

*First published in a special section of Rifrazioni 5 edited by Dr. Andrea LaPorta*

### **Stan Brakhage's History of Seeing: The *Scenes from Under Childhood* (Including Remarks on the Importance of Point-of-View)**

Brakhage's note on the *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967–70) for the New York Film-maker's Cooperative catalogue reads

A visualization of the inner world of foetal beginnings, the infant, the baby, the child—a shattering of the “myths of childhood” through revelation of the extremes of violent terror and overwhelming joy of that world darkened to most adults by their sentimental remembering of it . . . a “tone poem” for the eye—very inspired by the music of Olivier Messiaen.

Here Brakhage asserts his interest in primordial perception, in the way that the untutored eye sees, and notes that this sort of experience is an emotionally fraught territory.

In *Scenes from Under Childhood*, Brakhage strove to carry out that task mentioned at the opening of *Metaphors on Vision*, of seeing his children deeply. To do so, he attempts to recall features of his own childhood, including the perceptual world he inhabited at different times in his life. He attempted to recollect his childhood, for he understood there is a relation between self-understanding and understanding of one's loved ones

The first simple, daily impulse to make it was to see my children—to see them as something much more than mine, much freer than that possessive word “mine” would imply, to share with each and every one of them (and I have five) various parts of their life more directly than I felt I was being able to. Photographing them was one way (I'm most intensive and excited when I'm doing that) to begin a relationship of better seeing, or entertaining their world. But I felt that I had to do something much more than that, which was to remember my childhood, to relate in that way.

The project of *Scenes from Under Childhood*, then, was literally that of re-remembering—that is, of putting back together—Brakhage's various ways of seeing from earliest infancy through to the stage when his perception reached its developed form. He hoped that by re-remembering his own mode of experiencing as a childhood, he will become better able to understand the emotional vicissitudes of his children's life.

*Scenes from Under Childhood* was Brakhage major work in sixteen millimeter of the late 1960s. It is an extended work, in four sections, with a total running of over two and one-half hours. It realizes, as insistently as any of Brakhage's films, the Steinian ambition of using the material of everyday life: it shows Brakhage's children and his wife, going about their everyday life; it shows their home and its surroundings. Much of this material is presented in close-up, and often with superimposition (as often as not of the same object taken from slightly different viewpoints).

The four parts in succession represent a chronological progress of a sort: the children shown in the film seem a bit older with each succeeding part. This use of chronology is somewhat curious, inasmuch as the film is not a documentary of the children's maturation, but rather a chronicle of the filmmaker's effort to recollect the manner he experienced as a child. One might have expected, given the filmmaker's general commitment to Open Form methods, that the film would move through increasingly regressive, increasingly primitive modes of

experience, i.e., to be counter-chronological. Instead, it proceeds from what one might take to be the methodological *terminus ad quem*, from the culmination of the efforts to track perception back to its primal roots, and moves from there to present a Wordsworthian sort of autobiography that chronicles the history of the filmmaker's visionary faculties. Brakhage likely used this form, as it is better able to evoke the tragedy of senses (which Brakhage remarked upon at the beginning of *Metaphors on Vision*)—that as one grows, one's perception become more conventional and less intense. This conjecture about the film is borne out by the conclusion of Part I, which concerns the child's accession to seeing stable deep space images; as Marie Nesthus points out, Brakhage associates this phase with submitting to the will of the another (which Brakhage represents by showing a young girl attempting to feed the baby, but, because she wants for skills, doing so rather roughly).

Thus, after the opening sequence of Part I (on which I comment below), there appear indistinct visual forms that cannot be associated with identifiable objects. After the first few minutes, the forms become increasingly distinct and the objects they derive from increasingly identifiable. Further, any shots that appear after the first few minutes that seem indistinct can be retrospectively identified (or identified on subsequent viewings) as a blurry version of something that appears more distinctly later in the film. One soon realizes (principally by the shots' object matters) that we are being shown scenes of the sort that fascinate a tiny child: the floor, shown especially in the yellow section in many variants of colour and light; a stretched cord, that forms a diagonal cut in space; a leg, with no body shown; a gourd; Jane, as the mother. However, most of what we are shown does not embody the vantage point of a crawling baby; rather, it embodies the vantage point of adult, but an adult who is looking at objects that typically engage babies' attention, and is seeing them in a way that the baby might see them. Striking images of floorboards appear (many seen from closer up and held for longer times than are typical of the images of this section of the film, and in various colours and shades and, often, in superimposition, with one image of the floorboards placed overtop of the other); these images are redolent of an infant's entranced observation of his/her local geography, while the chromatic variations Brakhage produces evoke the protean character of young infants' visual sensoria. The images of three young girls appear, in various degrees of abstraction, but generally these figures are seen more clearly than what we see through the images around them—perhaps these images present Brakhage's imagining an infant's fascinated scrutiny of his/her siblings. A night scene evokes the mystery of that time.

