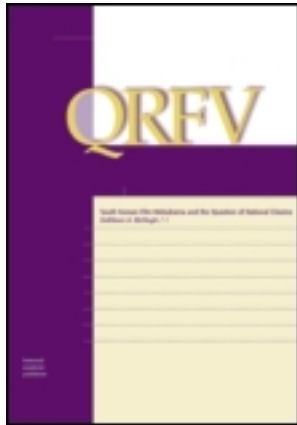


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On: 06 October 2011, At: 15:32

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20>

A Review of "Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Movements in the Early Twentieth Century"

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Available online: 15 Sep 2011

To cite this article: David Sterritt (2011): A Review of "Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Movements in the Early Twentieth Century", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28:5, 408-412

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200902820464>

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question Kit's state of mind, as opposed to the images of the billboard, which resonates without being indicative of anything.

Throughout the text, Michaels discerns similar comparisons in how the images refer to one another. In *Days of Heaven*, the flames consuming the wheat fields "... fulfill the destructive potential of the ominous bonfire dance at harvest time ..." (47). Bill's death in the river similarly is foreshadowed by the workers bathing in a stream or the underwater shot of the dropped glass in Bill and Abby's late night rendezvous. A few of the readings are opaque and difficult to rectify in the context of the plot, such as Michaels' contention that in *The New World*, Smith's "... immersion in the forest stream ..." amounts to "... a natural baptism ..." (89).

At other times, as when he indicates that *Days of Heaven* features four kinds of dance, he gives us scant explanation of the significance in these images. Still, most of his readings of these images are lyrical and gratifying, as with his description of the train crossing an elevated trestle at the beginning of *Days of Heaven* (49). He notes the movement of the train from right to left suggesting movement westward, as well as how the silhouette image has a universal aspect. In Michaels' reading of this image, it depicts "... a moment of perilous passage and human vulnerability ..." (49), which seems a very apt reading.

Working with such an elusive subject, Michaels has produced a compelling and coherent examination of the work created by one of Hollywood's most reclusive directors. He has made no effort to trivialize his study with a celebrity investigation of the director's intimate life, yet still manages to create a dynamic arc between the director and his work. Readers will likely have unanswered questions at the end of the book. Still, Michaels' book serves as the most complete analysis to date of the director and his work to date, and for this we can certainly be grateful.

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***Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde
Movements in the Early Twentieth Century*
by R. Bruce Elder. Waterloo:
Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008**

DAVID STERRITT

Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Movements in the Early Twentieth Century, the remarkable new book by author and filmmaker R. Bruce Elder, focuses on the powerful wave of innovative art and groundbreaking aesthetic philosophy that broke over the West in the first decades of the last century. Elder's basic proposition is that the advent and early development of cinema was a guiding inspiration, a connective force, and in some

ways a unifying principle among the various arts in this tumultuous time. The reasons for this included cinema's freshness as a newly invented medium, its capacity for recording and reproducing movement, the specifically modern nature of its mechanical and industrial bases, its aptitude for placing real-world photographic material and lofty artistic vision into dialectical juxtaposition, and other such properties.

So far, so good, but most of us have heard this before. What begins to move Elder's account beyond other such historical-theoretical narratives is its far-reaching insistence that we in the twenty-first century habitually think of cinema in terms that are profoundly different from those that dominated film-related thought when the machine age was racing toward its pinnacle. Things get really interesting when Elder zeroes in on his main and most fascinating premise, arguing that instabilities bred by the escalating onrush of modernity gave birth to a sense of cognitive, perceptual, and epistemological crisis that a startling number of artists and thinkers tried to contend with by turning to a paradigm that was at once primordially old and breathtakingly new. This was the paradigm of pneumatic or noetic experience, paying renewed attention to such extrarational states as dreams, trances, contemplation, meditation, and even prayer, all given short shrift by post-Enlightenment thought and therefore ripe for rediscovery by adventurous spirits in the vanguard of modern art.

To his credit, Elder brings self-assured skepticism to the movements and manifestos he probes, stating at the outset that the spiritual interests of the early film and photography avant-gardes "were largely of a peculiar, woolly character" and that he is scrutinizing these notions "in order to expose the stain that marks them" (xi). Having said this, however, he pays them the respect of sustained and serious examination; he comes to illuminate them, not to bury them, and he provides us with more than enough information to arrive at our own conclusions while pondering his. He explicates, you decide.

