

Alchemical Features of Bruce Elder's *The Young Prince*
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True to a strand within Modernism, Bruce Elder's current film cycle, *The Book of Praise*, unfolds as an alchemical process of transmutation of base materials into precious metals — which happens to be how his mentor Stan Brakhage understood the hand-processing of film. This aspect of his film cycle culminates in *The Young Prince* (2007) as the achievement of gold at what is usually taken to be the supreme “red” stage (*rubedo*) of alchemy. This film clarifies features incipient at the “black” stage (*nigredo*) where the cycle started with *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* (1997), before undergoing the ordeal of *Crack, Brutal, Grief* (2000) whose intense inwardness *The Young Prince* echoes (in bright rather than dark mode). In this, these films stand in contrast to the ecstatic embrace of the outside world at the “white” stage (*albedo*) in the intervening works *Eros and Wonder* (2003) and *Infunde Lumen Cordibus* (2004). In the closing comment of “An Immodest Proposal (Notes on Alchemy and *The Young Prince*)”, which he read at the film's premiere at Cinematheque Ontario on November 27, 2007, Elder himself cast his new film as a homeward journey:

The Young Prince travels to a foreign land, and when he has arrived there, he forgets his royal heritage and, through ignorance, sinks into the depravity of the foreign land. A heavenly female messenger reminds the prince of his status and mission. Once awakened, the prince finds the treasure and returns home in glory.

This awakening in glory seems to be distinguished from the features of the “red” stage in the older fourfold account of the royal art that Elder outlined just before:

Think of the psychological meaning of blackness (*nigredo*, or putrefaction and spiritual death), whiteness (*albedo*, purification) and thirdly yellowness (*citrinitas*, the solar dawn or awakening), and redness (*rubedo*, the integration of consciousness and matter).

Bright red and yellow hues vie with each other in the final reel, of *The Young Prince*, shot on gold-tinted stock, as the corresponding alchemical stages are reflected in the last two sentences of a hymn of praise—one of the poetic texts written by Elder to recur as voiceover or titles

throughout the *Book of Praise*. They become clearly audible in this film when read out by male and female voices in both official languages of Canada, as though to reflect the hermaphroditic ambivalence of the alchemical Mercury that it foregrounds. One sentence sounds like a recapitulation of the whole alchemical process of “integration of consciousness and matter” that culminates at the red stage:

I thank You that, little by little
in successive stages,
finitude is made brighter
by Your Word.

And as Carl Gustav Jung reminds us, “Mercurius is the Logos become world”ⁱ as its *prima materia*, to be distilled and reintegrated into embodied consciousness in the philosopher’s stone—crowning the Work of alchemists. “They have compared the *prima materia* to everything, to male and female, to the hermaphroditic monster, to heaven and earth, to body and spirit, chaos, microcosm, and the confused mass [*massa confusa*]: it contains in itself all colours and potentially all metals [...]”ⁱⁱ This is reflected in the colour-coded successive stages of the hermetic Work’s transmutation of base metals into gold by virtue of Mercury (the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Hermes), loosely matched by the sequence of colours of the film stock used for the six reels of *The Young Prince*: black, white, red, green, blue, gold. Departing from the traditional hermetic tinctures, green and blue actually refer to modern theosophy’s colour system: the former as a bad vibration and the latter as transcendent harmony (hence the name of Vassily Kandinsky’s *Blaue Reiter* movement). The underlying hermetic assumption that “every material fact is a symbol of a spiritual fact” is repeated several times over the course of the film. It is echoed in the Romantic notion of metaphor, described at the outset of *Harmony and Dissent* as evidence of “a metaphysics that saw all parts of creation as related by analogy and every material form as a signature corresponding to a similar form in a higher order of reality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, the transfiguration of finitude in the royal art of alchemy relates to Elder's "Immodest Proposal" that "the longing art expresses can be captured in the phrase: 'I am the finite square; I wish to be one with the infinite circle,'" supposing "we were to consider the square to stand for the material world of forms, and the circle to stand for the infinite spirit that surrounds and permeates all material forms [...] as an invisible reality that is formless." Elder achieves this squaring of the circle in the dazzling, shape-shifting, non-Euclidean four-dimensional hypercube of golden bodies that emerges as the philosopher's stone or *lapis* towards the work's climax. For in the words of C. G. Jung, "Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the work: he is [...] the play of colours in the peacock's tail and the division into four elements. He is the hermaphrodite that was in the beginning [...]"^{iv} As for the finite objects made bright as gold in Mercury's cleansing fire (since "Mercurius is really the only fire in the whole procedure"^v of alchemy), Elder says of the latter in another poem for this cycle: "It burned in all things to turn the eye inward", i.e. toward their state of non-separateness as encompassed by the Spirit. This squared circle's character as *The Young Prince's* true home and final destination becomes clear in the last line of Elder's hymn of praise:

Bless the light from which
 we come; bless the time
 when He will suspend the light
 in the air
 and withdraw His Word
 into Himself.

