

The book cover features a central red book with a circular emblem containing a profile of a head. The title 'DANTE, CINEMA & TELEVISION' is printed in black serif font on the red cover. The background is a dark, textured illustration of various faces and figures, some appearing to be in a state of distress or suffering, with a dramatic, almost hellish atmosphere. The book is shown at an angle, with its pages visible on the right side.

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Dante and Canadian Cinema

JOHN TULK

Canadian cinema, like the cinema of other countries, has two broad periods, the silent one from 1896 down to 1929 and the sound one extending from 1929 to the present day.¹ The silent period sees, at its outset, the appearance of documentary films, which were then followed, especially after 1912, by a proliferation of fiction films, especially wilderness and adventure stories, filmed by numerous studios located in very unlikely places from Halifax to Victoria. The sound period witnesses the intervention in film of government, first in 1939 with the foundation of the National Film Board of Canada under the leadership of John Grierson, and then, much later, in 1964 with the creation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, which changed its name to Telefilm Canada in 1983. The National Film Board has acted as a kind of film school for budding Canadian filmmakers. At first it fostered English-Canadian and male film talent, and developed such directors as F.R. 'Budge' Crawley, Sidney Furie, and Don Owen. Then the NFB created French and woman units, which led to the cultivation of French-Canadian and women filmmakers who have made their mark with a number of uniquely Canadian film contributions, from Michel Brault's *Les raquetteurs* (1958) to Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* (1989), and from Bonnie Sherr Klein's *Not a Love Story* (1982) to the teenage female collective's (Beverly Brown, Morgan Gage, Amber Goodwyn, Karen Shamy-Smith) *Salt* (2000). The Canadian Film Development Corporation of Canada has played a very different role, providing funding to stimulate independent production in the private sector. It has helped finance many commercially and critically successful films and flops, but has unwittingly, in the process, attracted the movie moguls from the south, who have conferred on major Canadian cities not only a

curiously American filmic character but also the dubious sobriquet of Hollywoods of the North. Finally, Canadian sound cinema saw the beginnings in the late 1960s of Canadian experimental or avant-garde film. Its forebears were visual artists such as Jack Chambers and Michael Snow, while its numerous present-day practitioners include Al Razutis, David Rimmer, Richard Kerr, Mike Hoolboom, and Bruce Elder. Together, these experimental filmmakers have established Canada as an international leader in this milieu and have provided 'Canada's foremost contribution to contemporary cinematic discourse' (Feldman, *Take Two* 246).

Throughout this history, one presence is pervasive and enduring, the presence of Dante. In fact, Dante has been appropriated by Canadian filmmakers for all of the reasons he was appropriated by filmmakers of other countries. This is true of both good and bad films. Thus, he has been used to bestow authorial significance on a particular filmmaker's work, as with Eric Nicholas's 1996 *River Rats*, a rather sophomoric crime caper, which opens with a quote from *Inferno* 10 and proceeds to an extended and juvenile discussion of bodily bowel movements. Or again, he has been used to lend plot, structure, or mood, as in Nicholas Campbell's 1999 *Boozecan*, 'a slice-of-life sleaze film' (Files 34) which takes us on a downward journey through the seamy and infernal underbelly of Toronto's illegal after-hours drinking clubs and which introduces us to a host of lost souls who represent gripping vitality and criminal depravity. Or, again, he has been used to develop character as in Carl Bessai's *johnny* (2000), the first Canadian film shot according to the stark dictates of Dogme 95.² Its utterly realistic squeegee kid hero is a Mephistophelian demon who gets off enticing his fellow squeegee kids to do evil and who devours them as they freely surrender to his will. Finally, Dante has been used to impart a particular type of allegorical meaning to a film or suite of films, such as Paul Almond's profound 'Bujold trilogy' (*Isabel*, 1968, *The Act of the Heart*, 1970, and *Journey*, 1972), which, like Dante's poem, was undertaken to 'profit a world that lives badly' and which deals with the difficulties of attaining 'spiritual reality' in a modern urban setting that is resolutely materialistic.

