AN INTERVIEW WITH R. Bruce Elder

by Aysegul Koc

On a cold February night this year, Cinematheque Ontario presented the world premiere of Eros and Wonder, R. Bruce Elder’s latest experimental film. Being part of the impressed and delighted crowd that night at the Cinematheque, my mind immediately went back to a few months ago, when I saw Elder’s prior film Crack, Brutal Grief at a screening at Ryerson University. This disturbing work, made up of—footage downloaded from the World Wide Web—deals with the imaginative transformations of found footage, with a deep sense of wretchedness. Eros and Wonder, on the other hand, involves other kinds of transformations: that of the creative/vital power, imagery, history/memory and the self. Technically, on a production level, the film also makes use of both electrical and chemical transformations.

Along with A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy, Crack, Brutal Grief and Eros and Wonder constitute a cycle of films that Elder entitles The Book of Praise. Elder’s earlier cycle called The Book of All the Dead comes from an interest the filmmaker felt, in his words, toward the aesthetic qualities of the Catholic liturgy whereas The Book of Praise is influenced by Protestant spirituality, particularly the place of the subject in Protestant thought. As Elder expressed, the withdrawal of the subject from the outer world into itself, the place of imagination and imagination as generative force became the key concerns of The Book of Praise. I took the viewer’s liberty, and asked Elder questions about his last film based on my vision/interpretation of it, alongside other questions on his work and Canadian cinema.

This interview was made at a time when Bruce Elder was busy programming the Stan Brakhage Memorial Screenings at the Images Festival. He had finished a manuscript of a book on the influence of cinema on shaping the ideals of Futurism, Surrealism, Cubism, Constructivism and Dada. Needless to say, R. Bruce Elder is one of the most productive filmmaker/professor/writer/critics of the Canadian art scene. He probably is one of the few—or the only!—who has a background in applied mathematics and computer science.
Aysegul Koc: Starting with the title of your last film, *Eros and Wonder*, there's a passage in your article *Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception* where you talk about eros.

A nude implores us to caress; but a caress acknowledges that we cannot close the divide across which the Other resides. In caressing, or in imagining caressing, we acknowledge that erotic relations are not really reciprocal relations as our sense of justice would have us believe. Caresses tell us that eros is bound into an unintelligible, unfathomable condition (and so a condition that cannot be reduced to signification), for they tell us that our most profound, most creative (“self-making”) relationships are to a being that not only is totally separate, but belongs to a different realm altogether. They tell us, then, that we are most deeply linked to what withdraws from us.

(Elder, 21)

I'm curious about the meaning you attribute to 'Eros' and 'Wonder'.

R. Bruce Elder: Both the experience of the erotic and the experience of wonder are the experiences of something that calls out from beyond that it reaches down to us into our most intimate being and disrupts our conception of what it is to be a human being. Most of us play some kind of a lip service to the idea that human beings are gentle, decent, loving beings. But the profundness of the experience reveals something working beyond that, outside of ourselves but which reaches into our inner being and transforms us utterly. But at the same time when we try to grasp the Other that transforms us—or even try to give ourselves over to it, it withdraws from us, we never become entirely at one with the object of either our erotic enthusiasms, or with that which provokes wonder. It remains an Other, or it fails to provoke Eros or Wonder: the more we understand the subject of what we wonder about, the less it seems able to provoke wonder and the more it is converted into something else. There's something of that with the attempt to identify and to possess the object of one's erotic affection, it too withdraws as we try to seize it. There is something paradoxical here—nasmuch as that which reaches into our most intimate being and transforms us most deeply, most inwardly, most personally, remains something alien, something beyond us.

A.K. Eroticism as depicted in *Eros and Wonder* is raw, plain and unornamented. It made me think about a primordial state. Instead of aestheticizing the images you made them direct, perhaps as remembered through adolescence.

R.B.E. I take it that our most important very early experiences are something very primal. Our first experiences of seeing and feeling human to human... I think they are primal and raw. But there's also that sense, the article you were quoting from is devoted to thinking about an element of artwork, is the sense of something in strong works of art that really upsets order, some kind of a principle or force that has the power of disordering form in artwork but also of upsetting perception, of destroying our customary ways of responding, of allowing in something primitive and raw.

