poem's claim to being true almost trivial, for on it we do not assess a poem's truth by determining whether its propositions conform to reality (such a test of truth applies only to representational language); indeed, nothing outside the poem could be relevant to assessing its truth. A poem creates the world in which it moves, through the effects its energy has on the bodies of those who hear or read it, and it is in the poem's capacity to provoke flows of energy within the reader or listener's body that its truth lies. Poetic language is replete with truth in this sense, because it is full of energy, while representational language (and representational visual forms) is nearly empty of truth (again truth in this sense) because its referential bonds stable it and reduce its energy. Poetic language creates its own truth and such truth we do not measure by the accuracy of the propositions it offers to a world beyond itself; it constitutes its own truth by saying nothing about the world beyond itself—in fact, by offering no propositions at all. It effectuates its truth by instituting the singular reality to which its goal belongs, by inaugurating a reality which is other than the one we ordinarily know.

This conception of meaning depicts it as non-referential; and so, as Brakhage worked out this notion of meaning and its implication became increasingly clear for him, his films became increasingly non-representational. Over time, he has made an ever smaller portion of his films from photographic images and hand-painted films have become a larger portion of his output. The past few years have seen a marked increase in interest among writers, critics and artists themselves in the idea that poetic language is important not so much for what it states as for what it does. Among writers who have adopted the idea that what distinguishes poetic language from other sorts of language is that, unlike ordinary language, poetic language is never constative (to use J.L. Austin's term, intending the descriptive propositions that statements are used to make), but always performative and that it is what poetic words do that makes them unique, many have formulated forms that bring into evidence the process which drains artworks of referential signification. One means of highlighting that evidence is to create texts the propositional content of which the reader cannot render fixed and stable. Brakhage has resorted to this means on occasion, by making systematic use of contradiction. *Metaphors on Vision* exemplifies this form of construction, for it is not a manifesto of the traditional sort, that is, a polemical statement by an artist of his or her aesthetic credo. For, Brakhage insists, a contradictory statement balances each "statement" the text appears to offer; for each thesis that the work asserts, a counter-thesis exists, for each affirmation that it offers, there is a

corresponding negation. Hence, no single meaning for the work can be formulated; what remains in the end is the passion that fuels Brakhage's declarative acts. The splendid Romantic irony of both the extraordinary initial lecture Brakhage gave at the opening meeting of the first course in film history he gave at the Art Institute of Chicago (published in *The Brakhage Lectures* and *Film Biographies)* and *Dog Star Man* (especially *Part One*) have a related end, of rendering more complex, because more unstable, the relation between the *énoncé* (enounced) of the work and its *enunciation*.

The farthest reaching effect of the conception of meaning as action is the impulse to dynamize even photographically derived images. For the stable, realistically coloured photographic image provokes the illusion that the image's referent is the source and the end of its visual significance. Thus representation threatens to create the illusion that the image's meaning is fixed and singular, and this illusion threatens to engender in turn the illusion of the self that is stable and fixed, not the self in process that is a key to Brakhage's energetics. Brakhage's frequent use of fragmentation, the almost constant alterations in luminous intensity in his more collage-like films, his frequent emphasis on the grain of medium, use of visible splice-marks, transformation of speed of actions, the sometimes trembling camera work that inscribes the process of creation—a process that mirrors that by which his works engender their effects, and, generally, an entire repertoire of ways to bring the constructed object into awareness, reflect a desire to destroy any possibility that the actual object of awareness will recede from consciousness and that the image will be mistaken as a transparent transmitter that passes reality to the viewer unaltered. They ensure that we experience the constructed object itself, the film that we see on the screen, as a dynamic transformer that engenders energies in us which reflect the energies that impelled Brakhage to make it. This ensures that the meaning of the work is never singular, never a matter of discursive assertions that we can decode, assimilate and exhaust, but something to which we return often and experience differently each time.

What is most important are the extraordinary visual forms that Brakhage has created that have the purpose of transferring energy over from where the filmmaker got it, by means of the film, all the way over to, the viewer. Brakhage, too, takes an interest not so much in what visual forms say as in what visual forms do. Among the effects of works of art is a peculiar form of awareness, one that mirrors the crisis in subjectivity that is the subject of nearly all of Brakhage's films (and perhaps of artworks in general). Brakhage declared as much when, at that same gathering in Berlin, he announced that his works are the products of "crisis," which he described as any form of intensely emotional experience or, perhaps, an upheaval in consciousness/affect. We can see the crisis effects produced by the emergence of primordial awareness in such works as the *Arabics*, the *Babylonian Series*, *The Glaze of Cathexis*, *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse*, *Paranoia Corridor*, *Black Ice* and *The Mammals of Victoria*.