Working out his thesis in almost 500 scrupulously researched pages, complete with hundreds of endnotes and quotations in Greek and Cyrillic script, Elder visits some historical areas that others have charted in the past, but which take on new significances in this distinctive context, especially when analyzed in such meticulous detail. At other times he sets forth facts, hypotheses, and speculations that I've encountered nowhere else. A long chapter on "Modernism and the Absolute Film," for instance, discusses (among many other things) the possible provenance of Athanasius Kircher's seventeenth-century idea for the Steganographic Mirror, a projector using sunshine as its light source, in the Egyptian shadow play, which had reached its artistic peak in Islamic culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and which Kircher probably knew a lot about, since one of his countless accomplishments was the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, a two-volume study of Egyptian theology and philology. Although the Steganographic Mirror may never have actually worked, others developed the concept into the better-known *Laternae Magicae*, on which Kircher commented in his *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* in 1671. (Samuel Pepys, 19 August 1666: "comes by agreement Mr. Reeves . . . [who] did also bring a lanthorne with pictures in glasse, to make strange things appear on a wall, very pretty" [101].)

A century later we come upon the French painter Philip Jacob de Louthembourg, a student of alchemy and the occult, and his Eidophusikon, a device for presenting landscape scenes via a concatenation of "lighting, movable filters of coloured silk, painted transparencies, Magic Lantern slides, clockwork automata, and movable three-dimensional models" (102) plus music and sound effects. These and other figures in the protocinematic era paved the way for the links between cinema and magic that flourished in the films of George Méliès and his heirs.

More quasi-occult connections arise in Elder's section on "Constructivism and Counterscience," which explains how the purported association of mesmerism and electricity, embraced by many thinkers in the late nineteenth century, overlapped with the notion of souls *en rapport*, which held that "at the speed of light all minds/souls merge, thought becomes a noosphere, and ideas hang in the ether." It followed (somehow) that mass media might exert their influence through a sort of mass hypnosis, and this brings us to Sergei M. Eisenstein, for whom, Elder proposes, "cinema was precisely such an influencing machine" (325). Elder hastens to add that Eisenstein would blanch at such a suggestion, since his conception of cinema was grounded in ideas about communication bred by the invention of telegraphy and radio. But no matter, since widespread conceptions of the telegraph "drew on older ideas about immaterial action, including discourses concerning angelic intelligence and the spiritual transmission of divine intelligence" (436). I still think Eisenstein would blanch, but these speculations are of strong interest all the same.

The things I've mentioned make up only a small fraction of the ideas and intuitions, borne by sages and crackpots and all types between, that Elder investigates in *Harmony and Dissent*, which gains much of its persuasive power from the vividness and clarity of his descriptions. I wasn't around for the 1913 premiere of *Victory Over the Sun: An Opera*, for instance, but I attended a conscientiously reconstructed production of it at the Brooklyn Academy of Music some years ago—it's an amazingly concentrated music-theater work that conjoins Futurist aesthetics, Suprematist design, atonal music, and transrational *zaum* poetry—and I can testify that Elder's word picture is accurate, precise, and in one sense better than the real thing, since he captures the sense of over-the-top excitement sparked by its first performances, when nothing like it had ever been before.

Harmony and Dissent takes its title from an idea that crops up often in avant-garde writings of the period that Elder explores: that a truly organic unity—in the realm of art, of philosophy, or of metaphysics—is a sublime form of harmony that can incorporate discordant elements, including oppositional and resistant ones, into a Whole that is all the richer as a result. (Reference to this idea is why the title juxtaposes harmony with dissent rather than discord.) Elder finds this principle to be powerfully at work in Romantic art, then in Symbolist art (one of the book's most productive veins), and later in modernist and postmodernist art, and it is one of the recurring tropes that help the book itself balance diversity and cohesiveness so successfully.

Other concerns that predominate in various portions of the volume include the wide array of theories aimed at proving that everything is made of vibrations; the long, complicated history of efforts to nail down point-by-point correspondences between colors of the spectrum and pitches on the musical scale; the genealogy of absolute (abstract, nonrepresentational) film and its precursors; theories of the fourth dimension, of synaesthesia, and of correspondences between inner and outer space; the effort to discover a *Generalbass der Malerei*, an all-embracing theory of painting (and by extension other arts; the term itself comes from music) based on the notion that art's aesthetic, pneumatic, and noetic powers derive from the fact that the learned human creator is replicating in art "the celestial harmony whereunder God had framed His creation" (140); and the perennial contest among advocates of different creative forms to establish a favored candidate as the *ottima arte* having prima-facie superiority over all others, with cinema staking a widely accepted claim in its early decades.

And there is much more, replete with discussions of the roles played in art making and theory by such systems as theosophy, anthroposophy, Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, Cosmism, spiritualism, et cetera. Among the key players in this sprawling drama are famous and not-so-famous figures such as Eisenstein, Kircher, Hans Richter, Viking

Eggeling, Walther Ruttmann, Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Rudolf Steiner, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Aleksandr Scriabin, and there are cameos and walk-ons by Arthur Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson, Vladimir Tatlin, Pyotr Ouspensky, Cesare Zavattini, G.I. Gurdjieff, Johann Sebastian Bach, and many other notable figures.

