

**A CINEMA OF CRUELTY AGAINST VIRTUAL SPECTACLE:
BRUCE ELDER'S *CRACK, BRUTAL, GRIEF* AS UNDERWORLD JOURNEY**

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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), which traced the West's descent into the hell of technological nihilism, while pointing a way beyond it to paradise regained by using the film medium to reunite mind and body. The year of its completion, Elder summarized the presuppositions of his work as artist and thinker in an interview with film scholar Antonio Bisaccia for the Bologna daily *Il Manifesto*:

La tecnologia è anche dentro di noi, si è interiorizzata. Essa è entrata nei mondi più profondi del nostro essere. La nostra concezione del valore è realmente quella della tecnologia. La situazione si è come ribaltata. Noi siamo divenuti i suoi mezzi e non il contrario. Essa erige il nostro mondo. ... Quella tecnologia dispenserà i corpi. Noi stiamo per essere cambiati, come ha predetto il filosofo canadese George Grant, da creature di carne ad oggetti di metallo. Io con i miei film, nel mio piccolissimo orto, cerco di sviluppare un' estrema carità verso il corpo umano, cercando di sfuggire a questo destino.¹

Yet this very fate was soon to catch up with him when his friend and colleague at Ryerson University James D. Smith, 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 mood of many of Elder's films, including the first one of a new cycle of more modest proportions, *The Book of Praise*, begun in 1997 with *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy*. The next one, *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, dedicated to Smith's memory and inspired by his passing, came out in 2000. 130-minutes long, it started to take shape when, under the impact of his friend's grizzly suicide, Elder did a search on the Web for the words "suicide" and "power saw." He was thus drawn into its dark underbelly of repulsive images of the human body's degradation by violence, disease, and depravity —an endless array 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.

And yet, more is at stake here than an extravagant personal catharsis. For Elder aims to "restore to these degraded images the full dignity of their horror,"² by wresting them from the indifferent s(t)imulation of their trivialization amidst the great stew of the World Wide Web, to concentrate the incandescent authenticity of their elemental energy in the retort of the *camera obscura*, a dark chamber that seems designed for such a distillation. While the *Book of All the Dead* was structured by the Biblical sequence of Eden-Fall-Exodus-Redemption that the literary critic Northrop Frye discerned in all works of the Western canon, the *Book of Praise* unfolds as an alchemical process of progressive transmutation of base materials into precious metals in three stages. This applies to the general progression of this new cycle: from the Black Work of

¹ Antonio Bisaccia, "La pellicola nel corpo. Intervista a Bruce Elder, regista che usa la computer grafica per creare una nuova bellezza, con suoni frattali e colori," *Il Manifesto*, Saturday, November 26, 1994, pp. 24-25.

² Elder, cited in the ad for the Toronto premiere of *Crack, Brutal, Grief* in *Cinematheque Ontario*, Fall 2000, p. 39.

nigredo in *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* and *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, through the White Work of *albedo* with *Eros and Wonder* and the 20-minute short *Infunde Lumen Cordibus*, completed in 2003 and 2004 respectively, to the Red Work of *rubedo* in the *The Young Prince* that just came out in 2008, leaving open the question of whether and how the alchemical model might apply to further planned instalments of the cycle.

But the *Book of Praise* is also of Christian inspiration³, and *Crack, Brutal, Grief* specifically evokes the Harrowing of Hell, between Christ's Passion and Resurrection, when the Redeemer went down to the place of the dead to take up Adam and Eve from their exile in darkness into his own bodily resurrection as the Light of the world, much as film images of the body are rescued from their alienation in digital format and their objectification in pop culture. This is but another instance of *nekuia*, the hero's journey to the underworld as an ordeal to gain saving wisdom, a common pattern in Western literature since Homer's *Odyssey*, which was already central to the *Book of All the Dead*. It is signalled in *Crack, Brutal, Grief* by serialized slow-motion footage from an early silent film,⁴ taking the viewer from inside a dark tunnel to the light of day at what is finally revealed as a subway station, to mark the stages of the hero's journey. This thread allows Elder to bring out the latent mythology in pop culture material, in the manner of Kenneth Anger in *Scorpio Rising*. It reflects the fundamental role he ascribes to the physical experience of a film as akin to that of an ancient mystery, where the initiate allows him/herself to be drawn into a realm of darkness and unknowing in order to receive there the revelation of something larger than life, that engulfs and carries one away to an unknown world.

