

narrative in design. Elder's mature cinema could hardly be called a cinema of perception, though it longs for such a cinema just as Elder the critic lingers over the films of Chambers, of Snow, of Brakhage. These filmmakers are the ones making the movies Elder himself needs. The kind of cinema they have made is the kind he aspires to make and, so far, has not made. In the themes Elder's recent films take up and develop he tries to discover how he wound up in a spot where he cannot make the cinema he needs; in his manifesto he tries to imagine what that cinema would be like were he – or anyone else – able to make it. This, too, is a Grantian gesture: to call up the image of idea of that to which one aspires and cannot attain now. It is also the gesture of the unhappy modern Romantic, a figure stricken with memories of the future he imagines, the frantic, frequently abrasive, rather funny figure who writes our manifestos.

#### NOTES

(1) I think Piers Handling takes this up in the present issue of *Cinema Canada*.

(2) See, for example, Elder's "On the Candid-Eye Movement," *Canadian Film Readers*, edited by Joyce Nelson and Seth Feldman (1977), pp. 84-94.

(3) This is, in turn, why I take it that anyone who wants to argue with "The Cinema We Need", the text of an artist, must also be prepared to argue with *Illuminated Texts* and do so in political terms. Peter Harcourt's article in this issue of *Cinema Canada* indicates this is the case but if the article does not engage in the argument it, I hope, prefigures. I would guess *Lamentations* will also be of interest in this regard. What Harcourt misses when he says Elder's films are becoming more philosophical is that the way they are becoming more philosophical is political.

(4) Elder utterly despises (or professes to despise) Stephen Heath but, at the broad level of current film theory isn't *Questions of Cinema* really in the same universe of critical assertions as this sentence by Elder: "Narrative first creates and then reconciles discord"?



by Piers Handling

Bruce Elder's "The Cinema We Need" is the first theoretical manifesto of principles to have appeared in English-Canada since John Grierson laid down his views in the '40s. Coming as it does from one of our most prominent film thinkers, both at the level of practice and of theory, it needs to be taken seriously, especially at this point in time when Canadian cinema seems to be standing at yet another crossroads in its history.

Yet, Elder's proposals, despite the eloquence with which they are argued, must be countered and questioned in a variety of ways, from the assumptions that he makes, to the conclusions that he draws and the cinema that he proposes.

It almost goes without saying that Grierson has been the most important aesthetic influence on the way our cinema has evolved. The tradition of realism that Grierson spawned was vital for its period. It gave us the freedom to explore the social, cultural, and occasionally the political and economic reality of our country while establishing an indigenous style of our own. It served its purpose but, like all theories, it was specific to a certain historical period and its usefulness was, or should have been, consigned to those times. Like all theories, it needed to be challenged, built upon, used, and then ultimately transcended, synthesizing into something else. Filmmakers in Quebec understood this dialectical process and perhaps as a consequence their films grew in stature as a result of this dynamic. In English-Canada, a similar debate did not occur and perhaps our cinema has been the poorer for it.

Much of the recent debate in contemporary film criticism has centred around the question of realism, a debate that has particular relevance for Canada because of the overwhelming documentary tradition in our art. Elder is right to foreground this issue and posit it as problematic. Certainly it is beginning to assume a position of centrality in my own thinking on Cana-

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## The cinema we need?

dian cinema, and ironically I agree with many of Elder's conclusions in this regard, although he ascribes to Peter Harcourt and myself the position of being the defenders of the "realist" cinema. This accusation I find puzzling, for nowhere, to my knowledge, have I assumed this position. I may have written on filmmakers like Don Shebib, Bill Fruet, Gilles Carle and Andre Blanchard but never in any prescriptive way, and those directors whose films I have recently examined – Derek May, Mike Rubbo, Larry Kent and David Cronenberg – all trouble the realist surface, contest it and situate it as a problematic. But, at the same time, Elder also maintains that Harcourt and I are proponents of the New Narrative, a form that deliberately calls into question realist conventions.

