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Chaos or the Polyphonic Vision of Artistic Imagination

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It seems that art, almost perversely, creates tasks that cannot be mastered by our normal faculties. Chaos is precariously near.

Anton Ehrenzweig

This paper is a companion piece to the programme of films and videos that was presented at the Toronto/Montreal: the Proliferation of Screens conference in February 2006. The works included in The Proliferation of Screens in Experimental Cinema programme demonstrate various plastic explorations in the tradition of experimental cinema of artists multiplying and fragmenting the image within and beyond the cinematic frame.1 Many of these works immerse viewers in the complexity of the multi-dimensional or polyphonic fabric of their moving visual compositions while stimulating a less focused and more dispersed or scattered attention in the viewing experience. This scattered attention reaches down below the grasp of conscious focused thought and reactivates

a more primal mode of experience. It appears that the aim of these polyphonic compositions is to stimulate intense bodily sensations in viewers by means of their active engagement with images and sounds, which incite free wandering or drifting of the mind amidst the densely woven moving audio-visual compositions as opposed to fixing these mobile constellations into concrete concepts. The viewers while looking at these compositions are forced to constantly move along with their rhythms, as their eyes glide all over the surface of the image or are overwhelmed with twenty-four different images in one second. Most importantly, the flow of experience in the presence of these polyphonically structured cinematic compositions echoes the uncontainable and plural flow of bodily experience, thus elevating the corporeal experience over rational thought while giving primacy to the body and asserting the importance of the corporeal dimension in human existence. By choosing the path of psychoanalysis and the writings of Anton Ehrenzweig, I will provide a sketch of artistic imagination and the form of vision and attention that are involved in the creation and reception of the polyphonically structured audio-visual compositions while simultaneously asserting the centrality of corporeal experience and libidinal interest that direct and are invested in these compositions. In particular, Ehrenzweig’s concept of syncretistic undifferentiated vision (the low-level unconscious vision), also referred to by some as polyphonic vision, will be explored in detail, given that it is the form of vision engaged when viewing multiple screens or the polyphonically structured visual compositions, therefore it is central to this paper and to the theme: the proliferation of screens. For the purposes of this paper I will limit the scope of my discussion only to a handful of artists and to one filmmaker (R. Bruce Elder), whose film was included in the conference film screening.

In *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (1967) Anton Ehrenzweig made a statement that perhaps best illustrates his theoretical position on art, its creative process and its indebtedness to psychoanalysis: “Art is a dream dreamt by the artist which we, the wide awake spectators, can never see in its true structure; our waking faculties are bound to give us too precise an image produced by secondary revision” (p. 79). In this book Ehrenzweig continues the efforts of other psychoanalytic theorists from the later part of 1950s in revising the classical concept of primary process (the process of mental functioning in the unconscious) as one characterized by its seeming lack of structure and chaos. The classical definition is based on Sigmund Freud’s definition of primary process, which he first introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), as the mental process of the unconscious that is involved in composition of dreams or the dream-work. Prior to Freud’s dream analysis that eventually led to the discovery of dream-work and the primary process, dreams were perceived as chance by-products of the half-paralyzed mind during sleep. By analysing the manifest content of the dream Freud was
able to demonstrate its concealed meaning by referring to the unconscious wish that was imbedded in the disconnected contents of the dream, while at the same time justifying its seemingly nonsensical content. Nonetheless, according to Ehrenzweig, Freud was not able to justify the dream's structure, which after all appears to the conscious waking mind as chaotic and not as a rigorously organized structure of the secondary process (the process of mental functioning in the consciousness and of the ego, based on reality testing and matching). The distinguishing traits of the primary process include: loss of time, drifting or timelessness and continuous present; no narrative or chronological ordering but visual or auditory similitude and substitution; it is ruled by inner necessity of an unconscious wish as opposed to conscious rational idea; exemption from mutual contradictions; and undifferentiated structure. This last characteristic of the primary process, its undifferentiated structure, is central in Ehrenzweig's revision to the standard conception of this process' structure as chaotic and, furthermore, to the expansion of the term unconscious, as it is the undifferentiated structure of fantasies and images that makes them unconscious, \textit{i.e.}, the collage or web-like structure of these fantasies impedes their differentiation and thus identification by the consciousness.

