



TAKE TWO

A TRIBUTE TO FILM IN CANADA

EDITED BY
SETH FELDMAN



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The Films of R. Bruce Elder: The Evolving Vision

BY LIANNE M. McLARTY

Near the end of R. Bruce Elder's Illuminated Texts, the computer previously identified as having controlled the optical printing and editing of that three-hour film begins to sing. The song it chooses, "Deutschland über alles," comes into a frightful congruence with the Holocaust imagery manipulated within the last hour. The net effect is that of a new and uninvited presence on the screen, the presence of a foregrounded apparatus unwilling to maintain the facade of anonymity. It is far more disturbing than if Elder had merely created a Frankenstein. Instead, the question posed is the degree to which the Frankenstein of mechanized perception has, through our passivity, created us.

As Lianne McLarty points out here, the ploy at the end of Illuminated Texts is typical of a definition of the artist's role that prevails throughout Elder's body of experimental films. In his The Art of Worldly Wisdom, that role is underlined as a deeply personal commitment when the illusory nature of perception is called upon to highlight the equally illusory nature of self. The signifiers of an autobiographical presence are deliberately flawed, until what remains is nothing but the audacity of their presumptuous signification. By the same token, the cinematic tempest brewed in 1857 (Fool's Gold) is a storm made of human constructs: texts written on the screen and read in voice-over, heavy reliance on optical printing, a counting of the film's very frames.

Elder's awareness of the highly defined yet arbitrary nature of his apparatus extends beyond the films discussed here. As seen in his writing elsewhere in this volume, this critical perspective grows out of an assertion of the centrality of that concern in all of Canadian cinematic practice. To Elder, the photograph, and its extension into cinema, do not provide evidence of the outside world so much as they provide evidence of an ongoing debate as to the characteristics of mechanical perception. As a Canadian filmmaker, Elder recognizes that his work will inevitably come from within this debate. As administrator, teacher and spokesperson Elder recognizes and sustains the priority of, to use McLarty's term, a "quest" for perceptual integrity.

Since western culture has seen consciousness as something which is other than Nature and that its mode is primarily one of self-reflection, that which characterizes consciousness is consciousness of consciousness. It is, in its very essence and being, self-reflective. That's how Western Man sees consciousness. He pictures consciousness as something alien from Nature. And one of the marks of that alienation is that, because it knows itself, it knows its destiny, and its destiny is a very solitary one.

*Any culture which is a self-reflective culture is one which is aware of the destiny of consciousness—that is to say aware of death—and a culture which lives with an awareness of death is a culture that's marked by a vision of consciousness as isolated, solitary, lonely and doomed.*¹

In his early films, *Breath/Light/Birth* (1975), *She is Away* (1975), *Barbara is a Vision of Loveliness* (1976), *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1978), *Trace* (1980) and *Sweet Love Remembered* (1980), Bruce Elder created a world without context. These films seldom refer to any reality outside themselves; rather they present an enclosed, claustrophobic world that perhaps could best be described as a void. The space in which the figures move is undefined. This lack of a recognizable space or context suggests that the imagery of these films belongs to an interior world, to a "mind-space,"—that it embodies the artist's consciousness. It is as if the mind of the filmmaker has been transposed to the screen so that we, as spectators, can see his thoughts and visions before us. Given Elder's beliefs about the nature of consciousness, and the fact that his films are "consciousness on celluloid," it is not surprising that they stress this isolation.

Thus, in *Look! We Have Come Through!* a lone figure is situated within an entirely black, undefined space. When the film begins, the woman's form seems to be suspended in air. The lone figure moves against a dark and potentially threatening landscape. The distortion of the figure and of the space through which she moves further contributes to a sense of the ominous. Time, too, is distorted by repeating a single action over and over, so that it seems to continue heedless of naturalistic temporal reality. The world of this film is not ruled by conventional properties of time and space, and for this reason, it seems threatening and ominous to the viewer used to more traditional employments of time and space in cinema.

Barbara is a Vision of Loveliness shares stylistic properties with *Look! We Have Come Through!* Once again there is a highly distorted sketch of a female form which occupies an undefined, dark space. Again, the figure is alone, isolated from any context, though here her form is more severely fragmented than in *Look! We Have Come Through!* At one point, near the end of the film, a series of still images of the dancer flash on the screen, frame by frame. By this point, the figure has become quite abstracted and in the course of various transformations seems to split in two, the separate parts gravitating to opposite sides of the frame. Whatever attempt there has been to create unity and harmony here seems to fail. Reality seems to be irremediably fragmented, to be broken beyond repair.

