

Concrete Particulars in R. Bruce Elder's *Illuminated Texts*: A Model for Criticism

R. Bruce Elder's *The Book of All the Dead* (1974-1992), stands, from any perspective, as a towering achievement of experimental cinema, and one of the few films of any sort for which the epithet 'epic' could be applied in a sense that did not belittle the true epics of other media, the 'Faerie Queen's or 'Nibelungenlied's. Its forty plus hours and the immensely varied and complex store of formal and aesthetic technique and thematic from which it draws stand testament to this fact, but also pose obstacles to approaching the work, and especially to making any general claims as to the artistic or discursive content of the work as a whole. Exacerbating this situation is the fact that each of the three sections, based as they are on the divisions of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, carry with them radically different structural and, especially in the final *Exultations* section, technical devices, along with the far easier delimited shifts in philosophical/discursive content, usually presented through voiceovers and super-titles. The mere presence of this 'discursive content', by which I mean the explicitly philosophical texts and ruminations often presented in essayistic form that appear throughout the film, pose what I consider one of the major interpretive challenges of the film-cycle, and one to which I will return. Regarding the problem of the epic nature of the film, however, the near impossibility of making any general statements about the work as a whole in anything short of a book-length study suggests a tactic of addressing formal relationships in smaller sections of the film in the hope that interpretive models suggested therein will be applicable for viewers and critics of the entire cycle. I believe the idea of interpretive frameworks is especially vital for reading *The Book of All the Dead* because of the aforementioned difficulty of addressing the potential unity or disparity between its aesthetic and discursive cores. I will attempt here to briefly examine *Illuminated Texts* (1982), a 180 minute film within the first *The System of Dante's Hell* section of *The Book of All the Dead*,

with the intent of interrogating the relationship between the discursive and aesthetic content of the work.

Before moving on to *Illuminated Texts* however, it is important to place *The Book of All the Dead* and what I have suggested as its discursive/aesthetic split within a more specific critical context. Although several commentators have remarked on Elder's use of philosophical texts and his unique filmic language, I believe Stan Brakhage's comments on the film, many made before Elder even completed the film-cycle, are especially revealing, coming as they do not only from a fellow experimental film artist, but from one who claimed to feel closer to "this epic-maker Elder than to any other living filmmaker' alongside an equally powerful 'aesthetic opposition'". (Brakhage, *Telling Time*, 124) Any viewer of Brakhage and Elder would be disposed to understand both the closeness and the opposition: certainly both filmmakers are among those most interested in exploring the phenomenon of vision and perception, and both are even more certainly among the most 'poetic' of filmmakers, but, at least in this stage of Elder's career, poetic in radically different ways. Brakhage's films are predominately lyrical, perhaps the most lyrical of any films yet made, and have been named such repeatedly. Elder's films are poetic more in the mode of one of the great sources for *The Book of all the Dead*, the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound: epic, inclusive in their intellectualism, occasionally awkward, and in a certain way, doomed to incompleteness.

In a letter regarding his film's allusions to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Elder comments that 'just as life does not comment on the particulars it gives us to experience, neither do *The Cantos*, and neither does *The Book of All the Dead*.' (*Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks*, p. 462) The 'particulars' of his film are what earlier calls the 'voices, images, fragments of documents, literary texts and scientific works' whose order seems random, and whose relationship to the accompanying images seems arbitrary. (Ibid. p.461) Elder goes on to write that what is 'crucial

to such an enterprise is a trope that was essential to Pound's own method, namely, ellipsis.'
(Ibid.)

Again, we see a great deal of the meaning-making structure of the film originating or at least greatly depending on the methodology governing the relationship between text and image, and between the discursive and the aesthetic.

This type of meaning making structure is related to, as Brakhage puts it the opposition between the two filmmaker's respective uses of the 'Picture': "a framed collection of visible things" (Elder's realm) and the 'Aura': "the UNnameable streamings of irregular biologically hewed shapes and mixed hues" (Brakhage's realm). (sic., *Telling Time*, p.122-123) This realm of Aura, importantly, corresponds for Brakhage to a *prelinguistic* state of being, where he sees Elder's making as specifically rooted in linguistic meaning making. He clarifies this concept in a key passage:

For Bruce Elder, Scene is Word, and a camera pan across a landscape is (or can be seen to be) a "sentence" or "fragment of sentence" being cut to another in paragraphic editing, often interwoven with verbal and printed text – eye's sight and *in situ* "thought" on screen being at one as a process – a continuity which admits no space, nor more of Nothing than is philosophically given. (Ibid., 92)

