At the beginning of October, the Art Gallery of Ontario held a major homage to one of Canada's outstanding film artists, with a retrospective of the dozen film-works of R. Bruce Elder that concluded with the Canadian premiere of Elder's just completed eight-hour film-poem Lamentations.

Bruce Elder occupies a rather unique place in Canadian filmmaking by the breadth of totalization he aspires to. Both philosopher and filmmaker, Elder's films, particularly his more recent, combine in a distinctively Canadian synthesis the cosmic emotionality of a Stan Brakhage with the educative didacticism of a Jean-Luc Godard who might have studied Heidegger instead of Mao Tsetung. If Elder's films can be seen as sweeping attempts to save (Western) culture from itself, his writings (see, for example, Cinema Canada Nos. 120-121) are distinguished by their determination to localize Canadian experimental filmmaking within specifically Canadian artistic traditions.

In a country whose approaches to filmmaking are so overwhelmingly influenced by non-Canadian practices and traditions, Elder offers a necessary reminder that the truly universal does not bypass Canada, but can establish a home here as well as anywhere.

The following interview, with Associate Editor Michael Dorland, took place in Toronto.
Cinema Canada: You and Michael Snow are the only Canadian film artists who have had retrospectives of this kind at the Art Gallery of Ontario?

Bruce Elder: In specialized screening centers outside of Canada, I think it's had a good reception already. I've taken programs of experimental films to Germany, I've arranged screenings of the films in several centers in the U.S.: in Los Angeles, in New York, and in Buffalo. I've been present at screenings of Canadian experimental films in London, and, I think, generally film artists here are recognized abroad as world-quality experimental filmmakers. Of course, we've had three, four Canadian experimental filmmakers that have received international recognition of the highest order - Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Jack Chambers, and Dave Rimmer are all recognized as among leading figures in the avant-garde cinema; maybe I am too. And that's not bad for a country whose population is something like 25 million. I think at home, though, the situation is dismal, just dismal.

Cinema Canada: Is the recognition given Snow, Wieland etc., given as Canadian experimental filmmakers or as representative of European or American traditions?

Bruce Elder: No, the three or four that I've mentioned are generally thought to be American artists. Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland and David Rimmer all established their reputations working in New York. Only Jack Chambers has been recognized as a filmmaker whose works are distinctly Canadian, though I've wanted to argue that one can perceive in the works of all those people features that set their work apart. One recognizes that all of those people are working on issues that are rather outside of the mainstream of American avant-garde filmmaking, think, and that marks their work as distinctively Canadian. I don't think that difference has been really perceived in the United States.

Cinema Canada: Marginality as distinctively Canadian?

Bruce Elder: I think they wanted to eliminate the differences, to level them out, and to make the works appear as American-type films. Snow's works are generally classified as structural films; he's classified as belonging to a group of filmmakers that include George Landon, Don Loper, Harry Frumpton, Barry Gerson, and I think that the issues that the Americans - Gerson, Frumpton, Landon - are dealing with are significantly different from those that the Canadians are investigating. And the issues that Snow has dealt with are issues that I think, connect him to a tradition in Canadian art: an interest in landscape painting, and yet this difference hasn't been perceived. They've made him appear as an American filmmaker.

Cinema Canada: Bringing it back home, that recognition is not the case here?

Bruce Elder: I think that none of these people has had the acclaim in Canada that he or she deserves, and reputations in Canadian experimental filmmaking have mostly had to be established in the United States. It's one of the reasons why people want to be acknowledged in the United States - it means that at last they will be recognized in Canada. I don't think it's surprising that Chambers is the filmmaker, the Canadian experimental filmmaker who's been, I think, most seriously neglected, given the quality of his work. It's only been in the last few years that his films have been shown at all and this occurred only when a number of people in the United States were introduced to his films and took them up as a kind of cause. Stan Brakhage visited Toronto in '74-'75 and he asked me what Canadian films he should look at. I said, "You have to see Hart of London, you'll love it. It's a film that shares many features with your work" - the interest in the cycle of life and death, the interest in light, the kinds of printing techniques that film uses, are all reminiscent of Brakhage's own work though it's stamped with Chambers' individuality and with other features that make him recognizably Canadian. Anyway, Brakhage did take a look at the Hart of London and decided it was one of the greatest experimental films ever made. He took it around to programmers in the United States, wrote program notes for the San Francisco Festival, had it acclaimed in many places and has turned a few people onto the film and since then it's been recognized. But I can remember an art critic telling me about this film, just two, three, four years after it was finished, and I went to a screening of the film and people were just outraged. They thought it was just a shocking, horrifying, dreadful film. It's only been since the Americans have recognized Chambers' importance that people here have taken him up.

Cinema Canada: How do you account for the non-recognition in Canada, and how do you relate that to equivalent phenomena in, say, poetry, or Canadian culture in general?

Bruce Elder: I think that one problem that experimental film has confronted is the problem of perception that results from what's believed to be a cultural imperative for Canada: that we develop an indigenous feature-film industry. It's believed that it's in the works of popular culture that our identity will be established, that our coherence as a nation will be founded and "high art" can wait. And, of course, experimental film is seen among the film community as paradigmatically "high art." Secondly, I think there's a cultural trait in Canada of timidity and experimental film is seen as vanguard, off-the-wall, crazy, our cultural timidity works against the reception of experimental film as well.

Cinema Canada: In a general way, doesn't our cultural timidity work against the reception of any kind of Canadian art?

Bruce Elder: Yes, one can't think of other arts without a tradition. Poetry has a tradition and, in that sense, even experimental work in poetry isn't seen as outrageous, off-the-wall, crazy. I think the lack of a tradition, the lack of a tradition in filmmaking - films are only 90 years old means we haven't much of a tradition in experimental filmmaking and this makes the works seem all the more outrageous.

Cinema Canada: Isn't that also the case in Europe or in the United States?