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 a brief presentation text written for the film's premiere, Elder explains that he is trying to elicit visceral reactions, since "spontaneity blasts open the prison-house of false consciousness ... which turns the subject against his or her real interests. It blasts apart the sedimentation of the self in the petrified projections of the spectacle" that robs us of the ordinary pleasure of everyday existence in the real world it devalues with virtual substitutes. To be able to go with the flow of our authentic passions by first countering "the alienated *méconnaissance* of the *société du spectacle*" (in Guy Debord's terms) that has undermined our ability to directly experience the world through our senses, "we must intensify the image ... by steering it towards immediate perception" that "is attentive to what is, to the gift of the given."⁵ This is an allusion to "the idea that nature is the product of the Divine," of "a supernaturally ordained providential order," that modernity abandoned "as all that once seemed sacred became profane, all of nature melted into air." Thus, confirming "George Grant's dark prophesy" about the demise of the flesh, "a percept came to be regarded almost as a discorporate phenomenon, a passing phantasm projected on an immaterial mind-screen — a virtual image in an immaterial reflector," for which cyberspace was beginning to provide a model as Elder wrote these lines in a book written in the interval between his two film cycles.⁶ Hence the need to intensify images untangled from the Web's virtual mind-screen, be it by distortion into complex forms, heterogeneous juxtaposition, extreme close-ups and lightning-fast zooms,

³ The title is that of the hymnal of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, in which Elder was raised. Cf. C. Roy, "The Redemptive Translation of Cyberspace Trash in Bruce Elder's Film *Crack, Brutal, Grief*," on www.helsinki.fi/carhu.

⁴ *Interior N.Y. subway, 14th St. to 42nd St.*, photographed by G. W. "Billy" Bitzer, a cinematographer on many D. W. Griffith films. This film was issued by American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in 1905, is part of the Library of Congress' "Paper Prints" collection, and is available on the *American Memory* website. The author owes this information to a 6/01/08 e-mail from Bruce Elder, along with vital clues about the role of Frye's ideas in his work.

⁵ R. Bruce Elder, "Fascinated by the Web? How to get over it. ...," unpublished.

⁶ R. Bruce Elder, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997, p. 6.

searing them on a film screen retactilized by the onslaught of painfully abrasive sensations of vitriolic scorching and relentless pounding due to the varied combinations of grating textures and shocking contents, flaming colours and pitch blacks engulfing the viewer for most of *Crack, Brutal, Grief*.

While the recombinant collage of media images in this film owes much to the Situationist principle of *détournement*, their distortion and heightening is reminiscent of this movement's Nordic component, issuing from the CoBrA group of artists. Among them, Asger Jorn provided the splashes and gashes of bright colours that made up the *structures portantes* of Guy Debord's *Mémoires* (1958), a memorial of the times entirely put together from cut-out visual and verbal citations from the print media, and that can clearly be seen as a model for *Crack, Brutal, Grief's* collage of found audio-visual materials, alongside Debord's later films based on the same principle, such as *La Société du spectacle* that also draws on Hollywood material. Jorn's aggressive painterly additions to kitsch art, as well as his menacingly dark paintings of toothy, hairy black "eagles" may also find echoes in *Crack, Brutal, Grief* in the clashing areas of loud colours within a field of frosty grain, with jagged edges crackling like electric flames as they encroach each other's black borders, into which Nuremberg rally footage from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* is processed as an onslaught on all the senses at the beginning of the second reel. Shortly before, a sequence of *détourné* images and sounds bears closer examination for the way it meaningfully conveys through visual metaphors many of the film's underlying concerns. It interweaves shots of divers from Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, spiralling upwards in defiance of gravity in elongated shapes, after recurrent footage of the ill-fated *Challenger* launch climaxes in the space shuttle's mid-air explosion, with long plumes of smoke extending in the sky much as the snake-like carnivorous digits of a mutant mad scientist reach across a clinic room towards hapless patients in a schlock horror movie as he announces: "The Doctor is in!", whereupon a heroine exclaims: "Oh shit!" As the first reel ends, against a fiery background, we get a glimpse of the wavy male dancing shadow figure that first appeared against its opening shot, only to start losing his balance and becoming increasingly deformed in contorted extensions of his limbs across the screen as the film progressed, in a way that is now put in parallel with the hubristic overreach of techno-science (an open Promethean *challenge* to Heaven full of the same mythic associations as the *Titanic* shipwreck) and its attempts to create the weightless body beautiful by total control, even as we dimly hear the kind of Middle Eastern music that will attend his eventual healing.

