Go ahead, laugh to see me haunting all these shipwrecks, a salvager leaving sumptuous silver plate behind, not too handy with the net, rather clumsy with fishhooks, bending over you with such care and concern …

Patrick Chamoiseau, *School Days*

Landscape With Shipwreck is dedicated to the late Marian McMahon.

LANDSCAPE WITH SHIPWRECK

first person cinema and the films of philip hoffman

edited by karyn sandlos and mike hoolboom

Co-editors: Karyn Sandlos and Mike Hoolboom
Project Coordinator: Kelly Langgard
Production Manager: Chris Gehman
Technical Assistant: Larissa Fan
Design: f. duran productions
Franci Duran
Steven Casey
with Simon Rojas and Kika Thorne
Copy Editor: Sharon English
Proofreader: Scott McLeod
Financial Support: The Canada Council for the Arts

Cover photo: *Sweep*, photo by Alli Anttilainen
Full page photo credits
page 17: *Chimera*
page 41: *?O,Zoo!*, photo by Marian McMahon
page 75: *river*
page 137: *passing through/torn formations*
page 166: *Kitchener-Berlin*
page 200: Philip Hoffman, polaroid by Carl Brown
page 245: *What these ashes wanted*
page 253: *What these ashes wanted*
page 257: *What these ashes wanted*

Typeset in bodoni BE light, light italic, bodoni BE regular and medium. Printed on Accent Opaque 70 lb. Smooth,White
Printed in Canada by AGMV Marquis, Cap-St-Ignace, Québec

ISBN 1-894663-00-4

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data
Main entry under title: *Landscape with shipwreck : first person cinema and the films of Philip Hoffman*
Includes bibliographical references.

1. Hoffman, Philip - Criticism and interpretation. 2. Experimental films - Canada - History and criticism.
I. Sandlos, Karyn Elizabeth, 1968-
II. Hoolboom, Michael. III. Images Festival of Independent Film & Video.
PN1998.3.H63L36 2001 791.43'0232'092 C2001-930329-7

Co-published by Images Festival of Independent Film and Video and Insomniac Press

Images Festival of Independent Film and Video
401 Richmond St. West, Suite 448
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 3A8
info@imagesfestival.com
www.imagesfestival.com

Insomniac Press
192 Spadina Ave., Suite 403
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 2C2
www.insomniacpress.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Landscape With Shipwreck would not exist without the help of those who believed it essential that Philip Hoffman's work become the focus of our collective ruminations on first-person cinema in Canada. Special thanks goes to Mike Hoolboom for inspiring and jet fuelling this project. Kelly Langgard has been instrumental in coordinating production, and Chris Gehman and Larissa Fan have attended to the countless details that have ensured the completion of this book. I am indebted to many others who have offered their talents and expertise: Franci Duran, Marc Glassman, Ellen Flanders, Sharon English, and all of the writers and artists who have lifted this collection up to the light of day. Finally, thanks to Mike Cartmell for his wonderful title, and to Beth Easton and Deirdre Logue for their understanding of shipwrecks.

Love and gratitude to Philip Hoffman for his light and shadows.

Karyn Sandlos

This book was made possible through financial assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts.

The Canada Council for the Arts | Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

CONTENTS

stills (top to bottom): *passing through/torn formations, river, What these ashes wanted.*

photo: Hoffman's mother with
the triplets before he was born.

INTRODUCTION

I met him at the equipment crib of Sheridan College, primal hearth of the Escarpment School, though that name had not even made its way into rumour then. He always wore flannel, and jeans that would never come quite clean, no matter how often washed, as if part of the world was always sticking to him. He wasn't Philip Hoffman then, he was just Phil, dishing out light meters and grip-stands with a smile, rubbing together the dimes to make rent on his basement digs.

He was serious, even then. Working summers at a hog plant will do that to you. On a clear night you could still smell the blood on him, the muscles working overtime just to keep him still. He never talked much, soaking it all in, and wherever he went his camera was sure to follow. He was a diary filmmaker, collecting moments of his own life the way others collect rare stamps or hockey cards. He didn't work off a script, never believed in plans or Daytimers, knowing the places he was headed would never make it onto anyone's map but his own.

Phil Hoffman is my friend. And I am afraid for him.

When I reread this collection of writings, it's hard to shake off the funereal air, the sense that something is over. The book is closed. The project is finished. In biblical times, there circulated rumours of a book so fearsome, so awful, that its reading would occasion the events it described, and end the world as it was known. I have no doubt that for Phil, this is that book. I pray he never reads it.

Phil Hoffman makes personal documentaries, which is to say he strains history through his own fictions. His work takes on some formidable themes: memory, the family, the making of official and unofficial histories, the ethics of representation, love and loss in the time of AIDS. He has devoted his life to examining the narrow aperture each of us uses to bring our own experience into focus. Some might call this personality. Or style. Subjectivity. A sense of immediacy emanates from work that means more than it knows, and in arriving at Hoffman's films, many of the writers in this volume have taken up the same beat, making

confessions of their own, allowing their ghosts to haunt this inscription. This memorial.

Whatever may be recognized has already passed.

still: *passing through/torn formations.*

I met him four years ago in a darkened theatre. I was looking for something, though I didn't know it then. He was sitting behind me and we were introduced moments before the Marian McMahon Award was granted to filmmaker Jennifer Reeves. At that time I didn't know about the Film Farm or the films that are made there. But there was something in the way people spoke about the workshop, and about Phil and his late partner, Marian. I got on the list.

In 1992 Phil and Marian moved to a farm north of Toronto and started the Independent Imaging Retreat. This is a no-logo film school: no computers or hi-tech gear, just some wind-up cameras, some DIY film chemicals, two makeshift darkrooms, and a few flatbeds. In pouring over the contents of this book these past months, I realize that each year I go back to the farm because I'm working on something that will never be finished.

I've learned many things from Phil Hoffman, one being that I have a few friends who are also my teachers. These are difficult people to know. Friends like

THIN ICE

by Karyn Sandlos

In my mid-thirties I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood.
Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*

Beginnings can be awkward, because they ask us to do things before we know how. I read somewhere that we can't learn our personal histories off by heart. Memory is fickle; it doesn't fade with time, it shape shifts. And although memory is a central preoccupation in Philip Hoffman's work, his first film, *On the Pond*, suggests that telling personal stories requires a degree of amnesia. In 1978, while a student at Sheridan College, Hoffman tape-recorded a family gathering as material for a personal documentary film. The occasion was his birthday, and the Hoffman family had assembled for a celebratory slide show. Following his own diaristic work in writing and photography, Hoffman recalls that his aim, in making *On the Pond*, was to begin with what he knew. What could be more familiar than one's own family history, retrieved from an archive of Kodak mementos? Yet, in *On the Pond*, tensions between what can be revealed and what must remain hidden behind a veil of propriety suggest a much deeper layer of prohibition at stake in the telling of personal stories. In this film, pictures of home give provisional shape to an indeterminate longing and make the familiar an uneasy place to return to. At our most personal, it would seem, we are never quite at home.

Memory, the thirst for presence …
Octavio Paz, *A Tree Within*

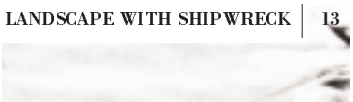
In *On the Pond*, Hoffman brings the truth-making apparatuses of the still and moving image to bear on that most colloquial of historic documents: the family anecdote. The film opens with a series of black-and-white stills, underscored by a family's exclamations of delight. A number of voices proffer the details of time and place. There is the cottage and the pond. Children fish in summer and skate in winter. There is Princess, the family dog. The photographs are animated by the

usual snippets of commentary: "Oh, that's a good one of you!" "Do you remember when we …?" "I wish I knew you better then … " Amidst the convivial clamor of the soundtrack, a daughter's wish to have known her mother better captures my attention, for she speaks to her mother with the quiet resignation of one who has arrived too late. In this moment, the family's exuberance for the factual details of a past life together belies the tones and shadows of their shared recollections. Through fleeting disclosures they tell stories of longing using a past—or at least a version of the past—that might temper all that is unbearable about the present.

I often wonder whether I have any actual memories of my own childhood, or whether access to my past is made possible only by the stories of others. There are few things I find more frustrating than being left to my own failed recollections. Lost keys, forgotten directions, and misplaced bits of information are the hints that trying too hard to remember makes us forget. Perhaps most images are like tools that relieve us of this kind of difficulty by giving shape to a past that is largely made up of traces, impulses, flashes of colour, and fragments in need of a structure. *Tell me a story that will help me forget what I want from a past that is lost to me.* Images aren't lies exactly, but they may work like screens that shield us from the discards of our lives. To preserve the past, to give meaning to these fragments, is at once the work of a magician and the practice of an embalmer. With a wish to give order to the refractory pull of desire, the archive snatches memory from the flow of time.

On the map of history, perhaps the water stain is memory.
Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

But even anesthesia can be administered in uneven doses. *On the Pond* cuts between family photographs and the recurring scene of a boy playing hockey on a frozen pond—the clamour of the domestic drama and the stillness of a frozen landscape. At night, backlit by the windows of the cottage, his father prepares the ice with buckets of water. The water will be solid by morning, but first it leaves a stain. While most stains have only a material presence, this one lingers in the mind with a haunting intractability, there and not there at the same time. Amidst images of landscape and childhood that beckon with a nostalgia echoed in the words of Hoffman's older sister intoning "Oh, I want to go back," traces of uncertainty pierce through ordered time. If there is a true picture of the past, it must be like these fleeting glimpses when they surface like a photograph that could easily have been discarded or returned from the lab stamped "print no charge." In *On the Pond*, these are moments when, just as the negative image gives birth to the positive print, amnesia gives memory its contours.



stills (left and right): *On the Pond.*

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.
Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

In *On the Pond*, there is a strange image of the back of Hoffman's mother's head, framed by a figure in motion on the left and the small face of a very young Hoffman lower down. The voice-over tells us that this photograph was taken on Thanksgiving Day, when Hoffman's mother was "feeling lousy." While the emotional tone of the day is admitted, Hoffman's effort to cheer his mother up becomes the focus of this conversation. But the seconds of silence that surround the tiny image of a child's smiling face tear at the delicate suturing between meaning and image, between memory and the psychic cost of bringing the past to light. The family gathers in an act of forgetting. It is not the picture itself that leaves a stain, but the layers of affect and meaning that linger unresolved in the silence that follows their conversation about a day that is lost to them. Forgotten, perhaps, but not gone: the image is as permanent and imperfect as the conflicts it serves to disguise, and it glances off the viewer with the tug of retrospective desire. This is, as Benjamin might have put it, a moment of recognition in which the past flashes up as an image, never to be seen again.

If only I had a photograph, so that people could see who I was.
Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*

On the Pond is a study in still and moving images, and the flow of the past through preserved moments in time. Pictures of home and family are intercut with photographs of Hoffman's hockey team, the silence of the pond broken by the clamour of an audience, a coach's obsessive words of encouragement, and the encroaching chant of Ca-na-da! Ca-na-da! A young Hoffman surveys a collection of trophies alongside team photographs that herald his departure from the family. Through a laboured series of push-ups, he measures his stamina against the ice. Photographs of Hoffman's own childhood provide a measure of the distance between home and the world, and the small rituals of the pond reveal their larger purpose: Hoffman gains strength in order to leave, and distance so that he may one day return.

It is no accident that many of us become fascinated by our family histories long after we have left home. For years after my own leaving, I asked my family not to pose for photographs taken at our annual reunions. I stopped taking pictures, however, when I realized that we didn't know how not to perform in front of a camera. Not posing was more awkward than posing. Perhaps this was my way of trying to call attention to a certain distance of my own—to manipulate the conventional time of family portraits as a way of trying to live outside the ordered traditions of home and family. And it may be that going home requires this measure of distance, this lapse of memory, that most pictures afford us. If absence clears a

path for our return, a little amnesia may be the price of presence. Like trying to hold light between two hands.

As in childhood we live sweeping close to the sky, and now what dawn is this.
Ann Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

It is possible that the process of making a personal film relies more on memory lapses than it does on memory. My own first film began as a disparate collection of stories that I had been repeatedly told about my childhood, until I was old enough to wonder where the stories ended and my own experience began. The images I made didn't lend themselves to an easy or obvious ordering, and so I experimented with one version and then another, wondering why I felt compelled to tell stories that seemed to fill in the spaces where memory failed me. There was a period in which mastery over the film's unfolding gave way to a strange sense of disorientation. The film began to unmake the maker, like a dream that was nudging me forward in search of artifacts, vestiges, echoes.

Toward the end of *On the Pond*, Hoffman, now in his twenties, reclines on a bed flipping the pages of an old hockey album. Next to the bed, a projector reel rotates and a turntable revolves. The film has ended and the music has stopped, but the silence is disturbed by the skip of the needle and the incessant hum of the projector. If memories are like water staining ice, then the best replicas of memory must glimmer even as they disappear. The problem is that we make films when we wake to the knowledge that we have been sleeping, but we also make films in order to help us sleep better. And if we do, in fact, sleep through much of our childhoods, it is not just the familiar that we reach for later on, but the urgent flashes of ourselves that can't be explained, or understood, or fully retrieved. Hoffman glances intently at the camera as he moves off of the bed, leaving the photo album behind. Emerging from the cottage, he makes his way back to the pond.

photo: *On the Pond.* Production still by Dan Swim.

ALL THIS FALLING

by Daniel Reeves

I can't help thinking how unspontaneous it is to prop open a book of old family photographs and sit awkwardly at a keyboard trying to breathe life back into the past, which although forever here, is also hidden by time. The earliest photographs are two-by-two inch black-and-whites that could almost pass for big postage stamps, with their square frames, crinkle-cut edges and tidy compositions. I will use them to launch this letter of inquiry, moving with their crisply outlined silver halides and chiaroscuro clouds toward that part of my life that is largely hidden: memories obscured by sadness and my mother's inability to sketch out even the broadest strokes.

It is possible that the shame of her own weakness and irresolution, galvanised by our step-father Milton's abhorrence of what existed before him, keeps her commentary bound to the litany of how much she loved my father, and how handsome and despicable he was. Oddly enough, I can't even name this man at the moment. I want to call him John, or Charles, yet I cannot speak with any certainty. Perhaps this amnesia is the inevitable product of the choking dilemma I find myself in: to be unable to name or even say the thing which, however dim, is here before me like a tree or house. I am reminded of those dust devils in the desert: you never see them plainly, no matter how fast you whip your skull around, since they live only in the periphery of vision. So here they are before me, these slightly browning blacks and blank whites, hidden from view until my brother Tom and I were well into our thirties.

My brother asked if I wanted to see any photographs of my REAL father? Who disappeared from view so long ago but could have been living just around the corner for all we know? Yes, Tom, I said, I suppose I would like to see them, as well as read the clumsy letters of protest he wrote to my mother when she (as the story goes) discovered he had another wife and family. Whether my father was actually married to my mother at the time, I cannot be sure. It has only recently occurred to me what a shadow of half-told stories and hidden plots lies behind me.

My real father is bereft of any redeeming or endearing qualities, apart from his so-called handsome visage and seductive charm. I conjure up his vanity and deceit in my own deluded wandering. It's true, we look a bit alike, moulds from the same press. Yet this tiny silver image has an appropriately tilted horizon, as if everything on earth were already in full slide and I am being held up by this wayward rascal in baggy pants with the clumsy potato-sack ineptitude of men who can't be bothered with parenting. In spite of what little I have heard about this boozing womaniser, I really like him. I like my father for his cockiness and nonchalance, the way I also admire detective heroes.

In these little squares my mother Suzanne is desirable, with her handsome face, white-ribbon-decked curls, fine big bones adrift in satin, and her shy, cloth coat. With little effort, I can imagine her opening again and again like a warm flower to the men who knew how to love her, but not live with her.

I find three other shots from the same roll. They share the same light, and the cold spring air of temporary grace that precedes the deep well of disappointment and shame known only to the truly abandoned. I am looking at my brother's early face, usually so animated and intelligent. Here, it is blank, as if he is seeing into an altogether different movie or shadow world. As if he already sees the familial drift and slide in all its vain, glorious tumult and banal horror—the years of harsh oppression and control that were to besiege the tiny forts we built around our hearts to barricade ourselves from darkness.

Rilke once wrote, "Oh look, it's in this one, it's in them all. And yet there is someone who holds up all this falling." This feeling of being held is in these photographs for me, and not just because they are rooted in who I am. I find it in all old photographs, the older the better. It is born fresh in the Polaroid as it slips into this very morning—only it is not ripe yet. Ripening requires time. How much time is determined by the viewer. For me, it is a long time, and it is mostly a black-and-white time, since colours seem to trick and glamourize vision. Looking now at two new-baby photos, it is clear that the one left uncoloured is full of light and presence, while the other looks like a child who never existed. Gazing at the first, my eyes fill with love for this chubby, smiling face and curling hands. I want to pick him up gently and walk slowly around the room with him cradled in my arms, singing the world outside.

