

# Dorland's error

Michael Dorland's review of my film *Lamentations* (*Cinema Canada* No. 124) did a splendid job of presenting its conceptual background. The challenge of reviewing a film of the length and scope of *Lamentations* is formidable. Dorland seems to have measured up to the challenge.

Yet the review troubles me. It's really not that I find it insufficiently laudatory; after all, it is mostly positive. What troubles me, I suppose, is a sense that it shoots wide of what ought to be its mark, for it describes lucidly some of the film's secondary features while muddling its depiction of what I take to be the film's primary features.

I can express in another way the uneasiness I feel with Dorland's review. It seems to me Dorland commits the error of arguing that because I reject one of a pair of what are conventionally conceived to be opposites, I embrace the other. One instance of this is his conclusion that *Lamentations* gives evidence my work is progressing towards narrative. The only reason for asserting this I can conceive is that Dorland assumes that narrative cinema is the antithesis of experimental cinema. He notes quite correctly – and this is an insight that no other commentator on my films has had, and for which I commend him – that my films are unlike those belonging to the mainstream different from the avant-garde's "standard product." Sure 'nuff, a criticism of avant-garde filmmaking (as it is currently practised) is implied in this. But Dorland proceeds to the incorrect inference that if I criticize avant-garde filmmaking, I must be headed toward narrative cinema. I can assure you, I am as resolutely opposed to narrative as when I wrote "The Cinema We Need."

I dwell on this elementary logical error because it has a close relation to an issue central to *Lamentations*'s structure. So, when I see (or believe I see) Dorland committing this mistake, I am led to suspect he may have missed the film's point. For *Lamentations* critiques that exclusionary form of thought which establishes distinctions among things (or features) and effectively chooses among them by ranking them in a hierarchy. At the same time, it critiques an opposing form of thought that seeks to resolve all contradictions in some grand but inevitably empty synthesis.

Let us consider the latter critique first. *Lamentations* uses a variety of strategies to foreground the "representational" quality of images: it re-presents obvious stereotypes of women and re-uses the stock-in-trade images of Romantic art (why it uses these particular images I shall soon reveal) – the noble savage, ruins, exotic tropical locations, the bohemian artist. The purpose of these strategies is to demonstrate the process by which the simulacral – representations that are always already part of a conceptual system – have come to take the place of the real.

*Lamentations* also demonstrates the function of this displacement: it places the mask of the unreal over what we

cannot explain using the empirical methods dominating thought today. At the same time, through this displacement, the opaqueness of the real is, as Adorno points out, transmuted into "a metaphysical mystery by the individual who suffers them and at the same time identifies himself with the very powers that determine those (real) processes" (T.W., Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, p. 112). The individual transforms the real into a phantasmagoric image imbued with the character of the thinking subject itself. These phantasmagoric images are then re-appropriated by the subject as the real itself. Pound recognized the problems with this process for Hugh Kenner tells us (in *The Pound Era*, p. 417), that in an abandoned version of *Canto I*, Pound wrote:

*Shall I  
Confuse my own phantastikon,  
Or say the filmy shell that circumscribes me  
Contains the actual sun;  
Confuse the thing I see  
With actual gods behind me*

The problem is that the illusion hides the source of value (reality) from sight.

In this process of projection and re-assimilation (not too unlike that experienced routinely in watching films), we lose our connection with the real. We come to live in the "good universe next door" the film speaks of. Consider in this connection the quotations from Pound's *Cantos* concerning artificial paradises which appear on *1857: Fool's Gold*, and the image of mad(?) Ludwig's artificial paradises – Herrenchiemsee and Neuschwanstein – which appear at the beginning of *Lamentations*. Or, for that matter, the artificial paradises embedded in the Romantic conceptions of the Native American, the love-bed or the primitive mystery sites of lost civilizations – images of which compose most of the film.

But the longing for utopia turns easily into a death wish, a longing for extinction – there is, indeed, something of this in the mythically expressed longing for the past. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the process of dissolving the real into simulacra, Western culture conceived a death wish for itself. *Lamentations* comments on this, too. Central to both the male and female narrators' discourses is a mystically expressed longing for the past and the narration connects this longing, through the mediating ideas of madness, solipsism, dissolution and the desire for what does not change, to death. The film expresses the belief that one can go off in search of the artificial paradises of human love, Amerindian life, etc., but all one will be left with in the end is a nervous collapse.

