

# Filmmaker focuses on consciousness

BY CAROLE CORBEIL  
The Globe and Mail

**"DON'T BELIEVE** that we have privileged access to our own inner being," experimental filmmaker Bruce Elder says, in a tiny alcove in his apartment that hasn't been taken over by film equipment. He is talking about *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, his "autobiographical" film, which contains deliberate lies and evasions. "The reason for using those kinds of lies," he continues, "is to show how we manipulate our past, how we come to babulate about our past, and the babble has nothing to do with the truth of the experience."

When asked to give a biographical sketch, Elder, a kinetic talker who is as beguiling in his enthusiasms as he is profound in his pessimisms, obliges, but with the proviso that all biographical sketches are retroactive inventions. In Elder's reconstruction of his past, it's telling that he binges everything on intellectual encounters.

Meeting philosopher George Grant at McMaster University, meeting experimental filmmaker Stán Brakhage and critic Gerald O'Grady at the University Film Centre in the United States, these are the turning points in Elder's life. Grant shaped Elder's philosophical approach to life, while Brakhage's experimental films rekindled his belief in that medium. Elder does not dwell on his childhood in Hamilton, nor on a protracted bout of pancreatitis which almost killed him in 1976.

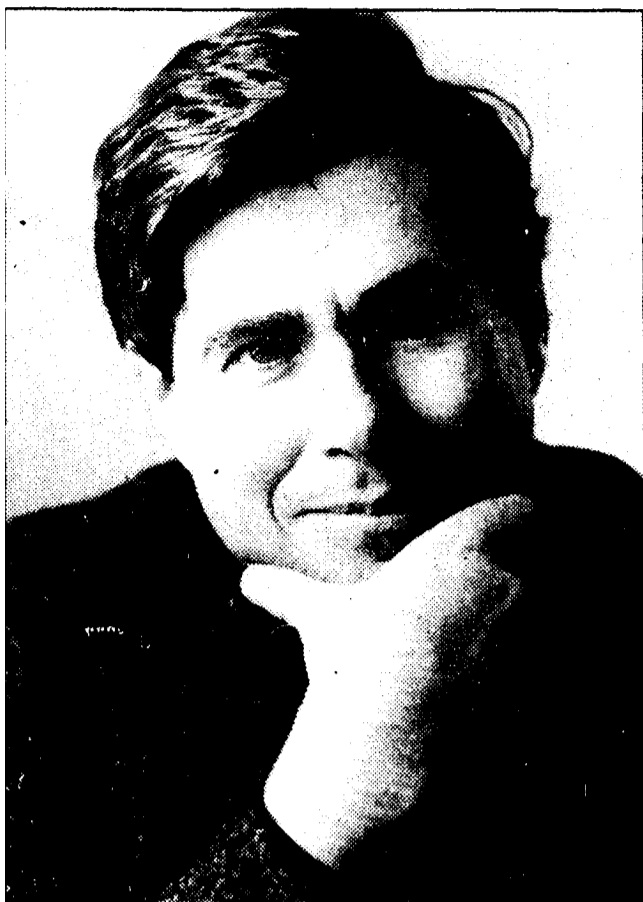
Some critics, in fact, have seen Elder's illness as the catalyst for his most profound films. It is true that from that point on, Elder used his own sense of quest to explore a larger historical context, as if his illness were some kind of metaphor for what ails the world. (Pancreatitis is a peculiar and rare disease; the body literally starves itself because it is unable to digest any food without pancreatic enzymes.) More importantly, Elder's illness jarred him perceptually. "So long as one does not brood over his ills," as the narrator puts it in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, "disease has singular powers of producing revelation."

There is something boyish about Elder, something sweetly ebullient, as if he had been purged by illness. But the most striking thing about him is the grand level of his intellectual life. Elder can invent complex spiritual tactics to save the world from itself and, at the same time, order with complete delight a chocolate milkshake and rice pudding at his local greasy spoon.

Elder has become known as the spokesman for experimental film in Canada, as well as its leading practitioner (the Art Gallery of Ontario recently showed a retrospective of his films, and his latest eight-hour opus, *Lamentations*, will be shown tonight and tomorrow night at the Bloor cinema). He is a purist, and that is what makes him so fascinating as an artist, the fact that he genuinely attempts to capture consciousness on celluloid. He is obsessed with the true nature of experience, so much so that he is affronted by the conventions, approximations and representations that pass for experience in works of art.

