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BRUCE ELDER'S

FILM-DIGITAL HYBRIDS

&

MATERIALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

JIHOON KIM

Avant-garde cinema in the last decade has witnessed a considerable growth of digital experimental filmmaking, which has been represented by both such veteran practitioners as Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Phil Solomon, to name just a few, and numerous filmmakers of younger generations. A notable tendency of digital experimental filmmaking is hybrid uses of film and digital video in ways that explore and bring into relief the materiality of both mediums. Filmmakers such as Jürgen Reble, Dietmar Brehm, Kerry Laitala, Johanna Vaude, Stephanie Maxwell, Marcy Saude, Aaron F. Ross and Anna Geyer all physically manipulate film stocks (Super-8, 16mm, 35mm) in various ways, including painting, etching, and chemical treatments, and then digitize the stocks in order to further reorganize and transform them, or vice versa (that is, to take on video footage as their source images and transfer them to film for hand-processed, frame-by-frame manipulation).¹ These combinatory techniques largely result in the ever-changing flux of highly complex, abstract shapes that testify to the

coexistence of, and the continual interaction between, the material traces of both mediums: emulsions, tints, and grains as markers of celluloid on the one hand, and pixilated colors, geometric forms, and the unreal surface textures derived from different (high or low) definitions of digital video on the other.

More than taking their inspiration from the traditions of abstract imagery in the history of avant-garde film and video, these filmmakers push to the limit the boundaries between film and the digital and thereby resist a couple of dichotomies that have still loomed large over the current climate of avant-garde practices and criticism: first, the opposition between film's recalcitrant materiality and the immateriality of the digital that has been known as eroding it²; and second, the contrast between the filmmaker's artisanal treatment of celluloid and digital software's automated, algorithmic procedures whose simulation of hitherto meticulous and time-consuming techniques to alter images has been deemed as threatening to the filmmaker's physical intervention.³ For one thing, the

filmmakers who have sought to produce the hybrid images of film and digital video run parallel to "digital materialism." As noted by critics Ed Halter and Steve F. Anderson, "digital materialism" is a mode of practice that defies the conventional assumption of the digital as immaterial by making visible its physical materials and supports (pixels, codes, networks, etc.) through mutation, accident, and malfunction, and in this sense it is compared to the self-reflexive investigation into the material components of film or video technology within the spheres of avant-garde art in the 1970s, ranging from the US and UK structural/materialist filmmaking (represented by Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice, Paul Sharits, etc.) to the trope of image-processing video (lead by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Nam June Paik, Stephen Beck, etc.).⁴ Seen in this light, the images produced by the filmmakers, which I am calling "film-digital hybrids" often present noises and glitches – in the forms of aberrant pixels, ghostly distorted figures, and degraded lines – as demonstrating and symbolizing the "constantly mutating materiality" of the digital as a medium.⁵ The filmmakers' embracing of "digital materialism," too, challenges the general assumption of the digital as totally automated and non-human tools, inasmuch as their uses of it are made in close dialogue with their hand-processed techniques of treating film and a range of aesthetic effects that the techniques make. In this sense, the filmmakers' hybrid deployment of film and digital video in the light of materiality, along with the work of Jacobs, Gehr, and Solomon, reflect "a broader trend toward the incorporation into video of concerns and pursuits first explored and undertaken with photochemical film."⁶ Malcolm Le Grice, one of the experimental filmmakers who extended his filmmaking to digital systems earlier than others, argues that the systems' developments are driven by "a desire to produce a time-based auditory and visual capacity which is more or less continuous with the forms and language developed from the history of cinema."⁷ In this sense, Le Grice coins a term "hydra-media" in order to suggest a possibility for deploying film and the digital in combinatory ways and thereby redefining the limits of both.⁸ Considered this way, the filmmakers' hybrid uses of film and digital video suit Le Grice's concept of "hydra-media," in the sense that the viewer can see the two "heads" of both mediums simultaneously: namely, the components of the original film that are able to be dissected, assessed, halted, and reassembled in various ways on the one hand, and the inscription of visual effects, such as signal-based transformation or pixel-based compositing, that confer upon the original film a range of spatiotemporal

OPPOSITE Bruce Elder, *Crack, Brutal Grief* (2001), frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.

¹ See Reble's *Materia Obscura* (2009), *Zagreb Tram Station* (2009), and *Liquid Movements* (2011), Brehm's *Praxis* series (amongst them, *Praxis 1-3 Scenes* (2007), *Praxis 3-7 Scenes* (2007), *Praxis 8-12 Scenes* (2010)), Laitala's several "Chromadepth" films since 2009 (including *Chromatic Cocktail Straight-Up* (2009), *Chromatic Cocktail Extra Frenzy* (2009), and *Chromatic Revelries* (2011)), Vaude's six films included in her compilation DVD *Hybride* (Lowave, 2007), Maxwell's *terra incognita* (2001) and *passé-partout* (2002), etc.