Bruce Elder: I think there is the same cultural timidity. I think that we are an extraordinarily timid nation - it's one of our outstanding features as a culture. One sees the evidences of this timidity everywhere. The acute embarrassment that parents so often demonstrate about minor childish misbehaviour in restaurants or whatever. I think actually it has to do with a very strong sense of community in Canada. Again, that has to do with living in a climate and a landscape that's very harsh and very difficult. We huddle together, I think, and establish very strong bonds of community, and what that means, of course, is that the person who steps a bit outside of the community is really in trouble...

Cinema Canada: Especially one who tries to look at the community and represent it.

Bruce Elder: I don't think we want those sorts of representations. I think we want them all from the inside. I think we want sweet and very approving images of ourselves. Imagery that comes from the prevailing norm of what we are as Canadians...

Cinema Canada: Even more, from outside who the question doesn't come into it at all.

Bruce Elder: We're not recognized as a community, that's just an estranged image of ourselves. But I don't think that we want incisive scrutiny of our character.

Cinema Canada: Does Canadian experimental film, since you have done the most work in trying to bring forward a sense of its traditions, does it come out of a kind of dialectic with Canadian feature films, documentary, with Canadian filmmaking, or more from painting and poetry?
Bruce Elder: I don't know that it's an either/or question. I think that one could find roots for features, some of our best feature and documentary and experimental filmmaking is a tradition of Canadian art. I think one way this arises is in the interest that Canadian filmmakers have shown in the nature of photographic representation. I would like to think that, for example, the presence, in the body of work that has been produced by the National Film Board, of several films that make use of still photographs or that offer themselves as a film - stock, or film making, is not accidental. That derives from an interest in the nature of photographic representation and the reason why we are interested in photographic representation, so very much has to do with the photograph's ability to answer, or to provide an indication of the way that certain questions about the relationship of consciousness and nature might be answered. And why these question present themselves so forcefully in the context of Canadian culture is something that's worth thinking of. I'd argue that we live in a climate in which the landscape, the indifference of nature to man is utterly obvious, and if nature is indifferent to man, we might also say, in a way, other than man, other than consciousness, then questions arise. Well, how can a mind know matter, how can a mind know nature if nature is so utterly alien to man and, in fact, hostile to man? And a photograph, I think, gives some indication of how this can be.

Cinema Canada: Does that frivolity have something to do with the general non-recognition of the medium?

Bruce Elder: I wish it had something to do with a joyous affirmation but it doesn't. It's just a desire to be fashionable and to be a little bit outrageous. You know, there has been some interesting kinds of boiled-down Baudelairean cinema. Its roots are in the American underground in the early sixties, and wonderful stuff, you know. Work like Star-Spangled To Death, or Little Stakes At Happiness or Flaming Creatures - the real outrageous, decadent, Baudelairean stuff. But unfortunately the people who are making these films today strike me as people from the suburbs who've come down to tour the downtown, the central core of big-town Toronto on week-ends and, let's say, their Baudelairean convictions are a little thin.

Cinema Canada: The photograph is an answer to the question?

Bruce Elder: It provides an indication of how those questions might be answered. A photograph is, on one hand, a product of nature, it's made by natural forces. You can, of course, simply set up your machinery and walk away and have photographs taken now until you're blue in the face; nature will make the photographs for you. Yet, on the other hand, we know it's the product of the mind, of a vision, so it seems, in that way, to reconcile consciousness and Nature. Its structures are those of the outside world, the external world, the natural world, and yet its manner of presenting itself, I think, resembles the way that images appear in consciousness also. And so, it appears to have the capacity to reconcile consciousness, or to give an indication of how questions about how consciousness and nature can be reconciled might be answered.

Cinema Canada: Is this particular to the still photograph? Is it the same for the moving image?

Bruce Elder: No, I think that one of the things that Canadian film artists have been interested in is the photographic basis of film. It might seem obvious that all film is based in photography. You sometimes refer to the cinematographer of the film as the director of photography. It's a photographic medium. Yet, in other countries, among experimental film artists, there was always a strong movement to re-drawn films, there've been black-and-white flicker films dealing with the materialist base of the medium itself. Other artists have wanted to push film towards abstraction so it would more closely approach the conditions of a painting or of music. And there was never, in the history of the Canadian avant-garde, I think, any strong push in either of those directions. Always, the fundamentally photographic nature of the medium was affirmed, and, I think, that harks back to a tradition in Canadian painting itself, in which photography has been accepted, approved, and painters have often tried to create paintings which take on some of the positive features of a photograph.

working with a camera, working in a photographically-based medium and he tells us it was his interest in photography, partly, that led him into film. It was also an interest in time that he couldn't work through in the paintings that he was doing. Even if you divide the canvas, even if you try incorporating several moments within a single canvas, still there is a sense in which a film can deal with time in a way painting cannot. But at least one of the reasons he was interested in film is that it was, he tells us, a photographically based medium.

Cinema Canada: The showing of something, of a landscape

Bruce Elder: Not that long, a decade. I guess.

Cinema Canada: Have you seen the situation of the Canadian experimental filmmaker change in that decade?

Bruce Elder: I think there are more people making experimental films today than there were a decade ago, a decade and-a-half ago when I began meeting experimental filmmakers, talking with them, writing about their work. But I think a good part of the production is still, very serious, much less rigorous, much less frivolous that I've ever known it. Trendy, hip, silly... worthless. I don't say this of everybody, there are people doing real fine work... Richard Kerr and Phillip Hofmann and Rick Hancox and Henry Jesionka do nice work. Barbara Sternberg, outside Toronto, Chris Gallagher doing very fine work. It's not everyone, but there's such a large number of people who are doing silly, trendy things.
Cinema Canada: Does that come from operating with an awareness of the traditions of Canadian experimental film?

Bruce Elder: I think if you look at Jessioka's film, *Resurrection Fields*, what you see is, in some ways, an anthology of imagery from other Canadian experimental filmmakers, that indicates that kind of awareness. I would say there's no way of those people are aware of the work that's been done before. Kerr programs Canadian experimental film, Hoffman teaches.

