

Politics or paranoia?

by Peter Harcourt

"The Cinema We Need," Bruce Elder's article in *The Canadian Forum* (February, 1985) while challenging and insightful, confuses a theoretical debate with a political position and embodies assumptions that have to be confronted.

To begin with, Elder's comments concerning the Canadian retrospective organized for last year's "Festival of Festivals" in Toronto: to what extent can any retrospective advocate a cinema for the future, the cinema we need? Are not all retrospectives condemned, by their very nature, to present the cinema that has been achieved? And did not this particular retrospective allocate 50 hours in one of the four theatres reserved for the Canadian product specifically for the presentation of "experimental" films? Was this innovative programming covertly designed to facilitate the "sacking" and "pillaging" of the experimental product by less imaginative filmmakers seeking to resuscitate their moribund narrative structures? Indeed, do *Sonatine*, *La femme de l'hôtel*, or *Le jour S...* display traces "hijacked" from *Wavelength* or from *Illuminated Texts*? To use Elder's own words to ask these questions is to underline the false assumptions that deform the tone of Elder's latest article on Canadian cinema.

The conceptual confusions embedded in this article can perhaps best be dealt with by positing the need for a variety of levels within cultural discourse and for an equal variety of assumptions about the production and consumption of art.

Take the problem of "realism" in the cinema. While the urge to use of medium as "naturally" as possible may well condemn the art work to the past tense and to the apparent naturalization of those aspects of the past that have been represented for our attention, has not this urge been an aspect of all cultures and civilizations since the beginning of speech? Is not the

impulse to tell stories and to listen to the stories of others both a primordial human need and a chief agent of social bonding? Has this not been so since the time of Homer through to Margaret Laurence? And without it, would we – as a social entity – have any sense of ourselves at all?

What I have always enjoyed about this impulse towards naturalism, especially in the cinema, is that it can never really work. Whatever the "intention" of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, it cannot convey to us today the sense of "how things really are" but of how things were once imagined to be, of how they were felt by a certain group of people in a certain place at a certain time. And by what order of moralistic logic must we assume that such a work suggests that "the present order of things cannot be transcended"? I have always assumed that naturalism in the cinema suggests exactly the reverse: the present order of things *must* be transcended. Of course, it doesn't tell us how!

Furthermore, the passing of time systematically *de-naturalizes* the most naturalistic cinema. As codes of dress change along with codes of speech and behaviour, attentive spectators become more aware of the strategies of construction than they are of the "authenticity" of the moment of capture. Seen nowadays – largely because of its editing strategies, its "structured absences" – *A Married Couple* has as much in common with Sartre's *Huis Clos* or with Bergman's *The Silence* as it does with Rossellini's *Paisa* or with Zavattini and de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, those supposedly classical models of a "realistic" cinema.

I have always felt that Roland Barthes posited a somewhat specious distinction between "writerly" and "readerly" texts: while it is true that the "writerly" text remains irredeemably writerly – one has to work at deciphering *Finnegan's Wake* or *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* – one can choose (if one wishes) to work at deciphering a wide range of "readerly" texts. One can "read" *An American in Paris* as the vehicle for American cultural imperialism as much as we have been encouraged to "read" Donald Duck.²

Of course, I am arguing more on a sociological than on a theoretical



level; but my insistence would be that this level of social discourse also has validity – depending on whom you are arguing with and on what you are trying to achieve. Discourse does not take place solely on the theoretical level, especially discourse designed to intervene directly within the political arena. Any form of suasion must be cast in the language that the people with the power to effect change will be able to understand.

To offer a theoretical argument to cultural bureaucrats, to the guys who pull the strings of cultural practice in this country, is to commit an act of suicide. Furthermore, if we are going to talk about the cinema we need, surely it cannot be *only* the experimental cinema. If, with our limited economic resources in Canada, we should turn away from narrative and devote our energies solely to developing a cinema that "will use non-causal, non-teleological forms of instruction and will not attempt to arrest time," then on a political level we have completely surrendered our right to what we might call our narrative sovereignty, our right to tell our own stories about ourselves in our own way.

When I think about what kind of cinema we need, I would argue for *all* kinds of cinema. We need our own TV sit-coms, our own rock videos, our own dramatic features, both in the theatres and on television; we need to nourish and protect the distinguished "minimalist" tradition of narrative filmmaking in Quebec such as we find in the works of Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Denys Arcand, Jacques Leduc, André Blanchard, Mireille Dansereau, Paule Baillargeon, and even, with *Sonatine*, Micheline Lanctôt (this is *not* "new" narrative: it has been going on for 20 years). We even need our own industrial and educational films; but of course we also need to nourish and protect our experimental filmmaking.

As Elder has argued, experimental films do address problems and complexities generally beyond the reach of most narrative films; but they often address them in such a way that only a specialized group of people can properly understand. If experimental films might be seen as salvation in some way from our technocratic, managerial

world, then they could provide salvation only for the very few.

