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Elder aims to recapture our lost sense of good: [SUN Edition]

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Abstract

Meet Bruce Elder, the man many consider Canada's most important film-maker. No Elder hasn't made a Porky's or a Meatballs. His movies don't win Academy awards or set box office records but in the rarified world of avant-garde cinema, Elder is an internationally respected figure.

In recognition of this, the Art Gallery of Ontario will honor Elder with a full-scale retrospective. Running from Tuesday through Oct. 11, it includes all of Elder's major films such as *The Art Of Wordly Wisdom* (1979) and *Illuminated Texts* (1982). But the highlight of the retrospective will be the premiere of Elder's latest work, a multi-layered epic titled *Lamentations*. This extraordinary film attempts nothing less than the depiction of human consciousness. Clocking in at a hefty nine hours, it will be screened over two evenings (Oct. 10 and 11).

So, says Elder, mainstream moviemakers perpetuate lies. Though he admires some of the European directors - Antonioni, Godard, Fellini - he washes his hands of contemporary North American film-makers. "They make viewers think they're in control." Elder couldn't disagree more. The whole point, he maintains, is that we've lost control. "Modernity," he says, "is darkness."

Full Text

Meet Bruce Elder, the man many consider Canada's most important film-maker. No Elder hasn't made a Porky's or a Meatballs. His movies don't win Academy awards or set box office records but in the rarified world of avant-garde cinema, Elder is an internationally respected figure.

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multi-layered epic titled *Lamentations*. This extraordinary film attempts nothing less than the depiction of human consciousness. Clocking in at a hefty nine hours, it will be screened over two evenings (Oct. 10 and 11).

Born and raised in Hamilton, Elder studied medicine, mathematics and philosophy before turning to film. By the mid-1970s, he had established himself as the most important Canadian experimental film-maker, carrying on the pioneering work started by Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland in the 1960s.

A man of passionate convictions, Elder believes we are living in an age of severe crisis. "Unless we find a way of stepping outside Western tradition, we're doomed." Technology, which represents the will to mastery, is dominant. As a result, he feels, "We have lost our sense of the good."

Lamentations, which has occupied Elder for the last two years, continues the investigation into this crisis that has been central to his films since 1975. "Our will is not unbridled," he says emphatically. "I am arguing for a form of thinking that encompasses notions of the good."

In a highly controversial article published last February in *The Canadian Forum*, Elder stated that "the cinema we need (is) a cinema not of imagination but of perception.

"The cinema we need," he proclaimed, "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."

And so, says Elder, mainstream moviemakers perpetuate lies. Though he admires some of the European directors - Antonioni, Godard, Fellini - he washes his hands of contemporary North American film-makers. "They make viewers think they're in control." Elder couldn't disagree more. The whole point, he maintains, is that we've lost control. "Modernity," he says, "is darkness."

It is this messianic quality that makes Elder and his films unforgettable. *Lamentations* presents the world as a place of barely apprehended sensations. The camera, which is never still, functions as an extension of the film-maker. It is no longer an invisible, god-like presence but moves with complete subjectivity, doing and seeing exactly what it wants.

Lamentations takes the form of a journey. It begins and ends with a montage of landscape images whirring past at breakneck speed. Historical monuments whizz by and turn circles as the camera follows its eccentric course. In addition to the dialogue, too low at the start to be understood, there is a written text that appears on the screen like sub-titles. "What we have in common," it begins, "is a sense of a broken totality. A Divided Self."

Suddenly, we're in a psychiatrist's office. We listen as he discusses a patient prone to violence. Each time we return to his office the psychiatrist's behavior is more like the patient's. Not even the line between the self and others, Elder is saying, can be distinguished clearly.

Neither the film nor the retrospective will transform Elder into a hero of Hollywood North. But for anyone interested in how Canadian cinema might have been, it will be "must" viewing.

Illustration

Caption: Photo Elder

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