A.K. Can you talk about some key words that come to my mind when I think about *Eros and Wonder*, like 'delight in tension'? This is a phrase you have used in another context, but seems relevant to *Eros and Wonder* as well.

R.B.E. I wanted to provoke the experience of the fascinated consciousness. What I mean by fascinated consciousness, in part, is a consciousness that has experienced time dissolve into timelessness. I think often of the marvellous title of that great Bach cantata, *Gottes Zeit ist die allbeste Zeit* (God's time is the best time of all)—and I imagine that what he meant by Gottes Zeit is time that has passed over into timelessness. Eliciting the experience of that time is the goal of my work.
I hope, if I do my work well, that when you watch my film, you're entranced—you're not trying to recollect what has happened so far, or trying to figure out how this film is going to end, but are riveted on the present and the sensuous experience of color and movement of texture.

A.K. Very primal.
R.B.E. Yes, exactly. I think children spend a lot of time in that state of living in the immediate present. Narrative has a harmful way with us in that we are always encouraged to think about where we're headed and how we got to where we are. We begin to live our lives in anticipation and recollection rather than giving ourselves over to sensuous wonder.

A.K. Isn't your interest in the raw eroticism also a reaction to, as you have mentioned earlier, the idea that human beings are decent and gentle and loving? Body and the rawness associated with it is something you talk about in The Body in Film with reference to filmmakers taking out the not-so-sacred body parts and making them the core of their films.
R.B.E. Yes, but I don't know if I make a distinction between the abject and the sacred, between what's considered lowly and base and what is considered to belong to the realm of the holy. In fact it is that very proximity of the sacred to all that is humble, rejected, despised, condemned that fascinates me. We like to think that sacred exists in very prettified forms that you can see in the most delicate of circumstances but in fact the sacred has traditionally been associated with blood rituals, with what's despised and lowly, with what provokes the terror of the abject. The sacred teaches us about death, decay, dejection, despondency, the despised.

A.K. The abject and the rejected is something you associate with 'the cinema we need' in your article 'Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception':

Thinking-through-rhythm acknowledges the future is for the lowly, for time will raise them. Thinking-through-rhythm discloses that abjection and destitution lie closer to being than do the vaunted and the celebrated. That proximity accounts for the redemptive power of the outcast and the rejected; and that proximity also explains why a humble cinema, a cinema povera (a better name for the "experimental cinema") is needed.

Maybe we could talk about the role of the rejected and the outcast in your films/cinema.
R.B.E. You're absolutely right I think in identifying this one element in the representation of the body because these aren't prettified representations of the body—certainly not in the later work. The representations I have made are generally raw and troubled. How could it be otherwise: the body in Western culture has been treated in many different ways. One can speak with some accuracy of a widespread contempt for the body in modern European culture.

But also, it is not just the representations of the body that suggests my interest in a humble cinema, in a cinema povera. More important, I should think, are the use of humble forms, humble forms that suggest what's broken, what's incomplete, what's fragmented, damaged. My films do not provide a prettified surface—they don't trade in the perfected forms of the narrative cinema, they don't furnish the smooth and seamless structure of dominant cinema. They consort with what's broken, hurt and damaged, in pieces.

A.K. And that's how you define your work?
R.B.E. Yes, very much so.
A.K. How about Canadian cinema? Would you call Canadian cinema a humble cinema?
R.B.E. We've had filmmakers I would consider to belong to a 'cinema povera', yes. As examples I would offer such people as David Rimmer and Richard Kerr. But I think recently the tremendous enthusiasm for applying the model of the European art film to Canadian cinema has shifted the Canadian cinema in another direction.

I think we relatively went through an austere patch in late 80s and the 90s, when an ironic mode of filmmaking—and in art generally—began to seize people's imagination. I think these works were very much subject to the tyranny of the 'cool', one doesn't want to be seen as too passionate; one mustn't reveal religious or spiritual sensibilities—instead one is smart, cool, distanced. So the filmmaking of the 80s and 90s interested me much less—it affected me much less deeply—than films made from the 60s to the early 80s. This led me to withdraw my attention from the contemporary experimental film and to undertake historical studies.

Things have changed over the last few years, however. There are a number of new, young filmmakers whose work I think is extraordinary.

