N O R T H E R N   E X P O S U R E S

R E C E N T   C A N A D I A N   E X P E R I M E N T A L   F I L M

BRUCE ELDER

By Bart Testa

Bruce Elder provides the literary antecedents and inspirations of his film *Exaltations: In Light of the Great Giving* (1992). The film, he says in a note, is prompted by his "meditations" on John Donne's poems "The Extasie" and "The Canonization." *Exaltations* is also the fourth of six films (and the titular piece of the set) organized to parallel Dante's *Paradiso*. This series is further enclaved within a very long and extraordinary film cycle Elder began in the seventies called *The Book of All the Dead*, modelled as a whole on *The Divine Comedy* as a whole. All together the films have accumulated to over thirty hours. Now, one of the consequences of this extended format is that the structure of each individual film develops at comparative leisure.

In the *Exaltations* series, the structural progression is not notably advancing narratively. Although whole sections are devoted to pixillated passages depicting the ascent up a mountain (a narrative motif taken directly from Dante), the film's composition works through an evolving array of adjacent motifs that only indirectly advance dramatically, and seldom illustratively, draw us back to the Donne. While poetry appears intermittently throughout *Exaltations* both visually and aurally, it is a quiet murmur behind the film and not a linguistic armature, even in a way hardly part of the film at all.

Taking these observations to heart, it is obvious that this film is not, then, precisely an adaptation or a "setting" of poetry as one might encounter in music. Rather, Elder's imagery, taken as arrayed motifs, composes what might be termed an interpretive vision of the poets, arrayed around themes of identities and differences. The identities are often developed quite directly, as in the rose, both a main symbol and a powerfully depicted vision in the *Paradiso*. Dante's synchronous panoply of the mystical rose—the luminous vision of the liturgical unity of the many saints and angels within the rose answering the precise and juridical isolation of hell's punishments—reappears in the film as a series of homologies and improvisations on the rose shape. Elder repeatedly recomposes these using computer-imagery and also introduces religious homologues of the shape (the film is rich in mandela symbols, for example).

The rose and its variants do not demonstrate or develop a significance, the unity of the saints in God, directly. A viewer already knows Dante's meaning, and Elder simply accepts the poet's significance and deploys it as given as a motif. The evolving forms and the actual visualization are, then, the immediate subject of the rose motifs. However, the effect is not formalist (much less decorative) in its end. Despite the pleasure in its formal virtuosity which the film affords, it is celebratory and philosophical. The viewer is not here, at this level of the symbol, elicited to interpret *Exultations* or to decrypt its formal evolution, for this is not a film in which meaning is built by succession, by completing one block of meaning then advancing to another. It is not a film that makes an argument.

Rather Elder proceeds by accumulation and association across the whole filmic event and it is at an implicatory level that it elicits reflection. Or, implications can be ignored and taken for the obvious meaning Elder accepts from Dante and enjoyed by a viewer for their visual composition. In this sense, it is a film that aspires to the condition of music, in this case Bach's music in particular. However, the film's ambiguous solicitation hesitates between accepting an ancient poet's mystery as homage, and considering what it implies when one tries to film it.

There are also disruptions, for the film does not only linger in a cinematic vision of Dante's *Paradise*. It returns often to history, represented with barrages of television imagery (dating mainly from the Gulf War), and, at times, rough sexual imagery seeps into the composition. These intrusions are themselves dialogically countered by other shots, of Mennonites and a Scottish holiday in traditional dress. These idealizing passages of people's continuous community life contrast with the rush of televideo-history in which life is clipped into extinction and resurrected as video-simulation. The film, therefore, inhabits two spaces, our everyday world of violent simulacra and the realm of a religiously charged imaginary that the film wants to reach, and does for many sustained passages.

At times, too, Elder cuts to the beautiful body-eros of two

dancers, a black woman, long the vitalist archaic muse *of The Book of All the Dead,* whose smiling face (all we see here) seems to conjure the proceedings; and the white dancer, shot in super slow motion video so close to the lens that her skin fills the frame like a dream screen absorbing the viewer—like Donne's "pictures in our eyes to get." Her melting presence also suggests "The Extasie"'s "souls gone out" into the ecstatic union of the poem's lovers, the imagination of the body transfigured into a flow.

The rose motifs serve as the film's steady constant for the length of the film, but then too all this imagery returns as well. As is customary in Elder's work, and recalling the artist's apprenticeship in structural film, the serialization of each image-strain takes the whole film to unfold. In *Exultations* none of them end: the journey upward continues, the dancer's body still turns, the rose reappears, and so on, creating a contrastive synchrony that does not conclude, much less climax, but which we seem to leave, for now, at the film's end.