For years I have thought about the boys who died in the water alongside me on the only day I can really remember from Vietnam. My feelings are a mixture of anger, anguish and pure astonishment at my survival. I think of those soldiers as lost children, like those in the limbo preached to my brother and me in childhood. Like us, the boys in bloodied uniforms never had a chance to live, and like these photographs, they remain frozen in time. In my deeper understanding I can see that the boys have moved on. I have tried to move on as well, but in this

stills (right and below): *Obsessive Becoming* by Daniel Reeves.

moment I can't help but think of them like glass shattering at my feet as it tumbles from my frozen hand—so quickly without warning. I see them with all their time stolen, snatched from their eternally open arms, and I see myself walking out of this arrested moment and going forward into promise, into light. Yet there is something I have left behind with the boys in that crystallised stillness.

The Japanese word for mysterious, *shinpiteki*, is pronounced "shimpi-teki." This is a perfect sound to describe the qualities found in these old photographs. In this mood I discover the early photographs of my brother. Dressed in white, like a sacrifice or an inmate, this baby appears abandoned, hollering and clutching toward the closest edges of the frame. The camera is barely off the squared perspective of tiled floor, and its gaze charges the room with the tensile feel of a huge mouth about to spring shut. This tension is heightened by the soft, out-of-focus jitter caused by the nervous hand of the photographer during a sluggish sweep of the shutter.

In this photograph I see a wee boy in trouble, and I cannot break into this lost space. As much as I might wish to soothe him, there is no way into this room, for it is locked inside him. I have a teacher who says that sometimes it is difficult to be solid; it is hard to stand upright in times of fierce wind and hard weather, when there seems to be nothing at all of substance or strength to cling to. I believe the real lesson is that there is truly nothing to hold onto.

In the christening shot of my brother (who was born almost two years after the war, in June of 1947), my mother is looking down with a bemused smile at his tiny face, which is dwarfed by the comet tail of an unbelievably large white christening gown. My mother's torso, shoulders and Slavic head (adorned with a bad hat and ugly glasses), are encircled by a shiny church window that rises on two arches of brick window framing. The secret of the photograph is this mirroring circle of glass that opens into a world left behind. This is another universe, another family cosmology that trails off behind my mother and back through the 40s into the Depression and other beginnings.

There are other photographs that are gone, lost, buried, or that have otherwise disappeared in our shifting lives. In that window I see another family. There

is my mother's husband (Charles Derman, I believe) and two children of that union: Robert and Jaqueline. The children walked out of the picture of my dear mother's life and never turned back. This is the true mystery and, I suspect, the proper key to all that remains so obscure and illogical in this fractured history. It is the story line and the detail behind all those times and places that my mother fails to talk about. If my view was wider and more perfectly aware, then all this would just be noise or dim movement. But for someone still walking, still seeking, these rags tied to branches fluttering in the wind must mark the way back home.

Questions: Why, if our father's name was Merkle, were we brought up and always registered in schools as Derman? Was my mother, in fact, ever married to this man Merkle? Why did my mother's marriage to Charles Derman end? Why did the children go off with him to England and the air force rather than stay with mother, the more socially acceptable thing to do in 1940s Catholic America? Why have the children never made contact with my mother? Why did Milton go through the trouble of using his influence at city hall to get faked birth certificates (which I have used successfully all my adult life), which state that he is our real father? Why would Milton, whenever he really lost control, call us little bastards and the like? Why do Tommy and I look so different, and yet, where similar, look like our mother? Why was the divorce and dispensation such a long and complicated ordeal?

Lately, it has occurred to me that some of these mysteries might be explained by the strong possibility that mother was having an affair with this Mr. Merkle, and that her first husband left with the children when the affair was discovered. Subsequently, my mother never legally married my father (thus keeping the name Derman, which my brother and I had as a last name while we were growing up). All this will remain unclear until my mother cares to share the truth with us. Somehow, I feel that knowing would put some ground under my feet.

Returning to the album, I find a series of shots taken on a summer day in the park. Among them is my favourite image of myself. It is a symbol of all that I would like to be remembered by. In this photograph I am seated beneath a large, wide-brimmed straw hat, enthroned upon a picnic table with my denim-clad legs

splayed out in front. Each leg ends in a fat sneaker, and these look like two mute pages at the court of happy fools. I am looking directly into the lens and holding a can of National Bohemian Beer, a local brand often referred to as National Bo, or in times of urgency, just Bo. The white stem of an unfiltered cigarette perches on my lips, unlit, and awkward as a first erection.

You have seen this photo before. It's the one where the children wield the power symbols; the ruddy Plains Indian boy buried in a mountain of buffalo hide with a feathered pipe and Winchester cradled in his thin brown arms. His eyes are like a frozen lake, and they reel in the future with the pull of a magnet for a herd of pins. The child with the top hat and pipe, the chubby hands that grip the steering wheel, the fingers that stroke the flank of the hanging stag or pitch coal into the steam and brass of forward motion—these children are all acting out parts, filling up the costumed space of those in power, aching for and acting out the future. When I was young and had begun to reason, I yearned for the power of the grown-ups in towering trousers and looming skirts, who filled the lonely horizon of my helplessness with their demands and one-way suggestions.

So much from birth until five lies buried or blocked. What do I remember? Going to a night-club act with Milton and mom and being given all of the baby chicks that the magician had used in his act. I took them home in a cardboard box, where they died one by one during a week-long wake to the tune of *Tammy's In Love*.

I remember two scenes of anger and violence. In the first, my mother and I are walking downtown when a man in a station wagon is rear-ended by a black taxi driver. His car is not really hurt, but the man is consumed by an intolerably powerful rage, and he repeatedly smashes the car behind him by roaring forward and then slamming his car into reverse. His wife, who is clutching a young baby and crying hysterically, flops about in the front seat like a suburban Raggedy Ann. Pieces of both cars tear away and fall with a great, heartbreaking commotion. The whole scene goes by in a minute, but it seems to linger like the slow-motion inferno of *Zabriskie Point*. Finally, the enraged man screeches away and vanishes into traffic, tires howling and burning into the soft, black summer tar. Someone from the dumbstruck crowd yells to the taxi man, "Hey! Don't worry pal, I've got his number!"

I have just turned three. We are in a long line of cars moving slowly and hesitantly through hazy fields, following a weaving drunk whose erratic driving is keeping everyone from passing and forcing oncoming traffic onto the shoulder. Suddenly, as the drunk lurches to the side of the road, a few other cars stop. Men emerge. They surround the drunk and yank him from the car. As we pass, the men can be seen pummelling and kicking the drunk man to the ground. My mother says he is getting what he deserves.

In his last poems, written as he approached an early and certain death, Raymond Carver refers to a picture taken two years before he was informed of his fatal cancer.

> You open a drawer and find inside the man's photograph,
> knowing he has only two years to live. Only he hasn't found
> this out yet. That's why he can mug for the camera.

No matter how tightly I shut my eyes, or how forcibly I peer into the labyrinth of my faint memories of these early years, I can retrieve only fragments. Half a room, the shadowed parts of a hall, the element of fear from an incomplete scene, the eclipsed pattern of a quilt, many faces devoid of names. Where does the *rasa*, the sweetness hide? Where is the juice of the thing? I am certain there must be rooms bulging with books in all the major cities and universities, ready to offer a definitive answer to this mystery of memory, but as Rumi says, "Truth is not a matter for discussion." Thesis upon theory from epistemology to deconstruction and back around the bend in time again. These are shadow studies: bound to language, they are fettered by the expectation of result. For me, what is real must necessarily be signless—without reference or symbol—and while the truly signless cannot be measured or rationally described, like all this falling, it must be held.

THIS IS CINERAMA

by Jeffrey Paull

The war is over. We learn about atomic bombs and concentration camps. We read about the suburbs, even as we are creating them. Since the 20s, my mother's family have been picture-takers, filling candy boxes with snapshots of their New World lives. But there were no pictures of their parents, my grandparents, the old country. It is as if life and images began in Cleveland. By not appearing in photos, the old country was buried and forbidden. (Consider the generation gap when interpreting the phrase "escaping to Cleveland").

The family get-together ritual involved cousins and aunts with handfuls of photos, jumping in and out of each other's stories. Our multiple points of view and sudden story twists brought laughs; nothing bad ever happened. This was a floor activity, away from the civilizing influence of chairs and tables. Our pictures returned us to our bodies, granting us permission to speak, look and act, just like in the movies. By sharing we found a place to belong in each other. And it was a way of celebrating the safe (but unspoken) passage across an ocean and two world wars. Many Jews, we had only recently found out, had not been so lucky—though we rarely spoke about that. When we saw pictures of the camps, we were silent.

The photos weren't arranged in albums or slotted in slide trays. They were in our hands and our laps, taking the place of our faces. While the images stayed the same, the order and emphasis changed as years went by. The distancing of the photographs' semblance allowed us to get closer to intimacy. We orchestrated those evenings as we went along and performed the photos from riffs we had learned long ago, improvising the lyrics, singing the pictures.

None of us were able to be as free with one another when we were without our shared Fanny Farmer boxes of iconic visual aids. The snapshots were important, that is, they "worked," because they resembled the surface of people or things. The photograph's shard of time, that song without music, was the interior time of our imaginations. It lasted for all of us, as long as we made the story last. In this way the snapshots freed us, temporarily, from the implacable domination of the atomic second, from the present that is the "always" part—the mathematics,

philosophy, and spirituality part—of Time itself, caught in the act of passing.

Sometime around 1946 I first became aware of images qua images. My family took me to the Loew's Park on 105th and Euclid. The black-and-white movie showed a couple of cops. As we were leaving I saw two real-life cops by the real-life candy counter. Were these, in fact, the black-and-white cops I had seen in the movie? How did they get from the movie screen to this lobby? Though I was just seven, I knew it troubled no one else, so I was afraid to ask. It was my problem. Sadly, that was the dark side of my love for movies. I was safe from having to ask, because the story in a movie answers its own questions. Questions for me weren't entrees to knowledge or people, or for that matter, to myself. They were evidence of weakness and vulnerability, incompetence and shame. Asking questions might disturb some unknown and delicate balance, generating chaos. Except for questions about how things worked. Things: mechanical contrivances, gear, paraphernalia, tech. Human relationships remained, for me, a picture in motion: the mechanical contrivance of the image.

In fifth grade some hip teacher showed Norman McLaren's *Hen Hop* and *Begone Dull Care*. I discovered the aesthetic equivalent of life in an alternative universe. This was the world of primal visual experience: of pressing on my eyelids and seeing shapes; of flying dreams in which I swooped and soared and steered with my shoulders. McLaren's movies showed me a world familiar as a child. The colours and actions demonstrated the energy of life rather than the likeness of snapshots.

I'm in seventh grade. It was a time of twelve-inch, black-and-white TVs and small movie screens. Women wore girdles and gloves, men wore hats, people who got polio lived out their days in iron lungs, everybody knew their place.

photo: Jeffrey Paull's parents.

Unmarried women were spinsters or old maids, toys were wood, and Raggedy Ann was still the doll of choice in this Time Before Barbie. Movies in colour were just for costume fantasies. I read about Cinerama in a *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Cinerama's three-projector array blended left, centre and right film frames onto a huge, semi-circular screen with seven-track stereophonic sound. The works, sensuously speaking. We are dropping off my freshman sister at her Chicago college when I declare that the family will go to Chicago's Cinerama theatre. And we actually do. The show begins with a small-screen rendition of Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (which, in 1953, was trip enough for me) and Lowell Thomas' voice-o'-God short history of film. Then the drapes open up the rest of the screen with, "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Cinerama!" and the spectacle and sensation go on forever. We are on a roller coaster, of course. In one year:

1. My sister leaves the house.
2. I have my Bar Mitzvah.
3. I discover sex.
4. This is Cinerama.

I am nearly sixteen when I see Fellini's *La Strada*. I feel a kinship to the lonely and uncomprehending Gelsomina, and I long to emulate the spirited and inspirational tightrope/clown character played by Richard Basehart. I am moved to tears. Tears as a teen? When I was nine, I remember cutting my hand badly. I didn't cry because I wasn't helpless in my own pain. But in *La Strada*, I was able to experience the plight of a character, and their sufferings returned me to my own. I was a step closer to being a man. (It is only a movie.)

When I was seventeen I went with my pals to see *And God Created Woman*. It starred Jean-Louis Trintignant and Brigitte Bardot's ass, as I remember. Back then girdles obscured the crack of American tushes, and 1957 brassieres turned breasts into cones or bullets. Women's bodies were not of this world. But it was possible, in images, to see women's flesh as warm and yielding to the touch. Just as mine was.

I go through a period of making (pre-"super") 8mm high-school/hijinx movies with my friends and family. Unaware I'm acting out a variation of "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," I naively do all sorts of Méliès and Griffiths stuff. I mock drama, and attempt slapstick. I have no feel for editing, but my camera's well-placed.

My next image revelation came after I endured the humiliation of flunking out of university, and at the end of my third year, too. I hated school. My sustainment of it represented one thousand days and nights of avoidance and passivity, reflecting weakness of spirit. It took me three years of managing to accomplish

very little and just enough until grades forced the issue I couldn't handle on my own. I was still using somebody else's snapshots to evoke my responses.

But now I'm in film school, at university number two. On the first day, Dr. Steel is talking about Marilyn Monroe, who has recently cashed in her chips. Then it hits me: MY HOMEWORK IS GOING TO THE MOVIES. I lean over to Closest Classmate. "Am I in heaven, or what?"

That semester, I discovered that images can have intense spiritual power. The film was Carl Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. We were sitting in the basement of a former booze warehouse, and I remember my wonder that I was experiencing this film in my eyes, chest, knees and legs—not my mind. Not my mind. I remember thinking, "I didn't know! I didn't know!"

Dreyer's film is silent, so the movement of its characters and camera are free of the time required for dialogue. Real-life actions, on the other hand, take as long as distance requires. Speechless people in silent movies are de-corporealized just like snapshots; both suggest a world without gravity.

I've seen hour after delicious hour of movies by Fellini, Bailey, Preston Sturges, Deren, Brakhage, on and on. The movie cafeteria is overflowing with choices as I enter Film Production One and make My First Film. My protagonist walks through endlessly empty streets (remember it's 1963) and finally gets crushed in one of those tall, many-spoked, cylindrical subway turnstiles. To Vivaldi. Never, I think, will another movie have to be made, except maybe a comedy. I show it to my class and the teacher says, "Well, if you want to make an experimental film …" Of course I was crushed. I thought I had done the real thing.

Years later I asked one of my teachers how I was accepted in Boston's film school after previously flunking out. Only one answer in my application set me apart from other applicants. The form asked, "Why do you think you should be accepted in our program?" I bet the farm on just one sentence: "I want to make movies. If I don't get in I will die." They decided to take a chance on me, and after becoming a film teacher myself, I've tried to pass that opportunity along to my students.

My sister gave me the gift of being there first, absorbing my parents' desperation during the Great Depression. There was little work for my father as a new lawyer, and mother's classes swelled to thirty-five. Without daycare, our mother had to arrange a place to park Margery each day. Five years later, when I was born, things were less hectic.

My father gave me the gift of working with my hands and fixing things; my mother gave me the gift of a visual imagination. We had an attic, old clothes to do Let's Pretend, mother's eight albums of classical 78s, and art classes on the weekend. But the drawings I made never meant much to me. Only movies and photos, only images of real things or things that moved made my inner mechanisms

emote. Movies and stills extended more of the universe in my direction: ritual belonging, spiritual awareness, an expanded sense of compassion, seemingly hot sex, and (to my amazement) a feeling of joy within the bounds of institutional learning. In film school I became aware that a movie was able to evoke a range and depth of emotions in me that didn't happen when the auditorium lights of the world were on. The further away from people I was, the closer I could get. I had yet to deal with the sentimentality and brutishness inside myself.

There was more to come. In 1963 I saw Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. I was drawn to its construction in ways that evoked a new sort of response, and I wanted to know why. Such a deeply experienced curiosity had never happened before. I eventually realized that I was used to cutting on action, which is a central part of a movie's illusion of "realness." The scenes, people and objects seem to extend beyond the space of the screen, and have a life independent of the composition. Everything is still there after the cut.

This is not so, however, with parts of Eistenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. Cutting on action accents the physical forces of the bodies that act. Eisenstein resolved actions inside shots, which left the image de-corporealized, echoing the loss of physicality in a still photo. The kinetically dramatic aspects of the actors were resolved in each shot, and only then would Eisenstein go on to the next. This technique had a couple of effects. The actions themselves seemed realistic, but the shot-to-shot linking wasn't. Time was no longer fluid, but experienced as droplets, discrete elements, mosaic elements. Running your eyes over the length of *Ivan* is like running your fingers over the surface of a Byzantine church mosaic. Temporally, Eisenstein's isolation of motions does what Byzantine church mosaics do spatially. Each image is likened to its physical-world counterpart through metaphor, rather then a necessarily specious resemblance.