Cinema Canada: Does a retrospective such as the one at AGO serve as an exposure to those traditions such as they pass through your work?

Bruce Elder: I certainly hope that. What I hope for, I think won't be realized: what, of course, one hopes is that people recognize that these are works that couldn't have been done anywhere but in Canada and fundamentally they are very, very traditional, I don't see myself as a very experimental filmmaker. I see myself as a really classicist, but I don't think that we are received that way at all; we're seen as outrageous and kooky. Possibly they are pleasurable, but the fact that these are works that are grounded in a long tradition and only have meaning within that tradition, is not something that will be recognized. Though it's true, it's real true.

Cinema Canada: What brought you to films? To the extent that one is aware of that, was there some overiding influence that made you realize that's what I want to do, that's the kind of expression I want to pursue?

Bruce Elder: I didn't develop an interest in cinema early, I had no interest in cinema till I went to university and there I was caught up in the excitement of the '60s and helped program arts events at the university that I attended. McMaster University, arranging readings by poets, performances by musical groups, that sort of thing. We had what we called an arts festival and one of the ways we made money was to invite up underground movies. These were amongst the first screenings these films had in Canada. This took place before even the famous Sin City presentation of American avant-garde films in 1969. I suppose '60 or '61 before than even. We knew with titles like *Pussy On A Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sins of the Fleshpots* and *Hold Me While I'm Naked* and so on, so that we could sell out the houses, make a certain amount of money, and that money could go to pay poets, musical groups and whatever. And, of course, I went over to see the films we programmed and I thought they were extremely interesting, just very, very interesting films. But then too I saw the works of Godard around this time and one of the things that Godard convinced me of was that cinema could be a mode of philosophical discourse, that it wasn't just a medium of popular entertainment, but it could embody fairly serious thinking about fairly deep issues.

Cinema Canada: Were these underground films that were, they serious?

Bruce Elder: They were caught up in a movement towards, let's say, spiritual liberation movements, sexual liberation movements, personal liberation, liberation from the excess repressions of our society, free-speech movements—there was a real political thrust to that kind of filmmaking, not political in the sense of trying to establish a different government in some sea of power, but rather to, you know, kind of, I would say, spiritual liberation.

Cinema Canada: The liberation of everyday life

Bruce Elder: Precisely; capture the joy of the body and the spirit, and the excess repression. These were commonplace ideas in the '60s, associated with taking drugs. But they certainly did have a vision of man's spirit that, I think, is very enriching.

Cinema Canada: What was the first Canadian influence?

Bruce Elder: I saw Wavelength not long after it came out in 1968-69, I guess. I can't forget that first showing. People were shouting and screaming and yelling that take that thing off the screen, this is horrible, change the shot, enough, enough, it's horrible.

Cinema Canada: Where was this?

Bruce Elder: This was at McMaster University, and I thought it was just an absolutely remarkable film. And, of course, the first things that I thought about that film had to do with the way it was so very much involved with being in time and with the extraordinary colour effect. Wavelength pre-

Cinema Canada: Would you relate Norman McLaren to that at all, or was McLaren separate?

Bruce Elder: Curiously the work that's been done at Film Board, I think, had been kept very... I don't know whether it's just the result of institutional politics or what, but it's always separated itself from the mainstream and I would say that the whole string that turned up their nose at Film Board work. One recognizes just how closely related the issues that Arthur Lipsett was working on in his films were to those of some of the other people working in related collage, experimental filmmakers working in collage-forms, but that wasn't perceived very strongly, very clearly in the '60s. They had an institutional endorsement and, by and large, the people who were making experimental films were, if anything, very strongly anti-institutional.

Cinema Canada: Did this have to do at all with the fact of being in Montreal, and Toronto being another place?

Bruce Elder: A Montreal poet was certainly adopted as the spiritual father to the movement and that was Leonard Cohen. John Hofsess's movies included Leonard Cohen's poems. In the Pleasure Palace film, you have the "lovers, they are nameless", that poem is included. Ewing's *Picaro* includes a setting of a poem of Leonard Cohen, — so, it didn't seem to make much difference in that case.

Cinema Canada: No, I mean in terms of Canadian filmmaking always being ghettoized, and so what was happening in Ontario was something else again.

Bruce Elder: People did look out to find in other forms of expression, such as literature: did look to Montreal, did look for people working in other forms of expression, but in film we didn't. And I think it's partly that the people who were working there were fundamentally bureaucrats and not artists. I remember when Brakhage was up on that same trip, in '74, I guess, and he was just as cross as can be about the Film Board, claiming that you could see in Film Board films the evidence of bureaucracy, the evidence of a de-humanizing bureaucracy and that the films just smacked of death and, in a sense, I think that's real true. And, of course, as I say, in this period the spirit really was revolutionary, anti-institutional, anomic, libertarian.

Cinema Canada: And yet at the same time there was an influence from the Candid Eye, was there not?

Bruce Elder: I would say that, rather than an influence from the Candid Eye, that both the people working in the documentary forms and in experimental forms shared roots, but I am not sure that one influenced the other. They have common roots rather.

Cinema Canada: How?

Bruce Elder: Well, I think common roots, I think feeling about the relationships, between, well, about the fundamental importance of representational imagery as a way of indicating the way in which certain questions about the relationship of consciousness and nature might be resolved, and an
terest there for landscape art. Both the documentary and experimental filmmakers shared these issues.

Cinema Canada: It's striking that given a certain commonality in terms of roots, there wasn't any kind of closer contact between the two. There's some sort of ideas in terms of other production forms, in terms of features and so forth, and you have the official industry which is bureaucratic and bureaucratic, and there you have the other people making films, yet they never find a meeting place.

