

Bruce Elder's
Lamentations

The burden of belatedness – how to proceed despite the crushing sense of coming too late with too little into a world filled by those who've already done it all and better – that so oppresses Canadian cinema as a whole, is not that surprisingly the special field of Canadian experimental cinema. And here, broadly, two principal approaches to belatedness can be distinguished: the 'naïve' tradition best exemplified by the films of Michael Snow, and the 'knowing' tradition so characteristic of Bruce Elder's films since *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979). Both traditions reflect dialectically different answers to the same question: How is belated or post-technological art possible?

With *Lamentations: A Monument To The Dead World*, Elder's eight-hour film-monument to belatedness that recently premiered at the conclusion of the Art Gallery of Ontario's Elder Retrospective (Oct. 1-11), the question is pushed to psychological and technical extremes. Technically, the film's montage is composed from over 7000 shots, layered over with printed text, readings, narration, stills, dialogue and music mixed on some 34 tracks. The soundtrack was created from a battery of computer and electronic equipment including, say the production notes, "speech synthesizers, phasers, phalangers, vocorders, computer-controlled synthesizers, echo boxes, digital percussion units, digital reverb units, analog delay units, custom built sequencers, filters and computer orchestration equipment." Psychologically, the ante of belatedness is raised to the point of transcendental paranoia in that *Lamentations* offers itself as constructed from the state of mind of one who imagines himself to be the last (thinking) person in history. In the light of such a dual over-determination – the technological death of art, and the end of history – Elder seems to be asking, what happens?

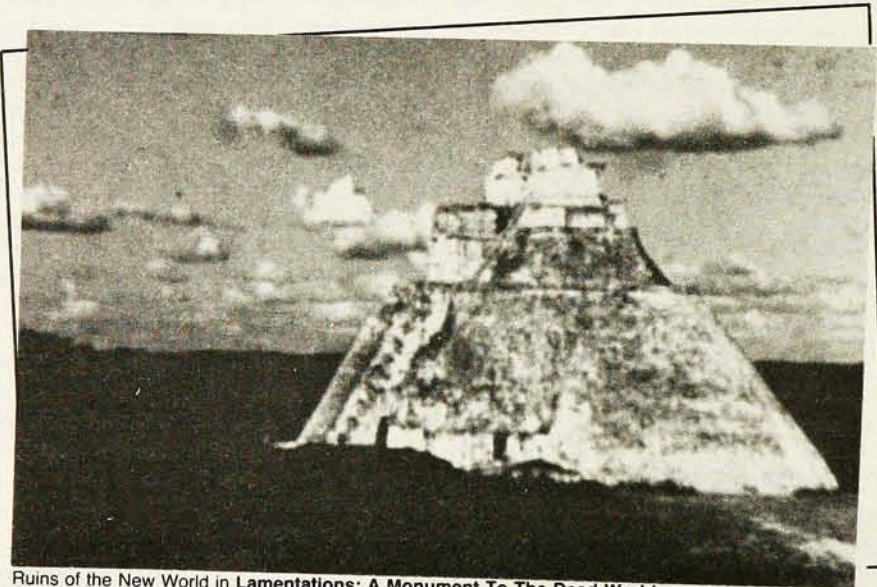
Such a question only raises others: to whom or to what? To me, to you, and all the rest of us who inhabit these modern times? To Film, Art, or the Meaning of Life? If "This film is about you, not about its maker," as *Lamentations'* text explains early on, the statement is later amended with the words "(at best, a half-truth)." For, in the half-truths of the end of History, perhaps nothing happens – and that's why films keep being made.

If Elder hoped that, by taking upon himself the burden of belatedness, a filmmaker can make a film which unburdens *him* of his own sense of belatedness, then that is pretty much what does happen. Because *Lamentations* is an intellectual filmmaker's "Portnoy's complaint" in that only after this long confession is he truly free to actually begin – yet as a confession *Lamentations* both succeeds and fails simultaneously. It succeeds in being a tremendous trope of imaginative liberation for

its maker who has with this film freed himself of a psychological burden. But it fails technically in that beyond an eight-hour journey through a mental and imagistic cosmos inhabited by a great many representations all named Bruce Elder – a not uninteresting excursion by any means, given the wild catholicity of Elder's mind – one seldom has much occasion to forget that that is exactly where one is entrapped.

