

**Bypassing Elder:
Reading Sitney on Elder on Brakhage**

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[Written in early March 2000 in response to a review by P. Adams Sitney of Bruce Elder's *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1998) in the *Canadian Journal Film Studies*, Vol. 8, #2, pages 83-87. The journal, lacking precedent to sanction the publishing of responses critical of reviews that it had solicited, refused to print it. Professor Elder, to whom I then sent a copy, welcomed it warmly, lamenting its lack of publication. I issue it here in belated tribute to him.]

Bypassing Elder: Reading Sitney on Elder on Brakhage

We owe much to the work of P. Adams Sitney, and his review of Bruce Elder's book on the films of Stan Brakhage compounds our debt, for he writes lucidly, succinctly and with sympathy for difficulties that the author had to overcome. Sitney commends Elder, for example, for having pondered the range of Brakhage's films, affirming that the author

... knows the oeuvre thoroughly and has thought seriously and originally about many films he passes over briefly ... [making] one regret that he did not take more space to devote analytical attention to [them]" (pages 84 and 85).

After noting in passing that the book is "... both a manifesto by a filmmaker ... and an open love letter about the films and the filmmaker who has meant the most to his own work", Sitney remarks that Elder nevertheless "... demonstrates repeatedly the qualifications of an academic analyst of this material with rigorous and insightful readings of films, poems, and philosophical prose" (page 84), suggesting that the primary limitation of the text is that it "... leaves us wanting to know even more about Brakhage's films" (page 84); and he adds to the provocation of the book by suggesting influences impinging upon Brakhage that Elder either chooses or fails to consider (page 86).

Lastly, one must applaud Sitney simply for having undertaken to review the book, for digesting a text by Elder, as a wag once said of reading Dewey, can be like 'eating hay'. Elder's barrage of sources, associations and references, while eliciting admiration, can elude registration like sparks from a pinwheel. Sitney has my sympathy and appreciation, therefore, for having tried in some measure to construe Elder's text coherently, for, as every student of Elder's works will attest, one might say of him without much stretching what Gottfried Haberler said of his teacher, Schumpeter.

The great wealth of ideas which constantly streamed through his mind, and his acute awareness of all sides of every question, and the limitations of each standpoint and method, made it very hard for him to present his own views on any subject neatly and systematically.¹ ("Joseph Alois Schumpeter 1883-1950", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 44 (1950), pages 333-372)

¹ Haberler, Gottfried, "Joseph Alois Schumpeter 1883-1950", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 44 (1950), pages 333-372)

I thank Sitney for all of the above and would have preferred to have found the following caution unnecessary. I must nevertheless commend to readers the *aim* and *content* of Elder's book, for Sitney has misunderstood them. Despite the virtues of his review, it is likely to mislead readers about the book, its author and his achievements here and elsewhere, textual and cinematic.

Elder's Sources

What is Elder's book *about*? One might think that the answer should be obvious from the title and so it is, but only if one reads it as carefully as Elder constructed it.

The Films of Stan Brakhage *in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* [italics mine]

Were one to misread Elder's title as a prolix substitute for 'Stan Brakhage: his Life and Works', as Sitney seems to have done, one would then be tempted, as Sitney does, to concentrate upon those passages within which the author recites biographical or descriptive minutia about Brakhage and his films, discounting the bulk of the book – Elder's references, that is, to works by himself and others with which Brakhage may have been unacquainted or only marginally so and with which Sitney seems equally unfamiliar – as distractions having little place within a focussed study of the man named in its title. Elder's book would then seem, as Sitney puts it, to be an "oddity" overflowing with extraneous observations, discursions and authorial reflections having "no place within a strictly academic study" or, if so, only within one or another of the "two or three books" that the author has here scrambled together, each struggling for a separate identity (see pages 84 and 86).