Techniques of the primary process, which are employed in dream-work and to a lesser extent during the waking state in the form of slips of tongue or jokes, include: fragmentation, repetition, representation by the opposite, condensation and displacement (Ehrenzweig, p. 33). Sigmund Freud in an essay titled \textit{The Unconscious} (1915) defined displacement and condensation as follows: “By the process of \textit{displacement} one idea may surrender to another its whole quota of cathexis; by the process of \textit{condensation} it may appropriate the whole cathexis of several other ideas” (p. 186). Moreover, condensation and displacement have their equivalents in language as metaphor (association of two or more entities based on their similarity or possessing some connection between them) and metonymy (based on contiguity), and can be further extended to other sign systems, such as visual art. It is no surprise that artists and poets have put these techniques of the primary process to use in their art, whether consciously or unconsciously. The extraordinary compositional plasticity of dream imagery and the imaginative, but also absurd to the conscious mind, word couplings and substitutions in slips of tongue are an endless well of inspiration for the creative arts. After all, we all experience the techniques of the primary process in our waking life but especially so during our sleep, therefore it would appear as natural for artists to broaden the horizons of their art by including that part of our life when we are in our nightly repose, or the immemorial memories and childhood wishes that are persistently pushed away by the pressures and censorship of our waking mind. The techniques of the primary process have been explored in varying degrees throughout the history of art, and perhaps most rigorously over the last century in the works of the
avant-garde poets, artists and filmmakers. It was therefore not unexpected that Ehrenzweig would turn his attention to art when attempting to vindicate the seemingly chaotic structure of the primary process. He insists that art itself posed a problem to the classical conception of the primary process and pressed for a revision of the classical conception of this process as the artistic creations appeared to dip below the surface of the conscious and the preconscious mental functions, and yet remain rigorously organized and not imbued with chaos. Contrary to the established views which dismissed primary process and deemed its surface appearance of chaos as insignificant, by concentrating his inquiry on art and artists’ creative processes Ehrenzweig was able to demonstrate that primary process is very meticulous and precise, for he saw its precision manifested in art, while at the same time validating its significance and suggesting that “it may be that the analysis of art can continue where the analysis of the dream has left off” (p. 4).

Ehrenzweig insisted on making a clear distinction between the concept of chaos and undifferentiation. In order to establish the groundwork for this distinction it might be worthwhile to consider the process of matching. According to Ehrenzweig the process of matching, which is generally considered the function of the secondary process, also takes place in the primary process on the lower-level of mental functioning in the unconscious. However matching of the primary process is syncretistic as opposed to the analytic matching of the secondary process, which is based on dissecting and analytically matching detail to detail. Syncretistic matching is global or total; it does not differentiate and therefore does not focus on detail but instead takes in the total object as an entire indivisible whole. This conception lies at the core of Ehrenzweig’s argument that this form of mental activity which takes place in the lower-level of the unconscious, the primary process, is not to be dismissed as sheer chaos because of its undifferentiated structure. In fact, he emphasizes that the undifferentiation of the primary process is not chaos but syncretism. He writes: “The chaos of the unconscious is as deceptive as the chaos of outer reality. In either case we need the less differentiated techniques of unconscious vision to become aware of their hidden order” (p. 5). To illustrate this Ehrenzweig provides an example of an infant’s drawings whose vision and experience of the world is still total because s/he has not yet moved into the scrutiny of the analytic matching of the secondary process. In those drawings one shape or colour are permitted to freely represent various objects. One can also think of numerous examples in the twentieth century avant-garde art where a similar syncretistic matching has been employed by artists, for example: Pablo Picasso, Juan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, etc. This is the reason why he argues against the classical definition of the primary process and the commonly accepted idea that the primary process is only capable of producing a chaotic
structure that requires the scrutiny of secondary process to order it. Contrary to the classical conception, Ehrenzweig asserts that primary process is “a precision instrument for creative scanning that is far superior to discursive reason and logic” (p. 5). He insists that only by means of syncretistic matching, and not verisimilitude, an artist is capable of bringing forth a composition that holds together the whole, as a delicate balance or an intricately woven web of multiple elements, and simultaneously renders the artwork realistic however abstract it might appear on the surface level of the consciousness. Ehrenzweig refers to Pablo Picasso’s portraits as exemplary in their use of syncretistic matching; he writes:

Picasso’s incredibly convincing portraits defeat all analytic matching by jumbling up and distorting all the details of a face […] We then no longer judge the verisimilitude of the portrait by analysing single features, but intuitively grasp the portrait as an indivisible whole […] Only superficially does this lack of proper differentiation and spatial coherence seem chaotic. The resemblance achieved by a syncretistic portrait relies on a subtle balance which is not amenable to conscious analysis (p. 7).

Ehrenzweig therefore makes it clear that the undifferentiated structure of Picasso’s syncretistic portraits is not chaos but a carefully ordered rendering of the sitter’s face in the portrait, which is treated in its totality that unfolds before the viewers’ eyes as a web comprising multiple and discontinuous fragments of the face that together form its genuine likeness. This likeness has of course nothing to do with the detail by detail verisimilitude of the analytic matching but is the result of Picasso’s undifferentiated syncretistic matching, which dips into the lower registers of his mental functioning and goes directly for the whole, while at the same time eschewing clear differentiation of forms and abstract details, and therefore their conscious identification. Furthermore, this syncretistic matching pulls out a common element or characteristic of the sitter’s face, which acts as an instant cue pointing straight towards the individual qualities specific to the portrait model.

