

The shadow of Canadian cinema: Bruce Elder's immodest proposal

by Michael Dorland

*As individuals
The men lost their identity; as groups,
As gangs, they massed, divided,
subdivided,
Like numerals only.*

— E.J. Pratt, *Towards the Last Spike*

"The problem is not writing stories set in Canada, but fully and painfully assuming all the difficulties of its identity."

— Hubert Aquin

La fatigue culturelle au Canada français

It was the late French philosopher Michel Foucault who said that our time exists in the shadow cast by Hegel and all we have done since has been to futilely attempt to escape from that recognition. For Hegel, last of the Moderns, was the first to recognize the impossibility of thinking against the system of technique — and all art since Hegel has been a desperate flight from the iron laws of technological closure. Nowhere, perhaps, has this been more evidently the case than in 'questions of cinema.'

As Walter Benjamin grasped at the height of the first cinematic avant-garde, cinema (or, as one could add today, television) had this unique propensity: it was the first 'art form' that essentially managed to dispense with the artist in having shifted the locus of the work as a manifestation of an individual creation to within a collective system of production/distribution/consumption. In the resulting Hegelian 'inverted world' the loss of the individual artwork's 'aura' only meant that it was *the system itself* that had been auritized, and the heroic attempt to reinvest artistic notions into purely technological forms such as cinema was hopelessly retrograde, not to say mere idolatry. For cinema is post-Promethean in the sense that it is the capturing of light by the machine, and so the operative condition for its very existence was the generalization of the surrounding darkness.

If cinema was the art-form that aestheticized the social robotization of man, it also, as Benjamin suggested, dialectically implied the ethicization

of the social. For the cinema system in articulating simultaneously an aesthetic politic (the masses are beautiful) and a political aesthetic (the romance of technology) itself could never be a genuine (ethical) politics, only its simulacrum: that is to say, an imposture.

Cinema, in other words, is inherently one moment of a vaster propaganda system most obviously and primarily on behalf of modern technique, and secondly for all forms of group-activity (nation, industry, class, or filmmakers) and only somewhere far, far along the infinite combinations thereof, almost as an afterthought, reaching the level of the sub-category of the individual and his/her consciousness.

Bruce Elder — most recently and explicitly in an article entitled "The Cinema We Need" (*Canadian Forum*, February, 1985) — invites to seriously consider what it means to dwell within such a system, as individuals, but also as Canadians. And perhaps more importantly as Canadians to the extent that that level of generality is the only other thing we potentially share in common beyond being simply decentred individuals within the universal technical system. For, as a Canadian, Elder still believes in the possibility of there being other Canadians willing to participate in the questioning he has embarked upon both as a film-thinker and a filmmaker. Nor is this assumption utterly utopian to the extent that Canada itself has marked intellectual and artistic traditions of just this kind of questioning and also that, on paper at least, Canada remains a distinct geographical entity.

Whether Canada, except perhaps in the most abstract legal sense, constitutes a sovereign entity is, of course, another question altogether. Certainly it is one of the tensions of Canadian history, not to say its fundamental predicate, that Canada is, if not yet a nation, at least a North American entity existing alongside the other North American nations, the United States of America and the United States of Mexico. Vis-à-vis the other United States, Canada's existence is thus predicated upon some notion of similarity/difference that in the official discourse of the central Canadian state is political, economic, social, linguistic, and cultural. Yet despite the hundred-odd



rates of Canada's separate existence as a political entity, it has only been three years since Canada has come into being in the juridical sense of official sovereignty derived from internally generated, agreed-upon principles. Thus the following paradox: if the Canadian sense of self-consciousness is *formally* extremely new, the originary, naturalistic sense of *Canadian* difference has in the past century been profoundly compromised by the *American* similarity. The erosion of Canadian economic and social difference, along with the Americanization of political and cultural difference, means that now, more than ever before, it devolves upon the Canadian cultural project (as manifested by the Canadian artistic and intellectual imagination) to bear the entire burden of not only reviving, but enlarging what is left of the sense of Canadian difference. As Elder put it in "The Cinema We Need": "The task of achieving some clarity about our cultural situation and of developing the means to deal with the present cultural crisis is an urgent one — I believe the most important one now demanded of Canadians..." For a time that urgently calls for manifestations of the Canadian imagination is, at the very least, a time for manifestos — and a manifesto is, as Bart Testa argues, what Elder has written in "The Cinema We Need."

One could say that the most incandescent moments of the Canadian past — in which emerges what it means most fully to be Canadian (with all the agony and tension that implies) — are constituted by its manifestos: W.L. MacKenzie, the 1837 *patriotes*, the Canada First manifesto, George Grant's *Lament For A Nation* (or its predecessor, Goldwin Smith's *Canada and the Canadian Question*), the Regina Manifesto, *Refus global*, the Waffle Manifesto, Expo '67, or the FLQ Manifesto.

