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# **MEDIASCAPE**



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**The Postmodern Scene**

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Subscription information should be addressed to:

**CJPST**

Concordia University, Department of Political Science

7141 Sherbrooke St. West

Montréal, Québec H4B 1M8

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## ELDER: ARTAUD AFTER TELSAT

*Loretta Czernis*

Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.<sup>1</sup>

Antonin Artaud

The one thing that is certain is a hidden violence that makes all things uncertain.<sup>2</sup>

Bruce Elder

*Lamentations*,\* Bruce Elder's new eight and one half hour film, was designed to perform a kind of epistemological surgery, so that, upon leaving the screening, we are changed in some way strangely familiar. Elder operates, through his film, upon the arrogance underlying our "new and improved" discourse. Our conceit emerges from how much we know as "proven" by how many efficient inventions we have produced, and that these intellectual and manual productions have catapulted us into post-modernity. *Lamentations* removes obstructions so that we can consider that which is still largely unknown to us: how we managed to disconnect from history. This film makes us experience our self-confidence as a pathetic cultural narcissism. The laments act as purging insights capable of luring spectators away from an isolated estrangement toward a communal one; we become active participants in (re)creating collective memory.

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\**Lamentations: A Monument For A Dead World*  
Part One: *The Dream of the Last Historian*  
Part Two: *The Sublime Calculation*



## ELDER'S LAMENT

Artaud believed that theatrical violence could cleanse the human soul. He sought out historical situations of tragedy, believing that it was only in times of tremendous suffering that people could understand reality. In the midst of catastrophe the beauty and the horror of life are as one. A vision, given birth in crisis, can transform us. Artaud wished to recreate such experience in the theatre, searching for the necessary magic in a total spectacle, with actors who knew how to scream, so that we might remember something of the passion and cruelty of Nature/Culture. Artaud wanted theatre to do the same job that narrative painting had done for centuries — teach morality. But he lived during a time when people still went to the theatre to be enriched — before TV, before computer games, before laser lightshows. Anyone now wishing to teach must bring the message to the people in a spectacle which can both caress and jolt our digital sensibilities.

In classical theology, natural and moral evil have always been distinct, the former being the reasoned study of why God would allow natural disasters to occur in Nature, the latter being attempts to understand the origins and nature of evil within human will. Elder renders this distinction arbitrary, reminding us that we think we "own" Nature, when, in fact, we have been allowed co-presence with it. The proof for our folly lies in the ways in which we have imposed names on the forces of Nature, in an effort to dominate and control it. One such name is natural evil. Nature is violent, teeming with deadly plants and animals, floods, earthquakes, and many other elements which humankind takes up as threatening to survival. We have imposed our word for our own fall from grace, "evil", on the earth itself, upon which we depend for our survival. We are all implicated in this treason, this abandonment of our Home. In betraying Nature we betray ourselves.

Baudrillard has discerned that "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."<sup>3</sup> In his view there is "... only "information", secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion and simulacra of spaces where the real-effect again comes into play."<sup>4</sup> At museums people feel a brush with history. This is achieved by skillful exhibition of collected objects. The cases, the lighting, the prose on the little catalogue cards must be exactly right in order to create the theatrical effect we have come to know as "historical". Sometimes they even play music to fabricate a total environment. This is not different from entering a funeral parlour, where every object arranged for viewing is neatly masked and out of easy reach.<sup>5</sup> Such lamentable cultural artefacts exhibit a bizarre dualism which emerges, Elder would say, out of a hatred of time. The most insidious illusion is that we can capture what has died and keep it present to us. This folly exhibits our hatred for mortality. We love production; we hate corruption.

History books, documentaries and historical sites are tourist attractions. Every attempt to build a City of God has become a Coney Island. For every "real" cathedral and totem pole there are thousands of plastic replicas.



Indian dolls and bishop dolls switch costumes daily in the bedrooms of little girls everywhere. Punjabi children go to village halls to watch Dallas and National Geographic specials on bears and Hopi indians. TV via Telsat satellite is educating them to read life in the west. Neither the educational show nor the prime time soap opera tell them anything about what life is "really" like in North America. What constitutes understanding now? Information-gathering, not knowledge-seeking, not wisdom-listening. In order to cope in the information society, it is essential to believe in the reproductions.

Historical writing is static description including insular analyses of geographically conditioned "events". When events take precedence over Things, when we forget Being which language represents, we are expelled from history.<sup>6</sup> Forgetting what is always there in the background, we are forced to leave the Garden, because we have failed to be attentive, to care. Outside of the Garden is disconnectedness, despair, hatred, madness; not the passionate madness of creation but the cool madness of rationally planned destruction. We have severed the connection to Home and in so doing we have also alienated and, as Elder shows us with dizzying imagery, driven Nature mad. "A heartless Nature has opened her great maw and swallowed everything."<sup>7</sup>

Bruce Elder is a diary-keeper who understands another way of doing history. "We must resist the folly of historical writing."<sup>8</sup> There is no history to be remembered beyond my own, for my life is a fruit from the family tree of mankind. To try to plot what happened between people hundreds of years ago is an impossible project, and reads awkwardly, like a bad play. We can only read ourselves in history. In (re)writing myself I write about the meaning-world. Elder's diary is about me; mine is about him, and you. We are connected, not isolated. As he states, the last historian is everyone.

### **This Film Is About You, Not About Its Maker**

(at best, a half-truth)<sup>9</sup>

Elder has made *Lamentations* a performance in which the audience must attend to many spectacles all at once. We watch a travelogue. We watch the filmmaker himself reading poetry and filming his friends talking, talking, talking about everything from physical disorders to ladies' perfume to geometry, some wearing costumes, yet always still "themselves". We see ruins from many cultures. We observe sexual relations. There is a narrative on one thing, subtitles relating other things, music, superimposition, rapid montage: reproduction upon reproduction. I began to no longer watch, but to be affected. For a time the scenes changed so fast I couldn't recognize anything. The swaying movement of the images became severe. I was overwhelmed by the intensity of Elder's vision. I found myself in the midst









