

Elder explores the Inferno to forge Azure Serene epic

► film when • where

AZURE SERENE: MOUNTAINS, RIVERS, SEA AND SKY, directed by R. Bruce Elder. 95 minutes. Rating: **NNN** Premieres February 20, 7 pm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Jackman Hall, 317 Dundas West. 581-0127 or 978-7790. \$5.

By CAMERON BAILEY

An impassioned, prolific filmmaker, R. Bruce Elder is both loved and hated, a towering inferno of the Canadian avant-garde who may just be chilling.

With the premiere of *Azure Serene*, Elder has come that much closer to turning the last page on *The Book Of All The Dead*, his mammoth 30-hour film cycle. Encompassing all of his films since 1975, it's an epic that models itself on Dante and seeks to address all that's right and wrong in the world.

Azure Serene's method is varied. Jittery, moving landscapes range from city to wilderness. Computer-generated images construct abstract patterns and crude pictures.

TV samples of war and tease and crisis whirr into a headspinning condemnation of the modern world. A naked man and woman appear in close-up, singly and together, shot with a Super 8-to-Mo video camera adapted from sports broadcasting. All of it is set to Elder's very atonal variations on Bach.

Placing himself within a tradition that includes all the big names in German philosophy and European literature, Elder takes on and refashions the past grand narratives of Western thought for the present use of his tribe.

Speaking with an extraordinarily intense urgency, he sums up his aims in *The Book Of All The Dead*.

"At the heart of it is the idea that we should not strive for something that is transcendent, eternal, beyond change," Elder says over coffee at a Queen West restaurant.

Fleeting moments

"We should learn to cherish the fleeting moments of exchange, love, beautiful things that are here for a moment in the realm of nature and then disappear.

"We should not delete the importance of those memories we have — sitting in a cafe, sitting at the kitchen table with someone we're close to and having good conversations. That's the most complete and perfect thing we can ask for."

One sequence in *Azure Serene* atests, almost literally, to that spirit. A dinner party attended by Stan Brakhage and others takes on an absolutely magical cast as the film gives itself over to pure romance.

The light is rich orange. The editing is no less frenetic than in other sequences, but somehow its effect is more lyrical. The sequence serves as an homage to Elder's friends and colleagues and a testimony to delight in simple pleasures.

At other times, though, Elder's work comes on like an intellectual freight train. Excessive by their very conception, his films have been called brilliant, audacious, romantic, didactic, monumental and unwatchable, and at different mo-



Bruce Elder celebrates fond memory in *Azure Serene*.

ments in different films, each word applies.

"I am ordinarily described as a controversial filmmaker," he admits. "I can't say that I like it."

"I'm doing the work that I'm called to do. I have a certain notion of what an artist is, of what the character of our time is and of what the appropriate response to that is. Some people agree with me, some don't. I'm trying to speak what I believe as cogently as I can.

Fallen world

"The basic conceit of *Azure Serene* is a person climbing up a mountain. But in the midst of the ascent, our protagonist is plagued with memories of the fallen world, of a world that's overcome completely by technology, that's reducing the surface of the visual world to a hideous simplification of itself.

"The protagonist is, of course, like the protagonist of Joyce's *Ulysses* or Dante's *Commedia*, a stand-in for myself, not as the sole bearer of these wounds, but rather as one who tells the tales of the tribe."

Ezra Pound's *Cantos* play a central role in *The Book Of All The Dead*, and for Elder, Pound represents more than just good writing. Without making any parallels to the specifics of Pound's life — his vicious anti-Semitism, his descent into paranoid madness — it's clear the filmmaker identifies on some level with the poet's plight.

"Pound stands as a paradigm of the afflicted artist of our times," Elder says. "We have to acknowledge the cruel suffering that Pound exposed himself to by his hideous silliness.

"He came to his despicable conclusions because he saw friends of his — artists, writers — go off to the trenches in the first world war and die, he thought needlessly. He began a crusade against that economic force that had sent his best friends into the trenches and into the grave. And, in his analysis, he failed.

"The great terror that Pound's life teaches a reflective person is that he did the evil that he did out of a desire to do good. I hope that I haven't done the same."

VIDEO

By INGRID RANDOJA
NEW RENTALS

TRUST (1991, C/FP), dir. Hal Hartley w/ Adrienne Shelly, Martin Donovan. Hartley's desparingly funny look at the fledgling relationship between a pregnant teen (Shelly) and an angry young electronics genius (Donovan) stands alongside *Metropolitan* and *Sex, Lies And Videotape* as a study of love among a young, self-consciously literate generation. A warily intelligent and moving film. Rating: **NNN** Release: February 20.



Adrienne Shelly is Maria in Hal Hartley's *Trust*.

HARLEY DAVIDSON AND THE MARLBORO MAN (1991, MGM/UA), dir. Simon Wincer w/ Mickey Rourke, Don Johnson. With a high stunt/light count, this dumb action flick is a testosterone-pumped rip-off of *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*. Great background noise for a stag. Rating: **N** Release: February 19.

ANDY WARHOL'S FRANKENSTEIN (1974, C/FP), dir. Paul Morrissey w/ Udo Kier, Joe Dallesandro. Warhol's name is the grabber for Morrissey's bloody and teasingly campy version of the *Mary Shelley* classic. Morrissey and stud/actor Dallesandro's previous films, *Flesh*, *Heat* and *Trash* are sexually candid, and *Frankenstein* needs a lot more skin and sex to live up to expectations. Rating: **NN** Release: February 20.

BODY PARTS (1991, Paramount), dir. Eric Red w/ Jeff Fahey, Lindsay Duncan. A criminal psychologist's right arm is replaced with the arm of a mass murderer. A nifty premise concerning the origin of evil is hampered by a slow and unimaginative middle portion and only takes off in the last 20 minutes, when much blood and guts start to fly. Rating: **NN** Release: February 20.

NNNNN — excellent, maintains big-screen impact. **NNNN** — very good. **NNN** — worth a peek, memorable moments. **NN** — mediocre. **N** — what's on the weather channel.