

## Bruce Elder

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*Sweet Love Remembered* (12.5 minutes, 1980) is one of the least discussed films in Bruce Elder's forty-two hour "The Book of All of The Dead." No doubt this is because the film resists interpretation. Often nearly clinical in its depiction of two nude women caressing and clasping each other, it disarms erotic response though it is composed of imagery that, isolated, is highly erotic.

Elder defuses passion through a visual treatment that largely isolates the two women. Except for some of the earliest images—during the opening credit sequence—we do not see the two together in one shot until midway through the film, and then what we unambiguously see are two pairs of feet. Before this moment hands do caress or pass over the first woman's body, but we see them in such a way as to suspect they may belong to the first woman.

What is not ambiguous is the distinctive way the first woman's body is illuminated, by sunlight that bears the shadows of window curtains, flowing over the woman's body. These streaming shadows—that immediately reminded me of Man Ray's depiction of Kiki in *Retour a la Raison*—at first seem to be the subject of the film, but then are displaced by the eventual appearance of the body of the second woman.

The body has been a central motif in Bruce Elder's films from the beginning. Central as an image of the beautiful, and likewise as an image of mortality. Central as an image of transcendent experience and also of ultimate isolation.

In his *Consolations* one of Elder's many intertitles declares "The beautiful is resplendent, blissful in itself." Earlier in the film another intertitle says, "Beauty is one way that truth shines." Usually such quotations are located close to effulgent landscapes or a nude, revolving woman who is an athlete or a dancer.

But beauty is only one side of a coin, with the reverse revealing "fatality, incompleteness," "a fleshy vehicle that is distressingly subject to disintegration and decay." These words—and the following—are from Elder's slim 1991 catalog *The Body in Film*:

"One of the most obvious means of expressing our beliefs about ourselves is to create imagery of the bodies we inhabit, or perhaps, are. The frequent presence of images of the body within avant-garde films suggests much more than that cinema's transgressive aspirations; this presence is an aspect of that cinema's involvement with issues concerning the nature of the true self. After all, we are given to thinking of the body as an instrument that expresses our deepest desires made flesh. Creating images of the body is therefore a means of thinking about the self."

This background illuminates much in the two films, *Sweet Love Remembered* and *Lamentations*, that I am addressing here. I came to think about Elder's use of the body through the experience of seeing *Lamentations* eleven years ago, and then four more times over the next decade. In particular I was struck by Elder's direction and depiction of Maria Finta who did makeup for all of the performers, and for herself. In significant ways she became a metaphor for the whole film. Finta is the nude woman we see, repeatedly, in upward sweeping tilts, a pause

on her face, and then an equal downward tilt. In these upward sweeping shots we first see her nude, then with a few daubs of paint, then more, finally with a great eye painted on her naval. Each upward/downward camera move pauses at her head, and she looks out at us with informed, melancholy knowledge. Her's is a film-dance, only she moves between the takes, and the camera moves when she is on screen.

Elder has spoken to me about the painting of Finta's body—about the “savage inscriptions” she increasingly bears as the film develops. These inscriptions are like wounds, but are also expressions of her self. One of the titles that appears over her tense face declares that “Pain tears things apart.”

That “tearing apart” is what *Lamentations* is so often about. The isolation of the individual, the separation of mind and body, the separation of man and nature. This separation is present in *Sweet Love Remembered*. Indeed, it is what the film is about. The two women we see caressing each other never connect. They never generate an erotic spark, they remain isolated and alone in a solitude that is fundamental. Elder assures this solitude by the way he shows them to us. By changing camera position to opposing sides, on virtually every shot, he does not support the illusion of continuity; he interrupts our response to these two solitary women. Little wonder, then, that in the penultimate sequence we see both women looking past each other. Physically accessible, they are cinematically wedged apart. They are, like all of us, ultimately alone.

Supplementary note: A decade after I wrote this I had an opportunity to see *Sweet Love Remembered* again, and discovered that there were some very minor errors in what I had written. Rather than revise the original, I am keeping what I wrote in the form as presented at Ryerson. My regard for Elder's film has only grown in the subsequent years.

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