Francis Bacon is another example of an artist who like Picasso eschews verisimilitude and spatial coherence of analytic matching, and instead relies on syncretistic matching and cues that capture the individual traits of the portrait model or tone of the setting. His 1930 self-portrait presents Bacon as a young and lively twenty-one-year-old man, who appears to be invigorated by life, just as we the viewers are invigorated by the colour pallet which relies on vibrant reds, oranges and yellows set against a white background that bears the marks of orange and red dry brush. Furthermore, the overall composition, which is shaped as a “V,” along with the solid and almost straight lines that move in an upward direction give the impression of a general upward movement, i.e., as if the head of the portrait model is moving up, growing up towards
maturity. Its opposite is Bacon's 1971 self-portrait, where he captures himself in a reflective state – certainly fitting for a sixty-two-year-old man – and his face appears to bear the marks of life's toils and exhaustion. The overall composition in this self-portrait is shaped as an upside-down “V.” In this portrait the predominance of solid lines disappears and the facial features are shaped by the use of colour curvilinear planes, with an overall emphasis on a downward movement that gives the impression of the face melting downwards and away into death. The colour pallet in this painting is composed of grays, blacks, and whites with only a hint of rose and orange, and is set against the void-eliciting black background. Again, the emphasis in both self-portraits is less on particular details that can be traced to the model by means of scrupulous analysis, but instead the artist attends to the entire composition and gives the viewer cues that help bring forth the resemblance of the portrait model and tone of the setting. In this sense, in both Picasso's and Bacon's paintings the true likeness of the sitter's face is captured in the portrait when the artist intuitively attends to the total expression of the face and its individual cues as opposed to analytically matching it, detail by detail, and rendering its likeness based on geometric relationships of facial features. In fact, this is where Ehrenzweig locates “the paradox of order in chaos,” namely in the precision of the total syncretistic vision to unconsciously gather the whole object along with the cues or individual features with the intent of rendering genuine resemblance of reality but at the same time being indifferent to abstract detail or pattern (p. 12). In other words what appears to the higher surface level of the differentiated conscious analysis as chaos is but a meticulously arranged composition that requires the lower registers of intuition or unconscious to grasp the indivisible whole and its undifferentiated structure while being guided by the latent cues to perceive order within this seeming chaos.

Ehrenzweig also extends his division between the analytic and the syncretistic matching to his concepts of attention. He divides attention into two types: the conscious focused attention and the unconscious scanning or scattered attention. The first is related to the secondary process. It is therefore differentiated and with its pinpoint focus divides the visual field into insignificant ground and significant figure, while paying particular interest to detail. However, as the result of this focus on the particulars, it can only attend to one object in the visual field at a time while forcing the viewer to make a choice to focus “either” on this “or” that particular detail. In contrast with the conscious focused attention, the unconscious scanning attention is related to the primary process. It is therefore undifferentiated and its scanning abilities make possible for it to hold the totality of the visual field in a single undivided act of attention. Furthermore, instead of forcing the viewer to make an “either/or” choice, this scattered attention opens up the total visual field, where in one all-encompassing “vacant stare” the complexity of a composition is freely
scanned and its every minute detail is registered by the unconscious, however, not as an individual detail but as inseparable from the totality of composition. Ehrenzweig provides an example of a visual artist working on his painting to illustrate the unconscious precision of scanning attention; he writes:

How often have we not observed how an artist suddenly stops in his tracks without apparent reason, steps back from his canvas and looks at it with a curiously vacant stare? What happens is that the conscious gestalt is prevented from crystallizing. Nothing seems to come into his mind. Perhaps one or another detail lights up for a moment only to sink back into the emptiness. During this absence of mind an unconscious scanning seems to go on. Suddenly as from nowhere some offending detail hitherto ignored will come into view. It had somehow upset the balance of the picture, but had gone undetected (p. 24-25).

What appears as emptiness of the “vacant stare” that Ehrenzweig refers to in this passage is what he also calls the “full emptiness” of unconscious scanning (p. 25). The “full emptiness” lacks the pinpoint focus and is indifferent to the division of the visual field into the significant figure and the insignificant ground or the formation of gestalt, and for that reason, according to Ehrenzweig, it will strike the conscious perception as empty. Nonetheless, this “full emptiness” of the undifferentiated empty stare opens the viewer towards the richness held within the undifferentiated unconscious structure of artwork which is grasped as a single indivisible whole.

