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The Philosophical Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes: *The Silent Films of Stan Brakhage*

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In "Against Interpretation" Susan Sontag warns of the dangers associated with critical interpretations of art that work off the mistaken notion that art is reducible to an accurate interpretation, if "certain codes, certain 'rules' of interpretation" are applied and followed. Herein, I seek to revisit the filmic art of Stan Brakhage through the lens of philosophy in a way that avoids this tendency toward reification in critique, acknowledging at the outset that the depth and complexity of Brakhage's work makes it impossible to even approach anything resembling a correct interpretation, for the capacity for these films to mean lies beyond the grasp of even the most deft and careful critic. What I am offering the reader is a constellation of interpretive gestures gathered around the central theme of philosophy: I intimate several possible ways, among a multitude of ways, that these films might express their truth. Sontag states that in most interpretations of art, the intellect takes revenge on art, in the attempt to do the unthinkable, namely, render great art "manageable," because as she rightly attests, great works of art hold the power to "make us nervous." This, I propose, is exactly what Brakhage's films do - they shake us from our commonplace ways of seeing, understanding, and discoursing about the world, and accomplish this in a philosophical manner. His films, I argue, work toward the recovery of the bodily dimension of thought and return us to the original moments, liminal events, that mark out human "becoming" as we make the passage from the abyss, the void of absolute Being to a formal sense of conscious self-awareness. Brakhage, unlike any other filmmaker, captures and re-presents the precarious nature and uncertainty of such acts defining human subjectivity, haunted as they are by the looming, foreboding presence of death, and does so, in great part, through the formal and stylistic choices he makes as a filmmaker and artist.

1. On the Way to Philosophy Through Film

Beyt Gault suggests that we celebrate great works of art "for their profundity, their insight into the human condition, for how they make us see the world anew." The qualities of great art that Gault identifies are epitomized in Brakhage's work, which is, as I show, from the beginning related to and inseparable from a philosophical attitude toward existence, because his films emerge out of an authentic "existential" mode of attunement, a mind-set wherein the potential for human transcendence is framed and filmed within its intractable relationship to death, the most extreme possibility of non-existence. Brakhage is not only viewing existence in a philosophical manner, beyond this, he is engaging in philosophical inquiry in a fundamental way through the medium of film. The films arise from and respond to what Karl Jaspers views as the ultimate source (*arche*) of philosophy, namely, "the will to authentic communication," which embraces "wonder leading to knowledge, doubt leading to certainty, forsakenness leading to the self." This amounts to the philosophical struggle to arrive at a sense of metaphysical coherence and existential familiarity, a belonging in the world with others. This foregoing claim about the relationship between philosophy and Brakhage's filmic art is not unique to this analysis, for my authentic thinking on this issue was

inspired by Fred Camper, who writes that while “the at-the-edge quality of his work may have been born out of his personal psychology, it ultimately becomes, particularly in his major films, a philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence.”

Brakhage draws inspiration for his work in a manner that weaves philosophy and art together in a seamless relationship, in that he questions and contemplates existence with the acuity and sensitivity of an artist, attempting to come to some sort of philosophical understanding of the situation, and then attempts to recreate this insight or vision in the artistic medium of film, in doing so, the films live simultaneously on two levels: a personal, or particular level, and a universal level, in that they show or intimate something of the foundations of the human condition. For example, in Brakhage’s epic, *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964), amidst the particularities of *this* woodcutter, *this* mountain, *this* seemingly insurmountable life-task, *this* particular struggle with dead wood, something of the universal emerges, and it might be expressed in terms of what Jaspers calls “fundamental situations,” existential-ontological situations that can only be acknowledged and confronted, never changed or surmounted. It is only in relation to these situations that human life holds the potential to become meaningful:

We are always in situations. Situations change, opportunities arise. If they are missed they never return. I myself can work to change the situation. But there are situations which remain essentially the same even if their momentary aspect changes and their shattering force is obscured: I must die, I must suffer, I must struggle, I am subject to chance, I involve myself inexorably in guilt. We call these fundamental situations of our existence ultimate situations.

The reconciliation of philosophy and art, which might be read as vengeance against Plato’s revenge on art, is something we prominently encounter in the German philosophical aesthetic tradition, e.g., in Schopenhauer, who argues the following: “Not merely philosophy but also the fine arts work at bottom towards solving the problem of existence.” Although they both share the same concern, namely, the search for meaning in human existence, the methodology and the manner in which they express their truths vary. Art is perceptual and philosophy is conceptual. This, according to Julian Young, is the manner in which analytic philosophy views the issue. However, as he points out, in the so-called “Continental” tradition, in somewhat crude and reductive terms, those philosophers more concerned with Kant’s aesthetics and morals than his epistemology, there is a blurring of the lines between philosophy and art in such a way that conceptual knowledge and aesthetic understanding hold the potential to co-exist. The knowledge that we glean from art, by means of the aesthetic experience, which I will outline, is neither reducible to propositional knowledge or calculative knowledge, nor is it wholly devoid of cognitive content.