This description of Elder's filmic language is one answer to the question of models for interpreting the relationship between image and text in *Illuminated Texts*, or, as Brakhage here intended it, for *The Book of all the Dead* in its totality. Brakhage's model for Elder's film language is that of a totalizing linguistic (indeed almost orthographical) system that subsumes the text on the screen and the spoken word on the audio track into what he brands the text of film-as-sentences, solving the problem of the disjunction between the discursive and the aesthetic by instead framing the differentiation as textual/visual and then naming the visual units as becoming-textual. In many ways this is a neat way to provide a framework for analyzing *The Book of all the Dead*, as it skirts the question of how the 'aesthetically pure' images relate to the 'philosophically pure' text not by pointing out the inevitable contamination, but by simply moving

the entire debate into the realm of textual signification. In this model, the images need not be translated or transformed in order to comment on the textual content, and neither vice versa: the two modes of expression having already been converted into a common language. The problem with this model of interpretation is that it can effect a type of 'flattening' of the film's content, aesthetic and especially philosophical. The many philosophical and poetic texts that are quoted, referenced, acted out or metaphorically depicted throughout *Illuminated Texts*, exist in a certain relationship to the equally varied filmic conventions and aesthetic 'content' that exist alongside them. By first briefly indexing a few of the various philosophical quotes and constructs alongside the accompanying filmic images in *Illuminated Texts*, and then attempting to find a framework in which their relationship can be understood, I hope to suggest another type of model besides Brakhage's early one.

Illuminated Texts begins with Elder himself playing a Ionescu's professor from the eponymous play, a mix of fixed camera and jerking handheld camera movements recording his laughable attempts to mathematically educate his student, a multiplication and addition prodigy who, nonetheless, cannot even grasp the basic concept of subtraction. This action which occasionally gives way to title screens showing excerpts from the script of the play, all while occasional music and sound emerge in the background. The performances of Elder and his student are as stilted and awkward as appropriate for two 'actors' reading their scripts while on camera, a self awareness which gets a further push from the momentary interruption of 'Diabolus' from Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, a play which, notably, is mostly composed of play within a play. This intro, a self-reflexive meditation on film and film performance, serves as well as an introduction to several of the recurrent themes of the film: pedagogy, autobiography (Elder himself is a professor), and mathematics, in particular Cantor's set theory, a recurrent theme in the film to which we shall return. The disjointed, or, as Elder puts it 'off-metre' nature of the editing, in conjunction with the aforementioned interruptions in which the text of the play is

displayed onscreen also signify another theme that will intensify throughout the film, one which we could call 'cognitive'.

Besides Stan Brakhage, another filmmaker with whom Elder shares a kinship is fellow Canadian Michael Snow. Snow, who is frequently referred to as a 'cognitive filmmaker', earned the appellation through a remarkable career of works in film, holograph, painting and other media, often oriented around expressing or awaking the viewer to realities of cognition. Snow accomplished this through many devices, most famously through meditations on the zoom (*Wavelength*, 1967) and the pan (<---->, 1969) that push the viewer past reflection on the filmic mechanisms they exploit towards a reflexive awareness of the processes of cognition necessary for even basic visual perception. Although Elder's films, *Illuminated Texts* included, are far less 'conceptual' in this sense, they often exploit similar tactics: one of the perceptual outcomes of the practice mentioned above of bombarding the viewer with seemingly disconnected concrete particulars is the eventual reflexive turn to the process of perception itself. This practice begins with the cognitive dissonance of shifting from a read play on screen to the letters itself and back, and amplifies over the course of the film.

The next section of *Illuminated Texts*, whose form, consistent with several other films in the cycle, also persists through a vast majority of this film, is composed of multiple film images: landscapes, animals, disabled people, athletes, tourists, etc., shot with rapid tilts or pans, tilts regularly cutting into further tilts to impart the sensation of diving or falling, pans often cutting into reverse pans in actions mirroring a left/right snap of the head or flicker of the eyes, all intercut with the occasional series of progressive Muybridge-style stills fitting the previous film footage, and rotoscoped footage of what will eventually become clear is Auschwitz, setting the stage for the devastating final sequence pertaining to the holocaust. All of this footage is beautiful and moving in its own right: it is self sustaining as 'aesthetic content', carrying the individual concrete signification of what it depicts, along with the secondary 'screen' significance