Bruce Elder: Turn it around the other way. I can remember being with some Board people who were watching a film by John Hofsess, the Pleasure Palace film, was being screened, and I found really and truly entrancing. The film Board sorts looked at this film and, at the end, pulled themselves off their chairs, sniffed haughtily, and said, Oh, what a shabbily made film, this is just imaginatively bankrupt, technically poor, sub-cultural nonsense. That was as much as was said, and I was quite intrigued with the film, I tried to say, No, look, I find this interesting and that interesting—No, no, this is just sub-cultural nonsense. Well, it's the spirit which I would accuse the Board of still harboring, frankly.

Cinema Canada: Is this not a function of having mechanisms that are officially mandated to create an official culture?

Bruce Elder: Yes, it's bureaucratic filmmaking. Precisely. So, for example, a couple of years ago, I met with John Spotton (God bless his name) who is the independent sector in Toronto and he asked me why I thought the independent filmmakers, some independent filmmakers expressed some grievances with some annoyance with the Board.

Cinema Canada: You mean independent experimental?

Bruce Elder: We mean broadly independent filmmakers, documentary, political filmmakers, experimental filmmakers and so on. The first thing I said was this. Well, look, the NFB has an official style, and they seem to have 90 per cent of the people just going to resemble films in that style, and they refuse any productions that don't possess, that don't resemble films of that style. And he told me that was utter nonsense, just not true. And so I said, well, that's very nice to hear, but most of us find the budgets rather inflated, and he said that's just not fair. I said, gosh, I can think of a documentary that I saw this week at the NFB and I'm moderately interesting documentary, an hour-long film. I could have done it for $25,000 and the board's price for that was $250,000. It seems to be that the Board and that's a factor of 10. And he said, this is nonsense, it is impossible to do a film, an hour-long film, for less than $25,000. So I said, well, I finally finished a three-hour film (Illuminated Texts) and so, I take it then, the minimum is $100,000, and that is a film in the neighborhood of $1 million. He said: Oh, bare minimum, absolutely bare minimum. Well, I said, I did a three-hour film last year and I figure it cost me $100,000, maybe $125,000 to do. And in that figure I included a salary for myself for the year that I did; I didn't receive a salary; I was teaching doing this at nights and weekends, but I included in that figure a good salary, he said, $125,000, in Board film, just about getting it for any funding because we don't support stuff like that. I pointed out that this is just what I said at the beginning: they have a way of making films, there is a style that they have, if you conform to that style, you have a chance of getting funding, you deviate from it and they are going to tell you that you really don't know what you are doing. It's that kind of fussy staffing. But I saw in the room the day the Film Board people looked at Hofsess' Pleasure Palace.

So, I think that the spirit that experimental filmmakers have with them is that they are really marginalized, that the Film Board's the enemy and the industry is the enemy. I don't really think that is true. I have tried to point out the there are features that connect Canadian film with other aspects of our film production and art, but I must say that's an unusually catholic view. The industry and the Board are most seen as the enemy.

Cinema Canada: Does that bother you?
Cinema Canada: You were saying earlier it goes back to a series of very conscious decisions to develop and support popular mass-forms of filmmaking. Given the prospect that this isn't very likely to change in the near- or long-term future, how do you feel about that?

Bruce Elder: The prospects for change in this I think are very limited. All the indications are that the government is going to just shift support more and more toward what they envisage as popular culture. I find the whole wave of distinctions made here between popular culture and high art, very, very curious indeed. Here, opera seems the paradigmatic high art, it's what money people do when they want to really demonstrate just how wealthy they are. In Europe, opera is seen by and large as a vulgar art-form, it's just vulgar and impure. And how we arrive at these notions of what's popular and what's culture and what's high art is something that I think really demands very serious scrutiny, but it ain't gonna get it here, let's not kid ourselves. But the indications are that there's going to be more funding for television, that there will be more stress on popular entertainment films. I found the comments by two people, by Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling in the controversy around 'The Cinema We Need.' ('Cinema Canada Nos. 120-121') very, very interesting in this regard – chilling too, perhaps, in that Harcourt's position basically was that the '80s have not been too kind to innovation in the arts. This is a time when popular culture, when all the support is going to be for popular culture – we may as well recognize that these are the realities of the '80s and buckle under. There's just no place for the kinds of personal cinema for which you argue. It may be artistic or may have aesthetic value, it may even be that if the questions were thought about more carefully that it would be recognized that there is a cultural value, but let's not kid ourselves. These are the '80s and we know what it's like in the '80s, and I think actually he's bang on about all of this. My attitude is to fight rather than buckle under, but it's an accurate diagnosis.

Cinema Canada: Do you ever get the feel in your own work, whatever the legitimacy of the traditions you are operating out of, that this is a dying art-form? Isn't that the lamentations part of Lamentations?

Bruce Elder: You are quite right. I think that the film's partly about the end of history, but it's also about the end of cinema and there is a comment to that effect in the film. There is a series of scenes of a man in the alleyway ranting about this and that – mostly about women – and he comments at one point, this film will be the end of cinema. I think that avant-garde cinema is beseiged – it has not received the kind of financial support that's required to do it. You can imagine what institutions cost to make, you can imagine what I could get from public sources – where am I going to get the rest of the money, and who's crazy enough to do that kind of work in those conditions? How much longer can I go on? Not long, working under those conditions.

Cinema Canada: How real a consideration is that?

Bruce Elder: It's a day-to-day consideration. It's something that just never leaves my mind, I don't see how it could. I can't continue to run up the debts that I've been running up, I can't continue to do the work after hours in the way that I have. I can't continue to work under the conditions that I have been working, I mean, I don't have the kind of free-time that people working at the universities have to do this sort of work. I'm like a Sunday painter, trying to do eight-hour-long films on the side, it's craziness. And, you know, if I continue like this, I'll be either crazy or sick.

Cinema Canada: Towards the end of Lamentations there is a line, I believe, that goes "a kind of dance, a leaping into the future, a purpose to go on." How do you see your purpose?

Bruce Elder: Well, I hope to say something about the conditions in which consciousness has found itself in the last few decades – or that have become apparent in the last few decades – though I think these conditions have existed now for 200 years, that, well, frankly, life on this planet...