2. Vision and Knowledge in Philosophy and the Filmic Aesthetics of Brakhage

While a detailed analysis and defense of *cognitivism* in aesthetics as related specifically to the avant-garde is beyond the scope of this essay, there is a way in which to approach the issue of knowledge and art by examining what Brakhage states about the viewing of film. In the documentary *Brakhage on Film* (Gassan & Stegmler, 1968), Brakhage likens the experience of watching film to that of participating in a religious “ritual.” In the writings of William James, on the variety of religious experiences, the “noetic,” or knowledge-giving, aspect of such psychological experiences is highlighted as one of several defining aspects of religious, or spiritual, possession. Heidegger, although renouncing the psychology of the event, as he thinks in terms of fundamental modes of attunement, in his now-famous (or infamous) interpretation of the Greek temple as monumental work of art, also draws out the inner workings of what might be termed a religious-aesthetic

experience for the Greeks who gathered at the great temple for worship, and who were, in an *ecstatic* moment of aesthetic attunement, within the “truth-happening” of the artwork, transformed, transfigured in a communal occurrence. Through an act of consecration inspired by the work of art, “the holy is opened up as holy and the god is invoked into the openness of his presence.” Below, Brakhage articulates the unique form of knowledge that he envisions as belonging to the domain of film-as-art. We might understand that the “pursuit” of this type of aesthetic knowledge is not limited to the filmmaker, and as well, is shared by the viewers of his films:

I suggest, there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word.

Two crucial points emerge from Brakhage’s statement as related to philosophy and the topic of aesthetic knowledge: First, the knowledge of which Brakhage speaks is analogous to the ancient Greek understanding of *αἴσθησις* (*aisthēsis*), which is present to philosophical discussions from the Pre-Socratics through Plotinus, and generally represents the simultaneous act of perception-*cum*-intellection. It is a legitimate form of perceptual-emotional knowledge that is gleaned from works of art, and while it can be “poetized” – expressed through metaphor and symbol – it defies language in the sense that it differs in both form and content from empirical, axiomatic, and what we might term “propositional knowledge,” and is described as an immediate perceptual-*noetic* insight into whatever truth the artwork might inspire. Aesthetic knowledge, or understanding, is a legitimate form of world-disclosure, or movement into the truth as *aletheuein* (dis-closedness). Far from a difficult or spurious epistemological notion, this form of knowledge might be likened to what Nelson Goodman views as emotional-cognition, wherein our unique encounter with art adds to, deepens, and refines our understanding of the world in ways that would have been impossible without the encounter with the work of art. The artist, according to Goodman, “grasps fresh and significant relationships” through her immersion in the world, and then “devises means for making them manifest,” i.e., making them accessible to others within works of art, which function epistemologically in a unique manner.

Secondly, Brakhage’s focus on “vision” and the understanding of what he terms the “optical mind,” were both notions intimately familiar to the ancient Greeks. As Jean Pierre-Vernant relates, vision had a privileged status for the Greeks, and unlike the Cartesian admonition to turn from the senses into the isolated, interior world of the subject founded on elementary truths gleaned by means of pure reason, in opposition to “things seen,” the Greeks viewed knowing *as* seeing, “to see and to know were one; if *idein*, ‘to see,’ and *eidēnai*, ‘to know,’ are two verbal forms of the same term, *eidōs*, ‘appearance, visible aspect,’ also means ‘the specific character, the intelligible form,’ this is because knowledge was interpreted and expressed through one’s way of seeing.” Vision set the Greeks within the world in a way that defies ontological dualism. Prior to any discourse in modern philosophical circles, the ancient Greek was a *Being-in-the-world* in the most intimate, visceral, and primordial sense of this notion. “To see and live were one in the same,” as Vernant states, “and to be living, one had at the same time to see the light of the sun and to be visible to the eyes of all.” To leave the light of the sun signaled the loss of sight, the loss of knowledge, and the loss of Being, for to “leave and abandon the clarity of day was to delve into another world, that of Night.”

This is certainly not to indicate that the Greeks accepted *prima facie* that which came to presence before them, in fact they were well aware that phenomena tend toward dissembling and concealment, but this is not to invalidate the claim that vision located them within an authentic epistemological and metaphysical relationship with the real world of their experience. However, Plato had a unique view of vision as it related to the real world, or realm of true Being, and this

emerges through the “non-naturalism” and “ontological dualism” of his philosophy, wherein existence is divided into two distinct realms: (1) the physical world, which is “visible” and accessible through sense perception, always changing and deceptive, and (2) the upper world of the forms (*eidai*), which are paradigms for the physical instantiation of entities. It is the case that for Plato, as he writes in the *Phaedrus*, the “bodily” (visual) experience of beauty captivates us through scintillating, sensuous appearance, and grants access to the immediacy of sensory appearances while simultaneously drawing us beyond the realm of the sensuous to the super-sensuous realm of the forms, where true Being resides at a remove from the lower realm of experience, which Plato literally classifies as *me on*, or “non-being.” In Plato, there is an acute attention to vision as it is bound up with the occurrence of an aesthetic experience, but ultimately its value lies in its ability to facilitate the movement away from the type of “embodied thinking” that great art inspires, away from the sensuous context of the lived world of our experience wherein the life-blood of art pulses.

