



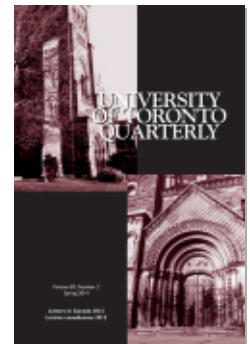
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A Body of Vision: Representation of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry by Bruce Elder (review)

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gaze, yet 'owns her body'; one who enhances the artifice of gender and sexual relations, but shows commitment to an 'honest portrayal' of nastiness; one whose gender traducing qualifies as inclusive, though she 'fails to satisfy a gay standard' of resistance. Though I concur with Faith that dyadic or exclusive interpretations of Madonna are inadequate, and though I sympathize fully with the author's qualified attraction to the performer, I also feel that the popular and academic presses (especially the 1993 *Madonna Connection*) have drawn ample attention to the provocative and troublesome politics of Madonna, and that an unmitigated focus on relativity may allow for unexplained slippages among analytical modes. When humanist and postmodern assumptions of identity are simultaneously or alternately mobilized – as they are in this text – what is the theoretical relationship between them, and what determines their opposition, complementarity, or hierarchy? Why, for instance, do Madonna's assertions about power and control generally signify as factual, while her self-identification with gay men – surely a pushing past binaries – receives a failing grade? Why commend Madonna as a role model for young women, only to dismiss (in a single paragraph, the penultimate one of the chapter) the issue as false, implying unavailable consensual standards?

That said, Faith shrewdly uncovers various ways in which Madonna discomfits viewers, including the apropos comment that Madonna disturbs some feminists precisely because she evokes 'longing for the perfect, politically conscious and articulate woman to represent us on world stages.' Faith, conversely, subordinates her own uneasiness to relish Madonna as the Whore who revamps the term from the inside, and whose body (bawdy) becomes a flagrant signifier of cultural contradictions in the inevitably compromised script of success. For Faith, Madonna's flirtation with seemingly incommensurate cultural fantasies is finally what frustrates our standards and compels our attention. (GRACE KEHLER)

Bruce Elder. *A Body of Vision:
Representation of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry*
Wilfrid Laurier University Press. 400. \$49.95

An internationally acknowledged experimental filmmaker, Bruce Elder is also a critic best known for the seminal *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (1989). A synoptic interpretive account of Canadian experimental cinema centred on the painter-filmmakers Jack Chambers and Michael Snow, that book opened new terrain in Canadian film studies. American experimental art and film were a stalking horse throughout *Image and Identity*, and inevitably Elder turned to them separately. This is the first of two books encompassing the 'American'

project; its sequel, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson* is forthcoming in 1998.

Given first form as a film series 'The Body in Film' at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1989, *A Body of Vision* opens with the claim that the body is the last stand of the individual and the imagination against modernity and its handymen, technology and the instrumentally reduced model of language. This is a blunt declaration of Elder's critical affinity with postwar American art, which, in every important zone of its activity, seized on this perspective. American poets, painters, and filmmakers have gone about creating an art of resistance centred on the body, and Elder's intention is to analyse a select group of the film artists, and to provide accounts of the poetry and thought that shaped them. Writing such a book now is itself a defiant gesture of cultural reclamation, since contemporary 'Body Criticism' with its fetishistic 'cybernetic' concept of corporeality is exactly the opposite.

The thinkers and poets Elder enlists seem initially an odd assortment – Immanuel Kant, Ernest Becker, Wilhelm Reich, Luce Irigaray, Antonin Artaud, Julia Kristeva, Gnosticism and the Kabbala – but the filmmakers are obviously directly pertinent, and in several cases these are the first sustained critical discussions of their works despite their assured reputations as experimental artists. The key filmmakers of the book are Willard Maas and Marie Menken, Ed Emshwiller, Carolee Schneemann, James Herbert, and Andrew Noren. There are also shorter discussions of Bruce Conner, James Broughton, and Amy Greenfield. Stan Brakhage is discussed here as well, but glancingly, in expectation of the next book. The obvious strength of *A Body of Vision* comes from the very full critical accounts of the key artists. A precise description of the Maas–Menken *Geography of the Body*, one of the most famous of all American experimental films, finally opens that gnomic 1940s American surrealist masterwork to full interpretation. Similarly, Elder's discussion of Schneemann offers the first full reading of her remarkable work as a painter, pioneering performance artist, and filmmaker whose sexually charged *Fuses* has remained one of the scandalous jewels of American avant-garde film. Schneemann has never been accorded a place in feminist art, and Elder suggests that the application of French feminist concepts (out of favour among anglophone feminist film critics), as well as Reich and Artaud (who directly influenced her), illuminates her works. Where Elder excels is not just in his conceptual choices, but in bringing such concepts into his own close readings of the films, and this is likewise true of his chapter on Emshwiller, who specialized in dance-based works, and on Noren, whose work Elder brilliantly recasts in the light of Gnosticism.

Other filmmakers, like Claude Gutman, Broughton, and Conner, are handled more casually, and seem to serve to fill in Elder's schema, which will seem to the reader a scaffold that falls away as the book progressed.

(As it happens, though, there is more than one kind of body in this book.) The other feature of the book is the number of long conceptual expositions – on Kant, Artaud and Gnosticism–Kabbala, and (oddly) Leonard Cohen. While these are solid, erudite, and informative, and one can eventually see their point, they are not rhetorically integrated with the film analyses fluidly – the great virtue of *Image and Identity* (which brought Canadian philosophy so alive in its film analyses). The final effect is that *The Body of Vision* feels like loosely joined essays rather than a fully realized book. But each of the book's principal parts is exemplary of the kind of criticism film studies needs and should have a great deal more of. (BART TESTA)

Noel S. Baker. *Hard Core Road-Show: A Screenwriter's Diary*
Anansi. x, 246. \$19.95

Director Bruce McDonald's 1996 film, *Hard Core Logo*, is a hard-drinking foul-mouthed tale of the last months of a rock 'n' roll band as it wends its noisy, chaotic way through the Canadian west. Though a 'fiction' film, it unreels in the surprising form of a *cinéma-vérité* documentary covering the reunion tour of the four-man Hard Core Logo band. Film audiences are aware that McDonald is filming the members of the band performing in front of authentic crowds, occasionally spitting in each other's faces or mouths as the urge hits them. McDonald even appears briefly before the camera as the creator of the 'documentary' we are watching on screen, and the musicians address the camera (McDonald himself) from time to time, sometimes in less than flattering terms. Every word of dialogue comes across with unadulterated spontaneity. There seems to have been no need, then, for a 'writer' on this free-flowing filmed slice of unbridled twentieth-century picaresque life. Could it be anything but improvised?

After a Free Friday Film screening at Innis College in January 1998, the appreciative audience learned from the (unexpectedly) well-spoken Noel S. Baker, the film's scenarist, that indeed 80 per cent of the film was scripted. While the actors playing the members of this fictitious band had altered some details of dialogue to suit their personal characterizations, they were doing so from an oft-revised screenplay. Fascinated at the process of bringing a feature film to fruition, Baker kept a diary covering the period from the day he was providentially led to the project (21 July 1994) to the film's screenings at major film festivals and reaping of awards at the end of 1996. *Hard Core Road Show* is Baker's published diary. Its companion is another *real* documentary film that Dandy Salerno was simultaneously making about the making of *Hard Core Logo* and that Baker covers as well in his book.

Baker's diary form picks up well the day-to-day suspense of the unfolding story. Early on, he expresses his relieved delight in the assignment to write the script, his admiration for the Michael Turner postmodern