So there's something enormously parenthetical about *Lamentations* – as if Elder, after the apocalypse-Auschwitz end of European history that terminates *Illuminated Texts* (1982), had come to the astonishing and troubling realization that he, the filmmaker, had survived his own film and there was nothing to do but go home.

Lamentations (Part 1: The Dream Of The Last Historian), then, is the journey back from the gas-chambers of instrumental reason, back through the ruins of European civilization and the rubble of the European mind's echoes of its eternal debates, back to the New World in a pilgrimage towards new beginnings, or, if nothing else, that sense of a broken totality that we hold in common.



Ruins of the New World in *Lamentations: A Monument To The Dead World*

Part 11 of *Lamentations* (The Sublime Calculation), large portions of which were shot on the Canadian west coast, in the American south-west and in Mexico's Yucatan, is a vision of what those new beginnings might have been, if, instead of "sickly, doomed" North Americans, we had had the courage to be Spaniards "a race artistic to the core and monstrous in their lust for blood." But even there/here, where "the world of sunlight meets the dagger" in a "a landscape so exuberant we believe nature has lost her mind," our northernness as belated Europeans condemns us to, at best, a consciousness of absence: "literally everything slipping away together all at once, dissolving into the gloom of an all-pervading Nothing." For what we hold in common, finally, is "suffering" and the confession of the Last Historian is that he is Everyman.

Not quite. After all, the film represents the mind of a paranoid or, by his other name, that cowardly dissimulator, the poet. And as poetic history (or so the text says) "is the story of how poets have suffered," and *Lamentations* is a poem-on-film, how poets will continue to suffer. The poetic suffering that Elder grapples with is where to find the "pur-

pose to go on," specifically, how to end the film. "Look," confesses a character's voice, "what I need is an ending."

For out of the crucible of belatedness, the Canadian poet emerges to find that he *can* sing – but "only the snow falling," "the endless world of the snow falling." Because at the end of *Lamentations'* long lament, nestled there in its dizzying snow of images, sound and text, is the possibility of a beginning. Unless, of course, *that* is the specific paranoia of the poet.

If summing-up is one of the advantages of belatedness, one of *Lamentations'* advantages over any reviewer is that its length defies encapsulation. In its details, *Lamentations* contains a whirlwind, encyclopedic tour of Old World philosophy from Plato to Heidegger, Nietzsche and Freud, historical personages (Newton, Berkeley, Liszt), art (imagery and music) from the Renaissance to the Romantic, architecture, medicine's therapies from analysis to electroshock, New World ruins from pre-Columbian to urban contemporary in mineral, animal and human, form, as well as vignettes of mechanized modern life's car-filled streets, crazies, or robots, contrasted against representations of

that imaginative control subsequently comes and goes, the inclination towards narrative recurs right through to the film's ending where even such a marvelously visual sequence as the sparkling rhinestones on a Mexican flamenco-dancer's dress tends to be dominated by the narrated conclusion (written à la Virginia Woolf or some such resolutely pre-Joycean prose).

Most curious of all, the viewing of *Lamentations* produces the strong suspicion that Elder is teetering on the verge of abandoning experimental film altogether. And what makes for such an intriguing possibility is the film's own demonstration that Elder, by following his imagination beyond belatedness, has in him the potential to become a director along the axis from Fellini to Syberberg; that is, if he would pursue that tyrannical control over the utter artificiality of his medium that the Newton-Berkeley sequence displays so convincingly. Albeit, this would involve something of a theoretic reversal in Elderian cinema akin to Heidegger's own *kebre*.

Otherwise, what remains are problems. For one, as a poem, *Lamentations* is still entrapped in belatedness; indeed, at much the same point Canadian poetics found itself in by the early '50s. As an 'experimental' film, *Lamentations* is primarily interesting because of the triple feat of its length, erudition and technique; that is, as an object of specialist inquiry. Above all, it is as narrative cinema that *Lamentations* reveals elements of a formidable imaginative redirection.

Having troped itself, the 'knowing' experimental tradition's further evolution could signal the beginning of the complete abandonment of Canadian cinematic belatedness by the realized Canadian Romanticism that *Lamentations* indicates negatively.