The sun for Plato, as described in the *Republic*, is the source of light, which represents the origin (*arche*) of vision, growth, and development, but it is not equated with any of these processes directly, and rather is a metaphor for the Form (*eidos*) of the Good, which is itself nothing experiential, but is the authentic source of goodness within the realm of the experiential. In other words, nothing would be capable of being defined as good in the sensate realm, if it did not participate in this Form, which is super-sensuous: “Light,” as Levinas reasons, “whether it emanates from the sensible or from the intelligible sun, is since Plato said to be a condition for all beings.” This represents the erroneous belief prevalent in our thought today, namely, the epistemological predisposition to associate light and its illumination with truth. In addition to Levinas, both Heidegger and Derrida are critical of this modern “Platonic-Cartesian,” which manifest in terms of the *metaphysics of presence*. As the logic runs, when things are revealed, they are brought into the clarifying light of truth, and when things are understood, they are “possessed,” as one might possess a *present-at-hand* object; they have been made manageable. “Light makes objects into a world,” writes Levinas, “that is, makes them belong to us.” Thus, there is a propensity for “truth” to be understood in the following manner: truth is viewed as a form of possession, or “ownership,” and truth is then wielded as a scepter for control and domination. Foucault reminds us that we must be cautious about approaching truth in this manner. For within the relationship between knowledge (truth) and power, power depends for its effectiveness on knowledge with respect to those claiming possession of it, and knowledge engenders and legitimizes power.

The films of Brakhage radically subvert this philosophical tendency ingrained in the modern consciousness, for as Camper indicates, Brakhage’s art flies in the face of “our tendency to limit ourselves to settling on a single way of thinking, a single way of seeing, a single set of objects defined or possessed.” For the illuminated images within his films, even when they are not abstract, are certainly not representational in the classical, traditional sense of the cinema. In most instances they are recalcitrant to any efforts to concretize them in terms of the understanding, e.g., the shimmering images that are brilliantly bathed in the direct, reflected, and refracted light in *Commingle Containers* (1998), evade our comprehension and tend toward dissembling and illusion, or what the Greeks called *phantasia*, which refers to the appearance of things by way of the senses that manifest as *phantasma* - apparitions and visions. Brakhage may well be taking the viewer on an imaginative journey, but he refuses to grant us access to a transcendent world beyond the films, a superior, paradigmatic world of Platonic super-sensuous truth, as if a “real” world beyond the immediate experience of the film existed. Brakhage also refuses to provide a vision of the world wherein it is rendered understandable, where it has been reified in knowledge. Brakhage’s films refuse to provide the viewer with what Camus calls “metaphysical solace,” which is to say, these films fail to satisfy “man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe, [his] insistence upon familiarity and appetite for clarity, that nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute.” The

philosophical questions Brakhage asks, which give rise to the film in the first instance, always remain *as* questions, because he is asking original, or fundamental, questions, which are philosophical and of a dual-nature: they are *transformative*, they seek to reveal things that facilitate our development, and they at once inspire us toward the mode of *preservation*, they inspire the care and keeping of the basic question-worthy status of the things and issues his films address, such as love, existence, freedom, and human potential.

3. The Return to Embodied Human Consciousness in the Films of Brakhage

Prior to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who ushered in a way to radically re-think our “bodily” connection to the world (the “body-subject”), Nietzsche, who might be considered a proto-existentialist, fought against the traditional notion of the single, hypostatized “ego-subject” and was already carving out a prominent place for the body in philosophy after it had been exiled in favor of the power of reason (mind) to think true Being at a remove from the experiential realm – namely, he was attempting to overturn Platonism: In place of Plato and the “two worlds” of truth and seeming, he proposes one world, and in it he locates “the phenomenon of the body,” which for Nietzsche is far “more fundamental than belief in the soul,” because it is a “richer, clearer, more tangible phenomenon” than either the belief in the soul or in the power of so-called “detached thought” to accurately capture the depth and complexity of our existence. Brakhage, in his own radical manner, in an act of *trans-valuating* traditional cinematic values, sought to overturn the conventions of modern filmmaking, which included: first, rethinking the role of the spectator in terms of participant, for Brakhage’s films, as A. L. Reese points out, “make uncompromising demands on the viewer to elicit and construct meaning” because Brakhage shifts the “attention from the author’s voice to the spectator’s eye,” and secondly, retuning the senses of the cinemagoer by eliciting the “body,” in terms of consciousness as an “embodied phenomenon,” as the primary mode in which to experience his films, which included, most importantly, re-teaching us to see and feel again, as if for the first time. This is precisely what is called for in the *mechanical age of reproduction*, which might in part be inspired through sensitive art critique: the rediscovering and recovering of our senses and the meditative capacity of our Being as related to life and works of art.

