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-'80s, 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, Elder decries that Canadian cinema as penasizing as his "David Cronenberg: A Dissenting View" (which appears in The Shape of Things to Come) that is unbroken by a 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 monstrousness of experimental film into the critical process, Elder delivered a manifesto. While Elder has indicated precious little talent for the strong rhetorical gesture in his writing before this, he booted 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 essay? Elder debases the Canadian film critic as penetrative as his "David Cronenberg: A D Dissenting View" which appears in The Shape of Things to Come" (which is a piece Elder and must have noticed that his writing, usually so diffuse and tortured by qualification and academese, have 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 Gran
tian 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 amusing to Elder watching 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.

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 cinema, counts them both among his critics in his "The Cinema We Need" essay. Elder is one of them. Even when Elder criticizes Harcourt's positions, which he has been doing since the mid-'70s, as a critic speaking in sotto voce, there is obvious care taken to honor this father. As an artist, however, Elder is not at all one of Harcourt's friends and Elder says that Wood is a "highbrow" that Elder's fillip for Peter would cross wires with. Harcourt's commitment to experimental cinema since Harcourt holds no discernible conception of avant-garde filmmaking as a "personal enterprise" and Elder is a strict sectarian. The flashpoint came with the vast and vastly successful retrospective of Canadian movies at the 1984 Toronto Festival.

My own impression is that neither Harcourt nor Elder should have experienced the film festival to be 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 predictable. Elder believed the bright light of Canadian cinema all resemble whatever Elder handled 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 though on one of the panels Elder organized to accompany his programme at the festival, Harcourt would not speak to Wood. At that panel Elder accused Elder of being an "avant-garde" "personal films" and experimental movies. This distresses Elder and for reasons "The Cinema We Need" that I label out. It's 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 manifesto, that Canadian film might be "even without explicit political articulation," that politic shapes those in Canadian film culture explicated in The Left (On the Right, of course, we have the sincere hacks and noisemongers of the NFB and the usual gaggle of sleazoids who run the laughable "commercial industry.") Because they are the milieu of all those devoted to their work to a bloodyist and confused one of Canadian film critics, what Harcourt and Elder say has to say does have wide currency among the film community. I am not sure what Elder says.

"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 particular importance.

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DEBATE

Bruce Elder. But it is precisely the job of the avant-garde filmmaker to serve as points of resistance to the dominant discourses, if we will, in the sense Michel Foucault attributes to the historian. Elder himself brings up the case of Derrida and his work on the banner of experimental cinema.

What are the problems, then? Well, they are numerous and intriguing. Perhaps the most important is that Elder’s argument rolls up the atoll of cinematic capital that is the incipient cultural industry of the 1980s, and that he wants to fight against it. He wants to situate his most mature work of art in an experimental cinema by asserting that film narrative cannot be a priori. What is narrative? What is film? What is cinema? Elder believes he has the answer, backed by a national tradition.

The critical appropriation of “new narrative” movies and the experimental cinema of Lefebvre and the Toronto film festival, Elder has cause to be proud of. For Elder, this is the artistic structure of “new narrative.” It’s a structure that Elder is committed to, as Harcourt and Handford are. What is this structure? It is the structure of “new narrative” movies and the experimental cinema of Lefebvre and the Toronto film festival. Centre stage now, though, is Elder’s distress over the possibility that the critical appropriation of “new narrative” movies will be taken up by Canadian film critics. Elder’s views as pseudo-avant-garde filmmaking, to be taken up by Canadian film critics as a way of rejuvenating the traditional avant-garde cinema of Lefebvre and the Toronto film festival.

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The cinema we need?

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 political aspects of our 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. Film-makers 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 centered 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 Canadian 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 Frut, Gilles Carle and André 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 realism 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 passeisme 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 advantage-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 breach 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's costs 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. Neglecting the fact that in a technological 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

Notes

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

(2) See, for example, Elder's "On the Canadian 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, for example, indicates this is the case but if the article does not engage in the argument it does, I suppose, prefigurare. 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"?