

R. BRUCE ELDER: Hamilton Connections

I met Bruce Elder around four years ago through a mutual friend. Bruce is Hamilton-raised and educated. Internationally renowned, he is thought by some to be the most significant North American experimental filmmaker of the 1980s, as well as an important critic and writer on alternative filmmaking. Elder received the Governor General Award for Visual and Media Arts in 2007. We sat down recently to discuss his Hamilton connections.

Bruce arrived in Hamilton around the age of five or six when his parents moved to Westdale. His mother grew up in Westdale. During his childhood, Westdale was known as the businessman's district of the steel-making city of Hamilton. Elder's paternal grandfather, who played a significant role in young Bruce's life, lived in the east end, on Balmoral Avenue. This was the working-class section of Hamilton, downwind of the steel mills, whereas affluent Westdale was upwind of these industries and their odours.

Bruce's grandfather had moved to Hamilton from Glasgow, Scotland, after working in the shipyards as a child in a Dickenson environment. Bruce recalls stories told by his grandfather about the difficult life in the Glasgow shipyards, where it was not unusual to arrive at work and find a dead worker floating in the water.

Once his grandfather arrived in Hamilton, he was fortunate enough to get a job at Stelco as a plumber. He became involved in the early years of the union at Stelco and was blacklisted for doing so. Bruce admired his grandfather for his craftsman's skills, and his ability to repair just about anything. He credits his grandfather for instilling in him pride about technical processes and this transferred to his pride in pushing the technical processes of filmmaking to its limits. He sees his grandfather as very adaptable and innovative with the technology of his time.

As a young boy, Bruce was fascinated with the radio and in particular the CBC. Like many boys of his pre-television generation, Bruce took great pleasure in building a crystal radio set. He would hide under the covers and listen via an ear plug to a station from Montreal at night, when the reception would be best. Bruce claims that he was not influenced by television when it arrived in the early 1950s. Audio, rather than film or television, had more of an influence on him.

His paternal grandmother would take young Bruce to the Westdale theatre and later to the downtown Tivoli when he was a teenager. He doesn't recall being particularly influenced by the movies of the day, nor by the cinemas of Hamilton. His first memory of any cinematic event was of being terrified, as a child of three or four, by Walt Disney's reissue of the 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. He isn't certain what it was he disliked, but he hid behind the seat and wanted to leave immediately. This event might be looked upon as a foreshadowing of his critical attitude towards mainstream cinema.

Bruce attended McMaster and obtained a degree in philosophy in the late 1960's. While at McMaster, he began to develop a strong interest in cinema, and in particular New American Cinema, with its movement away from narrative film towards what became known as Experimental Cinema. He tells of a group of progressive students that became involved in various artistic activities between 1966 to 1969.

These students were involved in producing the student newspaper, "The Silhouette", putting on art events and running the McMaster Film Board. They often worked on several cross over cultural projects at the same time. The students were interacting, not only about what was going on in their classes but in the outside world: in the era of Viet Nam and of anti-war protests they became part of the intellectual and cultural upheaval of the late 60s. Elder recalls discussing and reading works by

such diverse writers as Augustine, Dante and Norman O. Brown ideas on the condition of humanity. At the time, Elder had a keen interest in poetry, and saw himself devoting his life to poetry.

One influential person in this group was named John Hofsess. Hofsess seemed older than the others, but in hindsight Elder thinks that Hofsess was probably only twenty-five at the time. Influenced by Hofsess, and by McMaster religion professor George Grant, the group explored alternatives to the mainstream culture of the late 1960s. The influence of George Grant on Elder is evident in his "The Cinema That We Need" manifesto of 1985. This document was strongly criticized by Elder's peers at the time, but is now regarded as the first manifesto on Canadian cinema.

This group of student leaders was very progressive in thought and action. It was one of the first groups in Canada to screen films of the New American Cinema, such as Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966). It was through popular screenings such as *Hot Pussy on a Tin Roof* that funds were gathered to bring to Hamilton such people and events as Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. Warhol was very innovative with his combination of music, dance, film and live performances. If my memory serves me well, I was one of the people sitting in the audience at a Warhol production of that era of McMaster. I still recall one of the characters in the film suddenly walking through a slit in the screen, moving from screen image to living person on the stage with the dancers and the Velvet Underground. Elder remembers that the band including Nico and Lou Reed partied in Dundas after the performance.