Again, I sympathise with Sitney, for Elder is an author of rare erudition, and especially so for an artist commenting upon the work of others, who without apology or preparation will link persons of achievement across diverse disciplines and disparate times through associations seemingly irrelevant if intelligible at all to readers unfamiliar with them, their historical context and the sources that he cites. But Elder, although commenting in larger part upon Americans working within an American tradition, is *writing* within a contrary tradition of broad learning and careful knowledge –European and indeed Germanic – that once served as the model for North American education as well.

How strange Elder's book must seem, therefore, to an American reviewer entrenched within a culture of competitive personality whose 'academic' presses are leading the charge toward eliminating footnotes, delineations of context and cautious explorations of evidence, arguments or relationships, prohibiting readers from encountering thereby,

much less pondering, an author's sources and their relevance – publishers intent upon issuing works of 'scholarship' to be consumed in an evening or transferred to audiotape for 'reading' while driving through traffic. How tempting it must be for an American reviewer to disregard Elder's references to unfamiliar sources that could be mastered only through great effort, for they must seem to the reviewer to be extraneous to what *ought* to have been the author's intent.

Elder, however, chose his title and structured his text to manifest exactly his intent. His title contains no colon after the name of Brakhage and hence no subsequent subtitle (unlike most 'academic' titles of our era in North America, chosen by publishers eyeing the marketplace to hint at broader boundaries of concern than the book could justify). Elder's book is entitled without colonic interruption "The Films of Stan Brakhage *in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*" [italics mine], confirming that the author will be concerned in his text with the films of Brakhage *only* as embedded within and as measured against the encompassing cultural forces that determined the scope and limits of *the American tradition* exemplified by Pound, Stein and Olson – the tradition of *modernism* within which Brakhage and Elder have worked.

By his title, therefore, Elder is signalling that although he will be using the films of Brakhage as the *subject* of his text, returning recurrently to them as primary targets of appreciation and tools of artistic measurement, his aim overall will be to construe them as diverse and provocative examples of a *tradition* of artistic enterprise driven by pervasive and encompassing cultural forces whose sources and effects, being obscure, will require of him a delineation equally pervasive and encompassing and thus passing far beyond the minutia of Brakhage's life and work.

Brakhage's name is central to the title of Elder's book and Brakhage's films are its *subject*, but is Elder's book *about* them? Assuredly so, but only in a sense transcending the narrower notion of Sitney, who faults Elder for looking long and hard within a book about the films of Brakhage at issues of context unknown to its subject.

Consider a comparable question. Antonio Diabelli's surname is central to the title of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, for Diabelli had submitted a theme to fifty composers, among them Beethoven at work on his ninth symphony, with the request that they each compose a variation upon it to be published collectively. Beethoven, perhaps thankful for the diversion, took the theme and used it instead as the rudimentary musical structure upon which to construct one of the most extensive and memorable sets of variations ever composed for the piano (so extensive, indeed, that the work had to be published in a separate volume). Diabelli's theme is the *subject* of the Beethoven's variations, for it is the root musical idea to which the composer adhered when

constructing them and therefore the germ from which he drew the astonishing musical possibilities exemplified within them.

But what, then, are Beethoven's variations on the theme of Diabelli *about*? To anyone wishing to be informed by the work and especially to composers striving to learn better how to measure their own endeavours against it, the variations are *about* Diabelli's theme, and therewith *about* how Beethoven used it to structure the work in whole and part, and therewith *about* Beethoven, and therewith *about* the tradition of composing within and against which he wrote, and therewith *about* the cultural influences at work upon him and his contemporaries, and therewith *about* ... world without end, amen!

Elder's book, similarly, is *about* Brakhage and his works but only, as its title implies, if construed to be *about* how the films of Brakhage happened to appear as they did when they did, and therewith about the American modernists tradition within and against which he constructed them, and therewith *about* the cultural forces at work upon him and his contemporaries, and therewith *about* the evolution of those forces and the identities of those contributing to their generation, and therewith *about* ...

