

## Films Transcending Death

Ninety-two years of the 20th century are nearly over—a period of immense growth but also of immeasurable pain. Two of Manhattan's premiere film institutions are presenting special programs in December that are a kind of index to what has happened in our time.

The Museum of Modern Art has the series "Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds," playing through January 12, 1992. It is the largest retrospective of Yiddish film ever shown in America.

At Anthology Film Archives Bruce Elder has returned with the newest chapters of his ongoing epic film cycle, "The Book of All of the Dead." On Friday December 6 his *Flesh Angels* will have its US premiere; the next day his *Newton and Me* will be shown. Each film is two hours long; they are autonomous units, but also part of what is the longest movie ever made, "The Book of All of the Dead" which is now more than forty hours long. Of course what is important about the film is not its length, but its content.

*Flesh Angels* and *Newton and Me* continue Elder's cosmic inquiry into human aspiration, especially in Western Europe and North America. It is a kind of Blakean descent from Paradise to the state of dread and alienation that Elder finds in modern urban culture, Auschwitz, and philosophy.

In *Newton and Me* he regards Isaac Newton's contradictory (to us) and complimentary (to Newton) concern with both the occult and the scientific. That our culture eschews notice of Newton's interest in the supernatural, preferring to dwell on Newton as the father of modern physics, speaks to problems of our time, less visible but undermining our sense of the world.

All of Elder's films are obsessively concerned with ultimate questions of love and Be-ing, of Death and meaning, of the search for God and the spiritual at a time when such a quest has either been largely abandoned, or left in the hands of fundamentalists and cynical politicians.

Elder is conducting an inquest on what the West has lost, and what can be preserved among the ruins of philosophy and morality. This may sound abstruse, but it is exhilarating because Elder's method is to shower the spectator with provocative images, printed words (subtitles), voices, music—allowing us to share in his search for MEANING. The films of "The Book" are an adventure of spiritual education—a cinematic whirlwind of the ideas of Dante and Simone Weil, Ezra Pound and Martin Heidegger, of Spinoza, the Bible, Newton, Nietzsche, Blake—a description of the transformation of consciousness that finally, wonderfully, leaves us with a sense of, or the hope of, exalted knowledge.

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