As the film also shows, the ideality of such Romantic myths gives rise to ever more fervent demands for their realization, simply by force of will, in the here and now. To make matters worse, the ideality of the object towards which this will strives, this (no-place) utopia, results, as simulacra come to replace all real objects, in the will's being transformed into a will for sheer spectacle.

Now here lies an interesting ques-

tion. If the simulacrum, as unreal, is nothing – and at the no-place of utopia there can only be no-thing – then such a will becomes a will for no-thing (and indeed, with a most extraordinary negativity, for nothing – such a will simply nihilates). Wishing no thing, it is simply a will to will. And the question: is this mirroring a form of self-reflexibility or does it block self-reflectivity in the circuits of narcissistic fascination and solipsism?

The endlessness of the circuit of demand that is the will to will produces an unceasing nihilating negativity. In an ill-fated attempt to liberate the spirit from this unceasing demand arose that emphasis on immediacy and on presence familiar to us from abstract art. This was the main response to the loss of the real in the modern age of the simulacrum. (Whenever we think of it, we should remember that, wherever they could, the Fascists appropriated the means whereby the impression of immediacy could be created.) But there has been another response to the loss of reality, characteristic of our age, a modernism that combats the pervasive sense of self-estrangement. Through an act of will, this art attempts to impose itself on us by using strong effects, direct appeals, powerful pathos. It attempts to lessen the distance between art and action, to abolish self-estrangement in the voluntarism of the heroic self.

This way, though, lies the debacle of Razutis' *Amerika*. Such work throws its own vulgarities up against the vulgarities of mass media and, with its own shrillness, it attempts to drown out the shrill pronouncements of the media. The reason this art is bound to fail is obvious. As the wreck and disorder of *Amerika* makes manifest, in the era of the simulacrum, spectacle no longer borrows primarily from myth. It borrows from what only has the appearance of myth, that is, from history. For this art, history is only a spectacle, a show, a "put-on." In this hall of mirrors, everything is arranged so that when one looks in any one direction one sees, though the elaborate superposition of myriad reflections, an intersection of all possible sights. Here, any world view is confirmed merely by meeting its reflection.

This is the world-view *Lamentations* critiques and this is why it is constructed from mirroring parts. The "strip-dance" sequence is a mirror image of the art dance, the Mexican insect sequence is a mirror image of the ECT sequence, etc. This should be clear, it seems to me, yet not only was its significance not twigged, this fact wasn't even mentioned!

The construction of *Lamentations* embodies a critique of a form of cinema (and of art) which attempts to resolve all contradictions. The conception of the cinema as an analogue of the Universal Mind in which all forms of art and, finally, all forms of knowledge are reconciled has real appeals, it must be admitted. But cinema (or Mind) can effect this reconciliation only by imposing on all the forms it subsumes an ontological condition identical with its

own, that is, by converting them all into signifiers of an absence, an Other that never enters the system of representation. As a result, this art impels itself on us by force (as Razutis does), by taking the place of the real, that is, by an act of will. This, as my Marxist friends used to say, is the true face of Romantic art.

So, *Lamentations* critiques Romantic art for its wilfulness, for the imperiousness of the means by which it substitutes a complex system of relations (the whole) for discrete particulars, for the way it dissolves all things into the unreality of that system (hence the emphasis on the images as simulacra) and, consequently, for its manner of engendering an estrangement from reality. But instead of recognizing this critical thrust, Dorland deals with *Lamentations* as though it were a Romantically inspired work. ("What is striking about *Lamentations* is to what degree it is a traditional Romantic quest poem at war with elements of filmmaking".) For *Lamentations* to criticize the Romantic ethos, it had to take up, though only provisionally, the same grandiose self-heroizing standpoint that it criticized – but only to make manifest what it truly is. Unfortunately, Dorland seems to have missed the whole critical thrust of the film.