The domestic images of Part II are grouped into a number of distinct segments. Here the children are a little older than they were in Part I and engage in different activities: they play dress-up, handle small objects and furniture, and play out of doors. We see them in their quotidian round: they eat, sleep, cry. Their mother and father are depicted more frequently. Much of this material is also presented in a number of variants, produced by changes in camera position, colour filtration, and film stock (resulting different palettes, different degrees of object modelling, different ranges of contrast, and different granularity); the variability of these images again suggests the instability of young children's visual faculties.

Part III takes even further the consequences of insights into the instability of the young child's perceptual manifold and the fascinated nature of his/her perceptual processes; indeed the transformative processes to which the images in this part of the film have been subjected are so extreme and thorough-going that the film images become almost—*almost*, but never completely—non-objective visual forms, pure constructs of texture and colour, devoid of representational import. These almost non-objective forms exhibit the traits of the fascinated consciousness that has the capacity to be absorbed by pure qualities, qualities that have a separate phenomenological existence from the objects they actually characterize. Particularly revealing of the relation that Brakhage's transformative techniques bear to the consciousness of

fascination is his use of close-ups: in this section, he makes especially radical use of close-ups that, by isolating parts of an object, abstract it into visual forms that accord with the manner the fascinated consciousness selects a part-object and transforms a highly cathected quality (that is, a quality in which a large amount of psychic energy has been invested) into something that presents itself virtually as an autonomous being. Further, the shots in this section are not equally abstract: some startling ruptures occur when a more descriptive shot is presented—at one point, for example, we see clearly a family walking in the woods, or reading, or riding in an automobile.

Part IV is the longest of the four parts and contains the greatest diversity. Both Stan Brakhage and Jane Brakhage, Stan's wife at the time, appear more often this part than in the previous three. This part engages with the mode of perception of a child who has separated him- or herself out from the environment; that this section of the film correlates with this stage in the child's perceptual development is established by the section's represented objects' being much more distinct one from another than they were in any previous section, and by the much higher degree of perceptual object constancy of which the section gives evidence (in its use of less radical means of transformation than the previous parts employed, and in its repudiation of modes of construction that abstract qualities into autonomous existents). The general level of emotional intensity that this section of the film evokes is considerably greater than that evoked by any of the previous parts, perhaps to indicate that the mode of seeing with which this part engages is one that develops as a child separates out from the environment; or, perhaps, to emphasize the tragic loss of the individuality of a person's way of seeing as he or she becomes socialized; or, as is most likely, to both ends. Accordingly, we see Jane Brakhage weeping, Stan Brakhage in a rage, the children fighting and crying, but also taking delight in the feel of grass and water on their bodies.

In all parts of the film, additional sorts of material are interwoven with this domestic material. These are of three principal sorts: First, there are photographs of the filmmaker and his wife Jane as children. Second, there are frames of a solid, uniform colour that, when projected, seem to flicker at different rates—the purity and simplicity of these colour frames contrast with the dense texture Brakhage gives to the domestic images by superimposition and close-up shooting. Finally, there are passages that present a highly textured screen, consisting of larger and smaller animated dots, shot through with elongated, roughly rod-shaped forms moving on a monochrome ground.

The film appears to be largely first person—in fact, to be what the film historian Gerald O'Grady calls a document of consciousness, i.e., a work that presents aspects of the filmmaker's manifold of awareness. Still, we should note that this assertion presents certain problems: Brakhage avers that his films are not really representational—and, given the number of non-objective films he has made, there is good reason to believe him. Moreover, some of the properties his visual forms (for example, those created by rapid pans) have no correlates in the field of vision. These difficulties notwithstanding, Brakhage's concerns with his films' active qualities give us a clue as to how to revise the idea of documentary so that we might make sense of his claim that he is a documentary filmmaker. Like Charles Olson's verbal constructions, Brakhage's visual forms embody energy that will be imparted to those who attend to them; and since experience is a matter of energy, by imparting energies to reader/viewer that are equivalent to the energies that the poet/filmmaker experienced while making the work, the poem/film elicits experiences that have similar qualities within the reader/viewer's mental universe as the originating experience had in the maker's. In this sense, the poem/film conveys experiences similar to those the poet/filmmaker underwent. The film or poem that results from openness to circumambient energies can therefore be considered a document.