Cinema Canada: No, just on the level of your daily effort as an experimental filmmaker.

Bruce Elder: Well, this is a mission and I do hope to say that Western concepts of reason have driven us into an absolutely extreme situation – a situation that threatens life on this planet, actually. And these films are partly a call to recognize this extreme condition; I hope a suggestion of a way beyond. So there is a mission behind this film that doesn't make the personal difficulties of doing this work any less grievous, however.

Cinema Canada: Do you see Lamentations as potentially your last film? Is that just one of the dimensions of the film?

Bruce Elder: One is always afraid of not being able to continue and certainly I was, all the time I was making it, wondering if there would ever be another film I hope there will. I want to do another film called Consolations.

Cinema Canada: This is part of a cycle? Bruce Elder: Part of a cycle and...

Cinema Canada: This would be the third part or...

Bruce Elder: There are longer portions and shorter portions to this cycle. So far, I guess, there are about seven or eight parts, and there are about seven or eight more parts.

Cinema Canada: Seven or eight parts, taking the body of your work to this point?

Bruce Elder: Correct.

Cinema Canada: What would it mean for you not to be able to make films anymore?

Bruce Elder: It would be a relief; financial relief. It would take a lot of the burden off me. There are times I think I could happily go on by diverting my creative energies into writing. At other times I think that belief is excessively sanguine.

Cinema Canada: The belief that you could divert?

Bruce Elder: Yes, excessively sanguine and, in fact, I wouldn't know what to do with myself, if it came to that. Already now I haven't photographed. I haven't used a camera for a year now, other than one week-end, because I couldn't stand the loneliness, and I went and bought some film and shot something for no particular reason. But I can't go on. I just need to photograph.

Cinema Canada: Is it like writing, is it that kind of itch?

Bruce Elder: Oh yes, it's just an urge – you just have to satisfy it or it just gets stronger and stronger, until you are driven harder and harder, till you finally give in. Oh yes, I have to photograph.

Cinema Canada: That is the method, if you want, in your filmmaking? And then the structuring is subsequent to that or they are working together?

Bruce Elder: It works both ways, actually. I collect material, I go out to collect and then the urge that I just described, and often times I've no idea were the footage that I'm shooting will fit into the overall cycle. I do have a sense of the progression of the cycle and the structure of the story that I am working in film. I've known that there would be certain kinds of connections between individual works that, for example, '857' would deal with illness on a kind of abstract or social level and The Art of Worldly Wisdom would deal with illness on a personal level, so there would be a kind of personal calamity and a social calamity that those two films would mirror. I've thought about such connections.

Cinema Canada: Likewise illuminated Texts as the social catastrophe and Lamentations as the intellectual catastrophe?

Bruce Elder: Yes, and even these is there is an alternation between the social and the personal level, because there's a danger among who want to rescue their personal lives and then there is an attempt to re-begin, to start our culture over again, to recognize that Western history has drawn to an end and to turn to outside sources for the vitality with which to start a new culture. In other words, to turn culture's life around as figures like Lizst or Newton attempted to reshape their lives, so it's personal and there is an alternation of the per-
human consciousness. So I would love to be able to explore drama, to explore these features of pleasure, to explore these features of consciousness. What stands behind our interests, what stands behind the pleasure that we take in identification with dramatic characters? What stands behind the pleasure that we take in discerning a world that was set in disarray being returned to order and harmony? These are interesting questions to ponder and I'd like to have the apparatuses used to produce dramatic films with which to think these questions. But I don't think there's that possibility in Canada.

Bruce Elder: Is that the developmental direction that would take you beyond experimental or is it still in the context of your definition of experimental film? Do you, indeed, consider your filmmaking experimental or is it filmmaking period?

Bruce Elder: There are lot of complex questions there, because, for one thing, I have to recognize that there are figures, there is a self consciousness about my filmmaking and one form this takes is the recognition of the tradition, traditions in filmmaking from which my works come from, a recognition, an acknowledgement of the influence that people like Brakhage have had on my work, that Snow had on my work, that Owen Land has had on my work, very, very traditional. It would be facile of me to claim that I didn't believe that my work was more strongly related to those filmmakers who have been classified as experimental filmmakers than to others. There is another sense in which I would want to claim, though, that my work is very, very traditional work, that people who were in any way familiar with as central epic tradition in Western literature, running from Homer through Milton, through Blake, to Joyce and Pound, would not find my work in any way strange or unfamiliar. In that sense, and I don't really see it as experimental, as innovative, as avant-garde, as vanguard filmmaking. All those terms do seem to me preposterous, but they are the terms that are used to refer to the tradition in which my works exists and I use to refer to my films. Furthermore I don't really see that one can establish the features, or describe features that experimental films must have, that separate them from other sorts of filmmaking. One can't say that experimental films can't include actors, or can't make use of scripts or can't do this or can't do that. That seems to me that one can work, self-consciously, and without submitting to the pressures of entertainment business and still make use of actors and scripts. But in Canada this will never happen. There won't be a chance to make Passion here for decades at least.

Cinema Canada: You said earlier this summer that the deeper you go into it, the harder it was to see an end to this filmmaking period.

Bruce Elder: It's a very unpleasant recognition. It's unpleasant that every single level at which I can think about this problem, from the possibility of continuing financial difficulties, to recognition of the personal toll that it is taking on me, that is this on my health. On the other hand, one can take a long view and realize that the chances of completing in any medium a work of the proportions that I have conceived is probably not better than 50/50. One would arrive at this figure by surveying the history of 20th-century art. So lots of others have failed at it too. I think it's harder year-by-year. I am very eager to make a film entitled Consolations.

Cinema Canada: Would which be a continuation?

