

The Violence and Charity of Perception

“. . . where each object is encountered as an adventure in perception” Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*.

“But now let me speak about the Good . . . He is the time within which things happen. He is being for whatever is. He is coming-to-be amid whatever happens. . . . He is the being immanent in and underlying the thing which are, however they are. For God is not some kind of being. No. But in a way that is simple and indefinable he gathers himself and anticipates every existence. . . . He was not. He will not be. He did not come to be. He is not in the midst of becoming. He will not come to be. No. He is not. Rather, he is the essence of being for the things which have being.” The Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, chapter 5.

. . . the mysteries of God’s Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable,
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.

The Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*.

I have called for, and dedicated much of my creative life to, the pursuit of a cinema of perception. If I have emphasized perception, it is because I believe the mission of our time is to move thought closer to things themselves (*zu den Sachen selbst*), and to do so by disassociating itself from ideas. Every era, and every artist, has an image of thought — an image his or her “thought gives itself as to what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one’s bearing in thought” (as Deleuze and Guattari put it in *What is Philosophy*); and, as Brakhage’s films make so evident, this image of thought figures among the central subjects of every artist’s work. To advocate a cinema of perception is to advocate forging in the cinema a different image of thought than that which dominates that age, one that moves the cinema closer to things themselves. Brakhage’s cinema certainly presents an image of thought (including perception) different from that which dominates the age, and how it differs from the image of thought that dominates the age makes it vital, live-giving and crucial. But we have come to different conclusions about thinking, including perceiving, and I want to present some of these conclusions today.

When perception is attentive, it responds not merely to the actual objects of experiences, but also to that which sustains their be-ing, (i.e., that which makes them what they are). For this, perception must rise above what is given and sense the sacrifice through which beings (objects) come into be-ing. It does not learn to cherish this sacrifice by accepting the seamless appearance of things, enframed in a seemingly continuous and unconflicted, material reality; rather it learns this by opening itself to the ruptures and discontinuities from which experience arises and that constitute the true grain of experience, and by attuning oneself to the convolutions and distortions from which all experience arises.

What does this entail? First, that we must recognize that the act of reading is creative. That is, we must learn that every perception is an interpretation that actualizes one aspect of the *energeia* of λογος, that same *energeia* that grants the potential for be-ing. All perception is

an act of reading (i.e., the mediated apprehension of the non-sensuous correspondences) that interprets the configurations that $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ inscribes in beings and that are the condition of their legibility. Perception, responds to — reads — the discourse of things because it is preternaturally responsive to their language. That hermeneutical questioning we call perception is a harkening to the order the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ brings forth, a loving attunement, a receptivity that is creative. Beings are the dependent variables of those functions we call perception. Perception is *poiesis*, i.e., making — it brings objects out of nothingness and into be-ing. It wrests them out of nothingness; in this sense, every perception is a violent imposition upon that grace which endows beings with their be-ing.

As every hermeneutical activity is, perception is bound up with language. Every perception has already been structured by language. What is the evidence, you ask, that thinking is housed in language? Do we not have much testimony, that includes literary works describing thought as imagery, Kekule's dream, and even Einstein's well-known remark that he first formulated his theories in images and only later clothed them in mathematical apparel? I respond by saying that in such descriptions the term "image" is used metaphorically, to refer to thoughts that are not self-reflexive. Propositional thinking is always accompanied by some measure of self-reflection — I am always aware that I am thinking when I work out some idea in more or less precise language. But we all engage too in thought processes that are not accompanied by self-reflection, and because such thinking is usually pre-propositional, we imagine, when we consider it retrospectively, on the evidence of traces, that since the thought had no verbal representation in consciousness it must be preverbal.

I believe, however, that it is not — on the contrary, I believe that prereflective thinking is always already articulated. I argue this way after considering incidents which evidence such prereflective thinking, I am typing a sentence and for a moment my mind wanders — I am writing about typology, but I forget the word "typological." Against that consternation ("Is my mind slipping?") I engage in a bit of reverie about playing my drum, then imagine myself making a mistake, then continue typing, and without even been aware of having thought of the correct word write "typographical" in its place. I continue typing, then stop to reread the paragraph, then notice the inapposite term. I try to reconstruct how this happened — nothing as distinct as a picture of myself in reverie comes back to me; rather, I have some vague sensation, and recognize that my reverie caused me to substitute a word for a type of error (a typographic error) for the term that refers to the method that the Puritans used to interpret the meaning of historical events.