Even in the context of this revised understanding of Brakhage's films as documents, the presence of the photographs of both the filmmaker and his wife as children initially seems to

present something of a conundrum. For it is easy to suppose that the photographs represent memories, or, rather (more in keeping with our revised notion of document), present occasions that stimulate memories. But then we have to ask, “Who the subject for these memories are, the filmmaker’s or his wife’s.” One might be inclined to resolve the problem by deciding that it is really a non-issue—that it could be either the filmmaker or his wife thinking about his/her spouse’s childhood.

That answer, however, is disingenuous. That there is a single consciousness to which all the events depicted in the film belong (and that, judging by the urination scene this consciousness is a male’s) is a key to the film. Moreover, the photographs are not so much stimuli to memory as evocations of actual memories. The project of the film is a monumental effort towards the recovery of lost forms of self-awareness; the photographs (both of the filmmaker and of his wife), like all the real world objects in film, belong to his transitional space (to borrow that term from the great child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott), a zone that mediates between the self and the world. These photographs of Stan and Jane’s childhoods differ from other objects that appear in the film in two respects only: first, they cast the film’s autobiographical project into highlight—they highlight the fact that the filmmaker is attempting to reconstruct the history of his seeing; and second, because they portray the filmmaker, they indicate the process of self-reflection. In sum, they are special transitional objects only because they reveal the method of the film; in other respects, and especially as being self objects, they are just like the other real world objects the film presents.

Brakhage incorporates these photographs into *Scenes From Under Childhood* to reveal the method of the film, for the use he makes of photographs show the process by which memory images come into consciousness—*Scenes From Under Childhood* is, after all, a film about *re-membering* (about piecing experiences from the past together in the manifold of consciousness), so using photographs to illustrate the process is integral to the film’s method. An example in this use of photographs occurs in Part II: we first see a shot of Brakhage’s first-born son, Bearthm, on a tricycle. This shot is followed by a photograph of Stan Brakhage, as a little boy, on a tricycle. The second photograph, however, is not simply presented as it is—rather, Brakhage presents it in a number of variants. He does this to show the process by which the mind works over the raw material of memory, to bring it in the end fully to consciousness. Thus, the photograph of a young Stan Brakhage on a tricycle is presented in various colours, with different degrees of sharpness (focus), and masked in various ways (as to suggest that consciousness is focusing on different parts of the image.)

But this awareness that the material of perception is formed and stabilized by a “framing process” that shapes the raw material of perception into stable images—and, more to the point, that this framing process depends upon other images, on which it models its shaping process—is only the first layer of insight Brakhage excavates in his dig towards the *materia prima* from which the mind constructs a communalized representation of the world. For after presenting these part-images of the photograph of himself, Brakhage gives us an intricate montage of non-objective shapes and flat colours; and then—as though to indicate transitory mental phenomena that belong to a less primitive phase of consciousness—additional images of Brakhage as young boy: a formal portrait and a picture of him sitting on a curb with his arm around a dog. Like the photograph of the young Stan Brakhage on a tricycle, these photographs are presented using devices (principally changing focus and matting) that draw attention to different parts of the image. Interspersed among these photographs are images of the more primary matter of consciousness, presented as abstract shapes and spaces of pure colour, and images of the filmmaker’s young family (to indicate the manner in which the present interacts with the matter from the past when a memory image is pieced together). At the end of the sequence, the tricycle photograph is presented, alternating between blurry and sharp, to literalize the process of shifting from the indeterminate primary matter of perception to determinate perception.

Part IV, the part which contains the highest preponderance of still photographs, presents a similar example: we see Jane Brakhage crying and still photographs of her as a child and, presumably, of her parents and grandparents. What distinguishes this example of incorporating still photographs into the film from the previous (involving the photograph of Bearthm Brakhage and Stan as a boy on a tricycle) is an addition layer of indirection. For we are presented the image of Jane Brakhage crying, and with images of her childhood. Yet, for reasons I set out above, we should not interpret this as presenting mental activities going on in Jane Brakhage's mind as she re-members (that is, as she pieces together an image of past experience), but rather as the filmmaker's efforts to imagine that process of recollection. Brakhage imagines the inner processes that might have induced such sadness (inner processes that resulted in the formation of distinct mental images that, by their association with other lived experiences, are emotionally fraught). But what he presents (or, more accurately, what he evokes by eliciting equivalents in the viewers' mental universe) are the results of his own efforts at recollection—they cannot be Jane's, since the problematic of the film and its methods assume the privacy of consciousness. The images of Jane weeping testify to the challenges Brakhage himself experienced—challenges that resulted from necessity he felt to imagine a loved one's inner world.