Ehrenzweig widens the scope of “full emptiness” of unconscious scanning by extending it from visual arts to music. In doing so, he draws on Paul Klee’s writings on painting, in which Klee explores aesthetic concerns in visual art through the lens of music. Ehrenzweig writes: “[Klee] calls his dispersed attention that can attend to the entire picture plane ‘multi-dimensional’ (this expression happily stresses its irrational structure) and also ‘polyphonic.’ This too is a good name. Polyphonic hearing also overcomes the conscious division between figure and ground” (p. 25). This “irrational structure” of “multi-dimensional” attention echoes Ehrenzweig’s concept of the work of primary process in the syncretistic matching, for example in reference to Picasso’s paintings, and in particular the spatial coherence of the picture plane in his cubist portraits that is not amenable to three-dimensional compositional logic. By taking cues from Klee and extending his argument from the multi-dimensional attention in visual art to polyphonic attention in music allows Ehrenzweig to illustrate the work of scanning attention as it disperses itself in both time and space; in the measure and the tonal distribution of notes in the space along the five lines of musical notation. According to Ehrenzweig there are also two types of hearing, for which musicians have coined the terms “vertical hearing” and “horizontal hearing” in reference to the spatial arrangement
of notes in the musical notation and their corresponding auditory perception. He notes that these two types of hearing also correspond with the two types of attention: the conscious focused attention and the unconscious scanning attention. The vertical hearing is concerned with the vertical distribution of notes that form a solid harmonic arrangement of sounds or chords, which is not unlike the distinguishable figure and its solid presence in visual composition that the pinpoint focus of conscious attention can easily extract. Moreover, Ehrenzweig argues that the vertical hearing of the focused conscious attention is only capable of perceiving very “loose” or weak polyphonic structure. The reason for this is that the conscious attention is incapable of dividing its focus between two or more independent voices, the true polyphonic structure. Therefore, the solid harmonic chords are heard simultaneously below the dominant melody or voice. However, they are not independent voices but complement and are derivatives of that dominant melody. Ehrenzweig writes: “If we observe ourselves more closely it soon becomes apparent that it is impossible – on a conscious level – to divide one's attention even between two independent voices, unless of course one makes it jump between them in a breathless attempt to catch up with each of them in turn. But this is surely not the way to appreciate music” (p. 26). The vertical hearing, therefore, corresponds with the conscious focused attention, and conversely the horizontal or polyphonic hearing is concerned with the horizontal distribution of notes along the five lines of musical notation, as each voice in polyphonic composition is written out horizontally along the five lines of the musical notation. Moreover, in polyphonic hearing attention is unfocused and empty, and therefore relies on the “full emptiness” of unconscious scanning in order to perceive in this undifferentiated totality several voices simultaneously as a single indivisible whole. Ehrenzweig maintains that for either a trained musician or a layman, in this moment of “full emptiness” of unfocused attention, all the needed information is extracted from this undifferentiated totality very efficiently and quickly. In fact, “[s]o quickly is this information obtained,” argues Ehrenzweig, “that in retrospect the moment of emptiness is forgotten. This is why we know so little about the gaps in the perpetually oscillating stream of consciousness. In these gaps the work of unconscious scanning is carried on” (p. 26-27).

Ehrenzweig treats both modes of attention with impartiality. However, he acknowledges the fact that Western culture has placed larger emphasis and value on the conscious focused attention, the analytic matching and discursive logic while treating the unconscious and syncretistic experience of reality as trivial, due to its surface appearance as irrational and chaotic, and therefore banishing this experience to the margins of Western culture. This is the reason why he insists that children around the age of eight find their drawings deficient and crude because at that age their analytical matching abilities have set in
and their sources for comparison are the predominantly analytically-oriented works of adults, which have already dispensed with the imagination of syncretistic matching and place emphasis on focused conscious attention and analytic matching, as opposed to the unconscious scanning and the techniques of primary process. Ehrenzweig argues against the disregard of unconsciously oriented syncretistic matching and scanning attention and replacing it with analytic matching and attention. Instead, he insists that these unconscious faculties should be preserved, encouraged and honed by exposing children throughout their development of analytic faculties to the works of the twentieth-century avant-garde artists such as Klee or Picasso, in whose art the balance between the unconscious and the conscious modalities is at its best. This would encourage an open flow or the free swinging between the unconscious and conscious modalities, because after all “[t]here is no hard and fast distinction between vertical and horizontal listening just as there is no sharp boundary between conscious and unconscious processes. One mental level gradually leads into the other. The oscillation between the two types of hearing can be shallow; but it can also be profound” (Ehrenzweig, p. 27). In other words, only in the state of free oscillation between the two modes of attention can the profound depth be reached, where the polyphony or the multi-dimensionality can be fully experienced as the simultaneous embrace and momentary collapse of the vertical hearing into the horizontal, or the figure in a visual composition into the ground, just as the surface-level conscious modality lapses into the depths of the unconscious. This is why Ehrenzweig maintains that a good artist or “trained musician allows his attention to oscillate freely between focused and unfocused (empty) states, now focusing precisely on the solid vertical sound of chords, now emptying his attention so that he can comprehend the loose, transparent web of polyphonic voices in their entirety” (p. 27).

Throughout his book, Ehrenzweig strives to assert the importance of this “profound” or deep oscillation between the two types of hearing, or between the two mental processes. It is this depth-reaching dynamic that has atrophied in Western culture, for this culture gives primacy to reason and analytic logic while negating the importance of the lower level mental activity in the unconscious, along with the imagination and the profundity of bodily experience that it simultaneously engages and springs from. However, Ehrenzweig attempts to reengage this dynamic by gradually leading the reader through the spiral of his argument that constantly oscillates between the two modes of mental activity while at the same time broadening the scope of his discussion by illustrating their function in different aspects of perception.