"Now ve may begin," says the psychiatrist at the conclusion of *Portnoy's Complaint*, tellingly entitled "Civilization and its discontents" in an earlier draft. In this sense can *Lamentations* be seen as the conclusion to the intellectual Elder's massive critique of civilization, marking the true point of departure for the "real man" Elder, no longer dissimulating, but fully able to assume himself as a filmmaker. Unless, of course, this *too* is only another belated, and paranoid, fantasy.

Michael Dorland •

LAMENTATIONS d./sc./cam./ed./p. R. Bruce Elder p.assts. Stephen Smith, Tom Thibault, Cindy Gawel mus. Bill Gilliam narr. Kristina Jones, Robert Fothergill, J. Peter Dyson titles Charles Luce make-up Maria Finta anim.seq. Charles Luce flute and add. syn. Ron Allen drumming Claude Desjardins text/narr. (Mexican insect sequence Indian dance sequence) Murray Pomerance supertitles (voice synthesis for "Ode to Joy," text mocking Palestrina) Murray Pomerance tech. support Emil Kolompar conforming Piroshka Hollo Mr. Pomerance's clothes courtesy Harry Rosen Mr. Pomerance's office courtesy Arthur Gelgoot L.p. David King (Newton) Murray Pomerance (psychiatrist) James D. Smith (Lizet) Bart Testa (lecturer) Tony Wolfson (Berkeley) Michael Cartmell (man in alley) print Medallion Film Labs thanks Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, The Ontario Centre For Robotics (Peterborough), The Canada Council, and The Ontario Arts Council sp.tnx.to Michael Snow, Peter Harcourt, Anna Pafomow, Michael Cartmell, Greg Svaluto, Karen Noble. Ex.sp.tnx.to James D. Smith (for hilarious conversation and mad brainstorming). Hilarious excessum habere nequit, sed semper bona est, et contra Melancholia pater est mala. (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica* V, prop XLII) p.c. Lightworks Film Prods. dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 16mm, col. running time: 8 hrs.

Mort Ransen's **Bayo**

Part of the pleasure of a good film comes from those tiny verbal and visual clues that knit it together to form one seamless unit. To some extent *Bayo* has this quality, and for that reason it is an enjoyable and involving film to watch. But there are times when, unfortunately, these small clues are made too large, destroying that subtlety so crucial when dealing with the huge themes *Bayo* attempts to.

Much of the film's appeal is in its very "real" story, and its "real" people. There is a universal truthfulness to the comedies and tragedies played out in this film that draw us into it. And this story is so much more than just that of Bayo, a 10-year-old boy who finally gets close to his seafaring grandfather before the old man takes to the sea for the last time. *Bayo* tells of expectations and disappointments, humiliations and triumphs, personal discoveries and losses; those things that make up "real" life. The film does it with insight and compassion. One feels these characters are not just movie images, they are truly human, exposing their ugly sides as often as the beautiful, their weaknesses as well their strengths. This is handled in such a way that the viewer cannot help but identify with, and so the film

has the power to touch us the way it does.

Undoubtedly, one of *Bayo's* strongest qualities is the community of Tickle Cove. The people of the community add that quality of truth and believability which lie at the heart of this film. Using non-professionals well on film is difficult, but *Bayo* pulls it off, for several reasons. The most important is that they are allowed to be themselves. The camera and script make no tremendous demands on any one individual. The camera flows easily, never lingering too long where it may become obvious that these people are not professionals. It was a heartwarming change from the overly-done and ultimately unbelievable communities portrayed by Hollywood. But, as with others in *Bayo*, this quality also proves in certain instances to be a shortfall. There are moments when the naturalness is pushed and overplayed so the "quaintness" of the community becomes too much.

At the centre of the story is the trio of Bayo, his mother Sharon, and her father, Philip Longlan - "Grampa," who returns to Tickle Cove after 60 years at sea. From the opening shots of pounding waves as they beat against the prow of a boat (from what would be Grampa's point of view) to the final shot of Grampa as he walks into the ocean while Bayo "takes a picture," the viewer is pushed to identify with his character; to understand his life, and his fantasy.