And herein lies the idea that has excited me since I saw *Ivan* eighteen or so years ago. I discovered that Time (*Ivan*) and Space (Byzantine paintings and mosaics) are interchangeable. Everyday experience of a time-space continuum has something in common with the seemingly arcane relativity of Einstein and sub-atomic physics. My imagination is taken with implications and fantasies about that. Still images and movies, in fact all gesture and poses, have equivalencies in other forms.

The following semester I make another film. No more experimental films! Now for the Real Thing. I want to make a film about people and feelings. A film about love. I am pleased with how it comes out. The film is about a young couple. He's a student (what else?) and she's pregnant. His studies mean he doesn't have much time for her, and her increasing size makes her self-conscious and lonely. After a playful opening of the couple in bed, and a semi-erotic bread-making sequence, the couple reunite at dinner and resolve nothing. End of movie.

Years later I'm visiting a friend who has showed that film each year in his classes. I hadn't seen it during this time. We're walking down the hall when he says, "Your problem is you fall in love with your friends' wives, and instead of making love to them, you make movies about them." My feet froze to the floor, and the breath of words froze in my mouth. What was, for Ron, an off-handed remark, and an obvious truth, was too dangerous for me to acknowledge all these years. And I thought I was getting somewhere.

I have a picture of my parents on top of the TV. It was taken before they were married, which is about ten years before I would have been old enough to "know" them. It's a long shot of them standing in a field. My mom wears a long skirt and short-sleeved sweater; you can see a large blouse collar framing her neck. Her right arm is partly lifted as she grasps my father's hand, which is around her waist. Her stance and smile are confident; her strong Russian jaw frames her deep-set eyes.

Many years later I'm leaving a live theatre production here in Toronto. I've enjoyed myself immensely and wonder, "Why don't I go to plays more often?" I had been going to movies a lot, but rarely to plays. I pictured myself watching a movie and then a play, imagining back and forth, and realized that live theatre makes me subtly anxious in a way that a movie doesn't. When one watches movies, one is always watching the past. Live theatre, of course, only happens in the present, so the next moment, and all the moments after, are beyond the control of history. Images are safe because they've already happened: they're no longer attached to chance, sudden changes at the last moment, the moment of death in the middle of life.

My dad is a pile of black hair and mustache, full dark lips and alert eyes. His other hand is in his trouser pocket. He wears braces and a tie, and stands ready with his legs apart. Both he and my mother look like fun, ready to go, attached to each other, bright and confident. It is a dream photo of parents. I never knew these people, even though we lived in the same pleasant, well-meaning, upper-middle-class home until I went away to college. We all meant well to each other.

When I was fourteen, we lived three blocks away from the only movie theatre in Cleveland that showed British movies: Alec Guiness, Dennis Price, Glynis Johns, Valerie Hobson, Alistair Sim. One night, a man sitting next to me put his hand gently on my thigh. The complex emotions that generated in me would take years to untangle. The image could touch back.

photo: Hoffman and Kerr, Cinecycle 1993, by John Porter.

THE SPY WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

by Richard Kerr

Confession

I have known Philip Hoffman for more than thirty years. We used to travel together, play hockey, make pictures. An old friendship demands loyalty and discretion, a respect for the line between the stories only the two of you can share, and those fit for print. Phil is an autobiographer; that is his muse, his stock-in-trade. Rarely has someone's life and work been so interchangeable: his life is his material, and any pulling back the curtains or insider exposé might threaten this project.

In place of hyper-biography I've relied on exchange and process, a terrain that, as practitioners, we are both comfortable with. We wanted to keep it on the lighter side—there's enough angst in our work after all—and rely on a faux interview dialogue. I wanted to touch on the broad strokes that lay at the heart of Phil's work and process. More importantly, I wanted to know what he is thinking these days in order to reflect on the consistencies and changes in his thinking over the years. This dialogue is necessarily incomplete. What is said is important, but what is left unspoken is more important. That is the way these old friends would have it.

Questionnaire

RK: What is your idea of perfect happiness?
PH: It changes daily.

RK: What is your greatest fear?
PH: Hospitals (in Ontario).
Lightning (everywhere else).

RK: What is your greatest extravagance?
PH: 400-foot loads of Double-X negative.

RK: What is your favourite journey?
PH: Inner. It's cheap, fast and out of control.

RK: What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
PH: Confidence.

RK: What is your current state of mind?
PH: It changes as I write.

RK: What do you consider your greatest achievement?
PH: Most Gentlemanly Player, Waterloo Siskins, 1974.

RK: What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
PH: Imprisoned in your own life.

RK: What quality do you most like in a man?
PH: Emotion.

RK: What quality do you most like in a woman?
PH: Muscle.

RK: How would you like to die?
PH: At home.

RK: What is your motto?
PH: It changes.

Correspondence

August 31, 2000

Hi Richard,

It seemed as Monday morning rolled around there were just too many pressures with J's family visit outside of Montreal, and the little girl's needs (you know all about that, kids are new for me). Anyway, it seemed too much. I'm very moved that you are contributing to this book because in my mind, you are my brother. Our drifting apart was quite painful for me, so your gestures to reconnect are touching. I want to do the same and am really sorry our meeting didn't work out.

Phil

Context

In the mid-1970s, when Phil was gearing up the grand project of autobiography as his life's work, the times were less than encouraging. Especially for a middle-class white male. And there was a considerable canon of experimentalists who had forged significant works of cinematic autobiography. Marie Menken, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage and Robert Frank come to mind, but you can make your own list. This received history can be heavy for a young maker trying to sort it all out.

The mid-70s also marked a sea change from modernism to postmodernism, with its libraries of cultural theory and prescriptions of political correctness. It was

photo: Hoffman, Kerr and Josh (dog) circa 1970.

uncool, if not politically dangerous, to reflect on the self. These pressures of influence could easily have led a young filmmaker away from his muse. But Phil's clear thinking and thoroughness, his wait-and-watch style and deliberateness, separated him from the rest of us. Day-to-day discipline created his body of work. As Yogi Berra put it, "You can observe a lot just by watching."

Memories That Won't Be Made Into Films

Teenaged Phil alone in his room, listening to Dylan while family life reverberates around him.

Walking on water wasn't built in a day.
Jack Kerouac

Phil always looked like his father. He was the youngest, with triplet sisters, but he was always the man around the house, possessed of an early quiet confidence and responsibility.

There is no decisive moment. It's got to be created. I've got to do everything to make it happen in front of the lens.
Robert Frank

Phil was small, wiry, strong and tough. He got bigger every year. He was a natural athlete, competitive but clean, and he never backed down. Phil was a crafty

pool player, a game he sharpened in the basement with his pool-shark uncle Wally. The darkroom was next door.

I'll play it first and tell you what it is later.
Miles Davis

Things happened fast once we built our first darkroom. Enterprise and imagination. Dylan sings, "You go your way, and I'll go mine."

No poet, no artist of any art has complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.
T.S. Eliot

Young Phil at his lake a.k.a. *On the Pond* (1978). Another classic setting in the young man's life. I always imagined he did his big thinking there. The river served a different purpose …

Ideas are one thing and what happens is another.
John Cage

On the banks of the Saugeen River, eighteen-year-old Phil guts a brook trout. Every year the same scene on a different river: Quebec, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Alberta … but never Saskatchewan. I lived in Regina for fifteen years. Final note about fishing: I suspect Phil enjoyed fishing by himself, as opposed to in groups. Too much bonding in a boat will drive a young man to the river.

It is a mistake for an artist to speak too often about their job. It releases the tension needed for work.
Jemina Knowles

Phil Hoffman's father is proud of his son. I saw that look in his eye thirty years ago, on the (backyard) pond. I saw it again fifteen years later at the Toronto debut of *passing through/torn formations* (1988). I hope to see that look one more time before I go.

I never heard much about Phil's days in his father's meat-packing plant; they were overshadowed by his father's stories which were fantastical. His roots were German, hardworking, filled with personal sacrifice and just rewards. But it was always clear that the son would go his own way. Solo is vertical. The Hoffman team has the most refined sense of father and son I can imagine.

photos: (left) Marian McMahon with Bolex; (right) Hoffman, photo by Judy Rozencweig.

I always say keep a diary and someday it will keep you.
Mae West

There was always cold beer, reefer and a loaded camera on the road trips. But Phil was the only one who could fix a flat tire in the middle of the night.

I write for myself and strangers … The strangers, dear reader, are an afterthought.
Gertrude Stein

The more Phil travels, the more verbal he becomes. He may be the best life observer I know. We took some important research and development trips together. In 1976 we drove to the Allan Ginsberg archives via Ginsberg's New York apartment—a good story, but I've forgotten too much to tell it properly. Phil would be able to, though. Four years later we drove east to find Robert Frank in Mabou, chronicled in *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983). We took a sci-fi-type journey to Love Canal. Countless rages into the night that I can barely remember. Once again, Phil's memory is better than mine … of the details, at least.

I know with certainty that a man's work is nothing but the longing to recover, through the detours of art, the two or three simple and great images which gained access to his heart.
Albert Camus

In the restless years between high school and university, Phil looks for the way through. We stay tuned in. One day, he shows up at Sheridan College. Things happen fast again. We are living our movies. Here are the first signs of Phil as an image and sound collector, so organized and methodical. His obsessive work patterns are already established: a life of consistent film creation lies ahead.

All art is a more or less oblique confession. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced to tell the whole story, to vomit up the anguish.
James Baldwin

Before photography: many nights out with Phil where nothing is said but much is seen. After photography: even less is said, but pictures are taken, sound recorded. We are pecking, hunting and gathering. Process is process, but where are the negatives? It was never about copyright, but archive. Memory counts. Phil taught me that.

Marian comes to my wedding in Toronto. It becomes a late afternoon lawn party. As a jet passes overhead, I say it's Phil on his way to Holland and Greenaway's zoo. We smile.

We teach together at Sheridan College, huge hours, the beginnings of our second careers. We are dragged into our first academic mutiny, always learning on the job. Today we're still teaching, keepers of some sort of flame.

There are a few industry freelance ventures, promos for Women's College Hospital. I direct, Phil shoots, the piece wins awards, good start! Kevin Sullivan's

first effort, *Krieghoff*, is really Phil's story, maybe one of his best. I often wonder if he tells his students about his freelance days. There was a Parachute Club video called *Sexual Intelligence*, good work if you could get it.

The moment you cheat for the sake of beauty, you know you're an artist.
Max Jacob

I moved to Saskatchewan to take a teaching job after Phil turned it down. Phil referred me, I made a cold call, and once again it all worked out. Phil and I weren't seeing much of each other by then, both trying to look after our separate lives.

Personal history (autobiography) is an effort to find salvation, to make one's own experience come out right.
Alfred Kazin

In Saskatchewan I sit with my young family glued to CBC watching the Genies. Phil is up for Best Documentary with *?O,Zoo!* (1986) He wears his comfortable brown cardigan. He has a winner's look.

Autobiography provides insurance against oblivion. But without publicity, oblivion endures. I believe that all careers end in failure, that each of us manages a certain coherence manifest in a particular work, and granted by personality, hard work and luck. But after that moment, our later years are spent in decline. If we are fortunate, we are able to coast with dignity. Life is diamond shaped. In the beginning, opportunities expand: later they contract. Unfortunately, none of us knows where the widest point of the diamond resides until we've already passed it. The big bang theory of careers? This contracting might not be as negative as it appears, because one may retreat from career into home life, perhaps to take care of elders or make gardens. But perhaps there are several diamonds expanding and contracting at different times in your life. Like those party hats you get as a kid, excited to find that as you unfold them, each one is connected to the other, and they go on and on, forever.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN

by Jeremy Rigsby

Travelogues are films made by tourists. They are defined by their creators' decision to remain on unfamiliar terms with unfamiliar surroundings. These are not documentaries, which presume or strive for some unmediated relation to their subjects. Unless documentaries can demonstrate that they are provisional and selective, they are prone to be mistaken for truth. Unless travelogues can demonstrate that they are art, they are largely the product of hobbyists who can afford vacations. Travelogues may affirm their artfulness by appealing to an aesthetic derived from the lyrical avant-garde, or more frequently, by adopting the discursive strategies of fictional films. *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984) takes the latter route, all the way to a Mexican crossroads of the real and the imaginary.

The fictive convention relied upon by *Somewhere Between* establishes an artificial contiguity between the film's two discrete components: intertitles and images (mostly of Mexico). This convention is associative editing, a neat version of the so-called Kuleshov effect, whereby details noted in the intertitles are presumed to refer to the images they immediately follow or anticipate by the simple virtue of proximity. The dead youth, for example, is nowhere seen or implied in any of the footage. The titles state that Hoffman "put the camera down." But the cop car that speeds by the boy's corpse must be the very one just seen passing the Coke billboard. Likewise, the beggar girl who is conceded a peso is identified as the beggar girl who then appears. And the girl with the big eyes awaiting her dead brother? There she is, her presence lingering by symbolic association with the image of a snail. Much of the film's remaining footage is neutral and irrelevant to the text, but marshalled to support a funereal aura through melancholy slow motion or sepulchral, greenish-black tints.

That the film's apparent coherence of text and image is a construction of cinematic artifice should be obvious, but the film condescends to underline the point. The soundtrack, a plaintive sax solo, twice jars incongruously with footage of musicians playing visibly different tunes—prompting suspicion of any simple

still: *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*

congruence between real events and their remains on screen. And in a sequence quite exceeding the credulity that associative editing might sustain, a funeral procession plods down conspicuously non-Mexican (i.e., Toronto's) streets, a near-parodic intrusion that must be rationalized as a metaphorical digression on the universality of death, or some such thing. All these contrivances and retractions cumulate in a film whose reliability as documentation is severely undermined by its imperative to simulate fiction. *Somewhere Between* thus exploits a special tension inherent to the travelogue as a genre. Conventions that would affirm the continuity of narrative films, or the veracity of documentaries, are here destabilized, indeterminate, somewhere between … where, exactly?

Clearly not the poles of the debate on the film's ethics, which aroused controversy when *Somewhere Between* was first exhibited in 1984. The film's supporters regarded the omission of the child's dead body as a noble refusal of spectacular and exploitative documentary practices. The detractors, conventional "journalistic" documentarians, considered the film irredeemably deprived of the potential impact conferred by such a powerful image.

Both these arguments assume the film's images support the text and signify only the conclusive absence it describes. But the latter position does implicitly contain a more incisive interpretation: footage of the accident or its aftermath would confirm that it actually happened. This shopworn raison d'être of the journalistic documentary finds application here; an appeal to evidence validates the skepticism this film seems designed to provoke. Its issues aren't ethical, but ontological. Did the dead youth exist, or did Hoffman invent him? Given the film's

lack of positive evidence, coupled with its protracted insistence that it be acknowledged as a synthetic construction, the question remains. There are two plausible answers. In the first instance, Hoffman sifts through a large amount of Mexican vacation footage to find a few shots that, by chance, contain imagery similar to details he recalled of the accident and to the text he wrote to describe it. Or he returned from Mexico with a relatively small amount of attractive but disparate, mismatched footage, which he united into coherent form by fabricating the accident as a kind of plot device.

Occam's razor might suggest the second option, but that's not the rub. As film critic Rita Gonzàlez writes:

> … international filmmakers have been drawn to the notion of Mexico as a transgressive or mythic space, an eidolon that they have done their part to perpetuate.

As the avant-garde film canon attests, south of the border has been a popular destination for filmmaking tourists, the special condition of their alienation in Mexico circumscribed by this imperative to solicit visionary experience. The roster of sojourners includes Bruce Baillie, Bruce Conner, Richard Myers and Chick Strand, who made most of her career around Guadalajara and once confidently declared that "Mexico is surrealism." The Mexican travelogue is almost always these filmmakers' projected phantasmata. The "reality" of the death in *Somewhere Between* is akin to the "reality" of, say, the quintessentially Mexican peyote hallucinations in Larry Jordan's *Triptych in Four Parts*: as real as permitted by illusory circumstances. The virtue of *Somewhere Between* is to be conscious of its complicity in this tradition of cultural mystification. It inspires and permits doubt. It doubts the authenticity of the particular experience it describes, the authenticity of Mexico as an experience of the "mythic," and perhaps ultimately the authenticity of experience in general. Typical of the traveler's tale is a tendency to embellish. Rarely is one so evocative, or so obliging, of the tendency to disbelieve its teller.

Works Cited

Gonzàlez, Rita.
"The Mexperimental Cinema." *The Mexperimental Cinema.* Guggenheim Museum: 1999.
n. pag.