Furthermore, the feeling of estrangement from the real that Romantic art engenders is easily converted into mourning for a lost past. Thus, in Romantic art the Golden Age of antiquity is frequently depicted as a necropolis. The attention *Lamentations* pays to the Golden Age is more than obvious: it shows Romantic art's feeling of longing and regret for a bygone Golden Age results from the dissolution of the real into the simulacral.

I began this letter by noting that Dorland's commentary/analysis rests on an exclusionary logic that starts from a conventionally-conceived antinomy (e.g. experimental film/narrative film) and then forces a choice between what are held up as opposites. I further suggested that *Lamentations* criticizes this exclusionary logic even while it exposes the concept of a unity in which all contradictions are resolved to be an empty one. (As Hegel suggested, commenting on the philosophy of his contemporary Schelling, this is the conception of the Absolute as a night in which all cows are black). How can such a position be elaborated?

The antinomy central to *Lamentations* is that between conception of the ultimately real as the Whole and the conception of the ultimately real as the discrete particular (the fragment). I have shown how *Lamentations* reveals the dangers of the quest for the Whole – and, contrary to Dorland, *Lamentations* is not a Romantic quest film but a critique of such quest films. As the supertitles so often state, and the foregrounding of the simulacral status of the images suggests, the Whole is a projection in which the real is converted into the representational. *Lamentations* depicts the Whole as a product of the will, as informed by our appetites, wishes, beliefs, etc. It was one of my objectives

to demonstrate this. That is why I feel it is quite wrong of Dorland to say:

"But (*Lamentations*) 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... one seldom has much occasion to forget that is exactly where one is entrapped."

Whether there is any escaping solipsism, whether our mind has not been converted into a cinema-like universal mind consuming everything, whether the progress of consciousness has not foreclosed access to the Wholly Other – these are the questions *Lamentations* raises. While I believe their formative role is obvious, Dorland uses my raising them as grounds for accusing *Lamentations* of being a "technical failure." I, on the other hand, believe that *Lamentations*' power derives from the strength it exhibits in its facing up to the questions about modernity.

Too, Dorland seems not to recognize – certainly he fails to mention – *Lamentations*' tragic structure. I believe this oversight is also a result of Dorland's exclusionary logic. A tragedy is a drama in which the protagonist finds himself caught in a situation in which he is forced to choose between opposites, because there is no middle way between opposites as there is between extremes, and, whichever choice he makes will be made at some cost. *Lamentations* depicts modern life as caught between the demand to live one's life within the pervading sense of the Whole known to the ancients and the demand on live one's life among the fragments of modernity.

I have already shown *Lamentations* demonstrates that succumbing to the former demands results in estrangement from the real and the psychic distress that attends the loss of the sense of reality. Now I must state briefly how the choice to live in modernity's sundered world also results in a loss. But before doing so, I shall make a final comment on the structure of the film. *Lamentations* alternates sections composed from many fragments, so many their unity cannot be grasped in any single viewing and passages composed of a single sequence-shot. This parallels the opposition between the Whole and the sundered world.

Dorland failed to note the significance of this structure. Instead, he opted for one ("So too the film's narrative scenes" – though I would never call them narrative, only acted scenes – "are the strongest") and against the other (in the montage scenes "Elder succumbs to the worst kinds of dualism – logomachy and camera-frenzy"). What bothers me about this claim is not that it runs counter to the prevailing opinion – and generally the montage scenes have been highly praised – but, rather, that instead of taking into account the way the two types of construction relate to one another, Dorland chooses for one, against the other. This is yet another product of Dorland's exclusionary logic.

But we must get to the point of showing *Lamentations* to be tragedy. What of the sections of the film assembled from fragments? What do they say of life in the sundered world? Well, *Lamentations* sets up a network of references, emblems, historical signs, musical

echoes, which stimulate recognition as memories. In this way, it shows that memory, observation and desire enter into the image, that from the evidence contained in the fragments, we can piece together a history of subjectivity. And though we may dream of concatenating luminous details in a paratactical syntax, still, those who are in any degree acute recognize that any work composed in this way would be endless. (This I believe was the problem Pound found himself in, because he believed the word could deliver its referent.) Only a poem containing a perceiving and unifying mind can ever hope to arrive at a transfiguring, ordered vision.

