SAN FRANCISCO

CINEMATHEQUE

Crack, Brutal Grief by R. Bruce Elder

R. Bruce Elder In Person

Thursday, February 22nd, 2001 at 7:30 p.m. — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

"R. Bruce Elder is regarded, among the more rarefied circles of experimental film, as a genius. His dense, multi-layered films, made over the past 25 years, combine cinematic images, animation, music and text, and address the big issues: technology, the body, God, history and the fragmentation of consciousness. His work is rhythmic, complex and, while obviously intellectual, also religious. His films aim to reclaim a state that is preverbal, when the direct apprehension of the whole of existence leads to an awareness of the Creator. ...For a non-narrative film more than two hours in length, *Crack, Brutal Grief* maintains a constant sense of forward urgency. Along the way, Elder establishes that even the most horrific images, in a compassionate and aesthetic context, can trigger a sense of mourning and sorrow, rather than simple disgust. After his stream of imagery goes through its darkest view of humanity, it emerges again, suggesting the possibility of joy. The choice of image of dancing women, both erotic and symbolic of life, reasserts itself as the film draws to a close. The questions that are raised, especially about the nature of modern repression, run deep. Liberated from old-fashioned shame and modesty, Elder's film suggests that we've given ourselves licence to walk into a different kind of prison. The problem is not that anything goes; it's that nothing matters." (Liam Lacey, "The Thinking Man's Horror Flick," *The Globe and Mail*)

"Two years ago, my best friend committed suicide, in an especially gruesome manner: he took a power saw and slit his throat. In an effort to understand what he had done, I searched the Internet, for images of suicides. To my amazement, the search engine directed me to images of a corpse whose neck had been mangled by a power saw. Horrified, I began searching other banned images and banned "videos" (i.e., Avi files, or MOV's, or MPEG videos) and discovered a troubling abundance of "videos" of every sort of cruelty imaginable. Such images can be found on the Web in such obscene abundances that I have been tempted to conclude that the vertiginous experience of the horrible suffering of others, raised beyond any degree with which the mind can cope, has now become the sine qua non of any sensibility whatsoever, so anaesthetized have we become. I began to think of the World Wide Web as a nervous system, fraught with stimuli of unprecedented brutality. Increasingly angered by the Web's banalization of suffering, I decided to fashion a compilation film, using only material from the Web that would return to the degraded images I found there the full dignity of their horror.

"The film is a phantasmagoric compendium of images of the present that chronicle how we came to be where we are. Like the Web, the film consists of sedimented layers of images that encode the history of consciousness through the century just past, an apocalyptic history, to be sure, but one that too is in keeping with the character of the century we have just come through." (RBE)

Crack, Brutal Grief (2000); 16mm, color, 130 minutes, print from the maker

The regime that dominates modern society has consolidated itself by homogenizing experience through converting all forms of experience into the discursive mode. Types of experience that other cultures accorded respect modernity has rendered vestigial. Moderns know little to nothing of the knowledge that is revealed in prayer, in meditation, or through contact with the body. It has fallen to art to evoke, render and embody areas of experience that modernity has disenfranchised, areas of experience that we cannot categorize. It has fallen to art to assemble, preserve and convey those energies that match no existing forms in modernity's consciousness.

Nonetheless, we are moderns, and the forms of the modern are what we have to work with; fate has decided this for us and one cannot be of another time. It has required us to work with the tacky, unseeming detritus left behind in the wreck of history. Values have become fugitive and violence banal in ways they never before have been. A vision of paradise lasts only a moment before being relegated to the scrapheap of a history whose last

century has been the story of spilled blood and technological horrors. The Internet itself has become a mammoth graveyard that absorbs anything and everything, a giant mouth devouring the carnage of a civilization that has begun its death convolutions. Its contents are the grubby leavings of a civilization about to implode, destroyed by the brutality and violence that have poisoned its soul. And it is with this sad pile of vicious and coarse images that we must work, for that imagery reflects our condition more truly than any other.

One is tempted to say that we must strive to redeem that debased imagery, and indeed *Crack, Brutal Grief* starts out as though it wants to redeem the tawdry base images which have rendered the furthest extremes of violence the banal contents of everyday experience. But soon enough, things seem to be going badly, that the efforts to lift grief to song will come to naught. The grubby, soiled, miserable, and sometimes vile qualities of the source images seem to resist transmutation, just as the text that scrolls across the bottom of the screen resists being brought into clarity (except by extreme effort and then only fleetingly). In their grisliness and lack of detail, they seem like images that inhabit a traumatized consciousness as befits the contents of a network of devices one well might think of in metaphoric terms as a nervous system for an emerging global consciousness that has been rendered half-insensate by the brutality of the imagery it harbours at each of its synapses.

Yet out of this despondency, as the film seems to grind mechanically towards the ultimate of despair, it rises mysteriously out of it. Paradoxically, it is only when the drive towards the transmutation of dross into the gold of transcendent experience is suspended that only when will and purpose are deflected and brought to an oscillating standstill that the possibility of discovering truth even within the tacky, grotty, unseemly matter of the present is realized. When the will is suspended, the strangeness of the given comes to presence.

The failure of human effort is the invocation of another mysterious power. (RBE)