

Abstract

This article, a reflection on the aesthetics of cinema, concerns the complex relation between perception, the cinematic image, language and reality. It deals with the implications of an attribute unique to the photographic arts, viz., that they are written in the language of reality, a language which perception is fitted to read. It argues that the mission and destiny of the cinema is to make us attentive to the discourse of things, a discourse written by the Logos. It seeks to make clear that as the image, the “seen” form, enters into human be-ing in the experience of abiding in wonder that a strong film can provoke, so too does an unseen and invisible principle. The nature of the invisible principle is principle topic of this essay: this principle is discovered to be an activity, a power, a potentiality, an *energeia* that actualizes all that becomes present. The analysis of the nature of this principles includes commentary on the character of aesthetic experience that attempts to acknowledge the savage and violent nature of aesthetic experience and to accord due importance to the role that the primordial plays in it, and on the manner that narrative precludes the primordial’s serving its necessary rule.

The Violence and Charity of Perception

By R. Bruce Elder

“Yet I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication.” Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*.

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, and to do so by disassociating itself from ideas. To advocate a cinema of perception is to advocate forging in the cinema a different image of thought than that which dominates that age.

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). Perception does not passively render a pre-existent reality that lies before it. Rather perceiving transforms – violently transforms – what gives rise to it, by converting “what might be” into “what is.” The violence of the conversion is that it reduces potentiality into actuality, possibility into determination, the infinite into the finite. Perception configures one particular arrangement out of the infinite possibilities that are implicit in the nothingness that hides itself in darkness. One does not learn to cherish this sacrifice by accepting the seamless appearance of things, enframed in a seemingly continuous and unconflicted material reality; rather one learns this by opening oneself to the ruptures and discontinuities from which experience arises (discontinuities which constitute the true grain of experience).

To become open to the experience of this sacrifice, one must accept that every perception is an interpretation that actualizes one aspect of the *energeia* of the [?][?][?][?][?], that same *energeia* that grants the potential for be-ing. Perception is an act of reading (i.e., the mediated apprehension of the non-sensuous correspondences) that interprets the configurations that the [?][?][?][?][?] inscribes in beings, configurations 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 that the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?] brings forth, a receptivity that is creative. Perception is *poiesis*, i.e., making – it brings objects out of nothingness and into being. It wrests them out of nothingness; in this sense, every perception is a violent imposition upon that which endows beings with their be-ing.

As every hermeneutical activity is, perception is bound up with language. Every perception, in fact, has already been structured by language. It is easy to mistake pre-propositional thinking for non-verbal thinking. 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 such propositional thinking is not the only form of thinking we engage in: we also engage in thought processes that are not accompanied by self-reflection, and because such thinking is usually pre-propositional, we surmise, when we consider the thought-process retrospectively, that, since it had no verbal representation in consciousness, it must have been preverbal.

But prereflective thinking is always already articulated. Consider the sort of incident that evidences prereflective thinking: While working on an article, I reach a point when I want to allude to the idea of typology, but I forget the word “typological.” Against the consternation that this lapse of memory engenders (“Is my mind beginning to slip?”) I engage in a bit of reverie about my hobby, playing percussion; then, when I continue typing, I make a dactylographic error, notice it, correct it and continue typing, without even thinking of the word I am looking for, “typological,” and its relation to the type of error (“typographical”) that I made. The example is typical. Thought is informed by language, even when we do are not aware the fact. And, beyond that, the segmentation of the thought (its articulation) is homologous with the structure the language – thought fits beings because thought and being partake of the same for (the substructure of language, imparted to beings when they were created by the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?]).

While perception, like all reading, is interpretation, it is nonetheless different from other interpretative processes: 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. No thought can ever recover the ἀρχή. In that sense, all thought is already quotation, i.e., the repetition of another’s originary discourse (or, rather, an Other’s originary discourse).

Memory and thought owe their be-ing to the possibility of repetition, variation, reproduction, citation and inscription. In thought’s dependence on another’s originary inscription, we glimpse the irreducibility of the triangular relations among thinking, memory, and imagery. As memory, a perception does not co-incide with its origin. Thus, a perception emerges out of disruption and dislocation. But we do not open ourselves towards these gaps, these ruptures. That we are disposed to attend more to the ligatures we use to bind the elements of a process together than to the ruptures among them 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 the flow of thoughts, but also their arrest.”(1) We hear the aphorism and recognize that the insight it offers devolves upon the word “involves.” For the relation of a 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. 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 potentially limitless capacity of language to produce names by designation – by its potentially inexhaustible ability to engender novel forms of reference. Because thinking is potentially infinite, it 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 do so only by negation: thinking about what cannot be thought has a positive, indeed transcendent, content. 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, without allowing itself to be thematized, nevertheless manifests itself in experience. 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.