This, however, is not the primary focus of Elder's piece, nor should it be, and I would like to confront that. Elder, throughout, seems to be simultaneously afraid of the present, yet determined to give it a place of centrality in the cinema he proposes. There is a strong element of *passéisme* to Elder's article, a hatred of the technical/managerial, of what he thinks we have become, of the present. He even cites Adorno to emphasize what we have lost, and Milton as an example of the enduring past. Indeed, much of Elder's analysis of our technological society could have been written a hundred years ago by someone warning of the dangers of the industrial revolution. And Elder's sense that we have been dispossessed of "that realm known to the ancients, the realm of mystery and wonder" carries overtones of a late nineteenth-century romantic sensibility confronted with the evil machine age. So much of Elder's article is defined by a sense of loss. Things have been "vandalized," "commercialized," "hijacked," and "pillaged." Surely, if anything, we must learn to take the new technologies and adapt them to our own purposes. We live in a technological society whether we like it or not, and there is nothing we can do to reverse that reality, in the same way that we live in an atomic age. We cannot ignore technological changes; we can only learn to control them and use them to our advantage.

But, if there is a fear of this technological present, there is also a fear of fruitful intercourse, of a mingling of forms and strategies and a desire to erect barriers, to mark off the avant-garde from the New Narrative, to dismiss narrative, to create something pure and untainted. On the one hand Elder criticizes the New Narrative and its breaches of the conventional as having "little lasting value, for what seems unconventional one day, often becomes a cliché the next," while proposing a cinema of the present that presumably avoids these clichés – as if art and the forms it takes is somehow timeless. Is this what is important to art, that it simply endure? This idea that there are unchanging standards with which we can judge "art" has surely been undermined in the past decade, and the question of good or bad has tended to become an irrelevant question.

Narrative he discards as a form, but his objections to the New Narrative I find weak. He argues that Harcourt and I view the New Narrative film as a revitalization of the "Canadian Art Film" after the dark years of the capital cost allowance. While I have great admiration for the films made here between 1962 and 1974, I do not think it possible, or maybe even desirable, to turn back the clock and recreate those times. As Godard noted at the end of *Prenom: Carmen*, the days of the personal film are dead. That historical period has passed; we have entered into another and our films must reflect that change. It doesn't mean that I don't value some films that are independent and personal but I don't feel that the future lies here, in the same way that I don't think Godard is as central to our experiencing of the world now as he was in the '60s.

Elder objects to the New Narrative in two important ways:

- These films are still fundamentally narrative. Narrative in Elder's world is a falsification of experience that conceals more than it reveals, that essentially closes off the world and suggests that experience is ordered, rational, explainable. To speak against Elder, all art is a falsification of experience. No art that I am aware of can replicate experience. Furthermore, if New Narrative is narrative, it

also calls this ordering into question, subverts it, troubles its surface, creates ambiguity, often denies the notion of closure, and by so doing forces the viewer into a position whereby s/he becomes the active producer of meaning.

• Elder does not believe that "self-reflexive strategies used in some forms of avant-garde filmmaking can be comfortably accommodated within story-telling forms or that they serve important ends when used in that context... Such breaches of convention have little lasting value, for what seems unconventional one day often becomes a cliché the next." What are these "important ends" that remain unspecified? Again we are back in the domain of Milton and "lasting value" as if there is some imaginary standard against which art can be measured. Elder's statement denies the historical specificity of art, the fact it speaks to a particular set of historical, political and economic realities, and espouses the notion of an art that transcends this specificity. Is this the art of the present that Elder argues for so vehemently?

Let us take a look at the cinema that Elder proposes, a "cinema that can deal with the here and now," "a form that will immediately present the coming into presence (that is, the formulation) of present experience." He describes the terms of this cinema as follows:

1. "A cinema not of imagination but of perception... we must cease to impose ideas on experience... we must rid art, and ourselves, of self-consciousness." Surely this is impossible. What is art but a re-ordering of experience that automatically infers a degree of self-consciousness? The only artists to escape this are either the naive or the primitive. Is Elder proposing that we turn back the clock to try and rediscover a lost childhood of perceptual art free from social influence? His own films both impose ideas on experience and are self-conscious; they are certainly amongst the most intricately mediated and philosophically sophisticated art works currently being produced.