² Some panelists who participated in the round table discussion on digital experimental filmmaking also share this dichotomy, which can be found in numerous writings related to the "death of cinema" discourses since the mid-1990s. See Malcolm Turvey et al., "Roundtable on Digital Experimental Filmmaking," *October* 137 (Summer 2011), pp. 51-68.

³ For a study that argues for this dichotomy, see Tess Takahashi, "'Meticulously, Recklessly Worked-Upon': Materiality in Contemporary Experimental Animation," *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema*. Eds. Chris Gehman & Steve Reinke (Toronto: YYZ Press, 2006), pp. 166-178.

⁴ Ed Halter, "The Matter of Electronics," *Vague Terrain*, last modified February 3, 2010, online at <http://vagueterrain.net/content/2010/02/matter-electronics>, accessed on May 5, 2012. Steve F. Anderson, "Aporias of the Digital Avant-garde," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (online journal), Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 2007), online at <http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/1/2/000011/000011.html>, accessed on May 1, 2012. For the broader discussions on the materialist approaches to digital technology, see Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

⁵ Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto," *Video Vortex Reader II: Moving Images beyond Youtube*, Eds. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (Amsterdam: The Netherlands, Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), p. 346.

⁶ Federico Windhausen, "Assimilating Video," *October* 137 (Summer 2011), p. 78. Malcolm Turvey, too, has examined Michael Snow's and Jacobs' uses of digital video effects to continue and extend their desires that had long been developed since their pre-digital avant-garde filmmaking, such as Snow's desire to control space and time, and Jacobs' desire to reveal what lies beneath the forgotten frames of early cinema. See Turvey, "Dr. Tube and Mr. Snow," *Millennium Film Journal* 43-44 (Summer 2005), pp. 131-140; Turvey, "Ken Jacobs: Digital Revelationist," *October* 137 (Summer 2011), pp. 107-124.

⁷ Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), p. 283.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 308-309.

plasticity and multidimensionality not acquirable from it on the other. In this way, their works as “film-digital hybrids” evoke both the digital in the filmic apparatus or the filmic in the digital algorithms or operations on their material and technical levels.

Canadian experimental filmmaker R. Bruce Elder is one of the filmmakers who have produced “film-digital hybrids” by developing his own “hydra-media.” Since the 2000s, Elder has made a series of found footage works in which film and digital video are thrown into a dynamic circuit of intersections – not just an interpenetration between each medium’s material properties but also a combination of the two mediums’ technical processes: film’s chemical-mechanical process and a process derived from the pictoriality and transformativity of the digital. For Elder, the algorithmic automation of the computer-based image processing does not obliterate two key aspects of experimental filmmaking which serve to establish it as an artisanal practice: the filmmaker’s direct contact with film, grounded in his creative intent and technical virtuosity; and the medium’s chemical change of state marked by its surface qualities (colors, tints, grains, glitches, emulsion, and even damages). Rather, he revamps his material and technical concepts of celluloid-based practice by incorporating them into image processing and database methods given by the computer. To this end, he devised his own computer program that could operate a database containing a set of reference images classified according to a number of criteria (form, texture, figure, etc.), as well as information about various methods of image processing appropriate to those images. The program’s applications then “choose which image processing methods to apply to the images by measuring the similarity between the target images (the images to be processed) and the reference images – target images that closely resembled the reference images were treated with processing methods.”⁹ While the choice of the image processing methods follows what Elder calls the “chance operation,” they are at the same time constrained by the similarity between the target images, which include Elder’s manual-chemical treatment of film, and the reference images constituted by his conceptual design. In this way, he succeeds in making analog and digital technologies coexist, in such a way that one does not negate but affects the other.