As the story unfolds, the ocean becomes a stronger and stronger point of reference. It is *always there*. Its relentless, indomitable quality permeates. We can feel how it controls the lives of the

people who live by it and forms their moral codes and standards. References abound to the men who went to sea but never came back, like Bayo's father and Grampa's younger brother. At the party, an old man tells Sharon how difficult it is for a man like her father to come home, where the people have made him more than a man with their legends. Yet that man has confronted the fact and frailty of his humanity every day at sea.

These are the kinds of clues that link the story together, developing Grampa's character as well as the ocean's, so his fantasy of walking on the water like God becomes believable and understandable. He is a man driven by a need to overcome his human limitations and gain power over that which has ruled his life. When he dons the white robe and walks into the ocean at the end, one feels the inevitability and the correctness of his action.

Yet for all the careful development of Grampa's character, it is with Bayo that most viewers must become involved. Caught between the fantasies and delusions of his mother and his grandfather, Bayo is like a tiny piece of driftwood bounced about on the waves. His need for the closeness of his grandfather reaches out and clutches our sentiments. Much credit must be given to Stephen McGrath who captures the essence of Bayo so beautifully and honestly. Such a relief from the Hollywood style of kid, where precocity is admirable.

Sharon is one of those women of which at least one is found in every small community. Patricia Philips is excellent as the lusty, angry and disap-

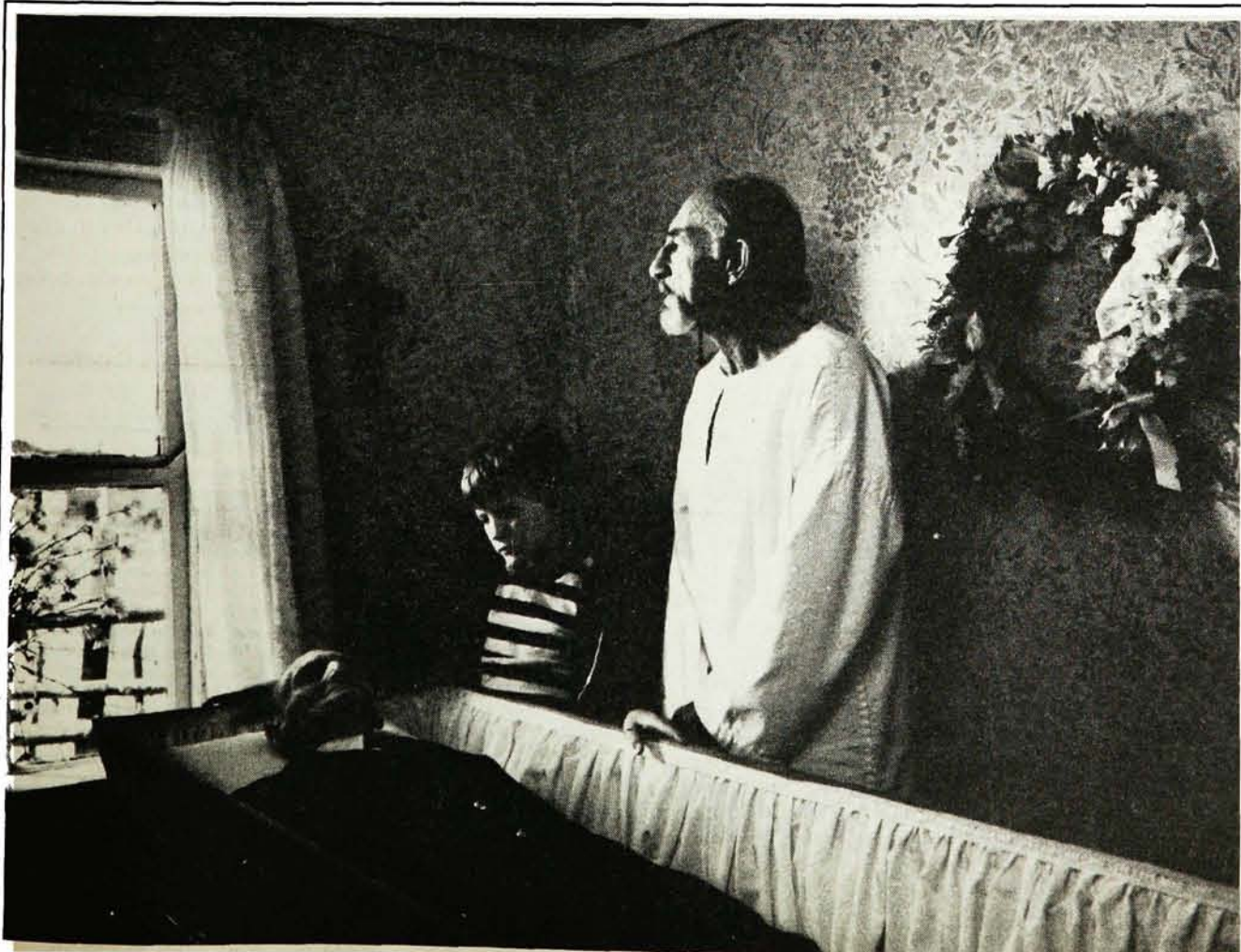
pointed woman who has spent her life waiting for something that never comes. The outcast, the unwed mother, the village whore; she turns a brittle and haughty face to everyone. Yet when the moment comes for that veneer to fall, Philips does it with grace. One would wish for more filmic moments like the one where she holds Bayo tenderly and he mumbles "You just don't know how fine you are." So much can be said with so little.