LETTER

by Peter Greenaway

January 24, 1984

Monique Belanger
Arts Awards Service
Canada Council, Ottawa

Dear Ms. Belanger,

I met Phil Hoffman at the 1984 Grierson Seminar. His films were a breath of fresh air amidst so much conventional material. His films blithely side stepped the orthodoxies so taken for granted by those who believe documentary cinema is an educational rostrum, is about questions of balance, is essentially a dissertation on something described as "truth." Meeting him in the context of his films backed up my impressions of his aims and abilities. His work is an encouragement to those who want to use autobiography as subject matter, personal vision as a trademark, and show how small resources can be a positive virtue.

It was Phil's suggestion in London several months later that he would like to be some sort of witness to the feature production of the film *Zed & Two Noughts* in Rotterdam in the spring of this year—which I am certainly agreeable to—though I will not hide the fact that I believe, as a filmmaker with a personal vision, he is well past the apprenticeship stage. What he needs now is opportunities, encouragement and experience. Since his method is to work with a camera as a constant companion, I would wish he could be encouraged to make a modest film whilst he is in Rotterdam and London, certainly to be encouraged to shoot some two or three thousand feet of 16mm. The desirability of his presenting a script before hand, as far as I can see, is not necessary, considering his work method. In fact, I think it ought to be a condition of his association with the *Zed & Two Noughts* project that he shoot on his own on any subject whatsoever.

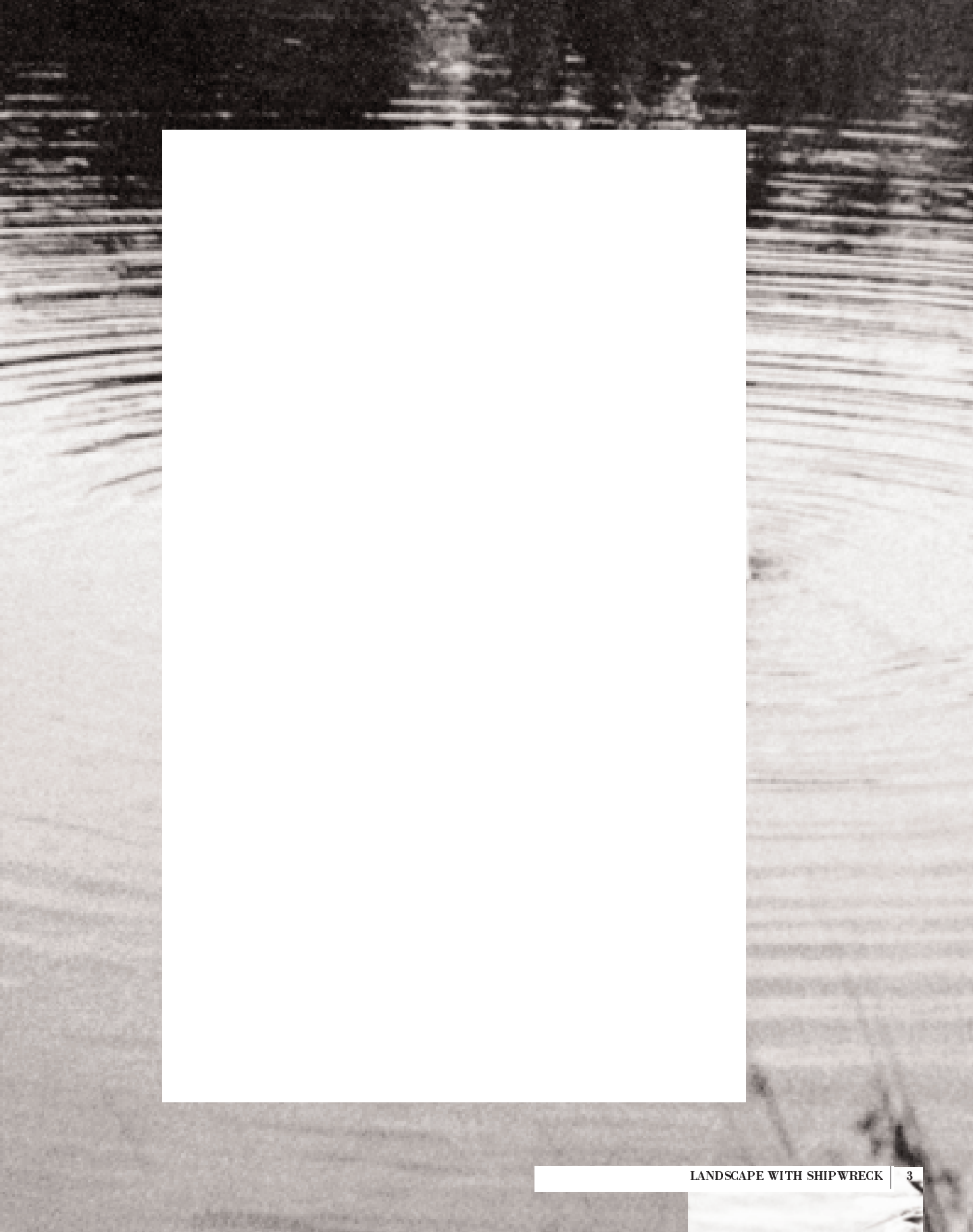
Most of the relevant detail of the production of *Zed & Two Noughts* Phil has already mentioned. It is perhaps not so strange a co-production, as seen from a British point of view, but nonetheless will present a nicely complex mixture of finance, production, cast and crew that aptly mirrors the complexity of the film's structure and content—the ambivalent diversity of species and purpose—of beasts and men—both sides of the cages in a zoo. Phil has volunteered not just to stand by and observe but to offer practical help which will always be useful on such a modestly budgeted, ambitious film.

If he (and you) believe that he (and you) can profit by his experience with the production, then I am certainly happy to invite him. If there is anything else you would like to know, I am sure I can help, though I would be obliged, as I am sure you would understand, to keep bureaucracy to a minimum. The production of a feature film is very time-consuming and demanding.

Here's hoping that you can agree to Phil's participation.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Greenaway



still: above, "That old battle-axe" *?O,Zoo!*.

DECEPTION AND ETHICS IN ?O,ZOO! (THE MAKING OF A FICTION FILM)

by Michael Zryd

Like all "anti-documentary" films—those that call into question the documentary genre's easy claims to epistemological certainty—Phil Hoffman's *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986) must be approached in terms of the particular documentary form it questions and the particular context of its maker and making. In *?O,Zoo!* Hoffman plays off the filmic projects of John Grierson and Peter Greenaway to furnish an admirably tentative meditation on two knotted ethical problems of film form. One concerns the way that sound/image constructions attempt to dictate meaning in conventional documentary. The second takes on film's photographic claims to certainty in one of documentary's favourite subjects: the representation of death. These intersecting planes of subjectivity and convention, and these ethical meditations, create a turbulence underneath the disarmingly simple and elegant surface of *?O,Zoo!*, a turbulence that accounts for the emotional resonance of its ending(s), and for its troubling aftertaste.

My thanks to Karyn Sandlos for her excellent editorial work on this essay.
Michael Zryd

Founding Fathers

?O,Zoo! is, in some ways, atypical of Hoffman's work, being his most directly analytical examination of a set of film conventions. In films like *On the Pond* (1978) and *passing through/torn formations* (1988), a much more meditative and lyrical mix of image, sound, and narration offers an intensely personal view of childhood and family. *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984) deals with Hoffman's reaction to an isolated incident in Mexico: the death of a small boy in the street. *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983) is a diary-quest that follows Hoffman and some friends "in search of the Beat generation" as they trek across eastern Canada to find Robert Frank. All these films share an explicit personal voice (either in voice-over or written text), a voice by turns matter-of-fact, self-ironic, or poeticized (here, often with less certain success), but always direct and Hoffman's own.

Robert Frank's influence is central to the development of Hoffman's sensibili-

ty. Aware of the filters the apparatus imposes between film and experience, the filmmaker seeks direct contact with his subjects. With Frank, Hoffman shares a concern for the articulation of the filmmaker's subjectivity and for the camera's power to record and reveal events. Unlike Frank, however, Hoffman's approach is tentative; as Blaine Allan puts it, Hoffman places himself "on the temporal and spatial edges of an event" (91). In *The Road Ended at the Beach*, Hoffman ironizes the Frank persona to point, finally, to the folly of attempting to recapture the immediacy of the Beat generation's attitude to "experience." When he finally finds Frank in Nova Scotia, Hoffman is told, in a low key (and utter) deflation of his quest, that Kerouac is dead, the Beat generation is over, go home.

If *The Road Ended at the Beach* can be seen as Hoffman's attempt to exorcise the ghost of Robert Frank, *?O,Zoo!* finds him tackling two more figures of influence: John Grierson and Peter Greenaway. In *?O,Zoo!*, they are paired as the Founding Father and the Grand Inquisitor of the institutional documentary. Hoffman links the two unmistakably, though not explicitly, in a passage in the first sequence of the film:

> That spring, I went to the Netherlands to make a short film around the making of a fiction film. I met the director in a seminar in my native country in the fall before my grandfather's footage was found. This seminar, an annual tradition since 1939, is devoted to the documentation and categorization of all types of wildlife species ever captured on film. The seminar grew out of the same institution that employed my grandfather as a newsreel cameraman. I can still hear my grandfather's remarks about the founder of the institution, as he put it, "that old battle-axe."

The "fiction film" is *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985); the director, Greenaway. Hoffman and Greenaway met at the 1984 Grierson Documentary Seminar held in Brockville, Ontario. The seminar that year, entitled "Systems in Collapse," was devoted to the anti-documentary. The seminar began after Grierson's death and within the fiction of *?O,Zoo!*'s first sequence, Hoffman conflates the seminar with the National Film Board (NFB), founded by Grierson in 1939. "That old battle-axe" is an appropriate description of the mythical, crusty Scotch Calvinist; to underscore the point, the phrase appears over a close-up of an ostrich's head. The physical similarity to Grierson is striking.

Grierson hovers as a key figure behind both the Canadian and British documentary traditions, and is thus a point of departure for both Hoffman and Greenaway. Grierson's unique legacy as film director and administrator of openly propagandistic film products in the service of the state makes the "Griersonian"

mode of documentary a particularly acute model of what Noël Burch calls an "Institutional Mode of Representation" (1979). Certainly, one can identify an NFB house style, with as many stylistic tics as any Hollywood studio study could muster. Greenaway worked for eight years in the British equivalent of the NFB, the Office of Information. During that time, he produced what he called "soft-core propaganda" (qtd. in Della Penna and Shedden 20) before turning to experimental and narrative-fiction modes of filmmaking. Especially in his hyperbolically parodic anti-documentaries, *The Falls* (1980) and *Vertical Features Remake* (1979), Greenaway works to great advantage off the solidity and recognizability of the government-issue documentary. Systematic in their astonishing mimicry of form and profound in their analysis of the technocratic ideology at the base of Grierson's form, Greenaway's films initiate a full-frontal assault on the Griersonian institutional mode.

Hoffman's confrontation with the Grierson mould and myth and with Greenaway's analytic project is oblique, even affectionate. *?O,Zoo!* adapts the central formal device of Greenaway's critique—a coherent voice-over ordering disparate images to create a hermetic, non-referential fictional universe—to the rhetorical traditions of the narrated, personal diary-film of the independent filmmaker. The fiction of the grandfather frames Hoffman's own penetration of Greenaway's narrative film production, less to satirize Greenaway than to harness the skeptical dynamic of Greenaway's voice-over/image relation.[1] While the extreme artifice characteristic of Greenaway's later cinema is concentrated in his elaborate visual tableaux, in earlier films Greenaway's artifice is concentrated in the complex counterpoint between his soundtrack (Colin Cantlie's voiceover narration and Michael Nyman's music) and "documentary" imagery. Hoffman mobilizes Greenaway's counterpoint, but refuses to capitulate his filmic world entirely to fiction; instead, Hoffman keeps his meditation on events focused on what he calls "lived experiences."

1. In one delicious sequence, Hoffman ironizes Greenaway's move to big-budget feature filmmaking. While Greenaway's crew makes futile attempts to corral a flock of flamingos, Hoffman simply sets up a feed bucket in front of his Bolex. A flamingo approaches and he gets the shot; personal control of the apparatus has its rewards.

Sound Models

In *The Creative Use of Sound* (1933) Grierson outlines his defence of the freedom and power of sound. Clearly inspired by the 1929 *Statement on Sound* co-signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, Grierson insists, like the Soviets, that "the final question is how we are to use sound creatively rather than reproductively" (158). Yet, though he maintains the mobility of the sound-montage piece, Grierson prescribes a limit to the possibilities of asynchronous sound:

> Our rule should be to have the mute strip and the sound complementary to each other, helping each other along.

> That is what Pudovkin meant when he talks about asynchronous sound. (159)

By invoking Pudovkin instead of Eisenstein, Grierson demonstrates his preference for linear coherence at the expense of a dialectical approach that would expose contradiction. In this respect, when Grierson calls for art to be a "hammer" (qtd. in Morris 41), he is far from Eisenstein's "kino-fist."

Complementary sound/image relations serve the production of coherent, stable meanings in filmic text. Later in his essay, when Grierson speaks of the use of a "chorus", he says it must be in the service of unity: "By the chorus, characters are brought together and a single mood permeates a whole location" (160). Interestingly, he notes of the "recitative chorus" that "the very crudest form of this is the commentary you find ordinarily attached to 'interest' films" (161).[2] Yet even if Grierson favours, at this early point in the 1930s, a voice-over narration "which adds dramatic or poetic colour to the action" (161), that "colour" must not in any way create conflict. Rather, it must enhance meaning. As he says of the general desired effect of the propaganda film, the voiceover should "inspire confidence," not present "problems" (Morris 45). Grierson's dislike of Humphrey Jennings' WWII films demonstrates how the "creative use of sound" must not be in any way disturbing. Moreover, the dominance of the "recititive chorus" in Canadian WWII documentaries made under Grierson's command demonstrates how the route of least resistance to a strong propaganda message is through "authoritative narration" (Elder 157).[3]

The complementary voice-over/image relation is the bedrock of the institutional documentary. The image track is arranged to illustrate the narrator's descriptions, and the indexical power of the photographic image is harnessed to the rhetoric of the soundtrack. Referential authority is thus placed in the service of an authoritative voice-over narrator, usually male, whose vocal performance is coded by standardized diction, pacing, clarity of tone and coherence. Greenaway's mimicry of this convention is superlative. In *Vertical Features Remake*, Colin Cantlie's "BBC voice" explains the attempts of the "Institute for Restoration and Reclamation" to reconstruct a film by a "Tulse Luper." As names and places appear on the soundtrack, photographs, drawings and moving images appear on the image track to illustrate the often convoluted but always self-assured narration. The insistence of the illustration is key to the satire; the film cuts to the same photograph of Tulse Luper no fewer than twenty-three times.

Hoffman's clearest appropriation of Greenaway's method of constructing a fiction in fake documentary form appears in the opening sequence of *?O,Zoo!* Instead of attacking the authority of the institutional narrator (Greenaway's target), Hoffman undermines a different set of conventions: those surrounding the author-

2. "Interest" films refer to educational and industrial lecture films of the 1920s, from which Grierson was at pains to distinguish his "true" documentaries.

3. Kathryn Elder describes the "recurrent features" of the Canadian WWII propaganda films: " … authoritative narration, rapid cutting, and close alliance of image and text; features that today can be easily identified as NFB trademarks" (157).

ity of the filmmaker-narrator of the personal diary film. Interestingly, *?O,Zoo!* is the only early film of Hoffman's where he does not read his own narration. Reminiscent of Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971), where Frampton has Michael Snow read the voice-over of his most obviously "autobiographical" film, Hoffman puts himself at one remove from the "revelations" contained in *?O,Zoo!*.

Sound-Image Relations and Fake Framing

The film opens in silence on a lion roaring—a joke on the MGM lion announcing the beginning of another, more familiar kind of fiction film. The image is sepia-toned (as will be all the images of this sequence), connoting age. The silence is broken by the voice of the male narrator:

> The footage was found by my sister in my grandfather's loft. Having been at one time a newsreel cameraman, grandfather knew to keep the canister well sealed, and since the loft was relatively cool and dry, there was no noticeable deterioration.

The voice is flat and deliberate, not a BBC voice but a voice appropriate to a personal diary film. This explanation of the image's integrity and lack of deterioration makes reference to the filmmaking process, while bringing the viewer into the confidence of the voice-over. The narrator assumes we know that a cool, dry loft and a well-sealed canister will prevent a film from deteriorating. The immediate wedding of image and voice-over, the personal tone, and the reflexive explanations attempt to pull us into the film, which is itself consistently set against the institutional film:

> I recalled seeing my grandfather's old newsreels. There was a marked difference between the repetitive nature of the news film and the footage found in the loft.