In *Sweet Love Remembered*, two women are seen making love. The action, the women's lovemaking, is depicted positively; it is used to suggest the attempt of two beings to become one. Yet here again this sense of unity is ultimately undercut by Elder, who disrupts spatial continuity by editing together shots taken from different vantage points. The action is similarly fragmented: a shot of the two women lying side by side and then rolling apart on the bed is replaced by a shot of them standing; a caress is replaced by a different action recorded from a different angle; and so on.

Elder has said that he took as his inspiration for this work a quotation from Freud—"Eros nowhere makes its intention more clear than in the desire to make two things one"—and also one from Nietzsche—"What must these people have suffered to have become so beautiful?" Elder illustrates our desire to merge with one another, and our sense of separateness that gives rise to this desire. *Sweet Love Remembered* clearly speaks to this tension. The film begins with many close-up shots, taken mostly with a moving camera, of parts of the female body that are

photographed in such a way as to lead the viewer to believe that a single woman is the subject of the piece. As the camera becomes somewhat more distant and larger portions of the body are shown for longer periods of time, it becomes obvious that there are two women. Retrospectively, then, we realize that the techniques of the film have been used to make two beings one. By the middle of the film that unity breaks apart. As though in response to that loss of unity, Elder attempts to recreate it "cinematically," by superimposing one body upon the other. Yet this attempt rings false, partly because it is too obviously cinematic—a product of technique—partly because the very structure of the film militates against the achieving of unity, for the actions it depicts are too fragmented by montage and the women's bodies too fragmented by the use of close-ups. Thus, the last portion of the film consists mainly of images of the women rolling apart, separating themselves from each other. At the end of the film, they are shown alone and isolated from one another.

Unlike the other films discussed which presented human figures in an indeterminate space, *She is Away* presents the viewer with a clearly defined space, but one in which no human figures exist. It is as if, at this stage in his filmmaking, Elder felt unable to unite the two, to reconcile the human form with his/her environment. The emptiness of the space depicted in the film is accentuated by the images of women seen in two paintings, because the presence of these representations makes the absence of actual women from the film all the more emphatic. Since these images represent lives frozen in the past, they suggest the absence of real lives in the present. This absence is also hinted at in the representational images which, one assumes, remind the filmmaker of the "she" of the title who is away; the sheets, the robe, the nightdress, Mozart and the paintings all seem to invoke her memory.

As with the other films discussed in this section, the sense of isolation evoked by this film reaches a point of claustrophobia. Although there is no dark void here, one still senses that the artist feels incapable of escaping the confines of the space which he inhabits. Near the middle of the film, there is a scene that is much longer than any other in the film, and is further privileged by the use of synchronized sound. The camera stares out through a balcony window overlooking a darkened street. This sequence is composed of three shots in all: the first includes a bar of the window frame, the second (in which the camera moves in a little closer) excludes this bar, and the third repeats the first shot. This seemingly minute detail has considerable significance. The second shot, because it is closer to the street, perhaps represents an attempt to reach outward from this space and to escape. It further suggests a sense of looking and waiting. The third, then, could represent a retreat, a moving back into the empty space, surrendering to it.

The final image of a tree is curious in this regard. Because it bears no immediately obvious connection to the other images in the film—it is the only image associated with Nature—it stands out, seems even a bit dreamlike, especially since it does not come from the physical space which Elder reveals to the viewer during the course of the film. Rather, it seems to stem from the filmmaker's unconscious. Perhaps it is used to suggest escape through dream, through a visionary sensibility.