Ehrenzweig extends the syncretistic matching and scanning attention of the primary process and the analytic matching and focused attention of the secondary process to vision: the syncretistic vision and the analytic vision. He
insists that both modes of vision are important and neither should be sacrificed to the other but that their presence should freely oscillate between the two modes, just as the attention must swing between the lower-level and the higher-level mental faculties or the undifferentiated scanning of polyphonic attention and the differentiated focused attention. The analytic or surface-level vision consciously differentiates, as it draws on its powers of conscious attention and its “pinpoint focus” to extract detail, simple pattern, or the figure from the ground. Ehrenzweig also calls this form of vision gestalt vision, which he relates to Gestalt psychology; he writes: “The conscious gestalt compulsion makes us bisect the visual field into significant ‘figure’ and insignificant ‘ground’” (p. 21). Its opposite, the syncretistic or low-level vision, is total or global and undifferentiated; it therefore relies on the unconscious to scan the complex web of the visual surface and to hold its complexity in a single undivided and unfocused glance, rather than in a sharply focused detailed view. By working on the low level of the unconscious, syncretistic vision operates in a manner similar to the primary process and employs its techniques, for example: “displacement of emphasis” by reversing the conscious preference from the figure to the background; indifference to temporal and spatial cohesion; “or-or” structure or “mutually exclusive constellations” by means of its ability to fully interchange the components of its total structure (p. 32-34). Furthermore, because syncretistic vision is undifferentiated it is also impartial, i.e., it registers and treats all the details with equal importance, while being indifferent to their position either within the figure or the ground. Moreover, just like the work of primary process in the dream, the work of syncretistic vision is marked by unconscious plastic coherence, as opposed to rational coherence based on analytic matching, and while it is less clearly defined and more plastic syncretistic vision appears more real than the analytic vision and its abstract pattern recognition. Ehrenzweig maintains: “we have to suppress our interest in pattern as such in order to make vision into an efficient instrument for scanning reality. The plastic quality of vision giving vividness to reality depends more on the suppression of form than on precise articulation” (p. 14). Furthermore, this is precisely where he situates the paradox of syncretistic vision as well as the main reason why the structure of the primary process has been mistaken for chaos and its contributions as accidental in its previous classical formulation. He describes it as follows: “Syncretistic vision may appear as empty of precise detail though it is in fact merely undifferentiated […] It impresses us as empty, vague and generalized only because the narrowly focused surface consciousness cannot grasp its wider more comprehensive structure. Its precise concrete content has become inaccessible and ‘unconscious’” (p. 19-20).

According to Ehrenzweig, syncretistic vision is also conjunctive and serial; its structure is open to an unlimited number of variations but within firmly defined boundaries of the unconscious content and the primary process that
manages it according to the rules specific to this process (p. 32). Moreover, he maintains that “serialization discards every remnant of an identical sequence and systematically attacks every vestige of a surface gestalt [and] directly attacks all conscious means of continuity” (p. 34-35). In other words, by attacking continuity and thus the possibility to anticipate the order of progression, the chief goal of serialization is to disrupt and drain the conscious powers of surface-level focus and comprehension while prompting the lower-level undifferentiated unconscious scanning, which opens new modes of perceptual engagement and facilitates recognition of the work’s submerged order. This disruptive force of serialization is present in visual art, where the elements belonging to the visual totality of the work are interchangeable and scattered within its composition. The attack of serialization on sequence and its continuity is particularly evident in the cubist paintings of Picasso, for example: Portrait of Ambroise Vollard (1909-1910) or Violin, Glass, Pipe and Inkpot (1912), where it disrupts the spatial sequence; the disruptions to both the spatial and the temporal sequence in futurist paintings of Carlo Carrà, such as The Funeral of Anarchist Gali (1911), and Giacomo Balla’s Plasticity of Lights + Velocity (1912-1913), the futurist sculptures of Umberto Boccioni, for example his Uniform Forms of Continuity in Space (1913), and Léger’s and Dudley Murphy’s cubo-futurist film Ballet Mécanique (1923-1924); and films employing combinatorial possibilities of serialization such as Peter Kubelka’s Adebar (1957), Schwechater (1958) and Arnulf Rainer (1960), and Bruce Elder’s Permutations and Combinations (1976) and Infunde Lumen Cordibus (2004).2 The course of these disruptions

2. The following are R. Bruce Elder’s descriptions of the serial processes used in the creation of Infunde Lumen Cordibus (2004, 22 min. COL SD) and Permutations and Combinations (1976, 8 min. COL SD). Both are available on the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre website (<www.cfmdc.org>):

