

# So, what did Elder say?

by Bart Testa

So, what did Elder say when he wrote that piece for *Canadian Forum*? Lots of things, some of them open to complicated interpretations. But, first, we might want to know how Elder came to say what he said and this involves several circumstances.

The piece that appeared in the February *Canadian Forum* under the title "The Cinema We Need" was originally the artist's "statement" Elder wrote to accompany grant applications to the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for his new movie, *Lamentations*. The slightly edited *Canadian Forum* version appeared in a special section devoted to Canadian cinema along with articles by Gary Evans, Brenda Longfellow and Geoff Pevere. The magazine's regular critic, Robin Wood, took the month off and there is a tale here that, I believe, affected the tone of all but one of the pieces.

Once upon a time, until three years ago actually, *Canadian Forum* had a rotating chair that was held by a changing group of film critics that included Peter Harcourt, Kay Armatage, Seth Feldman, Joe Medjuck and others. They wrote often (but not always) on Canadian films. When *Forum's* new editor, John Hutcheson, replaced Sam Solecki in 1982, Hutcheson canned this crew and installed Wood as the magazine's regular film reviewer. A distinguished academic critic who has written a whole shelf of invaluable film books since the mid-'60s, Wood is also a topnotch journalistic film reviewer who, in recent years, has done some really good things at *Body Politic* and *The Toronto Clarion* as well as at the *Forum*. Now Wood does not think much of Canadian films and writes about them less. He has explained why in the May *Canadian Forum* where he responded critically to Elder's "The Cinema We Need": basically, Wood does not believe in the project of

Canadian cultural nationalism, at least in the forms that project now takes.

Although I wish he would contribute more essays to the debates in Canadian cinema as penetrating as his "David Cronenberg: A Dissenting View" (which appears in *The Shape of Rage*, ed. P. Handling, Toronto, 1983), Wood's decision pretty much to ignore Canadian movies is his business. But this decision also has meant that in the three years Hutcheson has been running *Canadian Forum*, yet another outlet for writing on Canadian film has been stoppered.

The point is that when the special section ran in February, it provided a rare editorial window for Canadian film critics at *Forum* and the writers felt compelled to shout through it loudly. Pevere tried to nail down every male model movie in Canadian cinema; Longfellow crammed mentions of just about every feminist Canadian film of the last year into her piece. Only Evans was untouched by the others' urgent sense of the occasion, penning a trailer for his new book, *John Grierson and the National Film Board of Canada*. Naturally, it was a piece in praise of propaganda — just the cinema we need, right?

Carrying the monstrosity of experimental film into the critical procession, Elder delivered a manifesto. While Elder has indicated precious little talent for the strong rhetorical gesture in his writing before, this time he boiled over into belligerent accusation and prescription, regular moves in manifesto-writing and just the ticket for the ceremonies *Canadian Forum* unwittingly staged.

So much for the genre, what about the auteur? Figuring out what Elder said is partly a matter of whom the article addresses and who's doing the addressing. At first it might seem silly to divide up one man into two writers but there are at least two Elders: the avant-garde moviemaker of long films like *Illuminated Texts* and the academic critical writer of long essays on Jack Chambers and Michael Snow. These two Elders are the same man entertaining the same ideas but writing under two compulsions, using two different rhetorics, serving two different projects. In this instance, Elder was writing as an artist addressing



groups of his peers gathered in council to deliberate on the grant-worthiness of his film *Lamentations*. The decision to widen the readership of his artist's "statement" came later and at *Canadian Forum's* invitation to submit a piece to their special section on Canadian cinema. No doubt Elder also must have noticed that his writing, usually so diffuse and tortured by qualification and academes, had come out of the word-processor with sharp contours and a pissed-off charge of indignation. In short, a manifesto.

Some of the qualities of "The Cinema We Need," I should add, were borrowed from George Grant. The opening nine paragraphs are written in unmistakable Grantian cadences; Elder's use of "technology" as his central critical idea comes pretty much straight from Grant's *Technology and Empire*, and the politics Elder invoked were Grantian through and through. Although Grant is hardly known among film critics in Canada (Wood, for example, utterly misses the point of the term technology for this reason), Elder knows the philosopher's idiom well, having already deployed it extensively through *Illuminated Texts*. It must have been impossible to resist singing the heavy sarcasm that colors his artist's "statement" for *Lamentations* through the vocal arrangements of the Canadian author best known for *A Lament for a Nation*.

