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Abstract

In 1970, when he was a philosophy student at Hamilton's McMaster University, [BRUCE ELDER] used occasionally to sit in on a film class. Among the students was a young Ivan Reitman, who, as Elder recalls, was "usually railing against the professor, asking, 'Why do we have to do all this Eisenstein crap? Why don't we talk about what people care about? Comedies!' "

Full Text

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Not your typical popular filmmaker

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Saturday, February 13, 1999

The Globe and Mail

In 1970, when he was a philosophy student at Hamilton's McMaster University, Bruce Elder used occasionally to sit in on a film class. Among the students was a young Ivan Reitman, who, as Elder recalls, was "usually railing against the professor, asking, 'Why do we have to do all this Eisenstein crap? Why don't we talk about what people care about? Comedies!' "

Reitman, who went on to direct such hits as *Meatballs* and *Ghostbusters*, stuck to his guns. But Elder, who became a very different kind of filmmaker, stuck to his guns as well.

A scholarly, gentle-spoken man, Elder is regarded as one of the world's leading avant-garde filmmakers and writers on experimental film; his work has been featured in career retrospectives at the Art Gallery of Ontario, La Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal and the New York Anthology Film Archives, and today his films and writing will be the subject of an international symposium at Ryerson University (where he teaches) entitled *Image, Flesh and Thought*. The event will bring together composers, film scholars, multimedia artists, literary critics and photographers, all of whom share his

sense of film as a potentially profound art form.

Experimental (or avant-garde) film is a term originally associated with French and German experiments of the twenties, and the later underground American personal cinema of the forties and later; it can mean many things, from very slow long shots, to personal diaries to paint on film. Principally, it's filmmaking as art that does not conform to the rules dictated by studio financing and theatre chains. In Elder's case, it means a philosophic and poetic form, a way of "finding images that are the representatives of thought," as he puts it. Far from fitting the stereotype of a wild-eyed avant-gardist, he has a conservatism so deep that it's truly radical.

Raised in Hamilton, Ont., he's the son of a high-school teacher with a strong church-based sense of social mission (one brother works for the Privy Council; a sister is a United Church minister). Elder wanted to be a poet but he needed a day job, so took a course in filmmaking, hoping to make industrial movies. Instead, Ryerson offered him a job teaching aesthetics (he had an MA in philosophy). Before starting teaching, he went to a summer arts camp in New England to brush up. There he first saw the films of Stan Brakhage, the *pater familias* of American avant-garde cinema, who has probably made as many films as anyone alive (he has more than 70 hours of film), from home movies to abstract, including cycle movies of cosmic depth.

In fact, today's symposium coincides with the publication of a new book by Elder entitled *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson*. Brakhage, who first inspired Elder to make films, will also speak at the event. "I fully believe that the 22nd century will recognize him as one of the major artistic figures of this century," says Elder. "He's an artist of the magnitude of Pound or Picasso."

Along with Brakhage, Elder shares a love of poetry and a desire to find spiritual solace in a fragmented, alienated world. Through a polyphonic juxtaposition of image, text and sound, Elder tries to capture a "primordial" reality, where our whole being -- mind, body and intellect -- feels heightened and more aware.

The interest in the body is pervasive in his work, partly in response to a series of personal physical illnesses: two bouts of hepatitis in college, life-threatening pancreatitis in the late seventies, and a stomach rupture that hospitalized him several years ago. "The flesh is our gift from God," explains Elder. A filmmaker who had his own films held back by the Ontario Censor Board in the early eighties, he nonetheless deplores the proliferation of pornography, which he considers to be a sign of our collective panic that our bodies are being replaced by machines.

Following the lead of the Canadian philosopher George Grant (*Lament For A Nation*), with whom he studied at McMaster, he's a Christian (formerly Presbyterian, now United), who feels the technological society represented by the United States is a spiritual threat to our relationship to God.

Elder's thoughts on Canadian culture, replete with wide-ranging erudition, are summarized in his 1989 book, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Dismissing the Hollywood North obsession, he argues instead that Canadian filmmaking arises out of the same core sensibility as our painting and photography, and reflects the same defining cultural experience: a confrontation with a hostile landscape. That sensibility is best demonstrated, he believes, in the work of such avant-garde, non-narrative filmmakers as Jack Chambers or Michael Snow. Narrative cinema, he says, falls into the "circuitry of technological reason" rather than remaining open to "things in themselves."

Elder notes with amusement that the book was initially received with "about five years of silence," but says the ideas are now beginning to filter through. "In the last few years, I hear it mentioned more and more at conferences."

At age 51, he has been teaching for 27 years at Ryerson, and has been married to his wife Kathryn for just slightly longer. His studies are eclectic -- dance, music, semantics, West African, Ghanian and Egyptian drumming, computer programming and mathematics -- all adding to the layered reality of his thought and work. And beneath all of it -- the objects in the world, the signs of language and symbolism, the sensory information of film working on audiences -- is the sustaining Creator.

"I sometimes say, a little facetiously, that I love filmmaking because film is not a creative art; it's a reconstruction of reality, which is the gift of the Giver."

In other words, don't ask Bruce Elder the critic, to evaluate the place of Bruce Elder the filmmaker in history. Just think of him, in all humility, as God's gift to filmmaking.

Image Flesh and Thought: A Celebration of the Films and Writings of Bruce Elder *takes place today between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. at Eaton Theatre, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Rogers Communication Centre, 80 Gould St., Toronto. Admission is free.*

ELDER STATESMAN

Selected films of Bruce Elder:

The Book of Praise: A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy (120 minutes, 1997): A depiction of forms of life that have grown out of touch with the body, and the joy at reconciling with our natural being.

The Book of All the Dead (1975 to 1994): A 42-hour, 18-film series involving (among other things) the longing for the holy, the rhythms of the natural world, Dante, Isaac Newton, the manipulation of shapes and movements in purely cinematic ways, the resurrection of the body, and the descent from paradise into the technical horrors of death camps. The films range from one minute to more than three hours.

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