Curiously, (English) Canadian cinema has never produced a manifesto, at least until now, and one might well wonder: why not? For a manifesto is the cry of an imagination in search of a practice, often the precondition for that practice itself. (Not that a manifesto alone is a sufficient condition for an artistic practice, but it is at least a necessary condition and it is precisely this kind of articulation of its own

necessity that Canadian cinema has never had, with the one exception, Elder would argue since he has produced most of it, of the Canadian avant-garde cinema.)

As both Testa and Piers Handling note, one has to go back to Grierson in Canadian film history to find anything resembling theoretical principles, and there's the rub. For if Grierson was the founder of a distinct Canadian cinematic realism (and not merely just another colonial administrator), how does one account for the fact that the debate as to the nature of that realism rages on 40 years later (and continues in these pages)? Now it may well be as Testa sharply observes that "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" — in which case the realism debate is not only a false debate but a dead one. Or it may be that the debate is not so much one between "realists" (Peter Harcourt and Handling) and a "paranoid" (as Harcourt characterizes Elder) as between three kinds of realists: the social realism of Harcourt, the political realism of Handling and the abstract ethical realism of Elder. And what is being argued over is far less a question of realism *in* Canadian cinema than it is the perplexing reality of Canada itself: its bureaucratic infallibility in the case of Harcourt, something similar but with a politically critical pedagogy in the case of Handling, and whether or not Canada can be conceptualized in the case of Elder. Testa is right to discern behind the debate a politics struggling to express itself, though one could specify in the form of three strategies: a cultural pragmatics for Harcourt, a culturally subversive entryism for Handling, and a cultural ideology for Elder. In other words, within the arc of Canadian cultural nationalism three political prescriptions for Canadian cinema: liberal (Harcourt), social-democratic (Handling) and radical (Elder).

Except that, in the case of Harcourt-Handling, their cinematic politics only repeat the two dead-end subordinations (to state and marketplace) in which Canadian cultural discourse has been fatally entrapped, as Arthur Kroker recently analyzed in his "Spitting on the TV: Insubordinating Canadian broadcasting." And Elder's is less a politics than it is an ethics because — and this for the first time — it grounds the possibility of a Canadian cinema in a conception of Justice (the Good) that is normative (and so prescriptive) only to the degree that it considers the existence of Canada (and so of Canadian culture) a manifestation of the Good.

Now Canadian cinema has (so far) been nothing if not political to the extent that the Canadian cultural project has itself been politically bounded, and this has been both the source of its few strengths as well as its limitations: its utter dependency upon a state-defined politics on the one hand, and a market-defined economics on the other, and the accurate perception of it by the public as propaganda (which has only reinforced that public's desire to escape Canadian propaganda by throwing itself into the welcoming arms of the largest propaganda ma-

chine in the contemporary world). In the context, then, of the disappearing Canadian public, a state-apparatus whose commitment to Canadian cultural 'objectives' has always been ambiguous, and a marketplace whose commitment to American culture is its *raison-d'être*, what is left of Canadian cinema? If Harcourt can still remain vaguely hopeful, Handling for his part is pretty much ready to sign the death certificate and promptly revive the corpse in the form of an "image industry." (And explicitly for the likes of a Robin Wood, Canadian cinema never amounted to anything much in the first place, so nothing's been lost – as nothing was there.)

Only Elder, it seems, would disagree – vehemently and radically so. First, by wrenching away the state-monopoly on a cultural politics, he anchors the Canadian cultural project in the concept of the nation itself. For Elder, the very fact of being Canadian, of being able to think about Canada, posits a metaphysics of Canadian culture that is neither cramped nor defensive, but immense and at least at ease in its difference. Secondly Elder, because he is comfortable within Canadian metaphysical traditions therein encounters that bedrock of the Canadian mind that is a profoundly ethical critique of the American technological universe.¹ Thirdly, on the bases of that critique which stems from the assumption that Canada offers *different* face to the universal technological system (which means that the American appropriation is only a trope and not the thing itself), he absolutizes the Canadian critique of American modernity into a conception of cinema from within (as opposed to against or, in the case of importing U.S. culture, from without) the technological closure. Righting the Hegelian inverted world, the Elderian concept of Absolute Cinema presents the phenomenological dissection of the will-to-technique that results from the encounter of a spectator's consciousness with the unfolding (or coming into presence) of the cinematic system. Unlike American art's endless celebrations of the disappearing subject, Canadian art (as I read Elder) is a manifestation of the appearing subject-object as the dialectic between place, person, and mind. His is a realism in which Canada is not a perpetual becoming or vanishing, but an integer. Nor is the analysis he is making based either on his own behalf or to promote the kinds of films he himself makes, but only as one Canadian mind thinking about what Canadian cinema already has the capacity to be. For modest Canadians, it's an extraordinarily immodest claim – were it not that it is no different from the literary claims made by a Hugh MacLennan in his epic conception of Canada, or the painterly claims of a Paul-Emile Borduas, for it is nothing less than the Canadian imagination manifesting itself.

If, as the debate here shows, there are other ways to 'read' Elder, including Elder's own reading of himself, perhaps the least that should be said for now might be, in a paraphrase of Rimbaud: "Allons, messieurs, mesdames les cinéastes (les professeurs, les gouvernants...), encore un effort, car c'est de votre Canada qu'il s'agit."