While Elder's earlier films convey rather general notions of isolation, loneliness, loss and absence, the visions of the later, much more complex works are more concretely defined. These films are all informed by a prolonged illness Elder experienced in 1976 and 1977. This experience of suffering seems to have been the catalyst for the development of his vision. *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979) depicts a quest for self-awareness, a quest which involves his attempt to situate both his public and private selves within a larger social context. What allows him to do this is the experience he shares with all beings—the experience of illness

and suffering. *1857 (Fool's Gold)* (1981) explicates Elder's view of the artist's power more clearly as he attempts to illustrate the artist's ability to transcend reality. It is through the consciousness of the artist that the physical world is transformed and transcended. Indeed, it seems in this work, as in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, that it is torment and suffering which makes transcendence possible.² Elder's most recent film, *Illuminated Texts* (1983), also examines this idea; it also carries still further his attempt to reach outward to adopt a broader worldview. Since illness as a symbol of decay, corruption and suffering is a motif which links these three films, the meditation on illness offered in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* is a good place to begin examining these films.

That film's credit sequence is a paradigm of the film as a whole. It begins with a series of drum beats. Soon the title of the film appears in block letters on a black screen. When the title appears, an inflated and pompous piece of orchestral music appears on the sound-track, humorously evoking the notion that the film will present an authoritative treatment of some subject matter that is of high seriousness. The opening credits, then, ironically suggest, using both visual and aural means, the pretence of order, control and logical progression.

This pretence is soon exposed for what it is. The drumbeats cease and the title is obscured by flashes of light; accompanying these persistent white flashes is the disturbing sound of a stereo needle repeatedly jumping the grooves of the record. This sound is replaced by carnival music, featuring the coarse and comic tones of a trombone, which seems to have been used for its conventional signification of the throwing off of order, of temporary anarchy. The entire sound-track then disintegrates into a complete cacophony of conflicting sounds: a singer singing the introduction to the choral passage of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; tunes emanating from a radio rapidly moving over stations; and a "live" female voice (actually that of Elder's wife, Kathy) singing, haltingly and under instruction, the popular song "What Have They Done to My Song?" Each sound in its turn evokes the sense of a loss of control, of the corruption of some originally "pure" sound.

The visuals which accompany this passage reflect the disorder one hears. The title reappears, sketchily scratched on the emulsion, and moves rapidly from side to side within the frame, creating a double-image effect. To add to this confusion, Elder mixes in a bongo drum, playing a fast, highly syncopated pattern which creates a state of excitation. Soon, though, the original credits reappear, this time accompanied by polyphonic choral music; then the screen suddenly goes black and the viewer is left in silent darkness.

The opening sequence has progressed from order to anarchy and back again. This indeed is the same progression followed by illness, by most works of art, and by the experience of transcendence. At one point later in the film Elder declares: "It is small wonder, then, that in disease, as the mortal part wastes and withers away, the spirit grows more sanguine with its lightening load." Just as the body racked with disease at first breaks down, so too does the credit sequence, and just as disease burns away impurities, lightening the spirit's load so it might reach a state of calm, so too does the credit sequence achieve a final tranquillity. Similarly, the film as a whole will follow the progression from order to dis-ease, to a "higher order," like that experienced when illness brings about a greater clarity of vision as it burns away the dross of superfluous self. The religious music heard in the film evokes this strengthening of the spirit which occurs as the suffering body withers away and the soul ascends to its highest Visionary potential.

The view that illness experienced and accepted can bring deeper perception is again articulated in the next sequence, which begins with a high-angle tracking shot of empty tombs, which takes up only the bottom right portion of the screen.

the rest of which is black. On the sound-track one hears a mixture of wind and the well-known lyrics of Leonard Cohen (an artist whose sensibilities Elder in some measure shares):

I was handsome. I was strong.
I knew the words of every song.
Didn't my singing please you?
No, the words you sang were wrong.

These lyrics, the wind and the images of tombs combine to produce a sensation of coldness, the tombs because they are an image of death, the wind because it is haunting, and Cohen's lyrics because they are melancholic. Furthermore, because in western culture one scans an image from left to right, by relegating the image to the bottom right corner of the screen, Elder leads the viewer's eye through total darkness to the image: this further strengthens the melancholic nature of the passage. As Cohen's lyrics and the image fade away, leaving only the sound of the relentless wind, a sense of ennui and tristesse remains.

The next image appears at centre screen. It is a brilliant blue image of water rippling softly, creating myriad shapes and shadows. This image is accompanied by natural sounds of birds chirping and of gently running water. In the preceding sequences the camera was searching, even relentless; here it is stationary and calm. Not only is this sequence more pleasant than the Cohen sequence, it is also decidedly more positive, because it evokes the harmony of nature. The narration too offers this positive view: "Sickness, too, individualizes a person, sets him apart from others even in his way of seeing."