No wonder Elder is less concerned within his text with what Brakhage may have read or pondered than with the sources of the ideas that provoked and constrained the modernist enterprise within which Brakhage's works and his own have been constructed. Elder, with other modernists, has always maintained that a viable work of art must exemplify how the unique sensibility of an artist has registered the diverse complexities of that part of the world impinging upon it and thus how the artist has uniquely yet humanly present within it. Almost alone among them, however, Elder has insisted forthrightly, consistently and with extraordinary industry within both his films and his texts that to do so requires artists to register both themselves and the *world* rightly, Expression untempered by the world rightly construed is, for Elder, as pretentious within art as without it, and the effort required of artists to locate themselves accurately within the world within which they live, move and have their being is every bit as difficult and time-consuming in its own exhausting way as is the task of scientists or philosophers. How broadly, accurately and well artists exemplify the encounter *between* themselves and the world is the measure of their achievement.

Elder's goal in his book, therefore, transcends the boundaries of the narrow and thus misleading task within which Sitney would constrain him – the supposed obligation to speaking solely or even predominantly about the writings or works of others that Brakhage would have acknowledged as having influenced him. Sitney, for example, rejects Elder's use of the structuring of the poem "Young Sycamore" by William Carlos Williams to assist us in comprehending Brakhage's film MADE MANIFEST (page 85), complaining that it diffuses the "vigor and usefulness" of Elder's comments upon the

movie, for neither Brakhage nor Williams were acquainted with the work of the other. To anyone as interested as is Elder, however, in how the broad forces of modernism were exemplified in both poem and movie, the striking formal similarities of the poem and the film manifest a common structural response by their creators to the cultural forces impinging commonly upon them, regardless of whether they recognised the forces or even knew of the similarities. Sitney may be right in suggesting that Brakhage pondered Pound or Stein to different ends than Elder, never read Williams and knew nothing of Schopenhauer, Bergson or Whitehead. His remarks, however, even if correct, are irrelevant to Elder's task of disclosing the shadowed forces impinging in different ways and to different degrees upon all of them.

To understand what Elder is saying and why, one must attend to his sources and the uses to which he puts them. Elder has spent a long time pondering them and assessing their relevance to the modernist enterprise. One may disagree with his conclusions, of course, but to do so persuasively one must take the time and effort to travel with him down the path that he has chosen to tread.

Among some of my acquaintances, Elder has a reputation for being cantankerous, but I have never known him to be so to anyone who has bothered to read, see, hear and ponder even in part the filmic and textual sources of his work. He believes in what he says and will reject out-of-hand those who approach him enshrouded in ignorance, but when confronted fairly upon the broad ground that he has traversed with such extraordinary perseverance and consistency, he welcomes argument, listens to contrary opinion and changes his mind recurringly as both his films and texts show.

Elder the Filmmaker

Sitney recognises but only in passing – and thus as if of only minor consequence – that Elder's book is a commentary by a filmmaker upon the works of another. In the sentences that Sitney permitted Elder's publishers to reproduce as an advertising blurb upon the jacket of the book, he remarks that it is "... less an academic study than the enthusiastic and fully committed response of one filmmaker to another and to the modernist literary tradition they both share". Exactly so! and had Sitney respected the implications of this early assessment, he might have avoided suggesting later that the bulk of Elder's text was irrelevant to Elder's task.

It seems never to have occurred to Sitney to ask why Elder has been so sensitive for so long (indeed, uniquely so) to the diverse influences that impinged upon Brakhage as a modernist filmmaker, and why he has devoted himself for so long (again, uniquely) to the task of registering, identifying and testing them. The answer is crucial and

unequivocal: Elder, like Brakhage but unlike Sitney, is a *filmmaker* who has made a substantial contribution to the modernist enterprise by being strikingly aware and responsive to the *same* modernist forces. Consequently, Elder's book is a record of how Elder, a filmmaker, has *used* the films of Brakhage, the filmmaker who provoked his entry into the art, as a means toward registering, identifying and clarifying the forces that have impinged contextually upon *himself* as a modernist filmmaker – after they impinged upon Brakhage as well, whether or not he knew it.