This withdrawal of divine light significantly translates at one point in the film as a dark blot superimposed on footage of a Gay Pride parade, amidst an array of porn images. Light from above is thus made to shine by its very absence in the midst of base carnal displays that might seem antithetical to it. The spiritual rationale for this paradoxical epiphany of erotic and moral ambiguity is twofold. On the one hand, in hermetic lore, "the term *homo* is used as a synonym for 'microcosm', as when Mercurius is named the 'Philosophic ambisexual man'."^{vi} On the other

hand, as another Elder poem used in the film states, in keeping with the inner correspondence of the lowest and highest states in the royal art:

This fire returned to the heavens
 the light that Lucifer
 had drawn down
 into the abyss,
 though much remained
 mingled with mud
 so as to redeem even the mud from its vileness.

For “Mercurius truly consists of the most extreme opposites; on the one hand he is undoubtedly akin to the godhead, on the other he is found in sewers.”^{vii} Elder likewise maintains in his poem that just as “anything redeemed is Holy”, so “anything not yet redeemed is Holy, and there is nothing not ever to be redeemed” by alchemical transmutation since “every living thing is surrounded in light and reflects light, and is therefore Holy. ”This shining, encompassing spiritual dimension is echoed in the “poem’s essence” as an “organic unity” analogous what “binds every thing together in a higher unity”, even though this unity “need not be simple, precise, measurable”, nor even a concord. The core thesis of *Harmony and Dissent* is

that it can even incorporate elements that seem to protest against — and, in some measure, successfully resist — the poem’s effort to integrate these dissenting elements into any resolved form. Many of those who participated in twentieth-century vanguard movements celebrated this strife that ends in concord.^{viii}

This principle was reinforced by the advent of cinema—a fact that suggests we may also interpret the passage in one of the voiceover poems of the *Book of Praise* about “the fire [as] a living fountain of the brightest light, that only the inward eye could see” to be a reference to the film medium, based as it is on the projection of bright light in a darkened space.

Bruce Elder’s “Immodest Proposal” about *The Young Prince* also alludes to this liquid suspension of the Light’s *logos spermatikos* (as Stoic and early Christian writers referred to the Word scattered throughout the world as the seed of every single thing) in the guise of the fog of spangles “hallucinated rather onanistically” by Marcel Duchamp’s “Bachelors” in *The Bride*

Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (according to his *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*); once “they lose their awareness” and “can no longer retain their individuality [...] the spangles dissolve [...] into a liquid elemental scattering, seeking no direction, a scattered suspension!” Elder’s exegesis of the Dadaist masterpiece in support of the hermetic intent of *The Young Prince* is but another instance of the thesis he put forward in *Harmony and Dissent* as well as in its forthcoming companion volume on *Dada, Surrealism and the Cinematic Effect*, namely, that modern art is frequently patterned on the royal art. In this case, he highlights in Duchamp’s work “the alchemical idea that the destruction of the self (*mortificatio*) is a stage on the route to redemption.”^{ix} It is captured in the maxim *solve et coagula* that recurs throughout the whole hermetic process and is clearly in evidence in Elder’s film. For it begins with the flooding of New Orleans and end with the appearance of a hypercubic philosopher’s stone, crystallising the new Self’s emergence in the boundless expanse of heaven beyond space and time, out of the old self’s dissolution in primordial waters. New Orleans is after all famous for its Mardi Gras as a classic instance of the social inversion and playful chaos that seem to be prerequisites for the reassertion of cosmic order and stable holiness once a new cycle of life begins in time. It is not by accident that the naked couples that are shot dallying orgiastically in *The Young Prince* are seen to wear Venetian Carnival masques.

As the Lutheran mystic and theosophist Jacob Boehme says in *De Signatura*, “the corpse rises again with a new body of beautiful white hue... [...] And it is a new Creation, solar, white and red, majestic, luminous and fiery.”^x In the Book of Genesis, the re-emergence of Creation following the Flood is sealed by a new, permanent alliance of peace between Heaven and Earth in the form of a rainbow, after salvation has first been denied by a black crow and then announced by a white dove. Similarly, the alchemical Work reunites the earthly microcosm and the heavenly macrocosm in a vivid display of basic colours like the one that structures *The Young Prince* down to the film’s very stock, after the black humour and then the lighter tones of

the films that preceded it in Elder's *Book of Praise*.