Brakhage succeeds in getting us to see and feel more, but this phenomenon is not reducible to the incorporation of non-representational shapes and images, as in films such as *Purgation* (1987) and *Existence in Song* (1987), which on the surface are abstract studies of color and light that challenge the eyes and the conscious sensibilities of those engaging the films. Brakhage also radically alters the cinematic experience of the spectator due to the unconventional manner in which physically wields the camera to produce the types of shots incorporated into such films as *Desistfilm* (1954), *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), and *Dog Star Man*. For example, in *Desistfilm* the camera not only shakes in an unsteady fashion, it jerks rapidly, yet with a sense of purpose and precision, from one subject to another in the interior shots of the intoxicated party. In *Dog Star Man* the camera whirls and spins in a manner that elicits an out-of-control, spiraling and dizzying effect, as Brakhage re-creates the woodcutter’s vision of the sky as viewed through the twisted, outstretched branches of the great trees that menacingly look down from above. In short, filming a movie for Brakhage was an intense, unadulterated bodily event, and often the result of hard and intensive physical labor on the part of the filmmaker. In the documentary *Brakhage on Film*, Brakhage is shown in the woods practicing various and quite radical techniques for filming with an empty camera, literally performing repetitive exercises in creative movement that closely resemble the beautiful and strange movements of modern dance, in order for these movements to become for him second-nature, as part of his organic bodily make-up. Listening to the interview, it becomes clear that for Brakhage,

filmmaking is as much about the bones and sinew – the blood and sweat - of the artist as it is the capacity and capability to “see” and visualize.

In the documentary *Brakhage* (Shedden, 1999), we encounter an interview where the filmmaker actually reverses the polarity, the traditional relationship, between eye and camera, in that while it is the case that Brakhage’s camera, which produces the film, retunes the vision of the spectator who is taught to see anew, it might just as well be said that Brakhage is training the camera to see more like the human eye. He punctuates for both interviewer and cameraman the very way in which the classic “Hollywood” pan-shot, where the camera moves smoothly, effortlessly from one side to the other, located firmly on a tri-pod, is completely unnatural and antithetic to the way in which our eyes really take in the environment, and states emphatically, “The eyes can’t see that way.” Thus, as opposed to classic cinema, where in most cases the camera is most present when it is absent, or unobtrusive, in the films where Brakhage is not painting directly on the film-strips, there is a stark and bold obtrusive presence to the camera within the frames of the films, and as indicated above, it is a “living-camera” that shakes, trembles, and darts to and fro with a sense of autonomous conviction in order to transcend the mechanical, the cold technological remove of the machine, and return *it* to the “lived world” of the filmmaker, as a physical and emotional extension of the person holding the camera, who views herself and world, through it, and in turn invites the spectator to dwell in this world as if he or she is viewing the world directly through the filmmaker’s third organic eye.

I think immediately of two such films that bespeak the *situatedness* of the human within the conscious world of its poetic making, as anchored within that world by the camera and overall “vision” of Brakhage, wherein its most primary mode of dwelling is undoubtedly linked to the optical organ, and they are *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1971), which is, as Camper relates, a “curious” and “creepy, study of the varieties of light reflected off of skin, with luminous fluids appearing to dance with the camera.” These films, when viewed one after the other, represent a powerful philosophical *womb-to-tomb* meditation on the human condition, with all of its ecstatic moments of joy, elation, and sublime wonder along with the concomitant horrors, fear of the unknown, and the realization of the fragile and ephemeral nature of human existence, all revealed through a vision within which we participate, and are granted privileged access to, only through the act of seeing *qua* seeing. There is a fusion of worlds taking place as we experience these films: Our “lived world” merges and participates in the visceral “lived world” of the film. We are in a quite literal sense present to the birth of the child, exploding with life and shimmering with liquid color, present in the morgue with all of its macabre, clinical sublimity, which is accentuated by the cold and calculating manner the medical examiner is probing, measuring, and examining the body prior to the incision. This film emanates a beautiful glowing reddish-orange hue in varying shades and tones, all of which transform the film into a contemporary “filmic” analogue to the grotesque, beautifully illumed paintings by Caravaggio, such as *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