Perhaps the weakest scene is the storm at sea. Technically difficult to pull off, this scene represents a courageous attempt at creating tension and suspense. But it just doesn't work. It is not believable and erases so many of the magical and believable scenes that preceded it.

Most of *Bayo's* strengths are also the source of its weaknesses. Its truth, sincerity and universality come from an honest perception and portrayal of those small everyday events and the emotions that make up life. When they are left small and subtle, the film is very good. But there are times when it seems as though the filmmakers became too wound-up in what is so clearly a good idea, trying to make it more and only creating excess. It's regretful that honest sentiment is so easily turned to schmalz.

Nevertheless, *Bayo* is a special film. For the most part, it has shied away from the Hollywood gloss that would have destroyed it and has achieved an uncommon ability to make the viewer both joyfully and painfully conscious of his own *humanity*, that element which is the only true "universal."

Jan Teag •



• *Bayo*: last of the old-timers, Ed McNamara (in white) confronts the inevitable outcome, while young Bayo (Stephen McGrath) looks on

BAYO CBC prod. exec. David Pears assoc.p. Dorothy Courtois Lecour co.-p. Arnie Gelbart, Wendy Grean exec.p. Andy Thomson, Robert Verrall p. Harry Gulkin d. Mort Ransen sc. Ransen, Terry Ryan, Arnie Gelbart, based on the novel by Chipman Hall d.o.p. Georges Dufaux ed. François Gill, Yves Langlois mus. Loreena McKennitt mus.arr. Loreena McKennitt, Cedric Smith art d. John Meighen, Hazel Appleton cost. Paul-André Guérin cast. Diane Polley sc.sup. Monique Champagne a.d. David Hood loc.sd. Richard Besse sc.cons. Ted Allan asst.to p. Kate Jansen NFB adv. Stefan Wodoslawsky dia.cons. Chesley Yetman p.man. Josette Perrotta 2nd a.d. Anne Murphy unit man. Denis Normandeau p.acct. Yvette Duguet p.coord. Jacky Lavoie loc.man. Terry Ryan NFB p.cood. Denise Beaudoin post-p.coord. Grace Avrith studio admin. Marie Tonto-Donati make-up Tom Booth props.master Gilles Aird asst.props Marc Corriveau ward.asst. Laval Guy const.man. Peter Hopkins art d.trainee Jim Maunder focus puller Michel Girard clapper loader Michel Bernier boom Yvon Benoit gaffer Don Saari best boy Chuck Hughes elect. John Lewin key grip Jacob Rolling grip Michel St-Pierre p.assts. Eileen Pittman, Lorna Simmons, Anne Miriel chief sd.ed. André Galbrand sd.ed. Danuta Klis asst.sd.ed. André Chaput asst. pict. eds Rita Roy, Alice Wright, Hélène Crépeau foley artists Andy Malcolm, Peter McBurnie mus.rec. Louis Hone re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll titles Serge Bouthillier neg.cut. Claude Cardinal timing Denis Cantin stills Fred Smith add.stills Antonia McGrath, Algis Kemezys legal counsel Stephen I. Selznick film audit. Morton A. Katz M.B.A.C.A. tech.cons.water shoot Movie Marine & Sons editing Telepoint Inc. lab. + studios National Film Board of Cda. cam. Panavision (Canada) Ltée make-up lab. Dr. Renaud p.c. Jape Film Services Inc., in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada, in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with the participation of Telefilm Canada. cdn.dist. Col., 35mm, running time: 98 min., 5 sec l.p. Ed McNamara, Patricia Phillips, Stephen McGrath, Hugh Webster, Cedric Smith, Patrick Lane, Maisie Rillie, Nellie Ludlow, Jane Dingle, Griffith Brewer, Gordon Ralph, Richard Edwards, Fred Smith, Lloyd Olford, Harris Lodge, Philip Donovan, Hayward Dobbin, Thomas Legge, William Tremblett, Gerald Quinton.