Bruce Elder: Yes, the hook for the title of this film appears in the passage in Lamentations which presents Franz Liszt and Liszt is at this point near the end of his life. He has passed that point in his life where he is travelling around Europe and inflaming the hearts of women with his passionate concertizing and has by now taken minor religious orders, and is an abbe. And in this passage he is composing Sunt Lacrimae Rerum, there are tears in the affairs of things, a brutal, dismal, bleak, bleak piece and then at the end he remembers whom he serves and sits down at the piano and plays a piece entitled "Consolations" and...
Bruce Elder's  
**Lamentations**

The burden of belatedness — how to proceed despite the crushing sense of coming too late with too little into a world filled by those who've already done it all and better — that so oppresses 'classic' cinema as a whole, is not that surprisingly the special field of Canadian experimental cinema. And here, broadly, two principal approaches to belatedness can be distinguished: the 'found' tradition best exemplified by the films of Michael Snow, and the 'knowing' tradition so characteristic of Bruce Elder's films since *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979). Both traditions reflect different approaches to the same question: How is belatedness, or post-technological art possible?

With *Lamentations: A Monument To The Dead World*, Elder's eight-hour film-monument to belatedness that recently premiered as the conclusion of the Art Gallery of Ontario's Elder Retrospective (Oct. 1-11), the question is pushed to psychological and technical extremes. Technically, the film's montage is composed from over 7000 shots, laid over with printed text, readings, narration, stills, dialogue and music mixed on some 54 tracks. The soundtrack was created from a battery of computer and electronic equipment including, say the production notes, "speech synthesizers, phasers, phalangers, vocoders, computer-controlled synthesizers, echo boxes, digital percussion units, digital reverber units, analog delay units, custom built sequencers, filters and computer orchestration equipment." Psychologically, the tone of belatedness is raised to the point of transcendent paranoia in that *Lamentations* offers itself as constructed from the state of mind of one who imagines himself to be the last thinking person in history. In the light of such a dual over-determination — the technological death of art, and the end of history — Elder seems to be asking, what happens?

Such a question only raises others: to whom or to what? To me, to you, and all the rest of us who inhabit these modern times? To Film, Art, or the Meaning of Life? If "This film is about you, not about its maker," as *Lamentations* text explains early on, the statement is later amended with the words "at best, a half-truth." For, in the half-truths of the end of History, perhaps nothing happens — and that's why films keep being made.

If Elder hoped that, by taking upon himself the burden of belatedness, a filmmaker can make a film which unburdens itself of that burden then that is pretty much what does happen. Because *Lamentations* is an intellectual filmmaker’s "Portnoy’s Complaint" in that only after this long confession is he truly free to actually begin — yet as a confession *Lamentations* both succeeds and fails simultaneously. It succeeds in being a tremendous trope of imaginative liberation for its maker who has with this film freed himself of a psychological burden. But it fails technically in that beyond an eight-hour journey through a mental and imagistic cosmos inhabited by a great many representations all named Bruce Elder — a not uninteresting excursion by any means, given the wild catholicity of Elder’s mind — one sedentum has much occasion to forget that that is exactly where one is entrapped.

So there's something enormously parenthetical about *Lamentations* — as if Elder, after the apocalypse-Auschwitz end of European history that terminates Illuminated Texts (1982), had come to the astonishing and troubling realization that he, the filmmaker, had survived his own film and there was nothing to do but go home.

*Lamentations* Part 1: "The Dream Of The Last Historian," is the journey back from the gas-chambers of instrumental reason, back through the ruins of European civilization and the rubble of the European mind's echoes of its eternal debates, back to the NICCTICA and the addiction to a pilgrimage towards new beginnings, or, if nothing else, that sense of a broken totality that we hold in common.

For out of the crucible of belatedness, the Canadian poet emerges to find that he can sing — but "only the snow falling," "the endless world of the snow falling." Because at the end of *Lamentations* long lament, nestled there in its dizzying snow of images, sound and text, is the possibility of a beginning. Unless, of course, that is the specific paranoia of the poet.

If summing-up is one of the advantages of belatedness, one of *Lamentations*’ advantages over any reviewer is that its length defies encapsulation. In its details, *Lamentations* contains a whirlwind, encyclopedic tour of Old World philosophy from Plato to Heidegger. Nietzsche and Freud, historic personages (Newton, Berkeley, Lissitz), art (imagery and music) from the Renaissance to the Romantic, architecture, medicine’s therapies from analysis to electroshock. New World ruins from post-industrial to urban contemporary in mineral, animal and human, form, as well as vignettes of mechanized modern life’s car-filled streets, crazies, or robots, contrasted against representations of that imaginative control subsequently comes and goes, the inclination towards narrative recurs right through to the film’s ending where even such a marvellously visual sequence as the sparkling rhomboid flamedancer’s dress tends to be dominated by the narrated conclusion (written a la Virginia Woolf or some such resolutely pre-Joycean prose).

Moreover, as all the viewing of *Lamentations* produces the strong suspicion that Elder is telescoping on the verge of abandoning experimental film altogether. And what makes for such an intriguing possibility is the film’s own denial of its self-abandonment. Elder, by following his imagination beyond belatedness, has in him the potential to become a director along the axis from Fellini to Syberberg, that is, if he would pursue that pyramidal control over the utter arbitrariness of his medium that the New York-Canadian sequence displays so convincingly. Albeit, this would involve something of a theoretic reversal in Elderian cinema.

Otherwise, what remains are problems. For one, as a poem, *Lamentations* is still entrapped in belatedness, indeed, at much the same point Canadian poetics remains in its poeticity ‘50s. As an ‘experimental’ film, *Lamentations* is primarily interesting because of the triple feat of its length, erudition and technique; that is, as an object of specialization, for Elder’s films represent cinema that *Lamentations* reveals elements of a formidable imaginative deduction.

Having trooped itself the knowing experimental tradition’s further evolution could signal the beginning of the complete abandonment of Canadian cinematic belatedness by the realized Canadian Romanticism that *Lamentations* demonstrates negatively.

"Now we may begin," says the psychoanalyst at the conclusion of Portnoy’s Complaint, tellingly entitled Civilization and its Discontents in an earlier draft, "and begin a new civilization of joy.” As a statement in the context of the intellectual Elder’s massive critique of civilization, marking the true point of departure for the ‘real man’ Elder, no longer a fleeing self-concealing ‘true woman’ but himself as a filmmaker. Unless, of course, this too is only another belated, and paranoid, fantasy.