The sequence of these two passages, then, follows the same natural progression that was followed by the credit sequence, the progression from disorder to order. This pattern of development is used to convey the idea that illness is not a final state but a transitional state, leading to further change. In this way, Elder reiterates the Romantic view that illness leads to a heightening of vision, to a greater apprehension and appreciation of the world that surrounds us, an appreciation expressed by his use of long takes of the rippling water, which acquires new colours, contours and clarity with each ripple. In this passage he allows us, as he so seldom does, to study the many manifestations of its texture, its shadow and light.

Later parts of this sequence continue to develop this idea. In this portion of the sequence, which is composed wholly of natural sounds and images, Elder presents the viewer with images of the natural world that suggest it is seen anew. Most of this imagery consists of close-ups. The camera tilts up from the water to reveal a snail magnified several times. This single image gives way to multiple images of the natural world as the screen becomes alive with colour and movement.

Still later in this section, Elder introduces images of European cities. In context, they seem to connote that which is foreign and unnatural. This sense of foreignness is underlined by the Dylan lyrics accompanying these scenes, which include the phrase "living in a foreign country." In all, the passage alludes to the notion of travel abroad, a notion Elder returns to later when he speaks of Keats, D.H. Lawrence, Chopin, and Robert Louis Stevenson, all of whom were artists who experienced serious illness, and all of whom were sent into exile by their quests for their art and their health:

It (sickness) also makes one an exile, a wanderer in search of a healthy place. Sickness is an excellent reason for a life that is mainly travelling. It was sickness that sent Keats to Rome, Chopin to the Islands of the Mediterranean, Robert Louis Stevenson to the South Pacific and D. H. Lawrence around half the globe.

All these artist-travellers, it might be pointed out, espoused the Romantic view of art and suffering; indeed we insist on seeing Keats as the archetypal Romantic, wasted bodily by suffering but transcending his condition by writing sublime poetry.

The odyssey with which *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* is concerned is both actual and metaphorical; it is at once a journey out into the world and inward toward self-consciousness. The narration makes a statement about this latter journey:

Disease was one of my better teachers Fever and illness, I have found, so jar the perceptual process that the world is seen anew Disease ennobles a person, etherealizes him The sadness that one feels in illness is a mark of refinement of sensibility In truth, a man in good health is rarely interesting. He lacks both the experience of the terrible which confers a density upon his ruminations and the imagination of disaster that allows him to see past the ordinary wretchedness of those boring people who have never suffered the calamities of illness and is oblivious to both himself and things around him. He becomes thing-like. Pain, like every other disequilibrating force arouses tension and conflict. It animates a person, gives him life. . . . So long as one does not brood over his ills, disease has singular powers of producing revelation.

The theme of self-discovery, of the development of sensibility, of learning that one is not thing-like, is central to *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*. As the product of a near-fatal illness, it involves considerable self-examination and self-scrutiny, and so includes several images of Elder himself. These images are of two sorts: of Elder as a public figure; and of Elder as a private person. Among images of the first sort are those that show him at work at his synthesizer composing the electronic music that accompanies his films, depicted on an advertising poster for a public appearance, and lecturing to a group of students. Among images of the latter sort are images of him examining his emaciated body in the mirror, and images of him masturbating.

These "images of self" share the frame with a wide assortment of other images, sometimes even with two or three other images at a time. These are street scenes, photographed in many European cities, shots of architecture old and new and of a variety of types of religious statuary, scenes from CBC television, of people in urban settings, at carnivals and even in nature. The precise motivation for each juxtaposition of image with image is difficult to discern, with the result that this multi-image format seems based simply on "the juxtaposition of incongruous elements," of which the narration makes mention. If the relationship between images is not readily discernable, it is not intended to be, for the viewer surmises that the appearance of incongruity, rather than of forthright clarity, is the very point of this form of construction. Even so, certain common oppositions are frequently evident in these juxtapositions. For example, different cultures are contrasted in the juxtaposition of a CBC religious program, "Hymn Sing," with European cathedrals; different times are contrasted in the aural juxtaposition of contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous songs by Dylan and The Beatles with "timeless" classical works. But the major effect of the juxtaposition of imagery in the multi-image format is to destroy the coordinates of physical time and space. This destruction of physical time and space, and its replacement with a new set of spatial and temporal relations constructed by (and in) the creative consciousness of the artist, illustrates the possibility of the imaginative transcendence of objective reality.

