



SPIRAL

No. 5 / October 1985



████████ Publisher: Spiral Group, Inc.
████████ Editor: Terry Cannon
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Subscriptions

Four issues \$15; Institutions \$20; Foreign \$20. Single copy price \$6. Subscriptions will begin with the next published issue. Due to the difference in the exchange rate, we cannot accept personal checks drawn on foreign accounts. Please make payments in U.S. funds in money orders or checks drawn on U.S. banks. Remit payment to: SPIRAL, P.O. Box 5603, Pasadena, California 91107.

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SPIRAL is a publication of Spiral Group, Inc., a non-profit California corporation. The magazine is published four times a year (January, April, July, and October) at: P.O. Box 5603, Pasadena, CA 91107.

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Bruce Elder playing Palestrina as interpreted by Sergei Eisenstein

LAMENTATIONS: A MONUMENT FOR THE DEAD WORLD

by Bruce Elder

The following is an excerpt from the narration for Canadian filmmaker Bruce Elder's *Lamentations: A Monument for the Dead World*. The film, which was completed in 1985 with a running time of 7-1/2 hours, has been described by Elder as "a story of love fallen on hard times."

In 1976, I was involuntarily admitted to a mental hospital, held, as they say, at the pleasure of the Lieutenant Governor, that is, incarcerated for a period of no fixed duration. I had become suicidally depressed but, I hasten to add, had perpetrated no actual violence on anyone nor even attacked, emotionally or physically, close friends or relatives, for I had, throughout the weeks leading up to the institutionalization, kept pretty much to myself. Moreover, those few people whom I did see had no knowledge of the state I had come to since I am a master at dissimulation if nothing else.

Involuntary admission means a locked ward and a nurse stationed outside your door for twenty-four hours a day. You get used to the constant noise and the incessant uproar, to hearing lunatic laughter and cursing all through the night, to the general grime and the defiled clothes, and to the degraded expressions on the faces of fellow patients. In fact, your powers of adaption quite surprise you and give you hope. What you never get accustomed to is the terrible agony of never being alone for a minute. A nurse accompanies you when you shave, when you take a bath or use the toilet, when you change into or out of your clothes. She watches over you at night and so enters your dreams, leaving you no escape from her even in sleep. She accompanies you to the common room and her watchful presence beside you identifies you as "a real case" to the other patients.

A mental hospital is the opposite of a prison in this respect. In a prison, special punishment usually takes the form of solitary confinement, while in a mental hospital it takes the form of compulsory life in common. Whether isolation from one's fellow convicts is worse than the unrelenting invasion of one's private space, I cannot say, never having been sub-

jected to the former. But I would conjecture that I, for one, would prefer the delirious, dream-like state that I imagine the former induces to the cretinous effects that follow as the spirit contracts into an ever-diminishing personal space, for the latter can only be likened to soul murder.

The people with whom I associated in this place were an assorted bunch: women convicted of beating or neglecting their children; men convicted of wife-beating, of child molesting, of exhibitionism, or, like myself, of having self-destructive propensities. In fact, other than myself, all of the depressives, with a single exception, were women; males, it seems, generally direct their aggression outward toward others, while women generally turn it toward themselves. This mournful group of women and weakly men banded together, mostly out of fear of the drubbing we would get if, alone in the company of a few violent men, we unwittingly revealed our timidity. Even though I have, for as long as I can remember, felt more comfortable in the company of women than of men, that there were almost no other men in this group certainly exacerbated my feelings of isolation.

Nearly all the patients, as they called them (though those who were being held involuntarily to protect society from harm could more accurately be called "prisoners"), whether they were of a violent or of a depressive nature, were sullen, envious, boastful people; surprisingly vain, considering their conditions; and above all, sticklers for form, even if those forms might not be conspicuous to those unaware of their nature and odd even to those who are. They were, therefore, very prone to taking offense. Consequently, one had constantly to be on his guard against provoking a violent outburst. You lived mostly by your wits, if you were lucky enough to keep some about, otherwise you were in peril and