So where are we? We choose fragments and lose all sense of order, or choose for the Whole, for order, and lose touch with reality. An unhappy choice! And what are we left with? Well, obviously, no work of art that existed outside a system in which contact with reality is lost could ever reach its destination (meaning) or even a resolution. In the end, I suppose all that is left is the power to produce difficult, long, hermetic texts. You might exclaim "That's all!" To which I would offer the predictable retort, "That's plenty to be getting on with!" After all, a torrent of words may (and this is my rebuttal of Dorland's remark about logomachy) produce enlightenment.

One last comment. Cindy Gawel, Stephen Smith and Tom Thibault credits were given in *Cinema Canada* as production assistants. In my credits they were given the credit of filmmaker's assistants. They had much more significant roles than those production assistants fill: they shot some scenes, and did a great deal of the sound and picture editing. Tom Thibault cut the music tracks and did the mix with Cindy Gawel. And, on a related matter (though no error was made here), Dorland quoted a line from *Lamentations* in the interview with me. His procedure in doing so was perfectly in accord with convention, but the author of the line, after reading the interview, asked me to assure that credit attribution be made. The line was written by Murray Pomerance.

If this letter seems harsh, I did not mean it to be. Dorland's review was very fine. But I suppose all filmmakers get a bit upset when one aspect or another of their precious work goes unrecognized, and I'm certainly no exception. But not many critics could have done as well as Dorland did. But still...but still...There's more to say about the film than he said!

**R. Bruce Elder**  
Toronto

## Congrats, Cinema Canada

As an other than disinterested party, I would like to suggest that it is time *Cinema Canada* be complimented for some of its recent efforts in the area of scholarly cinema studies. The swollen stack of *Cinema Canada's* that keeps sliding off my bookshelves are a record

of the policies, personalities, productions and modest proposals that represent what film history we have. But your recent co-publications with the Film Studies Association of Canada, the debate on Bruce Elder's "The Cinema We Need" and the recent Elder interview are something else again. These are important steps in hashing out why anyone bothered or plans to continue bothering with the continuation of that history. You are getting into existential housecleaning.

So, a small bit of dusting. Much as I enjoyed Michael Dorland's review of Elder's *Lamentations*, I take issue with his description of the film as "an object of specialist inquiry." It is, to be sure, a long and taxing work. Although Elder evokes Ezra Pound to explain the film's structure, the effect of a first viewing of *Lamentations* is closer to that required reading of *Ulysses* in a university literature course. Everyone, to his/her own surprise, survives the thing's beauty. And whatever comes next is that much more serious, that much more complete for having done so. I would hate to scare anyone away from a cultural initiation rite so well suited to a cinema and a nation coming of age.

**Seth Feldman**  
York University  
Toronto

## Sound-track illuminations

In the November issue of *Cinema Canada*, there was a statement by Bart Testa to the effect that Bruce Elder had, in all his films prior to *Lamentations* composed the music, or was otherwise responsible for the soundtrack. I feel I must set the record straight in regards to at least one of his earlier efforts, *Illuminated Texts*.

I composed the music for this film through the winter and spring of 1981-82. The music track is almost wholly electronic and was recorded in Elder's studio that winter, with myself acting as sole performer. I edited the soundtrack, also in Elder's studio, in the late winter of 1981 and spring of 1982. The track was mixed at the mixing theatre of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in April, 1982. I directed and engineered the mix, assisted at the console by Henry Jesionka. Throughout the production of this soundtrack I received no assistance or guidance from Elder beyond what I have since grown accustomed to receiving from a film's director, and in many areas, e.g. the construction of the climatic "Is It Far?" ending (the "howling last reel" in Testa's phrase) and during the mix, I received a good deal less than is customary.

My naiveté in these matters at the time prevented me from protesting against the credit I received in the film – "Assistant to Sound" – which was set without prior agreement and, in fact, with no discussion at all. I have not seen this sort of thing happen in the commercial film industry, either television or theatrical, in several years of a busy

career since the post-production of *Illuminated Texts* and have, in fact, found people fair and even generous in giving credit where credit was due. With these facts in mind, I wish to draw your attention to the statement in the November issue of your magazine that Elder had previously composed the music for this film or was responsible for the soundtrack in some way beyond the normal director-composer relationship.