Instances of the artist's manifesto — the broad, combative declaration of purpose, intention, aspiration and prescription for artistic practice — are almost unknown in Canadian film culture since the days of John Grierson.<sup>1</sup> Typical of manifestos everywhere, the actual topics taken up in "The Cinema We Need" belong not just to the practice of filmmaking but to a politic of culture and to the agenda of art itself. It is also typical of manifestos that Elder's article has set off a controversy between the artist and the critics, so far in this case, Wood, Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling, the latter two right here on the pages of *Cinema Canada*. Elder's article openly attacks Harcourt and Handling naming them as the best representatives of what he opposes;

in fact, these two critics are father (Peter) and son (Piers) in the discussion of Canadian cinema.

Harcourt, who has done more to provoke the best writing on Canadian film than anyone, has many sons among English-Canadian film critics and Elder is one of them. Even when Elder critiques Harcourt's positions, which he has been doing since the mid-'70s,<sup>2</sup> as a critic speaking *molto sotto voce*, there is obvious care taken to honor this father. As an artist, however, Elder is not at all one of Harcourt's sons, but a child of the avant-garde brought up by that extraordinary teacher, Gerald O'Grady. It was inevitable that Elder's filial piety for Peter would cross wires with his fierce commitment to experimental cinema since Harcourt holds no discernible conception of avant-garde filmmaking as a distinct enterprise and Elder is a strict sectarian. The flash-point came with the vast — and vastly successful — retrospective of Canadian movies at the 1984 Toronto Festival of Festivals. The programmes were coordinated by Handling with Harcourt, Armatage, Jim Monro, Ian Burnie and other critics lending a hand, including Elder who ran the experimental programme.

My own impression is that neither Harcourt nor Handling should have expected the accusations Elder makes against them in "The Cinema We Need" since the festival was, for them, a vindication of the one big happy family of Canadian cinema. But when I expressed that view of the proceedings in *The Globe & Mail*, Elder promptly delivered an angry reprimand to me over the telephone. It should have been obvious that Harcourt and Handling believed the bright light of Canadian cinema all resemble what Handling repeated called the "small personal film" in press interviews published around the festival. For those two critics, the narrative movies of the early '60s are the paradigm of Canadian filmmaking. Even when pressed, on one of the panels Elder organized to accompany his programme at the festival, Harcourt would not speak to differences between "independent personal films" and experimental movies. This distressed Elder and for reasons "The Cinema We Need" tried to lay out, its writing came shortly after the Toronto festival.

Elder argues for one politic of Canadian film and against another which may prove to be a phantom without force or trajectory. However, in its present form, as a critical model of what Canadian film might be (even without explicit political articulation), that politic shapes those in Canadian film culture who count themselves on its Left. (On the Right, of course, we have the sinecured hacks and snoozers of the NFB and the usual gaggle of sleazoids who run the laughable "commercial industry.") Because they are the most thorough of Canadian film critics, what Harcourt and Handling have to say does have wide currency among the enlightened. One of the purposes of "The Cinema We Need" is to force open the articulation of the politic behind the model — Elder's tactic is to be frontal and abrasive. Elder takes "independent personal narrative films" and argues its political importance

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can bring experimental cinema under the critique of cultural "utility." But Elder does this all ass-backwards, by putting *his* political critique first.

What he says in "The Cinema We Need" is, 'Okay, bring on the critique - I'm ready to play in your park, so put 'em up. Elder insists the politics of Canadian filmmaking come out in the open, by arguing how the cinema he espouses has *its* politic. This, I take it, is why he starts his manifesto with a statement of the Grantian politic, that structures Elder's most mature work of art, *Illuminated Texts*.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Elder's rhetoric of counter-critique serves not so much as a defence of his own movies as a preemptive strike. For the usual reasons artists write manifestos, he wants to map out and occupy - bunker, mortar and sand-bag - the intellectual ground on which he wants to fight.

Elder's argument rolls up the atoll of cinema by asserting that film narrative always articulates the technological view of time, of purpose, of experience. "Narrative is the artistic structure of structure of technocracy," he says. The already known is enfolded, the subject of the discourse is already mastered, perception is closed, thrown into a past and denied its problematic. What is so striking about this assertion is that almost everyone involved in serious film criticism believes some version of it.<sup>4</sup> This goes for critics who just shrug, those who seek to discern subversions in some movies (Robin Wood, for example) and those who, like Claire Johnston, have sought to forge new tools of analysis in order to chase down the political implications to their last reverse angle.

