

R. Bruce Elder: In the Realm of Mystery and Wonder

By Brett Kashmere



When the Toronto-based filmmaker, writer and professor R. Bruce Elder's manifesto "The Cinema We Need" first appeared nearly 20 years ago (*Canadian Forum*, February 1985), it challenged the "official" construction of Canadian film history. Specifically it raised questions around the critical attention afforded our homespun narrative feature-film tradition, in particular the mid-1980s celebration of "new narrative," a mode that cribbed experimental strategies and techniques to remix and deconstruct illusory style, linear structure and emotional affect. Elder maintained that Canadian narrative cinema, both new and established, was interesting only insofar as it was made "here," while Canada's film avant-garde on the other hand regularly garnered international consideration and acclaim. "This work has never received the [domestic] attention it merits," he writes, "because the professors of movies have been too busy to take any notice of it. Now, after years of neglecting this form of cinema, they propose to honour it by advocating its vandalism and commercialisation, for their praise of New Narrative is tantamount to legitimating the mainstream cinema's hijacking of hard won achievements of vanguard cinema."

His objection to the critical dissemination of Canadian cinema is rooted primarily in a disagreement over the dubious artistic merits of "independent personal films" such as *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* (Don Owen, 1964) and *Goin' down the Road* (Don Shebib, 1970); movies his colleagues Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling championed. In Elder's view, "Narrative is the artistic structure of technocracy. The cinema we need, the cinema that combats technocracy will, therefore, be non-narrative." Furthermore, this cinema will combat scientific rationality, organizational integration and technical mastery by accepting ambiguity, mistakes, repetition and "lingering mystery" as positive qualities more in tune with the realities of human life than the manufactured verisimilitude of narrative realism.

In a critical but sympathetic analysis of Elder's manifesto titled, "So, What Did Elder Say?" (*Canadian Cinema*, May/June 1985), Bart Testa accurately notes that "The Cinema We Need" was intended as both a self-critique and a proposal for the films Elder would like to but was up till then unable to make: not a précis of past activity but a foreshadowing of things to come. His endorsement of a non-narrative cinema based on perception and spontaneity rather than self-consciousness and mediation was, after all, in marked contrast to his major work circa 1985 that, in Testa's view, was "obsessed with ideas and thoroughly narrative in design." While this observation proved accurate at the time, Elder's films have clearly progressed to the point that they now fully encompass the principles laid out in "The Cinema We Need." Viewing *Eros and Wonder* (2003), as well as Elder's other recent films, through the wide angle of historical perspective should clarify the relationship of his theoretical beliefs to his current film cycle, *The Book of Praise*.

Based on traditional Protestant spirituality, *The Book of Praise* also references the name of the Presbyterian Church of Canada's hymnbook, thus signalling a deeper, personal significance. As Elder relates, "My mother was a very pious person, whose life revolved around her local Presbyterian church [where his sister is an ordained minister]. When my mother died, I began to consider why I had separated myself from that particular form of spirituality." Impelled to reconsider his Protestant roots following his mother's death and inspired by the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, Elder set out to make his own *Book of Praise*. The first three sections have since been completed. They include *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy* (1997), *Crack, Brutal Grief* (2000) and *Eros and Wonder* (2003).

Since finishing the sprawling 42-hour film cycle, *The Book of All the Dead* (1993), an epic 20 years in the making, Elder's films have assumed an increasingly tactile quality marked by amplified physiological intensity. The resultant visceral assault, reminiscent of earlier films like *1857*:



Fool's Gold (1981), is in part his response to the overwhelming spectacle of today's technological environment. In an unpublished statement titled "Fascinated by the Web? How to get over it..." (2000), he writes that in order to escape from the anaesthetizing simulation of reality, "we must use every extreme means for restoring our connection to our bodies [...]. We must intensify the image." This can be achieved by recovering our sense of immediate perception and by working and living more spontaneously. Heightened perception, in his view, arouses our anticipation of the unexpected (the gift of the present), reinvesting direct everyday experience with mystery and wonder. Spontaneity, meanwhile, "blasts open the prison house of false consciousness, the alienated *méconnaissance* of the *société du spectacle*," and in doing so restores attention to our genuine passions. What's striking about these comments, written to accompany the release of *Crack, Brutal Grief*, is how concisely they summarize the main tenets of "The Cinema We Need."