Michael Dorland
LETTERS

Dorland's error

Michael Dorland’s review of my film Lamentations (Cinema Canada No. 124) did a splendid job of presenting its conceptual background. The challenge of reviewing a film of the length and scope of Lamentations is formidable. Dorland seems to have measured up to the challenge.

Yet the review troubles me. It’s really not that I find it insufficiently laudatory; after all, it is mostly positive. What troubles me, I suppose, is a sense that it shoots wide of what ought to be its mark, for Dorland overestimates the film’s secondary features while muddling its depiction of what I take to be the film’s primary features.

I can express in another way the uneasiness I feel with Dorland’s review. It seems to me Dorland commits the error of arguing that because I reject one of a pair of what are conventionally conceived to be opposites, I embrace the other. It seems to me Dorland’s conclusion that Lamentations gives evidence my work is progressing towards narrativity. The only reason for asserting this I can conceive is that Dorland’s own conclusion that narrative cinema is the antithesis of experimental cinema. He notes quite correctly — and this is an insight that no other commentator on my films has had, and for which I am grateful — that my films are unlike those belonging to the mainstream different from the avant-garde’s “standard product.” Sure nuff, a criticism of avant-garde filmmaking (as it is currently practiced) is implicit in this. But Dorland proceeds to the incorrect inference that if I criticize avant-garde filmmaking, I must be headed toward narrative cinema. I can assure you, I am as resolutely non-narrative as when I wrote “The Cinema We Need.”

I dwell on this elementary logical error because it has a close relation to an issue central to Lamentations: structure. So when, then, I am committing this mistake, I am led to suspect he may have missed the film’s point. For Lamentations critiques that exclusionary form of thought which establishes distinctions among things (or features) and effectively chooses among them by ranking them in a hierarchy. At the same time, it critiques an opposing form of thought that seeks to resolve all contradictions in some grand but inevitably empty synthesis.

Let us consider the latter critique first. Lamentations uses a variety of strategies to foreground the “representational” quality of images: it re-presents obvious stereotypes of women and re-uses the stock-in-trade images of Romantic art (why it uses these particular images is another matter); the noble savage, ruins, exotic tropical locations, the bohemian artist. The purpose of these strategies is to demonstrate the process by which the simulacrum is produced; representations that are already part of a conceptual system have come to take the place of the real. Lamentations also demonstrates the function of this displacement: it places the mask of the unreal over what is real.

I cannot explain using the empirical methods dominating thought today. At the same time, through this displacement, the opaqueness of the real is, as Adorno points out, transformed into the artificial mystery by the individual who suffers them and at the same time identifies himself with the very powers that determine those (real) processes” (T.W., Adorno, “The Negation of Negation,” p. 112). The individual transforms the real into a phantasmagoric image imbued with the character of the thinking subject itself. These phantasmagoric images are then re-appropriated by the subject as the real itself.

Dorland recognized the problems with this for process with Hugh Kenner tells us (in The Pound Era, p. 417), that in an abandoned version of Canto I, Pound wrote: Shall I Confuse my own phantastikon? Or say the filmy shell that circumscribes me With actual sun; Confuse the thing I see With actual gods behind me

The problem is that the illusion hides the source of value (reality) from sight. The dream of man’s projection and re-assimilation (not too unlike that experienced routinely in watching films), we lose our connection with the real. We come to live in the “wonder world next door” the film speaks of. Consider in this connection the quotations from Pound’s Canto concerning artificial paradises which appear on 1857: Fool’s Gold, and the dream of man’s projection and re-assimilation.

Herrenchiesse and Neuschwanstein — which appear at the beginning of Lamentations Or, for that matter, the artificial paradises embedded in the Romantic conceptions of the Native American, the love-bed or the primitive mystery sites of lost civilizations images of which compose most of the film.

But the longing for utopia turns easily into a death wish, a longing for extinction there is, indeed, something of this in the mythically expressed longing for the real, a faint image of the real in the process of dissolving the real into simulacra, Western culture conceived a death wish for itself Lamentations comments on this, too. Central to both the male and female narrators’ discourses is a mystically expressed longing for the past and the narration connects this longing, through the mediating ideas of madness, solipsism, dissolution and the desire for what does not change, to death. The film expresses the belief that one can go off in search of the artificial paradises of human love, Amerindian life, etc., but all will be left with in the end is a nervous conclusion.

As the film also shows, the ideals of such Romantic myths give rise to other more fervent demands for their realization, simply by force of will, in the here and now. To make matters worse, the quality of the object towards which this will strives, this (no-place) utopia, results, as simulacra come to replace all real objects, in the ill’s being transformed into a will for sheer spectacle.

Now here lies an interesting question: if the simulacrum, as unreal, is nothing — and at the no-place of utopia there can only be no-thing — then such a will becomes a will for no-thing (and indeed, a will for the phantasmagoric mystery, for nothing such a will simply nihilates). Wishing no thing, it is simply a will to will. And the question: is this mirroring a form of self-reflexivity or does it block self-reflexivity in the circuits of narcissistic fascination and solipsism?

The endlessness of the circuit of demand that is the will to will produces an unceasing nihilating negativity. In an ill-fated attempt to liberate the spirit from such unceasing demand arose that emphasis on immediacy and on presence familiar to us from abstract art. This was the main response to the loss of the real in the modern age of the simulacrum. (Whenever we think of it, we should remember that, wherever they could, the Fascists appropriated the means whereby the Nazis could use art against the arts. But instead of manifest what it truly is. Unfortunately, Dorland seems to have missed the whole critical thrust of the film.