The example is typical. Freud provides several in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: A man invites his wife to join him, by taking the Lusitania (instead of the Mauretania); a wealthy man is greeted "famillionarily" or better, the story of Ferenczi blaming himself for having committed a technical error in a patient's psychoanalysis, so he stumbled several times as he walked along the street (a representation of his *faux pas*) in the treatment, or of Freud's climbing one floor too many, in a very familiar building — i.e., "climbing too high" because he was irritated by a (phantasied) criticism of his writings in which he was reproached with always "going too far." Time and again, as I consider the evidence I have of prereflective thinking (after all, we know of such thinking only by what it leaves behind), I discover something that shows I was thinking in words. Such evidence makes plausible the famous assertion that V.N. Vološinov (Mikhail Bakhtin?) offers in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*: "consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs. . . . The individual consciousness is natured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects its logic and laws." (p 11, 13). Whenever my train of thought is disturbed, whenever my thinking disrupted, I

can discover the evidence, retrospectively (for at the time the cause of the interruption sometimes seems verbal, and sometimes seems to be, literally, nothing) that the disturbing factor was associated itself with language. Of course, I do not know that factor itself was linguistic, but it is clear to me that, at the very least, it operates through language.

Though there are aspects of his metaphysics that I utterly disagree with (likely because they have gnostic provenance), Plotinus too maintained a belief that what is greater than language operates through language:

But as those who become and inspired and possessed may know this much, that they have something greater [than themselves] within them, even if they do not know what, but from which they are moved and what they say derives a sensation of that which moves while they are different from that, thus we are apt to be disposed to it . . . that are of that rank, itself not being such, as it is not these, but something greater than that which is called "being," but fuller and greater than what-is-said, because it is greater than speech and mind and sensation, bestowing these, while not itself being these. (*Enneads* 5.3.14: 8 - 19)

While perception, like all reading, is interpretation, it is nonetheless different from other interpretative processes. It is different in this way: that for perception alone (among interpretive acts) the act of inscription and that of interpretation are cotemporal — the sign and the act that interprets it emerge together. Yet, though the creation of the sign and the interpretation are cotemporal, they are not copresent. Perception is always remembrance, just as one's first thought on some matter is always already a recollection. Thus, against one of the convictions that founds the extraordinary work of Gertrude Stein and Stan Brakhage, I argue that an art of the present represents an unattainable ideal (though, as the staggering achievement of those two artists suggests, it might be true that an artwork gains in vitality the more nearly it approaches this ideal). No thought can ever recover the *αρχή*. In that sense, all thought is already quotation, i.e., the repetition of another's originary discourse (an Other's originary discourse). Accordingly, I emphasize intertextuality.

Memory and thought owe their be-ing to the possibility of repetition, variation, reproduction. citation and inscription. In thought's dependency on another's originary inscription, we glimpse the irreducibility of the triangular relations among thinking, memory, and imagery. Every thought is always already a memory because every thought emerges out of dislocation, disruption, hiatus — out of what the philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida calls *é spacements*. But, to be sure, in arising from nothing, a thought is no different from any event — for each event is a miraculous creation *ex nihilo*. That we attend more to ligatures within processes than to the gaps between events that make each new event a miracle evidences the productive force of ideology — here, as so often, ideology's effect is to obscure the creative role of discontinuity and conflict.

Walter Benjamin remarked that "Thinking involves not only a flow of thoughts, but also their arrest." We hear the aphorism and recognize that the insight it offers devolves upon the word "involves." For the relation of the hiatus in thinking to thinking is not the same as the spatial limit or boundary to what it bounds; rather, the hiatus belongs to thinking itself. Benjamin's writings helped me to understand this; no wonder, then, that Benjamin has been so important to my writing and making. Thought can be compared with a receptive surface, acting and reacting to the propagation of energy; subjectivity is simply the body's disposition to respond, with a sensimotor reaction, to this energy. Thought is a complex, variegated and,

indeed, infinite surface, its infinitude ensured by the limitless capacity of language to produce names by designation. Because it is infinite, thought contains its own limits. That thinking contains its own limits is made obvious by the fact that thinking can formulate the notion of what cannot be thought, and when it does so it does not follow do so only by negation — thinking of what cannot be thought still has a positive content, an idea of a transcendent being. Language, the substance of the thought, is an infinitude of possibility, an infinite, though bounded, surface on which numberless configurations may be inscribed; and these inscriptions are beings.

