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The Redemptive Translation of Cyberspace Trash

in Bruce Elder's Film *Crack, Brutal, Grief*

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Canadian experimental filmmaker R. Bruce Elder established his reputation as a master of avant-garde cinema with a 42-hour film cycle inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos: The Book of All the Dead* (1975-1994), tracing the West's descent into the hell of technological nihilism while pointing a way beyond it to paradise by using the film medium to reunite mind and body. His work aims to coax the viewer into surrendering to the poetic rhythms arising out of the counterpoint of the disparate stimuli of a non-narrative multimedia collage that thwarts the rational subject's fantasies of control and continuity. Integrating chance operations and contemporary music into the interplay of advanced digital imaging and chemical hand-processing, Elder takes this strategy to new levels in each instalment of the new cycle he is currently working on, *The Book of Praise* (1997-), modeled on the alchemical transmutation of base matter into pure gold. Lead and sulphur are thus identified with cyberspace's magma of debased and trivial images, as gold is with the symbolic reintegration of these elemental energies, in the cycle's second film: *Crack, Brutal, Grief* (2000), matching the early "black" stage (*nigredo*) of the alchemical Work. This paper will probe the poetics of the (re)translation of found video footage (often originating in TV and films) from the Internet (back) to the film medium, in a process understood theologically as a form of

redemption by drawing on the theories of translation of Jewish thinkers Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig.

Crack, Brutal, Grief was conceived after James D. Smith, Elder's friend and colleague at Ryerson University, overcome by his wife's senile dementia, took his own life by putting a buzz-saw to his throat, in a nightmarish literal actualization of Elder's worst fears about the abuse inflicted on our humanity by technology. Jim Smith had performed in many of the comedic interludes inserted as a counterpoint to the brooding, elegiac mood of many of Elder's films, including the first one of *The Book of Praise: A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy*. But it is as it were by his very absence that Smith would shine as a haunting presence behind the next film in the cycle: *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, dedicated to his memory and inspired by his passing. This 130-minute film started to take shape when, under the impact of his friend's grizzly suicide, Elder launched a search on the Web for the words "suicide" and "power saw". He was thus drawn into a fetid morass of repulsive images of the human body's degradation by violence, disease, and sexual depravity — which actually gave the tone to this aggressive display of media representations of systemic contempt for the embodied human condition. *Crack, Brutal, Grief* was put together from this sorry harvest of images and sounds taken from XXth-century pop culture, ranging from the innocent erotic allusions of early silent films to the hardcore pornography clogging cyberspace, through visual archives of the Second World War and the Cold War and slapstick comedy excerpts from all eras, while Hollywood and television clichés jostle with the sensationalism of gore movies, trash culture, and yellow journalism.

Paradoxically, Elder had to rely on digital technologies to process the video versions of photographic images lifted from the Web, so as to restore them to the genuinely physical — and hence metaphysical — medium of film, on account of the ontological

features of the photographic image; to his mind, it is not made by human hands so much as by the unconcealment of light. This natural iconic potential of a medium that allows the outside world to generate a trace of itself as the locus of human consciousness is what fuels his wager to fashion through film “a new model of reality — a post-modern paradigm” “that most closely resembles the pre-modern beliefs of Western Christianity”¹, where material signs reveal the elusive creative wellspring of all appearance. In this context, the technological transfer of an image from the medium where it was generated to another medium for which it is therefore not suited appears to Elder as a sign of the generalized inauthenticity of a fallen multimedia world. So as to undercut at its root the impression of “seamless unity that is the staple form of the entertainment ‘arts,’ that seamless form that absorbs our be-ing and leaves us inert and unproductive,”² Elder downloaded video clips from the Web and broke them down into their individual images, which he then processed one by one to play up their malleability against any illusion of stability.

This was a particularly vital consideration in the case of *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, a film meant to provoke an experience of the *mysterium tremendum* in the viewer, who is faced with death and destruction in their untempered horror. In this, Elder took his cue from such cultic forms as Vodun and Santeria, that “can engender weeping, dancing, and fits. These are all intense, physical responses to art.”³ Not content to simply evoke these dances and trances in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, Elder would make of this film an example of the cinema of immediate perception he calls for, by intensifying the image in every conceivable way, be it by heterogeneous juxtaposition, distortion into complex forms, extreme close-ups and lightning-fast zooms, or the fusion of the screen into clashing zones of loud colours within a field of frosty grain, with jagged edges crackling like electric flames. This language of images finds in the flesh of the world a cohesion that

“occurs without the mediation of any concept,” that “can defy the logic of form,” and yet demonstrates that “it is not the antithesis of dispersion.”⁴ This goes to show how much Elder shares that “supreme confidence in language, in discourse, in eloquence itself” that, in a 1979 essay, Susan Sontag saw displayed in *Our Hitler* and other films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg⁵ about the terror of history, a key influence on his early work.