In what follows I shall examine Elder’s two feature-length, film-digital hybrids since the 2000s, *Crack, Brutal Grief* (2001) and *The Young Prince* (2007), in terms of how his attempts at intersecting the materiality of digital video with that of film are extended into his found footage filmmaking. To be sure, found footage

filmmaking is a compelling category to which the hybrid materialist filmmakers aforementioned pertain because these filmmakers often appropriate various formats of celluloid film in order to explore and expose its material effects and the ways in which celluloid can be transformed by the material and technical influences of the digital. Despite this common ground, however, Elder’s found footage practices are distinct from those of the other hybrid materialist filmmakers. For Elder’s hybrid materialism applied to found footage filmmaking does not simply represent the materiality of found images and its aesthetic forms, his practice also channels the materiality of film and digital video into an investigation of the cultural and historical dimensions of the images. In this vein, with this essay, I will illuminate a deeper implication of Elder’s hybrid materialism by situating his found footage works within the framework of “materialist historiography,” a concept of Walter Benjamin that found footage filmmaking since the pre-digital age has been seen to explore and incorporate. In so doing, I suggest that Elder’s venture into hybrid filmmaking brings the materialist approach of found footage filmmaking to a new realm by putting film and digital into a dialectical relation.

The concepts of Walter Benjamin, such as the “allegorist” and “literary montage,” have broadly entered theoretical discourses on the aesthetic and formal principles of found footage cinema, as exemplified by the works of Catherine Russell, William C. Wees, Jeffrey Skoller, and Scott Mackenzie.¹⁰ In particular, the concept of the “dialectical image” as a specific form of the encounter between past and present legitimizes the great variety of found footage filmmaking as a broader method of Benjaminian historiography that is antithetical to the notion of history as the progression of linear time: namely, the “materialist historiography” that is “registered in that blasting of historical continuity with which the historical object first constitutes itself.”¹¹ Seen from this perspective, found footage filmmaking as “materialist historiography” is a practice of rewriting history through the discarded, fragmented, or forgotten material of the past in ways that the material is able to speak for it and thereby open up possibilities for the fresh view on both the past and the present.

While the existing theoretical views on found footage filmmaking have mainly focused on the celluloid-based cinema, its “dialectical” aspect, I argue, is also derived from the critical situation that the celluloid-based cinema has increasingly been thwarted by the overriding power of new digital technologies. This situation deeply echoes Benjamin’s own dialectical thought on the impacts of present technology on the past.

Benjamin demonstrates that an array of technological changes – for instance, the invention of photography, panorama, and film – restructured the ways in which humans unpacked and grasped traditions, cultures, or objects of the past: “The perceptual world breaks up more rapidly; what they contain of the mythic comes more quickly and more brutally to the fore... This is how the accelerated tempo of technology appears in light of the primal history of the present – awakening.”¹² In this view, technology threatens to destroy an old regime of human perception at the same time it sparks a renewed awareness of the “primal history” that might otherwise remain hidden under the logic of historical progress. Benjamin’s dialectical view on technology is also maintained in his famous thesis of the “destruction of aura.” Whilst the technological development in artistic production and reproduction, including the invention of photography and film, collapses a spatiotemporal distance that endowed the work of art with the atmosphere of uniqueness and inapproachability, this “destruction of aura” brings about both a new form of art and the structural change in the way that all previous artworks are produced and perceived.¹³ As I shall discuss below, Elder’s hybrid filmmaking that investigates the intersections between the materiality of film and digital video in allegorical manner suits not simply the materialist undertaking of found footage filmmaking as a method of alternative historiography but also Benjaminian dialecticism. His employment of digital video serves to offer a poignant critique of the ways in which celluloid-based found footage in the present loses some of its aura as it is transferred to the electronic signal or digital pixel and thus subject to the relentless flow of image consumption in contemporary network culture. At the same time, this auratic demise provides many opportunities to revitalize found footage filmmaking when the materiality of digital video manifests its own contemporary temporality while simultaneously serving to bring the materiality of film and its traces of the past to new light.

CRACK, BRUTAL GRIEF

A found footage film grounded in extremely sophisticated montage, *Crack, Brutal Grief* (2001) pushes the viewer into a complex barrage of the scenes of violence culled from still images and audiovisual clips found on the World Wide Web – the imagery existing as digital data. Angered by the banalization of suffering provoked and diffused by the culture of the Internet, Elder navigated through the Web for searching the data that matched such keywords as “suicide” and “power saw,”¹⁴ and amassed a wide variety of abject images,

including hardcore pornography footage since the birth of cinema, pictures of torture, bodily mutilation, and deformed babies, screaming figures coming out of B-horror movies, images of war such as fighter-bombers, explosions, ruins, and the mushroom cloud of the atom bomb, etc. Encompassing sensational early cinema, documentary footage from the World War I and II (mostly from German newsreels), and the detritus of the postwar-American media culture (the fragments of science fiction films, television news and pop videos), the image data are processed with the computer first, then transferred to film, and undergo manual and chemical processes. Those overabundant images neither are organized into a coherent narrative of the history of violence nor document the political and cultural forces that motivate the historical events inscribed in them. Rather, they are viewed as allegorical in Benjamin’s sense, in that they take on the extremely

⁹ Aysegul Koc, “An Interview with R. Bruce Elder,” *CineAction*, No. 61 (Spring 2003), p. 38.

