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 manifest 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.


(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 1940s. 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 passion­ions interest­in­the political and cultural economy 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 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 pose it as problematic. Certainly it is beginning to assume a position of centrality in my own thinking on Cana­

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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 avant­garde 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 cliche the next,” while proposing a cinema of the present that presumably avoids these cliches—as if art and the forms it takes is somehow timeless. Is this what is important to assert, 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 return to 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 critical. Not only is Elder’s world 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...
also calls this ordering into question, subverts it, troubles its surface, creates ambiguity and a need for closure, and by so doing forces the viewer into a position whereby she becomes the active producer of meaning.

Elder does not believe that "self-reflective strategies used in some forms of avant-garde filmmaking can be comfortably accommodated within story-telling formats to serve important ends when used in that context... Such breaches of convention have little lasting value, for what seems unconventional one day often becomes conventional the next, and these 'important ends' that remain unspecified... Again we are back in the domain of Milton and 'lastling value' as if there is some imaginary standard against which art can be measured. Elder's statement denies the historical specificity of art, the fact it speaks to a particular set of historical, economic and ideational realities, and espouses the notion of an art that transcends this specificity. Is this the art of the present? Does Elder argue for so vehemently?

Let us take a look at the cinema that Elder proposes, a "cinema that can deal with the here and now..." a form that has come into existence that is the formulation of present experience." He describes the terms of this cinema as follows:

1. "A cinema not of imagination but of perception... we must cease to impose ideas on experience... we must risk the world of self-consciousness..." Surely this is impossible. What is art but a re-ordering of experience that automatically imposes a degree of meaning? The only artists to escape this are either the naive or the primitive. Is Elder proposing that we turn back the clock to a time before the so-called lost childhood of perceptual art free from social influence? His own films both impose ideas on experience and are self-conscious; they are certainly amongst the most sophisticated art that we have ever seen, rooted in the place where we have our being. But where we are, always, is in a particular set of historical, political and economic realities, and espouses the notion of an art that transcends this specificity. Is this the art of the present? Does Elder argue for so vehemently?

Apart from the strong drift towards a kind of mysticism, a desire to cleanse art of the rationality that imposes order and hence suspends the present technical/managerial system, "the cinema we need" is perceived entirely in terms of formal principles. This formalist solution is the most limiting aspect of Elder's argument, devoid of obvious fascination. When the form that art takes assumes a precedence over everything else there is a very real danger that history is not only forgotten, but it is necessary that we not avoid saying "real" history. If I were to hesitate to say "reality", but from the daily intercourse of human life. This is not the first time that a formalist argument has been made. Its elegance is mass medium and it has to address itself to the general public. If the dominant form within cinema is narrative, we can't simply turn away from it, condemn it as impure and discard it as Elder wants to do. Narrative, the contrary, is a convenient trap. No, there is no one cinema that we need, there is one medium that we need to contain our cinema. Hopefully, there will be a plurality of forms which call into question the dominant ideology. It is a mistake to look at the world that surrounds us.

If the cinema is to be a tool for change or function as a medium that addresses itself directly to the way the world it cannot be an elitist cinema. Its power is as a mass medium and it has to address itself to the general public. If the dominant form within cinema is narrative, we can't simply turn away from it, condemn it as impure and discard it as Elder wants to do. Narrative, the contrary, is a convenient trap. No, there is no one cinema that we need, there is one medium that we need to contain our cinema. Hopefully, there will be a plurality of forms which call into question the dominant ideology. It is a mistake to look at the world that surrounds us.

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Godard, Straub, Huillet, Duras, Syberberg (not to mention Snow, Brackett, etc.) work in the margins and reach relation between the present and the past. People in the intellectual elite. I value these filmmakers and their work but is this the only cinema we need? Any piece of prescriptive writing opens itself up to an entire range of objections: Why only one cinema, one form and not a multitude of cinemas, of forms? Why exclusion and not diversity? What I fear is that Elder is functioning from a defensive position where he tries to erect barriers between avant-garde filmmaking, narrative and non-narrative cinema, that defines itself in opposition to these cinemas. There is any room in "the cinema we need" for a form of cinema that will not be restricted to one from other cinemas. Is this not a mean that filmmakers should cease experimenting. What it does mean is if this is what they want to do, they should be aware that audiences will be less receptive to these innovations. I lament this fact and wish it was not so but this too is the reality of 1985. On the other hand, to perform a positive function, experimentation fudgers in rock videos, a form that is becoming increasingly popular.

The one thing we must do now is deal with the idea that the cinema which we as a culture confront, of what it means to live in this society in the '80s, of how this society functions and the way it affects us, will be perceived by our filmmakers grappling with these questions although there are distinctions. Our response to the most vital and engaged at this moment, the cinema the most connected to the present, but this should come as no surprise because we didn't ask the most pertinent questions about their role in society and the cinema reflects the health of this debate.

This raises another point. No matter how much I would like to believe it, I do not think that the cinema can be a functional tool for change society in any significant way. I am not saying that people want to change their environment, want to alter their environment in any appreciable way, to "overthrow" the system. This will change the factors, of which the cinema is one of many and certainly not the most important.

Elder's argument strikes me that the cinema is no longer the pre-eminent art form of our time, that it no longer holds a position of centrality within our culture in the way that Elder by implication assumes it does. The zenith of the cinema's achievement has been reached, the creative people who really want to say something important have gravitated towards the cinema but towards video in its many manifestations. As Louis Malle recently remarked, the only people who go to the movies these days, they have to be 30 years old and older.

Questions like "the cinema we need" will become increasingly marginal as films reorganize their hegemony within the world of entertainment. However, the image industry - cinema, video, television, commercials - will always be important. An understanding of how these images are produced, what they represent, what they reveal, what they conceal, is a vital undertaking. The image industry we need would be, I hope, address these issues and situate them within a recognizable Canadian cultural, social, political, economic and physical landscape.