The same group of vanguardists were active on the McMaster Film Board's executive. The Board would sponsor students who wished to make 16 mm films. The students would be selected, and taught how to use a Bolex camera; the film was developed in Toronto and the students added the sound themselves at McMaster. Elder states that it was Hofsess who motivated other students to be more innovative. Hofsess used split screen effects in *Palace of Pleasure* (1966) and that was very new at that time. Elder himself remained on the periphery of the McMaster Film Board and never did complete his own film.

One summer evening, Bruce attended the premier screening of *Columbus of Sex* (1969) by John Hofsess with Bruce's future wife, Kathy. They attended the second screening that night. Half an hour into the film there was a commotion at the rear of the room. A member of the McMaster Film Board came to the front to inform the audience that the Hofsess film had been confiscated by the police, as someone at the first screening had laid an obscenity complaint. Hofsess and the producer, Ivan Reitman, were charged with creating obscene material.

Hofsess' film had to go before a committee of community representatives in order to determine if it violated community standards. One of the people who sat on the committee examining *Columbus of Sex* was Kathy's father, an executive employee of the Hamilton Board of Education. Needless to say, this created some concern about Bruce's character in the mind of his future father-in-law. However, *Columbus of Sex* was found not to have violated community standards.

The President of McMaster was quite concerned about this incident and began questioning these progressive thinkers, to the point that it was discovered that John Hofsess was not a McMaster student at all. Hofsess was banned from the campus.

At the time, Elder was unofficially auditing with permission of the professors some classes that interested him such as a class with Graham Petrie, which his girl friend Kathy was taking. Stimulating alternative films were studied and discussed in that class, of which Ivan Reitman was a member. Reitman became agitated one day in the lecture, complaining to Professor Petrie and all who were present that they were wasting their time studying such films. Reitman demanded to know when the

class was going to begin studying real films, like popular comedies. As we know, Ivan Reitman became famous as a Hollywood film director of such comedic films as *Animal House* (1978) and *Ghostbusters* (1984).

The next year, the McMaster Film Board had a new executive, as Huffsess had left and several of the students had graduated. The new executive of the McMaster Film Board was none other than a group involving Ivan Reitman. At that point, the direction of student film activity began to change, according to Elder. Hamilton artist Bryce Kanbara was one of the students that experimented with film when Reitman was president after Elder had graduated. I don't know what subsequently happened to the McMaster Film Board, but it does not exist today.

The Huffsess "community standard" challenge was a foreshadowing of challenges that Bruce would later experience with censorship; it was his belief that the human body was not pornographic.

Bruce says that he decided to become a filmmaker initially to earn money to live on, so that he could be a poet. He thought that he would become a creator of instructional 16 mm films of the kind that were popular in schools up until the 1980s. He took his first class at Ryerson in order to learn the basics of filmmaking. Having graduated from McMaster, he was a graduate student at the University of Toronto at that time. He was offered a teaching job to teach film history and film theory at Ryerson as there were no people who were trained in film history or had degrees in these areas at the time. He decided to teach until he could set up his business to create instructional films. In order to prepare himself to teach film, Elder attended a Summer Institute in Film Studies in New England where he again found New American Cinema films being shown. Seeing Stan Brackage's non-narrative films, and meeting Brackage, made Bruce decide at the age of 23 that experimental filmmaking was what he would devote his life to, rather than poetry. He saw Brackage's films as film poetry.

Upon returning to Toronto and Ryerson Bruce began to make his first film. Brackage was well known for using the female nude. Elder decided to use the the female nude while giving birth to explore concepts of isolation confronting the communal and the gruesome confronting the holy. The young Elder created his first film, *Breath/Light/Birth*, in 1975 while working at Ryerson. As a Ryerson teacher, he had access to Ryerson's video equipment -- video being a radically new technology at that time. Elder experienced difficulty getting the video transferred to 16 mm film in Toronto. The transfer company accused him of creating pornography and reported it to the Ryerson hierarchy. Fortunately, the Ryerson administration agreed with Elder that it was not obscene, and his job remained safe. He did have to send the video to California to be transferred to film, however. I find *Breath/Light/Birth* to be a very powerful film.

In later years, Elder's *A Worldly Wisdom* (1979) along with Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew* (1979) were accused of being obscene material by the Ontario Censor Board, a three-member body headed by Mary Brown. Elder and Snow found themselves attempting to explain their films to Mary Brown at lunch one day. Bruce began to explain to Mary Brown why his representation of male ejaculation in *A Worldly Wisdom* was not pornographic. This film is considered pivotal in Elder's career. It is an autobiographical film, portraying a period of his life when he was experiencing a near-fatal illness of Pancreatitis.

