



A scene from Bruce Elder's 8½-hour Lamentations: a difficult, frustrating, bleak work.

Avant-garde filmmaker laments the state of man

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We are so colonized by the technical empire that we cannot even think against the imperial system of technology. Our historical amnesia, to use Adorno's phrase, our inability to even conceive of what we have lost under the aggrandizing hegemony of technical culture, is a measure of the extent to which we are dispossessed of any other realm, including the realm known to the ancients, the realm of mystery and wonder.

— Bruce Elder in The Cinema We Need, published by The Canadian Forum.

LAMENTATIONS, Bruce Elder's newest work, which will make its debut this week at Innis Town Hall as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's retrospective of his experimental films, is aptly titled. (Tonight's 7 p.m. showing will feature the first part of the 8½-hour Lamentations: The Dream Of The Last Historian. The second part, entitled The Sublime Calculation, will be shown tomorrow at 7 p.m. at the AGO.) Lamentations laments both what we have become, and the realm of mystery and wonder we have lost. It is a monumental and unrelenting catalogue of how technology, and the will to master that it represents, has depleted the world of meaning, and ourselves of any notion of good.

In other words, Western man, in setting himself apart from nature, in portraying the universe as devoid of values so he can use it for his own ends, has come to a monumental impasse. Elder, who studied mathematics, philosophy and medicine before turning to avant-garde fil-

mmaking, is well versed in the philosophical roots of the subject-object split and the body-mind split which have led man to embrace technology.

Elder is also able to represent how technology has changed our ability to perceive reality, and this is his visionary strength. In Elder's view, there is no reality in the technological age, only images of reality, because the proliferation of images has perverted our encounters with the real. We never see, we see something like what we have seen in images.

Because the subject is so crucial and so interesting, it is unfortunate that Lamentations is not as accessible as it could be. It is a difficult, frustrating and bleak work which, in scope and style, resembles T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. The camera work is poetic and disorienting; some scenes feature historical figures such as Isaac Newton, Bishop Berkeley and Franz Liszt, while other scenes act as metaphors for our confused condition. An ongoing scene with a psychiatrist, for instance, points out that that psychiatrist's attempt to get patients to adapt to the modern world is misguided. Maladaptation to insane circumstances is most probably an instinct for survival.

The work, then, is difficult primarily because it is so stylistically complex. (The images swirl around in subjective camera work, a text is superimposed on the images, there is a complex soundtrack of narratives on any number of subjects from the courtly origins of romantic love to personal odysseys, as well as music and sound effects.)

The effect of this sensory bombardment is frustrating, debilitating, and in a curious way saddening. Elder has said he chose this form for two reasons: He wants the viewer to make his own movie, and he wants the viewer to feel the sense of loss directly. That is, he wants the viewer to feel there is a unity in the work, but that somehow, the viewer can never partake in this unity.

In any other avant-garde filmmaker this would smack of bad faith. But Elder upholds it thematically by pointing out how Western man has come to be disconnected from everything. He documents our hatred of the body and our contempt for subjectivity, anthropomorphic views and creatures other than ourselves. And that includes women, who are, in Lamentations, shown as either images made up to suit men, or as objects to be acted upon by men.

The camera takes us across Canada, through the American Southwest, and into Mexico. This disjointed journey seems to be an attempt at finding redemption in an embrace of the primitive. Elder also shows an attempt to find redemption in romantic love, in the abandonment of will that love demands. But that attempt is also doomed; love cannot take the burden of all our yearnings.

And neither can the primitive as we now find it. The montage of native dances which concludes the film, and which at first glance appears to point us toward a way out of our impasse, is not as pure as it at first seems. One native Indian has an American flag painted across his face, another has a number tagged to his leg, reminding us that his dance is part of a performance. The dance of hope, in other words, is not the real thing — it is a simulation of what once had collective meaning.

Elder has been called a romantic filmmaker. He has the yearnings of a romantic, it is true, and his sadness at our loss is an aspect of those yearnings, but Lamentations is the work of intellectual calculation. Yes, Lamentations represents itself as a history of Western consciousness, a history dominated by control. But Elder suffers from the syndrome himself. Nothing in Lamentations is allowed to breathe, to fly, to suggest anything. The filmmaker has put his mark on everything so that emotionally, the viewer, finally, is not allowed to lament.