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 traces 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 discontinuities are evoked by fragmentation, and fragmentation in cinema results, first of all, through cutting – through *the cut* (but not through editing). 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. While watching a shot unfold, we await its conclusion. The cut provides that finality: to the unfolding moment, pointed towards the yet-to-be, the cut furnishes the gift of death. But because the fragment that the cut creates appears under the sign of death, darkness, and dread, many filmmakers strive to suture the cut through the techniques of diegetic construction, plastic continuity, rhythmic flow, “good form” and the host of constructions that are the commonplaces of reactionary 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 film's 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 leans towards 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; its promiscuity demands that works composed in the medium be dispersive *opera*, deploying multiple structures, plurisemic, incomplete, imperfect, unresolved, without closure. The forms of such works must be contradictory, contaminated, impure.

Furthermore, the cinema's nature favours repetition over narrative progress, for repetition shows contamination at work, by showing that the purity of self-identity is an impossible ideal (nothing is ever the same on two appearances). And repetition, in art, because

it demonstrates that any linguistic element is wrenched from self-identity with every reappearance, manifests violence at work.

The cinema also has an affinity for flesh. 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. 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.

The cut serves the cinema as the arrest of which Benjamin wrote, for it converts a flow into a constellation; but we also catch a glimpse of that arrest in the petrified restlessness of the image itself. This arrest is not the arrest of self-identity, nor of identity with origin. 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. Through 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 the naive standpoint where consciousness is absorbed by its object, the standpoint that allows humans to avoid the question of what *Dasein* — what the fact that be-ing is there, as an opening for disclosure — contributes to the be-ing of objects. The opening towards disclosure that characterizes the "be-ing there" 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's being-with 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 ruptures, the gaps and spacings between objects and events. 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 just as corrupting to the time of be-ing. Narrative time occludes those gaps, those ruptures, those *é spacements* that precede the event of be-ing. Narrative conceals 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 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’s grasping the constitutive role it plays in the be-ing of beings.

The implications of these failures become more grievous as we repeat them over and over, with the result that 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 destructive mastery by concealing the deeper truth that could be uncovered in what lies before it, by allowing that deeper truth to be eclipsed by beings.

Moreover, narrative thinking is allied with propositional thinking. But it is not propositional thinking that is the key to art, but a form of thinking that, to indicate the dynamism of that form of cognition that opens what lies concealed within “what is,” I call “thinking-through-rhythm.” Focussed, propositional thinking is a filter that screens out elements, preventing them from entering perception. Thinking-through-rhythm alone can open us to a simultaneous presence of superimposed elements in an otherwise apprehensible synchrony that is not a regulative principle (it does not generate a structure) but, rather, disorders and disrupts structure. Its disruptive capacity is its ability to render everything labile. It undoes the reign of difference, by its capacity to transform any element into any other element. Because it operates to undo difference, it lies beyond language (which, as Saussure pointed out, is a structured system of paradigmatic and syntagmatic differences).

Unlike propositional thinking, thinking-through-rhythm relishes the polyphony of simultaneously existing elements that, due to their excessive number and energy, do not form a simple gestalt. This is the *khçric* power of polyphony. The cinema’s affinity for flesh makes it crave to be multiform and multisensuous; through its affinity for flesh, the cinema is disposed towards flux, multiplicity and the fragmentary. The primordial is rhythmic precisely because it animates the return of the same-within-difference – the persistent, obsessive reoccurrence of those differences that are generated through the transformation of the self-identical. It oscillates, repetitively, obsessively – rhythmically – in this on/off play of identity and difference. It has precisely the form-that-is-not-a-form of the death drive, that operates below the pleasure principle, and which similarity strives to reduce difference to identity. This drive belongs to darkness, to the darkness of the sacrifice, the darkness of a Creator-God who lets beings supplant be-ing.

The primordial perhaps expresses itself in disordered (and disordering) forms – but it does have some truck with form. In fact, it can only be known in the way it disrupts form even as it withdraws (dissipates) to allow form to emerge. The logic of this process is the logic of

what I call “apophantic relations” (relations between terms which depend on each other, but in which, as one term comes to the fore, the other withdraws): a similar logic ensures that it is possible that the act of picturing can convey also what cannot be pictured and that speech can convey what the speaker can never know. The reign of language over consciousness cannot be put to an end, precisely because of the connaturality of language, world and thought. But there is also that which is not thought, but which, nevertheless, acts – acts by conniving with desire.