Against the present climate of despair, I continue to believe that language is grounded in truth. I cannot accept that nothing fastens words and things, that language is free play.⁶

Following Walter Benjamin, Bruce Elder believes that the discourse of things is in itself a Holy Writ, and that they await being named by man to come out of the plaintive muteness to which they have been reduced by his Fall, and to praise the Creator along with him. “Cinematography, the duplication of the order of things, translates this mute speech into an audible language.”⁷ Thus, as Elder adds, alluding to the three parts of *The Book of All the Dead* (respectively titled *Lamentations*, *Consolations*, and *Exultations*): “Nature finds consolation for lamentation in cinematography, and by reason of this consolation, it exults. ... To glorify the Creator is the reason of all exultation.”⁸

The cinema was born to make evident that visible objects constitute the signs of a language, and to do so simply by repeating them. Or, as Benjamin might have had it, translating them. Because it is without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable. “Cinematography” is the name for the immediate process of translating the discourse of things, of filling in the translation between the lines in the sacred text which the logos composed — an activity that results in a sort of interleaving of the translated images of things with things themselves.⁹

It is possible to see an allusion to this interlinear translation of the world into its “literal” photographic reproduction in the visible streaming of text around a partly open

circular curve above a more stable straight line, evoking at once the unwinding of a reel of film and that of a Torah scroll. For according to Benjamin, in Holy Scripture, unlike any other text, language and revelation flow in the same direction, being one at their divine source — somewhat like the written and spoken poetry and the images shown in an Elder film, where photographic reproduction is used to leaf through the book of Creation without claiming to dictate its text. The visible text in words may be there to suggest, in its unfolding in parallel with the film's images, a proportional analogy between the latter and Creation's "text of light" (to borrow the title of a Stan Brakhage film) they translate to the divine-human realm of art.

Knowing that this interlinear translation of the world is "the mission of photography"¹⁰, it becomes clear that in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, Elder has undertaken to rescue photographic images from their captivity in the spurious virtual world of cyberspace, so as to allow them to perform their original task of translating the real world. That is why he had to retranslate them into the physically based medium of cinematography, from the digital world where "language is free play", indifferent to truth, subjected to crass exploitation, and the toy of evil impulses, since "nothing fastens words and things"¹¹ in a respectful, responsible manner. This would give a literal ring to Walter Benjamin's words as applied to what Elder does in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*:

It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.¹²

If Elder is the translator here, then "his own language" is that of cinematography, and he is trying to release the "pure language" of photography from the spider's Web of an alienating medium, by breaking the spell of a fascinating virtual world of falsehood, bringing the viewer back to his senses by shocking his/her psycho-physical system into

allowing truth to happen through the painstaking “re-creation” of the original photographic work. At the same time, as Benjamin puts it, “a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language,” “which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages”¹³, and that all translation assumes and intends.

For both Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig — another Jewish thinker who has had a profound influence on Bruce Elder, “the communicability, the translatability between the human and the divine is that which constitutes the impossible in translating, and is the only reason for the imperative to translate.”¹⁴ It is the universal communication that all particular languages aim at, each in their own irreducible way, and that can only be approached in the intimations of Truth they individually attain, according to Rosenzweig. As we have seen, Elder takes very seriously the specificity of each medium as a distinctive language with its own way of expressing the discourse of things about their coming-to-be, of which he makes us more aware by translating them into each other in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, without attempting to cover his tracks. He thus makes visible the medium and contents of the original photographic images he has culled from the Web, restoring to them “the full dignity of their horror”¹⁵ even as he enhances the unmistakable digital grain as evidence of a series of electronic translations that can no longer pass as naturalistic. All these levels of translation can now come together to form a single “universal” linguistic event, a poetic one akin to Creation itself in its undivided yet elusive process, that blurs the distinctions between immanence and transcendence, signifier and signified, not unlike the way “the lovers disclose themselves in and through language”¹⁶ in the Song of Songs, on the basis of which “Rosenzweig characterizes

revelatory language as more than analogy, more than simile. The essentiality of revelation is recognized in the presentness of experience.”¹⁷ Elder maintains it by avoiding the totalizing closures of a continuous discourse or narrative, particularly in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, where it is almost always impossible to read the randomly fonted running “subtitles”.