**Bruno Degazio**  
Toronto

## The Elder myth

As a maker of 'experimental' films, I was pleased to see so much space devoted to this generally neglected area in the November issue of your publication.

But it is unfortunate that all your coverage was confined to one individual – R. Bruce Elder. As you are probably aware, academics, bureaucrats, and cultural-mandarins have elevated this man to the position of our country's most prominent critic/curator/commentator in the field of 'experimental' film. The problem is that the rhetorically-elaborate 'history' of the subject he has constructed is a 'myth', with a few select 'heroes' and himself as 'crown prince.' He overlooks and/or misrepresents various aspects of cultural-context as well as numerous filmmakers who should be acknowledged in any accurate and comprehensive review of Canadian 'experimental' film. Elder's dismissal of the many artists' work that he excludes from his critical/curatorial domain as "frivolous, trendy, hip, worthless" (*Cinema Canada*, No. 124) is despicable.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to quote from Hamlet:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, (R. Bruce), Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

One should note that Elder never fails to include himself in his accounts of 'important' Canadian filmmakers.

I find his films and writing intellectually pretentious; regurgitating other people's words and ideas, and displaying an inflated sense of self-importance. The latter is exemplified in program-information from *Encounter Cinema* (UCLA/1980) where he billed himself as "Canadian poet, musician, dancer, choreographer, photographer, and filmmaker." I'll believe it when Elder makes a film in which he dances his own choreography to his own music and recites his own poetry (rather than quoting and paraphrasing others). Until then, can anyone really take this egotist seriously?

I hope that in the future you will print more objective, balanced, and enlightening reports on 'experimental' film in Canada.

**Peter Lipskis**  
Vancouver

## Don't forget 1812

(This is a response to Bruce Bishop's letter in Cinema Canada No. 124).

The Point of my article "Reflections on a Generic Void" (No. 122) was not to present a view of a vanishing cultural identity but to offer a point from which our endangered cultural identity can grow. At present, Canada's is an identity without substance - still struggling to exist. *Reflections* accepts and applauds the regionalist tendency of Canadians - and, let me make it clear, that even people from Ontario are regional in descent.

Canada has many cultural identities, but no identity as a whole - our identity lies in 'the resplendency of our divergence', but the powers that be now offer that cultural divergence to the world, and, in particular, the United States. Such a gift will operate to an annihilate our hope of a holistic cultural identity. Uncle Sam will smile and no

longer regret 1812, because once there is some semblance of cultural dominance then a nation is as good as defeated.

The piece I wrote takes pride in Canada as it is: an independant nation; and does not wish to see it flounder on an economic *faux pas*.

But look at Ted Kotcheff's comments on Canadian *Cinema Canada* No. 124. His references for praising of Canadian cinema are all based on the gospel according to Hollywood. The Americans must approve of our cinema before it is to be considered of expert quality - why do we require their O.K.?

I salute your pride in your Nova Scotia heritage, and agree with the premise on which you raise your voice, but I suggest that beyond your nationalism is a more personal passion for culture and a more global economics.

**Sam Zero**  
London, ON

P.S.: Bob and Doug McKenzie present an *American* picture of Canadians, eh?

## Stereo TV error

I would like to bring your attention to the fact that *Cinema Canada* and writer *Paul Quigley* made what we consider to be a serious mistake in the November issue "Stereo Television - Sounds of the Future". The article on *Danger Bay* states that *Danger Bay* is the first television series in Canada to be produced with a stereo soundtrack. This is not true.

*Nitevision*, produced by Western Video for *Superchannel* has been produced in stereo for over 18 months. Despite the underground nature of the program, it has received rave reviews out here in the west. The program is not seen in Ontario and Quebec, as First Choice has chosen not to run the program and compete with *MuchMusic*.

The program is a wonderment of special effects and stereo sound, geared for the late-night viewer. It makes use of Ultimatte Special effects on set in the studio. The audio is mixed at Pinewood Soundtracks in Vancouver on 24 tracks.

I would appreciate it if you would correct your mistake.

**David H. Baker**  
Producer/Director  
*Nitevision*,  
Vancouver

**Newsmakers,  
please note**

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