“Infunde Lumen Cordibus was made using principles derived from Stephen Wolfram’s work on cellular automata (A New Kind of Science) to determine the content and colour of the shots, their duration, and the time of their appearance: the palette of effects, and their rhythmical development […] is entirely the result of computational processes that model natural events. John Cage instructed us that art should imitate nature in its manner of operation; I have tried to take the lesson. The music was composed, using related principles, by Colin Clark with the assistance of Josh Thorpe.” In Permutations and Combinations: “Aleatory procedures are used to create movement at the points of fusion of the still images of which the film is constituted. For this reason, all movements within the film are completely reversible. This reversibility is extended into the film’s overall structure, as the film is formed into a loop – a closed container for the film’s chance elements. Such a structure, I believe, results in the complete elimination of all vestiges of drama from the film […] The sounds of the film, though determined in their occurrence by specific features of the image line, appear to form their own internal patterns, which phenomenally exist in counterpoint with the patterning of the images.”
to the continuity of the spatial and temporal sequence can be traced in the work of the 20th-century avant-garde art, culminating in its complete dissolution for example in abstract expressionist and colourfield paintings of the 1950s and 60s, and the minimal art of the 70s. Similarly in avant-garde and experimental cinema artists eschewed the continuity of sequence (spatial and temporal) and its resulting conscious differentiated cohesion, while relying on techniques such as serialization, polyphonic counterpoint or multi-dimensional/multi-evocative visual composition, which they employed as compositional devices in their works either deliberately or unknowingly. Furthermore, these stylistic techniques along with others have been explored extensively by filmmakers in the avant-garde and experimental cinema as a way of engaging syncretistic vision and polyphonic or multi-dimensional attention. Moreover many of the avant-garde and experimental film techniques, in their overall compositional effect, resemble the techniques of the primary process (fragmentation, repetition, representation by the opposite, condensation and displacement) and they roughly fall into the following categories: 1) reversal of emphasis and conscious preference: from figure to ground, from subject to object, counterchange patterns, and tension or strife between images and/or images and sounds; 2) indifference to temporal and spatial cohesion: multiple image compositions where images are presented either side by side or as superimpositions, serial compositions, and compositions that emphasize rhythm and repetition over continuity; 3) “or-or” structure: compositions that rely on plastic coherence and the ability to interchange images and sounds within the total structure of the composition. What is remarkable about these techniques is that they are interconnected and, in fact, depend on each other’s presence in a composition as a means of engaging the polyphonic attention in viewers, just like techniques of the primary process in the composition of a dream that also work together to engage the lower-level mental activity of a sleeper.

Perhaps more than any other filmmaker and scholar, R. Bruce Elder has stayed committed to his quest of polyphonic cinema for over the past thirty-five years, as well as his attention to the fundamental role of bodily experience and unconscious processes in the creation and reception of art – in particular in the avant-garde and experimental cinema – as a means to transforming consciousness while engaging real experience, and hence it revolutionary potential to transform life. I also do not think that it would be incorrect to claim that Elder’s entire body of film work [The Book of All the Dead (1979-1994) and The Book of Praise (1997-present) film cycles, and several films prior to the first film cycle] which at this point is well over fifty hours in duration, presents the most comprehensive exploration of the possibilities of primary-process techniques in the medium of film; each film being strikingly different aesthetically, and hence prompting different perceptual, emotional and mental
Elder's polyphonic cinema, in addition to the perceptual aspect of its visual and auditory composition, also involves his commitment to philosophical ideas concerned with questioning technology and human relation to it, and the place of religion in human life, following in the philosophical tradition of Martin Heidegger and George Grant. For the most part most film critics and theorists concentrate on the philosophical side of Elder's cinema, the content if you will. Only in passing some acknowledge his deeper interests in the corporeal experience, and hence his use of polyphonic structures. Those few who get past the surface level of analytic apprehension of ideas, which are present in the content of his films, move into the deeper levels of sensory and mental engagement where they come in contact with the form itself and its inseparability from the content. In fact, I believe that the form of his films is the radical crux of his film compositions, for it acts as an aesthetic response and a possible way out of the philosophical impasse presented in the content while, most importantly, prompting strong corporeal and emotive engagement in viewers. Of course, the use of nude erotic bodies in his films, including macro shots and close-ups of genitals, on the one hand, are an important part of the content in relation to Elder's philosophical concerns, and on the other hand, by virtue of being confronted by this content (intimacy of the body) on screen, it works as an element of the form, for it engages strong visceral and emotive response in viewers while redirecting their attention from the conscious analysis of the content to the unconscious scanning and apprehension of the form in relation to the content while experiencing its workings on their bodies. In fact, Elder's films require that viewers engage a swinging rhythm between the higher levels of conscious attention and analysis, and the lower levels of unconscious scanning and syncretistic or plastic coherence. The polyphonic form of his cinema already prompts this rhythmic swinging, as it becomes virtually impossible to sustain one's attention for an extended period of time.