In *The Cinema We Need* (an article published in *The Canadian Forum*), Elder attacked what he calls the dominant cinema in Canada. He did so with such vehemence that the article spawned counterattacks by critics such as Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling, who believe that Canada's cinema should be a mirror of ourselves. Elder believes our true identity can be found only in the work of experimental filmmakers such as Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland and Jack Chambers. But that was a small part of Elder's attack, and in following his argument we can trace the entire breadth of Elder's thought as it informs his own films.

"The cinema we need," he wrote, "will be a cinema of perceptions, of immediate experiences. It will not be a cinema of ideas. Like narratives, ideas are formed after the fact (and) serve to represent what is already past." For Elder, whatever does not resemble the very workings of consciousness itself — with all its ambiguities, contradic-



TOM SZLUKOVENYI/The Globe and Mail

Bruce Elder: 'It is impossible to recover what we have lost.'

tions and mixture of fact, fantasy and sensual perceptions — is a lie.

Some may view this kind of esthetic rigor as bordering on the pathological, but Elder, who studied medicine and philosophy at McMaster, and who completed a masters of philosophy at the University of Toronto, uses his considerable intellectual resources to back up his esthetic criticism.

When he attacks "the dominant cinema" and its dependence on narrative, he is criticizing what he considers the cultural legacy of Western thought. He is attacking nothing less than the mode of thinking which has led to our present historical impasse.

"The power of technological domination," he writes in *The Cinema We Need*, "attains its end by encouraging us to conceive of ourselves as utterly free. . . . It leads us to believe that we have unlimited freedom to make the world the way we want it, since it portrays the world as entirely devoid of values and as indifferent to the ends we choose. These delusions lie at the heart of the will to mastery." For Elder, the cinema of realistic narratives reinforces these delusions.

"You see," he says, "realistic narratives depend on linear order, on the fiction of coherence, and so cover over those gaps that represent a threat to the will to mastery. And it gives the viewer the illusion that he is in control, that it is his desire to know that controls the film." Influenced by Grant and thinker Simone Weil, Elder sees the history of Western thought as something that divorces the individual from nature, and sets the individual above nature; the present technological rape of our planet is, for Elder, the logical extension of Western thought.

"George Grant," Elder says, "was a strong reader of Simone Weil, and he was conscious of the way in which liberalism has made us lose our sense of the good. The reason for that is that in liberalism the individual is seen as the end of nature, there is nothing above the individual. With a view of the individual standing above nature, you get a philosophy of will. Nothing will limit the will at all. So there's a loss of moral values. Nothing puts a curb on the activity of will, there is nothing to which man might have to unconditionally submit."

Like Weil, Elder has developed a philosophy of submission to an indefinable something which is greater than himself. "If we are to escape the enclosure of human thoughts and beliefs," he says, "we must surrender ourselves to something

wholly other. We must learn to listen for the intimation of the Good which we have become deprived and learn to appreciate the gift of experience."

*Lamentations*, *A Monument To A Dead World*, with a complex soundtrack of music, voice-overs and a printed text superimposed on a delirious montage of images, defeats criticism and defies description. In *Lamentations*, Elder appropriates the history of modern consciousness in order to critique the state we find ourselves in. He is true to his esthetic beliefs; it is impossible for a viewer to feel in control of the experience.

"I wanted it to encourage a sense of loss in the viewer," Elder says, "a sense of being divided, separated from the experience. And I wanted it to be grandiose because I wanted it to recall other grandiose works. There are works of art that are grandiose in their ambitions, and that develop a sense of self for an artist to resolve certain contradictions — to overcome the alienation of men from other men, of men from God. *Lamentations* is a work that attempts to dismantle the notions underlying that kind of art.

"For instance," he continues, "it looks at the belief that the contradictions of existence can be resolved through sexual union. But there's every suggestion in the film that men only see women in relation to themselves, the women are not real, so the union is not real. There's also the suggestion that Eros has been made sick by having to carry the entire burden of resolving our alienation."

Some of *Lamentations* takes the form of a journey to Mexico and South America, and there too, Elder dismantles romantic notions of change through encounters with the past and with primitive cultures. "There's the D. H. Lawrence idea of Mexico, of racial memory, or the noble savage idea, and both these ideas are shot down," Elder says. "What I am trying to show is that it is impossible to recover what we have lost. So that's why *Lamentations* has to be so massive. Because I wanted it to be a systematic deconstruction of the ideas that underlie this kind of recovering of lost unity."

The film is bleak and without hope. "There is an inexorable logic to history," he says. "We now find ourselves in a situation where the technological system is creating the subjects it needs." Elder the filmmaker, however, is not totally bereft of hope. His next film is to be called *Consolations*.



Scene from Elder's *Lamentations*: 'The cinema we need will be a cinema of perceptions.'