If Hoffman differentiates the "voice" of the institutional newsreel from that of the personal diarist, he also invokes his own tradition: Canadian experimental filmmaking. One shot of the stock footage Hoffman uses had already been incorporated by experimental filmmaker David Rimmer into his film *Watching for the Queen* (1973). The allusion is at first proleptic of the levels of intertextuality in the film, as Grierson, Greenaway, Vermeer and a variety of structural film tropes make "appearances" in *?O,Zoo!* More specifically, the allusion refers to the tradition of Canadian experimental filmmaking that interrogates the photographic image. Rimmer, for example, often uses stock footage to study image degradation through

looping, so Hoffman's term "repetitive" is apt. When Hoffman later implies that the NFB is an organization devoted to the filming of wildlife, he alludes both to Greenaway's obsessive filming of animals (and the setting of *A Zed & Two Noughts* in a zoo) and to the stereotypical NFB nature documentary. The inversion is here complete: within the fiction, the "personal" images of the grandfather are linked, by subject, to the institution of the NFB. Meanwhile, the stock institutional images of the public event allude to the independent experimental tradition.

Another important method of cinematic critique in *?O,Zoo!* is the use of direct address to set reflexive traps for the spectator. In the next section, the narrator directly addresses the viewer in the imperative:

> There was something peculiar about grandfather's footage. Watch. Wait for the flash marking the beginning of the shot and then start counting.

Once again, the direct address underlines the reflexivity of the film by acknowledging our presence as spectators, underscoring its apparent honesty and transparency—even as it more forcefully tells us how to interpret the images (there is something "peculiar" to watch for). But the voice-over tricks us. After the flash, the narrator falls silent for about twenty seconds over a close up of a camel rhythmically chewing. Following the narrator's orders, we begin to count and fall into sync with the camel's chewing. But as the shot proceeds, the chewing gets more and more erratic and our counting struggles to keep its own pace. Finally, the voice-over returns to rescue the viewer and explain the "peculiarity":

> Most of the shots are exactly twenty-eight seconds in length.

Instructed to count, we are defeated by the rhythm of the image. The narrator's knowledge further points to our failure:

> I was impressed with both the precision and self-control my grandfather expressed in shooting this unusual material as compared with the erratic camera work displayed in the newsreels.

"Precision and self-control" are qualities of the text and its "maker," but not of the viewer. Moreover, the "self-control" is an arbitrary limit set by the apparatus; Hoffman's camera is a spring-wound Bolex, whose full shot length is twenty-eight seconds at twenty-four frames per second.

In addition to direct address, *?O,Zoo!*'s voice-over plays with codes of documentary evidence, specifically with one of the most banal elements of the camera

still: *?O,Zoo!*.

person's trade: camera logs. *?O,Zoo*! takes this elementary "document" and uses it to critique Grierson's technocratic logic of classification. The narrator suggests the following:

> More clues as to the nature of my grandfather's discipline were found on a slip of paper secreted in the film canisters.

After the shots of the camel, the film cuts to a close-up of a piece of paper entitled "Camera Negative Report Card," dated 6/6/45, with neat, legible printing listing six shots all under the heading "Day 17": "Lion", "Elephant slo-mo", "Fallen Elephant tries to get up", "Elephant gets up", "Camel Chewing" and "Insert Humps." Here is another piece of the film apparatus exposed—and if we read quickly enough, we can see that the shot list supports what we've been seeing. But questions arise: if this is a slip of paper the contemporary narrator has found, why would it be filmed with the same sepia tone as the grandfather's footage? The characteristics of different documents (paper and film) begin to collapse into one another.

Later in the film, we see that the contemporary filmmaker also uses these cards to chart the progress of his Holland diary, following in the family line, it seems. But here, too, the very neatness of the "documents" indicates that they are fictional constructions—not a log representing the process of filmmaking, but a later construction caught in the false, hermetic package of the fiction. All the shots listed on the grandfather's cards appear in *?O,Zoo!* (unless the film has a 1:1 shooting ratio, the report sheets must be reconstructions), and both the grandfa-

ther's and the filmmaker's cards list "S. Munger" as cameraman (explicable by continuity of family name, but improbable). Finally, later in the diary, we see the right-hand part of the grandfather's card from the first sequence, now dated 6/6/85, as a hand tapes a second card to it and writes "Day 17." This notation completes, in a sense, the missing left side of the grandfather's card (also Day 17). It would seem that even off-screen space can be recaptured by the hermetic bounds of the fiction-film frame.

Next, the long passage explaining the "making of a short film around the making of a fiction film" establishes *?O,Zoo!*'s link to Greenaway and Grierson:

> The footage was found in the winter. That spring, I went to the Netherlands to make a short film around the making of a fiction film. I met the director in a seminar in my native country in the fall before my grandfather's footage was found. This seminar, an annual tradition since 1939, is devoted to the documentation and categorization of all types of wildlife species ever captured on film. The seminar grew out of the same institution that employed my grandfather as a newsreel cameraman. I can still hear my grandfather's remarks about the founder of the institution, as he put it, "that old battle-axe."

This passage appears over shots of animals (a seal, peacocks, an ostrich), images which reinforce the grandfather's employment with the institution dedicated to wildlife photography. The phrase "documentation and categorization" alludes to Greenaway's obsession with classification and naming—that technocratic rage to impose order laid bare in Greenaway's films by the hyperbolic application of that rage. Though the allusion is no more than a nod to Greenaway's project, through recognizing their shared heritage in Grierson, Hoffman acknowledges the ideological implications underlying how documentary convention orders experience—and the subversive nature of any questioning of that ordering.

After the close-up of the ostrich and the narrator's statement "I can still hear my grandfather's remarks," the film cuts to a slow-motion shot of what seems to be the shadow of two gorillas. The gorilla is a Darwinian "founding father," and it turns out that the shadows of what appear to be two gorillas are in fact those of a single gorilla and the filmmaker. Once again, in the spirit of Greenaway, Hoffman slyly undercuts claims to cultural authority. On the soundtrack, we hear a mechanical whirring, then an old man's voice fighting through static and muted sound:

> That old battle-axe! What the hell does he know about this

> country anyway? All he knows about [sound unclear here] is whoring about in crammed-up pubs!

The narrator presents another piece of documentation, apparently a tape recording of the grandfather's voice (the voice explains the whirring as a tape recorder rewinding), literalizing the idiom, "I can still hear him say …" What the narrator hears in his mind can be conjured for the film. The question "What does he know about this country anyway?" refers to Grierson's status as a foreigner to Canada and underlines one of the central ironies of the NFB: an institution designed "to show Canada to Canadians" was founded by a Scotsman. The last line of the "recording" is ambiguous, a false "rough edge" attesting to its status as "document."

The tape recording introduces a new element into the soundtrack besides the narrator's voice. The next image, of a gorilla cage beside a spinning water sprinkler, contains a "sync" sound effect of a jet water sprinkler playing underneath the narration:

> Though the director was from the same country as the old battle-axe, I couldn't see a connection. I couldn't see why he'd been invited to the seminar. Yet there seemed to be similarities between my grandfather's footage and the films the director presented at the seminar. I thought I would try to incorporate my grandfather's footage with the film I would take on location in Holland. As usual, I would keep a diary of the whole affair. [music begins]

The "sync" water-sprinkler sound (an allusion to another of Greenaway's obsessions, water) and the introduction of music flesh out the possible range of sound at the narrator's disposal. The gradual and very subtle introduction of each sound option in *?O,Zoo!* parallels the increasingly arbitrary rhetorical power of the narrator and the complexity of the fiction he weaves. The "authenticity" of the "personal" voice-over is first established and then used as a springboard for the introduction of more and more conventional rhetorical effects. All of this precedes the announcement of the film's overarching form:

> As usual, I would keep a diary of the whole affair.

Faking Death: The Ethics of Representation, Fiction, and Actuality

This short film around a fiction film has its own enigmas to be worked out in its "narrative" progression. In the passage above, the narrator puzzles over the connections between Greenaway and Grierson, between Greenaway and the

Documentary Seminar. On one ingenuous level, of course, the puzzlement is justified; Greenaway's films are indeed fictions, and furthermore, are absolutely antipathetic to Griersonian documentaries. In specific reference to the 1984 seminar, the puzzlement registered by the narrator translated to outrage on the part of many conference participants. The challenge that the anti-documentaries shown at the seminar presented to seminar participants, for whom the Grierson Documentary Seminar was typically a "tribute" to Grierson's official legacy, led to violent debates and charges that films like Greenaway's *The Falls* were senseless hoaxes. In *?O,Zoo!*, Hoffman seems to be quietly satirizing this debate.

Working out the relations between Greenaway and Grierson is one problem the narrator will tackle. The second is the resemblance he notes between his "grandfather's footage" and Greenaway's films. On the level of the fiction, the narrator says he will incorporate his grandfather's footage into the film he is "about to make" in Holland—the sequence we have worked through is, in a sense, a different film than the *?O,Zoo!* to come. On the most banal level, the narrator "discovers" that "the director" shares his grandfather's fascination with animals. More substantively, Hoffman seems to be announcing that his own exploration of the relations between Grierson and Greenaway will be affected precisely by taking a page from Greenaway's book. Here, the narrator introduces a hermetic fiction by pretending that his grandfather's footage is not his own.

These two levels interpenetrate to present two problems. First, for the viewer, the problem is reading *?O,Zoo!* between the levels of fiction and actuality, between the image and the voice-over. The second problem is Hoffman's. When he says that "as usual" he will keep a diary of the whole affair, Hoffman is situating the film within his own practice and preoccupations—not Greenaway's assured multiplication and excavation of fictions, but Hoffman's own tentative probings of the problems of representation. The "resolution" of these problems of reading and making appears as the film finally incorporates the two missing shots from the Day 17 shot card: "Elephant tries to get up," "Elephant gets up." Just after the diary section shows us the right half of the grandfather's shot report, the narrator tells a two-minute story over a black screen about his witnessing and filming an elephant having a heart attack at the Rotterdam Zoo. The passage is descriptive and emotional, centred around the filmmaker's crisis of conscience in deciding to film the death, and the accompanying responsibility and guilt. In the end, he decides "to put the film in the freezer. I decide not to develop it." Yet at the end of the film, after the credits (in a sense, after the end of the film), two extra shots, both twenty-eight seconds long, sepia-toned and silent, show an elephant struggling to get up and then an elephant getting up.

The effect of this framing of *?O,Zoo*! is double-edged. In one way, these last two shots expose the artifice of the voice-over. The events of the first shot (the

elephant rocking back and forth, the attendants shoving bales of hay under the elephant) match the earlier voice-over, but in the second shot, the elephant gets up. The narrator lies twice. First, he developed the footage, and second, the events of the story are contradicted by the image. This decisive break in the fiction takes place by a radical separation of voice-over and image: the story is told over a black screen, the final images are silent. With this separation, the viewer can return to the film to reconstruct, in a sense, its non-meaning, and to question and revise the "authenticity" of the versions of events the film presents.

Working through these possibilities, of course, suggests that a thoroughgoing skepticism is called for in the viewer's relation to the film, and especially to the narrator's voice-over. For example, do the final images tell the whole story? Is there more elephant footage than is shown or listed? Is the order of the last two images correct? Yet thoroughgoing skepticism is not, it seems to me, the final effect of *?O,Zoo!* It is important to note here a crucial difference between Greenaway and Hoffman: Greenaway's oeuvre is obsessively interwoven with recurring images, themes, and characters, but his fictions are rigorously hermetic and unconcerned with the codes of realism. In *?O,Zoo!*, Hoffman exposes the hoax at the heart of his own work; moreover, the emotional resonance of the elephant's struggle is highly charged and excruciating to watch. One suspects that if the story of the elephant's death is a fiction, it is still a fiction filtered through Hoffman's sense of the crisis of representation.

The key to Hoffman's sense of his own intertextuality is this line in the voice-over: "I've come across this problem before." The statement refers to Hoffman's film made a year earlier, *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, where Hoffman, travelling by bus in Mexico, comes across a crowd of people around a dead Mexican boy just run over in the road. Hoffman puts away his camera and cannot film the scene. *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* is structured around the absence of the visual representation of the event, which is instead described in written text "voice-over." Yet while making *?O,Zoo!*, Hoffman did begin to shoot the elephant's struggle, not knowing if the animal would live or die. The absence structuring *Somewhere Between* becomes a kind of contingent presence in *?O,Zoo!* Just as Hoffman gathers and organizes the images of *Somewhere Between* to hint at, refract, and rehearse the moment of hesitation at the heart of the film, so in *?O, Zoo!*, he organizes the film around the potential consequences of his decision to film the event—a kind of rehearsal of the various responses he felt as he filmed. The expressive urge behind Hoffman's work, always constrained by its tentative, questioning attention to and awareness of the process of filming, distills itself into the structure his films adopt: radically extended meditations on a single, almost ecstatic moment.

When Hoffman showed *Somewhere Between* at the 1984 Grierson Seminar,

he was taken to task by a veteran war correspondent, Don North, who wanted to see the scene of the Mexican boy's death. Shelley Stamp, reporting on the conference, writes:

> [North] felt that the film would have been stronger with the addition of the death. What North missed, I think, was the very structure this absence provided, and Hoffman's implied critique of North's type of filmmaking.

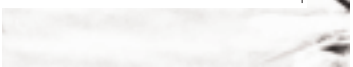
The nature of Hoffman's critique is clearer in *?O,Zoo!* In the voice-over, the narrator rationalizes his decision to film the scene with a lame excuse: "Maybe the television networks would buy the film and tell people that tragedy's in their neighborhood." After the elephant "dies," he admits that his "idea of selling the film to the network now just seems an embarrassing thought, an irresponsible plan."

The "social utility" arguments of sensationalist news and documentary makers and institutions always carry a hint of the *National Enquirer* ("because people want to know")—an epistephilia bordering on what Tom Gunning has called the spectatorial mode of curiositas (38). But it is important not to interpret Hoffman's tentative meditations on the problematic of representation as party to the opposing camp that censors represent under the flag of "responsibility to subject"—the simplistic and squeamish argument that filming "takes advantage" of the subject. Rather, Hoffman understands film's power to mediate between the consciousness of the filmmaker and the viewer; his hesitations around the problem of representation reflect a personal ambivalence about the necessary link between his vision and the viewer's. In an artist's statement for the Art Gallery of Ontario, Hoffman writes:

> By means of the personal content of my films I seek to uncover subjective aspects of the way events were recorded. Focusing on the way that I, as a filmmaker, can and do influence both form and content allows room for the viewer to reflect upon ways in which meaning is constructed in film. Using the processes of reflection and revision, I seek to examine and express how we bring meaning to past and present lived experiences.

Although Hoffman here names the terms of his meditation on representation, he does not make explicit the intensity of the tension between the filmmaker's extraordinary control over images and the guilt this arouses, nor his own sense of danger around his approach to the particular "lived experience" at the core of these films—namely, bearing witness to death.[4]

4. The final images of the elephant recall, in subject and single long-take form, that most astonishing primal scene of death in early film: Edison's *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903).



In the voice-over of the elephant story, Hoffman includes a sentence that clarifies this intensity of responsibility and danger:

> Concentrating on the image I had filmed as if my mind was the film and the permanent trace of the elephant's death was projected brightly inside. Somehow it's my responsibility now.

Hoffman makes explicit that central insight and concern of independent film practice and theory: film's status as a radical metaphor for consciousness and its relation to the world. Film's capacity to mediate the relation between consciousness ("as if my mind was the film") and events in the world arises from its indexical nature ("permanent trace"). This mediation carries the potential to represent death and suggests a radically powerful level of epistemological inquiry, carrying both an intimation of the ecstatic—outside space and time—and what Jean Epstein has called "a warning of something monstrous" at the heart of cinema (21). The "responsibility" Hoffman feels around this encounter with death is revealed by the word "projected." For if film is a radical metaphor for consciousness, we must understand the double-hinged nature of that metaphor as it swings between filmmaker and spectator. Hoffman's hesitations regarding filming, or developing, or showing his experience of death revolve around a terror of the urgent but reckless energy that representation burns into the filmmaker and the viewer.

If the filming of a moment of death is the central expressive theme of Hoffman's film, the moment's representation and deferral are never divorced from his recognition that the weight of film history and convention always interposes itself and structures the spectator's access to the image. The engagement of film history in *?O,Zoo!*, especially the Griersonian documentary tradition with its central claim to absolute truth, underlines the epistemological stakes behind Hoffman's questioning. Hoffman wants to bring the conventions and history of the construction of certainty to crisis, to clear a space for the spectator to approach, with Hoffman, the intensity of fascination and doubt inscribed in the image that appears literally as supplement, as coda, to the text of *?O,Zoo!* The point is not to escape mediation—this is not an Edenic pure image. Nor is it to restore certainty. Rather, Hoffman clears a space for consciousness to re-engage the world in "lived experience" via representation.

still: *?O,Zoo!*

Works Cited

Allan, Blaine.
"It's Not Finished Yet (Some Notes on Toronto Filmmaking)." *Toronto: A Play of History*. Toronto: Power Plant. 1987
83-92.

