

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.<sup>1</sup> 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-

vert the discourse of foreign cultural oppression), but the common end remains. We need a cinema, the prescriptive critic tells us, and we need our own.

According to Bruce Elder, the cinema we need probably isn't the cinema most of us want, if most of us want one at all. An example of prescriptive criticism so hypothetical and utopian it does not even touch ground long enough to identify any specific examples of the cinema we have, Elder's article addresses a multitude of issues and possible answers to the central and driving dilemma of prescriptive film criticism: how to get there from here, or, how to make the cinema we need out of the cinema we've got. According to Elder, the central problem facing contemporary Canadian cinema is nothing so common – and presumably repairable – as a condition of cultural retardation imposed by economic and ideological domination of the Yankee media monolith. In Elder's view, what corrupts the cinema we've got is nothing less than the ailment of an age: a materialistic, goal-oriented, technocratic mode of thinking that distracts human endeavour and contemplation from the desired and lamented realm of the immediate, multiple and experiential, to a future-fixed, selective and spiritually barren piecemeal existence. That, in Elder's view, is wrong. By thinking in linear terms of causally-related events, we are missing out on the blissful barrage of multitudinous impressions that comprise the everyday organism's experience of the here-and-now.

A cinema that reproduces the wonder and richness of the now, in all its sensual, ambiguous and rhythmic splendour, a cinema that rejects narrative – for narrative, with its structured reification of the dominance and legitimacy of cause-and-effect relations, and its basis in representative arts, which push events, *a priori* and by definition, into the past, is the concrete foundation on which the edifice of technocratic, selective thinking is built and sustained; a cinema that, through the use of such staple avant-garde strategies as stasis, repetition, rhythm and minimalism, emphasizes the temporality of its own unfolding and the material basis of its own formulation, a cinema that emphasizes its here-and-now-ness, is the cinema we need. Or do we?

It is a provocative and peculiar formulation certainly, which is made even more enticing and baffling by Elder's customizing of terminology (wherein technology becomes "technique" and olfactory experience becomes, nicely, "givenness"), frequent flights of messianic rhetorical fancy ("This association of the rhythmicity of the process by which events come to presentness in experience with the physicality and rhythmicity of bodily processes means that the rhythmic form of a work of art can, by uniting the pulse of the body with patterns inherent in emergent events (event phenomena), unite the mind and the body"),<sup>1</sup> and a tendency to employ value-packed phrases such as "good policy",<sup>2</sup> "a just society",<sup>3</sup> "the gift of things"<sup>4</sup> and, frequently, "values"<sup>5</sup> itself – without letting us in on what these terms mean to him, thus disguising relative and culturally determined concepts as absolutes or givens. And just who are "we", any-

way? What unites me, you, or us, as readers, to Elder? To whom the writer might be speaking is an issue left unresolved, and since the article suggests that what we need might be protracted epics of scratched emulsion, the "we" of the needy (not to mention the why of the need) is a constituency that must be delineated and identified. Personally, I don't think we includes me or the guy who manages the Mac's Milk on the corner.

Another curious (if less portentous) premise of the piece is the suggestion that irreparable damage has been done by the Peter Harcourt/Piers Handling school of film criticism, which apparently advocates the use of certain strategies of self-reflexiveness culled from avant-garde film practice in commercial narrative Canadian cinema, presumably for the purpose of assembling a cinematic mode that is more dialectical, intellectually involving and politically provocative than conventional illusionist/realist/representative Hollywood practice. Like "technique", Elder is against this. Yet his specific objections, on closer scrutiny, are either unfounded, off-base, or reactionary.

