
**GUIDE TO
THE CINEMA(S) OF
CANADA**

EDITED BY PETER HARRY RIST

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Denys Arcand); *Gross Misconduct* (TV), 1992; *Calendar*, 1993; *Exotica*, 1994; *Bach Cello Suite #4: Sarabande* (TV); *The Sweet Hereafter*, 1997.

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Peter Rist

R. BRUCE ELDER. Born 1947, Hawksbury, Ontario. Filmmaker, theorist, author. Elder is a central figure of the Canadian avant-garde, both for his considerable body of films and for his critical discussion of the entire project of experimental cinema in Canada. As a filmmaker, Elder has inherited the historical legacy of avant-garde cinema in North America and married that bounty of knowledge and practice with his own particular interests, producing in the process a series of increasingly lengthy and visually complex films that he has bound together in the grand project of an epic cycle, *The Book of All the Dead*. This extremely long opus, which began in 1974, consists of three sections: "The System of Dante's Hell," "Consolations (Love Is an Art of Time)," and "Exultations (In Light of the Great Giving)." Elder completed the cycle, temporarily abandoned in 1992, in 1994. At that time it included some twenty-one (film) parts, such as *1857 (Fool's Gold)*, *Lamentations*, and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*. The cycle maps the transitions from Elder's early cinema, with films such as *Breath/Light/Birth* (1975) and *Barbara Is a Vision of Loveliness* constructing a world largely without points of reference to orient the viewer, to his later films, which center intensively on the body. Some critics have suggested that Elder's development of an interest in the body, disease, and death stems from a serious illness he suffered in 1977, although Elder tends to regard such readings as too literal. An offshoot of his filmmaking struggles was one of the rare manifestos of Canadian cinema, "The Cinema We Need," which he wrote while making *Lamentations*. It appeared in *Canadian Forum* in February 1985. This polemical essay asserted Elder's conviction that the essential importance of a Canadian avant-garde lay not in the current development of "new narrative," which Elder regarded as simply derivative of American cinema, only able to deal with the past. In contrast, he advocated a cinema capable of dealing with what he termed "the here and now," a cinema of "perceptions." The article produced considerable commentary in Canadian avant-garde and academic circles. Elder went on to establish a theoretical foundation for his project of a Canadian avant-garde in his book, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (1989). With its equally polemical argument and its avowedly nationalist orientation, the book has met similar responses in some quarters. Having completed *The Book of All the Dead* in 1994, Elder began working on another cycle, entitled *The Book of Praise*.

FILMS INCLUDE: *She Is Away*; *Breath/Light/Birth*, 1975; *Barbara Is a Vision of Loveliness*; *Permutations and Combinations*, 1976; *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 1979; *Trace*, 1980; *1857 (Fool's Gold)*, 1981; *Illuminated Texts*, 1982; *Lamentations: A Monument for the Dead World*, 1984; "Consolations (Love Is an Art of Time)," includes *The Fu-*

gitive Gods; The Lighted Clearing; The Body and the World, 1988; "Exultations (In Light of the Great Giving)," includes *Flesh Angels*, 1990; *Newton & Me*, 1991; *Exultations (In Light of the Great Giving)*, 1992; *Et Resurrectus Est*, 1994; *The Book of Praise: A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy*, 1997.

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Dave Douglas

ELVIS GRATTON: LE KING DES KINGS Elvis Gratton: The King of Kings. Pierre Falardeau, Quebec, 1981–85, 90 min., 16mm. *Elvis Gratton: Le King des Kings* is a Quebecois cult classic that began as a short film made in response to the 1980 Quebec referendum on sovereignty (*Elvis Gratton*, 1981). The short's success (winning a Genie for Best Theatrical Short in 1983) led to two more shorts, *Les vacances d'Elvis Gratton* (1983) and *Pas encore Gratton?! (1985)*, which were put together as the feature *Elvis Gratton: The King of Kings*. In the first episode we follow garage-depanneur owner Robert Gratton as he prepares for an Elvis Presley look-alike contest. This is by far the best of the three episodes because it stays truest to its sociopolitical course, and in doing so the slapstick (Gratton's uncouth mannerisms, his lack of physical grace) helps define the satirical style. In the second episode he and his wife, courtesy of the contest, vacation at a Third World resort town, ruled by a pint-sized Hitlerian dictator, Santana Banana. In the weak third episode Gratton hosts a gaudy Hawaiian-style pool party, dies of a heart attack while trying to get into his Elvis costume, and then magically returns to life during his funeral, proclaiming himself as the new messiah (how can a myth die?). Although *Elvis Gratton* works at the specific level of Quebec's sociopolitical scene, it also satirizes the broader question of American cultural colonialism and the general 1980s Anglo-wide swing to the right (Thatcher, Reagan, Mulroney). Regardless of the broader target, members of Quebec society were still offended by the portrayal of Gratton as a petit-bourgeois, ultra-right wing, sexist, xenophobic federalist. This reaction is partly explained by the strong emotions surrounding Quebec separatism. But *Elvis Gratton* remains special in being able to comically reflect these emotions, as both a cynical, bitter response to the failed referendum, and as a hilarious send-up of the worst elements of cultural intolerance and ignorance. Robert Gratton is an overloaded stereotype, but, as PIERRE FALARDEAU and co-writer/lead actor Julien Poulin imply in the scene where each shopper in a depanneur is wearing an Elvis Gratton rubber mask, perhaps there is a bit of Robert Gratton in us all.

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Donato Totaro