Not many critics would, however, agree with Elder's Grantian formulation of the argument that narrative expresses a technological view. They would complain that his philosophical terms of reference are politically problematical. "Too metaphysical for me," is the succinct way one young film theorist put it on reading "The Cinema We Need." That's fair enough as far as it goes. Nonetheless, I have yet to read an adequate critique of Grant's thought that leads easily to dismiss its adaptation to issues of Canadian culture out of hand. On the contrary, the writings of Arthur Kroker (e.g., *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, Montreal, 1984) indicate that Elder argues from a strong political and philosophical position. However, on the side of film criticism, no topic has been so vexed in the last 15 years as the articulation of just what the big problem is with narrative. Elder believes he has the answer, backed by a national tradition, his "cinema of perception." That proposal raises its own problems and questions no doubt, but let's get back to the specific burrs under Elder's indignation.

The point Elder wants to clarify about the relationship between Canadian movies generally and experimental movies in particular takes focus on Harcourt and Handling's loose treatment of "personal independent film." Elder charges that they would, if unchecked, appropriate experimental film to narrative cinema by using the idea of "new narrative." Elder rests his case on a reading of the way these two critics handle Canadian film. They are, he says, committed to a cinema that "shows us as we really are... and so

engenders, or at least reinforces, our sense of identity." If this realist position Elder attributes to Harcourt and Handling sounds familiar, it should. Everybody - well, almost everybody - promoting Canadian culture makes these kinds of noises, as readers of *Cinema Canada* will have surely noticed. More to the point, Elder believes Harcourt and Handling do not underline the differences between the scruffy naturalist movies of Owen and Shebib, the lyrical art cinema of Lefebvre and the experimental films of Snow when they write their accounts of Canadian film.

For Elder, all this is, so far, the backdrop whose design stands out in thick relief when he reads Harcourt or Handling and whose surface just got a bright new coat of paint, with a bit of big-time glitter, at the Toronto film festival. Centre stage now, though, is Elder's distress over the possibility that the critical appropriation of "new narrative", which Elder properly views as pseudo-avant-garde filmmaking, will be taken up by Canadian critics as a way of rejuvenating the tradition represented by Owen, Jutra, Shebib and that bunch. On one side, the critics want a return to art-films; on the other academic publicists for "new narrative" claim to be waving the banner of experimental cinema. Canadian critics have been passing a decade praising mediocre Canadian feature films using the tools of an outworn auteurism while standing knee-deep in the ruins of a realist theoretical scaffolding. The history of their critical project culminates in *The Shape of Rage* (1983) and the bulging middle-section of *Take Two* (1984). Surveying this critical terrain from the gay hot air balloon set aloft at the Toronto film festival, Elder has cause to worry Canadian criticism as a whole could catch the "new narrative" virus now epidemic among younger, academically trained Canadian film critics. Elder believes that, if the contagion catches on, everyone will be coughing up the opinion that - now! today! this week! - experimental film means "new narrative" movies and "new narrative" movies means a re-birth of Canadian cinema.

So, what will happen then? Nothing interesting will happen with Canadian cinema but, according to Elder, the avant-garde cinema represented by Snow, Rimmer, Razutis, Hancox, Wieland, Hoffman and, well, Bruce Elder, will appear to be an irrelevance of dubious ("too metaphysical for me") political significance. Elder's response is to dig in and maintain the traditional strict opposition between narrative films and experimental movies, that opposition marking the spot where Elder really wants to fight it out.

Harcourt and Handling answer Elder's charges against them on their own realist/auteurist turf but their articles in this edition of *Cinema Canada* don't effectively move to his ground. I'm pretty sure that Elder has correctly stated what is at stake when his peers sit to deliberate over a grant application for a film like *Lamentations*. I'm less sure he does more than this. Elder's combative statement is not for him an airy abstraction but an urgent address made in the middle of an activity of film criticism, the granting process, that has the most serious consequences for an artist. And, as an

artist, Elder lives by his opposition between narrative and experimental filmmaking and his manifesto explains why he, at least, continues to make that choice.

I also think there are reasons to take his warnings seriously, if not whole hog. The critical confusions that attend "new narrative" films and the foolish try at moving Canadian art-film from its shrunken domain to the tiny island of experimental cinema probably do conspire to damage the further possibilities of the best avant-garde cinema being done in Canada. This will benefit no one, least of all the feckless filmmakers who want to make movies like *Low Visibility*, a perfect and sad example of what comes of such ill-considered sideways motion, as Elder fears and predicts.

