

Philosophy in Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*

Alberto Baracco

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in Stan Brakhage's
Dog Star Man

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To my childhood imaginary friend.

PREFACE

The central tenet of this book is that film can philosophize. The book therefore falls within the wide and composite body of work identified with the term *film as philosophy*. After decades of critical inquiry in film philosophy, film as philosophy seems now to have become an established, fully recognized area of research in film studies. Recent years have seen the publication of a large number of works focused on film as philosophy, conferences devoted to this area of research and the creation of numerous journals and websites. However, despite this important achievement, film scholars have not yet paid sufficient attention to the methodological problems of interpretation of film philosophizing. This book offers a study of *DSM*'s philosophy through an interpretive methodology based on Ricoeur's hermeneutics. The book suggests that a philosophical discussion of film cannot be conducted without an adequate methodological approach to the problem of interpretation. Interpreting the film's philosophy entails, first of all, a reflection on interpretation and on the interpretive act.

In its hermeneutic methodological approach to *DSM*, the book focuses on the filmgoer's film experience. The main problem is, therefore, what kind of relationship is established between film and filmgoer. No discussion on film and its philosophical power can evade this crucial question. In theoretical constructs as well as in interpretative practice, whether explicitly formulated or only implicitly suggested, each reflection on film always involves the identification of a specific form of film–filmgoer relationship. It can be defined through the comparison between

represented images and reality, or through the analysis of the perceptual and cognitive processes viewing the film activates, or also in the consideration of the symbolic space in which film and filmgoer meet. It is in this last way that the concept of the film world, which is at the heart of the study proposed here, shows its particular relevance. From a hermeneutic perspective, the film world identifies the space of signification in which the filmgoer's interpretative act takes place. The film world is the focal point of Ricœurian film hermeneutics and the fulcrum of its interpretative methodology.

In this book, I will apply the concept of the film world and Ricœur's hermeneutic methodology to a case study of *DSM*. This approach to the film raises a number of questions: What form does the hermeneutic discourse on film have? In what ways can it develop? Can film hermeneutics have a method and in what sense should this method be understood? Is it fruitful to apply Ricœurian film hermeneutics based on the concept of the film world to experimental cinema? Is it consistent to analyze *DSM* as a film world? In addition to these questions, other more general problems arise: What idea of interpretation emerges from film hermeneutics? What is the relationship between this idea and the one conveyed by traditional film theory? Faced with Ricœurian film hermeneutics that accepts different, divergent perspectives, how is it possible to arbitrate between conflicting interpretations? Is it possible to avoid an annihilating drift without falling back onto a foundationalist, universalistic philosophy? If so, how can this be done?

In its attempt to answer these questions, the book is divided into three parts. In the first part, the Introduction (Chapter 1) will examine the diverse solutions that film scholars have adopted in addressing the question of the relationship between film and philosophy. It will shed light on the plurality of approaches that have characterized film philosophy. In particular, I will emphasize the difference between a detached and purely objectifying approach to film and a hermeneutic approach in which the filmgoer is directly involved in the act of interpretation and not merely an indifferent interpreter of the film text. Chapter 1 also includes a discussion of the concept of the film world. Reconsidering the different theories that have made use of this concept, the specific meaning that it assumes in Ricœurian film hermeneutics will be clarified. As a symbolic unity of meanings that is offered to the filmgoer from a plurality of possible perspectives, the film world will emerge with its inherent temporality, defining the hermeneutic horizon within which

interpretation evolves. After this introductory discussion, Chapter 2 will focus on whether it is possible to apply the concept of the film world to *DSM* and the main problems this case study presents for Ricœurian film hermeneutics. Hermeneutic methodology and its three phases will be described, in order to explain the interpretive process through which the subsequent discussion of *DSM*'s philosophy will be conducted.

The second part of the book (Chapters 3–5) is devoted to the study of *DSM*'s philosophy. Its three chapters correspond to the three phases of the methodology employed in Ricœurian film hermeneutics, respectively identified as understanding, explaining and critical understanding of *DSM*'s film world. In Chapter 3 (*Understanding DSM's Film world*), after an initial reflection on the first insights that seeing film suggests, I will describe the symbolic meanings which identify and express its film world, composing a first, uncritical interpretation of *DSM*. In Chapter 4 (*Explaining DSM's Film World*), the history of *DSM*'s film world will be traced from its origin, through the history of its interpretations, and an exegetical study of the film world's symbolic meanings will be carried out in order to better deal with the conflict that arises between the film's various different interpretations. Finally, Chapter 5 (*Critical Understanding of DSM's Film World*) will try to proceed towards a critical understanding of the film world and its philosophy through a critique of the perspective I have adopted and the interpretation that has been proposed.

