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ELDER: ARTAUD AFTER TELSAT

Loretta Czernis

> Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.[1]
>
> Antonin Artaud

> The one thing that is certain is a hidden violence that makes all things uncertain.[2]
>
> Bruce Elder

Lamentations,* Bruce Elder's new eight and one half hour film, was designed to perform a kind of epistemological surgery, so that, upon leaving the screening, we are changed in some way strangely familiar. Elder operates, through his film, upon the arrogance underlying our "new and improved" discourse. Our conceit emerges from how much we know as "proven" by how many efficient inventions we have produced, and that these intellectual and manual productions have catapulted us into post-modernity. *Lamentations* removes obstructions so that we can consider that which is still largely unknown to us: how we managed to disconnect from history. This film makes us experience our self-confidence as a pathetic cultural narcissism. The laments act as purging insights capable of luring spectators away from an isolated estrangement toward a communal one; we become active participants in (re)creating collective memory.

**Lamentations: A Monument For A Dead World*
Part One: *The Dream of the Last Historian*
Part Two: *The Sublime Calculation*

Artaud believed that theatrical violence could cleanse the human soul. He sought out historical situations of tragedy, believing that it was only in times of tremendous suffering that people could understand reality. In the midst of catastrophe the beauty and the horror of life are as one. A vision, given birth in crisis, can transform us. Artaud wished to recreate such experience in the theatre, searching for the necessary magic in a total spectacle, with actors who knew how to scream, so that we might remember something of the passion and cruelty of Nature/Culture. Artaud wanted theatre to do the same job that narrative painting had done for centuries — teach morality. But he lived during a time when people still went to the theatre to be enriched — before TV, before computer games, before laser lightshows. Anyone now wishing to teach must bring the message to the people in a spectacle which can both caress and jolt our digital sensibilities.

In classical theology, natural and moral evil have always been distinct, the former being the reasoned study of why God would allow natural disasters to occur in Nature, the latter being attempts to understand the origins and nature of evil within human will. Elder renders this distinction arbitrary, reminding us that we think we "own" Nature, when, in fact, we have been allowed co-presence with it. The proof for our folly lies in the ways in which we have imposed names on the forces of Nature, in an effort to dominate and control it. One such name is natural evil. Nature is violent, teeming with deadly plants and animals, floods, earthquakes, and many other elements which humankind takes up as threatening to survival. We have imposed our word for our own fall from grace, "evil", on the earth itself, upon which we depend for our survival. We are all implicated in this treason, this abandonment of our Home. In betraying Nature we betray ourselves.

Baudrillard has discerned that "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."[3] In his view there is "... only "information", secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion and similacra of spaces where the real-effect again comes into play."[4] At museums people feel a brush with history. This is achieved by skillful exhibition of collected objects. The cases, the lighting, the prose on the little catalogue cards must be exactly right in order to create the theatrical effect we have come to know as "historical". Sometimes they even play music to fabricate a total environment. This is not different from entering a funeral parlour, where every object arranged for viewing is neatly masked and out of easy reach.[5] Such lamentable cultural artefacts exhibit a bizarre dualism which emerges, Elder would say, out of a hatred of time. The most insidious illusion is that we can capture what has died and keep it present to us. This folly exhibits our hatred for mortality. We love production; we hate corruption.

History books, documentaries and historical sites are tourist attractions. Every attempt to build a City of God has become a Coney Island. For every "real" cathedral and totem pole there are thousands of plastic replicas.

Indian dolls and bishop dolls switch costumes daily in the bedrooms of little girls everywhere. Punjabi children go to village halls to watch Dallas and National Geographic specials on bears and Hopi indians. TV via Telsat satellite is educating them to read life in the west. Neither the educational show nor the prime time soap opera tell them anything about what life is "really" like in North America. What constitutes understanding now? Information-gathering, not knowledge-seeking, not wisdom-listening. In order to cope in the information society, it is essential to believe in the reproductions.