Four general features characterize much of Brakhage's oeuvre (though he is such a protean creator that any statement about his work will belie some aspects of his output); all features relate closely the conception of meaning as action. The first is the use of what are generally called self-referential forms, forms that direct attention to the film medium's material basis. The best way to understand these, I suggest, is not in the orthodoxly modernist manner of highlighting the work's constructed character but as indices of the works productivity; too, they ensure that the meaning of the work's enunciation (to use Grice's term) will eclipse the meaning of its statement, that its pragmatic effect will overwhelm its semantic significance. The second is Brakhage's insistence, both in statements he has made about his work and more especially in the idiolexical character of his images and by his highlighting the performative nature of his creative process, that his films be taken as acts authorized by a individual maker; J.L. Austin, one of the earliest and still among the most rigorous explorers of language as

speech act, pointed out the inevitable subjective nature of performative uses of language, with a sentence that Brakhage could underwrite: "The 'I' who is doing the action [issuing an utterance] does thus come essentially into the picture." The third is the sense of temporal immediacy that his works often elicit; the movement qualities of his work provoke such a fascinated response that we, their viewers, give ourselves over wholly to the experience of the present moment that we have too little mental energy, and too little mental space and time, to engage in the activities of retrospection or anticipation. We experience the work in the perpetually moving "now" that William James and Gertrude Stein celebrated. The immediate "now" is the time of action and Brakhage's use of the temporal modality of immediacy reflects the fact that the truths of enunciation are presentational, not representational. The fourth is Brakhage's frequent use of what I call perpetually regenerating forms; from moment to moment in those films that possess such forms, one manner of structuring the work seems to dissolve and another takes its place. Such perpetually regenerating forms reflect the open form method of composition celebrated by the projective poets, for affording poets (or filmmakers) the capacity to respond to "the energies immediately underhand" (as Olson put it). Brakhage's use of perpetually regenerating forms produces a mirror effect in the viewer, of the constant alteration of the field of energies the work conveys, and so the constant revitalization of energies. And, in conformity with earlier comments, it provokes the sensation of the body subject as being-in-process, of the labile subject as practice, not the stable, fixed subject engendered by the agency of the language of discourse, a language whose meanings are fixed because they serve constative purposes. Even Brakhage's frequent use, in his early films, of speed and of multiple layers of imagery relates to this energetics, for it serves the end of transforming even denotative images into dynamic generators. In blurring the "natural," i.e., denotation meaning of the image, it imbues the image with perlocutionary potency.

Most recently, Brakhage's work has evolved away from the effort to transmit the energies of "moving visual thinking" to that of constructing forms of even greater concreteness—forms, which do not offer themselves as equivalents for perceptual or corporeal energies but, strictly, as generators of energies. The gestural quality of work has nearly vanished, and he has attenuated his use of all-over forms. In recent works, Brakhage has reprinted loops in forms involving repetition, often superimposing loops overtop of one another. This new method of film composition has several consequences.

For one, the reduction in the surface diversity, a result of the use of repetition, brings the films' structural principles into clearer evidence; while Brakhage's films always provoke a quite different experience of time than Steve Reich's compositions, these new films do highlight their structuring principles in a way not altogether dissimilar to the way the Steve Reich's less systematic compositions (e.g., *Vermont Counterpoint*) do. So important is the idea of structure in these new works that in two of them (*Paranoia Corridor* and *The Harrowing*) Brakhage uses symmetrical or nearly central compositions, while in *Black Ice*, *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* and *Tryst Haunt* he uses centred composition—a marked departure from the all-over compositions that characterized his earlier filmmaking. (Associated with these centred compositions, that often invoke the idea of a circle, and sometimes even use circular forms, has been the remarkable development of religious sensibility in the works). Furthermore, the use of layers of superimposed repetitions creates tensions between the visual forms combined through overprinting, as one layer frequently possesses a different palette and different qualities of animation than the other (or others, since Brakhage sometimes combines more than two layers). Too, the size and colour relations between the two layers sometimes, as in *Stellar* and *Study in Color and Black and White,* create processive and recessive relations amongst the forms, with the general effect of drawing the eye through the virtual depth; this, again, is a notable departure from the use of all-over forms of the period of the "moving visual thinking" films, the purpose of which was to spread one's attention over the entire surface of the visual

form and so to engender a scanning (optical) awareness that more closely resembles those forms of awareness that are more closely tied to corporeality.

Finally, though, they open into the area that Harry Smith indicated in the quotation given towards the opening of this piece. Brakhage wrote recently:

> God dreams a tree, say: and the tree is in the brain of a human, any/all humans—this story a terrible fable to frighten little children into sleep . . . a tree enfolded within each slept child's mind, so that the dream of God and the dreams of the children are one. This, each, tree grows to a great height which (envisioned as branches) is/(are) in the stars—these heights and branches become the very dreamt limbs which straightaway connect the, now, dreamt stars; however the *forms* which these limb-lines delineate haven't finally any solidity separate from an ever extending dream web of God's dreamt tree.