Having, I think, a passing familiarity with the work of both critics, I recall coming across no rallying to the cause of a "New Narrative" cinema in either of Handling or Harcourt's expansive writings on Canadian cinema. A hybrid of avant-garde and classical styles that employs the self-reflexive mechanisms of the former to undermine the reactionary hegemony of the latter, Elder's dreaded New Narrative "vandalizes",<sup>6</sup> "commercializes"<sup>7</sup> and "hijacks"<sup>8</sup> conventions of avant-garde cinema, a process which, claims Elder, not only robs the alternative cinema of its unique capacity for autotelicity – emphasizing nowness over then-ness – but also serves to preserve the reactionary ideological function of mainstream cinema: since the mechanisms of illusionism presumably overwhelm the strategies of autotelicity, the New Narrative only saps the avant-garde of its uniquely self-reflexive and subversive character, it, in doing so, ultimately serves the oppressive ends of dominant cinema, since it coopts conventions of the avant-garde in order to drain them of their potential to subvert.

This, the crux of Elder's biscuit, introduces enough theoretical and political gristle to chew on for 10 involved and likely unwieldy academic discussions, but I shall restrict myself to a brief survey and response to the most pertinent, pungent and contentious of the points just raised.

Elder maintains that narrative, in and of itself, is reactionary and serves existing systems of power and social relations because it is representative, and any representative forms of discourse freeze and isolate time and experience into a presumably safe, pre-interpreted, unambiguous and unalterable past. Narrative cinema limits experience in terms of the already-happened and thus the beyond-intervention. It creates a false and perennial continuum of pastness that blocks the future and blurs the present by relegating all experience into a safely distanced and untouchable past. Whatever the specific form of address, Elder claims that all narrative forms, by definition, speak in past tense. This is, I think, true to a certain extent.

Dominant forms of culture wouldn't be dominant if they did not function as part of those apparatuses which serve to support and preserve social and power relations the way they are. If not all narrative, then certainly most commercial movies, and all forms of popular culture, generally and by definition, police the possibility of social criticism by presenting endlessly re-gurgitated idealized representations of things as they are. Not by presenting or showing us how good things could be, but by showing us how great they are. Dominant pop culture reifies and legitimates things as they are by condoning, through representation, certain value systems and modes of behaviour and by condemning, through exclusion or exaggeration, other value systems or modes of behaviour not permissible according to the arbitrary but guarded parameters of the normal. And in suggesting that things are okay as they are, dominant pop culture forms nullify the need, or even a recognition of its possibility, for radical social change.

But there are ways of countering these effects. Popular culture may be ubiquitous, but it is not monolithic. Elder's return-to-zero, outright rejection of narrative simply ignores the problem of ideological hegemony and pop culture, but it doesn't confront it. Quite simply, once these status quo support systems, which must go unnoticed to succeed, are recognized and named, they are no longer transparent and thus their power to perpetuate is neutralized. Therefore, Elder's conception of a monolithic, impregnable system of "pastness" in dominant culture is insufficient, for the system *can* be challenged and altered. Elder forgets the third party in the process of ideological formulation by popular culture: the consumer. While the cultural apparatus may be fixed in time in terms of production and ideological usefulness, the consumer or spectator is not. S/he can use her or his position as subject-in-the-present to analyse and criticize the object-in-the-past position of culture artifacts. Meaning may be encoded in pop culture products, but it is not entombed there. The shifting context of consumption, in terms of both environment and ideology, and the relative perspective of the consumer means that the pastness of the artifact is always subjected to the presentness of its consumption. No movie is an island either.

Besides, does not all social discourse, by definition and design, isolate and objectify experience? All communal interaction depends on systems of shared symbols and codes which objectify and isolate experience so it can be traded among the constituents of those communities. And is this not because, without a system of mutually shared and recognized symbols, there would be no social interaction? Language is the basis of community, and it is representative by nature.

There is no community, no larger consciousness, no sense of temporal continuity or social connectedness without language and similar representative modes of discourse. Without them, we are left only with the unnamed and unnamable subjective sensory impressions that constitute our visceral experience – the very level of consciousness Elder posits as the

model for "the cinema we need." Adrift in the realm of the senses: it makes for an attractive image, if a romantic and apolitical one, but that's what Elder's conception of the cinema of subjective here-and-now-ness amounts to: by positing the ideal cinema as one which puts us in touch with the pre-linguistic, purely sensory realm of visceral response, Elder is hearkening back to the mystic (he even speaks, wistfully, of the "ancients"<sup>9</sup>); yearning, like some post-psychedelic hybrid of Merlin and Leary, for a pre-Jungian reinstatement of art into the realm of the subconscious, the magical and the ineffable.