Historical writing is static description including insular analyses of geographically conditioned "events". When events take precedence over Things, when we forget Being which language represents, we are expelled from history.[6] Forgetting what is always there in the background, we are forced to leave the Garden, because we have failed to be attentive, to care. Outside of the Garden is disconnectedness, despair, hatred, madness; not the passionate madness of creation but the cool madness of rationally planned destruction. We have severed the connection to Home and in so doing we have also alienated and, as Elder shows us with dizzying imagery, driven Nature mad. "A heartless Nature has opened her great maw and swallowed everything."[7]

Bruce Elder is a diary-keeper who understands another way of doing history. "We must resist the folly of historical writing."[8] There is no history to be remembered beyond my own, for my life is a fruit from the family tree of mankind. To try to plot what happened between people hundreds of years ago is an impossible project, and reads awkwardly, like a bad play. We can only read ourselves in history. In (re)writing myself I write about the meaning-world. Elder's diary is about me; mine is about him, and you. We are connected, not isolated. As he states, the last historian is everyone.

This Film Is About You, Not About Its Maker
(at best, a half-truth)[9]

Elder has made *Lamentations* a performance in which the audience must attend to many spectacles all at once. We watch a travelogue. We watch the filmmaker himself reading poetry and filming his friends talking, talking, talking about everything from physical disorders to ladies' perfume to geometry, some wearing costumes, yet always still "themselves". We see ruins from many cultures. We observe sexual relations. There is a narrative on one thing, subtitles relating other things, music, superimposition, rapid montage: reproduction upon reproduction. I began to no longer watch, but to be affected. For a time the scenes changed so fast I couldn't recognize anything. The swaying movement of the images became severe. I was overwhelmed by the intensity of Elder's vision. I found myself in the midst

of an experience for which ... I don't have adequate words. His explosive grammar shattered my assumptions about how to watch a film.

> A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectacle, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.[10]

Our consciousness contains the memories of how European civilization arrived in North America and Mexico, where it was not needed. Something of that which has died among we who seem to still live must be recorded before Bruce, before each of us, forgets, by recreating the remains of memory. Like all great artists, it is obvious from this film that Elder has had the experience of a very direct, blood-curdling communication with Nature. Accompanying this he has made some contact with his ancestors — our ancestors — who shared a tremendous respect for the earth which is alien to our present everyday understanding. He has travelled to cathedrals, petroglyph sites, hopi and mayan ruins, looking for signs — for points of contact — with the primordial. In these traces he senses how the Holy was once with us, that we once attended to the co-presence of Being and Things. The traces come from his remembering, sparked in surroundings which he realizes nevertheless to be modern productions of what was "ancient". "The record of the events that occurred in these sacred places is written in earth and stone."[11]

> The problem is to make space speak, to feed and furnish it; like mines laid in a rock which all of a sudden turns into geysers and bouquets of stone.[12]

Watching this film was for me at times like jumping into a pool full of prisms. I saw myself from many different angles, distorted in the "open field of possibilities," one moment listening to an actor as the aging Liszt play bittersweet melodies, and at other times being bombarded with cinematic images of people shooting up, getting shot, and electroshocked. This juxtaposition of the sublime and the sleazy does some justice to the complexities of human passions, which should not be seen as linear, but circulatory.

Elder reminds us that language creates meaning, hence reality for the mind. We are also (re)told that words are the symbols for the Things they represent. Speech is both rearticulations and symbols. We have forgotten the symbolic. We censor; we focus on the redundant. In so doing, we negate our own creative potential, for uniqueness arises out of tropes, of taking the courage to see beyond language-as-sign. All else is mimesis.[13]

One of the metaphors Elder elaborates is that of a map. There are scenes

of a couple in foreplay, exploring each other's crevices and plains, peaks and caves. The Elder geneological charts enter our field of vision again and again. So does an actor sitting behind a desk playing a psychiatrist, who speaks into his microphone about a patient he despises. The skit maps the violence of clinical discourse, which in the end traps even the analyst himself in its web. There are maps indicating where certain poisonous spiders live. There are photos of faces, whose deformities and disintegrations plot the indifference of the insect world. A map is filmed which points up the regions around the globe where plague has occurred. The rigourous clarity in the presentation of these images leads me to conclude that Elder wanted to disorient comfortable viewers, to make us leave abstract versus concrete behind, to perform what Artaud could have called a theatrical-alchemical operation for making spiritual gold. The process of purification is also one of purgation. An actor in a dingy alleyway relates aphorisms on pus, intestines, blood, sweat, vomit. We see a vulture eating carrion. These unpredictably recurring images provoke physical reactions. We who are civilized spectators are (re)introduced into our bodies. We are usually only on our bodies. We wear our clean skin and fit limbs like a costume. In everyday life we are not "in" our bodies, with our mucous, our bacteria, our sweat, our excrement. This is the stuff of us.