This "protagonist" of *Crack, Brutal, Grief* appears as witness to a key principle of Elder's "thesis about the body — that the divorce of the inner and outer worlds, and the hypervaluation of the inner world, and of all things non-material results, paradoxically, in the valorization of the body, as the body becomes the site of a last-ditch effort against nature vanishing into the abyss of non-being,"⁷ so thinly veiled by the Net that castration anxiety and morbid obsessions appear there at every turn. They testify to "the desperate effort, and failure, to ground a secure self in the body — a failure that animates much of the art of the last fifty years," yet "appeared first in Artaud's writing, for it was his baneful fate to have experienced the crisis of identity viscerally and therefore in an intensified form" such as that embedded in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*. For the early films of the *Book of Praise* owed much to Elder's concurrent research into the legacies of Surrealism down to Situationism for a scholarly book about to come out.⁸ If *Surprised by Joy* was openly structured by Bataille's heterology (from its theses illustrated in silent skits featuring Jim Smith as Keystone cop to jarring split-screen juxtapositions reminiscent of the review

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁸ R. Bruce Elder, *Dada, Surrealism and the Cinematic Effect*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, forthcoming.

Documents), *Crack, Brutal, Grief* may be seen as a systematic transfer to film of the principles underlying Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. (Rather fittingly, as it may have been Artaud who first coined the phrase "*réalité virtuelle*," about the theatre he likened in this respect to alchemy in *Le Théâtre et son double*.) As a representation of discarnate cyberconsciousness, *Crack, Brutal, Grief* displays the conditions that Artaud's troubled personality epitomized, starting with "the logic of paranoia," as "the paranoiac strives to maintain multiple possibilities of disjunctions, dismemberments, disassociations, and their subsequent recombination and reassociation. Unable to resolve the discord within the 'I,' the paranoiac projects onto the world the fragmentation he or she experiences,"⁹ opposing and fusing in turn fantasies of sex and death, as in Elder's film.

As Elder maintains, "sexual arousal prevents the body vanishing into the abyss of non-being" when the Gnostic heresies driving modernity "split the inner and outer realms apart" by privileging the former.¹⁰ "Splitting involves the attempt to identify oneself with all that is good — or even, the more primitive effort to actually incorporate all that is good into oneself — and to keep all that is bad outside. What is good is that which enhances being — that is, Eros, sexual pleasure, and sexual energy. Conversely, all that is bad comes from Thanatos," yet may be thrown back at it as violence on an erotically scapegoated victim, allowing us to have it both ways, in the kind of paranoiac "misidentification that attend[s] the self's origin in the other."¹¹ Thus, "the link between anality and aggression"¹² helps explain how, in *Crack, Brutal, Grief* as "everywhere around us, in hygiene advertisements, in pornography, in the bathroom humour that is a staple of sit-coms, we can find evidence of the excremental body. Consequently, several strong artists have made it their business to conceive and to display a contrasting body, the body transformed into spirit through sexual energy. To think of matter transformed into spirit by energy, however, is to think beyond the sets of opposing terms our culture has provided us as the tools with which to think about these issues — pairs of terms like 'body' and 'soul,' and 'flesh' and 'spirit.' It is to bring forth a new paradigm for thinking about ourselves,"¹³ probably the same "postmodern paradigm — that proposes an essential harmony between nature and consciousness," with roots "in a model of reality that most closely resembles the premodern beliefs of Western Christianity," that was forged by "the Canadian filmmakers and artists who have attached such importance to the photographic image" as the locus of that harmony between inner and outer realms, such as Jack Chambers and Michael Snow.¹⁴

By contrast, Elder accepts Harold Bloom's identification of dualistic Gnosticism as the American religion of "doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves,"¹⁵ (dis)embodied in the society of the spectacle, whose (self-)destructiveness, virtually identified with the masculine gender in *Crack, Brutal, Grief*, 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 — a castration anxiety often put in parallel with the fear of decapitation. On the other hand, Elder cannot deny his own indebtedness to American masters of avant-garde cinema who remain beholden to that same Gnostic dualism his own work keeps working through, yet never seems to quite get beyond, however much it may be moved by a

⁹ Bruce Elder, *A Body of Vision*, *loc. cit.*, p. 227.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁴ R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, p. 49, cited in Bruce Elder, *A Body of Vision*, *loc. cit.*, p. 195.