(1) Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*: Grant / McLuhan / Innis, Montreal, 1984, and New York, 1985.



by Geoff Pevere

Naturally, perhaps, Canadian film criticism (that is, criticism of and about Canadian cinema, and not criticism written in Canada about movies made elsewhere) tends to the prescriptive mode. What Canadian cinema should be, in other words, is a more frequently addressed matter than what it is.

Ostensible distinguishing marks and mannerisms notwithstanding, the frequency of the use of the prescriptive mode by Canadian film critics suggests certain fundamental and common assumptions. Basically, they are: first, that there is something identifiable as Canadian Film, and thus an object of criticism which exists. Second, that this object, Canadian Film, is qualitatively and observably distinct from other, similar objects borne of similar aesthetic (as cinema) and cultural (Canadian, American or whatever) concerns or standards of definition. Third, that the objects Canadian Film or Cinema, is somehow beneficial and necessary to someone. It performs a function that is somehow edifying, enlightening, nourishing and stimulating to someone or some group of someones (presumably, in this case, Canadians). In a word, it is worth having around.

So far, these are elementary assumptions for most or all film criticism, but the prescriptive mode makes its distinguishing detour here. While most forms of nationalist film criticism imply the values stated above, fewer suggest, as our criticism frequently does, first, that there is something definitely lacking in a particular national cinema that impedes it in realizing its ideal and necessary form and function; a lack resulting from factors imposed either from outside (economic starvation, cultural imperialism, governmental indifference, etc.) or festering from inside (psychological retardation, cultural immaturity or myopia, overfed middle-class indifference) the national organism.

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The rites (and wrongs) of the elder or The cinema we got: the critics we need

Finally, that this is a lack worth repairing.

And, furthermore, for the culturally crippled Canadian Cinema, that there are strategies and means available for making the repairs, and that these will, if carefully and rigorously administered, bring Canadian cinema closer to its ideal state. There are, according to this set of assumptions, workable blueprints for the reconstruction and sustained health and well-being of Canadian Cinema – or so the prescriptive mode implies.

But finally, the most significant and essential assumption shared by prescriptive Canadian film critics is also the least apparent and discussed, which is not surprising, given that it is also the most relative, contentious and abstract of this set of assumptions: that there is, in fact, a perfect state, condition and context for the object Canadian Film: a set of idealized environmental, political and ideological circumstances under which the object will flourish and nourish according to the relative standards of what this ideal Canadian Cinema is or must be. The reasoning is tautological but essential to the practice of prescriptive criticism, for there can be no healing measures applied to the organism until a standard of perfect health is established. All medicine implies a cure, but no cure is absolute. Like doctors, critics have varying standards of perfection. Unspoken and implicit as it is, this relativity of standards for the perfect Canadian Cinema is in fact the most fundamental and far-reaching determinant of the prescriptive mode. It directs all critical speculation, interpretation and even perception towards a particular end or set of standards which define an individual critic's conception of the perfect Canadian Cinema. Moreover, the prescriptive mode customarily submerges these standards, making implicit the ideological determinants in the explicit plans for the perfect Canadian Cinema. The critic's value system must be deductively retrieved by sifting through the apparent to the implied. By whatever means the critic's value system is sleuthed by the student of such things, it is an object worth sniffing out. Notions and standards of perfection, particularly as they shape or

influence cultural or political discourse, are valuable gauges of ideological self-definition, idealized portraits or reflections of how we might appear, were it not for the smudged and cracked looking-glass we've got – the cinema that stands between us and the cinema we want or, in the urgent prescriptive message of Bruce Elder, the cinema we need.

Before embarking upon an examination of the specific terms and implications of Elder's audacious, if eccentric, prescriptive blueprint for a national cinema (*Canadian Forum*, February 1985), it might be useful to briefly examine some of the conditions which have bred, fed and sustained the predominance of the prescriptive mode in Canadian film criticism. Basically, the practice of formulating strategies for a better Canadian cinema assumes that a better Canadian Cinema is necessary and will somehow be better for Canadians because, even more basically, there is believed to be a distinct, direct and discernible cause-and-effect relationship between cultural products and their consumers. Culture is viewed as a necessary agent in the process of social and political self-definition, and national identity remains a salient issue in the various debates over Canadian culture. Culture can increase our determination and potential to act upon and understand the environment we live in because it delineates our position in relation to that environment. It shows us who and where we are. In Canada, where most of the cultural products consumed are imported from other political and cultural contexts, the situation is regarded as urgent and particularly pronounced. Given the assumed direct relationship between culture and consumers in prescriptive criticism, the Canadian cultural predicament retards both our individual and social potential for personal and national self-recognition, growth and determination. Thus, while critics may not agree on the precise nature and form of the cinema we need, there is little quibbling over the fact that we need a cinema. Apparent motivations and determinations may differ (ranging, right to left, from cultural jingoism, to the practical drive to economic self-sufficiency, to the mobilization of strategies to sub-