Nevertheless, Elder is right to worry about the moral health of our society and he is equally right to stress the important role that culture can play in assisting us to understand what it is in life that might constitute the Good. Since it is so much at the base of his own artistic practice, I don't want to confront the religious emphasis that Elder places on rediscovering "our wonder at the gift of things, at what should be the wonder of wonders, that things are given"; nor do I wish to ask for greater specificity about what these "things" are that are given, nor by whom or to whom. I would, however, like to examine the logic around which Elder organizes his argument.

Elder begins by collapsing "technique" into the U.S. and then proceeds, to collapse "narrative" into "technocracy." Narrative, according to Elder, "eliminates the unmanageable ambiguities and the painful contradictions inherent in experience." From such a reductive description of narrative, which restricts to a single model an immense variety of organizational strategies, it is not too difficult for Elder to conclude that "narrative is the artistic structure of technocracy." "The cinema we need," he continues, "the cinema that combats technocracy, will, therefore, be non-narrative. It will not be animated by a rage for order – and order's concomitant, concealment."

But wait a minute! Did technocracy devise narrative, to use it for its own ends? Were there not stories long before there was technocracy, certainly long before there was a U.S.? And is this all that is going on in *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch*, and in *The Diviners* – a "rage" for order? In fact, has not Roland Barthes shown us how, through a series of intricate readings, we can find the concealed text within the ordered text? And isn't it an axiom of literary studies that the greater the novel, the greater the play might be between order and concealment, between the "manifest" and "latent" meanings of the text?

This hermeneutic activity is the very stuff of reading and thinking, of seeing and feeling, this continual play with texts – whether "readerly" or "writerly", closed or open, narrative or non-narrative, naturalistic or formalized. Some texts, of course, are more challenging than others, and some are of greater value. But to argue that a certain form of cinematic practice is "the cinema we need" while another form is "dangerous" is to imply a theoretical totalitarianism that must be resisted.

Were Elder's argument to be taken seriously, where might it end? Would there be public burnings of all copies of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and of *Goin' Down The Road* and of all the published work of Harcourt and Handling? I hope that Elder wouldn't go that far. At the same time, his repeatedly emotive vocabulary implies a personal "rage" that seriously distorts his discussion of the issues he is dealing with. It seems like the rage of a paranoid, of someone who feels he is insufficiently appreciated, who is fearful of being stolen from, and who is increasingly intolerant of any form of artistic, critical, or theoretical practice that is different from his own. Now

Peter Harcourt founded film studies in Canada and teaches at Carleton University.

this kind of "concealment" may, in fact, be "dangerous" because so unacknowledged by the writer himself.

Yet buried within this latest piece of Elder's is an intricate and insightful theoretical argument. Elder is actually contrasting multi-textual non-narrative, non-teleological filmic strategies with more conventional forms of cinematic closure. The cinema that Elder is celebrating (which, since he offers no examples, seems largely to be his own) is a cinema of becoming rather than a cinema of having been; and I agree with Elder that this kind of cinema is immensely important within the realm of theoretical activity for those who have the leisure and the training to appreciate it.

What troubles me is that Elder makes no distinction between the political and theoretical realms and that he has to privilege this "poetic" practice over the more "prosaic" practices of other artists, railing against them and their expositors – Harcourt and Handling – as if they were "dangerous." It is, however, as I have argued, this confusion of discursive levels plus the prescriptive insistence on only one correct for filmmaking for the nation which, were these arguments listened to, would be dangerous.

Elder's cinema is an intensely inward cinema. It involves increasingly an exploration of different states of consciousness and of the relationship of the self to culture. It is, in essence, a philosophical cinema.

Elder's theory, too, has been enormously important. Almost single-handedly he initiated a debate about the types of filmic practice that characterize filmmaking in this country;³ and he has written a definitive account of the essential characteristics of the Canadian avant-garde.⁴ More recently, however, certainly in this latest article, his theoretical work seems designed largely to justify his own filmmaking activity, making it seem monocratic and self-serving.

There can be no cultural health for any nation without a more pluralistic approach than Elder will allow. We do need Elder's cinema and, as Canadians, we can be proud that it was created here. At the same time, most of us want to watch other kinds of films at the movies on Saturday night and on television on Sunday. It would be fine, it seems to me, if some of these films might tell stories in innovative ways and if some of them might be Canadian.

NOTES

(1) *S/Z*, by Roland Barthes, trans. by Richard Miller. (London, Jonathan Cape, 1975). The original French words are *scriptible* and *lisible*.

(2) *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, by Ariel Dorfman & Armand Mattelart, trans. by David Kunzle. (New York, International General, 1975).

(3) "Modes of Representation in the Cinema: Toward a New Aesthetic Model," by Bruce Elder, *Ciné-Tracts* 6, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 55-61.