The latter of these two films is intimately related to the ontology of death as we find in early Heidegger (*Being and Time*, 1927). Were we to remain in the cold, sterile atmosphere of the morgue, amidst the lifeless forms, we would identify death merely in biological terms, i.e., the cessation of the organs, thus viewing death in an inauthentic manner, as that phenomenon that happens to others, or as a quasi-established abstracted truth, which occurs at some distant point in the future. When understanding death in this manner, we are, according to Heidegger, “*fleeing-in-the-face* of death” in terms of its ontological magnitude. For Heidegger, it is the mood (*Stimmung*) of anxiety (*Angst*) that puts us, through a process of “existential individuation,” in touch with the ontological aspects of our Being, namely, our mortality. With Brakhage, it is possible to state that it is the aesthetic experience we have with his films that attunes us in such a way that we might be free for

the possibility of embracing death in terms other than the everyday understanding of it, wherein all of our possibilities are subordinated to the uttermost possibility of death, and thus become provisional in light of our finitude and mortality. In essence, when we embrace the ontological implications of death, there is an “anticipation” of death, an authentic comportment to death, which amounts to maintaining oneself within the imminent threat of death’s “indefinite certainty” at each and every moment of our existence. This ontological understanding hinges on the way that Brakhage’s film has framed the events for us, for while they contain the same content as would be consistent with a scientific documentary on autopsy, it is through the transfiguring lens of his filmic art that this world of the morgue is shown in philosophical terms wherein there is a play of and counter-striving between the “ontic” and “ontological,” i.e., life depicted on the “slab” is the *bios*, the finite individuated life of *this* person, which is set within the general ontological potential of all life is *zoe*, the invariant, general processes of life itself.

Clearly this idea is present within modern existentialism and phenomenology, which generally unfolds through two phases: the *phenomenological epoche* (“bracketing”) and the *eidetic reduction*. Within this two-fold process the philosopher, in a preparatory moment, suspends her judgment with respect to the phenomenon under investigation, this allows for a whole range of unique and previously overlooked dimensions of experience to manifest. The phenomenological method allows us to see things through a reconfigured lens where epistemological and psychological categories are held in abeyance and things appear non-contingent and independent of our subjective categorizations for defining and understanding them. This reveals insight into the essential and invariant structures (ontological-existential) that give form to our existence. We see, as it were, in the particular manifestation of phenomena what is essential, or universal, to all phenomena of a similar type, e.g., this method would allow us to intuitively glean the existence of ultimate ontological situations, which are instantiated empirically, and within which we all find ourselves, such as those earlier introduced. This relates directly to what Camper writes about the process of readying oneself for the experience of Brakhage’s films, specifically the “openness” and “attentiveness” the viewer must cultivate in order to truly appreciate and benefit from the experience, and this includes the relaxed attitude of letting go of previously held conceptions, stripping oneself of prejudices about what film *is* or *should* be. Cleansing one’s conscious aesthetic palette, as it were, facilitates the mind-set required for the spectator to plumb “the depths of its imagery and the various themes and ideas suggested by its subject matter – imaginatively dancing with its flickering rhythms.” This process allows for the manifestation of things never before imagined, which initially involves a sense of giving, or releasing, oneself over to these films, and in a resolute manner, becoming open to new truths, indeterminate truths, that are on the approach in a unique way from the film.

4. The Philosophical Experience of the Films: The Struggle for Self and World Amidst the Deafening Silence and Oppressive “Presence” of Impersonal Being

In *Brakhage on Film*, the filmmaker states that he would prefer his 8mm films be experienced by the viewer in the comfort of her own home, wherein she can “live” with the images and meditate fully on them until they become familiar. In essence, the spectator creates the cinematic context within which the aesthetic experience occurs by reproducing the atmosphere of the cinema. This is precisely what Camper suggests that we must do when watching digital video reproductions of Brakhage’s original films. Much like Jean Goudal (“Surrealism and Cinema” 1925), who insists that the milieu of the darkened theatre is essential in recreating the dreamer’s habitat, crucial to the inspiration of that superior state of consciousness, *surreality*, Camper suggests a way in which to best “approximate the conditions of the cinema,” because in order to fully experience Brakhage’s work it

is “especially important not to view Brakhage films in the way most are accustomed to screening videos.” The atmosphere, he suggests, is one that is dark, intimate, and devoid of distractions, and for the silent films, I argue this is most crucial. Viewing a film by Brakhage is best approached within a space that, proximally and for the most part, privileges vision and hearing, a context that accentuates our vision and hearing, facilitating them into the acuity of their full power. For not only do our eyes need to be re-trained, but the screening of the films also provides an opportunity to re-train our aural sensibilities: The silent films of Brakhage invite the return to our original ontological predisposition to “hear” – our *originary* auditory capacity that makes it possible to listen in anticipation of the truth of the art work, to listen, like the poet, for the call of the gods, to listen, as Heidegger insists, for the call of “conscience,” which awakens us to our authentic potential for Being.

It is possible to draw an analogy between the “silence” of Brakhage’s films and the primordial “silence” of Being, which is something far more than merely the absence of sound. Below I reference Levinas’ description of the *presence-in-absence* of impersonal Being in terms of a “rumbling silence” as related Brakhage’s choice to screen many of his films in silence. The primordial silence of Being, states Levinas,

is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that “there is” is undeniable.