¹⁰ Catherine Russell, “Archival Apocalypse,” *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 238-273; Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-garde Film* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); William C. Wees, “From Compilation to Collage: The Found Footage Films of Arthur Lipsett,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 2-22; Scott Mackenzie, “Flowers in the Dustbin: Termite Culture and Detritus Cinema,” *CineAction!*, vol. 47 (1998), pp. 24-29.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 475.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 462.

¹³ See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility [Third Version],” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 251-283.

¹⁴ This information is quoted from filmmaker Brett Kashmere, see his “In the Realm of Mystery and Wonder: R. Bruce Elder’s *Book of Praise*,” *Take One*, No. 45 (March-June 2004), pp. 36-39, online at <http://www.brettkashmere.com/elder.htm>, accessed on April 3, 2012.

fragmentary, fleeting form that reveals the debris of the human civilization in the twentieth century – while maintaining ambiguity. In this sense, *Crack, Brutal Grief* also recalls the films of Craig Baldwin (*Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America* [1991] and *Spectres of the Spectrum* [1999]) and Johan Grimonprez (*Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* [1998]) in a few ways: the images' source is assumed as the garbage bins of the popular culture; the film privileges the iconic and metaphoric power of the images over the historical factuality of the record; and finally, *Crack, Brutal Grief* updates Baldwin's and Grimonprez's critique of the arbitrary manner in which televisual media appropriate, link, and discard the records of the past, by taking as its subject and its starting point of montage the Internet's accelerated and disastrous system of circulating information. In these senses, Elder's fragmentary, hallucinatory yet sophisticated use of montage, as in the cases of Baldwin and Grimonprez, establish *Crack, Brutal Grief* as a kind of "metahistorical" project that seeks to find "ambiguity and revelation in both the recognizable iconic image, resonant with cultural and historical connotation, and detritus, the seemingly inconsequential footage whose very banality and ubiquity is made resonant of mass media."¹⁵

Through the combination of optical printing and video-based effects, Elder transforms a multiplicity of human figures into something like liquid entities, depriving them of their solidity, stability, and even beauty. Those figures come from both lesser-known or unknown sources (for instance, an acrobat in a vaudeville-like primitive film, naked dancers, a training boxer, a half-buried cadaver on a deserted ground, screaming people at the attack of a monster in a science-fiction film of the 1950s, torturers who abuse a female victim in an exploitation movie, etc.) and familiar scenes drawn from classical films (such as the climactic conflict between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* and the murder scene of Janet Leigh in *Psycho*). Along with the film's fragmentary, disjointed trope of montage, the total meltdown, which surfaces the screen with blurs, blotches, and dissolves, renders all the figures extremely dense and degraded, while at the same time forcing their iconic details to be hardly discernable. In this way, Elder channels the viewer not simply into the moments of terror, fear, death, and loss which return from the forgotten past ceaselessly but into a correlation of film and video in the material dimension of the images. The continuous fluidity and pixilation of video signal merges with film's emulsion effects in such a way as to intensify its inherent process of decomposition.

For this reason, the image's visual texture in some sense evokes film's physical and chemical factors that determine its decay, such as faded colors, washed-out tints, blots, stains, flickers, and dusts, all that lead film archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai to proclaim that "cinema is the art of destroying moving images."¹⁶ For Usai, it is film's material mortality – that film cannot prevent both destruction from external causes and its internal degradation – that makes the ontology and historicity of cinema possible. For if there is an image that is immune to decay, it "can have no history."¹⁷ All the elements shaping the materiality of celluloid demonstrate that each film possesses an individual life span, or an organic life from birth – from the moment it is first printed and projected – to death.