By juxtaposing his own image with those derived from his odyssey through Europe and into the external world at large, Elder implies that he is searching

for a context for the self. At one point, he even shows himself looking at a slow motion image of himself. In this passage, he seems to stand outside himself, and even outside the world, attempting to find some place for himself in it. But to be searching for some place in the world implies that he is isolated from it. This sense of isolation is reinforced by the fact that while Elder shares the same frame as these scenes of the outside world, he does not share the same space with them. All such relationships are constructed and artificial.

There is, to be sure, a considerable pessimism expressed about the project of the work, the project of integration. But the credit sequence disintegrates and apparently fails. Furthermore, its mock-pompous nature expresses a mock-heroic attitude on Elder's part; the sequence involves more than a little self send-up. Elder keeps alluding to the idea of failure and of being a failure throughout the film. He seems at once, in the emphasis on the constructed, artificial character of the relationships of which the film is built, both to celebrate the power of creative control that, as an artist, he possesses, and to lament the extent that he exercises that control. The work is duplicitous, intentionally inauthentic. The narration begins with the statement, "This is a photograph of me"; Elder seems to introduce himself as the creator of this work. But in fact Elder himself is not represented in the photograph that accompanies this claim, nor is it his voice which we hear. This makes us call into question the authenticity of what we see and indeed the very notion of autobiographical authority. The narration makes a related point:

... a photograph plays false with appearances. A photograph, after all, is a highly artificial construct, no more natural or true to the world than other visual arts of its time. It shares with them, in fact, a very specific set of conventions for the handling of pictorial problems which, though imperceptible to most people of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, are nevertheless both well developed and highly arbitrary.

Neither a photograph, nor by obvious extension a film image, can be trusted to tell the truth, and the film itself, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, must be held suspect as neither art nor wisdom.

Even the form of the film seems to totter between order and disorder. There are many images on the screen at the same time (sometimes as many as four), and the sound-track is composed not only of the narration but also of music and sound effects: these latter types of sound frequently make the narration inaudible, with the effect that the film seems at times out of control. Elder has commented on the effect this apparent loss of control has on the audience. Most narrative cinema relies on the audience's illusory belief that they are in control of the events on the screen, that their expectations cause the film to answer their questions and meet their expectations; indeed the grandiosity implied by this is a major source of the satisfaction such films provide. A film like *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* not only denies this process but actively works against it. On this matter, Elder has commented:

I believe that much of the dominant cinema tries to construct a viewer who feels that he or she is in control of the work I believe one feels threatened by the loss of control that he or she feels when watching some of my films.³

Thus *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* presents the viewers with a dense, complicated narration which demands complete attention in order to be comprehended. Yet the narration often cannot be heard because it is drowned out by the music or sound effects. Similarly, the frame is composed of several different and seemingly incongruous images, none of which the viewer can absorb, let alone relate to the

others. Little wonder that the viewer feels he or she has lost control or even feels somewhat frightened.

In *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* Elder is never shown as a truly public figure who interacts with others. In the sequence with Elder teaching, he and the students are never shown in the same frame; it is as if even in his public persona, as a spokesman for his art, he speaks to no one. This sense of isolation is clearly illustrated in shots of Elder masturbating, for masturbation is a paradigm of an isolated act. He emphasizes the isolation using formal means, for he places the image of him performing this act at the bottom of the screen, and isolates it from surrounding images. Later, he is seen nude, filming himself in front of a mirror; above this image, in a separate part of the frame, are a series of close-up images of naked women. Placing the nude male and female figures in separate parts of the frame enhances the sense of isolation. Most tellingly, the film concludes with the relentless ringing of a telephone, a means for communicating, for establishing contact and connection. No one answers.