Perhaps, however, the major way in which Dante has engaged Canadian filmmakers has been with respect to the pivotal issue of vision. In this brief paper, I do not have sufficient space to do adequate justice to all of the Canadian films which could be brought together under this banner of vision. Instead, I propose to concentrate on select sets of scenes from two English-speaking Canadian films, one silent and one

sound, each very different from the other, each dealing with vision in a markedly different manner, and each corresponding to different aspects of Dante's vision as raised in the *Commedia*. In so doing, my approach will be that of an amateur, I being neither a professional film critic nor a Dante scholar. But I am an amateur in the fullest sense of the term, having a profound love of Dante and of cinema. My methodology will not be intertextual, that is, laying texts side by side and examining direct echoes of one in the other, but rather interdiscursive, comparing two works, albeit in different media, one of which, consciously or unconsciously, makes use of the other, which is clearly engraved in the public imagination. Thus I propose opening up the texts, looking underneath, to determine what is really happening: what is the vision of this particular filmmaker; how does this vision unfold in the particulars of this filmmaker's work; and how does this filmmaker's vision correspond to aspects of Dante's vision as revealed in the *Commedia*?

Back to God's Country was released in 1919. The film was directed by David M. Hartford and produced by Ernest Shipman, so-called 10 per cent Ernie, who was an extraordinary entrepreneur in the early Canadian entertainment business (Morris, *Embattled Shadows* 99 ff; Feldman and Nelson 14 ff). The screenplay was adapted from a short story by adventure writer James Oliver Curwood and was written by Nell Shipman, wife of Ernie, who was also the star of the film (Morris, *Embattled Shadows* 100 ff) and a pioneering talent in early silent cinema.³ The movie was shot largely on location, in the wintry wilderness north of Great Slave Lake, under very harsh conditions. Cast and crew had to face extreme cold (the original male lead, Ronald Byram, caught pneumonia and died) and unprecedented technical problems (Walker and Walker, 'Danger' 34–42). But Ernest managed to bring the shoot to successful completion and used his considerable marketing skills to sell the film to the largest possible audience. He developed, for example, the tantalizing slogan 'Don't book *Back to God's Country* unless you want to prove that the nude is not rude,' a slogan derived from a scene in the film which shows Nell diving nude into a pool of running water close to her cabin. When released, the movie was an instant critical and popular success, returning more than three million dollars to its backers, a yield of 300 per cent, and making it proportionately the most successful Canadian movie of all time.

The movie recounts the story of Dolores Le Beau (Fair or Good). She lives happily in a pristine forest with her father. Into her life comes consummate evil in the person of Rydal, who rapes her, kills her father,

and escapes unrepentant. Rescued by her fiancé, Dolores marries, moves to the city, and from there undertakes a sea journey to the northern wilderness accompanied by her husband. Complications ensue: the captain turns out to be Rydal; her husband is seriously injured; there is no doctor and the ship is frozen in for the winter. Refusing to yield to Rydal's continuous lewd advances, Dolores escapes with her husband on a sled across the barren terrain, accompanied by her faithful dog Wapi and hotly pursued by Rydal. She eventually makes it to safety, and Rydal perishes in the frozen North.

This melodrama is infused by Nell Shipman with a poetic vision of good and evil which is epic and which is, I believe, ultimately traceable to Dante. Dante's vision of the realms of the afterlife is, of course, unique. Nowhere is this uniqueness more apparent than it is with respect to Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise, the scene of the fall of humankind from grace. Dante literally rips Purgatory out of the infernal subterranean abyss to which it had been confined and turns it into a mountainous realm of repentance located in the southern hemisphere. Moreover, he makes the Earthly Paradise the crowning pinnacle of the Mountain of Purgatory (Iannucci, 'Dante's Limbo: At the Margins of Orthodoxy'). In so doing, he displays a deft strategy for structuring the pilgrim's journey of salvation. First, Dante establishes a strict polarity between the realm of evil and the realm of goodness, which are figured as two distinct realms. Evil is in Hell, a realm located in the northern hemisphere and a realm, especially the lower one descends, of extreme cold, darkness, cacophony, and dissonance. Good, on the other hand, is situated in Purgatory and, especially, in the Earthly Paradise at its top. These realms are located in the southern hemisphere and are places of warmth, light, euphony, and harmony. Secondly, in order for the pilgrim to reach the Earthly Paradise, he must first travel through the realm of evil, for only the soul which resists evil can enter the Earthly Paradise. Thirdly, whereas the Earthly Paradise had been viewed as a place long vanished, Dante brings it vibrantly to life (cf. *Purg.* 28–33). It is a divine forest, the last refuge of goodness before the celestial realm, and God's very imprint suffuses it: a lovely woman, Matilda, a figure of the golden age of earthly felicity, is its guardian; light shines and gentle winds blow; its stream is the purest water imaginable; and here the human and nature are one. It is, in short, God's country, and Dante's journey to it, the scene of the fall, is richly symbolic: it is the last stopover before the ascent through Paradise, and in coming to it Dante signifies that he is nearing his true and heavenly home.