Furthermore, the longing of estrangement from the real that Romantic art engenders is easily converted into mourning for a lost past. Thus, in Romantic art the Golden Age of antiquity is mourned as the point of originality (e.g. experimental film/narrative film) and then forces a choice between what are held up as opposites. I further suggested that Lamentations critiques this form of thought, for it opposes the concept of a unity in which all contradictions are resolved to be an empty one. (As Hegel suggested, commenting on the philosophy of his contemporary Schelling, this is the conception of the Absolute as a night in which all cows are black). How can such a position be elaborated?

The antimony central to Lamentations is one between the unrealism of the ultimately real as the Whole and the conception of the ultimately real as the discrete particular (the fragment), have shown how Lamentations reveals the ultimate reality of the Whole — and, contrary to Dorland, Lamentations is not a Romantic quest film but a critique of such quest films. As the suitably so often state, and the fore-grounding of the simulacrum, as Derrida suggests, the Whole is a projection in which the real is converted Into the representational. Lamentations depicts the Whole as a monstrous fiction, informed by our appetites, wishes, beliefs, etc. It was one of my objectives.
to demonstrate this. That is why I feel it is quite wrong of Dorland to say: "But (Lamentations) fails techni-
cally in that beyond an eight-hour journey through a mental and im-
agistic cosmos inhabited by a great many representations all named Bruce Elder ... one seldom has much
occasion to forget that is exactly where one is entrapped." Whether there is any escaping solips-
ism, whether our mind has not been converted into a cinema-like universal
mind consuming everything, whether the progress of consciousness has not
foreclosed access to the Wholly Other - these are the questions Lamenta-
tions raises. While I believe their formative role is obvious, Dorland uses my raising them as
arguments for accusing Lamentations of being a "technical failure." I, on the other
hand, believe that Lamentations' power derives from the strength it exhibits in its
facing up to the questions about modernity.

Too, Dorland seems not to recognize - certainly he fails to mention - Lamen-
tations' tragic structure. I believe this oversight is also a result of Dorland's
exclusory logic. A tragedy is a drama in which the protagonist finds himself
captured in a situation in which he is forced to choose between opposites,
because there is no middle way between opposites as there is between extremes,
and, whichever choice he makes will be made at some cost. Lamentations
depicts modern life as caught between the demand to live one's life within the
pervading sense of the Whole known to the ancients and the demand on live
one's life among the fragments of reality. Now I must state briefly how the
loss of the sense of the Whole, for order, and lose touch with

I have already shown Lamentations demonstrates that succumbing to the
former demands results in estrangement from the real and the psychic distress
that attends the loss of the sense of reality. Now I must state briefly how the
choice to live in modernity's sunned world also results in a loss. But before
doing so, I shall make a final comment on the structure of the film. Lamenta-
tions alternates sections composed from many fragments, so many their unity
cannot be grasped in any single viewing and passages composed of a single
sequence-shot. This parallels the opposition between the Whole and the
sundered world.

Dorland failed to note the signifi-
cance of this structure. Instead, he opted for one ("So too the film's narrative
scenes" - though I would never call them narrative, only acted scenes - "are the
strongest") and against the other (in the montage scenes "Elder succumbs to the
worst kinds of dualism - logomachy and camera-frenzy"). What bothers me
about this claim is not that it runs counter to the prevailing opinion - and
generally the montage scenes have been highly praised - but, rather, that instead of
taking into account the way the two types of construction relate to one
another, Dorland chooses for one, against the other. This is yet another
product of Dorland's exclusory logic.

But we must get to the point of show-
ing Lamentations to be tragedy. What of the sections of the film assembled from fragments? What do they say of life in the
sundered world? Well, Lamentations
sets up a network of references, emblems, historical signs, musical
echoes, which stimulate recognition as
memories. In this way, it shows that
memory, observation and desire enter
into the films in which they are
contained in the fragments, we can
piece together a history of subjectivity.
And though we may dream of con-
catenating luminous details in a para-
tactival syntax, still, those who are in
any degree acute recognize that any
work composed in this way would be
endless. (This I believe was the problem
Pound found himself in, because he
believed the word could deliver its re-
fert.) Only a poem containing a per-
ceiving and unifying mind can ever
hope to arrive at a transfiguring, ordered
vision.

So where are we? We choose fragments and lose all sense of order, or choose for
the Whole, for order, and lose touch with
reality. An unhappy choice! And what are we left with? Well, obviously, no work of
art that existed outside a system in which
contact with reality is lost could ever
reach its destination (meaning) or even a
resolution. In the end, I suppose all that
into the film Peyret from the difficult,
long, hermetic texts. You might exclai
"That's all?" To which I would offer the
predictable retort, "That's plenty to
be getting on with!" After all, a torrent of
words may (and this is my rebuttal of
Dorland's remark about logomachy)
produce enlightenment.

One last comment. Cindy Gawel,
Stephen Smith and Tom Thibault credits
were given in Cinema Canada as
production assistants. In my credits they
were given the credit of filmmaker's
assistants. They had much more
significant roles than those production
assistants fill: they shot some scenes, and
did a great deal of the sound and picture
editing. Tom Thibault cut the music
tracks and did the mix with Cindy Gawel.
And, on a related matter (though no error
was made here), Dorland quoted a line
from Lamentations in the interview with
me. His procedure in doing so was
perfectly in accord with convention, but
the author of the line, after reading the
interview, asked me to assure that credit
attribution be made. The line was written
by Murray Pomer-

If this letter seems harsh, I did not
mean it to be. Dorland's review was very
fine. But I suppose all filmmakers get a
bit upset when one aspect or another of
their precious work goes unrecognized,
and I'm certainly no excep-
tion. That much more serious, that much more complete for
having done so. I would hate to scare
anyone away from a cultural initiation
rite so well suited to a cinema and a
nation coming of age.

Seth Feldman
York University
Toronto

Congrats,
Cinema Canada

As an other than disinterested party, I
would like to suggest that is time Cinema
Canada be complimented for
some of its recent efforts in the area of
scholarly cinema studies. The swollen
stack of Cinema Canada's that keeps
sliding off my bookshelves are a record

R. Bruce Elder
Toronto

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