As noted earlier, Elder is not the first to open up some of these territories. A recent predecessor he doesn't cite is Rachel O. Moore, whose 2002 book *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* gives a more concise overview of similar issues. With regard to Eisenstein, for instance, she analyzes what he calls "sensual thinking," his predilection for analogies between filmed images and the spirit world, and his belief that "the very same magical belief that gave such [preternatural] power to things" in preverbal, prelogical thought "still obtains in the sphere of artistic representation" (74). And since Elder gives vivid portraits of various color-organ projects, some more cockamamie than others, he might also have looked at the work of American film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, who theorized about a "cinema of designed, *abstracted* light" (13) in the late 1920s. I'm not saying that Elder would have a great deal to learn from these writers, but it would have been intriguing to see him engage with their emphases and perspectives.

I have two other suggestions for Elder if he ever chooses to revisit this subject area, perhaps in a sequel to the present volume. After almost four decades of writing about film for *The Christian Science Monitor*, an activity that thankfully is now behind me, I was surprised to find no reference here to Mary Baker Eddy and her American metaphysical scheme. The film historian Kevin Brownlow once told me that a book cries out to be written about the impact of Christian Science in early Hollywood; I told him that he's absolutely right, and now I know that Elder would be ideal for the job. I also wish Elder would apply his methodologies to present-day manifestations of mystical and superstitious thought vis-à-vis the moving-image media.

While the pneumatic fantasies and spiritual inklings of the bygone avant-gardes he studies generally sought to fathom art's capacity for exaltation and transcendence, a significant proportion of today's experimental filmmakers, video artists, and mixed-media adventurers have headed straight for the dark side, and commercial movies like *Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) and *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) feed off unconscious fears that supernatural malignities lurk in the electron flows of our living-room entertainment centers. And then there's the Internet, seen by paranoid reactionaries like the Christian right as a "spiritual force with its own evil agency . . . another portal to Hell," in culture theorist Mikita Brottman's words.

But to ask for more is an ungenerous gesture when Elder has already given us so much. *Harmony and Dissent* is as expansive, imaginative, fact-filled, and action-packed as any film-related book I've come upon in ages. Like most of the artists, theorists, inventors, mystics, and visionaries he writes about, Elder is blessed with a sense of mission that rules out shortcuts and compromises. The result of his labor is intensely challenging at times, but its insights are copious and its scholarship is a wonder to behold.

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David Sterritt, Professor Emeritus at Long Island University and Chair of the National Society of Film Critics, has written extensively on avant-garde film, theater, music, and literature.

***Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*
by Karen Beckman and Jean Ma. Durham, NC:
Duke University Press, 2008**

LAUREN NEWTON GLENN

Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography compiles the diverse perspectives of film scholars, art historians, filmmakers, curators, and artists in an effort to assess the current intersection of the fields of film, photography, and digital media. Several of the most widely debated issues in film and art history emerge here, including the play of motion within still images, stasis within moving images, national and cultural memory, and the productive tension between still and moving images within our increasingly visual culture. This collection traces the interplay of these issues from the beginning of photography and cinema to the integration of digital media into the arts and beyond.

At a time when many film scholars are attempting to move away from the traditional method of situating films (and other, related products of media) into neat, linear categories, Karen Beckman and Jean Ma likewise advocate the resistance of "reductive linear logic that often underpins notions of clear-cut beginnings and terminations, [as well as] evolutionist understandings of history" (9). They encourage the abandonment of the idea that a singular work of art can be pinned down by the labeling of one specific genre, be defined by a certain theory, or be revealed by one critic.

In addition, the temptation to examine art movements as evolutionary, as beginning at the precise end of one movement and ending with the beginning of another, creates difficulties with the many works of art that possess attributes from different genres and can be discussed in relation to several different critical movements. The editors of this collection insist that art historians and film scholars have more in common than ever before; and, they advocate the blurring of formal disjunctions while warning against the potential for the increased interest in these mediums to "devolve into a regressive reassertion of eroded disciplinary borders" (3).

In the first section, "Beyond Referentiality," three essays explore the hermeneutics surrounding photography and film. Tom Gunning echoes Walter Benjamin's concern voiced over seventy years ago that technological advancements will change our collective perception of more traditionally established art forms. But, whereas Benjamin was concerned with the mechanical production involved in the photochemical process of photography, Gunning expresses similar issues as they relate to the newest advancement in photography—digital manipulation.