As Bruce spoke to Mary Brown, she kept one hand on her food while the other hand remained below the table. Bruce explained how the film was not pornographic, but that it was a reaffirmation of life itself for him to be able to ejaculate, at a time when he was questioning his existence and his ability to function as a human.

At that point Mary Brown brought her other hand up from under the table and revealed that she was

missing a few fingers. She explained to Elder and Snow that she had been a very proud piano player until she had lost these fingers. She was understandably devastated at the time, and recalled that she found herself looking at her nude body in a mirror while reassuring herself that she was still worthy. Mary Brown then realized that the film was not pornographic but an artistic expression of being human. She said that she thought that the Ontario Censor Board might find a different category and process for art films, outside of mainstream filmmaking. Things changed for art films in Ontario as a result of that meeting.

While attending McMaster, Elder managed to get a summer job at Stelco, a steel company and major employer in Hamilton. In those days, getting a summer job at Stelco was considered to be a lucky occurrence, as it was financially much more rewarding than other student jobs in Hamilton. Elder was one of many young men who got the job through family connections.

He was fortunate enough to be placed in the office for planning and forecasting rather than in the hot mill. Working with two room-sized computers; his job was to enter data. He found that he was finishing his work ahead of schedule, so he began to investigate, and to learn how to operate, a semi-portable computer in his workplace. It is this experience, along with his grandfather's influence, that he credits for his interest in exploring technology.

In his latest film cycle, *The Book of Praise*, Elder has investigated technology beyond the 16 mm film. Some experimental filmmakers in this medium have not moved beyond film itself. Elder is critical of technology in his 1985 manifesto "Cinema That We Need". Elder has developed a process where he transfers his 16 mm footage into digital imagery, creating computer software to enable him to manipulate the imagery; he finally converts the digital imagery back to 16 mm film. This has been used in such 16 mm films as *The Young Prince* (2007). It was screened in Hamilton for the first time on September 29th as part of the *Black Box, White Box, Small Box, No Box* symposium on the status of media arts in Canada.

We discussed his films and his connection to filmmaking in Hamilton. During the late 1970s and early 80s, the Hamilton Artists Inc. created "Zone Cinema." Jewel Foster, administrator at "The Inc", and Mike Cartmell were pivotal in creating the high calibre of film programming for Zone. Cartmell was influential at encouraging film production in Hamilton. Mike had met Bruce while Mike was trying to break into the Toronto film scene. Mike and Bruce would talk as friends and Bruce screened his films such as *Illuminated Text* (1982) at Zone Cinema.

We also discussed Bruce's autobiographical film, *A Worldly Wisdom* (1979), and its connection to Hamilton. It was screened at McMaster shortly after being made. I was particularly struck by one image in the film that apparently showed Bruce sitting with his wife Kathy on the Hamilton Beach from which the hydro towers were visible. The voice was speaking in the first person and spoke negatively about Hamilton. I was surprised to find that the photograph was not of Bruce and his wife, but his father and mother. The voice over was that of his father reading Bruce's poetry. He now looks at those words as the folly of a young man.

Within the past several years, Bruce has met a young doctoral student, Stephen Broomer, who has researched the 16 mm films created by the Mc Master Film Board. Broomer has transferred many of the original 16 mm films to digital technology.

Elder was invited to a screening of these student films about three years ago. He was hesitant, as he was concerned that the films – more than thirty-five years old -- would not stand up to the test of time. They were also undeniably student films, and he had experienced so much more in the film world since then.

As he watched a film by John Hofsess, *Black Zero* (circa 1967), Elder noticed books used as props in the film – books that he and his friends had spent hours discussing during that era. Upon reflection, he was stunned by how much he was influenced by the ethos at McMaster as it was then, and by John Hofsess' ideas on therapeutic cinema. He realized that his work in film and his aesthetic theories have been shaped fundamentally by those student discussions and McMaster experiences.

Bruce is a very kind and generous man. After our interview, I sent Bruce a thank-you email for giving me so much time out of his busy schedule. His response was to thank me for listening to his ramblings.

Jim Riley

Bio

Jim Riley is a Burlington, ON based video artist and independent curator whose art practice involves video installations as well as exploring the juxtaposition between video and painting. He has exhibited recently at Supercrawl 2011 (Hamilton), WKP Kennedy Gallery (North Bay), Art Gallery of Hamilton, World Film Festival (Take It to the Streets) and the Art Gallery of Sudbury. He recently co curated the Black Box White Box Small Box No Box Media Arts Symposium on the Status of Media Arts held in Hamilton.