

Making a movie by math

Nancy Bauer state of the art. Telegraph-Journal [Saint John, N.B] 12 Apr 2008: G.2.

Abstract

I'm a sucker for the word "experimental" when it describes the arts. Which is why I wound up at a lecture sponsored by the NB Filmmakers' Co-Op on making experimental films even though I know zilch about any kind of filmmaking at all. The lecturer was Bruce Elder, who has been described as the most important North American avant-garde filmmaker to emerge during the 1980s. Elder's website astounds with its lists of prizes, books and praise. He graduated summa cum laude with a PhD in philosophy from McMaster and has studied such diverse subjects as Vector calculus, Chinese, modern dance, and Java programming. His monumental *The Book of All the Dead* is a 42-hour-long cycle, modeled after several other monuments, including *The Divine Comedy*.

Elder does not narrate a story; there is no plot. He is not a maker but a collector of images, he said. Collecting bits and pieces and then creating something new out of them is a time-honoured tradition in crafts, visual arts, even in literature. One section of Brian Bartlett's new book of poetry, *A Watchmaker's Table*, is composed of words found in his family's history. Elder several times quoted in German, "What we call chance is from God." A recontextualization of images as well as the exploitation of chance forms one of his creative techniques.

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I'm a sucker for the word "experimental" when it describes the arts. Which is why I wound up at a lecture sponsored by the NB Filmmakers' Co-Op on making experimental films even though I know zilch about any kind of filmmaking at all. The lecturer was Bruce Elder, who has been described as the most important North American avant-garde filmmaker to emerge during the 1980s. Elder's website astounds with its lists of prizes, books and praise. He graduated summa cum laude with a PhD in philosophy from McMaster and has studied such diverse subjects as Vector calculus, Chinese, modern dance, and Java programming. His monumental *The Book of All the Dead* is a 42-hour-long cycle, modeled after several other monuments, including *The Divine Comedy*.

The two and a half hour program, "Cosmological Themes and New Media Technologies: The Body and The Celestial Dance," started with a showing of one of Elder's experimental films followed by his hour lecture, and ending with another film.

The lecture began with a quotation from John Milton, went on to Pythagoras, Plato, Euclid, Charles Olson, Ezra Pound and alchemy. Elder quoted Latin, German and French during this wild ride of a lecture. In making his films he uses Milton's writing on the harmony of the planets and the music of the spheres, along with Pythagorean proportion.

He writes his own software programs to manoeuver the film images according to these philosophical principles. He also manipulates the images chemically and electrically.

The disadvantage of this experimenting is that there is little opportunity for interested spectators to see the films. I was wondering if putting them on DVDs might solve this problem, but Elder said that watching a film on a TV screen from a DVD instead of on a movie theatre screen is like seeing a painting in a book of reproductions.

He described how he makes up a set of rules, often mathematical, and uses it to construct the film. One system he mentioned is Stephen Wolfram's Mathematica software. I was especially interested in this because I used the numerology and images of the *Book of Revelations* for writing *Flora, Write This Down*. I was inspired by *The Rebirth of Images*, a scholarly work on *Revelations*. The numerology provided scaffolding that enabled me to form the novel as an entity. Having this structure worked so well in driving me forward that I experimented with different kinds for my other novels. I reasoned that if I wanted to get away from having a plot drive my work, I had to invent something else to move me forward, but also had to have something that prevented my imagination from going off in all directions. Hugh Hood told me that he also used numerology in constructing his novels.

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In Elder's films, you see blobs of dancing colours and then glimpses of found images: gravestones, a hay field, a country lane, a factory. The aleatoric music accompanying the films is also composed using a mathematical formula. I think that the dancing images and the music must be part of what he calls "thinking-through-rhythm."

Before the showing of the second film, he told the story of its genesis. A close friend committed suicide by cutting his throat with a chainsaw. Elder wondered if this was common, searched the internet for "chainsaw suicide" and came upon dreadful sadistic websites.

The images on these disturbed him so much that he decided he must make a film that would be a kind of anti-porn, embodying harmonic ideas, dance, music, alchemy. Globules of colour swirl, dart and then morph into glimpses of women dancing the flamenco or a ballet, beautiful, not nasty. My description doesn't do it justice but even the DVD of the film didn't, according to Elder. At one point, he called out, "That colour is really a true gold."

If I had been a filmmaker, I might have liked more technical information linking the philosophical basis with the how-to of the films, although that perhaps would better come in a workshop.

The filmmakers present, however, must have been stimulated into pondering the creation of a theoretical basis for their work that wasn't just filming images or telling a story.

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