of film grammar to which we are accustomed, amounting to parts which, however, lack an obvious cohesion which would unite them into a meaningful whole. Besides the super-, sub-, and inter-titles and voiceovers that accompany these images, there is also the fact of the pattern in which they are cut together. Almost every subject is shown more than once, and in a complex pattern that gives the impression of an overriding contrapuntal, or fugue structure. The difficulty with receiving the work as such is that, of course, no image is stable: the repetition is never really repetition of the same, but repetition of the 'what was once the same. The diving bird or the rotoscoped scene outside Auschwitz, seem to stand as a unified concrete thing against which we might compare other images, and see them as single 'notes' in a contrapuntal pattern, but when they reappear on screen they are much changed, the motion that gives them meaning as images destroying any possibility of self-identity as singular concrete form. In Elder's *The Foreignness of the Intimate* he writes: 'Repetition in art, because it demonstrates that any linguistic element is wrenched from self-identity with every reappearance, manifests great violence at work.' (p.460) This violence is even further amplified in *Illuminated Texts*, as the search for meaning in patterns (fugal or otherwise) makes manifest the lack of self identity of any image on linguistic as well as visual bases, forcing the viewer again into the concrete particulars of the image. This is not, of course, to say that there is no structure to *Illuminated Texts*, or that the structure carries no meaning, for the fugal editing structure certainly exists and carries not only meaning-making possibilities, but also aesthetic importance. What it does mean, however, is that even the editing structure of the work cannot serve to undermine the degree of differentiation from shot to shot, and from image to text and voice. It is exemplary of what Elder terms film's "ability to show process; it does so best by emphasizing speed which liquefies, by stressing dynamism's ability to dissolve boundaries and lay form to ruin, [...] by allowing cutting, which is the domain of mutability, instability and ambiguity, to achieve the maximum of fragmentation.' (Bruce Elder, *foreignness of intimate* p.461)

Furthering the sense of fragmentation within structure in the ways that are unique to Elder's filmmaking is the fact that throughout *Illuminated Texts* the supertitles seem to be teasing the viewer with promises of systematization, with an elusive whole waiting to be uncovered. "The mind constructs patterns in the passage of time" goes part of a text that occurs and reoccurs in various stages of completion and combination over the course of the film. Poetic fragments from Charles Olson, William Blake, Kenneth Rexroth and others flit across the screen, lines often echoing each other on themes of organization, meaning-making, pattern-making and interpretation. Philosophical fragments from Lucretius, Derrida and Lacan also falsely promise organizational principles, but no real overriding pattern or core idea emerges. Perhaps the closest thing to a guiding statement in the super-titles would be an excerpt from Lacan's Seminar XI: "And there is only one method of knowing that one is there, namely to map the network. And how is the network mapped? It is through the fact that one returns, one comes back, one keeps coming across the same path, it always overlaps and crosschecks itself in the same way". The focus on repetition that marks this quote, here specifically referring to the priority of repetition over repression in the unconscious, seems to point towards an interpretive reading of the image/text, discursive/aesthetic relationship: Lacan's model of the unconscious providing a framework for understanding how we process the repeating images that lie beneath his text. The difficulty with this is that even a quote as specific and seemingly applicable as the above can refer only obliquely to the structure of the whole. Analogously there emerge occasional correspondence between poetic and filmic images: a quoted Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, for example, gives a textual echo to an image on the screen, but these moments seem more dictated by chance or a whim of the filmmaker than anything; they do not impart a sense of a systematic interrelationship between the two realms. Before returning to this, the largest section of the film, we should examine a few of the interludes, as they provide examples of more straightforward and focused relationships between the aesthetic and discursive modes.

Excluding the opening scenario, there are four 'interludes' or interruptions to the main body of the film, all touching upon themes of autobiography and pedagogy, two of which I will address here. The first of these is a short sequence depicting a statue of Egerton Ryerson, religious educator and founder of Ryerson Polytechnic University, the institution where Elder has taught since 1978. As the camera tilts up and down the statue of Ryerson, Elder delivers a lecture, with Nietzschean overtones, on the life and values of the man and the transmission and dissemination of these values throughout the history of the university. The Nietzschean theme of the multiple values located in the historical existence of a single entity brings new light to bear on the recurrent phenomena of displaced concrete particulars that echo throughout *Illuminated Texts*, transforming not only the image of the statue of Egerton Ryerson into a symbol of the evolution of religion and pedagogy but suggesting an historical dimension for each of many other images the film shows or alludes to.