Thus, this sequence elicits the notion of Stan Brakhage imagining the contents of Jane Brakhage's mind, just as *Scenes from Under Childhood* as a whole presents the energies engendered in Brakhage mind's as he attempts to recollect in his imagination how he saw as child. In this regard, too, Brakhage's manner of incorporating still photographs into *Scenes from Under Childhood* reflects the basic method of the film: the indirection involved in the filmmaker's attempt to imagine his wife's mental activities, in "re-memembering" her childhood, relates to an homologous indirection in the film's general method—*Scenes from Under Childhood* arose out of Brakhage's wish to better understand his children. To that end, he tried—not to imagine "the world that children inhabit", nor to imagine the mental world of each of his own children, but to re-collect his own ways of experiencing as a child. He hoped thus to prepare himself to expand his empathy for his children. But, the film suggests, watching his children, and imagining what they are seeing and thinking and feeling, provides stimuli for him in his efforts to recollect the ways he experienced as a child.

If Brakhage's use of still photographs in *Scenes from Under Childhood* sets out his understanding of how mental activity transforms the prime matter of consciousness into memories, the passages composed of solid colour frames relate, in a particularly complex fashion, to that prime matter itself. That is not to say that these passages (which consist of varying numbers of frames made up simply of a single colour that displays no variation from one spatial region to another, but whose colours modulate through time) actually represent the prime matter of consciousness (and memory)—for after all, as the mental analogon of *materia prima*, as the absence of form, this raw matter of experience is not something that either can be brought into consciousness (it remains stubbornly pre-consciousness, and is transformed when one attempts to bring it consciousness) or can be represented. The pure colour frames stand for this pure potentiality which cannot be represented. That they stand for an active principle—a principle of potentiality—out of which consciousness emerges is a point the film makes several times, most insistently in Part I. That section of *Scenes from Under Childhood* begins with relatively longish passages of solid frames in various shades and tones of red (to evoke foetal vision, as Brakhage's note makes clear). From one of these pure red frames (that modulate among shades of red) emerge, first, abstract forms that we cannot connect to particular objects, then, indeterminate blurry, shapes that some viewers would recognize as belonging to specific objects, though they certainly could not identify with certainty the objects from which they derive, and then increasingly distinct images. Thus, this sequence shows at a smaller scale what the entirety of Part I shows at a larger scale: the emergence of consciousness from its prime matter.

The note on the film that Brakhage prepared for the New York Film-maker's Cooperative catalogue alerts us to an autobiographical dimension to this study of emergence of consciousness from prime matter and the formation of visual representations, for it encourages us to realize that we are seeing an autobiography in which a life is chronicled in terms of the history of its ways of seeing. The autobiography charts the homology among the development of a visual percept, the history of the artist's faculty of vision and, more generally, the artist's immediate consciousness (to adopt that Hegelian term), and the course of the artist's life (from the higher moment of pure potentiality to the less elevated moments of an ever expanding ring of actualization).

The use Brakhage makes of solid colour frames is also informed by his interest in Olivier Messiaen's music—by Brakhage's own testimony, a major influence on the way he conceived the visual forms for this film. Messiaen's fundamental notions about composition came down to him from the Symbolists. Among the ideas he expounded that had their provenance in the Symbolists' thinking about music and the arts is the idea that music evokes the experience of colour. As one might expect, Messiaen claims that harmonies themselves elicit synaesthetic experience—this is the basis of his famous idea of *chromoharmonie*—, but his reflections on colour and music were not restricted to a notion so simple (though fundamental) as that: Messiaen's musical system rests on a number of modes, “. . . a tempered system of twelve sounds . . . formed of several, symmetrical groups, the last-note of each group being common with the first of the following group. At the end of a certain number of chromatic transpositions which varies with each mode, they are no longer transposable, the last [transposition] giving exactly the same notes as the first.” Each of these modes corresponds to a range of colours—and Messiaen is astonishingly precise about the correspondences: “Mode No. 3 corresponds to an orange with red and green pigmentations (overtones), flecks of gold, and also a milky white with iridescent highlights like an opal.”