2. "The cinema we need will be a cinema of perceptions, of immediate experiences. It will not be a cinema of ideas. Like narratives, ideas are formed only after the fact, serve only to represent what is already past." All of experience, except the microsecond of the present, is in the past. Film, because of its photographic base, is an art form that exclusively preserves what has passed, the past, and nothing else. Formally, this is a restriction of the medium. At the level of content there is a possibility, obviously, of orienting us to the present and the future, but Elder talks little of content, being far more interested in the formal properties of the cinema we need.

3. "The form will have to allow for multiplicity and contradiction... The attempt to dispose of contraries-in-experience is due to reason and perception." Perhaps this is true of science, but historians and artists, social scientists and philosophers have been aware of the hermeneutical principles of their disciplines that allow for the unresolvable, the unexplained, the paradoxical. This does not negate a desire to order one's perceptions, in the way that Elder has

done in his article, in an attempt to interpret the world and further understand its contradictions.

4. "In order to be true to the commitment to reveal the process by which events come into presentness, this form of cinema we need will reveal the process of its own emergence into being... The development of such a piece of cinema through time will be like that of totally improvised jazz..." Surely, this is an idealistic impossibility. Improvised jazz is one of the few forms that does indeed meet the requirements Elder desires, but film, because of its formal properties, can never represent the present in the way that improvised jazz can. And revealing the process of its own emergence into being sounds distinctly self-conscious.

5. "Our cinema should be profoundly rhythmic." Is this not a self-evident truth that defines the properties of most (not all) films as rhythms fundamental to film editing and structure?

6. "The cinema we need would be rooted in the place where we have our being. But where we are, always, is in language... It will not be a purely visual cinema, will not be a cinema against the word, but a cinema of the power of the word." How can one engage in this kind of practice without, to use Elder's words, imposing ideas on experience, being self-conscious in our art, both of which he regards as anathema?

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Apart from the strong drift towards a kind of mysticism, a desire to cleanse art of the rationality that imposes order and hence supports the present technical/managerial system, "the cinema we need" is perceived entirely in terms of formal principles. This formalist solution is the most limiting aspect of Elder's argument, despite its obvious fascination. When the form that art takes assumes a precedence over everything else there is a very real danger of isolating that art form, I would hesitate to say "reality", but from the daily intercourse of human life. This is not the first time that a formalist argument has been made. Its impulse is legitimate. We must find new forms of saying things to counteract the old way of perceiving the world. Experience, as Elder points out, is not reducible in the way that most films present it to be. It is far more complex, it is infinite, closure is a lie, etc. But does the formalist position provide a solution? It holds an obvious fascination for the film theorist, but it has resulted in increasing marginalization and thereby isolates itself from the very audience it is trying to educate. Joyce's experiments with the novel in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* marked an end, not a beginning. The formalist filmmakers of our times — Godard, Straub Huillet, Duras, Syberberg (not to mention Snow, Brackage, etc.) — work in the margins and reach relatively small numbers of people, an intellectual elite. I value these filmmakers and their work but is this the *only* cinema we need?

Any piece of prescriptive writing opens itself up to an entire range of objections: Why only one cinema, one form and not a multitude of cinemas, of forms? Why exclusion and not

divergence? What I fear is that Elder is functioning from a defensive position where he tries to erect barriers between the avant-garde and New Narrative and narrative to preserve the purity of one particular cinema, one specialized form. In this way Elder wants a cinema that withdraws and detaches itself consciously from other cinemas, that defines itself in opposition to these cinemas. Is there any room in "the cinema we need" for a feminist cinema, a native cinema, a political cinema, that might want to employ different structuring devices? It is hard to tell because Elder, unlike Grierson, completely and no doubt consciously, ignores all questions of content. Is it enough to make films that are formally correct or should they not address themselves to the central ideological questions and events of the day: the representation of women, the absence of certain people and classes from our screens, the nature of the "hidden reality" that ideology obscures in modern society, etc.?

