



Review

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perspectives. Though occasionally the relationship between entertainment and “reality” is treated as “fluid” (54) rather than opposed, more crucially missing is a broader sense of intertextuality and genre. Early cinema is regarded as an “original” (13) medium. The relation of its “fantasies” and “fairy tales” to other fictional forms is barely alluded to (John Fell’s *Film and the Narrative Tradition*, for example, is not listed in the bibliography); nor is the possibility even raised that newspapers and photographs are not bearers of the “real,” but are participants, in their own way, as much as cinema in the construction of “fantasies” and “fairy tales.”

The power of the state is another contextual area that remains underdeveloped. Discussing early melodramas that questioned the fairness of the police and legal system, Sloan notes a reference in *Moving Picture World* to efforts by South Dakota legislators in 1913 to outlaw motion pictures depicting resistance to a police officer. “Such explicit censorship, however, probably was not necessary,” (42) she asserts, on the grounds that film-makers by that time had already opted for a middle-class viewpoint on social matters. This neglects what is called (in the discourse with which Eisenstein and Brecht are associated) “determination.” The role of state intervention—or its threat—in shaping narrative tropes in early cinema is left unexplored.

Sloan devotes several pages to the making of a woman suffragist film, *Your Girl and Mine* (1914), a collaboration between a US senator’s influential daughter and Lewis J. Selznick’s World Film Company. Yet when the film was finished, and had been privately screened to acclaim, World backed out on arranging commercial distribution. From the sources she has consulted, Sloan is at a loss to find an explanation. This perplexing example, and other occasions she cites when distributors as well as censors were opposed to advocacy films, suggests that the medium was not in fact open very wide to the “public,” nor for very long.

Finally, what difference did it make? Woman suffrage was a movement that succeeded, after all. “The effect of the suffrage movement’s films on winning support for their cause is difficult to determine,” Sloan writes. (122) The effect of the many commercial comedies that lampooned suffragettes, however, is presumably less difficult to determine,

because they failed to sway the nation to reject granting women the vote. The impact of early social problem films is another subject on which the author is ambivalent. Her views range from the notion that movie fantasy diverted spectators from taking effective collective mass action (the old revolutionary standard again) to the possibility that cinema’s narrative structures “lessened the political threat of reform and added a human dimension” (74) and could assist in facilitating change.

*The Loud Silents* is a small book about big issues that need considerable further development. Kay Sloan deserves credit for focusing attention on a neglected area of early cinema history and on the challenge of formulating adequate historiographic and theoretical frameworks for linking cinema and society.

ROBERT SKLAR

## Image and Identity

### Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture

By Bruce Elder. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989. \$39.95 (Cdn.)

It is not easy to find a book that compares with this one. While we have any number of histories linking national cinemas to political events or social trends, it is a rare undertaking that looks to film for an enunciation of a given culture’s philosophical underpinnings. It is an even rarer work that argues, as Elder does here, for film as being central to the continuity of that thought. As he sees it, the work of that philosophy was to span the gap between the original settlers’ “commonsense” responses to their hostile environment and the absolute idealism inherent in their Protestant traditions. Some 80-odd pages of weighty prose later, Elder concurs with Arthur Kroker’s thesis that the current role of Canadian thought has been to internationalize that mediation. With Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and George Grant, Canada has undertaken a commitment to find a middle ground between America’s pragmatic technologism and Europe’s continual pondering of ideologies.

Cinema, whose apparatus is both technological and ideological, serves as the middle ground of that middle ground. Yet to Canadians and foreigners alike, Canadian cinema has shown little in the way of memorable products. Part of the blame lies with just this spirit of mediation. Canada, after all, is a nation built without a revolution, civil war, or Wild West. Whatever their announced ideologies, Canadian governments are reasonable in their deference to local concerns. The much debated national identity is less important to the average citizen than the comfort of his or her niche in a well-protected multi-cultural mosaic.

In creating the National Film Board, John Grierson tapped this strain of negotiated social realism. Fifty years later, the Film Board has come to define that aesthetic as the standard for the national cinema as a whole. As a result, Canadian cinema boasts few adventure films or screwball comedies. Conflict is hard to come by. The bad guys are educable and the good guys tend to be an institution or social movement.

So what is wrong with a socially responsible, if humble, national cinema?

Elder, as he has for the better part of two decades, argues that the NFB opted for the wrong realism. As he wrote in his seminal 1985 manifesto, "The Cinema We Need," he would have preferred to see a realism of form over content, using the full prerogatives of the technology in a far deeper exploration of the human condition.

*Image and Identity* is an assembly of writing organized and reworked to buttress the arguments of "The Cinema We Need." Its strongest chapters are lengthy, laudatory passages on the work of Michael Snow and Jack Chambers. These are the artists, Elder contends, whose work embodies the Canadian obligation to reconcile the technology of cinema with the realities of the world it depicts. Films such as *Wavelength*, *Presents*, and *Circle* are also posited as transitions between modernism's anti-illusionism and Post-Modernism's demand for a reconsideration of representational imagery.

Elder's lengthy appreciations of Snow and Chambers are works that might well stand as a fine book and a respectable monograph in their own right. His articles on the NFB in the 1950s, his revisionist reading of *Mon Oncle Antoine* and his take-down of *Goin' Down the Road* are, if not as central

to his contentions, also fine examples of a major critic and theorist at work.