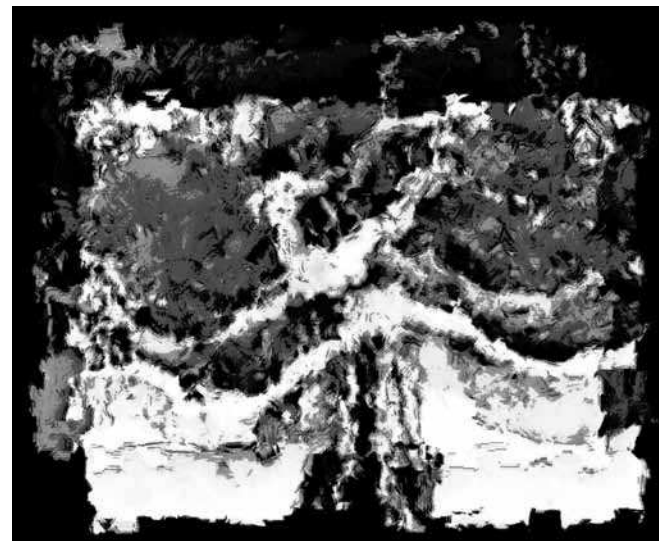
Due to its foregrounding of decomposition on the material level of the images, *Crack, Brutal Grief* is in parallel to a series of recent found footage films that dramatize Cherchi Usai's idea of "the death of film," films made of the gradual disintegration of celluloid by virtue of the excavation of the archive and the use of the optical printer: for instance, Peter Delpet's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) and several films by Bill Morrison, such as *The Film of Her* (1997), *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002), and *Light is Calling* (2003). André Habib classifies those films in terms of Benjaminian "aesthetics of ruin," which are made up of the "impression of a rediscovered aura at the intersection of its disappearance, plus the fragmentation of sequences, the mismatches, the construction of uncanny continuities between different styles and time periods, and the evanescence of the medium, the stains and scorias on the celluloid."¹⁸ For Habib, what the aesthetics of ruin invoke to the viewer is a multiplicity of temporalities at work: "To the first layers of historical time (the profilmic time, the time of the image's construction, the time of the image's projection) has been added another time: time's

¹⁵ Michael Zyrd, "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*," *The Moving Image*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2003), p. 51.

¹⁶ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁸ André Habib, "Ruin, Archive and the Time of Cinema: Peter Delpet's *Lyrical Nitrate*," *Substance*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2006), p. 132.



Bruce Elder, *Crack, Brutal Grief* (2001), frame enlargements.



Bruce Elder, *The Young Prince* (2007), frame enlargement.

passage. This time, eroding the film material, does away with the interval between the (man-made) filming process and the (natural) chemical process that subverts and transforms the initial imprint.¹⁹ Habib's insight can easily tap into Elder's "aesthetics of ruin," inasmuch as his images suggest the material traces of decay as the reminder of the process from their initial inscription on celluloid to its inevitable deterioration.

But what makes Elder distinct from Delpout and Morrison in terms of the "aesthetics of ruin" is the complexity of the temporalities that operate in his images of decay. Given that the images of disaster and violence exist and circulate in the form of digital files, they may maintain the "proflimic time" as a layer of "historical time" but lack the passage of time that only celluloid's material mortality is expected to contain. Then Elder brings the images dispersed throughout the dataspace to their possible origins, origins that had been stripped of them since they were placed into digital formats, by transferring them to film and subjecting their figural changes to its chemical-material life and death. It is only by allowing for the chemical decomposition that the reflection on and the

redemption of those forgotten or wasted images are fulfilled. Here the fluid transformation and pixilation of digital video functions to generate two senses of degradedness simultaneously: it pushes the images into the ruin of celluloid while at the same time rendering them to be the poor image, images that lost their original visual abundance in the course of their countless circulation, compression, ripping, and repurposing in the digital realm. Filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl provides a compelling view on the latter aspect of digital degradedness. The poor image, Steyerl notes, testifies to "the violent dislocation, transfers, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism," and for this reason, they contain "experimental and artistic material but also incredible amounts of porn and paranoia."²⁰ Seen in this light, Elder's achievement is to attest to the exploitative operation of capitalist media assembly and thereby to appropriate its images in such a manner as to disrupt it. Then the images become what digital materialism strives to produce and manifest, glitch that serves as a "persistent reminder that the perfection-oriented goal and desires of mainstream media are

all too easily fucked up."²¹ It is in this way that Elder succeeds in making the materiality of digitized images reveal their own time and simultaneously amplify the materiality and time of celluloid that their original sources suggest.

THE YOUNG PRINCE

The Young Prince (2007) provides a complicated interpenetration of life and death, of Eros and Thanatos. This time, Elder elaborates on his amalgamation of film and digital video by simultaneously utilizing two sorts of transformations: "electrical transformations" produced by the latter and "chemical transformations" brought about by the manual and mechanical processing of the former. More than establishing the dialogue between the two technologies at their material and technical levels, the two interwoven transformations relate to a set of formal and thematic interests that Elder assigns to the work: "The film is...about history as transformation, about Eros as a transformative power, about that old Eisensteinian idea of collage and montage as transformation, but most of all, about transformations of the self."²² All the transformations take place in the images of bodily postures and movements, varying from the sacred to the profane, from Greek and Roman statues as consummations of the odea of human beauty to grotesque portrayals of human bodies in Cubist and Fauvist painting, and from Muybridge's chronophotography to still and moving pictures of eroticism drawn from vintage pornography and pinup pictures. In this sense, Elder follows what Paul Arthur has called the "conceit of film apparatus as human body," a tendency of American avant-garde film to mobilize sensory impressions through an artisanal endeavor to foreground and transform film material.²³ At the same time, those transformations, in tandem with the arbitrary and fragmentary trope of montage, present the erotic, sensual images as Benjaminian allegories of the human being's beauty that discloses itself only through a process of breaking their corporeal boundaries.