In the last part of the book, some conclusive reflections will be presented. Chapter 6 will enable us to schematically retrace the hermeneutical path via which the study of *DSM*'s philosophy has been conducted and make clear how this case study breathes new life into Ricœurian film hermeneutics. In conclusion, it will be argued that interpreting the film world and the philosophy that the film world expresses is a process that always involves comparing different perspectives, in a search for meaning that requires the deep involvement of the filmgoer. For the filmgoer understanding a film world is also a new understanding of him/herself. Through interpretation, filmgoers not only understand a plot but, more profoundly, appropriate an existential project that becomes their own.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DSM *Dog Star Man* (1963)

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
1.1	<i>Theoretical Aspects and Possible Perspectives in Film Philosophy</i>	2
1.2	<i>Film Worlds Theory</i>	6
1.3	<i>Ricœurian Hermeneutics of the Film World</i>	9
1.4	<i>Some Preliminary Conclusions</i>	14
	<i>References</i>	17
2	DSM and Philosophy	19
2.1	<i>DSM Through Ricœurian Hermeneutics</i>	19
2.2	<i>The Process of Interpretation</i>	22
2.2.1	<i>Phase 1: Understanding DSM's Film World</i>	23
2.2.2	<i>Phase 2: Explaining DSM's Film World</i>	24
2.2.3	<i>Phase 3: Critical Understanding of DSM's Film World</i>	25
2.2.4	<i>Structure and Schemata</i>	26
2.3	<i>DSM as Film World</i>	28
	<i>References</i>	33
3	Understanding DSM's Film World	35
3.1	<i>Initial Guess: Pure Visual Perception</i>	36
3.2	<i>Symbolic Elements of the Film World</i>	37
3.3	<i>DSM as Poetry of Vision</i>	39

3.3.1	<i>The Rhetorical-Stylistic Structure of DSM</i>	41
3.3.2	<i>The Rhythmic Structure of DSM</i>	48
3.4	<i>DSM as Epic Mythology</i>	50
3.4.1	<i>The Genesis</i>	55
3.4.2	<i>The Conflict</i>	58
3.4.3	<i>The Innocence</i>	61
3.4.4	<i>The Desire</i>	64
3.4.5	<i>The Death</i>	67
	<i>References</i>	73
4	Explaining DSM's Film World	75
4.1	<i>Origin of the Film World: Deren, Duncan, and Brakhage's Heterodoxy</i>	76
4.2	<i>History of Interpretations: Camper and Sitney</i>	80
4.3	<i>Exegesis of Symbolic Meanings: Between Poetry and Myth</i>	88
4.3.1	<i>Poetry of Vision</i>	88
4.3.2	<i>Epic Mythology</i>	94
4.4	<i>Conflict of Interpretations: Is an Analytical Approach to DSM Appropriate?</i>	97
	<i>References</i>	108
5	Critical Understanding of DSM's Film World	113
5.1	<i>Critical Understanding of Interpretation: Further Clues on DSM's Film World</i>	113
5.2	<i>Critical Understanding of Interpreter: Mythopoesis</i>	117
5.3	<i>Critical Understanding of Film Philosophy: Rejection of Logocentric Metaphysics</i>	119
	<i>References</i>	122
6	Conclusion	123
6.1	<i>A Summary of Our Journey into DSM's Film World</i>	123
6.2	<i>A Last Remark on Ricœurian Film Hermeneutics</i>	132
	<i>References</i>	134
	References	135
	Index	141

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Approaches to film philosophy	3
Fig. 2.1	Phases and stages of interpretation	27
Fig. 2.2	Relations between phases and stages	28
Fig. 2.3	Scope of phases and stages	29
Fig. 3.1	Manipulation of the film medium (painting)	40
Fig. 3.2	Manipulation of the film medium (scratching)	41
Fig. 3.3	Example of synecdoche	42
Fig. 3.4	Example of metonymy	43
Fig. 3.5	Example of oxymoron	44
Fig. 3.6	Dog Star Man's transfigured face	45
Fig. 3.7	Dog Star Man's Calvary	45
Fig. 3.8	Synecdoche and metaphor (love)	46
Fig. 3.9	Synecdoche and metaphor (birth)	47
Fig. 3.10	Metaphor (conception)	47
Fig. 3.11	Parts and film rolls	49
Fig. 3.12	Parts and speed of image flow	50
Fig. 3.13	<i>Part 1</i> as winter	52
Fig. 3.14	<i>Part 2</i> as spring	52
Fig. 3.15	<i>Part 3</i> as summer	53
Fig. 3.16	<i>Part 4</i> as autumn	53
Fig. 3.17	Symbolic organization of parts (seasonal)	54
Fig. 3.18	Symbolic organization of parts (existential)	54
Fig. 3.19	Natural elements in the genesis (fire)	55
Fig. 3.20	Dreamlike dimension and Dog Star Man's consciousness	56
Fig. 3.21	Macroscopic level	57
Fig. 3.22	Microscopic level	58

Fig. 3.23	The symbolic battlefield	59
Fig. 3.24	A snowflake crystal	60
Fig. 3.25	Dog Star Man climbing	60
Fig. 3.26	Baby's sensory experiences (sight)	62
Fig. 3.27	Baby's sensory experiences (hearing)	63
Fig. 3.28	Baby's sensory experiences (taste)	63
Fig. 3.29	Baby's untutored eyes	64
Fig. 3.30	Symbolic use of superimposition	65
Fig. 3.31	Dog Star Man wielding his axe	68
Fig. 3.32	Images of family life	68
Fig. 3.33	Dog Star Man's axe and the white tree	69
Fig. 3.34	A sacred figure witnesses Dog Star Man's end	70
Fig. 3.35	Final emergence of film medium	70
Fig. 6.1	<i>DSM</i> as a case study	125
Fig. 6.2	<i>DSM</i> 's film world in the first phase of interpretation	127
Fig. 6.3	History of <i>DSM</i> 's film world	128
Fig. 6.4	Exegetical study of <i>DSM</i> 's film world	129
Fig. 6.5	<i>DSM</i> 's film world through the conflict of interpretations	130
Fig. 6.6	Towards a critical understanding of <i>DSM</i> 's film world	131