Christian sense of the basic goodness of the created order, even though no theodicy can dispel the terror of history. “The horrible conflict between the broken body, the body of shame and disgust — or even, as in Artaud’s writing, the body of excrement — and the Gnostic body (i.e., the body of *gnosis*) is basic to the films of Stan Brakhage and Carolee Schneemann — as basic to their films as it is to my own.”¹⁶ The alchemical model of *The Book of Praise* calls like Artaud for a “transformation of the body” enacted in *Crack, Brutal, Grief* as “an event that could be produced by unleashing acts of ‘cruelty’ on the body to release volcanic, transformative energies that would convert our fleshy dimension into a ‘body without organs,’ essentially into a non-body.”¹⁷

Artaud longs for the energized body. He complains about the moments when the flesh loses its electric charge and when he can no longer sense the activity of thinking in the coils of his nerves. He values only those moments when flesh and matter transmute alchemically into energy. He proclaims that his fundamental task is to form a new body, the redeemed body, the body spiritualized by energy. He longs to become a flesh angel.¹⁸

It is no coincidence that the film that opened the Paradise region of the *Book of All the Dead* was entitled *Flesh Angels*, as though Elder, again like Artaud, “saw his task in life as the formation of the angelized body,” “flesh that has become immediate understanding,” “quick as lightning,”¹⁹ since, as he quotes Artaud, “the excitement of the flesh partakes of the high substance of the mind.”²⁰ This is exactly the meaning that Fred Astaire’s song *Heaven* at the end of *Crack, Brutal, Grief* is meant to confer along with its rhythm to a flood of *tits’n’ass* close-ups:

Heaven, I’m in Heaven,/ and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak;
And I seem to find the happiness I seek/ When we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek.

Following Artaud, Elder aims to teach man “again to dance inside out/ as in the delirium of dance halls/ and that inside out will be his true side out.”²¹ 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 undulating 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 amidst this great feast of bodies in which humanity communes in a universal mutual gift. “For 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”²² in a playfully dynamic organicity that is no longer that of static utilitarian function aimed at self-preservation. Thus, much as in Frye’s Christian interpretation of Blake, “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

¹⁶ Elder, *A Body of Vision*, *loc. cit.*, p. 233.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁰ Antonin Artaud, “Situation of the Flesh,” in *Selected Writings*. Ed. Susan Sontag. Tr. Helen Weaver. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 110-111, cited in *ibid.*, p. 230.

²¹ *To Have Done With the Judgment of God*, in *Watchfiends and Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period* by Antonin Artaud. Ed. & tr. C. Eshleman with B. Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995, p. 307, cited in *ibid.*, p. 231

²² *Ibid.*, p. 463.

to flesh reaches towards a numinousness that binds all together in an anonymous universality.²³ This seamless garment of humanity seems to be put on as a kind of flesh dress by the female dancing presence that gradually takes over the screen as *Crack, Brutal, Grief* approaches its climax, demonstrating what Elder means by the eruption of the real in perception as a form of authentic thought, thwarting the will's attempts to impose itself on what is experienced as "electric sensation-in-and-of-flux".²⁴ For as disturbing as such immediate perception may be on account of the violence of its elemental flow or of its explicit contents, at the same time it teaches us charity in the act of unconditionally welcoming in pure attention the gifts it bestows upon us, be they samples of the apparently trivial flotsam of that cesspool of mass culture that is cyberspace. On the side of frailty, vulnerability, and the unpredictable, thinking-through-rhythm is thus a form of *pensiero debole* in Gianni Vattimo's sense, and so it calls for a humble cinema, a *cinema povero*, a term modeled on *arte povera* that Elder would prefer to "experimental cinema," one steeped in the metaphysics of subjectivity he strives to counteract.²⁵

His own kenotic project of using "every extreme means for restoring our connection to our bodies"²⁶, since there is no Incarnation without Passion, draws on Western mythic patterns as articulated in Northrop Frye's literary criticism. *Crack, Brutal, Grief* clearly shows that it undergirds the *Book of Praise* as much as the *Book of All the Dead*, since for Frye "the descending hero or heroine is going down into a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows which is also either the bowels and belly of an earth-monster, or the womb of an earth-mother, or both," as in Elder's film, where the latter aspect eventually overtakes the former. "The undisplaced, or death-and-rebirth, form of the dragon quest is a descent through his open mouth into his belly and back out again, the theme that appears in the Biblical story of Jonah and is later applied to Christ's descent to hell." What is more, "the mythological universe is, in one of its aspects, a gigantic or macrocosmic body, with analogies to the human body. ... At the bottom of this macrocosmic world we find the organs of generation and of excretion, which are emphasized in proportion as this part of the mythical universe is made demonic." This is why booty literally fills the screen at the end of this "descent narrative, where we enter a lower world which reveals the sources of human absurdity and folly," always located by satire in the abdominal regions, "as the etymology of such words as hypochondria and hysteria makes clear. *Gulliver's Travels* reminds us that we recurrently find in this lower world very little people and very big people,"²⁷ such as the lightly clad "70-Foot Tall Courtesy Lady" who terrorizes a town in a 50s sci-fi spoof in the first reel, yet anticipates the close-ups of an exotic dancer's belly at the end, dwarfing the shadow dancer protagonist as he now sways happily to her rhythm. Joining her belly dance was no doubt facilitated by the kind of belly laugh elicited by the final conjunction of raunchy pole dancing with innocent crooning, anticipated in reel 2 by the interpolation of such images amidst original footage of an amateur dance class to the soothing rhythm of *Rhum and Coca-Cola*.