There are, moreover, other adjacent motifs more abstract and elusive. They suggest a key to *Exaltations*'s interpretation if one is needed. These are the various types of images made by computer using "fractal" mathematics. Some of these openly suggest geometrical structures by quickly evolving complex and odd-seeming graphs. Others appear to be landscapes, depictions of trees, parts of a body, or nothing representational. Produced by a video-film interface, they have all undergone extensive transformation and are immediately distinguishable from Elder's film-camera footage.

Introducing the films, Elder has spoken of Piet Mondrian as an inspiration for the *Exultations* portion of his cycle.

In his major phase, Mondrian's paintings had as their project the visual representation of an ideal but mimetic mathematics that is a true mathematics of the world. The painter offered a sort of Neoplatonic account (at times also Theosophical) to the effect than a certain ideal mimesis of forms and proportions in painting might represent something true not in nature but subtending it. His famous grid-like abstracts were an attempt at such mimetic work.

A problematic side of his project is that Mondrian's paintings are frankly linear, or Euclidian, in their geometry. His aspiration as a philosophical artist is questionable on mathematical as well as philosophical grounds, although these are scarcely separable issues in the longer history of thought.

Fractal geometry's fundamental pretense is that it is a truly mimetic mathematics because it does not abstract from (that is, reduce) nature to an idealized geometry or set of formulae that promise to predict and control all natural phenomena. Fractal mathematics refutes extrapolation when it refutes linearity and, yet, for modelling weather systems, the shapes of clouds, plants, and other "self-reflective" natural phenomena (like trees whose leaves are miniature homologues of the whole plant), fractal mathematics affords a powerful mimetic authority. Philosophically, fractals constantly demonstrate a mathematical complexity in these natural phenomena that, on one hand, excludes the type of control linear mathematics promises (and that it delivers to technologists) and that, on the other hand, reveals in its complexity a rationality beyond technical control. This latter is revealingly termed "Chaos Theory" by those who cannot conceive that order can be thought or imaged beyond the extrapolatory techniques of prediction.

The technical image-making systems of *Exultations* draw upon fractal mathematics in a way recalling Mondrian, but within a poetics of imagistic implication. Rather than a mimetic metaphysics surrounding linear mathematics, the film's imagery leads towards a meditation on the overt processes of image-making using non-linear mathematics, i.e., fractals. The Dantean paradisal imagery and Donne's poems spiritualizing physical love are classic noetic works about wonder at what appears and what happens in heaven and on earth. *Exultations* tries to perform, with highly controlled technical means, a learned reader's memory that is also a reconfiguring of what those classic works grasped noetically.

NORTHERN EXPOSURES

CEPA Gallery presents Northern Exposures, a special series of recent Canadian experimental films on five Saturdays in the winter and spring of 1994. Twelve filmmakers will be featured and many will be present to discuss their work. The series was curated by CEPA Gallery's Film Curator Lawrence F. Brose. The series is co-sponsored by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and will be held in their auditorium at 1285 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, New York.

Northern Exposures is made possible by support from New York State Council on the Arts, Electronic Media and Film Program; the Canadian Consulate, Buffalo Office; Canadian Filmmakers Distrubution Centre; Film/Video Arts; CEPA Gallery Film Program, Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Alternative Images. Northern Exposures will travel to the International Center for Photography at the George Eastman House, Rochester, NY in April 1994.

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NORTHERN EXPOSURES
RECENT CANADIAN EXPERIMENTAL FILM

FILMMAKER CARL BROWN
SATURDAY JANUARY 29, 1994, 8PM
United States premiere of
Air Cries, "Empty Water" Parts 1 and 2 (1993)
120 minutes
Part 1: *Misery Loves Company*
Part 2: *The Red Thread*

FILMMAKER BRUCE ELDER
SATURDAY FEBRUARY 19, 1994, 8PM
Exaltations: In Light of Great Giving (1993) 100 minutes

AN EVENING OF SHORT FILMS
SATURDAY MARCH 12, 1994, 8PM
Introduced by filmmaker Gary Popovich:
Visions ....Gariné Torossian 1992
Warm ....Wirk Mead 1992
Understanding Science ....Dirk DeBruyn 1993
Human On My Faithless Arm .....Valerie Tereszko 1987
Current ....Ellie Epp 1982
You Take Care Now ....Ann Marie Fleming 1989
Archaeology of Memory ....Gary Popovich 1992
Bricolage............................David Rimmer 1984
Total running time 85 minutes

FILMMAKER BARBARA STERNBERG
SATURDAY APRIL 9, 1994, 8PM
Transitions (1982) 10 minutes
Through and Through (1991) 60 minutes

FILMMAKER MICHAEL HOOLBOOM
SATURDAY APRIL 30, 1994, 8PM
United States premiere:
Kanada (1993) 65 minutes