The limits of this surface are revealed by the trace that the surface contains of its Other, an Other evoked by ruptures, discontinuities, by whatever is antithetical to “good form” (i.e., to *Gestalten*). In cinema these continuities are evoked by fragmentation, and fragmentation in cinema results, first of all, through the cutting — through the cut, not through editing, nor through montage (Montage, à la Eizenstejn, is only the attempt to impose “good form” on the rupture effected by the cut.) The cut effects the work of history, work that, as Hegel pointed out, is accomplished on the slaughter bench. A cut converts the fluid, continuous present — the present of both cinema and life — and converts it into the “historicalized present” of art and death. Thus the fragment that the cut creates appears under the sign of death, darkness, and dread — those features that make so many filmmakers strive to suture the cut through the techniques of narrative, diegetic construction, plastic continuity, rhythmic flow, “good form” and the host of constructions that are the commonplaces of reactionary cinema, which comprises the whole of the dominant cinema and much of what is sometimes mistaken (especially by those who love the calming, soporific, narcotizing, anaesthetic results of mainstream work) as the mainstream cinema’s other — this cinema is other than the talkie, perhaps, but certainly not other than the dominant cinema, for it deploys the same calming, soporific, narcotizing, anaesthetic effects as the dominant cinema. It is with the cut that cinema begins, and not really, as people often presume, with shooting (which anyway is more akin to devouring than shooting, for its processes are akin to rending, ingesting and assimilating the other to itself).

If the cut is the formal sign of cinema’s disposition towards fragmentation, the inner cause of that disposition is its affection for the world, an affection so profligate and so unjudging that it results in self-dispersal. The assimilation of reality that is the mission of film disposes it to contamination. Film is massively promiscuous, and as impure as all whose nature is promiscuity. Its readily given affections carry it beyond itself, towards the other. Its proclivities, accordingly, result in dispersal. Its nature calls for forms that are fragmentary and incomplete, that texts composed in the medium be dispersive *opera*, deploying multiple structures, plurisemic, incomplete, imperfect, unresolved, without closure. Their forms must be contradictory, contaminated, impure. They must favour repetition over narrative progress, for repetition shows contamination at work. (That exact repetition is impossible implies the realization that the purity of self-identity is an impossible ideal — nothing is ever the same on two appearances.) Repetition in art, because it demonstrates that any linguistic element is wrenched from self-identity with every reappearance, manifests violence at work.

Further, the cinema itself is multiple — comprising image, movement, sound (which, often, is itself multiple, comprising speech, music, and natural sounds). This multiplicity itself lays waste to any efforts at formal consolidation premised on purist ideals. The cinema’s multiplicity opens it onto that which cannot be represented, which is similarly plural, similarly labile, similarly without identity. So this multiplicity should be intensified, carried to the extreme. Its sensory (visual and aural), intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal and even verbal (oral and written) must be made to contend, for that contention evokes the unrepresentable. The cinema has the ability to show process; it does so best by emphasizing speed which liquefies, by

emphasizing dynamism's ability to dissolve boundaries and lay form to ruin, by animating light's searing destructive power (light's power to destroy what hides) through allowing changes in light to overwhelm spatial form, and by allowing cutting, which is the domain of mutability, instability, and ambiguity, to achieve the maximum of fragmentation.

Because the world that is erected in light is emerges through our desire to take hold of something, to acquire something for ourselves, a species of violence drives its construction. Sensuousness, the activity of flesh, is unreflective, and unrelated to ideation or ratiocination. Representation, as a form of ideation, develops out of an antithetical urge, the urge to account for something through a formal structure. Representation arises through intentional thinking, that form of thinking that appears in the writings of cognitive scientists as the only mode that intelligence assumes. What sensibility discloses, on the contrary, is indeterminate, elemental, formless, without beginning or end. It is before the light that is the dwelling-place of beings; and the light through which beings have their be-ing overwhelms it. Its element is the darkness of the elemental — the darkness of which the Pseudo-Dionysius and John Scotus Eriugena wrote. That is why, as the Surrealists realized, dream and memory are the domains of reality that are most akin to the language of the cinema.

The unthinkable is merely evoked by that rupture whose sign is montage, but is never actually represented within the rupture; even so, the unthinkable lies within the domain of thinking, just as the unsayable lies within the domain of language. The reason for this correspondence is evident: it arises from the fact that no thinking is possible in the absence of the material signifier. So it is, too, with perception: the transcendent is paradoxically immanent within that which it transcends. Attentive perception opens itself to the inconspicuous ways that the absolute manifests itself in experience, without allowing itself to be thematized. Of course, the manifestation of what transcends attentive perception never takes the form of beings; rather, these manifestations have the character of ruptures, gaps, distortions that the absolute introduces into what the inattentive mind takes to be the unruffled web of experience.