This is precisely the experience of “noise” one hears and feels when viewing the silent films of Brakhage, and the aesthetic experience, along with the creation and enhancement thereof, is dependent in great part on the cinematic environment one has organized as described above. The incorporation of silence in Brakhage’s films is a crucial formal, stylistic, and aesthetic choice grounded in the quest to remain true to the purely visual aspect of film. In “The 60th Birthday Interview,” Suranjan Ganguly asks Brakhage what he learned from his relationships with both Varese and Cage, and Brakhage offers the following: “Primarily what I got from them was the inspiration to make silent film.” In the documentary *Brakhage*, filmmaker Phil Solomon speaks about the detrimental effect a sound track would have had on Brakhage’s films. “Brakhage,” states Solomon, “developed a sophisticated visual aesthetic based primarily on rhythm, and if one puts a soundtrack on, you face the possibility of being redundant.” The works, due to their visual rhythm created by the interplay of images and editing techniques, inspire a “mind’s eye soundtrack.” Solomon reasons that “if the major concern of film is mainly visual, then the reason sound is a blind alley is that it cuts back sight,” when film is silent, as Solomon suggests, “it becomes more possible to see.”

And, as I suggest, what we see (hear) and experience when viewing a Brakhage film is the foreboding presence-in-absence of what Levinas’ identifies as the “There is,” or the ominous presence of impersonal Being. As opposed to the “dreamer’s milieu” of Surrealism, when experiencing a Brakhage film in the approximated conditions of the cinema, one is returned to a time before temporality, prior to the formation of the subject conceived in hypostatic terms, which might be poetized as a pre-linguistic world of Being prior to any and all beings, entities, and consciousness itself. Levinas, philosophizing the “There is” (*il y a*), or the “existing without existents,” writes:

having taken an initiative, anonymously. Being remains like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one.

It is possible to relate Levinas' notion of impersonal Being in poetic, mythological terms to the great void of Chaos as conceived by the ancient Greeks.

Chaos is an emptiness, a dark emptiness where nothing is visible. A realm of falling, of vertigo and confusion - endless, bottomless. That void seizes us like the yawning of an immense gullet where everything is swallowed up by murky darkness. So at the start there is only that Void, a blind, black, boundless abyss (Vernant).

This "blind, black, boundless abyss" is as impenetrable as the darkness of night, and it is at night, during the darkest, blackest nocturnal hours that the "rumbling silence" of impersonal Being is most powerfully heard and felt in the midst of its deafening silence. For Levinas' notion of the "There is" can be understood in terms of solitude and insomnia. In darkness we lack the power to "see" anything, but intuit the undeniable presence of "something" – we hear *it*, we feel *it*. The night, as Levinas claims, induces horror in the child who is relegated to the haunting solitude his room. When as a child, "one sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as 'rumbling,'" and in such moments the "I" is depersonalized, and this is also related to insomnia, for in this state of persistent wakefulness amid the night, "one can and one cannot say that there is a 'I' which cannot manage to fall asleep. The impossibility of escaping wakefulness is something 'objective,' independent of my initiative." In this state I am absolutely dependent upon the night, or impersonal Being, in its persistence and threatening. Yet this dependence is something that cannot be transcended as long as we strive to give form to our conscious world as subjects, as a human beings, and accompanying this ontological truism is an overwhelming sense of horror and dread, for only in death is there an "absolute negation wherein 'the music ends.'" However, as Levinas reasons, outside of this single fatality, "one has the impression of a total impossibility of escaping it, of 'stopping the music'."

The "There is" is indistinguishable from the sound of silence heard amidst the silence. It is, as Levinas states, the "absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation," and from out of this black abyss the subject as "I" emerges, which represents human existence in terms of the "the passage of going from *being* to a *something*." In this process subjectivity, identity, and consciousness are de-centered, they are secondary to the primary condition of impersonal Being, which is always antecedent to human consciousness. This is why Levinas claims that prior to the "I am," "There is," and in thinking about what the passage from *Being* to *being* is like in relation to the films of Brakhage, we might imagine that life, the process of becoming an "existent," is comprised of a succession of "liminal" moments, wherein human beings work to stand-out (*ec-static*) from the anonymous context of Being. In these liminal moments, we bring forth consciousness through the poetic act of creation when language, as a symbolic response to the void brings a world, a life, to stand-out in bold relief from the shapeless mass that forever encompasses our existence, from out of which our subject-hood emerges and threatens to return in death. Consciousness, for Levinas, is the *hypostatic* act of establishing an identity as separated off from the "There is," and is, in many ways, the ephemeral attempt to escape Being. However, our human being, our subject-hood, is never given over by Being as a "gift," it is "never inherited but always won in the heat of struggle," claims Levinas. This struggle is the battle for a worldly existence, and it is at once the warring against the forces of impersonal Being and a personal battle in which we must assume the existential responsibility for choosing and laboring toward the end of becoming an existent. Levinas, unlike Heidegger, does not subscribe to the notion that we are *thrown-into-the-world* as *Being-in-the-world*, in terms of representing the primordial ontological notion that our *Dasein* is always already located in

the world. Rather, Levinas views our existence as a continued process of laboring in order belong to a world in the first instance, for the human is always at a “distance” from both Being and the world. In short, winning a life, finding a home within the world amounts to engaging in a struggle with primordial forces that are indifferent to our condition: Life *is* “labor.”