Were one interested solely or even primarily in the films of Brakhage, as Sitney seems to be, then the bulk of Elder's book would appear to be barren manifestations of the parochial interests of its author, just as the early writings of Eisenstein on Marx would appear to be as trivial as the lectures of Brakhage on Eisenstein to those interested respectively in Marx or Eisenstein, for, however fascinating, we can learn from their remarks only how the filmmakers registered and used what little they knew of the life and work of the predecessors to whom they refer.

No wonder Sitney finds so much of Elder's text irrelevant. By the evidence of his review, Sitney has never pondered the range of Elder's films, much less tried to measure them against the context of their generation, but that is exactly the evolution of the modernist impulse within which Elder is trying to place the work of Brakhage and therewith his own achievement as well. Elder is an *exceptional* filmmaker, for he is exceptionally erudite about Brakhage and much else, but he remains – as author – a *filmmaker*, as Sitney's attests on the jacket of the book. His book is therefore essentially rather than by happenstance an accounting of his own reflections, insights and assessments as a filmmaker upon the modernist context to which he has been sensitised by having made films within it, provoked initially and thereafter recurrently by the example and works of Brakhage – an account encompassing extensive discussions of issues of context common to their work of which Brakhage may well have been unaware or cared less.

To fail to register *how* Elder, as a filmmaker, engages with Brakhage within his book as a filmmaker working like himself within the modernist tradition is to misconstrue its aim and content in whole and in part and thus to distort *Elder's* project and achievement within his films and texts. Elder, as usual, makes claims within the text for his own standing as a filmmaker, implicitly and otherwise, and although he salutes Brakhage for having stimulated him to much of his achievement, his homage, as was Berg's to Schoenberg, is hardly subservient. The measure of their comparative achievements will be exemplified in the long run only by those filmmakers who, having pondered their works, will in turn form them. Some of them may learn even more from Elder than he learned from Brakhage – though Elder, being Canadian, could hardly be expected to say so!

But the cards are now on the table! To speak as I do is to presume that the achievements of modernism were unrestricted to the American way, and that modernist artists of equal or superior achievement may be found elsewhere, constrained in part by forces bypassing the ken of many Americans.

When Hegel suggested that perspective comes only with distance, he was indicating how difficult it is for anyone entrapped in the middle of things to comprehend what they are doing. Elder's book is explicitly but even more so implicitly a commentary by a major modernist *Canadian* filmmaker, looking southward, on the scope and limits of "the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson" (and, in manner and method, on much else American as well), and Sitney's misunderstanding of the relevance of most of it is of a piece with the failure of so many of his countrymen to have registered the achievement of Elder as filmmaker and author. (I shall avoid delineating here the comparable if not surpassing disregard of Elder's films and his texts, to say nothing of their manner and method, by his compatriots within Canada as well.)

It would be pleasant to hope that we live in a world within which someone with Elder's drive and persistence might someday subject his films and their sources to the kind of sustained and engaged perusal to which he has subjected those of Brakhage, but that, I suspect, would be wishful thinking, for, even if someone were to become aware of the importance of doing so and wished to see it done, the task of mastering either would require a pursuit as sustained and arduous as Elder's own.

Careful readers of this note will have observed, therefore, that I have avoided applauding or condemning any of Elder's judgments and have thus avoided *reviewing* his book, for that would have required a text longer than Elder's own. Permit me yet again, then, to thank P. Adams Sitney for having reviewed the book and precipitated this response, for between the two of us we may yet manage to do what neither of us could have done in isolation, namely to provoke readers to ponder *Elder*, his films and his texts – by way of those of Brakhage.