This afterlife vision of Dante is a mirror vision of *Back to God's Country*, which likewise is imbued with two distinct realms. At the film's outset, we are introduced first to the realm of God's country. It is a blessed forest, located in the southern hemisphere, and has all of the trappings of Dante: pure water and light, gentle winds and sounds. Most importantly, Dolores is figured as a Matilda figure, the forest's guardian, an innocent person with preternatural gifts who has a quasi-mystical relationship with all of the beasts of the realm. But into her forest comes the archdemon of evil, and she is driven out. Now she journeys to the realm of evil in the northern hemisphere, a realm of icy cold, cacophony, and dissonance (all of the film's shots of the North are in extreme darkness, and everything is desolate, the cold and ice ever present). It is only when Dolores refuses to give into evil and flees from it that she is brought to safety and is able to return to God's country. The symbolism at the end of the film is as profound as Dante's: Dolores is saved and, like Dante, has a vision of her return to the forest, which then becomes a reality; Rydal, on the other hand, perishes in the realm of evil by plunging headlong into an icy grave, which engulfs him forever and which he shares with Dante's Lucifer, who is portrayed as a giant encased in the ice.

Back to God's Country is one of the few silent Canadian films to have survived (it was lovingly restored by Bravo television in 1997). It is memorable for a number of reasons: its length (it was an eight-reeler), its epic scope, its incredible sets, its remarkably daring scenes, and, above all else, its Dantean-inspired universal vision of good and evil.

Illuminated Texts was produced in 1982 by R. Bruce Elder, teacher and author, a most vocal critic of the Canadian film establishment, and one of the most pre-eminent of Canadian experimental filmmakers.⁴ *Illuminated Texts* is one small filmic element of the massive film cycle *The Book of All the Dead*, a cycle of films of the first quarter of Elder's life that takes over forty hours to view in its entirety.⁵ As Elder has made abundantly clear ('Dante and *The Book of All the Dead*' 1ff), the major inspiration for *The Book of All the Dead* is Dante's *Commedia*, myriad fragments of which have been scattered throughout the cycle. Both in *Illuminated Texts* and in the cycle as a whole, Bruce Elder shows that he shares much in common with Dante. Both work in the epic tradition (Dorland 27), a tradition which begins with Homer and continues through Dante to Milton, Blake, Joyce, and Pound, another author of major significance for Elder. Both, in their respective arts, create visions of entire worlds: Dante, a poetic vision of the three realms of the

afterlife; and Elder, a filmic vision of the unfolding of history leading to the world of modernity and technocracy (MacDonald 20; Dorland 22 ff). Moreover, in constructing these visions, both Dante and Elder share a *modus operandi*. First, both have a preconceived plan for the overall structure of their worlds' unfolding. Dante lays bare this plan in the prologue to the *Commedia*, *Inferno* 1, and Elder has admitted to having a sense of the progression of his cycle from the beginning and to have known the general shape before he began (Dorland 26–7). Secondly, both artists elaborate their visions with a dazzling and encyclopedic display of erudition. The *Commedia* and *The Book of All the Dead*, especially *Illuminated Texts*, are the products of a lifetime of learning, and both are constructed from a plethora of diverse sources with the result that the seamless interplay of all these sources constitutes a veritable polysemy and testifies to the eclectic retention of both artists' dynamic intellects (cf. Feldman, 'Bruce Elder's *Illuminated Texts*' 45). Finally, in their respective works, both Dante and Elder employ a mixed style, which intersperses scenes of daring reality and gross parody, as the appropriate vehicle for driving their respective visions home.

Illuminated Texts is Elder's *Inferno* (see Bart Testa's essay in this volume). But rather than a gradual spiral and downward journey, *Illuminated Texts* is a frenetic leap forward through history and time to the age of modernity and technocracy (Feldman, 'Bruce Elder's *Illuminated Texts*' 45; Testa in this volume). Employing philosophical models provided by George Grant and literary ones afforded by Northrop Frye, *Illuminated Texts* points to the Christian myth of the Fall and charts the movement from paradise to apocalypse, or, in the formal terms of the film, from plenitude to fragmentation. Divided into eight principal parts, *Illuminated Texts* is not narrative in the normal and narrow sense of the term, but uses images, both natural and computer-generated, voices, words, and sounds, many again generated by computer, and moves from depictions of a natural world, pure and unsullied, to those of a corrupted world, which gain horrible momentum along the way and which lead to the fragmentation of both society and the individual, as exemplified by the monadic texts of Sartre and Lacan, among others, which now occupy the film. These texts are shaped into a poetic narrative and 'provide the climax for the film's revelation of a world confronted by the horror of where its own collective history has led' (MacDonald 20). Thus, *Illuminated Texts* culminates in disturbing images of the most incomprehensible of all incomprehensible human acts – the extirpation, the annihilation, the genocide of an entire race –