Still, every expression – or, better, any configuration, insofar as it communicates a “psychic” (i.e., spiritual) content, already actualizes a language. That fact exempts the film artist from the requirement of forsaking imagery: the cinematic image was destined to embody a form of language prior to the languages of man, a form of language that reveals the inscriptions that the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?] has made, the unspoken and nameless language of things, related together in Glory that is One. The glory of the cinema is precisely that it grants priority to that which is rightfully language, viz., the unspoken and nameless language of things. The desolation that characterizes modernity has been to make the positive human languages the gauge of clarity, intelligibility, even of meaning. It results in “overnaming,” in which meanings are ascribed to things from without.

But a secret language of things is vouchsafed to those who can abide in that sort of contemplation that allows the be-ing (the first actuality) of beings to enter into human be-ing, to who can endure the violence of that form of charity which Keats called “negative capability.” Hearing the mute language of things demands an openness that allows the gifts of be-ing to come to presence – to show how one might receive of these gifts is the mission of photography. Photography perhaps is not creative, but is something higher, for it is a practice which enables the fugitive discourse of things to be preserved. Its time is the time of contemplation, of abiding; its mode is non-discursivity. The miracle of photography, of orienting us towards the mute language of things, should not be shunned; rather but to be taken up as the wonder it is.

But even as the image, the “seen” form, enters into human be-ing in this wondering abiding with things, so too does an unseen and invisible principle. This principle is an activity, a power, a potentiality, an *energeia* that actualizes all that becomes present. It operates according to an apophantic logic, for it discloses itself only by withdrawing. Its operates behind the constraints of repression, and is known only through the phantasmic constructions which it produces – constructions which reveal the unseen only by concealing it. So it is with images: the speak of what cannot be said, yet they are regulated by the economy of language – but that regulation is inevitable anyway, for the world as it comes forth in consciousness is always already articulated, always already segmented and structured by oppositions. That is inevitable; and it is what explains the “correspondence” between thought and the world. It also explains why, as Adorno pointed, that every unified work of art is what he called a “pseudomorphosis” of verbal language.

Aesthetic objects help us to understand a peculiarity in this discourse of things: we have learned that art objects often concern the medium in which they are realized and the process of their coming-to-be. But the discourse of things has similar intentions: the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?] creates the world, and its icons, the objects of the world, speak of the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?]. Thus language of things speaks of the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?]; or, to put it otherwise, the language of objects speaks of the word, of language itself.

The cinema’s mission is to reveal the discourse of things. The cinema is written in the language of reality, a language that puts on display the discourse of objects; cinematic images belong to a language that makes manifest the language that structures reality, the language first spoken by the [?] [?] [?] [?] [?] in the original act of creation. The cinema is the *écriture* that makes

evident the *language* that governs reality (the language of the [?][?][?][?][?]).

The cinema we see on the screen only replicates the cinema that unfolds in nature. Suppose all physical events are accompanied by images (we might refer them, in the fashion of medieval philosophers, as “species”) and that these images constitute the discourse of things. The cinema is the means that replicates these images, so as to make them visible to humans.

The purpose of cinematography is to record – or better, to translate – this discourse. Cinematography likewise extends the work of creation: the pictures that cinematography presents allow the pure language of things to re-address themselves to human be-ing. The discourse which things address to human be-ing resonates when they are translated to the screen, and by that resonance the cinema can provoke a sensation of the inner being of things. Thereby is God’s creation completed.

“*Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed,*” Bergson offered.(2) This register is what I just referred to as the cinema in nature, which the cinema we see on the screen duplicates. The image in the cinema is not a form cut in space; rather, it is fundamentally a matrix of temporal relations, relations that are never visible in the object itself. Time is intimate with the Open, out of which beings emerge. Thus the image helps make the Open palpable, even though it does not present it. Its capacity to convey change and transformation gives the cinema a relation to the primordial: though many try to deny it, by imposing “good form” on the cinema and freezing change. Change – transformation – is the most fundamental effect of the cinema. The cinema should liberate change, releasing from the regulatory controls of narrative and good form for doing so will enable the screened cinema to more closely approximate the cinema of things.

The [?][?][?][?][?] wrote all things into the Book of Creation. The discourse of things constitutes a Holy Writ. The cinema was born to make the signs of this language readable, and to do this simply by repeating them. Or, as Benjamin might have had it, translating them. Because it is without the mediation of meaning, this text of the world is unconditionally translatable. “Cinematography” is the name for the process of translating the discourse of things, of filling in the translation between the lines in the sacred text which the [?][?][?][?][?] composed – an activity that results in a sort of interleaving of the translated images of things with things themselves.

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