The second interlude is a short and extremely funny interview with a self-proclaimed alchemist, overlaid with various sound collages and droning tones. The alchemist provides increasingly silly answers pertaining to, among other things, a film he intends to make, his plans to transmute rats into gold, and, most importantly, the difficulties of using a carpenter's square which is not, in fact, right angle. It is this last object, presented in a deadpan response indexing the tool's uselessness, that is one of the key's to this section, bringing to mind, as it does, Heidegger's figures of *Zuhandenheit Unzuhandenheit*, or ready-to-hand and unready-to-hand. *Unzuhandenheit*, the mode of being that equipment, in this case the carpenter's square, falls into conspicuousness through malfunction or difficulty of use. What is especially interesting in this passage however, is that this first, humorous, interview is followed by a near exact repeat of the same, except this time accompanied by a voice over track commenting on the formulation, reception and substance of humor. These comments, in conjunction with the images and interview below, amount to a very sophisticated reading of humor, incorporating the inherent

self-reference of the structure as well as the content to comment on the similarities between Heidegger's *Unzuhandenheit* and models for understanding humor, taking elements from Henri Bergson's *Le Rire* and especially Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation*. Bergson's theory of humor as the "mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p.84) presents a humanistic model corresponding nicely to several of the themes present throughout *Illuminated Texts* (as well as throughout Heidegger), and Koestler's vision of the mechanism of humor manifested through 'bisociation' (the intersection of two interpretive frameworks applied to the same object) can be read, in this context as an analogue to *Unzuhandenheit*: the useless square draws our attention towards its being in a special way that is related to the differential from what it is intended to do, just as humorous scenes or words draw our attention to them in ways related to the differential from the 'normal' or non-humorous sense of the same. Again, what is remarkable about Elder's construction of this scene, particularly in relation to the rest of the film, is the manner in which the disparate elements stand in relation to each other. The background droning sound which at first seems a blockage to enjoyment of the humorous dialogue becomes, in the second, repeated section overlaid with the lecture, and additional source of both humor and insight, providing another example of the interruptions necessary to humor. Likewise, the previous interlude section describing the founder of Ryerson university becomes progressively funnier in retrospect once it has been aesthetically and discursively attached to this sequence. This sounds almost tautological: events, of course, always affect events retroactively and set the ground for future events. What is unique about the manner in which sequences, whether simultaneous, coterminous, or temporally removed, effect changes of the perception regarding other sequences in *Illuminated Texts* is the utter distance and concreteness of any individual sequence or event within a sequence, events that, even at their 'lowest' level of division, that of a single frame, we would have difficulty naming as self-identical. Again, the problem of analysis, and even viewership is

twofold: the isolable events or moments within the film must be received in all of their possible concreteness and full complexity, which, in a film of this level of erudition and breadth of subject behind it is task enough; these events must, however, be received and even queried in relation to each other and under the aegis of some sort of ordering awareness. There are many ways in which one might accomplish this, I have been framing the issue mainly around problems of textual/visual or discursive/aesthetic because I believe the problems pertaining to that particular split are almost unique to Elder's films, but there are several related issues, issues which stand out as specific to this type of film grammar and whose possible resolutions revolve around models for mapping these relationships.

Returning to the body of the film we find several emergent 'storylines' in the voiceover as well as a darkening of tone in the increasingly Auschwitz-centered imagery and an intensification of the speed and complexity of editing pattern, climaxing in an astonishing and complex barrage of geometric patterns crisscrossing the screen with overlapping images generated through optically printed mattes. Two of the narratives that are spoken in voice over concern, respectively, a scenario involving the production and display of private sadomasochistic pornography, and in what forms the emotional core of the film, a harrowing account of a Holocaust victim forced to drag dead bodies from a mass execution site. What links these two stories far more than any superficial (and largely absent) thematic link is the mode and structure which governs their presentation. The story involving pornography concerns a series of photographs which document the staged sexual torture of a woman, the degree to which it was stage, and the identity of one of the women on the photograph. The story is told in a series of narrative spurts, interrupted by other sounds or voice over, until, in an unfolding that mirrors a series of photographs being examined one by one, the secrets of the story are revealed. Effectively the story is told in the form of a set of isolable narrative moments that are revealed in a linear fashion until they may retroactively be placed into one sensical thread of

meaning. In contrast to this, the story of the Holocaust victim is presented in a series of isolable moments that are presented in a seemingly arbitrary order before they are finally presented in a linear fashion making the narrative comprehensible. Prior to that final unity snippets of the story as appear as concrete descriptive events, possibly related but in an uncertain fashion, repeating and recombining in fugal form, suggesting that perhaps more meaning might be found in the formal presentation than in the narrative content before the pieces finally fall into a devastatingly final and irrevocable order.