The cinema we need, we are told, is a cinema separate from and unsullied by the grime and corruption of everyday discourse and popular taste. It is a cinema that depends upon mystery and superstition, a notion of art as something irrational, unexplainable, spiritual and exalted – something magic. It is a perspective that posits art as natural and given, rather than as the product of particular social and historical forces, and artists as divine mediums of messages dispatched somewhere from the black cauldron of the subconscious, and accessible only to them, rather than producers of historically determined cultural artifacts. It is a view that seeks to establish a hierarchy of knowledge and privilege that exploits mystification as a necessary means of maintaining an imbalance of power between the exalted few that produce and comprehend art, and the greater masses that do not. And, while we're at it, just what the fuck is "art" anyway?

And this attitude, I daresay, is a damned sight more reactionary than a veritable slew of decadent, past-fixed, narrative trash movies. Suggesting art must be liberated from language and the representative impulse in order for it to play a subversive rather than supportive social role in relation to dominant ideology may sound like a trumpet call to radical action, but what's really afoot here is the reactionary romantic impulse to return the production of culture to the realm of the mystic, to take it out of the realm of shared social experience and discourse (and thus politics), and return it safely to the tomb of sanctified privilege where it belongs. Rather than a more political cinema, in the sense of a cinema that addresses, in both form and content, the hegemony of dominant power structures, the cinema Elder says we need is not political at all. Apparently, it is above such things. It is thus, in my view, a useless cinema – and no less status quo than its Hollywood counterpart.

Perhaps prescribing what we should have is, in and of itself, a retrograde rather than a progressive activity for Canadian cinema. Certainly Elder's prescriptions, which call for nothing less than a romantic reinstatement of art to the antiquated realm of the mystical and its retrieval from social discourse, cannot be practical in terms of mapping a path to a "better" cinema through an understanding of the one we, as Canadians, have. While few examples of prescriptive criticism for Canadian cinema have retreated quite so far from practical political and cultural considerations as Elder's has, most do imply a similar withdrawal from an analysis of what we've got in

order to consider what we need. In fact, if there's a crisis facing Canadian cinema at the moment, it's a failure in film criticism as much as it is the films criticised. Why can't we deal with what we've got?

As mentioned, prescriptive criticism usually assumes a dismissal, on qualitative grounds, of the cinema we have. Disheartened with the likes of what we've got, like *The Surrogate*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Rock and Rule*, critics will indulge in reveries of what we might or should have. Usually, this critical utopianism implicitly or explicitly posits the achievements of national cinemas more consistent, pervasive and respected than ours as models for development. (The phenomenal success, in the past decade, of Australian cinema, which we once regarded fondly as a bedfellow in cultural retardation, has only sharpened the edges of our own sense of inferiority.) There is no single reason for this cycle of self-fulfilling critical self-flagellation, but it seems generally to spring from factors more commonly cited to bemoan Canadian filmgoers than critics, i.e., the state of cultural schizophrenia caused by the cumulative effects of the unhindered consumption of someone else's systems of self-definition. And like those audiences for whom the standard of quality, familiarity and even intelligibility\* has been firmly established by the American model, Canadian critics, when dealing with Canadian films, do so under the long shadow of Hollywood. Thus, our own films are invariably found to be "lacking" or "inept", "embarrassing" or "amateurish." Instead of being evaluated on their own terms or even in the context of a broader but culturally integrated area of enquiry like "Canadian Cinema," Canadian films are routinely hauled by Canadian critics onto the Hollywood chopping block and there condemned to death for failing to measure

up. Our producers, directors and awards-show presenters routinely resort to the euphemism "international" or "universal" as both goal and a standard of achievement for Canadian movies to aspire. But there's really only one border worth crossing for these "universalists", and it's the same one that's proven more difficult for Canadian than American movies to cross.

