

Bruce Elder's  
**Lamentations**

The burden of belatedness – how to proceed despite the crushing sense of coming too late with too little into a world filled by those who've already done it all and better – that so oppresses Canadian cinema as a whole, is not that surprisingly the special field of Canadian experimental cinema. And here, broadly, two principal approaches to belatedness can be distinguished: the 'naïve' tradition best exemplified by the films of Michael Snow, and the 'knowing' tradition so characteristic of Bruce Elder's films since *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979). Both traditions reflect dialectically different answers to the same question: How is belated or post-technological art possible?

With *Lamentations: A Monument To The Dead World*, Elder's eight-hour film-monument to belatedness that recently premiered at the conclusion of the Art Gallery of Ontario's Elder Retrospective (Oct. 1-11), the question is pushed to psychological and technical extremes. Technically, the film's montage is composed from over 7000 shots, layered over with printed text, readings, narration, stills, dialogue and music mixed on some 34 tracks. The soundtrack was created from a battery of computer and electronic equipment including, say the production notes, "speech synthesizers, phasers, phalangers, vocorders, computer-controlled synthesizers, echo boxes, digital percussion units, digital reverb units, analog delay units, custom built sequencers, filters and computer orchestration equipment." Psychologically, the ante of belatedness is raised to the point of transcendental paranoia in that *Lamentations* offers itself as constructed from the state of mind of one who imagines himself to be the last (thinking) person in history. In the light of such a dual over-determination – the technological death of art, and the end of history – Elder seems to be asking, what happens?

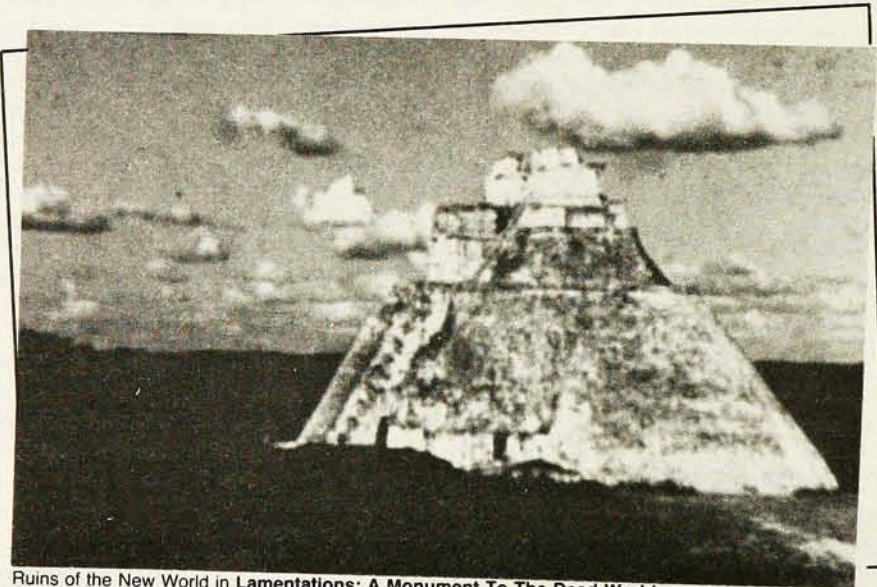
Such a question only raises others: to whom or to what? To me, to you, and all the rest of us who inhabit these modern times? To Film, Art, or the Meaning of Life? If "This film is about you, not about its maker," as *Lamentations'* text explains early on, the statement is later amended with the words "(at best, a half-truth)." For, in the half-truths of the end of History, perhaps nothing happens – and that's why films keep being made.

If Elder hoped that, by taking upon himself the burden of belatedness, a filmmaker can make a film which unburdens *him* of his own sense of belatedness, then that is pretty much what does happen. Because *Lamentations* is an intellectual filmmaker's "Portnoy's complaint" in that only after this long confession is he truly free to actually begin – yet as a confession *Lamentations* both succeeds and fails simultaneously. It succeeds in being a tremendous trope of imaginative liberation for

its maker who has with this film freed himself of a psychological burden. But it fails technically in that beyond an eight-hour journey through a mental and imagistic cosmos inhabited by a great many representations all named Bruce Elder – a not uninteresting excursion by any means, given the wild catholicity of Elder's mind – one seldom has much occasion to forget that that is exactly where one is entrapped.

So there's something enormously parenthetical about *Lamentations* – as if Elder, after the apocalypse-Auschwitz end of European history that terminates *Illuminated Texts* (1982), had come to the astonishing and troubling realization that he, the filmmaker, had survived his own film and there was nothing to do but go home.

*Lamentations* (Part 1: The Dream of The Last Historian), then, is the journey back from the gas-chambers of instrumental reason, back through the ruins of European civilization and the rubble of the European mind's echoes of its eternal debates, back to the New World in a pilgrimage towards new beginnings, or, if nothing else, that sense of a broken totality that we hold in common.