It is possible to imagine such a life as described being portrayed, or better, captured as lived by the filmmaker: The films of Brakhage document, as consecrated acts of subjectivity, the arduous process of resisting impersonal Being, wracked as it is with horror and dangers, by ceaselessly struggling to wrest our being, our conscious existence and world from unconcealment: We strive to give form and shape to our world, we work to define, redefine, and reconfigure our conscious existence while Being threatens at every turn to overwhelm even our most valiant efforts and engulf our consciousness, returning us to the black, shapeless void from whence we have struggled to emerge. Brakhage is not so much attempting to fully understanding Being, rather he is re-presenting the condition within which we find ourselves, i.e., he is not primarily concerned with “what” Being is, rather “that” it is, as a brute fact, and the richness in his work streams from his quest to examine through film the processes of “how” we become truly *as* human beings, how and to what degree we are able to shoulder the weight of the responsibility that presses down upon us for making a life.

As articulated, life might be equated with the attempt to escape impersonal Being, and works of art, poetic acts of creation, state building, nation building are all testimonies to human consciousness attempting to resist Being, to stand out again the shapeless backdrop of the void of Being. These are all labor-intensive acts, which acquire meaning in the personal struggle against the ontological forces that are beyond us, and since we can never assimilate Being in knowledge it remains external, it is never made a possession. It is not difficult to see this theme played out in *Dog Star Man*, for it is possible to read the film is a testament to our laboring to establish a world in the face of Being wherein we experience the onset and onslaught of fatigue, the impending drive to halt or escape from the weight of our “world building” activities. In moments of fatigue we seek to refuel and re-motivate, to somehow regain a semblance of strength to resist the urge to abandon the task and continue on in the ominous presence of the overwhelming weight of impersonal Being. For example, the woodcutter must always be reminded of his commitment to the task, and this comes through the experience of fatigue, wherein he is at once confronted by the unarticulated, implicit existential responsibility and necessity to carry on up the mountain and the concomitant desire to abandon the labor under the sheer weight of the task.

Brakhage, with deft sensitivity and imagination, re-produces the difference between Being and beings in the films *Stellar* (1993), *Study in Color and Black and White* (1993), and *Black Ice* (1994), for these films, while one might refer to them as light and color studies, are more aptly conceived in terms of the glaring absence of light, these films are dominated by the intrusion of Chaos and night on the subject’s conscious efforts to establish a terrestrial grounding amidst the groundless chasm of Being. Brakhage remarks about *Stellar* that it is “a visual envisioning of outer space,” and the void plays a dominant role in this film, for while brilliant, fleeting flashes of luminescent celestial forms emerge, are born, in a variety of brilliant hues, they just as quickly “burn out” as they are extinguished and consumed by the abyss from out of which they arose. *Black Ice* is also a short film wherein light and color are threatened to be overtaken by the black of night, and the zooming effect produces the feeling in the spectator, not so much that the film is rushing toward her, but rather that she is falling into the realm of impersonal Being, “the realm of falling, of vertigo and confusion,” as described by Vernant, and losing both her footing on the shifting foundations of her world along with her grip on consciousness amidst the onslaught of Being. Both of these films might be read as reminders that the formation of subject-hood is an act that always teeters on the brink of disaster, for the danger is ever-present that the “void seizes us like the yawning of an immense gullet where everything is swallowed up by murky darkness.”

Perhaps the film that most eloquently poetizes the overwhelming power, weight, and presence of the void of Being is *Study in Color and Black and White*. The dominance of black in the frames obtrusively plays a crucial role thematically and not just visually, for not only does it function as a stark contrast to the brightly lit shapes, setting the vibrant colors aglow, it also gives the tactile sense that darkness, night, impersonal Being threatens every second of the film to envelope and eclipse the light once and for all. This indicates that our existence, much like the films of Brakhage, as Levinas writes, unfolds in the “dread before Being,” in terms of “an impotent recoil, an evasion” from the haunting “shadow of the “There is.”” In line with this theme, Brakhage ingeniously incorporates the use of what I term the “cinematic caesura,” as in the films *Existence as Song* and *The Dante Quartet* (1987), which as opposed to merely representing, through the incorporation of several pure black frames, a pause delineating a rhythmic division in the films, as related to what has been stated about Levinas, Brakhage has them function in an ontological manner, reminding the spectator of the precarious nature of our being and our constant dependence on and the intractable relationship with the primordial void of Being that is inescapable. For the radical contrast Brakhage sets up between light and dark, between radiant color and black, or the complete absence of light, functions beyond a mere technique related to aesthetic composition. When describing the films I have chosen to analyze, one might well replace the phrase, “interplay of light and dark within a context of symmetrical and asymmetrical juxtaposition,” with the observation that their interaction is violent and resembles, more often than not, a life and death struggle for superiority, which threatens to break beyond the horizon of film’s frame.

