

R. Bruce Elder

Unpublished Essay

This presentation has a central theme – a photographer confronting the films of Bruce Elder – but it also consists of three parts, each somewhat different.

I want to begin with simultaneity of experience – for me an overriding aspect of these films – and present some ideas related both to Bruce's film work and to the themes of today's symposium.

There are three texts and three readers:

Bruce Elder will read from a section of *The Cinema We Need*

I will read from the preface to *The Body*, by William Ewing

Ed Slopek, who begins reading first, will quote from *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics*, by Frederick Sommer and Stephen Aldrich, included today in memory of Frederick Sommer.

The texts may be familiar, but each presents its own set of challenges.

(Reading)

However these few minutes may have seemed to you, the overlapped readings do represent, as accurately as possible in this kind of situation, some of the stimuli I have encountered, some of the questions I've grappled with, and some of the experiences I've tried to integrate while viewing Bruce's films over a period of many years.

Let me explain. As a photographer I am most comfortable believing that the earth is flat and that time is linear: I invest my faith in what is recorded on the picture plane, and I see this two-dimensional surface as somehow sanctified by its own framing edges. The emulsion thus becomes the perfect receptor for what we call visual information, and the photograph itself, being a rectangle, takes the form of a dignified object.

Since I experience time as linear I am also a dutiful student of Stephen Hawking, believing that the thermodynamic arrow of time proceeds in the same direction as the psychological and cosmological arrows – and that therefore we are all here, existing and experiencing along the same temporal axis, in the one known expanding and increasingly disordered universe.

The camera shutter, however, gives me the illusion that sensations and impressions related to these beliefs about the temporal are controllable, even relatively plastic. It provides me with a framing device for at least the psychological arrow of time, and gives the comforting illusion that we have more autonomy in matters of time than the evidence of science or the teachings of history will truly allow.

Finally, as a photographer for whom a beautifully rendered characteristic curve

represents some sort of gelatin-silver Grail, I have a completely automatic belief in the actual physicality of the photographic process. According to this credo, then, images formed photochemically –the varied densities of their metallic compounds validating their very existence – are by definition of a different order from, and mutually exclusive of, images assembled pixel by pixel, netted from a vast sea of binary digits.

So: I believed in photographs. Film, when I thought about it, was essentially a form of drama; and I didn't understand digital imagery at all.

I arrived at Ryerson eager to preserve these delusions, but a few individuals kept mentioning the films of Bruce Elder, and something in their voices gave me the feeling I should go see these films, even if I attended as a disbeliever.

The Art of Wordly Wisdom was the first of Bruce's films that I attended; I've returned to it many times since. This film is simply not completely graspable by the thinking mind alone, changing as it does its actual shape as one views and re-views it:

The footprint on the stone becomes the stone itself
Women become cities
Cities become fields
It's just the same old story
Spring is over very soon
The green changes very quickly
Every day brings a difference
The cities envelop little children
The footprint on the stone
becomes the stone itself.

The film may be rooted in the embodied and the physical – one of its central images is the filmmaker's own body, emaciated and severely ill – but it can only be understood as a set of experiences to be perceived over widely varying intervals and periods of time.

I've never thought about the frame of a photographic image, the flatness of the picture plane, or the specifics of a shutter speed, in quite the same way since.

I saw Illuminated Texts a few years later. This is a deeply upsetting film – those of you who were at its first screening will surely remember the stunned faces and charged atmosphere in Room 307 at the film's conclusion –but it also opened new doors, through the scope of what it tried to address, and through the means that it used to confront the viewer.

Most vivid in my mind is the conclusion of this film. Time slows and accelerates simultaneously while the disembodied refrain of a child's question – "Is it far?" – provides a ghastly counterpoint to the audience's knowledge that the child speaking will be led to the gas chamber.

The film assaults the viewer with layer upon layer of image, text and sound, penetrating all defenses, seeming to actually reach inside one's body and directly act upon one's mechanisms of perception, yet seeming also to emanate from a remote but tragic realm, one of no body and of no time at all.

Illuminated Texts also did something else; it wove computer graphics into the fabric of the film in a way that was, at least for this viewer, truly convincing. This aspect of Elder's filmmaking has grown radically in frequency and significance over the years, and it seems to me that an equilibrium of sorts – a true fusion of optical and digital – has been reached in his recent work. Both Azure Serene and Exultations (In Light of the Great Giving), completed in 1993, are of particular significance in this respect. As *The Art of Wordly Wisdom* acknowledges embodiment and as *Illuminated Texts* reaches a state of disembodiment, *Exultations* transcends the body altogether; but part of this transcendence involves imagery which is no longer recorded by photochemical means. The seamless nature of this last film depends partly on this fact, and I believe that the state of deep reflection which the film engenders is due, in some way I do not yet understand, to the free incorporation of the digital – I hope, as time goes on, to be able to articulate this assessment in a more meaningful way.

So, in these films, everything eventually falls away: the two-dimensionality of the framed image, the expectation of linear temporal boundaries, the no longer convincing distinctions between means of image formation. We are left, in these films – if we let ourselves be moved there – at the confluence of thinking and perception, viewing a cinema of immediacy, and multiplicity – a cinema, in Elder's words, that is “based on openness to experience.”

Prepared in conjunction with the Ryerson University symposium on the films of Bruce Elder, Image, Flesh and Thought.