Ruins of the New World in *Lamentations: A Monument To The Dead World*

Part 11 of *Lamentations* (The Sublime Calculation), large portions of which were shot on the Canadian west coast, in the American south-west and in Mexico's Yucatan, is a vision of what those new beginnings might have been, if, instead of "sickly, doomed" North Americans, we had had the courage to be Spaniards "a race artistic to the core and monstrous in their lust for blood." But even there/here, where "the world of sunlight meets the dagger" in a "a landscape so exuberant we believe nature has lost her mind," our northernness as belated Europeans condemns us to, at best, a consciousness of absence: "literally everything slipping away together all at once, dissolving into the gloom of an all-pervading Nothing." For what we hold in common, finally, is "suffering" and the confession of the Last Historian is that he is Everyman.

Not quite. After all, the film represents the mind of a paranoid or, by his other name, that cowardly dissimulator, the poet. And as poetic history (or so the text says) "is the story of how poets have suffered," and *Lamentations* is a poem-on-film, how poets will continue to suffer. The poetic suffering that Elder grapples with is where to find the "pur-

pose to go on," specifically, how to end the film. "Look," confesses a character's voice, "what I need is an ending."

For out of the crucible of belatedness, the Canadian poet emerges to find that he *can* sing – but "only the snow falling," "the endless world of the snow falling." Because at the end of *Lamentations'* long lament, nestled there in its dizzying snow of images, sound and text, is the possibility of a beginning. Unless, of course, *that* is the specific paranoia of the poet.

If summing-up is one of the advantages of belatedness, one of *Lamentations'* advantages over any reviewer is that its length defies encapsulation. In its details, *Lamentations* contains a whirlwind, encyclopedic tour of Old World philosophy from Plato to Heidegger, Nietzsche and Freud, historical personages (Newton, Berkeley, Liszt), art (imagery and music) from the Renaissance to the Romantic, architecture, medicine's therapies from analysis to electroshock, New World ruins from pre-Columbian to urban contemporary in mineral, animal and human, form, as well as vignettes of mechanized modern life's car-filled streets, crazies, or robots, contrasted against representations of

that imaginative control subsequently comes and goes, the inclination towards narrative recurs right through to the film's ending where even such a marvelously visual sequence as the sparkling rhinestones on a Mexican flamenco-dancer's dress tends to be dominated by the narrated conclusion (written à la Virginia Woolf or some such resolutely pre-Joycean prose).

Most curious of all, the viewing of *Lamentations* produces the strong suspicion that Elder is teetering on the verge of abandoning experimental film altogether. And what makes for such an intriguing possibility is the film's own demonstration that Elder, by following his imagination beyond belatedness, has in him the potential to become a director along the axis from Fellini to Syberberg; that is, if he would pursue that tyrannical control over the utter artificiality of his medium that the Newton-Berkeley sequence displays so convincingly. Albeit, this would involve something of a theoretic reversal in Elderian cinema akin to Heidegger's own *kebre*.

Otherwise, what remains are problems. For one, as a poem, *Lamentations* is still entrapped in belatedness; indeed, at much the same point Canadian poetics found itself in by the early '50s. As an 'experimental' film, *Lamentations* is primarily interesting because of the triple feat of its length, erudition and technique; that is, as an object of specialist inquiry. Above all, it is as narrative cinema that *Lamentations* reveals elements of a formidable imaginative redirection.

Having troped itself, the 'knowing' experimental tradition's further evolution could signal the beginning of the complete abandonment of Canadian cinematic belatedness by the realized Canadian Romanticism that *Lamentations* indicates negatively.

"Now ve may begin," says the psychiatrist at the conclusion of *Portnoy's Complaint*, tellingly entitled "Civilization and its discontents" in an earlier draft. In this sense can *Lamentations* be seen as the conclusion to the intellectual Elder's massive critique of civilization, marking the true point of departure for the "real man" Elder, no longer dissimulating, but fully able to assume himself as a filmmaker. Unless, of course, this *too* is only another belated, and paranoid, fantasy.

Michael Dorland •

**LAMENTATIONS** d./sc./cam./ed./p. R. Bruce Elder p.assts. Stephen Smith, Tom Thibault, Cindy Gawel mus. Bill Gilliam narr. Kristina Jones, Robert Fothergill, J. Peter Dyson titles Charles Luce make-up Maria Finta anim.seq. Charles Luce flute and add. syn. Ron Allen drumming Claude Desjardins text/narr. (Mexican insect sequence Indian dance sequence) Murray Pomerance supertitles (voice synthesis for "Ode to Joy," text mocking Palestrina) Murray Pomerance tech. support Emil Kolompas conforming Piroshka Hollo Mr. Pomerance's clothes courtesy Harry Rosen Mr. Pomerance's office courtesy Arthur Gelgoot L.p. David King (Newton) Murray Pomerance (psychiatrist) James D. Smith (Lizet) Bart Testa (lecturer) Tony Wolfson (Berkeley) Michael Cartmell (man in alley) print Medallion Film Labs thanks Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, The Ontario Centre For Robotics (Peterborough), The Canada Council, and The Ontario Arts Council sp.tnx.to Michael Snow, Peter Harcourt, Anna Pafomow, Michael Cartmell, Greg Svaluto, Karen Noble. Ex.sp.tnx.to James D. Smith (for hilarious conversation and mad brainstorming). Hilarious excessum habere nequit, sed semper bona est, et contra Melancholia pater est mala. (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica V, prop XLII*) p.c. Lightworks Film Prods. dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 16mm, col. running time: 8 hrs.