In *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe*, Elder draws upon the visionary imagination of William Blake to depict a world that has "grown out of touch with the body and the joy at reconciling with our natural being." It is, fittingly, one of his most handmade, personally interior films. Created with a rear-screen optical printer and matted cut out of construction paper, *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe* has a rough, ecstatic collage quality. While making the film Elder says, "There arose within me a new sense, a delight still physical (since understanding had no role in it). But all animation ceased, not in torpor but in bliss." Buoyed by the completion of *The Book of All the Dead* and filled with the pleasure of beginning something anew, yet still emotionally fatigued, Elder made a film located at the artistic and spiritual crossroads. Looking forward to the new digital-imaging processes with a deeper inward focus, *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe* also reflected on what has been left behind and what has been irreconcilably lost.

However, *Crack, Brutal Grief* is a much different film from *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe*. Elder, provoked by the violent suicide of a close friend and collaborator, constructed the film almost entirely from still images and audiovisual materials found on the World Wide Web. *Crack, Brutal Grief* is a phantasmagoria of human brutality and debauchery. The visual catalyst was an Internet search for “suicide” and “power saw,” which consequently opened the path to every type of abject imagery imaginable. Hardcore pornography and pictures of physical mutilation and degradation are combined with chaste erotic images and other pieces of sensational early cinema, documentary footage from pre-war Germany, passages from Leni Riefenstahl’s films and various pop culture detritus to fashion an unrelenting vision of a fallen world. Elder offsets the apocalyptic tone, however, by interweaving a Middle Eastern dance beat and the motif of a silhouetted dancer that suggest a coming through of personal darkness and depression, a movement from internal despair to re-engagement with the physical world and, finally, spiritual renewal. The optically printed, lo-fi found video also anticipates the formal territory explored in *Eros and Wonder*, which employs even more elaborate and sophisticated techniques to negotiate the digital/film interface.

At 106 minutes, *Eros and Wonder* is a demanding, confounding and finally rewarding experience; it is also a stunning technical and sensual achievement. Premiering at the Cinematheque Ontario in February 2003, this third instalment of *The Book of Praise* follows where the two previous films leave off: with a fugitive, quivering vision of human fragility and fleeting glimpses of beauty. Visually the film combines Super 8 diary footage of urban landscapes, pastoral vineyards and historic German locations, sites of Elder’s childhood fantasies, with sexual imagery including studies of a female nude. The material was then transferred to video, manipulated using digital-imaging processes Elder developed, outputted onto 16-mm film and hand-processed. Tension is gathered by the chaos of heavily processed, brilliantly coloured alchemical surfaces oscillating above or on top of the oft-static tableaux. A multi-layered,

polyphonic soundtrack designed by Greg Boa, combines electronically produced compositions by Boa and Alex Geddie, a synthetic voice-over and passages of Romantic music written in the German towns seen in the film. Finally, pinned to the bottom left corner of the screen, a persistent scrolling text drawn from an epic poem written by Elder (also the source of the voice-over) fluctuates between readable and unintelligible broken typography. This creates a tenuous pull between meaning and pleasure. The viewer, caught between scanning seductive, amorphous images and reading the text (in a futile attempt to make narrative sense of things), must become an active participant in the creation of “meaning.”

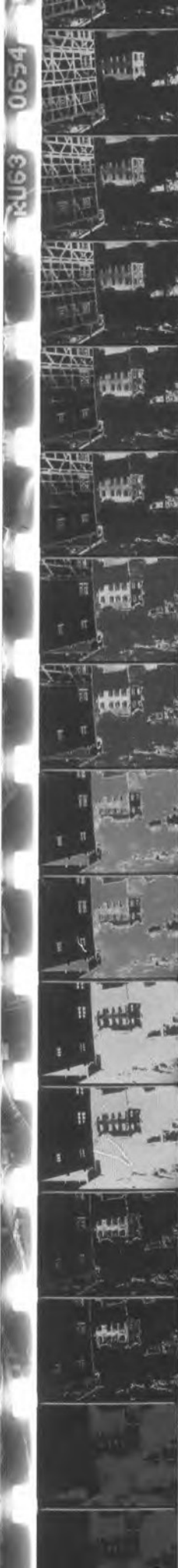
In a supplementary note titled “The Articles of Faith” (2003), Elder emphasizes that, “*Eros and Wonder* is a film about transformations—about transformations of imagery; about history as transformation; about eros as a transformative power; about that old Eisensteinian idea of collage and montage as transformation; but most of all, about the transformations of the self.” While researching the influence of occult forces on early modernism for a forthcoming book, Elder became interested in how theories expounded by the alchemists impacted the artwork of that period. Among the alchemists’s asserted aims were the transmutation of base metals into gold, as well as the preparation of an elixir of longevity and a universal cure for illness. The term alchemy is also commonly used to refer to any seemingly magical power or process of transmuting. Cinema, of course, has its own alchemical character. As Elder noted on the night of *Eros and Wonder*’s premiere, many filmmakers who are heavily involved with hand-processing refer to their practice as alchemy. And like alchemists, experimental filmmakers also often work in secret, often alone.

