



BRUCE ELDER

Lives & works in Toronto (Canada)

Very active in: 80s, 90s, 2000s, Current decade

More links:

June 12, 1947, Hawkesbury, Ontario [director, producer, screenwriter, film editing, cinematographer, sound]

Bruce Elder, an artist and critic, is a leading figure of the Canadian avant-garde. The New York critic and filmmaker Jonas Mekas declared, "Unquestionably, [he is] the most important North American avant-garde filmmaker to emerge during the 1980s." Initially trained as a philosopher and computer programmer, Elder became interested in experimental filmmaking rather late. His curiosity developed while studying film at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in the early 1970s, where, soon after, he became a film professor.

In his early films such as *Breath/Light/Birth* (1975), *She Is Away* (1976), *Permutations and Combinations* (1976), and *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1978), Elder explored several established experimental styles by way of academic exercise. However, following a life-threatening illness, the 55-minute autobiographical *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979) and the optically printed, virtuoso *1857 [Fool's Gold]* (1981), ended his apprenticeship. With these films, he established a strong reputation for powerful images, technical prowess and a daunting intellect that Elder fully realized with the first of his long films, *Illuminated Texts* (1982), which in turn initiated the gigantic quartet *The Book of All the Dead* (1975-1994).

The title *The Book of All the Dead* admits to the ambiguous truth of critic Michael Dorland's remark that Elder is a "belated" artist. Like every other experimental filmmaker at the end of the 1970s, Elder entered the field under the deep shadow of powerful predecessors; Elder admits as much. *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* begins with a long series of title sequences styled after the fashions of film artists before him. The irony, cast as a joke, arises from the admission that, while this should be a film of self-portraiture made near the start of his career, Elder cannot "start," even with himself, because other, stronger artists have already started with themselves. The split-screen images and plural voices deny the unity of self, while many of the episodes, in effect, serialize the artist's identity. But, in devising this film, Elder also discovered his project, his style and his big problem: time and history. The film would fuel his ambition unceasingly for the next dozen years. Two miniature, promissory, contrasting elaborations followed immediately: the sensual *Sweet Love Remembered* (1980) and the historiographical *1857 [Fool's Gold]*.

The Book of All the Dead, arrayed as a massive cycle of films – 40 hours of film representing 18 years of production from 1974 to 1992, – is as ambitious and complexly realized as any in international avant-garde cinema. In all likelihood, Elder will be the last experimental film artist with the emotional and intellectual energy to create a work such as *The Book of All the Dead*'s core quartet of films: *Illuminated Texts* (1982), *Lamentations: A Monument to the Dead World* (1985), *Consolations (Love is an Art of Time)* (1988) and the multiple-part *Exultations (In Light of the Great Giving)* (1990-1994). Much of this group of four films was completed in close to a single decade and combines several modes of filmmaking – including short dramatic scenes, long arcing montages, computerized graphics and image-language combinations – into large structural configurations.

The avant-garde of the 1980s seemed to be an era of dissipation, resentment, bad theory and even worse politics. After nearly 40 years of valiant independence, experimental film became a slave to the most whorish of all film aesthetics: academic film theory. The consequences were catastrophic for artists and viewers alike. This was not a time to contract ambitions for works of large imagination – but Elder became infected. *The Book of All the Dead* would attempt to be a work of total imagination, and as it was nearing completion, Elder compared it, without irony, to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. A host of formal and structural strategies arise, each of them more "postmodernist" than the last.

The confident logic of texts expressing modern ambition are undercut in *Illuminated Texts*, Elder's most powerful and blunt Canadian philosophical film. In *Lamentations*, the engagement with the solemn mythopoeic "return and retreat of origins" that modern poets and psychologists like Jung dig into to counter modernity are re-enacted genealogically over three continents. Its eight-hour journey travels through memorial time, a grand récit totally recited that is, likewise, totally "deconstructed" in the strong sense developed by Derrida.

Consolations is a 14-hour meditation on what an artist might do when history collapses, myth shrivels and the artist must struggle past resentment and disappointment. Finally, with *Exultations* (in fact, a sub-cycle of single, feature length films within the whole), Elder enters the chaos-cosmos of fractal mathematics, wholly computer-controlled imagery and sound and wordless signification. Despite all the inescapable qualifications, Elder uses the computer to recuperate J.S. Bach's sacred music, Piet Mondrian's neoplatonist order, Dante's *Paradiso*, John Donne's holy eroticism and Ezra Pound's unfinished *Cantos*.

The Book of All the Dead cannot be accused of not trying to be 'some kind of everything,' and that is why it fails – Elder refers to it as 'abandoned' – because it succeeds, finally, to remember without resentment that it cannot be 'that kind of everything.'

During the same period, Elder wrote the only sustained critical interpretation of the Canadian avant-garde, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (1989). He has also written two extensive studies of American avant-garde film, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (1997) and *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition* (1999). These books stemmed from a film series at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the book *The Body in Film*, which Elder published in 1989. Meanwhile, Elder kept writing a steady stream of articles punctuated by occasional controversial arguments. [Two of these articles anchor

Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow, 1956-1991, edited by Jim Shedden [1995].] Most notorious is "The Cinema We Need," which set off a heated debate among Canadian film critics. [The original text and the responses were gathered in Documents in Canadian Film [1988], edited by Douglas Fetherling.] Since then, Elder has produced two feature length films, A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy [1997] and Crack, Brutal Grief [2001].
By Bart Testa