Burch, Noël.
"Film's Institutional Mode of Representation and the Soviet Response." *October 11* (Winter 1979)
77-96.

Della Penna, Paul, and Jim Shedden.
"The Falls." *Cineaction! 9* (July 1987)
20-24.

Elder, Kathryn.
"The Legacy of John Grierson." *Journal of Canadian Studies 21.4* (Winter 1986-87)
152-61.

Epstein, Jean.
"The Universe Head Over Heels." *October 3* (Spring 1977), Trans. Stuart Liebman.
21-25.

Grierson, John.
"The Creative Use of Sound." *Grierson on Documentary*. Ed. Forsyth Hardy. London: Faber, 1966.
157-63.

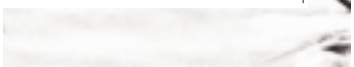
Gunning, Tom.
"An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." *Art & Text 34* (Spring 1989)
31-45.

Hoffman, Phil.
"Artists and their Work: Phil Hoffman." Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985.
N. pag.

Morris, Peter.
"Rethinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson." *Dialogue: Canadian and Quebec Cinema*. Eds. Pierre Verroneau, Michael Dorland, and Seth Feldman. Montreal: Mediatexte/Cinémathèque Québécoise, 1987.
21-56.

Stamp, Shelley.
Program Notes for Somewhere Between … Toronto: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 1984.

Winston, Brian.
Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited. London: BFI, 1995.



THE LANDSCAPE JOURNAL

by Ronald Heydon

Day One

Writing the first words, always something of a mystery. Might as well begin at the beginning. In *The End of Autobiography* Michael Sprinker traces the history of the word "autobiography" to the end of the eighteenth century. The Oxford dictionary credits Southey with the first usage in 1809, and the French Larousse attributes the French form to a derivation from the English. Prior to the eighteenth century, works that are today labeled autobiographies were known as confessions, memoirs, *journaux intimes*. As Sprinker describes it:

> Autobiography, the inquiry of the self into its own origin and history, is always circumscribed by the limiting conditions of writing, of the production of a text … Autobiography must return perpetually to the elusive centre of selfhood buried in the unconscious, only to discover that it was already there when it began … The origin and end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing … for no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self and author collapse into the act of producing a text. (342)

Day Two

My first conscious encounter with landscape came in Saskatchewan, when I was nine or ten. On a bright, mid-summer day, I crossed the highway that encircled the city and entered the wheat fields. I walked for hours, gradually removing my clothes because of the heat. I remember the wheat scraping slightly my child's flesh. I remember seeing no one and nothing but wheat and golden sun for miles. People have been known to panic in such conditions. In such solitude (and in each direction the same view) one either feels incredible importance or insignificance. The feeling I had was communion.

In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979), D.W. Meinig writes that landscape is a technical term used by artists and earth scientists, architects

and planners, geographers and historians. It is an ambiguous term, elusive. Landscape is, first of all, the impressions of our senses as well as the logic of our sciences. It is related to, but not identical with, environment. Landscape is defined by our vision, and interpreted by our minds.

In one of the books I recently read describing the frontier landscape of western Canada (was it *New and Naked Land* by Ronald Rees?), the author referred to early survey expeditions undertaken to determine if the prairies were habitable. The Plains Indians had roamed there for centuries and one of the surveyors (1857) wrote in his journal that "Apart from various trails, the Indians left the prairie unmarked."

The land, which was at first ignored (by earlier expeditions) and then explored and appropriated, was later treated as a commodity. It was surveyed, sectioned off and given away in parceled bits to incoming Europeans.

"Apart from various trails, the Indians left the prairie unmarked." Does the landscape remember? Can we talk of land and memory?

Day Three

Heard trumpeter Lester Bowie's jazz interpretation of *It's Howdy Doody Time*. Great title for an autobiography! Went to a party at Steve's (from sound class) last weekend. Most of the MA students were there. I started asking others about "referential productivity" (from one of Bill Nichols' articles) but no one had a clue. Rick Hancox has given me a video copy of the Philip Hoffman films to view for a class presentation on the 10th of November. Now I must find a friend with a VCR.

photo: Man on rock face by Keith Spencer.

Day Four

The closer I look at "autobiography," the more infinite it appears. There are four hundred years of it! Rick has set up the agenda so that I'm to defend the notion of autobiography in film. Does it need defense? Do the others understand? Does documentary only promote a cause? Expose malfunction? Couldn't all this be applied to self? What about autobiographical documentary as therapy?

Day Five

In an interview, Hoffman says his experience taught him the value of the film-making process as much as the finished work. He gathers "pieces of evidence"—films, videotapes, audio recordings, written diaries—that are reworked to create a meaningful understanding of past events. It's only while editing that patterns emerge. But this process of reflection and revision is extended to the viewer, who is asked to witness both events and their reconstruction. This "experimental" work allows an ambiguity that permits spectators to bring in remembrances from their own lives.

I view *On the Pond* (1978), his first film. Family album photos are juxtaposed with images of a young boy playing a solitary hockey game, on the pond. Still photos of hockey teams appear in succession as the boy becomes a teenager. Like my older brother, it appears the filmmaker lived his youth as part of a team. In the teen's bedroom, a slow pan takes us from a projector and record player, the instruments of reproduction, to a bookshelf, a row of hockey trophies, and finally to the boy in bed, looking over a hockey scrapbook.

It's the trophies that trigger my own personal flashbacks. Already the associations begin. I am from a family immersed in sports, a family of professionals. My older sister is a gym instructor and has played on Canadian volleyball teams for years. My older brother played every sport, won many trophies and now coaches football. My younger brother settles into karate and badminton (he was with Ontario's Champions last year). Even my mother has trophies from her younger, basketball years. "Star" they used to call her. I look at the wall next to my desk at the picture of my father, taken just before his marriage. He played basketball for the Canadian team at the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin. (I look for him walking with the teams whenever I see images from the Riefenstahl film, but have never yet found him.) His team came in second after the Americans. In the photo, he is seated at a desk, wearing his Olympic leather jacket, pen in hand, about to sign some register or other. There are many trophies in my parents' home, but none of them bear my name. I never won any. Obliged, like all the children, to play every sport (I could swim and skate before I could read), my own boy's landscape was outside the team.

Day Six

Autobiography is a cultural act, where language acts as a focusing glass. Eakin quotes Spengemann, who insists that the autobiographer brings together the personal experiences of the writer with the shared values of a culture. He discerns a core belief in "individual identity" which he conceives of as "an integrated, continuing personality which transcends the limitations and irregularities of time and space and unites all of one's contradictory experiences into an identifiable whole" (qtd. in Eakin, 73). Do all cultures compress essential values and convictions in human models? Is "self-conception" a problem in most cultures? Autobiography comes into its own at the end of the eighteenth century "in conjunction with the rise of individuality as the dominant ideal of personality" (Eakin, 74). This in itself is a complex issue—that we all possess unique selves, continuous identities that develop over the course of a lifetime. Eakin calls this belief in individuality an anti-model sort of model:

> In the opening lines of his Confessions, Rousseau captures the paradox at the heart of the notion of embracing individuality as a model, for he claims for his identity an absolute value of singularity. "I am like no one in the whole world," he writes, while enjoining others to confess the uniqueness of their own selfhood with an equal candor. "I have displayed myself as I was." His uniqueness, in other words, is exemplary, a model for others to follow. We must recognize accordingly that the very generality of such a model engenders problems of self-definition that every autobiographer and critic must face anew: what do we think our experience is really like, and how do we conceptualize the experiencing self? (74)

Day Seven

"Oh, you write? You keep a journal?" a school chum asks. "Yes, and hand-written too. Not in the computer," I am quick to add. I'm old-fashioned. I like the texture of the page, the written word. Sure it's "time consuming," but so is watching television. Handwriting is like a snapshot: it conveys mood through style. My writing is sometimes harried, sometimes slow and methodical; sometimes in black ink from my father's fountain pen, sometimes in spur-of-the-moment ball point.

"Oh, you write? Are you so important?" I have been asked in the past, for I have kept a journal since leaving Saskatchewan. But journal writing is so much more than this. It has little to do with fame, importance, "posterity." The journal is a work place. Asked by CBC's *Brave New Waves* to join a panel on journal writing, my initial response was yes, of course. Asked to read from my journal I

quickly changed my mind. "But why not?" asks the organizer. "It's my own personal working-out of private dilemmas," I answer, "not always for another's eyes, let alone ears!" Then I write a piece in the journal, a "working out" of the dilemma of a public text. I decide I could present this piece on the CBC (though probably they'll want something more revealing). Katz, in the Art Gallery of Ontario catalogue on autobiographical film, says that a journal brings one face to face with the meaning of one's personal existence—there, before one's eyes, and collected in one's own handwriting. A journal helps to put one's life in focus. Can I present this? I consult my agenda and see that I have an art history presentation the very next day—my most ambitious project and the one for which I'm least prepared. I decide I can't do both so I cancel the radio show. Missed opportunity? Story of my life.

"Oh, you write?" Remembering that time in New York, summer of '92, just after Raymond Carver passed away. There was an obituary in the New York Times that I quickly copied out before my taxi arrived to take me to the Port Authority terminal. The friend who had showed it to me, not realizing I had already copied it by hand, said he would photocopy it and mail it to me. "It's OK, I already have it," I told him. "You wrote it out?" he nearly gasped, as if I'd wasted so much energy. Of course his vehement reaction might seem relevant if the obituary had been a full page of text, but it was just the following:

> I don't know why people write stories.
> Raymond Carver said he wrote them
> because he was drunk a lot, and his kids
> were driving him crazy, and a short story
> was all he had concentration for.
> Sometimes, he said, he wrote them in a parked car.

Day Eight

Should a camera record death? There is no narrator in Hoffman's *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984), but there is a narrative in the form of intertitles that resemble Japanese haiku poetry. This story takes place in Mexico, where Hoffman chances across a dead Mexican youth surrounded by children. It begins:

> Looking through the lens at passing events
> I recall what once was and consider what might be.

We never see the dead youth, but read via intertitles that the filmmaker has put his camera down. While the intertitles tell the story of this encounter, the "walking" camera enters a village landscape, follows a textured wall overlaid with reli-

gious icons and paintings, and then a street procession (are we back in Ontario or still in Mexico?). A lone saxophone wails as if recounting the sad, difficult emotions. The hand-held camera pulls the spectator into the scene:

The little girl with big eyes waits by her dead brother.

I am suddenly in a different scene. I am eighteen-years old and hitching around Europe. I am somewhere between Modena and Florence, seated in a medium-sized truck with a young Italian of about my age, who also prefers the back roads to the autoroute. He speaks no English, while I manage just a smattering of Italian and French. With much hand gesturing and laughter he tells me that not only does he have a girlfriend, but that she is pregnant (la luna, la colline, capische?). Just ahead of us on the narrow road, an older man on a bicycle. We try to drive around him but the man turns left (doesn't he hear the truck?) and we drive right over top of him. We sit there, immobile and white. There is not a sound. I get out of the truck and see children running from a neighboring farm. The man is dead. The young Italian can't face him, he stands and weeps. I hold him and watch the children's silent faces that look at us as if we were murderers. "It was an accident," I want to say, but don't even know the words. I thought I would never forget the look on those young faces, but I did forget until Hoffman's film brought them back. I understand his ethical dilemma at filming death. What amazes me is his ability to make a thing of beauty from his coming to terms with it.

Day Nine

"Maybe I'm just more observational than the average person," I say to myself, trying to find some context for the constant cruising, the way I engage others on the street. I don't just look at people as I ride by on the bike, but rather provoke a response. Maybe I'm spending too much time alone.

I did get to see a Dutch documentary film entitled *The Ditvoorst Diaries*. Back in the early 70s, Ditvoorst, the filmmaker, had been compared to Godard. Not long after his last film, *Witte Waan (White Madness)*, he returned to the town of his birth and drowned himself, exactly like a character in his first film *Paranoia*. It was a strange film to see on a Sunday afternoon, and we were only six people in the whole cinema. Much of the text for the film was taken directly from his diaries.

An incredible snowstorm the first of November. The following day the tree branches are laden with snow in the bright, early-morning sun. Orange and black balloons remain tied to a tree in the neighbor's yard. A little snowman now stands by the sidewalk, next to a discarded jack-o'-lantern.

Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears in tangible, visible form … The cultural record we have "written in the landscape" is liable to be more truthful that most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves … There are no secrets in the landscape.
D.W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*

Day Ten
The idea "to defend" Hoffman's methodology leads to other questions: what is documentary film anyway? Can it be experimental? Can something become so personal it's no longer documentary? Who decides these things? Most docs unwrap issues: poverty, racism, child abuse, hunger. These are worthy topics, so why in my communications MA have I steered away from TV news and opted for documentary film, sound, art and identity? Art demands becoming more of who you really are. Not just the exposing of an issue, some "master narrative," but allowing local concerns, personal issues, to surface. And if some of that's labeled "experimental" —well, I'll deal with labels later. What was it Cocteau said while adapting George Auric's music to one of his early films? Something about scrambling the pages and using the notion of chance, which might reveal another way of interpreting the material. In that tension, some new aspect might arise. What is learning, if not a sense of discovery?

Discussing film music and image, Claudia Gorbman calls the relationship between music-image and music-narrative "mutual implication." Could any music accompany a film? Of course!

Whatever music is applied to a film segment will do something—will have an effect—just as any two words will produce a meaning different from each used separately. Kracauer's reactions to a drunken movie-house pianist from his youth, whose inattention to the screen resulted in pleasingly unorthodox audiovisual combinations, recall the Surrealist's delight in the fortuitous encounters between two unlikely entities. Jean Cocteau actually scored some of his films on the principle of what he called "accidental synchronization." He took George Auric's music, carefully written for particular scenes in the film, and applied them to different scenes entirely. Whether the relation between sound and picture is deliberate or not (surrealist word-games versus traditional poetic activity, the drunken pianist vs. a score by John Williams), their collaboration will generate meaning. Image, sound effects, dialogue and music-track are virtually inseparable during the viewing experience; they form a combinatoire of expression.
Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*

Why can't learning be like the viewing experience? It was Jim Lane, in 1993, who

equated the ideology of "the personal as political" with autobiographical documentaries. He said they moved between life and representation, and were as much about the genre itself as the people who made them.

Even Eakin equates the writing of autobiography (the "art of self-invention") with culture, in the sense that no writing, no matter how private, exists in isolation. It is made up of shared words.

Day Eleven

Hoffman's early interests related to photography and place. His pictures are the establishing shots of his life. The landscape sequences in *passing through/torn formations* (1988) were places he traveled in his youth. The remembering of that time, he says, is essential to his work. "Only now I must deal with those moments of discovery using the camera." *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983) was the result of several years of hitching back and forth across the country, not only experimenting with image making, but also struggling with the conventions of documentary. One reviewer wrote that Hoffman uses failure (in that film) to make his strongest points about the convergence and intermingling of anticipation and event. He was apparently spurred on by Kerouac's life "on the road."

I remember the jazz essay I wrote, the one based on Pierre Bourdieu's *The Aristocracy of Culture*, in which he expounded on taste ("manifested preferences") and the way, according to "educational capital," cultural products were consumed. I was trying to relate all this to the jazz fan: "The Construction of a Jazz Fan in the Post-Bop Era of the 1950s" or: "Jazz is a Language/Culture is a Game." Ambitious kid! Trying to adapt Bourdieu to the Beats. More interested in the music and those tapes of Kerouac's poetry.

… tortured by sidewalks—starved for sex and companionship—open to anything—ready to introduce a new world with a shrug.
Jack Kerouac, *The Beat Generation*

Miles Davis, leaning against the piano, fingering his trumpet with a cigarette hand—working—making raw iron sound like wood—speaking in long sentences like Marcel Proust.
Kerouac, *The History of Bop*

Day Twelve

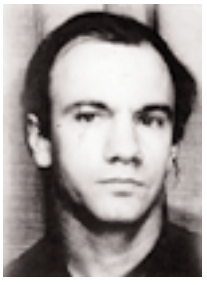
I go to Vanier Library in search of the Katz book on film and autobiography. I notice that it has been checked out until the end of November. At the front desk, I ask the fellow if he can let me see who has the book, as it may be someone in my class. "We can't do that!" he says. "It's against our rules." "Well, just look the

other way," I say: "It's happened before." He types in the number of the book, and then my ID, then nonchalantly shows me the screen. "Seeing is believing," he smiles. "The book is checked out … to you!" All the books I have are entitled autobiography anyway. And I have so many. But this is the height of absurdity, running after books I already have. Must slow down.