Dismissed and abandoned, Canadian cinema is left largely forgotten, or consciously put out of mind. Much is written about the horrendous and crass results of the c.c.a.-spawned boom of the late '70s, when tax shelter incentives stimulated film production on a scale this country had never seen before or since. The problem was the films were dreck of the lowest order, usually third-generation rip-offs of formula American genres such as police thrillers, teen comedies or teen slash-em-ups. Most were never deemed fit for distribution and, until pay TV, with its gaping, 24-hour-a-day appetite for product, came along in 1982, most were never seen. This period has become nothing less than the Cultural Revolution of Canadian film history. (This despite the humiliating fact that *Meatballs* and *Porky's*, Canada's most lucrative commercial exports of all time, were produced during this period.) It's rarely discussed, and never with any seriousness toward the films and always in an incendiary tone. Fault is usually found, and always somewhere else.

Yet, if the emphasis of Canadian film criticism shifted from the prescriptive and the evaluative to the descriptive and the analytical; if all film texts, from the *Heavenly Bodies's* to the *Grey Fox's*, were treated objectively as texts worthy of analysis (because all cultural texts, from the crass to the vanguard, convey vital messages of cultural and ideological self-defini-

tion), and were given equal due, Canadian Cinema might finally yield that elusive motherlode of self-identity sought by the prospectors of Canadian culture since Confederation. What we are, what we would like to be, what we aren't - the means for discussing these matters of cultural identity are as firmly encoded in *Death Ship* and *Running Brave* as they are in those rare English-Canadian\* features that do measure up to the arbitrary evaluative standards of "international" or "universal" appeal. Pop culture, all of it, high or low, crass or class, is an equally valid indicator of the cultural context which produces it, of the ideological temper of the times. The refusal or inability of Canadian film critics to adapt a non-evaluative, descriptive and analytical mode of criticism has merely perpetuated the colonization of the Canadian collective consciousness (if such a beast exist). Like the average weekend moviegoer, the critic in Canada has undergone a process of cultural dislocation, resulting from the adoption of imported critical standards that can only be self-defeating in a country where these standards cannot deal adequately with the cultural products that country produces: of course *Heavenly Bodies* sucks, we can all agree on that. But what does it tell us about our culture, our priorities, our values, ideals, and aspirations?

Concomitant to this negative of the evaluative and prescriptive mode as a necessary progression in the understanding of Canadian popular culture is a re-evaluation of what constitutes a national cinema. Here, as elsewhere, the cues have been borrowed from other contexts and applied back home, where the definitions can't be as safely or securely applied. To insist, particularly in English Canada, that the national cinema is comprised of theatrical features, is to further tighten the cycle of critical self-strangulation by limiting

the scope of analysis to a small, and particularly destitute, area of cultural activity, in Canada. Most of the film production activity in this country is dispersed to other media, such as broadcast and pay television. Unless the concept of national cinema is broadened sufficiently to encompass these vital and comparably flourishing areas of activity in film-related production, and the traditional cultural elitism elevating film from "lesser" forms of visual media is dismissed for the culturally stagnant attitude it is, Canadian popular culture, and Canadians' understanding of what it is and what it means - and ability to direct its future based on this knowledge - will continue to yield nothing but a sense of cultural embarrassment, impotence and retardation. And that, I'm sure, we don't need.

#### NOTES

(1) Elder, R. Bruce, "The Cinema We Need" *Canadian Forum* LXIV/746, February 1985, pp. 32-35.

(2) *Ibid*, p. 32

(3) *Ibid*, p. 32

(4) *Ibid*, p. 33

(5) *Ibid*, p. 33

(6) *Ibid*, p. 34

(7) *Ibid*, p. 34

(8) *Ibid*, p. 34

(9) *Ibid*, p. 33

\* Earlier this year, I taught an introductory course in film studies at Carleton University. It was illuminating, if dismaying, to discover that, in a course that included Godard, Bergman and Welles, it was the Canadian section of the course that proved a major stumper to students. Canadian films were the most "foreign" films, in terms of familiarity, presented all year.

\* In Quebec, as usual, as always, things are different. Most of the points urgently addressed here are either moot or non-existent there.

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