The questions posed in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* are answered, albeit only partially, in *1857 (Fool's Gold)*. In describing the Romantic period, critic M. H. Abrams has drawn a distinction between two prevalent metaphors of mind:

(There are) two common and antithetical metaphors of mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives . . . The second typifies the prevailing romantic conception of the poetic mind.⁴

Like the Romantics, Elder, a Visionary, sees Art as a force which, informed by creative consciousness—the “radiant projector”—transforms the world, and in transforming transcends it. An examination of the film *1857 (Fool's Gold)* indicates how the artist achieves this transformation. In her discussion of the film, Carol Zucker observes:

Elder has penetrated the natural appearance of things in order to present their “essence,” or, as the vorticists would have it: Images are abstracted from (a) scene and act as equations or formulas for the emotions the artist derives from it.⁵

The film begins with a naturalistic representation; we see a gull, a sailboat and a bridge surrounded by trees. Using an optical printer, Elder then breaks these images apart; they become more coloured forms than representations of real objects. Thus, the film does not present the world “as it is,” but the world as transformed by the creative imagination, a landscape that exists only in that imagination. If the film presents a journey, it is not an actual journey but an ascent of the imagination, a journey toward transcendence. Through the course of the film, the images become more and more distorted, and the viewer is transported farther and farther into the imaginative realm. S/he is bombarded with images which sometimes pulsate, a complex sound-track consisting of electronic music, electronically-processed percussive noise, thunder and crashing waves, and narration (drawn from Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*) which, because of the complexity of the sound-track, is often inaudible. The inaudibility of the narration, together with the difficulties involved in reading the Ezra Pound text while listening to this complex sound-track and watching the images, completely disorients the viewer.

As the film draws to a close, a woman's voice appears on the sound-track. It is soothing, calming; its liturgical quality suggests and perhaps induces a serene spiritual state. As the voice becomes more prominent, the sound of the storm subsides. At the same time, the images change from flashing and dark-hued to prolonged, slow-motion and white; the latter evoke a sense not just of relief, but

even of restfulness. Elder has taken physical reality and distorted, extended and deepened it; in sum, by transforming it, he has transcended it. These transformations of the natural world demonstrate the artist's control over it.

The opening sequence of *Illuminated Texts* is yet a further demonstration of this control. Elder and his assistant, Anna Pasomow, act out the opening of Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*. The sequence begins in silence with Elder sitting on a chair; a grid is laid over this image. With a clap of his hands (which sounds like the clapboard used to commence filming), a passage from Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* is introduced, and the grid (which suggests a planning stage) disappears. This suggests that it is only upon Elder's intervention that the film can commence. In this way, he demonstrates his complete control over both the action and the art form.

At a later point, Elder rises from his chair to answer the door. In doing so, he exits from the frame, and when he does so, the camera, which was previously steady, goes out of control, crashing into furniture and walls on its way. The implication of this is that it is Elder's presence which "stabilizes" the camera. When he is not present the creative act turns destructive.

The acting in this section of the film is deliberately stilted and unnatural. The characters read from a script, their eyes frequently meet the gaze of the camera, and they perform awkwardly. The unrealistic delivery undercuts the illusion of reality that conventional narrative and naturalistic acting contrive to establish. It points up the fact that the film is a construct only, a product of a creative mind, whose nature is determined by the artist. Further, the subject of the lesson is mathematics. Elder seems to be suggesting that the construction of a film is guided by rules as arbitrary as the axioms of mathematics.

Like the sound-tracks of *1857 (Fool's Gold)* and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, the sound of *Illuminated Texts* is a combination of varied and discordant sounds which often drown out the narration. Its complexity points up its constructed nature. Moreover, at its largest level, *Illuminated Texts* is divided into eight parts, of which half are "dramatic" sequences and half montage sequences. This structure makes the constructed quality of the film very obvious, as Elder is well aware, for in a proposal for his most recent film, *Lamentations*, which is currently in progress, he points out:

I find particularly appealing the fact that this alternation between different forms of construction provides a means for stressing the constructed character of the work which does not rely on the now somewhat tired device of making reference to the process by which the work was constructed.⁶

In highlighting the fact that the film is a construct, the product of his mind, Elder is demanding that we recognize how completely he controls the nature of the work. This conscious sense of control, especially over nature—as seen in *1857 (Fool's Gold)*—relates Elder's later vision to that of the Romantics. It is *his* consciousness which interprets and even shapes the world, which acts as the "radiant projector."