Messiaen's theory of music tied together *chromo-harmonie* and rhythmic form. The intensity of Messiaen's explanations of his rhythmic ideas did not result exclusively, or even primarily, from an exuberance regarding his ideas about his formal means, nor was his effort to contrive new rhythmic forms the result simply of a desire to expand the rhythmic resources available to composers. In fact, his commitment to developing new rhythmic forms—for example to work out means for creating non-retrogradable (or palindromic) rhythms—was the product of a deeply religious sensibility: by creating a form that runs identically forwards and backwards, one creates a form that is not subject to time (for, when time's arrow is reversed, such rhythmic forms remain unaltered). Further, Messiaen had a fondness for ametrical rhythms (often created through using added values, notes of short duration, whose values are simple divisions of the duration of the note that establishes the basic rhythmic tactus)—that fondness suggests a desire to formulate rhythms that do not divide time into an equidurational series, and that desire, in its turn, suggests an urge to avoid the spatialized conception of time against which Bergson aimed his philosophy. Messiaen's frequent use of polyrhythm indicates the same striving, as does his use of rhythms based on prime numbers (since they involve, minimally, the alternation of two non-identical units, and often more). These efforts should not be interpreted as efforts to create more intricate structures by applying more complex mathematical ideas than composers generally use—in fact, Messiaen insisted that many of these techniques were arrived at unconsciously, and that only later did he try to analyze their structural implications. Rather, they developed out of a desire, derived from Bergsonism, to avoid the mathematical and scientific conception of time and to replace it with a more corporeal understanding of time and process.

Marie Nesthus proposes that Brakhage's work with colour fields in *Scenes from Under Childhood*, and the rhythmical effects he creates using them, were influenced by Messiaen's technique and she provides a splendidly concrete commentary on the similarities between Brakhage's use of groups of colours in Part I of *Scenes from Under Childhood* and Messiaen's

use of modes, and between Brakhage's rhythmic forms and those of Messiaen.

. . . There seem to be five major sections in the work, four of which are introduced by long segments of colored leader and the last quite abruptly begun and ended. The first three sections each have quite distinct characteristics—a type of subject matter and specific subjects particular to each of them, and a basic color with which each is introduced and around which it is built. The fourth is an extremely complex merging of the moods and materials of the first three sections, and the last section is a radical departure from the modes which preceded it.

A careful viewing of the film will confirm Nesthus' claim that Part I (and in fact, all four parts) of *Scenes from Under Childhood*, can be divided into sections on the basis of their dominant colour properties. Nesthus proposes that Part I can be segmented into five sections: a red mode section, a blue mode section, a yellow mode section, a polymodal section, and a Western tonality section. Each of the first three sections is introduced by a passage in the dominant colour. In the ensuing section, the dominant colour will appear in a variety of hues, amongst which the section modulates, often by superimposition. In what Nesthus calls the polymodal section, the change from one colour to another is less gradual, and more strongly stated. Nesthus calls the last section the Western tonality section because the organization of colour forms in this section is analogous to organization of tones in Western tonal music and organization of visual forms in linear (Western) perspectival painting—it is significant, in respect to these similarities, that many deep space images appear in the fifth section.

By following up the clue that Brakhage's methods in *Scenes from Under Childhood* drew on Messiaen's compositional ideas, Nesthus arrives at many interesting insights into the film, and some of the most interesting have to do with Brakhage's means of creating his rhythmic effects. She points out that Brakhage's use of cinematic equivalents to rhythmic added values, for when the film is examined one finds that the beginning or end of a duration of pure colour fields does not always coincide with a frameline, but sometimes occurs in the middle of a frame. She provides a count of the number of frames composed of each colour in the sequence's colour series for one flicker passage early in Part I: three frames in which the object matter is rust coloured, four black colour-field frames, three frames in which the object matter is red, seven and one-half black colour-field frames, five and one-half grey colour field frames (composed of three separate fields in three different shades of grey), two black colour-field frames, two red colour-field frames, one pink colour-field frame, two black colour-field frames, two red colour-field frames, six and one half frames for which the object matter is rust coloured, four and one half grey colour-field frames (made up of three segments in three shades of grey), and six frames for which the object matter is rust-coloured. The half frames—or, to be more precise, approximately, but not exactly, half-frames bands—bands of colour shatter any impression that might develop of an overall pulse, for they are not simple divisions of the prevailing tactus; thus, they act as rhythmic added values do in Messiaen's music. Further, the colours have partly to do with interaction of chromas to produce a colour harmony, and partly to do with the film's developmental schema, beginning with foetal vision and progressing to the infant's experience of birth.

To confirm that Brakhage applies Messiaen's compositional ideas to create the rhythmic structures of this film, Nesthus analyzes another flicker passage and discovers that it uses prime numbers to create a non-retrogradable rhythm. In it, seven frames of black colour-fields alternate with three colour-fields in various hues. Another flicker passage exemplifies a decitala, a rhythmic pattern Messiaen analyzes in *The Technique of my Musical Language*. The passage, which alternates various tones of pink with black, consists of one frame whose object

matter is a beige-pink, five black colour-field frames, one medium pink colour-field frame, three black colour-field frames, one dark pink colour-field frame, two black colour-field frames, one purply pink colour-field frame, and several black colour-field frames. Thus, while the pinkish frames all have the same length (a single frame) but different hues, the black frames, all of which are of the same the same hue, have different lengths. As Nesthus points out, this form resembles that of the *deci-tala*, which has a constant durational value for a changing tone and changing durations values for a constant tone.