Day Thirteen
I prefer to write at sunrise. It's quiet and I can greet my ideas, reflections, impressions (the state of mind to write this) like an old friend. I think that if I wrote at night, I would sound desperate. In the morning I reconstruct and face another day.

Day Fourteen
"Art is not a mirror but a hammer," John Grierson wrote in the early 1930s, though it is his definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" that is most often quoted. In *Representing Reality* (1991), Bill Nichols discusses the evolution of documentary, how it organizes the materials presented to us and how the interaction of filmic codes produce meanings. Nichols suggests that contemporary filmmakers have lost their voice (i.e., replaced it with mere observation and unquestioned empiricism). He sets out to fashion his historical overview in order to advise filmmakers on how to make documentaries that will more closely correspond to a contemporary understanding of "our" (whose?) position in the world; in this way, effective political/formal strategies for describing and challenging that position can emerge. Nichols' concern is how to understand images of the world as speech about the world, and how to place that speech within formal, experiential and historical contexts.

Now let's face facts: the number of filmmakers who actually work this way can probably be counted on one hand. And though Nichols gives an excellent summary of the four types of documentary film (only four?)—expository, observational, interactive and self-reflexive (32-33)—I can't seem to place Philip Hoffman anywhere, save the self-reflexive, and then only up to a point. Nichols defines the



photos: (left) Hoffman; (right) Babji.

self-reflexive as a strategy (right away a problem) where the representation of the historical world becomes the topic of cinematic mediation (69).

It's odd that Nichols skims over the expository, voice-of-God mode (34-38), since his article exemplifies this approach. All his arguments lead to the self-reflexive mode as the only one worth pursuing. So why are television news and most documentaries still caught in the expository mode?

Day Fifteen
Today I only feel like quoting.

> The aim is to depict the place as some sort of historical palimpsest and/or the corollary of this, an exposition of a state of mind.
> Patrick Keiller, *The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape*

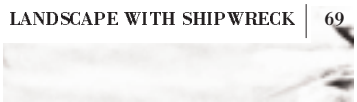
> It seems, then, that making moving pictures of spaces and places involves the same sort of consideration as any other picture making—perspective, framing, proportion, left and right, and so on—even when the camera is moving, and especially when it is not. The virtues of this approach can be seen in those of Vermeer's paintings where there always seems to be more shown of the corner of the room than there actually is. In other words, the picture of the corner of the room is so good that we can infer the rest of the room from it.
> Keiller, *The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape*

The deeper I delve the more complex it becomes. What was it Diane Arbus said, "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know" (qtd. in Sprinker, 321).

Day Sixteen
Fellini passed away last week. Big state funeral on the news. I notice, on a record jacket I have of selected music from his films, some quotes from *Fellini on Fellini*. "I am my own still life." "I am a film." "Everything and nothing in my work is autobiography."

Last week I gave my class presentation on autobiography and documentary film. As if I wasn't nervous enough, Phil Hoffman was also present. He was very relaxed though, and afterwards, we had a good talk. But trying to cogently present the complicated theories surrounding autobiography was another matter. I started skipping paragraphs, darting across the page, scanning for the essential, *un*suturing. I felt I was watching the paper crumble before my eyes.

After *passing through/torn formations*, most of the class left on break and I stayed to speak with Hoffman. I told him the story (which suddenly jarred in my



memory during his film) of my own grandfather. Originally from a tiny hamlet of a place in England called Hook Norton, he emigrated to Canada with his family and never returned. I never knew his wife, my grandmother. She was a French woman, and died shortly after giving birth to their sixth child. My grandfather raised his six children alone. When I was hitching around Europe as an eighteen-year-old I decided to visit Hook Norton, which is just north of London, though the only Heydons there were on the gravestones. I took a few black-and-white photos, staying for a few days, and spoke with the oldest woman of the village, who remembered my ancestors. I even copied out the record of christenings at the church going back over two-hundred years. The next year, back in Canada, I visited my grandfather, who still lived in Windsor with two of his unmarried daughters. I showed him the photos—silly, Instamatic pictures—and told him of my adventures there. My grandfather was a big man, and watched me with steady eyes as I spoke. I spent three or four days there and then left on a Sunday evening for Toronto. The next morning I received the telephone call from my aunt: "Come back. Your grandfather passed away last night in his sleep."

There were a few students who also listened to the story, and one of them suggested that it was my fault that he died! "You probably triggered something in memories long buried." Phil found it interesting, but only said, "Looks like you've got enough there to make a film yourself."

Day Seventeen

Hoffman made *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986) ostensibly to document Greenaway's making of *A Zed and Two Noughts*. Hoffman's film, however, is concerned with the conditions of how it was made—as Nichols suggests is the purpose of self-reflexive documentary. *?O,Zoo!* connects Canadian film history with references to Grierson ("that old battleaxe") and to a personal, diaristic travel experience. Landscapes vary from a small square in a Dutch city, to a static shot of one of Greenaway's outdoor locations, to lion cages in the Rotterdam zoo. As in Hoffman's Mexican film a death occurs, only this time it is an elephant that is dying. The question of filming this death is the same, however. The screen is left blank as the narrator describes the event. How to categorize a film that pokes fun at conventions while seriously searching for new forms and asking us to create these forms with him? The spectator is part of his ethical dilemma. The filmmaker's dilemma is also ours.

Day Eighteen

Some years ago, while preparing a demo tape of a radio broadcast (which turned out well, as I was hired immediately at CKUT), I included several quotes from an autobiographer who has influenced me greatly. Peter Handke's *The Weight of the*

World (1984) is a text made of reflections, observations, self-inventions.

> Washing a shirt in the washbasin when all is still and the heart is heavy.
>
> Someone has written me a letter in which he apologizes for not having phoned me instead.
>
> A television talk-show host laughs aloud at something, quite spontaneously—but all the same he forces himself to laugh into the microphone.
>
> A little while ago (evening) for the first time in ever so long—while standing at the kitchen sink eating grapes and spitting the seeds into my hand—I man aged to think of a future.

Independent film and video artists, Renov (1989) tells us, are asking themselves questions about the representation of their own subjectivity, in which history and subjectivity become mutually defining categories. Renov calls this "embroiling of subject in history" the new autobiography.

Day Nineteen
"It is a warm grey afternoon in August. You are in the country, in a deserted quarry of light-grey devonian limestone in southern Ontario. A powdery luminescence oscillates between rock and sky … "

I can see through Chris Dewdney's words, through the text, the poem, through the words on the page. I am a spectator. I am also a reader. I am the viewer in the dark, before a black screen, listening to these words, the introduction to *passing through/torn formations*. And I am glad Hoffman left the screen black. Some things are better left unshown, where the landscape of imagination and memory can more easily reside.

Hoffman describes the peopled landscape as "an inevitable collision between the old and new worlds, like two great landscapes colliding, erupting … Some people in my family just got caught at the epicentre."

Day Twenty
There are many family voices in *passing through/torn formations*, as well as a relentless movement of overlapping images. Sometimes we see the sameimage/scene from different angles. This restatement of imagery (never exactly the same) Hoffman compares to oral history (which changes through the retelling), or to the literary method of Gertrude Stein.

It was Stein who said, back in 1934, that to understand modern painting, one

had to fly over the plains of the mid-West.

With the many changes in the dominant systems of communication that affect our culture as a whole, will film and video replace writing as our chief means of recording, informing and entertaining? Is there a cinematic equivalent for written autobiography and, after four hundred years, is it close to extinction? Should I be angry with Philip Hoffman? Is writing to be formally displaced? Elizabeth Bruss writes in *Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film* (1980): "The unity of subjectivity and subject matter … seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible, recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye)" (297). What is there in language to explain its peculiar fitness for autobiographical expression? Can the autobiographical "I" survive the move from text to film?

Again I am faced with Descartes, as Bruss begins her search. The more radical his doubts (in the *Meditations*), she suggests, the more certain the being of the doubter—Descartes never considered whether the "doubter" might not be the product rather than the producer of the doubt (298).

She offers three parameters to autobiography: 1) truth value (autobiography is consistent with other evidence; it is sincere); 2) act value (autobiography is a personal performance); and 3) identity value (the logically distinct roles of author, narrator and protagonist are conjoined) (299-300).

Like the sentence I have been composing, language allows the same individual who plays the role of speaker to serve as his own referent—the speaking subject and the subject of the sentence are the same and this conflation is crucial to autobiography. In film, Bruss notes that " … the autobiographical self begins to seem less like an independent being and more like an abstract 'position' that appears when a number of key conventions converge—and vanishes when those conventional supports are removed" (301). Film, in other words, offers a new variable: the choice between "staging the truth" or recording it directly. Can we call a film sincere, she asks? Can a film shot (apart from vocal accompaniment) express doubt? (303)

But all film is manipulation, I want to cry out at her! And hasn't Hoffman overcome this very thing?

I look at *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990), Hoffman's latest film. I am immersed in family history—landscape, memory, time—and I go for a long bike ride afterwards to ponder. I think of my other grandfather, who came to Canada from the Ukraine many years ago. He came to our house one day and dumped my grandmother at our front door. "Here," he said to my mother in Ukrainian (he never did learn English), "Take your mother. She's sick. She can't work anymore." Or at least, that's the version my mother tells, not in anger, but in the hopes I'll understand.

"It's their way." Three weeks later, my grandmother was dead. I know it had something to do with cancer, but what I remembered most (as a young child) is that she died in my bed. I had to sleep in my sister's room. Why do I think of this grandfather who couldn't even talk to me, who could only say "hello" (in English) and pat my head?

I go out for a drink. Filled with books, papers and ideas. I stop at a singles bar in the Plateau where there are many people, voices, music, smoke, shouting and laughter. But tonight, there's no one here I know. Standing alone, watching others casually cruise and flirt, I remember my teen years on the prairies.

> Tonight, in the sky
> Even the stars
> Seem to whisper
> To one another.
> Oraga Haru Issa, *The Year of my Life*

Day Twenty-one

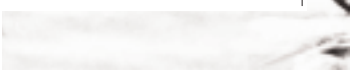
Last day. One final glance to that Bruss article. In studying, we don't just read the things we want to hear.

"It is doubtful," she remarks, "that the effects of shooting, editing and staging are capable of expressing what we conventionally call 'personality' to the degree that language can" (306). To distinguish the point of view of the first-person narrator in film from that of literature, "Mieke Bal has recently proposed a separate category, a 'focalizer' as distinct from 'narrator,' to make the different qualities of these vantage points more clear" (306).

Bruss argues " … there is a total absence of 'identity-value' in film. In speaking, 'I' merge easily, almost inextricably, with another 'I' whose character and adventures I am claiming as my own" (307). But as Bruss points out, in film there is an impassable barrier between the person seeing and the person seen, because the film spectator is always out of the frame. A merging of subjects would require the viewer to be in two places at once (307). Viewing films could relate to our sense of privacy, anonymity—viewing, yet feeling unseen. Bruss quotes Cavell: "We do not so much look at the world as look out at it, from behind the self" (317).

As Hoffman himself has noted, "when photography was invented, painting changed; but photography never replaced landscape painting. If avant-garde film is dying in its struggle to survive, let's celebrate its death and make it into something else" (1978). Perhaps film could offer a new way of experiencing ourselves. Bruss concludes:

> Film simply shares—or better, articulates—the dilemmas of
> an entire culture now irrevocably committed to complex



technologies and intricate social interdependencies. To make the means of film human without falling back on outworn humanism, to achieve more fluid modes of collaboration and diversity rather then the standardized expression, to establish practices in which "I" may no longer exist in the same way but nonetheless cannot escape my own participation—these concerns are not unique to film but among the most fundamental problems that confront "the age of mechanical reproduction" as a whole. (320)

Works Cited

Bruss, Elizabeth.
"Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical.* Ed. James Olney. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980.
296-320.

Eakin, Paul John.
Fictions in Autobiography. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1985.

Gorbman, Claudia.
Unheard Melodies—Narrative Film Music. Indiana University Press, 1987.

Handke, Peter.
The Weight of the World. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984.

Hoffman, Philip.
Artist's Statement. *Autobiography*. Ed. John Stuart Katz. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978.

Lane, Jim.
"Notes on Theory and the Autobiographical Documentary Film in America." *Wide Angle* 15-3 (July 1993).
21-36.

Meinig, D.W.
The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: *Geographical Essays*. London: Oxford UP, 1979.

Nichols, Bill.
Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary Film. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.

Renov, Michael.
"The Subject in History—The New Autobiography in Film and Video." *Afterimage* 17-1 (1989).
4–7.

Sprinker, Michael.
"Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical.* Ed. James Olney. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980.

NOTES ON RIVER

by Philip Hoffman

The Saugeen River was named Sauking, "where it all flows out," by the Ojibwa in the early 1800s. It runs into Lake Huron. The place where I know it is twenty miles south of Owen Sound, Ontario, near Williamsford, where I spent lots of time in my youth exploring. Over the past dozen years I've returned there to film and collected these moments in a fifteen minute meditation called simply, *river*. In 1977 I arrived with a wind-up Bolex and one roll of 16mm colour film. In 1981 with a half-inch, reel-to-reel, black-and-white video portapak. In 1984, indoors now, I used a rear screen set up to record the original 16mm footage on video. And finally, in 1989, I went for the first time beneath the surface of the water, the camera loaded with hi-con printer stock.

All the video images were transferred to film in the version that's now in distribution, though I sometimes still screen the piece as a film/video installation—once even outside, in a forest, on the snow.

On the way to the river to shoot the underwater section in 1989, I made a quick call to my parents, who live near the Saugeen, to let them know I was on the way up. My mother told me that my uncle had been found dead that day. He shot himself by the river (a different river) near our home town. She told me not to tell anyone because his immediate family wanted to say it was a heart attack. I got into the car with Garrick and Tim, my friends who were helping me with the filming, and we drove up. Churning inside.

I know that the death had something to do with what we filmed that day, and how I edited the section. I used the filming and editing as a way to mourn for him whom I cared for, who never had the chance to be heard.

In this last section of the river, underwater, I gave up the camera. I told Garrick—"just start the camera and let the current take us." I stood in the boat wondering about the death and watching. Giving up my hold on the camera.

KITCHENER-BERLIN: OR HOW ONE BECOMES TWO (OR NONE)

by Steve Reinke

I know it's a hollow rhetorical ploy, a cliché even, an excuse for a certain kind of sloppiness, unpreparedness, but I mean it sincerely: I have given up on the essay I meant to write. Instead I submit these pathetic notes in the form of a letter asking for forgiveness. By now I should be used to my failure as a critic. I continually back away from planned essays, taking refuge in the literary: the aphorism, the satiric manifesto, the autobiographical anecdote. But this retreat is more disappointing than most. When I watched *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) again (I hadn't seen it in many years), I was struck by its rightness, its perfection. It seemed to me exemplary. Trebly exemplary: to (or as) the work of Hoffman, to Canadian cinema, and to experimental film. The film surely merits close textual analyses from a variety of approaches. Moreover, it seemed to me that these analyses would constitute a more general discussion of experimental film as an endeavor.

Apology

Sure, art is long and life is short, but I am not troubled by this condition. What bothers me is that art is complex and I am simple, though conflicted: stupid. Art makes dullards of us all. Writing about it is a clumsy thing, doomed always to miss what is most significant and instead gloss the petty. Criticism becomes an act of contrition, an extended apology. I am sorry, and sorry that this is the case.

Film Contra Video

Experimental video is centred around the voice: an individual talking, rhetorically deploying a particular subjectivity in relation to a certain construction of consciousness. Video is willfully interior: its relation to the world is never direct, but processed through a particular subjectivity. Video is thus doubly mediated; there is no direct perception, no immediate apprehension of the world. One cannot speak of phenomenology in relation to video without undue strain. Experimental film

stills: *Kitchener-Berlin*. Photo courtesy of Kitchener Public Library, "Rescuing the Bust of the Kaiser from Victoria Park Lake," Kitchener 1916.

has a completely different relation to voice and the world. There is no such thing as a "personal" film. The voice in film always aspires to be the voice-of-God. Film is singly mediated, self-consciously authored by authors who retreat behind subjectivity to become merely thinking, perceiving bodies. Interiority is impossible, the world itself impinges too strongly. Experimental video proceeds through a process of talking to one's self as if one had a self; experimental film through a process of swallowing or incorporating the world into a self that is no longer human, but an author, a hollow signature attempting to structure perception.