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Let's sum up and see how the controversy around "The Cinema We Need" shapes up, and shapes our reading of that text. Wood, I think, believes the cinema we need must come inside an accessible popular moviemaking that draws the viewer into *his* "nation", the community of those who resist the dominant capitalist-patriarchal ideologies. And, for Wood, Elder writes like an authoritarian. Harcourt believes the cinema we need tells Canadian stories, reflects Canadian lives, in short, expresses/creates an identity that he associates with Canadian culture. And, for Harcourt, Elder writes *religiously*, like an impractical mystic who just doesn't know what the score is. Handling slyly sees Elder as resuming the prescriptive proposals of John Grierson, not in content but by genre, casting Elder as someone both authoritarian and at least moralistic. Handling's position is close to Harcourt's but his is a more historical and film-historical sensibility and his critical writing serves an "archeology" of Canadian film tradition.

These critics all come from and are still committed to kinds of film work that can be called auteurist/realist/sociological, with the accents falling on different sides of sensibilities at different times. In my view, Harcourt and Handling can (and do) provide ammunition for the practical battles on arts councils and at film festivals and they serve the cinema they think we need, or are mostly likely to get if we're lucky, as academic publicists modelled on early *Cahiers du Cinema* and early Andrew Sarris. As a critic, Elder is not so different in the purposes he serves, as Harcourt correctly mentions in his response to "The Cinema We Need." What is different, of course, is the canon of films Elder's criticism serves to exfoliate and to publicize, and that changes everything about the kinds of film criticism Elder practices, and makes for the differences on display in the current controversy.

But "The Cinema We Need" is not really criticism at all but a manifesto in which Elder tries to put the experimental cinema at the centre of Canadian film. This prompts reasonable people to ask who's cinema can this be? Harcourt and Wood answer by drawing on the perfectly obvious truth that that cinema will never belong to a *sociologically* significant audience. Harcourt probably has Elder dead to rights when he lashes out with, "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." Sure as shootin', they won't know what Elder is talking about. As you might imagine, bureaucrats are less likely to know George Grant, even in Tory Ottawa, than film critics are and, if they did, they could hardly be expected to embrace an essay like "In Praise of North America" as a basis for Canadian cultural policy.

So, what else is new? You think sociologically and you don't think like an avant-garde filmmaker or a Canadian philosopher. What could be more obvious? But film critics don't have to think sociologically all the time and everywhere and experimental filmmakers almost never do. I bring up Grant again for two reasons. First of all, he is a crucial Canadian philosopher and has taught us much about the kind of imaginary Canadian Tony Wilden cannot teach us. Grant is also a curmudgeon. So, I hasten to add, is Bruce Elder. But it is precisely the job of the philosopher and the avant-garde filmmaker to serve as points of resistance to the dominant discourses, if you will, in the sense Michel Foucault describes the matter. This has been the case since the 1920s with Delluc, Epstein, Vertov, Eisenstein and Kuleshov; it doesn't change 40 years later when you come to Conner, Brakhage and Mekas, and I don't see any reason to be annoyed now, 60 years later when, locally, you come upon Razutis and Elder. More, that Elder takes up Grant at the same time he moves to the high ground of "The Cinema We Need" is doubly traditional for an avant-garde manifesto. Elder owes the style of his gesture to a whole history of attacks on narrative and on its high valuation within a sociological film criticism, the history of avant-garde film theory and criticism. And he owes his local color and politics to a philosopher who upholds the political-ethical distinction of Canada by articulating how the nation can occupy a point of resistance, however weak it might be, against the technological empire.

It is embarrassing that film critics like Harcourt and Wood do not acknowledge these rather transparent features of "The Cinema We Need" before attacking Elder. They attack him personally. They see in his text not an artist making an artist's big noise for his kind of art but only a nefarious ambition. Nefarious because Elder's politic does not accept their sociologies, ambitious because he dares to say what artists should do. These critics have read Elder poorly when they could be reading him well and cutting him four ways to next Tuesday.

There is a personal side to "The Cinema We Need," in fact an auto-critique. Harcourt declares "more recently, certainly in this last article ("The Cinema We Need"), his theoretical work has been designed to justify his own filmmaking activity." Harcourt is mistaken. The cinema Elder proposes is to be a "cinema of perception" and will not be concerned "with ideas" and will not be a "narrative" cinema. Well, we have not yet seen *Lamentations* but all of Elder's major work - *Fool's Gold*, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, *Illuminated Texts* - is obsessed with ideas and thoroughly



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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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