



TAKE TWO

A TRIBUTE TO FILM IN CANADA

EDITED BY
SETH FELDMAN



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A Lucy-Caroll Book
in conjunction with
the Festival of Festivals



IRWIN PUBLISHING
Toronto Canada

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We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Department of Communications, Special Programme of Cultural Initiatives, and the Canada Council for their generous support in assisting the publication of this book.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Take Two

Index: p. 305

ISBN 0-7725-1506-9

1. Moving-pictures — Canada — History — Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Moving-pictures — Canada — Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Feldman, Seth, 1948-

PN1993.5.C2T3 1984 791.43'0971 C84-099029-4

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Project editor: Piers Handling

Editor: Carolyn Dodds

Designer: Keith Abraham

Created and produced by:

Lucy-Carroll Limited

228 Gerrard Street East

Toronto, Ontario

M5A 2E8

Printed in Canada by Gagne Printing Ltd.

Typeset by Q Composition Inc.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 91 90 89 88 87 86 85 84

Published by Irwin Publishing Inc.

180 West Beaver Creek Road

Richmond Hill, Ontario

L4B 1B4

The Films of R. Bruce Elder: The Evolving Vision

BY LIANNE M. McLARTY

Near the end of R. Bruce Elder's Illuminated Texts, the computer previously identified as having controlled the optical printing and editing of that three-hour film begins to sing. The song it chooses, "Deutschland über alles," comes into a frightful congruence with the Holocaust imagery manipulated within the last hour. The net effect is that of a new and uninvited presence on the screen, the presence of a foregrounded apparatus unwilling to maintain the facade of anonymity. It is far more disturbing than if Elder had merely created a Frankenstein. Instead, the question posed is the degree to which the Frankenstein of mechanized perception has, through our passivity, created us.

As Lianne McLarty points out here, the ploy at the end of Illuminated Texts is typical of a definition of the artist's role that prevails throughout Elder's body of experimental films. In his The Art of Worldly Wisdom, that role is underlined as a deeply personal commitment when the illusory nature of perception is called upon to highlight the equally illusory nature of self. The signifiers of an autobiographical presence are deliberately flawed, until what remains is nothing but the audacity of their presumptuous signification. By the same token, the cinematic tempest brewed in 1857 (Fool's Gold) is a storm made of human constructs: texts written on the screen and read in voice-over, heavy reliance on optical printing, a counting of the film's very frames.

Elder's awareness of the highly defined yet arbitrary nature of his apparatus extends beyond the films discussed here. As seen in his writing elsewhere in this volume, this critical perspective grows out of an assertion of the centrality of that concern in all of Canadian cinematic practice. To Elder, the photograph, and its extension into cinema, do not provide evidence of the outside world so much as they provide evidence of an ongoing debate as to the characteristics of mechanical perception. As a Canadian filmmaker, Elder recognizes that his work will inevitably come from within this debate. As administrator, teacher and spokesperson Elder recognizes and sustains the priority of, to use McLarty's term, a "quest" for perceptual integrity.

Since western culture has seen consciousness as something which is other than Nature and that its mode is primarily one of self-reflection, that which characterizes consciousness is consciousness of consciousness. It is, in its very essence and being, self-reflective. That's how Western Man sees consciousness. He pictures consciousness as something alien from Nature. And one of the marks of that alienation is that, because it knows itself, it knows its destiny, and its destiny is a very solitary one.

*Any culture which is a self-reflective culture is one which is aware of the destiny of consciousness—that is to say aware of death—and a culture which lives with an awareness of death is a culture that's marked by a vision of consciousness as isolated, solitary, lonely and doomed.*¹

In his early films, *Breath/Light/Birth* (1975), *She is Away* (1975), *Barbara is a Vision of Loveliness* (1976), *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1978), *Trace* (1980) and *Sweet Love Remembered* (1980), Bruce Elder created a world without context. These films seldom refer to any reality outside themselves; rather they present an enclosed, claustrophobic world that perhaps could best be described as a void. The space in which the figures move is undefined. This lack of a recognizable space or context suggests that the imagery of these films belongs to an interior world, to a "mind-space,"—that it embodies the artist's consciousness. It is as if the mind of the filmmaker has been transposed to the screen so that we, as spectators, can see his thoughts and visions before us. Given Elder's beliefs about the nature of consciousness, and the fact that his films are "consciousness on celluloid," it is not surprising that they stress this isolation.

Thus, in *Look! We Have Come Through!* a lone figure is situated within an entirely black, undefined space. When the film begins, the woman's form seems to be suspended in air. The lone figure moves against a dark and potentially threatening landscape. The distortion of the figure and of the space through which she moves further contributes to a sense of the ominous. Time, too, is distorted by repeating a single action over and over, so that it seems to continue heedless of naturalistic temporal reality. The world of this film is not ruled by conventional properties of time and space, and for this reason, it seems threatening and ominous to the viewer used to more traditional employments of time and space in cinema.

Barbara is a Vision of Loveliness shares stylistic properties with *Look! We Have Come Through!* Once again there is a highly distorted sketch of a female form which occupies an undefined, dark space. Again, the figure is alone, isolated from any context, though here her form is more severely fragmented than in *Look! We Have Come Through!* At one point, near the end of the film, a series of still images of the dancer flash on the screen, frame by frame. By this point, the figure has become quite abstracted and in the course of various transformations seems to split in two, the separate parts gravitating to opposite sides of the frame. Whatever attempt there has been to create unity and harmony here seems to fail. Reality seems to be irremediably fragmented, to be broken beyond repair.

In *Sweet Love Remembered*, two women are seen making love. The action, the women's lovemaking, is depicted positively; it is used to suggest the attempt of two beings to become one. Yet here again this sense of unity is ultimately undercut by Elder, who disrupts spatial continuity by editing together shots taken from different vantage points. The action is similarly fragmented: a shot of the two women lying side by side and then rolling apart on the bed is replaced by a shot of them standing; a caress is replaced by a different action recorded from a different angle; and so on.

Elder has said that he took as his inspiration for this work a quotation from Freud—"Eros nowhere makes its intention more clear than in the desire to make two things one"—and also one from Nietzsche—"What must these people have suffered to have become so beautiful?" Elder illustrates our desire to merge with one another, and our sense of separateness that gives rise to this desire. *Sweet Love Remembered* clearly speaks to this tension. The film begins with many close-up shots, taken mostly with a moving camera, of parts of the female body that are