David Winning's
Storm

Montreal's World Film Festival is notorious for its nearly hysterical edge of movie madness – for its sold-out screenings, and for the long, smokey waits endured in order to see completely unknown films on the basis of a rumor of a rumor.

So it was certainly a shock to have to watch David Winning's film, *Storm*, with five people in an otherwise empty theatre. Scheduling did not help the film – late on a Tuesday night, in the least prestigious of the festival's screening halls (an enormous theatre/classroom arena on the campus of Concordia University). But, at a festival like this one, the time and the place of a screening do not usually seem to make much of a difference.

Yet one has to wonder if the simple fact that this is an unknown Canadian film was in itself enough to discourage people. While an unknown American, Bulgarian, or Australian film would have been sold out, an unknown Canadian film stands not a chance. I find this incredibly depressing. Have our expectations of the Canadian cinema really sunk that low?

For this low-budget, shoestring feature manages to be almost a casebook study of the preoccupations of the Canadian imagination, at least according to Margaret Atwood's *Survival*. *Storm* is a survivalist story, that of a modern, urban adolescent's discovery of the wilderness and the savagery within himself that has to emerge for him to be able to deal with this environment. In the process, the youth changes from a child to a man; whether, as a result of this transformation, he is better equipped to do anything other than survive or

whether he has just been reduced to the bestial level of the wild itself, is, however, never made clear. Because if *Storm* manages to be slick and stylish on some levels, the film itself is ultimately shallow. As a result, *Storm* is not the film that will singlehandedly redeem Canadian cinema in the eyes of the national public.

David Winning, who is just 24 years-old, does a pretty good job developing the technical and stylistic elements of the film. *Storm* carries an interesting, non-linear structure: the motivations of the characters are only revealed slowly in flashbacks and hallucinations. This structure keeps the plot from getting too predictable and permits some wonderful surprises and shock effects, as, in homages to *Carrie* and *Night of the Living Dead*, the victims come back to haunt the living. While there are occasional continuity problems, the editing of the film is particularly tight and effective in the action sequences. There is an extraordinary chase sequence through deserted university corridors. The cinematography is often quite beautiful.

But Winning has an unfortunate tendency to give in entirely to the easy effect: a hallucination which will shock the viewer the first time finally becomes silly if it is repeated too often. He over-relies as well on a soundtrack which absolutely insists on underlining every emotion the viewer is supposed to feel.

If Winning opted ultimately for slickness, it's because there is really a void at the film's center. The script is formulaic, and the characters are undeveloped: a trio of largely unlikeable old murderers returns to the woods to dig up money which they had hidden years before, while a couple of immature young men come to experience the wilderness. The youths and the oldtimers engage in mortal combat. While there are some nice surprises here – a villain so nasty but

so vulnerable to a heart attack that he can barely chase his victims – the only character we really get to know at all is so dumb and uninteresting that his heroic transformation from nurd to a kind of Rambo is mainly incomprehensible. The script, in short, is missing a heart. The film becomes an exercise in conflict, tension and style.

Yet *Storm* is a slick, professional-looking, low-budget film, not without tension and not without charm. It will look good on TV and is probably best viewed in that context because there is simply not enough human substance here to create in the viewer the empathy and concentration characteristic of a really successful film experience.

But I think David Winning might be going somewhere in the film business. For a director so incredibly young, *Storm* is a considerable professional accomplishment. I look forward to seeing what he accomplishes in the future.