Brakhage's fascination with forms that convert a real object into a quasi-abstract texture field is an interest he shared with Messiaen: Messiaen often converted bird-song into musical structures with a rigorous musical architecture. Moreover, both artists were interested in synaesthetic experience: Messiaen told the interviewer, Claude Samuel that, "When I listen (to music), or when I read a score and listen inwardly, I see mentally corresponding colors that revolve, move and mingle as the sounds revolve, move and mingle, and in the same time. . . . I see them internally; it is not my imagination, it is no more than a physical phenomenon, an interior reality." Messiaen thus revealed that he was an artist who turned toward internal reality for the content of work, and the same was certainly true of Stan Brakhage.

The use of material from everyday life relates to Brakhage's concern with the transitional zone (a concern much in evidence in *Scenes from Under Childhood*), for the domestic environment and domestic events which the film chronicles belong to the intimate space that surrounds a person and is populated by objects that possess personal significance. Perhaps because he realizes that photography (and cinematography) have the power to make us believe that the objects that photographs (and film images) present are objective, Brakhage also uses devices that further interiorize and subjectivize the film's contents: much of the film's content (as we have seen) is presented in close-up, and often with superimpositions, often of the same object-matter taken from slightly different viewpoints. The forms created by superimposition slightly different aspects of an object one on top of the other evokes a mode of perception that belongs to infancy or very early childhood, when the two optical images have not been coordinated to constitute a deep space. The use of close-ups and, especially, of close-ups that turn the object into, seemingly, a non-objective texture, arouses perceptual activity of a similarly primitive sort, for these highly textured images address the sense of touch, in all its immediacy. In using these abstract, textured images Brakhage re-members the synaesthetic character of infantile sensation from a period when the infant hears sights and sees sounds.

Brakhage treats many of the scenes from everyday life much as he does the photograph of himself, as a young lad, on a tricycle. That is, he presents a series of variations on a single image, varying its granularity, its intensity or its colour—sometimes, in fact, only a part of the image will change colour, while all other parts will unchanged, a manner of modifying the image that suggests the work of memory and attention. An example of this sort of variation occurs in Part III, in a sequence that depicts a baby standing on a wooden chair at a wooden table that, by this point in the series, has become central player in the film: the chairs around the table and the table itself change colour (from a light green, to a dark green, to black) while the baby does not. Then the image reverses: the white refrigerator to one side of the shot becomes black, the baby acquires a greenish tone, while the chairs and table turn white. Then the image switches back, so the refrigerator is the lightest object in the scene; however there is an orange cast over the whole scene, with the exception of the refrigerator. Then the image turns turquoise, and finally fuschia.

Single (or closely related) images are subjected to other sorts of variations: a single image will be presented in varying degrees of sharpness, in varying intensities, or altered by reframing. The serial variations that result from these changes portray the activity of the mind as it formulates a memory image. And, since many of these series, including those produced through altering the colour of image, involve continuous change, Brakhage indicates that



memory operates somewhat as Bergson described it as operating. Indeed Bergson, like Brakhage, recognized that memory has a key role to play in constituting perceptions—Bergson claimed, in fact, that memory is responsible for the subjectivity of perceptions (as the biological role of perception, of enabling us to select amongst actions, does not require consciousness). Like Brakhage, with his notion of “moving visual thinking” (a term he used to refer to elemental or primordial consciousness), Bergson posited the concept of a pure perception free of any admixture, and in immediate contact with the realm of flux. Bergson referred to such pure perception as “intuition,” and Bergson accorded intuition as lofty a position in his system as Brakhage’s artistic endeavours accorded his notion of moving visual thinking. However, again like Brakhage, Bergson did not believe that pure perception is common—in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson pointed out that ordinarily our experience issues in recognition, which he described as resulting from a process in which past and present come together. Bergson maintained that an act recognition is the outcome of two separate, but simultaneous processes: one process, perception, originates in the world and progresses towards the subject, while the other process, memory, originates inside the subject and progresses outward to meet the material produced by perception. One could describe what happens in the passages in *Scenes from Under Childhood* that incorporate still photographs in similar terms: a process that begins inside the subject encounters material whose source lies in the outside world; moreover, these episodes treat still photographs in ways that bring past and present together, as Bergson’s intuition does.