A.K. Going back to your film, Eros and Wonder, I was fascinated by the juxtapositions of flesh against the city and its solid constructions, the bodyscape against the cityscapes.
R.B.E. There are levels to each of those surely. There are cold concrete forms, modern Berlin, and there's also architecture that's friendlier, that's more curvilinear, more humane. Then in between the world of civilization and the world of our body, there's the realm of nature. Nature too, is presented variously: sometimes in a wilder state, sometimes in a more controlled state—there are wild forests, but there are also vineyards, with vines in neat rows and carefully pruned.

A.K. It's interesting how you make use of Germany and especially Berlin, which is a city in ruins, constantly under construction, constantly reconstructed. It's one of the saddest cities of the world.
R.B.E. I don't think anybody goes to Berlin without experiencing ghosts. I must say it was even more so in the early 80s when I began going to Berlin. Now it's increasingly transformed into a city that could be almost anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, however compromised its internationalism may be, one has to acknowledge that the art scene in Berlin is one of the most exciting in all of Europe. And I think the political climate by and large extremely progressive—every one I meet is on the left (though of course, the sample I meet is undoubtly skewed).

A.K. Why Germany?
R.B.E. Because for me it's a kind of phantasy or imaginary place—or more exactly, a place. In the first place where fantasy and reality meet. When I was growing up Germany was a fairy tale country, the country of the Brothers Grimm—but remember, you can still take trips through Grimm country, from Hesse, along the Weser River, to Bremen. (Talk about a merging of fantasy and reality!) A little later, I memorized a lot of German romantic poetry. Still later, though still a boy, I studied classical music, that is studied the works of composers with names like Johann Sebastian Bach, or Georg Frideric Handel, or Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or Arnold Schöenberg, or Alban Berg. Then I read philosophy—books by people with names like Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger and in particular, read of fabled goings-on in Jena and Weimar. Is it any wonder that to me Germany seemed to me a place of poets, of deep thinkers—not that that represents Germany accu-
rately, I am not saying this is Germany but it became that for me.

But I didn’t shoot the entire film in Germany—there is quite a lot of imagery from California as well.

A.K. Could you talk about the rhythm of Eros and Wonder and also the choreography of sound, text and image?

R.B.E. Eros and Wonder was put together differently than any other film I’ve ever made. My co-filmmaker and I did the image, the text that appears as supertitles, and the sound separately—the sound and the image were not matched up until the print was made. One element that helps draw the sound is the text: it appears as both image (supertitles) and sound (through the voice synthesizer). I had rough times for when certain lines appeared in the image—and the reading by the voice synthesizer was loosely—very, very loosely—co-ordinated to that. However we didn’t try to exactly synch the computer voice with on-screen text—so sometimes the spoken text appears some considerable time before the written text appears, sometimes it appears just before the written text appears, and sometimes it is heard right after the written text is presented, sometimes it appears a long time after the written text is presented, and sometimes the sound and the written text appear just about the same time. There’s a sliding relationship between the sound and the image—the appearance of sound would either cue you that it would appear in the image relatively soon or would remind you it had just appeared in the image. Sometimes the appearance of a line in the audio would follow its appearance in the image, sometimes it would appear just sometimes (by accident) they would appear just about the same time.

Aside from that relation, the audio and the image were done quite separately—we didn’t try to “match” the sound and image. The sound and the image were conceived as having equal claim on the temporal space that is the films duration. The sound and the image each occupy that space in its own (I suppose that’s what it means to have equal claim on the film’s duration). There is no hierarchy of sound over image or image over sound; and neither should be subordinated to the other.

There are three elements on the soundtrack: the text (the poem) spoken by the voice synthesizer; the electronic sound; the quotations from pieces of music, by composers from the cities, towns and villages that are depicted in the film. The Romantic music that you hear was all music written by composers that lived in the German towns and villages that you see in the film, during the Romantic era. I hope that provokes in viewers some of the sense of wonder I feel in places like Jena and Weimar. The electronic sound is of two types: one type is sound composed by Alex Geddie for the film: he wrote a script that analyzed certain features of the poem that appears in the film—that counted the frequency of vowels in passages, that counted the average length of words in particular passages, and used the numbers he got to control parameters of the sounds he generated. The other type of electronic sound was simply sound controlled to fit with the electronic sound that was controlled by the text parameters, with the sound of voice synthesizer, and with the Romantic music.

A.K. You used computer programs for your film.

