

## BOOKS ON FILM: REVIEW

BY PETER GODDARD

Notes  
from  
the  
fringe

*A pair of guerilla  
Canadian  
filmmakers ponder  
the sometimes  
inexplicable whys of  
their calling*

**Plague Years:  
A Life In Underground Movies**

BY MIKE HOOLBOOM  
YYZ Books, 216 pages, \$19.95

**A Body Of Vision:  
Representations Of The Body In Recent  
Film And Poetry**

BY R. BRUCE ELDER  
Willfrid Laurier University Press,  
400 pages, \$49.95

Let Jim Carrey paddle around in a pool full of Dom Perignon if he wants to. For genuine unfettered movie freedom, you have to envy R. Bruce Elder and Mike Hoolboom — and the boundless, virgin territory they've cleared out for themselves to write about film.

For Hoolboom, this means a one-of-a-kind autobiographical collage called *Plague Years* where gossip, reminiscences and film criticism intermingle freely with pages of shadowy video images and reflections on a life lived with AIDs. Even the purely autobiographical elements follow their own rules. Some appear in conventional form — to be read as short stories — while some are transcribed as scripts.

Yet boundary-blurring has been the norm with Hoolboom throughout the years he's been at the Toronto heart of independent filmmaking. He never

met a border — sexual or artistic — he didn't get to cross in the some 40 films and videos (like *Frank's Cock* and *Panic Bodies*) he's produced in almost 20 years.

Even *Plague Years* itself should be read as something more than a book, suggests Hoolboom's editor, Steve Reinke, himself a distinctive videomaker. There are the "metaphoric possibilities of the body as book, the book as symptom, diagnosis as reading," Reinke writes.

Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore, as Dorothy said. Still, *Plague Years* is also a reminder of that wonderfully uncomplicated pleasure of remembering what it felt like to discover movies for the first time.

There's John Wayne, Jerry Lewis and Garbo. "We laugh at the opening cartoons," Hoolboom says, recalling those Sundays at the show with mom and his brother. "Somehow they'd taken a rat, put it in overalls and white gloves, and made it funny."

In *A Body Of Vision*, Bruce Elder goes out on more limbs than Wile E. Coyote. He analyses the fringiest of the fringe filmmakers in the context of Gnosticism, the quasi-Judeo-Christian belief that's as ancient as Christianity

itself but, until recently, barely more than a rumour. The time for Gnosticism, Elder believes, has come.

In the Gnostic belief, the body itself is just so much baggage. If you're having a great sex life, it can feel as terrific as a carry-on by Louis Vuitton. Mostly it's just an extra weight for the mind's spirit to lug.

So when feminist filmmaker Carolee Schneemann paints over some images of film taken during sex with her husband, we see the Gnostic spirit at work, suggests Elder.

"The photographed images represent the body," he writes. The painted-on parts represent a "sense of the body that is really only available to the subject" — that is, what Schneemann really thought of the sex.

This is heavy sledding even for those whose interest in film extends beyond the next Demi Moore vehicle. It doesn't help matters that Elder seems inexorably drawn to obtuse language with words like "diegetic" and "proprioceptive." Many parts of *A Body Of Vision* read like intellectual wipe-outs where the verbiage spins entirely out of control and any sense of what's going on is crushed as you crash into phrases like "dispersive temporal structures."



**THE EXPLORATION OF SELF:** Toronto's Mike Hoolboom, from his film *Letters From Home*.

For all of that, Elder is on to something, which, for better or worse, he can call his own. Hoolboom, too. For all of their excesses — Elder's more than Hoolboom's — their ideas don't feel as if they've been handed out at a film junket along with the customized T-shirt.

This is no small thing. Like Disney executives required to spend a day in a Goofy suit to better understand their corporate gestalt, movie critics are increasingly compelled to deal with the corporate Hollywood thinking, particularly now that movie profits are measured in billions of dollars and losses can threaten corporate collapse.

Making commercial movies is rather like playing Russian roulette, only with nuclear-capable tanks, not pistols. But because Hoolboom and Elder are dealing with film that's rarely seen outside of art galleries or museums — if it's seen at all — they aren't asking anyone to show them the money.

And for once at least, it's great to go to the movies — well, to books about movies — and not feel that somewhere along the line a lot of money will have to exchange hands.

Peter Goddard is a Star entertainment writer.