Some of the examples of the various explorations of the primary process techniques include: serialization in *Permutations and Combinations* (1976) and *Infunde Lumen Cordibus* (2004), and to a lesser degree other films in both cycles have used chance operations; use of counterchange patterns in *Barbara is a Vision of Loveliness* (1976); fragmentation of the visual plane through use of the multiple images, side by side in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979), *Illuminated Texts* (1982) [the last forty minutes of this film], *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* (1997), *Young Prince* [2007], and as superimpositions most notably in *Breath/Light/Birth* (1976) and *Sweet Love Remembered* (1980), although the use of superimposition also appears in several other parts of the two film cycles; displacement of emphasis from the figure to ground appears in nearly all the films in both cycles, and Elder's use of sound (narration, music, and ambient sounds) along with text helps to further it; indifference to spatial and temporal cohesion by means of polyphonic composition based on plastic coherence of forms, poetic connections between images and/or sounds, and rhythmic shaping of time rather than narrative continuity, are present in varying combinations in all his films.
on only one element from the myriad of visual and auditory elements that are in constant flux on the screen and in the screening space. The key traits of Elder’s polyphonic cinema, which appear in different combinations with one another and often simultaneously, include the following: the use of multiple images either side by side or as superimpositions; simultaneous use of several sounds (music, ambient sounds, and voiceover narration); use of text (subtitles, inter-titles, or typographic play with scrolls and spirals); image, text and sound often appearing in strife or conflict as opposed to in a harmonious relationship, thus echoing strife in bodily experience (the plurality and simultaneity of sensations); prominence of plastic coherence of forms, as opposed to the analytic coherence that inhibits the polyvalent potential of plastic forms and their poetic associations; use of repetition and rhythmic shaping of time as opposed to narrative continuity, thus preventing viewers from anticipating the end while holding them in the “presentness” of experience.

The Art of Worldly Wisdom (1979) is Elder’s first film in which he fully explored the polyphonic possibilities of cinema. This film takes the diary as a model for its composition, and as such it presents the viewer with fragments of Elder’s life, including his “afternoon reveries and night dream visions,” which he captured in his journal entries between 1976 and 1978, as well as on film (Elder in <cfmdc.org>). In this film he employs multiple images that appear as tiny windows side by side on the screen in combinations of 1, 2 3, 4 and even 5. These images include: Elder, his home, his surroundings, landscape, animals, architecture, footage from travels, images of various technologies including power plants, television footage, religious iconography, close-ups of male genitals. The sounds (narration, music and ambient sound), like the images, also appear often together, in strife with one another and with the images. This strife between the sounds, the images, and between the sounds and images, forces viewers to scatter their attention among the entire surface of the screen and to permit the sounds to meld together into an auditory weave, because prolonged focused attention is neither possible nor desirable in this film. In fact, the softness of the rectangular mattes along with Elder’s use of his hands as mattes through which each image spills onto the screen as a tiny window onto the world – a world that’s familiar to us because we can recognize it, yet strange – and the slight overlapping of the mattes produces the feeling of fluidity in the experience of the visual composition, as the images flow into one another and fuse while constantly moving within their mattes. As such, these tiny images force their light through the opening amidst the thick blackness of the matte, just like the dream images push through the thick barrier of censorship of our preconscious during sleep and we have no conscious control over them. Therefore while experiencing this film the attention has no other choice but to become fluid and to float amidst the thickly woven tapestry of Elder’s polyphonic composition while scanning its total structure. The
multiplicity of moving images and sounds enter through our senses and the best we can do is to allow these sensations to flow as experience and to momentarily present themselves to our consciousness as plastic associations of images and sounds, and as poetic couplings in language. Furthermore, this reverie or dreamlike quality is also reinforced by the content of images, and especially the footage of Elder’s travels, where he often shoots landscape and roads through a car window. This footage shot during his travels and images relating to traveling echo the ideas of transport and transformation, i.e., being transported from one state to another, from the waking to the dream state, from conscious focus to unconscious fluid scanning. The footage of the carousel, its whirling motion, which at one point is juxtaposed with the footage of a mother holding her baby, transports viewers into the depths of the unconscious while prompting childhood memories. Indeed transformation of consciousness is one of the key themes of Elder’s The Book of All the Dead cycle, which he begins with The Art of Worldly Wisdom. In his letter to Dr. Henderson titled Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks, Elder writes: “from ordinary waking consciousness (in The Art of Worldly Wisdom, the title of which I keep misspelling in the credits as ‘The Art of WORDly Wisdom’ in order to suggest the conventional nature of knowledge the film presents)” (Elder in Miller, p. 455).

**Figure 1**

*The Art of Worldly Wisdom*

Elder, therefore, opens viewers to a different mode of knowledge and experience; knowledge open to the unconscious through linguistic slips and associations, and through the experience attuned to the bodily promptings.