We catch a glimpse of the fact that arrest belongs to thinking in the petrified restlessness of the image. Thinking begins in a scene of violence which wrenches us from presuppositions concerning what is (presuppositions that, despite the complacency they engender are really the ultimate of will's violent imposition upon reality, a violent holding-at-bay of reality's eruptive disposition). Genuine thinking breaches the monotony of time which those presuppositions engender. It emerges from a power that prevents what it receives from ever being closed, from a power that disrupts all finality, that arrests events without allowing them to conclude, and that, finally, renders self-identity impossible. That power develops out of something more akin to idea-less perception than to ideas, the effect of which is to impose closure. Perception is attentive — it abides with things. However through this act of attention what hides imposes itself upon us with the force of a shock.

Yet, despite their violence, these shocks are charitable. Without them, we would have to surrender to our fear that the world, in its sheer givenness, is without novel possibilities. We would succumb to the lethargy of believing that everything is determined in advance, to the mechanistic worldview that made early modern philosophers shudder. We would inhabit a world bereft of good and evil, a world where the "being there of human be-ing" (Heidegger's *Dasein*) made no difference. These convulsions, these shocks (we ordinarily call them perceptions) become questions that engender intellectual thinking; but before they do, they give one to something, i.e., give one's being over to something primal. Furthermore, they encourage us to

be aware of the act of perception itself. They lift one out what Edmund Husserl called the “naive standpoint,” where consciousness is absorbed by its object and thus avoids the question of what Dasein — what the fact that be-ing is there (“*Da sein*” = “to be there”) — as an opening for disclosure, contributes to the be-ing of its objects. The opening towards disclosure that characterizes the “be-ing there” (the *Dasein*) of human be-ing, aligns itself to openness, that emptiness, that nothingness that is the scene of beings’ coming-to-be, and through this alignment we sense the being-together of human be-ing and what there was even before all creation. That is to say, we discover the primordially of human be-ing, and Be-ing that makes human be-ing the image of the Divine.

Narrative thinking belongs to the naive standpoint, for narrative thinking is absorbed by the objective representations that it constructs and is oblivious of the spacings (the *é spacements*) between objects. Like scientific thinking, narrative thinking constructs a seamless, integrated representation (which semioticians, following Souriau, refer to as the *diegesis*); the primary ideological function of this diegesis is to obscure the kaotic intervals that are scene of the event of be-ing — the intervals required for any object to become present-to-consciousness. Its time is that of “one thing after another” (or of one event leading, relentlessly and inevitably, to the next) — a construct which is akin to Bergson’s physical time, and as is just as corrupting to the time of being (and that explains, in part, why I insist on the importance of creative practices, like those of the Canadian composer Udo Kasemets, that allow the unforeseen to occur). Narrative time occludes those gaps, those ruptures, those *é spacements* that precede the event of be-ing. Narrative occludes those interruptions that demolish the continuity of historical time — but this demolition is required to clear a space in which the *καος* which is be-ing’s proper element might be revealed.

Thinking that allows itself to be absorbed in the represented object — for example, narrative thinking — hides from itself. For such thinking, the quantum of self-reflexivity required to disclose perception’s creativity dwindles past the point of vanishing. Narrative thinking plays a role in diminishing that capacity of perception to disclose what every perception might, *viz.*, human be-ing’s primordially empty condition. Our failure to seize the opportunity for ontological disclosure that every perceptual acts presents — a failure that, as Simone Weil insisted on pointing out, is really a failure in attention — has momentous consequences. For it is only our recognition of our primordially empty be-ing that grounds the possibility of human be-ing grasping the constitutive role it plays in the be-ing of beings.

The implications of these failures become more grievous as we repeat them (as we tend to do with failures of so many sorts) and that mode of perception becomes our customary one. Thus narrative thinking effects an hypostasis of being, for through the agency of narrative, “be-ing” passes over into “something that is,” or, simply, “something.” Narrative thinking is thinking that does not allow itself to be penetrated by its transcendent limit — that does not take into itself what is other than itself. Narrative thinking exerts its mastery, concealing what lies before it, eclipsed by beings. In this, it perpetrates a violence of another sort.