But in nearly all his films, Elder abundantly uses subtitles and voiceover of a fragmentary nature to contrast “the dynamics of cinematic rhythms with the stasis of texts.”¹⁸ For “our art must distort and fragment all with which it comes into contact: it must do all that it can to damage the wholeness of a work of art,” to quote the statement accompanying *Crack, Brutal, Grief*.¹⁹ This also goes for the classical concept of art in “The Foreignness of the Intimate, or the Violence and Charity of Perception”, a text where Elder’s protracted meditations on “thinking-through-rhythm” help account for the violence of this film. On the one hand, charity has no other time than that of the flesh, since “rhythm makes time, and time is the fundament of our relation to alterity, to what lies beyond us. Time, and therefore rhythm, reveals to us that the future is always without apprehensible content.” This is precisely why, on the other hand, “the pulse of rhythm too has a violence at its core. For its throb can lay order and law to waste, by accommodating the unexpected at the very heart of its being and, what is more important, by allowing the unexpected to arise continuously, from moment to moment.”²⁰ Moreover, “rhythm, like all artistic form, invites regulation, only to undo the word of the law and the law of the word. The disordering of thinking that results from being-in-relation to the inapprehensible is an effective antidote to the self’s desire to establish his sovereignty.”²¹

This craving for mastery is identified with the masculine gender in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, where its discomfiture is constantly on display in the numerous excerpts of

television shows and B-movies where a man gets beaten up by a woman, being most often kicked in the groin. This castration anxiety is put in parallel with the fear of decapitation illustrated by many other excerpts, and the two converge until they intersect at a turning point of the film, at the end of the second reel. Over a minute or so, we see in quick syntagmatic succession a woman waving her fist in triumph and claiming “complete control” as a tall phallic antenna (a symbol of media and technology?) crumbles in flames under the impact of a bus; we hear Ronald Reagan invoking God’s blessing on America; a cranky actress tells a transvestite she always thought he was weird, but not to the point of cutting off his “dong”; culminating with the exploding head scene from Cronenberg’s *Scanners*. The third reel then picks up by showing a diseased and disoriented sheep spinning around and hitting the walls of its fold, and then Buster Keaton vainly trying to walk upwind of an irresistible storm that is sweeping away all human constructions. The belly-dance motif then comes into focus with the kind of Middle Eastern music that already signalled the healing of the voiceover narrator in *Surprised by Joy*, pointing the way to another, more harmonious mode of being that will finally prevail at the end of *Crack*, *Brutal*, *Grief*, represented by the goddess-like female dancers whose rhythmic undulations spread to the entire screen.

In the final reel, preparing the ground for the final liberation of authentic desire in Oriental dance, the screen’s saturation by close-ups of porn footage brings out of the very stuff of these ambiguous contents the rhythmic tactility of the violent charity that exceeds the visible. The topless dancers and other distasteful images of modern Western (dis)embodiment, steeped in barbaric hard rock, are thus eventually carried along in the movement communicated to the screen’s tactilized surface by traditional Middle Eastern tunes. Their drumbeats propel a Carnatic dance troupe, jubilant African crowds, a college of whirling dervishes, as they join the belly dancers of a rich profane

realm that not much distinguishes now from the explicitly sacred realm, amidst this great feast of bodies in which all humanity symbolically communes. Here as elsewhere, Bruce Elder mobilizes for the cinema all the resources of new technologies as well as references to many more traditional arts. But his efforts remain grounded in the hope of using the specific ontological features of the film medium to recover spirituality and ethics through post-modern aesthetics, as a way out of the metaphysics of presence that the civilization of the image has taken to its logical extreme in the virtual world of cyberspace, to which he dares to oppose a theological poetics of radical embodiment.

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¹ R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity. Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 30-31.

² Elder, "Fascinated by the Web? How to get over it..." unpublished presentation text for the premiere of *Crack, Brutal, Grief*.

³ *Id.*

⁴ 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), 456.

⁵ Susan Sontag, "Syberberg's Hitler", in *Under the Sign of Saturn. Essays* (New York : Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 164.

⁶ Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate", 480.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 480-481.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 479.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 480.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Tr. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ Barbara E. Galli, "Introduction : Translation Is a Mode of Holiness", in *Cultural Writings of Franz Rosenzweig*. Ed. & tr. Barbara E. Galli. (Syracuse, NY : Syracuse University Press, 2000), 33.

¹⁵ Elder, "Fascinated by the Web?"

¹⁶ E-mail to the author from R. Bruce Elder, January 5, 2008.

¹⁷ Galli, "Introduction", 44.

¹⁸ Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate", 453n1.

¹⁹ Elder, "Fascinated by the Web?"

²⁰ Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate", 463-466.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 466.