Elder's use of the erotic images as the main target of his "electrical" and "chemical" transformations is predicated upon his interest in the relation between corporeal and aesthetic experiences. In *The Young Prince*, the relentless mutation of various body parts sparks the viewer's vision in such a way that the viewer's way of seeing is grounded in his embodied condition. Elder illustrates this aesthetic position through his appreciation of Stan Brakhage, who "maintains that all changes in one's body affect one's faculties of sight": "Indeed, [Brakhage] seems to believe that the organ of

sight is ultimately the entire body. The most important implication of his belief is the notion that all emotional experiences register in sight."²⁴ Elder extends this view into his own aesthetic definition of film medium. For him, cinema is a medium that has its own corporeality and aesthetically affects the phenomenological dimension of human perception: "Flesh is the medium that opens us towards the world, for it is the medium through which that which addresses itself to us emerges...The cinema is disposed to flesh...[It] imprints itself on all that we perceive – and on our body (the worldly representation of the earthly element) and the body of the object alike."²⁵

In Elder's "electrical transformations," the pulsating, fluid movement of electronic signal continually penetrates the female figures' shapes, thus exhibiting its own material texture and thereby rendering the figures barely indistinguishable. A high degree of electronic and digital manipulations deepen the deformation of those figures, metamorphosing them into an array of abstract forms like a free-floating bundle of lines or a whirling vortex of amoebic patterns. Although some figures – for instance, pin-up girls – are still legible, the photo frames surrounding

19 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

20 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal*, No. 10 (November 2009), online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/94>, accessed on May 6, 2012.

21 Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," *world picture 6* (Winter 2011), online at http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Manon.html, accessed on May 3, 2012.

22 R. Bruce Elder, "The Young Prince: Project Description," online at <http://www.ryerson.ca/~belder/filmsprojects/2005YoungPrince/youngprince.html>, accessed on April 2, 2012.

23 Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 157.

24 Elder, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), p. 312.

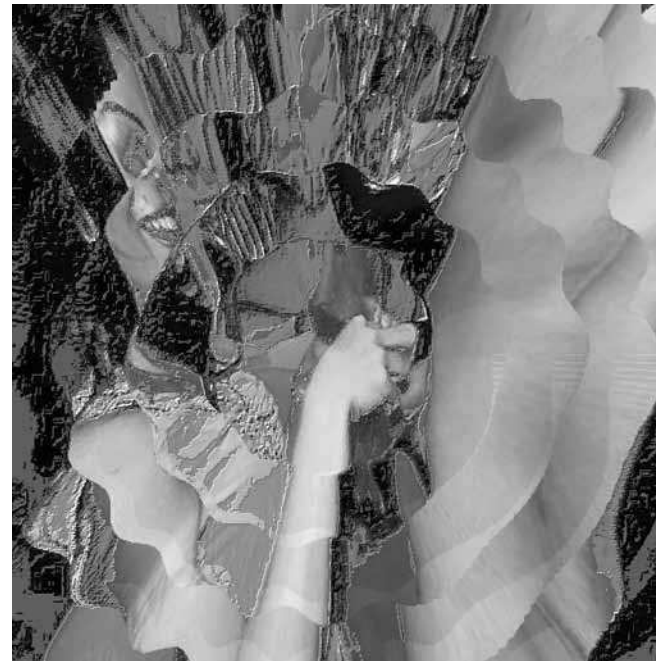
25 Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate, or the Violence and Charity of Perception," *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, eds. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 472-473.

them are turned into computer-generated imagery, whether curved like rolls of paper or reorganized into a three-dimensional cubic form. All those “electrical transformations” obliterate some key constituents of transparent optical visuality, such as depth of field and the clear separation between figure and ground, with such extreme complexity and subtlety that the viewer is forced to pay attention to the surface of those figures. In this respect, Elder capitalizes on what Laura U. Marks has identified as video’s medium-specific characteristics that transform the image’s surface and its texture into the field of multisensory visuality (in her own words, “haptic visuality”), such as “the constitution of the image from a signal, video’s low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital manipulation, and video decay.”²⁶