R.B.E. I wrote computer programs for the film, that we used when making it. We used chance operations in deciding how the images will be processed. A lot of the film was done by sequences of images and then loaded them into a database, which also contained information about various image processing methods. We trained the application which image processing methods were appropriate for certain “reference” images; then the application 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 similar to those that application had been taught where appropriate.

Thus the application used measures of image similarity to constrain the aleatory processes that were used to choose the image processing methods that were applied to the images. I suspect that many other computer programmers are like me, that when they write a computer program, they give it a folksy name while it is under development. In this case, the folksy name I gave the program was “The Cagey One,” because I was certainly working with Cagean compositional methods. Cage—or rather Cage’s collaborations with Merce Cunningham—influenced my conception of the duration of film as a field of time, on which image and sound have equal claim, a field of time that can be filled with an autonomous image structure and an autonomous sound structure that are not co-ordinated the one with one another.

The film incorporates various sorts of chance: there are the constrained random choices this application makes concerning the image processing methods to be applied to images; there are the chance relations between image and sound; and there are the chance effects that are produced by processing the film by hand. You understand, I hope, that for me, chance means selflessness—and more than that: “Alles, was wir Zufall nennen, ist von Gott [All that we call chance comes from God],” Novalis said.

The processing—both the digital processing and the hand processing—result in varying degrees of abstraction: sometimes the images show us the world, sometimes they seem more like abstract forms. One could consider this in another way: the film offers a series of transformations—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.

The presentation of the poem—in image and sound—is somewhat similar: at times the text is readable/audible, and at times it is not. We can appreciate it as pure sound—but at the cost of meaning; or we can appreciate its meaning, but then our appreciation of it as pure sound diminishes.

A.K. How do you see yourself as a Canadian filmmaker? In Image and Identity you’re talking about a need to move away from defining the national culture through oppositional conception of being the ‘Other’ of the US and towards what you
call a genetic approach.

R.B.E. I think the whole issue of the national identity is a very complex, convoluted one and undoubtedly national enthusiasts had a rather dreadful history in 20th century. That being said, I am not sure that there cannot be positive nationalisms. One reason for suggesting that there are possibilities to the national idea, it seems to me that it has a possibility of counteracting the spread of insidious American Ideas. For me the great threat in the world in the last fifty years has been America. I think a struggle against American hegemony is the most important struggle of our times.

A.K. When you say 'genetic approach,' doesn't it provoke that kind of a danger of homogeneity?

R.B.E. It has that potential and that has to be guarded against very, very scrupulously. At the same time it seems to me it's a danger that can be overcome by recognizing that any culture is organic, that it evolves. A culture evolves partly by assimilating differences but at the same time as it's taking in differences, that those differences get accommodated to a main mind of historical development. I don't know that it's insidious to say, that there's been a French culture that is distinct from a German culture. Importantly it is distinct from American culture.

A.K. There's a dilemma here, because you're saying 'let's not define Canadian national identity' in a 'compare/contrast' with the US but then the American hegemony is so strong.

R.B.E. I'm worried that we are evolving towards the condition of a universal homogenous state. The character of that state is increasingly defined by American ideology. The universal homogenous state entails various sorts of tyrannies and losses of liberty. It will level the differences between cultures and the differences amongst individuals; already we see the tyranny that is exercised over those who do not speak on behalf of the culture industries. The universal homogeneous will be a culture of greater and greater conformity. It will have no place for philosophy, no place for deep thought. It may well have no place for art.

Do I think we should define ourselves against the US? I think that's always the wrong way to turn. Identities defined in terms of oppositions are always harmful. I think what we need to do is to ask ourselves to remember our history and maintain our historical identities. There's a tremendous challenge however because as soon as one says 'we have to remember our historical identities', one is confronted by the danger of backward looking nationalisms based on ethnicities that are absolutely abhorrent. Remember that in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, the idea of a nation-state, of a state established to protect and to further the interest of a national group (usually understood in ethnic terms) was the norm. So a nationalism based on history can be abhorrent. The question is, whether it must be. And my answer is that it need not: that there is the possibility of a nationalism that can acknowledge sufficiently the centrifugal forces that bind people together in a deep whole, yet is not closed to influences from outside itself—that can take in differences and allow itself to be transformed by them. Yet at the same is sufficiently well-defined as an autonomous being that it offers resistance to the spread of the universal, homogeneous state.

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