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# The Canadian image

## IMAGE AND IDENTITY REFLECTION ON CANADIAN FILM AND CULTURE

BY R. BRUCE ELDER

Wilfrid Laurier University Press/  
Academy of Canadian Cinema  
and Television, 483 pages, \$29.98

### REVIEW BY BART TESTA

Practically all the writing on Canadian films attempts to draw up a history. This is probably a mistaken angle from which to look at them. In books that take the long view, like Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows*, the result is a portrait of a doomed enterprise, while Martin Knelman's snap-shot comedies, *Home Movies* and *This Is Where We Came In*, depict the recent farcical adventures of a hapless Canadian movie business. Not that such differences in tone or scope matter much, because the story remains the same: Canadian film is a loser that refuses to lie down.

If only because it is written from a different angle, Bruce Elder's *Image And Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* virtually creates a new subject out of the topic. The effect, doubtless intended, is magical: Canadian film suddenly seems heroic and brilliant. This is because Elder elaborates his "reflections" on a radical premise: that filmmaking in Canada arises from the core of the Canadian sensibility. Even if its fate as a national image-industry is to remain forever marginal, Canadian cinema shares the same intellectual source with Canadian painting, writing and photography.

This, claims Elder, is because Canadian consciousness was founded on a disturbing pivotal experience — confrontation with a landscape utterly alien, hostile and overpowering. That primal experience had to perplex the European settlers whose philosophical and religious traditions insisted the life of the mind and nature corresponded. But it could not in Canada, and so, Elder argues, image-making took on a distinct and urgent purpose here: images could make a common ground between alien nature and human perception.

This argument is not entirely new. It was Northrop Frye who remarked in *Divisions On A Ground* that painting in Canada developed quickly and was energized by a "documentary interest." In his early chapters, Elder correlates this artistic impulse with parallel questions of realism and idealism among early Canadian philosophers. He believes that photography and film inherited these questions, so that image-making in Canada has been persistently invested with ideas deeply ingrained in experience and thought.

In this regard, *Image And Identity* shares a great deal with the thoughtful work of Leslie Armour, Elizabeth Trott, Gaile McGregor, Arthur Kroker and others who have tried to show how philosophical thought and Canadian art and literature are a cultural unity with deep roots. Because he has narrowed his scope to a few types of cinema, focusing tightly in his later chapters on just two artist-

filmmakers (Jack Chambers and Michael Snow), Elder presses the point further. He wants us convinced that these artists actually work through a philosophical visual thinking in their paintings, assemblages and films.

The book starts with a portrait of the Canadian mind that some will find familiar, and it serves mainly as a prelude to critical differences between American culture and Canadian art. Elder believes that in Canada, because art and philosophy stem from the same source, the communal experience of hostile nature forced images to take on a peculiar philosophical urgency in Canada quite different from the role they played in the United States.

Elder's careful, at times difficult but quite clear, analysis of how images and identity bind together in Canadian culture leads him to argue that while in the United States romantic modernism led to abstraction, what endured in Canada was a "pre-modern" view, bound up with representational images. As a result, recent Canadian art, exemplified by Chambers and Snow, appears at the vanguard of "post-modernism," where representational imagery and especially film and photography return to the centre of artistic concerns.

Between the chapters laying out the ground for interpreting Canadian film, and his exhaustive discussion of experimental films, Elder devotes a long section to documentary cinema, traditionally the glory of Canadian film. Here his contribution to a debate already under way is to explore the esthetics of photojournalism, again exploring national differences, and then applying them to the National Film Board and Don Shebib's *Goin' Down The Road*.

However interesting his critique of the documentary is, the book really takes the high ground in the long chapters on experimental films, and especially on Chambers and Snow. The core of the book is Elder's analysis of how these two filmmakers recapitulate the Canadian mind in such films as Chambers' *Circle* and *Hart Of London*, and Snow's *Wavelength*, *Presents* and *La Region Centrale*. Although acknowledged (especially by American critics ironically enough), the heroism of these films has never been explored so thoroughly before and Elder shows the way in which they combine brilliant intellectual clarity and emotional pathos.

For all its earnest academicism, and Elder reads more like a professor than the filmmaker he is, *Image And Identity* at its best is intoxicated with its subject and can take a reader straight into it. For those who share the same serious fascination with Canadian culture that Armour, Trott and Kroker address in their books, *Image And Identity* will come as something of a revelation: that some Canadian films at least are not homeless orphans of a national cinema that keeps stumbling, but works very much at home in the landscape of Canadian art and thought.

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