In her brilliant analysis of Peggy Ahwesh’s *The Color of Love* (1994), a 16mm found footage film that subjects the fragments of outdated pornographic film to complex treatments of optical printing and coloring, Elena Gorfinkel illustrates how the decomposition of film’s material surface “is able to evince arousal out of ruin, re-eroticizing the allegorical image through the logic of [film’s] own fatality.”²⁷ Gorfinkel’s discussion on the film by way of illustrating the correspondence between pornographic footage and its materiality subjugated to decay and historicity is relevant to examining the pornographic imagery undergoing “chemical transformations” in *The Young Prince*. The most pervasive material traces on the surface of this work are scratches, glitches, and blotches, all of which bear witness to film’s inevitable deterioration. In addition, there are granular patterns on the close-ups of human bodies, as well as liquid forms that suggest those bodies’ organic change of state. All those decomposing patterns, attenuated by the drained tone of the film’s color, are overlaid with the human bodies so opaquely that they tend to neutralize the viewer’s perception of the bodies on the basis of optical visuality. Both those bodies’ extreme approximation to the viewer and the fragmentary montage that interweaves them heighten the effect of disintegration. After all, the erotic representation of the pornographic footage becomes obscure and is elevated to the phase in which, as in the case of digital video’s “electrical transformation,” the human bodies become indistinguishable from an abstract play of light and emulsion that takes the viewer to the universe of explosive colors and unknown shapes. This is where the viewer’s sensuous perception is activated. Then it remains to be further asked whether the two intersecting transformations have to do with Benjaminian “materialist historiography.”

For one thing, Elder’s “chemical transformation” embodies the idea of materialism as it is concerned with the pornographic film footage as the ruin of film. The footage allegorizes the representation of sexuality that lost its erotic weight, and, more significantly, the impending disappearance of film medium that has been alerted by the growing decay of celluloid. For since the tradition of pre-cinematic motion study pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey, pornographic portrayal of body and sexuality had been a driving force for the production of moving pictures and for the visual pleasure of their spectators. As Linda Williams writes, the cinematic apparatus allowed for the unprecedented visibility of the female body while at the same time reinforcing the mastery over the threat of castration aroused by it, through the illusion of movement (on the level of the collaboration between a filmstrip and a projector) and the dismemberment and reunification of the filmed body (on the level of framing and editing).²⁸ In *The Young Prince*, extreme close-ups gleaned from porno movies – faces of a kissing couple, a male’s hand caressing a woman’s skin, fragments of a woman’s handjob – function to indicate the longstanding bond between the body of the film and the filmed body, thereby positioning themselves as an archival record. Yet Elder confirms this historicity not by redeeming the pornographic footage as it was, but by subjugating it to the various processes of disintegration. Not only are the bodily fragments decolorized (the evidence of chromatic decay), but they are also covered with the densely granular patterns and scratches. These effects of emulsion recall the passage of time, and Elder’s attachment to the film’s material texture validates his love of the disappearing image as “finding a way to allow the figure to pass while embracing the tracks of its presence, in the physical fragility of the medium.”²⁹

Elder, however, appears not to be satisfied with resting on melancholia that Marks assumes as a dominant mode of the filmmaker’s emotional engagement with the dissolution of film: for the fragments of the pornographic footage in Elder’s case run past the viewer’s eye so quickly that it is immediately brought to the onslaught of other complex transformations, both chemical and electronic-digital. The melancholic attachment is replaced by the sense of ephemerality, which substantiates the status of the footage as a lost object and at the same time helps the viewer to separate himself from the loss. Thus, unlike the cases of the films (*Lyrical Nitrate*, *Decasia*, *Light is Calling*) that historicized cinema through directly exhibiting the fatal destruction of celluloid,



Bruce Elder, *The Young Prince* (2007), frame enlargement.