Unfortunately, the vagaries of academic publishing were not as kind to Elder's classic condemnation of *Not a Love Story*, appearing here in butchered form. His survey of contemporary Canadian experimental film-makers also falls victim to space limitations. Nor is it clear why there is no conclusion to a work that is otherwise so thoughtfully structured. An updated version of "The Cinema We Need" would have worked wonders.

Nevertheless, in his strong explications of Snow's and Chamber's films, Elder more than makes his point. Like a cinematic Stephen Hawking, he patiently unravels a long line of logic until we can conceive the world inside out and backwards. For him these experimental sensibilities are the norm, the perceptual peace that humankind may have with its moving image technology. It is entirely fitting that discussions of those millions of dollars of features and that unbroken string of documentaries are fragmented or missing. From Elder's perspective, these are the products of the Flat Earth Theory.

Is Elder right? And, if so, what difference could it possibly make? Is anybody, North or South of the border, likely to grant primacy to the experimental cinema?

Elder's argument is finally something of a tautology. Experimental cinema is the most appropriate venue for the exploration of form simply because that is what experimental cinema mainly does. If one is simply looking for a tool that may precisely respond to thought, to art, to important realities, there is no question that this is the cinema we need.

In American culture, the argument might well end here with the rejoinder that if you want to send a message, try Western Union. The dominant cinema is there to be dominant. Partisans of the American avant-garde are, by self-definition, renegades in the great American tradition.

Canada shares no such heritage. Its endlessly insecure culture seeks reconciliation with loud voices. Experimental film-makers, among the loudest of those voices, are accorded the protection granted any struggling ethnic group. Their influence is proportionately closer to that of the routinely marginalized feature film and all too common documentary. Given the deluge from south of the border,

most of Canadian culture shares the same swamped boat.

In this cultural context, Elder's tome is an argument with a future. Great sums will not be shifted away from the creative accountants, well-pensioned civil servants, and colorful entrepreneurs who produce most of Canada's moving imagery. But the culture is small enough to feel the need to listen. Hopefully, the resulting dialogue will be widely available should the rest of the world ever request that long-proffered Canadian mediation.

SETH FELDMAN

## The Cinema of Apartheid

### Race and Class in South African Film

By Keyan Tomaselli. Chicago: Lake View Press, 1988. \$29.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper

Tomaselli, editor and publisher of the South African media journal *Critical Arts*, is one of the most astute and prolific media scholars in South Africa. In this book he develops a methodology for the study of racist modes of film production within a white nationalistic cinematic tradition. Afrikaan films tend to focus on agrarian Boer life and espouse populist ideals.

Tomaselli critically analyzes the rise of an Afrikaan-controlled South African cinema. In his discussion of censorship and control by subsidy, he describes how the Afrikaan ethnic group increased their control over the South African film industry. Early in the book, the author studies the socioeconomic importance of Afrikaans language films and the economic value of increased subsidies for such films. Tomaselli writes, "The growth of Afrikaans, the most recent of world languages, was largely due to its promotion by the South African mass media: first print, then radio."

In 1969, however, the government increased subsidies for Afrikaans language films by 10% while subsidies for English language films remained at 44%.

Tomaselli shows that the Afrikaan government's monopoly over South African film resulted from (1) the government's increased subsidies for Afrikaans-language films, and (2) the Afrikaan-dominated financial control of film production,

distribution, and exhibition. He writes, "The Afrikaner insurance giant, SANLAM, bought out the 20th Century-Fox interests, which gave them control of production, distribution, and exhibition."

Unfortunately, the author does not offer reasons why the American company allowed such a buy-out. Nor does he discuss the effect of the indifference of international film scholars to the plight of Afrikaan-controlled South African film. Some questions that Tomaselli could have answered include: Did American criticism force 20th Century-Fox to sell their South African film interests? And if this was the case, why was the anti-apartheid movement so short-sighted as not to foresee that the Afrikaans would take control over the South African film industry? An analysis of the anti-apartheid movement's socioeconomic effects on the South African film industry should have been discussed during the late 1960s. This is especially true since Tomaselli's purpose is documenting the cinema of apartheid—an international rather than a national problem which makes a mockery of the free and democratic world.

Nevertheless, Tomaselli offers a most interesting insight to black film studies and any film studies of people of color. He writes, "The desire for a totally black crew will not necessarily lead to the making of critical films. Liberation lies not only in technical expertise but in counter-ideological commitment allied to a theoretical knowledge of cinema and its role in society." This understanding of black control of what I call "black-modes-of-creative-production" links race to a liberation ideology rather than merely black control over the means of production. When discussing black-oriented films which have been produced, directed, and/or written by whites and "uncommitted" blacks, media studies must use theoretical methodologies which distinguish certain forms of race and gender empowerment as well as discern the various ideological strategies that film-makers have chosen to represent the black community.

Interestingly, Tomaselli avoids simplistic racial dualisms in which black over white control of the film product produces a politically "correct" black film. But he does not acknowledge the importance of technically skilled blacks in an industry that is predominantly white. Even in America, where technical unions racially discriminate, the presence of