The radical transformations of the image that Brakhage accomplished by varying their colours represent a primitive mode of visual perception that belongs to the stage before the child has achieved perceptual object constancy (an achievement whose effects, Brakhage maintained, are partly positive and partly negative). In the *Scenes from Under Childhood*, Brakhage used a number of constructions to evoke qualities of several regressive or atavistic perceptual modalities. Among these are the use of visual forms resembling phosphenes.

*Scenes from Under Childhood* presents includes many passages that clearly do not represent objects in the external world. Many of these passages are nearly monochrome (but in different passages appear in wide variety of colours), and present highly textured forms, whose backgrounds resemble large grains of sand, mixed with tiny specks and with some larger forms, some of which are cell-like in form, and some of which are rod-like in form. These cell-shaped and rod-shaped shift about, and as they move some seem to position themselves overtop of adjacent shapes. These passages correspond to the child’s experience of phosphenes—visual phenomenon younger children experience more frequently than older children or adults. Indeed, children may take phosphenes as objects in their environment, for it seems likely that children do not make any distinction between the ontological status of phosphenes and the ontological perceptual experience of real world object. It is a fundamental formal principle of Brakhage’s filmmaking that the forms he contrives for his films do not distinguish amongst perception, hallucination, memory images or hypnagogic images—every experienced phenomenon is equally real, just for being experienced, and this makes Brakhage’s interest in hypnagogic images seem entirely appropriate.

The use Brakhage makes of colour field passages in *Scenes from Under Childhood* also furthers his inquiry into atavistic forms of experience. The long red and black passages at the beginning of Part One correspond to intra-uterine experiences. The images that follow the first of these passages, and similar images that appear in later passages that are in soft focus and stable, represent an early form of perception, of what the psychoanalyst J.M. Davie calls “the wobbly image,” in which phase the mental representation is still affected by the subject’s changing states (by transitory conditions of the subject, fleeting conditions involving the subject’s needs, interest and attention, and different investments of energies in what serves as a prototype for object cathexis). The colour-fields themselves seem to be stand-ins for—perhaps

it would be better to say “traces of”—what Wilfred Bion refers to beta elements, i.e., units of the sensory data created by an emotional experience, that have not yet been transformed into a form that allows them to be assimilated into experience (or, to use Bion’s terminology, transformed into alpha elements). They are contentless because they are stand-in for pre-experience, traces of the effects of emotional experiences that are not yet anything for consciousness because they have not be transformed into a form in which consciousness can assimilate them—by the absence of content in their colour-fields, these visual forms indicate a domain of pre-experiential and uncognizable effects of emotional experience. The colour of these fields indicates the emotional tenor of the experiences that produce these beta elements. We noted above that some of the sequences incorporating still photographs show how images furnished by memory act to stabilize the raw materials of perception, by shaping that material into new images. Hence, *Scenes from Under Childhood* traces the development of perception from beta elements, through synaesthesia forms of sensation and “wobbly images,” to perceptual forms that are somewhat more stable, but whose qualities are more protean and mutable than resolved, stable images achieved as the child attains the phase of perceptual object constancy, the final stage in the history of perception, a stage that the *Scenes from Under Childhood* alludes by its use of deep space images and by incorporating still photographs.

Features of the atavistic perceptual modes that Brakhage explores in *Scenes from Under Childhood* coincide with features he understands the film medium to possess, and this allows his investigation of these elementary perceptual modes to serve at the same time as a self-reflexive investigation into the nature of the cinema and, conversely, allows his efforts at constructing a film that is true to the nature of film medium to expose features of these atavistic perceptual modes. It is this convergence that sustains Brakhage’s efforts at joining his investigation of film materials with phenomenological inquiry. But we have to exercise some care in understanding this convergence, for Brakhage did not believe that cinematic forms natively resemble the contents of consciousness. For example, he did not believe that anything in perceptual experience closely resembles the onscreen effect produced by having a camera pan across a field of view. Nonetheless, in *Scenes from Under Childhood*, Brakhage often used rapid swish-pans. How can that fact be reconciled with the claim that the examination of cinema converges with phenomenological inquiry in *Scenes from Under Childhood* (and, indeed, in Brakhage’s film work generally)? The answer lies in noting the Brakhage’s phenomenological interests concern what Husserl, later in career, came to call “genetic phenomenology”—with the origins and constitution of things that appear in one’s stream of experience and with their meanings, including a process that Husserl calls *sedimentation*, intending the process by which earlier experiences come to shape and condition others. Brakhage’s interest in what we might call a genetic phenomenology led him to an interest in primordial perception and he noted that the contents of the very young child’s sensorium have features in common with the cinema. Take Brakhage’s use of swish pans: the effect of swish pans is to eliminate any illusory depth from an image—that is, it brings the film’s visual forms into conformity with its material basis; at the same time, the flattened forms produced thereby embody a characteristic of early visual perception. Other devices Brakhage used in *Scenes from Under Childhood* similarly pair the self-reflexive examination of the cinema’s fundamental character with phenomenological inquiry: *Scenes from Under Childhood* makes extensive use of out-of-focus shooting, bleached out footage, and close-ups (often of fabric or fur) that convert the represented object matter into a texture field—all these devices put emphasis on the screen surface at the same time as they embody the energies of the fascinated consciousness or of a mode of perception that presents objects as though they were fused forms (rather than as forms that are distinct and independent of one another).

