

R. Bruce Elder and Ajla Odošić, *A Gathering of Crystals*. HD Video, Colour, Sound, 122 min. Completed 2015.

A note on *A Gathering of Crystals*, followed by a letter to a friend.

Just before I began work on my book *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century*, I discovered a trove of photographs depicting participants in a radical German movement, *Freikörperkultur* (free body culture), the early years of which constituted something of a prototype for the hippie movement that would emerge in California in the 1960s. Many of the photographs were strikingly well composed. But these formal rigours were responsible for only a small part of their charm. More important was this: there was something unbearably sweet about these images of groups of people who were convinced that they might alleviate modernity's depredations through exposing completely their vulnerable naked selves to one another. They believed that through their openness and the charity that developed from it they could change the world. Though these social activities too soon ramified into more pernicious forms (including the body amplification taught by Hans Surén, who was admired by Adolf Hitler), *Freikörperkultur* did experience one brief, innocent, paradisiacal moment that reverberated through subsequent decades as an ideal. This moment was captured in these photographs. Reading texts produced by the advocates of social nudity, and especially *Kehrt zur Natur zurück! Die wahre naturgemäße Heil- und Lebensweise. Wasser, Licht, Luft, Erde, Früchte und wirkliches Christentum* (Return to Nature! The True Natural Way of Healing and Living) had made me aware that early forms of *Freikörperkultur* were associated with a distinctive aesthetic, one that was reflected in their use of an exercise regimen the purpose of which was develop participant's awareness of the deeply rhythmic character of fundamental corporeal energies. Similar aesthetic theories, I knew, had cosmological underpinnings, and the religious character of the more important strains of *Freikörperkultur* (alluded to by the last two works in the title of Just's book) connected these practices to such lofty metaphysical speculations. Ajla Odošić and I decided to try and make a film that would reconnect these photographs to the cosmological yearnings these images harboured by creating a thoroughly Pythagorean work (one whose harmonic principles are exactly those expounded in that resounding text issued by Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln, *De Luce*, as it was translated by Hollis Frampton for his similarly Pythagorean film, *Zorns Lemma*). Like Elder's previous film, whose title was borrowed from the English title of Just's extraordinary text, this work is dedicated to that pioneering exponent of *Freikörperkultur*, who could well claim responsibility for the beauty and charity of our work's source images.

Note by R. Bruce Elder

Dear Irina,

I didn't take up your comment on *A Gathering of Crystals's* relation to the topics of our Visual Culture seminar. The remark was perceptive, and I didn't intend to slough it off. But I found (indeed find) myself needing to be reassured that viewers don't need to possess special knowledge about the provenance of the photographs that film includes and the social beliefs that led to their production, or about the Platonic/Pythagorean ideas that went into making the film and that the film stands up as a visual/aural/dynamic construction.

But you were dead right that a central theme of the film is theosis. Of course, no one in their right mind talks of theosis (oh, maybe a few people in Greek Orthodox monasteries). But the hope of seeing humans returned to a form of being fashioned in God's image is a remarkably common in visual art. Indeed, the Adamite imagination is remarkably common. Images suggesting that we "get ourselves back to the garden" by running around bare naked was a staple of hippy culture. It was also one of the unconscious sources of a two wonderful Canadian hippy films, *Everything Everywhere Again Alive* and *August and July* (I'm convinced the makers of both were completely unaware of the sources in mythopoeic thinking of their works' strengths, because neither maker produced another film worth looking at). The images you see in Jehovah Witness publications are out-and-out Adamite. So is Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: indeed, it is probably the paradigmatic Adamite work. (But try in a research seminar to open up the question what the images in that work tell us about human longing: for certain, you'll be laughed out of the room! Nonetheless, I am certain we cannot put what these images tell us about desire into propositional language. We have to resort to poetry, myth, music, and imagery, which is what *A Gathering of Crystals* does.) Further, the ideas of descent and return as guided by number derive from Plotinus and from Platonized versions of Christianity.

But this Adamite imagery is only one of the film's transcendentalist strains. Another is Pythagorean. You probably noted that the external form was based on the Pythagorean tetratyks: the film has four sections of approximately equal length; the first section has one layer, the second section has two, the third has three, and the fourth has four. (This, incidentally, is also the external of Stan Brakhage's mythopoeic masterwork, *Dog Star Man* and, as I noted in class, of Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, and *A Gathering of Crystals* pays tribute to both). Many features of the film were computationally generated—number is the source of being, Pythagoras told us. So the order of the images, the number of frames of each, the colour of the bars on the top or sides, the selection of the abstract colour frames and their durations were all decided by stochastic processes. (To connect that to the new film, these processes invoked sequences of random variables of many different sorts—Ajla and I could choose which sort of distribution we would use, so these were controlled stochastic processes). From the beginning, I wanted each image be fresh, and to maintain its freshness

even with successive repetitions—John Cage’s reflections on aleatory processes and on time in music (I think he is one of the 20th century’s most profound thinkers on what it means to be a time-based art) taught me that metrical form is among the greatest enemies of forms that seek to afford each element its individuality. I’ve hoped that the unpredictability of sequences whose temporal structure is determined by random variates might ward off the homogenizing effects of rhythm. (The importance of experiencing each thing that is in the mode of presentational immediacy is lesson I took from the poetry of Kenneth Rexroth, who suggests that is the step of the love’s ladder of knowledge.)

Moreover, as a way of developing the film’s Pythagorean thematic, I gave each of the film’s ten sections a distinct character: I changed the parameters on the various distributions for each of the sections, and used a somewhat different set of source images for each section. Thus, I could ensure the film would have a developmental arc.

You might have noticed that the two themes I have described are divided between the corporeal and the ideal, between matter and spirit (even if there are suggestions of flesh seeking to become spirit, and of spirit [number] giving direction to matter). But, of course, like most works that are based on a polarity, this work seeks what will mediate between the two. Like many works of that have been created in the era of electromagnetic science, *A Gathering of Crystals* identifies energy as the mediating element. Electromagnetic energy is all pervasive: every body emanates electromagnetic energy, and penetrates and exerts a pull on all other objects, but especially on nearby objects. The comparison with love, and more especially with Plato’s and Ibn Sina’s views on love, is remarkably exact. (As I write this, I think of how callow and callous students of my cohort were in dismissing Emil Fackenheim’s bizarrely “old-fashioned” interests—or so we thought, convinced, with all the arrogance of youth, that our own “modern” research protocols were so much more “tough-minded”).

Finally, Ajla and I sought to create a work in which the between sound, text, and image differ from what is usual. Specifically, we sought to create a work in which the (creative) word (logos) dominates, and the visuals would be, well, not exactly an accompaniment, but something like that. But, as McLuhan taught me, the space of the ear is different from that of the eye: aural space is like a space filled with energies that pull us this way and that (like electromagnetism, and like love). Ajla did a brilliant job of creating a work in which the ratio between text-as-sound and image is truly original, defying orthodox views on what cinema is. She also did a brilliant job of making those energies of love palpable.

The image processing patches that Julia, Kassandra, and Ajla have been creating carry this idea of matter as energy flows, coursing in this direction and that, carry these ideas even farther. Matter fluxes as electrical fields penetrate and animate it. Hopefully, we will reach the point where that energy comes to resemble love.

There is nothing in what I have done that was not done earlier, and better, by Dante Aligheri.

Regards

Bruce