The premise of *The Young Prince*, as stated at the film's premiere, is "that art, if one is open to it, might crack the shell of egocentricity," and that it is through such cracks in everything that "the light gets in". Elder is here quoting Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" while Cohen's song "If It Be Your Will" is heard in the film as its climax is prepared. For "emptying oneself, that is, getting rid of the Little Self, is a stage along the way to apprehending regions beyond space and time", such as the "infinite, eternal, luminous, and loving" presence of the Creator Bruce Elder aims to make us aware of "beneath, beyond, around, and through all manifested reality".

We must take a musical excerpt heard early on in *The Young Prince* as a clue to the nature of this divine realm. It coincides with the appearance of a boiler room (echoing images of an alchemist's still) and with shots of refineries—devices that can be seen as petrochemical counterparts of the royal art, in that they make available the solar energy captured in the heavy dormant form of the "black gold" of the putrefied organic life captured in the underworld. The piece of music is by a contemporary composer, Olivier Messiaen, who, like Bruce Elder, saw himself as a docile instrument in the hands of the Creator. Messiaen has explained that his *Quartet for the End of Time*, written in a P.O.W. camp in 1940 and inspired by the Book of Revelation (KJV 10:1-2, 5-7), is not about an end time expected to follow history so much as about putting an end to time itself in a timeless dimension, made accessible through music as an art of time—just as Elder could point out, speaking about his Biblically-inspired *Book of All the Dead*, that "the New Advent does not stand before us, but above us."^{xi} Elder likewise maintains in "An Immodest Proposal" that if "gesturing towards the transcendent with symbols and metaphors has some value", "perhaps music and rhythm, because of their proximity to the primordial, have greater value." Apparently, "these were the lessons vouchsafed to the blind by the charity of their afflictions" in the conclusion of the epic poem that runs through the larger instalments of the *Book of Praise* since they came to experience music as blindsight.

Blindness has made my understanding
 contemporaneous with hearing.
 Blindness enables me to see
 the living light that is clothed by the shadow of light
 the sense of sight apprehends.

Bruce Elder seems to assume, along with Marshall McLuhan, that the difference between visual space and aural space coincides with the difference between the profane and the sacred. This aural sacredness of music connects with the film's alchemical imaging of the elements, such as water. As C. G. Jung states, "alchemy, well into the XVIIIth century, was very largely concerned with the miraculous water, the *aqua divina* or *permanens*, which was extracted from the *lapis*, or *prima materia*, through the torment of the fire."^{xii} In *The Young Prince*, the ordeal by fire is evoked by flowing patterns that call to mind purifying flames, while the ordeal by water is suggested by hurricane Katrina, a human tragedy that gives a poignant ring to the Eddie DeLange/Louis Alter song heard amidst news reports about it: "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?" (This song has also been used in many post-Katrina documentaries about New Orleans, including Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* in 2006.) In the wake of the threatened disappearance of the birthplace of jazz from the face of the earth, echoes of its legacy in Django Reinhardt and in Free Jazz resonates throughout the film, as though in the spiritual afterlife of music history. For the alchemical Mercury is both the "golden water"^{xiii} saturating all and the "man rising from the river" in a renewed form.^{xiv} As Cleopatra is portrayed as saying in one of the earliest Greek texts of the hermetic corpus, "when the waters come in, they awaken the bodies and the spirits, which are imprisoned and powerless. [...] Gradually, they bestir themselves, rise up, and clothe themselves in bright colours, glorious as the flowers of spring."^{xv} This is what we seem to witness as *The Young Prince* progresses.

Furthermore, jazz may take on a particularly sacred role in the context of Bruce Elder's oeuvre since, in his contribution to a collection of essays edited by Atom Egoyan, he asserts that "rhythm always discloses itself at once both as something beyond us, to which we give

ourselves, and as something deep in ourselves. Thinking-through-rhythm thus reveals the mutuality of self and Other.”^{xvi} Rhythm is thus intimately related to the tactile quality elicited, for instance, by the extreme close-ups of commingling bodies and seeping genitalia that likewise render the boundaries between self and other permeable, particularly across the gap separating genders, since the overcoming of sexual difference is a key aspect of the *coincidentia oppositorum* achieved at this stage of the hermetic Work where Hermes/Mercury comes into “his” own as hermaphrodite. In Elder’s poem for the *Book of Praise* photographic apparatus can conversely become a metaphor for the kind of tactile seeing made graphically palpable in *The Young Prince*:

I can summon your wrist
 between my thumb and middle finger;
 the very act of doing so
 can conjure up images,
 and act like a lens
 run along the visible surface of skin.
 May this stop the desiring-machine
 from running perpetually.
 May it help the days to glide away
 as ungraspable as mercury,
 until we all be born again.