Brian Lewis ●

STORM d./sc./p. David Winning assoc. p./a.d. Michael Kevis ed. Bill Campbell mus. Amin Bhatia cam. Tim Hollings loc. sd. Per Asplund make-up Stan Edmonds asst. cam. David Christie 2nd unit cam. Andrew Jaremko add. re-rec. James Porteous add. sd. Tim Archer cast. Larry Parrish loc. Shauna Clapp loc. crew Robert Caplette, Sandy Dickson, Paul Bailey, James Hutchison, Corinne Ruiz, Don Shank cater. Fay Winning illust. Leon Joosen trucks Nelson Thorne, Mark Arton campus loc. University of Calgary, Public Affairs Office, Ursula Wohlfarth, Fred Brannett, Cindy Murrell campus security Grant Edmonds props. Martin Winning, Dennis Kevis, James Winning, Ken Clapp truck mount des. Andrew Jaremko handgun replica Ken Hawryliw titles West Coast Optical & Graphics United Graphic Services neg. cut. Gay Black lab. Alpha Cine col. timer Bruce Whidden cam. Ariflex tax. Alberta Forest Service, Alberta Recreation & Parks, Dan Jenkins, A.J. Peter, Rod Gow, the Stolz family, Rick Garbutt, Pat & Ken Clapp, Jack Drummond, Red Cross Society, The Foto Haus, IBM of Canada, Allcopy Calgary, Ford of Canada, Fred Haeseker, Martin Morrow, Calgary Herald; Larry Day, CFAC Calgary; Marie Hohtanz, CFCN Calgary; Calgary Cable Ten North; Jean & Ludwig Splett, Doris Ostergaard, National Film Board of Canada, Heather Jaremko mix. Thunder Road Studios p.c. Groundstar Productions, Calgary, (403) 282-4906 l.p. David Palfy, Stan Kane, Tom Schioler, Harry Freedman, Lawrence Elion, James Hutchison. col., running time: 81 mins.

Sophie Bissonnette's
Quel numéro/ What Number?: The Electronic Sweatshop

"I look at my machine and feel it's treated better than I am," says one of the women workers in Sophie Bissonnette's latest documentary, *Quel numéro/What Number?* That feeling seems to be at the center of the computer revolution when seen through the eyes of those whose jobs now revolve around new computerized technologies. The film focuses on the psychological affects of machine-tending as experienced by checkers in computerized supermarkets, VDT operators, mail sorters in the computerized post-office, and telephone operators whose 'personal touch' and jobs themselves are being eliminated by the computer revolution.

"What was important to me above all," says Bissonnette, "was to return human beings and not machines to the heart of the issue of technological change and to focus the film on the human dimension of that relationship between human beings and machines, a relationship which is a highly political one to begin with." True to this intent, Bissonnette's film is a forum through which the women workers themselves articulate the daily frustration, stress and dehumanized working conditions imposed on them by the new technologies. "If you work with a machine over and over and over, you end up being a machine," says one of the supermarket checkers. "I'm plugged into the machine. That's about as exciting as it gets," says the VDT operator working the night shift. "You become a robot. You work automatically...I'm not there," says a mail sorter. And the film's long sequences shot at the workplace effectively underscore their feelings and observations.

From supermarket to computerized office to postoffice and computerized switchboard, it is clear that human beings are meant to be merely adjuncts and servants to a technological process and system geared to eventually eliminating the human dimension entirely. The women workers themselves are acutely aware of this fact, and of the irony in their situation. They accurately assess the economic conditions at the base of the technological revolution, and they graphically articulate the extent to which they are conscious of being caught up in the machine's goals. "It's not working for you, you're working for it," says a mail sorter trying to "maintain production levels" of 1800 letters per hour. "We, the employees, speed ourselves up," says a telephone operator of meeting AWT quotas (Ac-

● The villainous Jim (Stan Kane) puts Lowell (David Palfy) through a rough moment in *Storm*



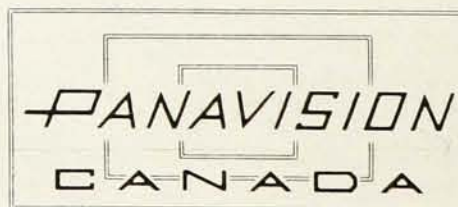
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