To aptly conclude reflections on this theme I examine *Eye Myth* (1967), a hand-painted and etched (scratched) short film that grows out of the above philosophical notion of the “There is,” i.e., that we are, from the moment we are conscious, precariously poised on the precipice of relinquishing our consciousness to the forces of night, of Being. This film portrays a man, immersed inextricably within the struggle with Being amidst the brute onslaught of sensory stimuli. Brakhage brilliantly recreates the phenomenon through the furious activity of light and color raining down on the protagonist, as if to assault him, as he desperately labors to give form and meaning to his world in a fleeting, and heroic, attempt to stand-out from the shapeless chasm of the “There is.” As the film poetizes, our lives are a continued, ever-renewed process of wresting beings from concealment, with the concomitant understanding that those things brought to the light of truth always hold the propensity to sink back into the black void of impersonal Being. In the span of 9-seconds, Brakhage manages to philosophically poetize the protagonist’s ontological condemnation to life in terms of the continued process of self-formation, deformation, and reformation, all the while haunted by the foreboding sense of danger of primordial darkness that threatens to intrude into all human endeavors, when our fleeting moments of existential clarity are thrown into confusion and we are overwhelmed by the shear force of the oblivion. The films I have analyzed in the final section all re-produce the human life-task in terms of the perennial passage from *Being* to *something*, from *Being* to *being*. Brakhage’s films capture the extreme uncertainty bound up with this life-task, with its propensity toward disaster and abject failure, which are experienced in moments when we are horrified and humbled before the sublime weight and mystery of Being.

Concluding Remarks

Camper outlines the thrust of Brakhage’s filmmaking in the following terms:

[H]is project was always to explore the richness of seeing and of life in its totality, accepting no givens about what seeing, or the film image, or life itself is, but always pushing toward the unknown [...] his films are made with an intensity, a kind of ‘wits end’ desperation, that suggests a

consciousness on the brink. Brakhage was not only a craftsman doing something he loved; he used his craft to try to come to an understanding of whether – and on what terms – he could continue to go on living.

This, as I have attempted to show, was Brakhage's pursuit of art rooted in legitimate philosophical inquiry, which dealt with philosophical issues through the medium of filmic aesthetics. A great many of his films, perhaps his art in general, emerges from traumatic events, a fall on a patch of black ice that left him blind for a short period of time, persistent and grave illnesses, oppressive thoughts on suicide. This, of course, is the perennial question of philosophy as modified by Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." In a universe that is devoid of intrinsic meaning, in a world that continually resists our best efforts to understand it or justify it in religious, scientific, or moral terms, Brakhage's films testify, in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche, that it is perhaps only as an "aesthetic phenomenon" that the world might be made meaningful – and Brakhage found his world intensely meaningful.

The human is a complex. However, as Heidegger states, "Philosophy need not be high flown, it is enough to dwell on what lies close and immediate in the here and now." Anyone can follow the path of meditative thought, thinking in her own way, within her own limits, and as Camper observes, through his films Brakhage wanted to make us aware that "each of us can become an inner explorer, continually pushing toward some new frontier of consciousness." I have always viewed philosophy as a form of creative problem solving, but perhaps a better definition would refer philosophy to a form of thinking that is never truly at an end, never completed. While its scope is grand and its issues many and varied, philosophy most often finds its subject matter, its place and home-ground, within the immediate realm of our day-to-day lives. Much like Brakhage, it is possible to think seriously and philosophically about such things as this patch of earth, this present time in history, this life with family and friends, and all of these things, it might be said, viewed through the eyes and lens of the filmmaker, served as his artistic inspiration, which rooted him philosophically in the world.

Brakhage's films show us something important and often overlooked about philosophy: We often consider philosophy a discipline that seeks to solve the problems of existence, and what is glossed in this understanding is that prior to any move to solve problems, philosophy must first seek a proper understanding of the issues, which often entails a reformulation of the initial questions that we ask, which amounts to an inquiry into the questions themselves, in order to clarify the manner in which to best approach the problems in the first instance. If the films of Brakhage are philosophical questions in celluloid, as I have attempted to show, then they denote the *on-the-wayness* of philosophy, the incompleteness of all philosophical thought. However, this is not a weakness in or critique of philosophy, this simply demonstrates the intractable nature of the things philosophy deals with, and one can view this as problematic or, as did Brakhage, through the attunement of "wonder" (*thauma*), wherein the world is revealed in such a way that our existence, although never fully explained or justified, shot through as it is with a preponderance of profuse and intense pain and suffering, also holds the "possibility of deep satisfaction and indeed, in exalted moments, of perfection." Brakhage's films undoubtedly give us many of these co-called "exalted moments of perfection," and to apprehend this reality, with the courage, sensitivity, and aesthetic acuity of Brakhage, amounts to grasping what Jaspers calls the "the aim of the philosophical endeavor."