Elder’s melancholic recycling of the decaying image is dialectically balanced by mourning as a psychical gesture to embrace its disappearance and invest himself in new chains of found images.³⁰ The dialectics of these two psychic states is inseparable from the collision between the two transformations, as he states:

Some of the transformations leave the image in a state close to the original; some change it so radically that the image is an image which cannot be discerned. Our response to this is curious: sometimes we long to hold onto what the image represents, and when it is lost, when it recedes behind those transformations, we are sad; but equally, we long to hold onto the abstract forms that the transformations produce, and when the representation comes to the fore, we mourn the loss of the abstraction. Thus, the subject of the film is what is gained, and what is lost, through these transformations: while we appreciate the ultimate richness such transformations bring, we also mourn what is lost in the process.³¹

The dialectics of melancholic “loss” and “mourning” is in parallel to the way in which the “electrical transformation” and the “chemical transformation” interpenetrate each other. While complicating its own figural changes,

each transformation goes beyond its material limit by pervading the other. The changing patterns of film’s decomposition such as blotches and fibrillations spill over the digital visual field, making its texture more dynamic and opaque, and thereby strengthening the acute sense of the haptic contact with the erotic figures in the field. At the same time, the digital transformation has a sweeping impact on any kinds of the found images, whether painterly, photographic, or filmic, to the extent that their figures are left to the varying degrees of dissolution and morphogenesis both formally and materially. The video signal’s extreme plasticity is manifested when male and female bodies are almost reduced to the shimmering and flickering

²⁸ See Linda Williams, “Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions,” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 507-532.

²⁹ Laura U. Marks, “Loving a Disappearing Image,” *Touch*, p. 96.

³⁰ For the difference between mourning and melancholia, see Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), pp. 201-218.

³¹ Elder quoted in Koc, “An Interview with R. Bruce Elder,” p. 38.

wave of electrons, on which different colors are conferred. Besides this painterly abstraction, digital visual effects multiply each of the bodies (particularly female bodies) or slice it into different sections while at the same time liquefying them. These manipulations bestow on the bodies new forms (curves and cubes, for instance) and dimensions, therefore suggesting that the beauty of the figures consents not to the ideal of classical beauty, which had privileged formal perfection and eternity, but to the infinite possibilities for the violent corruption of their iconic forms and for the reconfiguration of them into the corporeal forms that exceed and renew the viewer's perception.

It is in this way that Elder's project of *The Young Prince* echoes Benjaminian dialectics of the "destruction of aura." Unleashing its transformative force, the digital assault activates the sensational forces of the old figures, ranging from the Greek era to the modern period in which both non-figurative paintings and cinema flourished, through infusing into them its own material dynamism. This is also grounded in Elder's idea of what cinema is: "The cinema has the ability to show process...by emphasizing speed which liquefies, by stressing dynamism's ability to dissolve boundaries and lay form to ruin, by animating light's searing destructive power...which is the domain of mutability, instability, and ambiguity."³²

Due to the chemical transformation's dialectical relation to its electrical and digital counterparts, *The Young Prince* is in line with the films of Delpout and Morrison and yet, more significantly, is distinct from them. Like Delpout and Morrison, Elder dramatizes how the deterioration and fragmentation of film's chemical base bears witness to its historical trajectory, from its state as a new audiovisual technology at its inception to its status as an obsolete medium as of now. In this sense, his film mirrors what Mary Ann Doane has praised Morrison's *Decasia* for: "What is indexed here is the historicity of a medium, a history inextricable from the materiality of its base. In the face of the digital, the image is rematerialized in its vulnerability to destruction."³³ At the same time, *The Young Prince* radicalizes Morrison's achievement by considering digital video as material as much as filmstrip, and by opening up the dialectical interpenetration between the two. For this intermedial exchange challenges digital media's "fantasy of immateriality [and] the dream of the perfect archive,"³⁴ the utopian fantasy that Doane sees as annihilating the material historicity of celluloid. Instead of satisfying the demand for the perfect storage of the found images and for the systematic ordering of them, Elder's hybrid materialism propels the viewer's

embodied contact with the heterogeneous temporalities of the images through revealing and transforming their material textures. In doing so, it encourages the viewer to make new associations between the images as a way of transcending their historical origins and thereby rewriting the memory of the past in alternative fashion.

Elder's creative employment of the effects of digital video does not simply serve to explore and confirm its essential qualities in self-reflexive manner. Rather, the effects constantly hybridized with film-based effects validate that Elder is certainly among those avant-garde filmmakers who have rigorously used digital technologies to continue and update their aesthetic and technical interests that originated with their celluloid-based filmmaking, much like Jacobs, Snow, Gehr, and others. That is, Elder's investigation into the mutating materiality of digital video expands the longstanding tradition of found footage filmmaking as a mode of practice driven by Benjaminian "materialist historiography," as he employs digital technology as a medium that has a dialectical relation to celluloid-based cinema: Elder's digital technology continues to invoke the cinema's ongoing catastrophe by destroying some of its celluloid-based qualities, but it is also through this destructive impact that the technology opens up new possibilities for the viewer's awakened appreciation of it as the material archive of pasts.

32 Elder, "The Foreignness of the Intimate," p. 341.

33 Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2007), pp. 145-146.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

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