Another aspect of Elder’s art history research informing the design and structure of *Eros and Wonder* is his study of “chance operations,” a term coined in the early 1950s by the American

composer John Cage. In a condensed approximation of the *I Ching's* yarrow stalk oracle, Cage would flip coins to determine what notes to play or what instruments to use in his compositions. His goal was the surrender of authorial imposition to the indeterminacy and uncertainty of nature, also a long-time goal of Elder's. In an 1984 interview, Cage expressed his desire, "to create an artwork which is not the product of a man but of nature and so [I] attempt to concoct strategies for realizing that dream." He also utilized chance operations in his collaborations with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Since each composed independently, their music and dance were autonomous even though the work coexisted in the same time-space continuum.

Inspired by the ideas of experimental composers like Cage, Iannis Xenakis, James Tenney and Udo Kasemets, Elder uses aleatory techniques to reduce his influence over the creation of his films. In *Eros and Wonder*, these techniques included digital-imaging processes, database methods and chemical techniques such as hand-processing that beside affecting the imagery's colour and consistency, tempts scratching and other inexplicable "damage" during agitation. Using the film's text as a framework for the sound-image relationship also enabled Elder to compose each element independently, a condition analogous to the Cage/Cunningham collaborations. Except for occasional "sync" points between voice-over and screen text that were timed to orient the viewer, neither Elder nor Boa knew how the visual and sound elements would correspond until the first answer print was made. Talk about the element of faith.

Eros and Wonder should put to rest any lingering perceptions that Elder's films are too slow, too conceptual and too intellectually dense. On the contrary, this is an exhilarating, visceral cinema, akin to the immediacy of improvised music. Unlike several of his filmmaking contemporaries who have slipped into ruts, retracing familiar grooves, Elder continually embraces and incorporates new techniques and new technologies, revamping his entire working process from one film to the next. For example, he developed the computer applications for applying



signal-processing algorithms and programs for constraining random processes used in *Crack*, *Brutal Grief* and *Eros and Wonder*. Further, by combining analog and digital technologies that coexist in a reciprocal balance/binary convergence, the film answers early criticisms of "The Cinema We Need," namely its mistrust of technological progress, obsession with the past and what has already been lost. *Eros and Wonder* is deeply engaged with technological developments presently taking place, as well as the theoretical and ethical debates that have sprung up around them, a point made clear when he states, "The subject of the film is what is gained and what is lost, through these transformations."

Perhaps Elder's most important contribution to the long-term viability of Canada's avant-garde cinema has been his teaching. Recently a new generation of filmmakers taught by Elder have begun to receive public attention, including Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Annie MacDonell, Kelly Egan, Kara Blake, Greg Boa, Shana McDonald, Maria Raponi, Krikor Torossian, John Price and Thanin Chan. Operating within and around the Toronto-based Loop collective, an alliance of independent media artists that strive to integrate experimental film and video with other art forms, these filmmakers are making a significant contribution to the diversity and growth of experimental cinema in Canada. Taken together, their films mark an emphatic return to materialist strategies and handmade forms, forging a new, more artistically adventurous direction, which is in welcome contrast to the self-conscious issue and identity politics that has dominated the experimental film scene since the early 1990s. This group's work is a collective testament to Elder's lifelong gift to Canadian cinema while simultaneously affirming the ongoing relevance and vitality of "The Cinema We Need."

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