In the middle section of *1857 (Fool's Gold)*, the barrage of images and sounds reaches apocalyptic proportions; the viewer feels that s/he lacks control over what is happening, that some catastrophic event is about to occur—or indeed is occurring—which cannot be affected by mere mortal hands. Against this is set the demonstration of artistic control that in the end reestablishes order. Nevertheless, the horror of the apocalypse is suggested. Like *1857 (Fool's Gold)*, *Illuminated Texts* makes use of the idea of the apocalypse, but redefines it and extends its ramifications. As mentioned above, *Illuminated Texts* is composed of both dramatic sequences and montage sequences. The dramatic sequences are composed of the

following: the Ionesco play, *The Lesson*; a section dealing with Egerton Ryerson, the man after whom Ryerson Polytechnical Institute where Elder teaches is named; and a section in which Elder interviews a personal friend who is also an artist. The final dramatic sequence involves Elder's anguished response to a letter he received which accused him of breach of contract. Each of these dramatic sequences involves Elder himself, if only by implication. All of these sequences could be described as autobiographical to a certain extent; in fact, they all represent Elder's attempt to work through a problem in his professional life which appears to have been a source of great torment. The last of these dramatic sequences is composed of images of Elder suffering as a result of the Institute's accusations.

These personal sequences are juxtaposed with montage sequences which represent the "exterior" world—that is to say, the world which is not Elder's "personal world." Thus, like *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, *Illuminated Texts* represents in part an attempt by the artist to reconcile his existence with the world around him, and more importantly, to understand his suffering in relation to a broader context. This is most evident in the relation between the scene depicting a tormented Elder, and the final montage sequence of the film, composed of images from Nazi concentration camps. The first montage sequence is composed primarily of rich, lush natural imagery. Over the course of the four montage passages, the imagery changes from depictions of a natural world, unsullied by human intervention, to imagery which depicts nature "corrupted" by human intervention to greater and greater degrees.

This progression suggests the Christian myth of the Fall, the expulsion from Paradise. Each successive montage sequence includes more and more images of the human destruction of nature, and human violence. There are, for example, images of boxers, and pornographic images of violence against women. Even the act of masturbation depicted in the final section of the film seems desperate and frantic. Elder takes us from images of a natural paradise to images of the personal, sexual and cultural violence which culminates in the ultimate violence expressed at the end of the film: the destruction, or attempted destruction, of an entire people—the Holocaust.

The poetic texts superimposed over the images make explicit reference to the Fall:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire
Who durst defy the omnipotent to arms.

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*)

This is not the greatest thing, though great, the hours
of shivering, ache and burning, when we'd changed
So far beyond our courage—altitudes
Then falling, falling back.

(Robert Lowell)

This notion of the Fall is, I think, meant metaphorically; it suggests a society plunging into an increasingly violent world. All in all, *Illuminated Texts* proposes a vision of apocalyptic doom. It offers its viewers a vision of global significance representing perhaps the threat of global annihilation. As Milton and Lowell used images of descent metaphorically, so too does Elder. Even the Holocaust becomes, in *Illuminated Texts*, a metaphor for the threat of a more immediate human disaster.

Elder is an artist working at a time when the threat of massive global destruction is immanent; his art is beginning to reflect that threat.

Elder's earlier vision, one of absence, loss and isolation, has been transformed into a more articulate attempt to reconcile himself with the world around him. Elder is developing as an artist who, while still concerned with questions of his role and the function of Art itself, is also concerned with an expression beyond the enclosed world of his art. Yet it is still an expression *through* his art. In *Illuminated Texts* the antithesis to destruction is creation, and specifically the creative imagination of the artist. Perhaps Elder is suggesting that Art is the way out or through this holocaust. However, an Art that possesses such an ability would have to be not an Art that is a mere diversion from the world around us, but rather an Art which is conscious of the culture from which it emerges.

1984

1 Bruce Elder, in an interview with the author, August, 1983.

2 In the interview with Bruce Elder he contradicted this notion of illness as a catalyst. Instead, he asserted that this suggestion, which does occur in the text, is meant ironically. Illness, he asserted, is merely dehumanizing: "... it's nothing more than degrading." While Elder may feel this way about his work, I believe there is certainly sufficient evidence to support the reading I have given the text.

3 Bruce Elder, in an interview with the author, August, 1983

4 M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. viii.

5 Carol Zucker, "Bruce Elder's *Fool's Gold*: The Experience of Meaning," *Ciné-Tracts*, 17, 1982, p. 49.

6 Bruce Elder, "A Proposal for *Lamentations*," 1983. (Text unpublished.)