Once the synaesthetic immediacy of rhythmic touch takes over from the ego’s mechanical craving for fantasies, individual selves are freed to flow into each other as Mercury himself—a collective subject that is to be born beyond time, defined by grasping desire and space experienced as separation. This corporate fulfilment of the hermetic Work is thus deeply consonant with the Christological dimension of Northrop Frye’s interpretation of William Blake. Its profound influence on Bruce Elder is evident in the following passage of the essay quoted above:

The flesh is one; all flesh is the same flesh—it is made one through the reciprocity of sense, that is, through an utterly anonymous and therefore common sensibility inhabiting all humanity. So far as artworks reach towards the flesh, they reach towards something that is common to all, something that is prior to the self. Self-expression concerns what separates one individual from another; cleaving to flesh reaches towards a numinousness that binds all together in an anonymous universality.^{xvii}

It is cinema's privilege that it cleaves to flesh like no other art, combining the "thinking-through-rhythm" embodied in music and dance with what makes "the greatness of photography" as understood by Elder. For what drew him to cinema is also the wondrous way in which photography allows an image to come into being "without an image maker; such images are therefore utterly anonymous. A film, since it is a congregation of photographic images, is then a *Société Anonyme*" according to his "Immodest Proposal".

The term *Société Anonyme* is a significant allusion to the organisation of that name (a playful *détournement* of the French term for a limited stock company) that was a driving force of the introduction and promotion of modern art in North America from 1920 to the 1940s, involving a roster of European and American artists that can only be rivalled by the indexes to Elder's twin tomes on the Avant-Garde and Cinema. The *Société Anonyme* was founded by Katherine Dreier, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp (whose *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, as we have seen, helped give *The Young Prince* its alchemical cast) while Lawren S. Harris, the major Canadian presence within the organisation, was actively applying his (not untypical) theosophical beliefs in his own painting. By co-opting the name of the greatest Modernist collective to describe the art of cinema he prizes for its very anonymity, Elder is not merely putting himself in the company of the great artists he understands so well but, more importantly, he is also joining them in the secret tradition of the Great Work and royal art of alchemy that transcends art and artists themselves, since hermetists of all times have also purported to make up an anonymous, transhistorical community, in which a hidden Spirit strives to body itself forth in creative activity. Or as Elder says of his own art in the foreword to *Harmony*

and Dissent:

Cinema is an art whose very character is to assemble the scattered parts of a broken reality, all of which resist being unified : as when Osiris's scattered limbs are gathered together and reunited, a different whole emerges through that unification.^{xviii}

On that same hermetic principle of finding the starting point renewed in the end, in the *Book of Praise*, the “thousand painful shards of glass” of the bedridden protagonist’s body, first mentioned in voiceover in *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* are again evoked when that first stage of his healing is perfected with the last stage of his homecoming in *The Young Prince*. By the time this film ends, we too, like its chief narrator, can see with our own eyes the process of transfiguration described as follows in the *Book of Praise*’s epic poem:

Because of the fire,
 all human flesh became
 even more resplendent
 than when it was created
 in the heavens
 (and so, he realized, it is
 good to go about without clothes).
 All humanity was elevated
 by the light
 —elevated, yes,
 even above the heavens.

Thus, insofar as they trace this hermetic vision of redemption in the history of modern art, Bruce Elder’s scholarly books on cinema’s occult background can be said to enact the great conversation and ceaseless quest of the creative minds of Western culture in a medium other than film. As performed in film by both the *Book of All the Dead* and the *Book of Praise*, this same journey takes us with *The Young Prince* to a crest beyond which still unimaginable vistas no doubt await viewers of his work, that even the hermetic tradition, secretly continued by so much of modern art, may not fully encompass.

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- ⁱ Carl Gustav Jung, *Alchemical Studies*. Tr. R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 222.
- ⁱⁱ Hoghelande, "De alch. diff.", *Theatr. chem.*, I, pp. 178ff, cited in Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*. Tr. R. F. C. Hull. 2nd Edition. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 319.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent. Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008, p. XX.
- ^{iv} Carl Gustav Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, p. 294.
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- ^{viii} Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent*, p. XXI.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- ^x Jacob Böhme, *De Signatura*, XII, 23, cited in Julius Evola, *La Tradizione ermetica nei suoi Simboli, nella sua Dottrina e nella sua « Arte Regia »*. Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, p. 191.
- ^{xi} Letter from Bruce Elder to Antonio Bisaccia, October 1994.
- ^{xii} C. G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, p. 67.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- ^{xv} Berthelot, *Alchimistes grecs*, IV, xx, 8, cited in *ibid.*, p. 154.
- ^{xvi} Bruce Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate, or the Violence and Charity of Perception", in Atom Egoyan & Ian Balfour, *Subtitles. On the Foreignness of Film*. Cambridge, MA & London: Alphabet City & MIT Press, 2003, p. 463.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 476-477.
- ^{xviii} Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent*, p. XXI.