(4) "The Photographic Image in Canadian Avant-Garde Film," by R. Bruce Elder in *Take Two*, ed. by Seth Feldman. (Toronto, Irwin Publishers, 1984), pp. 246-263.



by Bruce Elder

The cinema described in my article is not any cinema that actually exists, made either by myself or by any other filmmaker. My own films are far too conceptualized to be the films argued for in my article. More sensitive readers have commented, accurately, that the article is primarily self-critical. (In this respect, it is like my forthcoming film, *Lamentations*.)

But does one accuse Eisenstein of self-interest for formulating and publishing his ideas on montage, because they are ideas which he used in his own filmmaking? Or Vertov, for advocating a documentary practice rather like that in which he was engaged? Or Richter, for expostulating on a "true cinema" whose foundational ideas were derived from his "experiments" in filmmaking? Is Leacock condemned for speaking out for "an uncontrolled cinema" rather like the *cinéma-vérité* he was, at the time he made these statements, in the process of inventing?

For my part, I believe the fact these filmmakers worked out notions of cinema and made films based on the principles they have arrived at gives both their films and their writings a special strength. The co-incident of the principles they expound and the principles they have practiced indicates intellectual integrity. I wish I could say I follow in their path, but, in honesty, I cannot. My own writing has been only an admission of the shortcomings of my own work and a celebration of the strengths of others, the Michael Snows, Jack Chambers and David Rimmers, whose work has been so very rich.

The danger that I pointed out in "The Cinema We Need" was the threat to alternative cinema posed by a failure on the part of professors, critics and theorists to pay any heed to the practice, and even the advocacy of practices which are likely to usurp the avant-garde's claims on the attention of those who are interested in discovering alternatives to the hegemonic

Bruce Elder's films include *The Art of Worldly Wisdom, Illuminated Texts* and the forthcoming *Lamentations: A Monument to the Dead World*.

A vindication

products of Hollywood/Mosfilm. The best rebuttal of my allegation would be to reel off a list of articles that professors and critics have produced on experimental film.

Another option that might have been exercised would have been to claim that, although professors have not actually written about experimental films, they really do recognize its importance. (One can imagine that this rejoinder would be offered to the accompaniment of much huffing and sniffing and wheezing.) I'm afraid that this response wouldn't be good enough either. In this period when Marcel Masse holds the purse strings, whatever cultural activity is not defended to the hilt is given away. Moreover, advocacy of one type of cinema (naturalistic fictions) along with demonstrable neglect of another type (experimental films) indicates a prioritization of practices on the part of professors. In fact, professors have often stated that experimental filmmaking is valuable only as a sort of research program and that its discoveries take on real value only when they are adopted and used by feature filmmakers.

I know experimental filmmakers who have worked for over 15 years now, have done fine work, and still have got none of the attention from professors that is regularly bestowed on mediocre narrative filmmakers. I know of experimental filmmakers who have worked at one-and-a-half or two regular jobs to earn enough money to allow them to make their art and, after years on such a regime, have only found themselves penniless and tired. Looking down from the Olympian heights of a university post, it is easy to pride oneself for a cool overview of things, to chide those of us who are reduced to scuffling to make their art and to upbraid us for using "emotive language."

My piece was not intended to be a contribution to film theory. I do not believe it reads like one. I think, rather, the piece has the rhetorical features of a polemic. Nor was it addressed to bureaucrats. It was written for people who, generally, are committed to developing a distinctive Canadian culture, and it was written to warn them that a type of cinema that I believe has

importance to the cultural life of our nation is being overlooked by nearly all of our cultural advocates. Perhaps, I even hoped to prod them into taking action. I hoped some of them would take a look at the work, think about it and, perhaps, take up the cause. Such interventionist ambitions embarrass me not in the least.

But these points seem to me obvious. Surely not every piece of writing on culture – nor even every piece of advocacy – is addressed directly to bureaucrats. Surely change occurs in many ways, and that one way of effecting change is to develop a cadre of people who are committed to some cause and might eventually challenge the policy-makers.

Now it is true, like all "occasions of speaking", that the telling of stories plays some role in constructing the world in which we live. All sayings act to set up the world shared by all those who speak a common language. But narratives have no particular importance in this regard. Which is not to conclude that all utterances (or, at least, all occasions of recounting a narrative) are equally valuable, since all participate in constructing the world that "a community of speakers" shares. But one would want to ask whether the world erected by one way of speaking might not be preferable to the world erected by some other way of speaking? One would want to ask whether the world set up in narrative does not have deleterious features due to the very nature of narrative? And, even if one answered this latter question in the negative, one would still want to inquire whether the world constructed by the common narratives of our culture is not less humane, less profound, less sensitive to the mysterious than the world set up by narratives of earlier periods in history?

I do believe what Hegel expressed in *Reason In History*, that "Everything that a man is, he owes it to the state; only in it can he find his essence. All value that a man has, all spiritual reality, he has only through the state" and that "No individual can step beyond; he can separate himself certainly from other particular individuals but not from the Spirit of the People." But I do not believe this implies a thoroughgoing moral relativism, since I believe