

Film leaves a trail of devastated viewers

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BY BART TESTA

THE FIRST time Bruce Elder showed his new film, *Illuminated Texts*, which has its Toronto premiere tonight at The Funnel, his audience was a group of university film teachers gathered for a meeting of the Canadian Film Studies Association. Having watched and discussed Michael Snow's latest experimental film, they settled in for three hours of Elder. At the end of the movie, the audience sat stock still for a few moments, then rose and disappeared without a word into the night.

Elder was shattered. These were his friends, many of them, and all talked about movies professionally day in and day out. Typically pessimistic, he assumed the worst: "I've been to screenings like this before. The silence means people are so embarrassed by how bad the film is, they don't say anything." Snow, the dean of Canadian experimental cinema, read a different meaning into the awkward silence. "The film is so tragic, it would have been awful to say anything afterward." After the film's premiere in Montreal on Monday, it was the same scene all over again, only this time one member of the audience did venture an opinion. He said: "Talk now seems irrelevant."

That *Illuminated Texts* leaves a trail of devastated viewers wherever it goes is no surprise. It is everything Canadian avant-garde filmmaking is not: rhapsodic in its passion, deeply wounded in its emotion and traditional, even religious, in its form. It is, as Elder proudly admits, "a very unstylish film," not at all the sleek and spare post-modernism that characterizes his short movies, his criticism and his curating (most recently for the film section of OKanada).

It was the autobiographical film, *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, made dur-

ing a nearly fatal illness in 1979 that marked a breakthrough for Elder. Despite tones of death-bed confession, it was a comedy — a garrulous and ironic self-portrait by a dying man who lived to see it banned in Ontario and celebrated in the United States with the presentation of the Los Angeles Critics Circle Award. *Illuminated Texts*, although it builds on the formal complexity of its predecessor, is no comedy. It is a grim mechanism that moves with increasing velocity toward its climax, a dazzling display of split-screen pyrotechnics.

While Elder himself appears several times in the film (even performing a suitably cranky Ionesco's *The Lesson* as a preface), *Illuminated Texts* is not another self-portrait. It is a film about history or, as Elder says, "about the self who bears the scars of history." The encyclopedic scope of *Texts* recalls Canadian avant-garde cinema less than it does the films of Eugen Syberberg. In fact, Elder has really created Canada's *Our Hitler*. Just as Syberberg's films could be made only by a German, *Illuminated Texts* is a film only a Canadian would be moved to make, and make in this deferential manner.

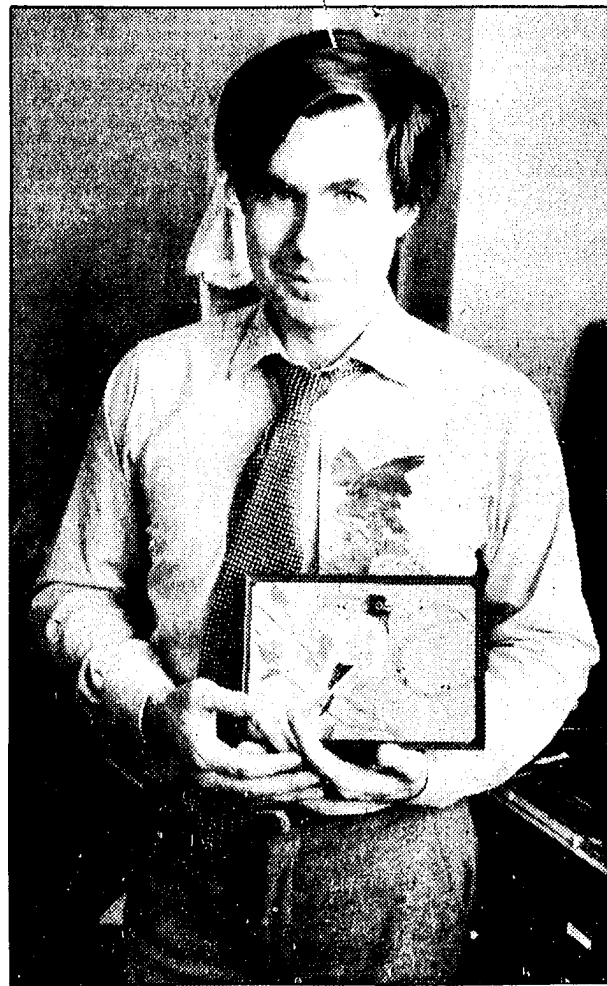
Shaped as it is, according to the cycle of the seasons, each associated with a part of the Bible, from Eden to Apocalypse, the film parallels Northrop Frye's literary structures. The rich golds and greens of the early sections shift into cold blue-greys; the luscious shots of nature cede to concrete and steel girders. At several points, nature and industry seem to meet: shot from below, Snow's Eaton Centre geese flap upward under the entrapping grid of the gallery roof.

Tracing the fall from paradise into modern barbarism, Elder draws Frye together with Canadian philosopher George Grant, setting out a central conflict between tradition and technology. Elder edits his

images and sounds to show the harsh modern consequences of intellectual choices that must have seemed easy when they were made 300 years ago. Many of the expanding terrors of *Illuminated Texts* arise from the pairing of calm voices reading smart abstract ideas with images that depict their brutal manifestation — a text on Newton's mechanical physics drones on as two wrestlers rhythmically drive their fists into each other's faces.

Elder never uses the structure provided by his Canadian thinkers, Frye and Grant, in a didactic way; rather, he presumes we will instinctively recognize our own reflection. He may well be right, since this recognition is, in part, what stuns the viewer. His vast arsenal of poetry and philosophy conveys the film's explicit arguments until, finally, the bickering voices are swept away. A terrible contraption, the soundtrack of *Illuminated Texts* combines voices, sound effects, computer vocobox and synthesizer music rising gradually from sweetness to a howling cacophony that, at last, yields a pathetic chant. Repeated again and again, it is the question of a child in a concentration camp who is about to be killed but is told she is being taken to her mother. She asks, "Is it far?" This is the appalling climax of philosophical debates between Sartre and Jacques Lacan, Henry Adams and Jean De Berg.

Elder's images largely consist of brief shots assembled by association rather than narrative, some by computer. These progress steadily from a blazing effulgence (Elder superimposes a line of poetry worthy of Kodak, "Moments that should last a lifetime") to bleached blacks intercut swiftly with blood reds. In the end, the film splits into swimming, nearly abstract forms, as if to prove Paul Klee correct — "The more terrifying the world becomes, the more art becomes abstract."



Bruce Elder: 'the self who bears the scars of history.'