

BOUND UP WITH TIME: RESTORING THE BOOK OF ALL THE DEAD

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The Book of All the Dead (1975—1994) is an epic cycle by the Canadian filmmaker R. Bruce Elder, encompassing all of the films that Elder made during this period. It is structured in three regions: ***Lamentations***, ***Consolations***, and ***Exultations***. Each region is named for an epic work made between 1985 and 1994, and taken together, they total approximately 36 hours. Contained within those regions are a number of short films made between 1975 and 1980, which appear in clusters and as interstices, out of chronological order; the three major parts, however, are presented in a rough chronology that brings us from the first epic, ***Lamentations*** (1985) to the conclusion of the final epic, ***Exultations*** (1994). Each of the three regions consumes one day's screening, with the work intended to be shown from Friday through Sunday over the course of Easter.

The Book of All the Dead draws many of its themes from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and features many visual and textual references to the six centuries that divide these works, but it is principally a work of autobiography. By his citations to history, philosophy, and poetry, Elder furnishes his autobiography with a heritage of medieval and modern thought, and places his experience in direct relation to a lineage of artists and poets torn between the rigour of spiritual calling and the fatal competition of earthly things. Elder has told me often that the act of committing poems to memory will save one's life. His citations are rooted in such a philosophy. The work confronts the blunt horrors of modern life as well as the wondrous and, at times, degrading experience of this man's quest, torn between pleasure and suffering, between divine mysteries and the cold tap of facts. This trajectory is met with a string of comic sketches, monologues, rhymes, and exclamations, the darkness accompanied by a great and resounding chortle.

Elder's approach was refined and intensified through the chronological development of ***The Book of All the Dead***. The early films were made under the influence of his first filmmaking teachers (which included Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, and Robert Breer), and gradually, as the autobiographical line of this work became clear, first with ***The Art of Worldly Wisdom*** (1979), Elder assumed a more mastered approach. The subsequent epic films were made in collaboration with film crews, featured performers giving dramatic readings, and achieved their ultimate form by the intense scrutiny of increasingly elaborate work on an optical printer. The cycle encloses social and autobiographical aspects, debates of form, and traces of still other perceptions (in his complex soundtracks, often featuring competition between voice and music, even to comic effect), thus becoming an education in itself.

Since 1997, Elder has developed a second epic cycle, ***The Book of Praise*** (1997—present), a work intended to run roughly 14 hours, to be screened on the Monday

following the first cycle. This cycle has progressed at a more measured rate than ***The Book of All the Dead***, with Elder releasing a feature-length film every three to four years, each running between 90 and 140 minutes. It is through the late course of this cycle that Elder made a transition between media, beginning with ***A Gathering of Crystals*** (2015), his first work completed and released on digital video. Video had played a central role in all of Elder's work from its beginning: his first film, ***Breath/Light/Birth***, though finished in 16mm, was rephotographed from Portapak analog tape, and almost all of his films since the early 1990s used images generated from video and computer processes. Elder decided through the course of ***A Gathering of Crystals*** that what could now be done in video, its possibilities for tangible forms and colour effects, was needed to conclude his cycle.

Since 2014, I have supervised the digital translation and restoration of ***The Book of All the Dead*** with a team of technicians and with Elder's counsel; I have simultaneously taken steps for the long-term preservation of ***The Book of Praise***. The work on both cycles will be completed by the end of 2017. My work has involved the high-resolution scanning of the film negatives, and in some necessary cases, prints, to 5K resolution; the digital cleaning of the image to remove scratches; and colour correction to ensure that the digital versions correctly emulate the colour schemes of the films in their printed 16mm form. In this sense the work retains the integrity of its original form. The sheer volume of the work has forced us to confront the question of what the core value of such an experience is, and how that aspect can be preserved in this new container, or rather, what this new digital container might bring to it.

As a multiform, multi-modal work, ***The Book of All the Dead*** defies those who would presume from its scale that it is a testament to Film and Film alone. In its new container, as a high-resolution digital release and as a blu-ray disc, ***The Book of All the Dead*** shall become newly accessible. Digital tools have allowed this cycle to thrive in its new form. Where a 16mm exhibition was prohibitively expensive both in terms of shipping the work (which comprised more than 50 reels), and in terms of the theatre labour required to cast its complex projection, now it can be seen in venues that previously could not afford to show it. This dense image of the world is now returned to the world. The work becomes more intimate, taken out of the realm of the spectacular exception and fitted into the home. Such a work could never exist, could not have been conceived at all, but for the modes, rites, codes and systems of film, and for that, its interior architecture remains.