The last forty minutes of Elder’s three-hour film *Illuminated Texts* (1982), the fifth film in *The Book of All the Dead* film cycle, employs multiple-image composition by means of travelling mattes. Just like in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* the emphasis is on strife between images and sounds, and especially in the last section of the film. Furthermore, in *Illuminated Texts* the strife is further intensified through the superimposed text that is both perceived as visuals and as sounds. Unlike the stationary mattes in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, which through the light spillage in the seams of its mattes and the presence of multiple moving images and sounds eventually pull viewers into the deeper mental levels of attention, the movement of the traveling mattes and the movement within the mattes in *Illuminated Texts* direct viewers’ attention more immediately to the surface and the total structure of this audio-visual polyphonic composition.

Elder’s use of the travelling mattes permits three moving images to be perceived simultaneously, however they can only be perceived as three when the attention is relaxed. The two moving images consist of portions of footage that have been superimposed as the A-roll and the B-roll of the travelling matte, and eventually superimposed together as a composite. This footage consists of the following moving images: European architecture captured during Elder’s travels; shots of roads and cars; shots filmed while driving in a car; car race track in an Olympic stadium; power plants and factories; countryside in Poland, along with shots of horse buggies, tractors, and Polish army trucks; footage from Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland; footage of female and male nudes; footage of slaughterhouse and animal slaughter. It is important to point out that Elder is drawing our attention again to movement, travel, transport – transport to another state – and, furthermore, his shooting style in this entire film is even more dynamic than in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*; images constantly move, swirl, vibrate with the presence of the filmmaker behind the camera. The third moving image in the travelling matte section of *Illuminated Texts* is the actual travelling matte itself. It is composed of numerous geometric shapes (squares, horizontal and vertical rectangles, triangles, and circles) that are constantly undergoing cycles of transformation in form and size. It is the emphasis on polyphonic movement in this section that makes it virtually impossible to focus on one moving image, as the travelling matte constantly closes in on it and opens with a new image. Furthermore, the human eye is necessarily drawn to each new movement, it follows it, and for that reason while watching this section of Elder’s film viewers’ eyes are constantly moving all over the complex surface of the screen. Moreover, the intermittent appearance
of the text momentarily directs viewers’ eyes to the centre of the frame while trying to make sense of the combination of text, image and the voiceover narration, which repeatedly asks “is it far?” and eventually disintegrates into an incomprehensive computer generated mumble. This travelling matte sequence in *Illuminated Text* brings the figure-ground oscillations to the fore, and as a result brings about the swinging between the conscious and unconscious mental levels, the swinging between the focused and scanning attention in the audience, where distinctions between the figure and ground, the self and the world, the self and the other, become fluid and eventually dissolve into an ocean bliss. This bliss is interrupted by the final shot of this film which is completely still and where we see Elder’s reflection while shooting with his film camera in a window of the concentration camp barrack. At this point all the fluid pieces from the travelling matte sequence flash in our mind’s eye while we are thrown back into the world of division and reason.

In 1995 Elder returned to the multiple image and sound composition when he began his new film cycle *The Book of Praise. A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* (1997) is the first film in this film cycle and like *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* is completely composed of multiple moving images that are projected through still mattes. The mattes in this film have
a much more organic, or even an Art Nouveau, appearance and they are hand-drawn and cut. The footage that is projected through these mattes consists mainly of nude moving images of female and male bodies that are juxtaposed with footage of European architecture and footage taken from Elder’s travels in Europe and Canada, and of course footage shot from a moving car. Elder superimposes still text over the matted moving images. The visuals in this film again appear in strife with the sound, which is made up of music and voiceover narration. His latest film titled *The Young Prince* (2007), which will premiere in the late fall in 2007, further employs the polyphonic image and sound composition but this time using digital technology. He has written numerous computer programmes that permit him to create new and previously unseen multiple moving image compositions in this film. Again, in both of Elder’s films, like in his others, the emphasis is on bringing viewers into a state of rhythmic swinging between the higher and lower registers of mental activity by means of strong corporeal engagement with the polyphonic image and sound compositions, with the ultimate goal of opening the way towards another mode, a more primal mode of experience.

In conclusion, Anton Ehrenzweig draws our attention to examples of children syncretistic vision and matching while at the same time asserting that every human being possesses this ability because we all experienced it as
children and it is the foundation of our mental capacity to organize this world and give sense to it. This also unites all the people by bringing them to the same level of commonality. Unfortunately, the reality of living and our toils to survive have forced us to push aside, to repress this primary and imaginative form of experience by expelling it to the lower registers of our mental activity and replaced it with the analytic vision and matching of the secondary process. However, as Ehrenzweig points out, and as I tried to sketch out through the course of this paper, art and artists grant us the momentary contact with the world of syncreticism and imagination while at the same time reconnecting people with this primary form of experience of this world. My descriptive sketches and analyses in this paper of films by Elder comprise but one level of interpretation, my interpretation, and I do not believe that their imaginative richness has been fully exhausted. Just like interpretation of a dream, which is virtually inexhaustible for the analysand as it takes on new meanings and richness each day and with each analytic session, works of art that engage the deeper levels of mental functioning, in both the process of their production and reception, function in the same manner as dreams and are truly inexhaustible; they are timeless.

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Bibliography