For if, "as the hero or heroine enters the labyrinthine lower world, the prevailing moods are those of terror or uncritical awe," "at a certain point, perhaps when the strain ... is becoming unbearable, there may be a revolt of the mind, a recovered detachment, the typical expression of which is laughter. The ambiguity of the oracle becomes the ambiguity of wit, something addressed to a verbal understanding that shakes the mind free. This point is also marked by

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 476-477.

²⁴ 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: Alfabeta City/MIT Press, 2003, p. 449.

²⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p. 466.

²⁶ Elder, "Fascinated by the Web? How to get over it..."

²⁷ *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, in Joseph Adamson & Jean Wilson, eds., *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, Vol. 18, Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2006, pp. 79-80.

generic changes from the tragic and ironic to the comic and satiric,” as in the mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis, where “the obscene jests and raillery of the servant girl Iambe and the old nurse Baubo finally persuaded her to smile” —the latter by way of an exhibitionist belly dance. Likewise “according to Plutarch, those who descended to the gloomy cave of the oracle of Trophonius might, after three days, recover the power of laughter,”²⁸ much as Elder’s viewers may crack up after so much brutal grief: that of experiencing the Net as a demonic memory that “conveys to us the darkest knowledge at the bottom of the world, the vision of the absurd, the realization that only death is certain, and that nothing before or after death makes sense. . . . But although in a world of death nothing is more absurd than life, life is the counter-absurdity that finally defeats death” by locating “one’s identity in the body of the god of gods who also contains the universe,”²⁹ be it the dancing Krishna Frye is referring to here, the eucharistic Christ Elder seems to have in mind, or the radiant Persephone he shows us finally springing out of Hades.

Thus, “when it is wisdom that is sought in the lower world, it is almost always wisdom connected with the anxiety of death in some form or other, along with the desire to know what lies beyond. Such wisdom, however displaced, is usually communicated in some sort of dark saying, and riddles and ciphers and oracular utterances of all kinds proliferate around the end of the descending journey,” so that it is “in an atmosphere of comedy” that dark spells are broken by “an explanation of a mystery.”³⁰ It is appropriately after a gently ironic burlesque sequence that the anagrams that had kept circling illegibly all through this film come clear as a famous palindrome: *in gyrum immus noctes et consumimur igni*. This Latin phrase for the alchemical process of *nigredo*, meaning “at night we go down into the gyre and are consumed by fire,” was already used by Debord as the title of one of his later films, where it seems to refer to the endless frustration of recycled desire in consumer society, that makes revolt against it such a Sisyphean task of fruitless repetition. In such a pessimistic context, as an infernal circle of desire’s fire, the palindrome evoked the ouroboros, the serpent endlessly eating its own tail in universal hermetic symbolism. But the end of *Crack, Brutal, Grief* reveals its other, positive aspect, the “counter-absurdity” implicit in its visual/verbal metaphor for film unwinding around a spool like Ariadne’s thread, to guide us out of the labyrinth of electronic media by the sheer rhythmic physicality of its circular motion as the message inherent in the film medium. For in Northrop Frye’s words, “in alchemy the ouroboros stands for both the *materia prima* and the *lapis*, that is, for both the beginning and the end of whatever process it was the alchemists were trying to accomplish. Like all images of its type, it is binary; it has two contexts, and one is the opposite of the other”³¹ In this hermetic understanding of Bruce Elder’s ambivalent use of debased images of the body, *détournement* leads into *retournement*: *metanoia* as conversion to one’s authentic, selfless self, following “the alchemical idea that the destruction of the self (*mortificatio*) is a stage on the route to redemption.”³² It is therefore no great loss, but a liberation to be consumed by fire, if it is to free us from the lower self’s dross, leaving us only the fire to identify with as our true nature: the luminous energy that propels moving images on the film screen as resurrected flesh of the world, even as it dispels the illusory shadows cast by technological spectacle in a virtual mind’s eye.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³¹ “The Ouroboros,” from *Ethos* 1 (Summer 1983), in *ibid.*, p. 288.

³² R. Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent. Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century*. Waterloo, Ont. : Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008, p. 314.