The film also creates many push-pull effects. The colour-field passages, by reason of the differing processive and recessive values of the different colours they incorporate, often seem to

pulsate in a shallow space; this effect is especially pronounced in passages in which the colour-fields alternate rapidly. Negative images (that represent darker objects in lighter tones and lighter objects in darker tones) sometimes have the effect of making what would ordinarily be a recessive area seem processive and what would ordinarily be a processive area seem recessive. Colour modulations of the sort just described often remould an image's spatial properties. This complex refashioning of the film's space draws the viewer's attention to the malleability of illusion of space (a feature of spatial representations that has a basis in early experience) and to the actual flatness of the screen surface—so, in these passages, too, the self-reflexive examination of the materials and conditions of the cinema converge with a phenomenological inquiry, the central interests of which co-incide with the topics genetic phenomenology addresses. The flicker passages that alternate colour-fields with different processive or recessive values are especially laden with self-reflexive indications, for the rapid alternation draws spectators' attention the phi-phenomenon that accounts for the illusion of motion that film presents and, by drawing attention to that phenomenon, deconstructs that illusion. At the same time, after-images (produced as the subjective effect of one colour-field interacts with the subjective effect of the following) engender a virtual image of two, differently coloured rectangles, one layered overtop of the other—and that effect reveals a great deal about colour's role in constructing the illusion of space.

As Marie Nesthus' analysis of the film's rhythmic means revealed, Brakhage's cuts do not always fall on the frame line. Most filmmakers attempt to conceal their splices from viewers, and they do this by a rather intricate means of alternating successive shots on different rolls, and separating the shots on each of these rolls with a piece of opaque leader. Because successive shots in the final film are not physically joined and because the spacer is opaque, the splices do not show. Brakhage almost never uses this production technique, and instead joins successive shots with a splice that viewers can see. While almost all of Brakhage's photographed films make use of visible splice bars, *Scenes from Under Childhood* makes more frequent use of splices placed close to the centre of the screen than he generally does. It is often an interesting exercise to watch one of Brakhage's photographed films (the hand-painted films rarely reveal anything interesting when watched this way) with one's attention hovering around a line about one-eighth of the way down the screen: a startling variety of marks appear—more or less obvious splice-bars that sometimes are dark and sometimes are light.

There is nothing in our perception that resembles the visible splice. Does Brakhage's use of visible splices therefore constitute a refutation of our claims concerning Brakhage's manner of pairing the self-reflexive examination of the film medium with a phenomenological examination of vision, and, especially, primordial vision (since Brakhage's phenomenological interests are primarily in the topics of genetic phenomenology)? Again, I don't think so, and my reasons for thinking that it does not once again indicate the importance of bearing in mind that Brakhage conceives of artistic semeiosis as being perlocutionary, not representational. The appearance of visual splices in Brakhage's films would constitute a counter-example to my claims regarding this convergence if every property of every form in Brakhage's films represented a possible property of a percept. But the properties of Brakhage's visual forms do not represent possible properties of vision; rather, they embody energies that can provoke experiences in their viewers. The visible splices that appear in Brakhage's films don't represent anything that appears in the manifold of perception. They do provide a jolt—a kick, an energy—that has the effect of destabilizing our perceptual representation.

Brakhage testified to the fact he conceived of artistic meaning as perlocutionary in a letter to the Avon Foundation of March 18, 1965.

. . . I am primarily concerned with making films which can be taken into the

viewer, in *thru* his experience of himself in the act of seeing, without his being taken in *by* the film and/or *via* his lack of experience. [Note this assertion casts the lack of experiential dynamics as the culprit in false knowledge.] The crucial word in all this, with regard to my future working processes, is “activated” in relationship to “awareness on the viewer’s part of a ‘Want of vision, or the power of seeing’”! [Here Brakhage again asserts that an absence of vision leaves the viewer needy.] To what extent can the work of art activate my sense of seeing without educating same or imposing propagandistically upon me? [Propaganda thrives where there is no personal, internal vision; art can dynamize vision; so art is contrary to propaganda.]