The temptation here, of course, is to take these models of textual presentation and hold them as interpretive of the film as a whole. Following that line of reasoning would, however, leave us with something very similar to Brakhage's view of Elder as textual or discursive filmmaker, and, in the process, flattening the aesthetic side of the work in the process. Before attempting to suggest a resolution I would like to make a brief interlude to discuss a concept which emerges a few times over the course of *Illuminated Texts*, that of set theory. Several times over the course of the film reference is made to multiple infinities, or 'meta-infinities', invoking Cantor's work with cardinal and ordinal transfinite numbers, the phrase 'Null Set' appears on screen, and even the entire structure of the film, with its neatly parsed categories and series of differentially related concrete particulars, any of which could be selected as a meaning making unit, could be seen as a reference to set theory: *Illuminated Texts* as Elder's 'axiom of choice' to Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*. Again, the temptation arises to use this discursive or analytical reference as a 'key' to the entire work, or even to sections of the work, attempting to read the order or arrangement of images, sounds or text as conforming to some function of set theory.

There are two notable instances in the recent history of continental thought that might provide some insight into the presence of set theory in Elder's film: Julia Kristeva's 'Toward a Semiology of Paragrams', and the ontology of Alain Badiou. Both of these thinkers have

complex bodies of work which I will not attempt to explore here, I mention them merely in the context of their respective 'uses' of set theory. Kristeva's 'Toward a Semiology of Paragrams' puts forth the theory that 'Poetic language is the only infinity of code' and proceeds to attempt to create a mathematical language nominally based on set theory with which to analyze the reading/writing, even going so far as to suggest the creation of an 'axiomatics of poetry' as a branch of symbolic logic. (p.26) Setting aside the veracity or usefulness of Kristeva's claims, the complexity of which I certainly cannot do justice to here, what I would like to draw attention to is the idea of using one formal system to interrogate and systematize another, unrelated system. Kristeva's model for relating mathematics to poetics, transported into the interpretation of Elder's film, would spur us to take any of the discursive elements presented in the film, whether Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-Cantorian set theory, Heideggerian phenomenology or Nietzschean value-criticism and apply it as a systematizing interpretative model to the aesthetic part of the film, giving us a Lacanian, Heideggerian etc. version of *Illuminated Texts*, the concrete particulars transformed into ordered series of events, no longer sensible as isolated units, dependent on the systematizing whole. Badiou is another philosopher who relies on set theory for, among other things, a repudiation of the theological nature of infinity found in Levinas and others, using Cantor to return the infinite to the banality of ontology. Badiou's use of set theory is, of course far more complex and nuanced than can be accounted for here, and, as with Kristeva, this is not a critique of his ontology or use of mathematics as such. I would, however, like to highlight one aspect of his theory: despite the famous claim that mathematics is ontology, Badiou will always remind us that, after all, mathematicians proper must be unknowing ontologists, merely providing a system with which we may, in a separate field, learn from through analogy, and, simultaneously keep separate from the work of. (L'etre et l'evenement, p. 20) This important distinction is what allows Badiou to keep mathematics, and set theory in particular, as a core of his thought without necessarily conforming his ontology to the

particularities of mathematics proper. Applied to our look at *Illuminated Texts*, this suggests a way of leaving the particularities of the discursive models intact, and even concrete: beyond our 'tampering' as it were. Just as Badiou does not 'contribute' to mathematics as such, but merely borrows extant models as they lie, it is possible to take the various discursive models in *Illuminated Texts* and, I believe, the entirety of *The Book of All the Dead* just as they lie: as concrete particulars, indexically linked to a large body of thought, yes, but not one that needs of being reflexively applied to the film as an interpretive framework.

Illuminated Texts' unique form as well as the near unprecedented depth of philosophical, poetic and theological references provide difficulties for would-be scholars and critics, not least of which is the temptation to transform the discursive content into a critical or interpretive framework for the film as a whole, a temptation whose resistance is, I believe, vital to a deeper understanding of both this film and the great epic in which it has its place. In 'Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks' Elder himself provides the concept of a series of concrete particulars, interpretable in a way analogous to how we must interpret the constant stream of impressions that make up our lived perception, I am here suggesting a critical framework for investigating his films that strives to leave this experience intact, investigating the particularities and their interrelations, yes, but avoiding what I believe is the misreading of taking any given particular as having the potential for systematizing the whole, whether aesthetically or discursively.

Martin S. Watson,

York University/Ryerson University Joint Graduate Program

in Communication and Culture

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