I do not intend to say that we need a cinema that deals with the nuclear issue, pornography, unemployment, abortion, the new technologies, native people — although these are all important and contemporary problems and I would hope that people would make films on these issues — because that would be slipping into a prescriptive trap. No, there is no *one* cinema that we need and there is no *one* form we need to contain our cinema. Hopefully, there will be a plurality of forms which call into question the dominant ideology, the accepted way of looking at the world that surrounds us.

If the cinema is to be a tool for change or function as a medium that re-orders our way of looking at the world it cannot be an elitist cinema. Its power is as a mass medium and it has to address itself to the general public. If the dominant form within cinema is narrative, we can't simply turn away from it, condemn it as impure and discard it as Elder wants to do. Narrative, on the contrary, has to be confronted head-on, as any form of colonization has to be faced, examined and transcended. Working within narrative obviously results in compromise and the danger of co-optation but at least it provides the possibility of assuming a centrality within the current debate that is otherwise abdicated. If we, as a culture and a film community, don't want to be confined to the margins, we must address this issue. Narrative, because it is so closely attached to pleasure cannot simply be dismissed. It has to be subverted from within, in the same way that technology has to be given a human face and harnessed to what we want it to do for us. As soon as technology, or narrative, is seen simply as the enemy we are lost and will just find ourselves plugging a leaky dam with our fingers.

I do not mean by this to dismiss Elder's vision of the cinema we need, but I would like to point out that it may well be a cinema we need but it is not *the* cinema that we need. I would like to see the avant-garde continuing to make films and am not proposing for a minute that we only make narrative or New Narrative films. The avant-garde and its innovations will always be valued and its experiments incorporated into the mainstream. This is also the history of art (and I might add,

civilization) and should not be perceived in negative terms as Elder does, but positively. This is how an art form or a culture remains healthy and progresses, by incorporating the ideas and inventions of its experimenters into the general fabric of society.

Apart from the theoretical questions raised by this debate, there is another realm of practicalities that Elder completely ignores: the pragmatics of an industry, the communications reality of 1985, the question of whether people will want to see this cinema, will understand it and want more. The '80s have not looked kindly upon experimentation in the arts. This doesn't mean that filmmakers should cease experimenting. What it does mean is: if this is what they want to do, they should be aware that audiences will be less receptive to these innovations. I lament this fact and wish it was not so but this too is the reality of 1985. On the other hand, to throw a positive light on things, experimentation flourishes in rock videos, a form that is becoming increasingly popular.

The one thing we must do now is deal with the practical reality of what we as a culture confront, of what it means to live in this society in the '80s, of how this society functions and expresses itself. I see little evidence of our filmmakers grappling with these questions although there are distinguished exceptions. Our women's cinema appears to be the most vital and engaged at this moment, the cinema the most connected to the present, but this should come as no surprise because women are currently asking the most pertinent questions about their role in society and the cinema reflects the health of this debate.

This raises another point. No matter how much I would like to believe it, I do not think that the cinema can have a potential to change society in any significant way. Films will not prompt people to want to alter their environment in any appreciable way, to "overcome this will to mastery." This will to change comes from an accretion of factors, of which the cinema is one of many and certainly not the most important.

It also strikes me that the cinema is no longer the pre-eminent art form of our time, that it no longer holds a position of centrality within our culture in the way that Elder by implication assumes it does. The zenith of the cinema's achievement has been reached, the creative people who really want to deal with the present will gravitate not towards the cinema but towards video in its many manifestations. As Louis Malle recently remarked, the only people who go to the movies anymore are teenagers on dates. Questions like "the cinema we need" will become increasingly marginal as films relinquish their hegemony in the visual marketplace.

However, the image industry — cinema, video, television, commercials — will always be important. An understanding of how these images are made, what they say, what they represent, what they reveal, what they conceal, is a vital undertaking. The image industry we need would, I hope, address these issues and situate them within a recognizably Canadian cultural, social, political, economic and physical landscape.