All civilizations censor, since reasoning implies censoring. Making distinctions is how we carve out a territory, take a position. "Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart".[14] Delineating boundaries makes religious belief, village life, sexuality, etc. into objects of thought to be defended. We have created many efficient systems as a result of setting up distinctions, which then very quickly turn into oppositions: white-red, Christian-heathen, reason-nature, perfection-corruption, rigidity-fallibility, male-female, yes-no, 0-1. Digital technology is logically a form of ethnocentrism. This obsession with positioning is the basis of competition in our global economy.

Our participation in these forces of production, as we well know by now, has alienated us, cut us off from seeing and developing praxis in our lives. This praxis is what we used to call faith (and before that it was what we called praxis). It was the ability to enter situations as open terrain for social relations, for being-with, not as opportunities for combat. It was the ability to acknowledge the futility of separateness.

> ... your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his [sic] face from you so that he does not hear.[15]

Elder has created a cinema of cruelty. In *Lamentations*, he addresses the "horrifying dualism" which created, then overwhelmed, civilization. This

dualism (our love for making distinctions) though essential for intellectual development, is not necessary, Elder argues, for the development of consciousness as more than rational thought. His is not a blind lament, but rather a diary with a clear and searing message: this dualism is deadly because by focussing on reason without praxis we have forgotten how to care.

> In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theater which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times.
>
> Our long habit of seeking diversion has made us forget the idea of a serious theatre, which, overturning all our preconceptions, inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.
>
> Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.[16]

Perhaps the greatest violence Elder inflicts on the post-modern viewer is an invitation to the dance. The end of the film shows scenes of frenzied dancing by many South and North American Indian tribes, who Elder has brought together on film, to recreate the world. Tribal peoples have always believed in dance as a sacred force, generating the power to reverse existing orders. The gestures expose and open up thought-cages, cleansing consciousness so that we may begin anew. I call this a "violence" on Elder's part because he is wrenching us out from under our everyday documentary reality, into an old/new oral tradition, back/forward into praxis. To believe in such imagery requires of us all a great leap into waiting. The trance-dance image provides one strong metaphor for how to make this leap now. All we have to do (the hardest thing for a culture to do that has not privileged contemplation for centuries) is to listen to the ruminations of the soul.

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.[17]

Elder's celluloid way-station makes an important contribution in our desperate search for a suitable cultural praxis. This is ironic, since technology greatly assisted in our alienation. We automatically respond to reflected images like new friends/objects to be quickly scanned. Elder, however, has

designed his film to move at points faster than any speedreader. *Lamentations* can scan the spectator. Both reader and text reverse positions unpredictably, making for a visual outward bound of Nature's stochastos. The viewer is thus (re)taught meta-literacy — a way of reading with double vision for both sense and meaning. This kind of reading is only possible, however, to viewers if we allow ourselves to become vulnerable to an experience which confronts all of the senses with a very powerful dream.

As was true of Artaud, Elder is not afraid to document what he sees to be generations of terror and grace. He has divined that the world is now dead, getting ready to begin again. Being slipped away the more we tried to grasp hold. Individuation and greed have anaesthetized us; fear and boredom keep us asleep. *Lamentations* jogs the memory, writing time as recollection and intuition. By seeing this poetic film diary, we inscribe ourselves not in a linearly truncated historical document, but in a crystal-like film environment, (re)creating many resonant shades of our experience simultaneously.

> For behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.
> And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.[18]

Notes

1. A. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*. Trans., M.C. Richards. NY: Evergreen/Grove Press, 1958 (fourteenth edition, no date), p. 99.
2. All of the following quotations attributed to Elder are taken from commentary he has written appearing in a subtitle format throughout the film *Lamentations*. Toronto: Lightworks, 1985.
3. J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*. Trans., P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman. NY: Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 38.
4. J. Baudrillard, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.
5. J. Baudrillard, *Op. Cit.*, *passim*.
6. "A people without history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments." From T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *The Four Quartets*. NY: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, p. 58. Elder quotes from the Four Quartets at various points in his film.
7. Bruce Elder, *Lamentations*.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. A. Artaud, *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.
11. Bruce Elder, *Lamentations*.
12. A. Artaud, *Op. Cit.*, p. 98.
13. "Man [sic] does not render efficacious grace efficacious, but he can render sufficient grace sterile