the Holocaust, accompanied by the text, in increasing frequency, of the question of a child who is about to be killed but who is told she is going to join her mother: 'Is it far?' The final shots of the film are a veritable bombardment of the senses and leave one drained, violated, alone, and ultimately forgotten as the individual self surrenders to the atrocities the collective self has wrought.

In addition, these final shots show us how completely Elder has absorbed Dante. They take us to the heart of vision, both Dante's and Elder's, and explore its ontological and epistemological status. In this respect, I should like to bring together Elder's culminating vision in *Illuminated Texts* and Dante's culminating vision in the *Commedia*, the former a vision of pure horror, the latter a vision of pure joy. Having prepared us since canto 1, Dante in the final canto of the *Paradiso* sets out to present his vision of the reality of the experience of the Godhead (*Par.* 33.55ff). This is the poem's culminating experience and one which taxes all of Dante's powers as a poet (cf. Singleton 571ff). There are a number of elements that stand out in Dante's poetic description of his vision. The first is that the poet is about to present an incomprehensible and inexpressible object, the very vision of God. The second is the seeming inability of the poet to capture that object given the incommensurate distance between the dazzling vision itself and Dante's meagre abilities as a poet and, closely related, between the seen and the remembered. Dante therefore begins with a modesty *topos* claiming that his speech is not up to the experience ('Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio / che 'l parlar mostra') [From that point on, what I could see was greater / than speech can show (*Par.* 33.55-6)] and that his memory is poor. To reinforce the latter, Dante complains that he can remember so little of the recent experience, whereas the famed exploits of Jason and his Argonauts are remembered twenty-five centuries later ('Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo') [That one moment brings more forgetfulness to me than twenty / -five centuries have brought to the endeavor / that startled Neptune with the Argo's shadow! (*Par.* 33.94-6)]. The third point, however, is that this modesty does not stop the poet, as the following description of the Godhead as three circles discerned within a single light makes perfectly clear (*Par.* 33.115 ff), a description which is both theologically and poetically impeccable. The fourth is that Dante *qua* poet, in order to present his object of experience poetically, must first internalize the object and be transcended by it. Dante's sight, he tells us, becomes rarefied, and he becomes altered and

is able to penetrate the Light more deeply ('ma per la vista che s'avvalorava / in me guardando, una sola parvenza, / mutandom'io, a me si travagliava') [but through my sight, which as I gazed grew stronger, / that sole appearance, even as I altered, / seemed to be changing (*Par.* 33.112-14)]. Thus does Dante move from seeming hesitation to poetic description and bridges the gap between the reality and the retelling, between the inexpressible and the expressed, between sacred truth and poetic approximation.

In a totally analogous manner, having prepared us gradually, Elder sets out at the conclusion of *Illuminated Texts* to present the culminating vision of the work, the Holocaust. The object to be presented, like Dante's, is incomprehensible and inexpressible. Elder, too, is aware of his meagre abilities as a filmmaker and so begins, like Dante, by suggesting he is doomed to failure, a failure suggested by the very pyrotechnic film sequences which precede and which seem to signify the end, not only of this film, but all film. But Elder, like Dante, continues and succeeds in conveying through the film's closing images the reality behind the incomprehensible. In so doing, Elder must first, like Dante, internalize and be transcended by his object. This is suggested by the image of Elder himself accompanying the closing shots, which show him as a ghostly image refracted off the wall of a concentration camp, absorbing, becoming the image. Thus does Elder move from stasis to filmic description and so bridges the gap between the inexpressible and expressed.

What makes this vision possible for both Dante and Elder? I feel that the answer once again highlights how much Dante and Elder have in common. Dante's *Commedia* is about suffering leading to consummate joy. Elder's *Illuminated Texts* is about suffering, but later parts of his cycle, *Exultations*, *Burying the Dead*, and *Et Resurrectus Est*, are also about discovering the joy of divine love. Images of suffering permeate Dante's work as they do Elder's. *Illuminated Texts*, in fact, links the personal suffering of the filmmaker and the collective suffering of humankind. Such visions of suffering are shared, can only be shared, by two individuals who have known the pain of suffering and the joy of release. Both Elder and Dante bring to their work the perspective of the suffering exile. In fact, an interview which Elder gave *Cinema Canada* in 1985 (Dorland 22-6), and which highlights his exile and his suffering, reads almost verbatim like the similar account of Dante's vicissitudes in the *Convivio* (3.4-5). In these passages, both men reflect on their exile, Dante from his beloved Florence, Elder from the established film com-

munity, and on the cost of that exile to them and their works. In other words, what accounts for the vision of Elder and Dante is suffering, which allows them to penetrate deep inside themselves and convert the images they find there in perception into the images of their imagination and, ultimately, thought. Out of this process comes vision. This vision represents the spiritual education that is the *Comedy* and *The Book of All the Dead*, a spiritual education that is

the growth towards the insight that all that is given in experience truly is a gift; and we must have faith that though some of our experiences, like nightmare monsters wrought in the dark, may seem like cruel repayments for our efforts to find God, even such cruel succubi turn out to disclose the Be-ing of Goodness, if we wait long enough. Consciousness of the significance of the particular is enlarged until, at last, the poetry of experience is awakened, and, an emotional experience is called forth that awakens one to our oneness with our circumstance, i.e., that which stands around us. (Elder, 'Dante and *The Book of All the Dead*')

Notes

- 1 Overviews of the history of Canadian cinema are provided by Canadian Institute; Clandfield; Feldman; Feldman and Nelson; Knelman; Morris; Pratley; and Rist. Individual aspects appear in Canadian Film Institute; Evans; and Leavey. A useful collection of film documents is assembled by Fetherling. Canadian experimental film is explored by Elder, *Image and Identity*; Glassman; Hoolboom; Jonasson and Shedden; Lowder; Shedden; and Testa. The industry side of Canadian film is covered by Beattie; Globerman and Vining; Magder; and Posner. The history of Quebec cinema is treated by Coulombe and Jean; Donohoe; Garel and Pâquet; Lever; Marsolais; Pageau and Lever; and Véronneau and Handling. The National Film Board of Canada maintains a web site (<http://www.nfb.ca>), as does Francocine, whose web site (<http://www.francoculture.ca/cine/>) is devoted to French-Canadian cinema and film. Finally, Donald Brittain's documentary film *Dreamland*, which is available from the National Film Board of Canada, is a nostalgic look at Canadian movies from 1895 to 1939.
- 2 Dogme 95, which established the genre of dogma film, was developed by a Danish collective founded in 1995 by directors Lars von Trier (*Idioterne* or *The Idiots*) and Thomas Vinterberg (*Festen* or *The Celebration*). Dogme 95 is a

- reaction to Hollywood-style filmmaking and presents a series of rules which are known as the 'vow of chastity.' The rules, quoted from the Danish collective's web site (www.dogme95.dk), include the following: (1) shooting must be done on location; (2) the sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa; (3) the camera must be hand-held; (4) the film must be in colour; (5) optical work and filters are forbidden; (6) the film must not contain superficial action; (7) temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden; (8) genre movies are not acceptable; (9) the film format must be Academy 35 mm; (10) the director must not be credited.
- 3 Nell Shipman has become the focus of much recent research. Besides her autobiography, *The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart*, there are studies of her life and work by Armatage, Everson, Foster, Slide, Smith, and Walker and Walker. There is also a web site (www.utoronto.ca/shipman) dedicated to her life and work.
 - 4 Elder is a professor at Ryerson Polytechnic University. He has published extensively and is the author of a key text on Canadian culture and avant-garde film, *Image and Identity*. Elder rarely minces his words. He was involved in a major controversy in 1985 over his essay 'The Cinema We Need,' which appeared in *Canadian Forum*. His position was heavily criticized by Piers Handling and Peter Harcourt in *Cinema Canada* (July-Aug. 1985). His rebuttal also appeared in the same issue. His films have been screened, among other venues, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Berlin's Kino Arsenal, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the San Francisco Cinematheque, and Hamburg's Kino Metropolis. Retrospectives of his work have been presented by Anthology Film Archives in New York, Il Festival Senzatitolo in Trento, Images '97 at Toronto, and the Antechamber in Regina. The recipient of numerous awards, including a Genie, Elder was honoured by the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1985 with a major homage, which concluded with the Canadian premiere of his just-completed eight-hour film *Lamentations*.
 - 5 All of the filmic elements of the massive cycle are catalogued by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and may be ordered through their web site (www.cfmdc.org).

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