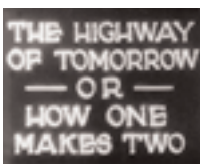
Deleuze

This season it's all about Deleuze's cinema books. I keep reading these books because his distinction between the time-image and movement-image seems a fertile launching point for a discussion of experimental film. But the only films people seem to discuss are Hitchcock's (when Žižek via Lacan should have silenced them all, at least long enough so these hacks could take a break and think a little bit harder). I asked Laura Marks why Deleuze is so rarely applied to artists' film and video. (She is one of the few academics who has used Deleuzian ideas to discuss experimental work.) She replied that, because artists like Hoffman are applying Deleuze's insights directly, (that is, literally enacting or embodying the ideas in their work rather than merely referring to or discussing them), the need for commentators to apply (reapply) a Deleuzian perspective is not so pressing, and per-

haps even redundant. This is probably true, but still I am not satisfied, and regret I am not able to supply such an analysis at this time. But here is what I have learned from Deleuze: there is a kind of vertiginous ecstasy in being always on the verge of coherency, in endlessly deferring sense with the hope that one approaches something previously unfathomable.

Dream

I dreamt last night that I came across a book called *Kitchener-Berlin* and it was a really big book—lots of words, hardly any pictures, a few diagrams—something between an encyclopedia and an autobiography. It contained all the information about the images in the film, where they came from and what they mean. This dream is partly a response to my hermeneutic anxiety—a feeling that I can't write about the film without a greater level of mastery, specifically the ability to form a reading based on an extensive knowledge of what is depicted in individual shots. So while I continue to remain firm that *Kitchener-Berlin* does not call for that kind of interpretation (that is, will not constructively yield to a directly hermeneutical approach), perhaps the film's dream book does (and would). Perhaps this dream book is a bible situated between the artist and the film and ready, in its encyclopedic detail, to tell us everything. We would study the book endlessly in order to derive increasingly accurate interpretations of the film. And the film itself—the hermetic, incorruptible art object—would sink into the background, as pure and coyly mysterious as the Mona Lisa.



still: *Kitchener-Berlin*

CIRCUITOUS QUESTS: PASSING THROUGH PHILIP HOFFMAN'S FAMILY CYCLE

by Peter Harcourt

I entertain the thesis that "avant-garde" in Canada is an instance of misprision and that the notion of experimental documentary may prove more productive in a Canadian context.
Michael Dorland[1]

1. International Experimental Film Congress, 33

There is a moment in Philip Hoffman's *passing through/torn formations* (1988) when we see a young boy entering a culvert. At a later moment, we see him coming out again. Who is this character? What is he looking for? How does he relate to the young girl we see at other moments in the film, sometimes in a field with cows?

As the film evolves, we might be able to infer that the girl is Andrea, a niece of the filmmaker, and that she is standing in for Sue, the filmmaker's mother, for the re-enactment of a story concerning Sue's childhood in Czechoslovakia, when she one day went looking for some cows. But who is the boy? *passing through* is the most probing film of Hoffman's Family Cycle films.[2] It is the most intricately concerned with a sense of quest. As a Canadian of European extraction, Hoffman is trying to understand the world in which he lives.

2. The Cycle includes all films made between 1978 and 1990. (see Hoffman list of works.)

Philip Hoffman belongs to the third generation of Canadian experimental filmmakers. He is part of what is now referred to as the Escarpment School. As Mike Hoolboom has explained:

> The Escarpment School is a loosely knit group of filmmakers that includes the likes of Rick Hancox, Carl Brown, Gary Popovich, Marian McMahon, Steve Sanguedolce, Philip Hoffman and Richard Kerr. Born and raised along the craggy slopes of the Canadian Shield, their work typically conjoins memory and landscape in a home movie/documentary-based production that is at once personal, poetic and reflexive. (43-44)

The notion of home movie is important. Like his friend, Richard Kerr, Hoffman

often employs the diary as impetus for more extended inquiries.

As much a photograph album as a diary, *On the Pond* (1978) was an auspicious beginning. Already Hoffman's family is everywhere; already he is concerned with the past; and already Hoffman combines family photographs with dramatic re-enactments, this time using a cousin, Bradley Noel, as stand-in for himself as a boy.

The structure of the film is simple, the effect immediate. While photographs fill the screen, we hear the ooing and awing of Phil's family remembering past times. There are shots of Phil's cousins and sisters, one of whom, Franny, speaks the desire of the film. "I wanna go back," she exclaims, as we see a photograph of two girls pirouetting on the ice beside Phil with a hockey stick. The wish to go back provides the thrust for all these films, as if by examining where he has been, Hoffman might better understand who he has become.

Already in this student film, Hoffman the filmmaker senses the limitations of Phil, the boy. An aspiring jock performing push-ups on the ice, going fishing, playing hockey, even if it is just passing the puck around with Princess, the family dog—while still a young man, Hoffman already recognizes that the projector of these values and the soundtrack of this life are exhausted. When the boy Phil goes out onto the pond (actually Lake McCullough) to push the puck around with Princess and a friend as if for one last time, the projector and record-player are left flapping away in his basement room. The story they have registered has come to an end.

If the life explored in *On the Pond* is over by the time filmmaking began, the same is true of *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983). Incorporating some "road journals" that Hoffman shot while still at Sheridan College, the film achieves a complex structure for what seems a simple piece. The older footage, shot both on Super-8 and on 16mm colour reversal, refers to previous trips, travelling west. But now, again with his friend Jim McMurry and also with Richard Kerr, the journey is east to Newfoundland. A tension is established between the journeys west—the footage of the past—and the journey east, the footage of the present. The point of view also moves from external to internal. Hoffman has explained the structure of the film:

> The first part is the external trip. It's getting on the road and moving forward. There's more of a linear plot there. Then there's a dissolve into a red screen. Now I look inside the van. The film becomes more psychological and emotional. That's when it starts jumping around, which gives me the go-ahead to be non-linear because I'm dealing with the emotional things that are happening on the trip. In the third part, it goes to blue, which are the realizations. It begins

3. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Philip Hoffman are from a personal interview conducted on 27 June 2000.

still: *The Road Ended at the Beach.* June Leaf and Robert Frank.

with me looking at close-ups of film on the light-box."[3]

The idea of "realizations" needs to be explained, but first we might examine how the film jumps around. Leaping forward in space and then back again, the film fudges its own sense of direction. We see Dan with his wood-carving before we know who he is; we have a flash-back of Jim in his studio in Ann Arbor, unrecognizable as he manages molten metal; Robert Frank, an icon of the independent American spirit, appears and then appears again. Geography is scrambled as the destination becomes unclear. The structure thus enacts, kinaesthetically, the confusions in Hoffman's mind. *The Road Ended at the Beach* becomes, in Michael Dorland's apt phrase, a "documentary of consciousness" (153). Hoffman wanted to make a road movie in the tradition of Jack Kerouac. "I expected adventure," his commentary explains, "But somehow the road had died since the first trip west with Jim."

The film engages us, however, not only through its structure but also through the random characters we encounter on the trip. A hitch-hiker is picked up who once appeared in a Robert Frank film; Mark, an accomplished trumpeter, jams with Jim in Ottawa; Conrad Dubé, initially a polio victim, has bicycled several times around the world—a man who, as Jim explains (drawing upon Aboriginal legend), has perhaps been "touched by God"; and Rup Chand, a Tibetan friend of Jim's, establishes with an Urdu diary appropriate spiritual expectations at the beginning of the film.

The encounter with Robert Frank could have been a destination, but is actually a non-event. Like *On The Pond*, *The Road Ended at the Beach* becomes an

exorcism of received ideas about male buddy-ism and adolescent adventure. Although Jim's dog is named (dogs are an important part of buddy bonding), Phil's sister Philomene, who is present on one of the previous journeys, remains unidentified!

After we hear Jim declaiming, in front of an "Export A" billboard, "I wanna live, I wanna find some place better," the film does achieve a kind of nirvana. The "realizations" that Hoffman referred to entail a recognition that such inherited quests must now discover a different kind of harmony.

The beach the road ends at is Burgeo, on the south coast of Newfoundland, about two-hundred kilometres east of Port aux Basques. The camera holds on the waterfront for an extended period, almost undetectable jump-cuts foreshortening time as dogs and children gambol back and forth with no direction and no perceivable goal. An island is visible in the distance and, along with a nonsense verse sung off-screen by a young girl, we hear the sounds of surf. Because we also heard these sounds at the beginning of the film, these sonic references to nature bring this filmic odyssey acoustically to a close. The quest is over, the scrambled journey at an end. The beach represents the surrendering of desire, a sense of peacefulness before inevitably moving on. Once again, Hoffman the filmmaker prepares the way for Phil the character to mature and expand.

Since the 1970s, when experimental film began to find a tiny place in academe and occasional sources of financing through government agencies, the practice may have lost its innovative edge. In a polemical piece published in the *Millennium Film Journal* in 1987, Fred Camper complained that the institutionalization of experimental film has produced schools of supposedly avant-garde practice, but with none of the genuine creativity that had marked the works of (say) Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage in the past. "By the start of the institutional period," he contends, "the fundamental techniques and values of avant-garde filmmaking have already been established, and what once was a movement now becomes a genre" (120-121).

Lamentations for originary moments in film–viewing experiences are legion. Experiences are never as vibrant as they were in the days when we were young! Furthermore, in his insistence on internal coherence and on individual creativity standing out against the conformity of mass society, Camper is romantically modernist and relentlessly American. With the passing of time, however, the notion of "genre" can be seen in a different light. As Janine Marchessault has suggested:

> If modernism was characterized by the drive towards origin and purity, then the post-modernist practices of a new generation of filmmakers emphasize heterogeneity of materials: a reconciliation of forms at once profoundly cynical and

politically hopeful. (*International Experimental Film Congress* 115)

Marchessault goes on to suggest that the films of this generation "take on the difficult task of making sense through the fragment" and she concludes that "the struggle to create meaning out of chaos, to express a different conception of history and experience is one that, in Canada, continues to be strongly inspired by our documentary tradition" (115).

Traditionally using a wind-up Bolex and thus a minimum of synchronous sound, often keeping separate the elements of sound and image, the filmmakers of the Escarpment School are dedicated to a fresh, simultaneous exploration of the relation between film viewers and film works, and between self and world. If the diary format dominates, with the narration generally in the first-person singular, the films also retain a documentary integrity in relation to the historical world.

The Road Ended at the Beach was followed by *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984). On the surface a slight film and supposedly a documentary, it is extremely evocative and, on examination, may be more complex than it appears. Apparently shot in Mexico, *Somewhere Between* conveys a sense of suspension, a waiting in the face of an alterity that Hoffman has no heart to penetrate. Although we see Mexican musicians in the film, the sounds of Mike Callich's saxophone come from another space. Mexican footage is abandoned to silence, conveying the sense of nightmare or dream. Unlike the Coca-Cola sign that hangs over a village intersection, Hoffman feels he has no right to be in this forbidding place. Private events occur that ought not to be invaded.

The crucial privacy concerns a dead boy in the streets, whom Hoffman decides not to film. Intertitles inspired by haiku serve as narrative markers, telling the story we are not allowed to see. However, we do witness images of a religious procession and of Christian icons appropriate for the solemnity of death. Meanwhile, the solo saxophone continues along its apparently uncaring, improvisational path.

The structure of *Somewhere Between* is entirely contrapuntal. The three filmic elements of image, sound, and language (here exclusively in the form of intertitles) are all kept separate, coming together serendipitously from time to time as when, for a moment, the acoustic rhythms of the saxophone seem in synch with the visual rhythms of a Mexican drummer. Although the film conveys the feeling of an impenetrable territory, a space of suspension between two worlds, "the bardo state in Buddhist terms," as Hoffman once explained, (*Inside the Pleasure Dome* 142) attentive viewers may observe that much of the film was shot elsewhere. The religious procession, the Feast of Fatima, was filmed in Toronto. The band we see and the radiant girl at the end of the film, seemingly the dead boy's sister, were actually filmed in Colorado—at a conference in honour of Jack Kerouac!

While partly the result of low-budget exigencies, this geographical cheating

still: *Somewhere Between Jalostotilan and Encarnacion.*

suggests universality. The film is placed in Mexico, perhaps initially still in homage to Kerouac and Cassady, as in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, but death occurs everywhere. Religious processions celebrate the mysteries of existence, and young girls gaze out at us—whether Dan's lovely daughter in Sable River, Nova Scotia, during a key moment in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, or a nameless child on her rock shell, supposedly the sister of the dead boy in the streets of Mexico but actually a stranger from Boulder, Colorado.

> The little girl
> With big eyes
> Waits by her dead brother
>
> Big trucks spit black smoke
> Clouds hung
> The boy's spirit left through its blue.

So conclude the final bits of printed commentary in Hoffman's *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, anchoring it in a specific place that, in actuality, we have scarcely seen. If, as in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, the roads of the Beats are now closed to Hoffman's generation, perhaps so too is Mexico as a site for mystic contemplation. Except by sly ruse. For if we think about it, was there ever, in reality, a dead boy in the streets?

Though my work in film always deals with place, I find it odd that the place where I live and work is near-absent in my films … I question to what degree the present place where I am affects the output of the work.
Philip Hoffman

For Philip Hoffman, going home has generally entailed a going away. The three major works of his Family Cycle all explore an elsewhere. In their very different ways, both *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986) and *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) explore the paternal inheritance, while *passing through/torn formations* (1988) explores the maternal one. All three of them touch upon fracturing and disease. Let us look at the two male films together.

?O,Zoo! doesn't appear to be a family film. Demonstrably, it is the most public film that Hoffman has ever made. It is certainly the wittiest, the most self-reflexive, the most deliberately theoretical. As Blaine Allan has written:

> *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* is ostensibly about the making of Peter Greenaway's feature film, *A Zed & Two Noughts*, the production of which Phil Hoffman was invited to the Netherlands to observe. However, Hoffman's film actually concerns the terms and conditions under which it was itself made. In part, the film translates actuality and memory into invention and fiction in which the symbolic father is cast as a real ancestor. Hoffman rewrites the Canadian documentary tradition into a family memory and romance. (90-91)

Indeed, the fiction film that *?0,Zoo!* supposedly observes is as much Hoffman's as Greenaway's. For *?0,Zoo!* is a fiction—a fiction about family and a fiction about film. Although the film is narrated as if in the first person, Hoffman withholds his own voice. He also invokes a host of imaginary father figures.

To begin with, there is the fictional grandfather, the newsreel cameraman, who made films supposedly for some federal film agency—an oblique reference to the National Film Board. The "old battle-axe" referred to is obviously John Grierson—the father of documentary and godfather of Canadian film. There is also the fleeting presence, evidently innocently included, of the source footage for *Watching for the Queen* (1973), a film by David Rimmer, one of the "father figures" of the first generation of Canadian experimental film.[4] Next there is a fuzzy shot of the Pope as seen on TV and even a decapitated statue of Christ in a Rotterdam square. Finally, there is the presence of Peter Greenaway, with his huge production facilities for the fabrication of his fanciful universe.

4. At the time of filming, Hoffman had not yet seen David Rimmer's film.

Purporting to be a documentary, offering us "truth" in the way that documentary is assumed to do, *?O,Zoo!* actually lies about its own practice. It constantly invites us to look carefully at discrepancies between images and sounds. In one scene, we witness swans swimming in a pond while their absence is described.

Furthermore, the film playfully parallels Greenaway's. Like *A Zed & Two Noughts*, Hoffman's short examines the relationship between earth and world, between nature and civilization's efforts to tame it, whether through confinement in zoos or through photographic representations.[5] If Greenaway's film involves dismemberment, Hoffman's shows decapitation. If there are two brothers in *A Zed & Two Noughts*, there are two boys in *?O,Zoo!* If Michael Nyman's musical score is a witty part of Greenaway's film, so Tucker Zimmerman's pulsational minimalism is a witty part of Hoffman's film. As Hoffman has explained:

> It may be my story but there's a lot borrowed from Greenaway. Even my voice-over is like a Greenaway ruse. It's playful and there's humour in it—the kids playing with the shoes and getting shooed away by the parents. It has that play with language.

If the death of a boy in *Somewhere Betwee*n was too private to film, so the death of an elephant in *?O,Zoo!* prompts the same kind of discretion. Except that in this film, the death is definitely a lie. Not only might we have noticed on one of the camera report sheets the scribble, "Elephant gets up," but by the end of the film—after the closing titles—we do indeed witness a resurrection!

Only in relation to Hoffman's other work can *?O,Zoo!* appear as a family film; yet without some recognition of family, the concluding shot of an old man with a camera in his hand walking side by side with a young boy wouldn't make much sense. The boy isn't Phil, but it could be; and as always in Hoffman's films, they are both, supposedly, relatives.

An immensely playful film rich in observational detail, *?O,Zoo!* moves us by its intimacy, yet challenges our assumptions about the nature of filmic truth. Hoffman acknowledges that the film "is less the diary of personal experience than an exploration of the ways in which we create fiction to make meaning of lived experience" (*Toronto: A Play of History* 157). As an "experimental documentary," it is an extraordinary achievement.

Less satisfactory, it seems to me, is Hoffman's *Kitchener-Berlin*. As a family film, it is certainly less accessible. Comprising footage shot by his paternal Uncle John, the images are less anchored in an observable reality, and Hoffman seems absent from his own film. Mapping such a work is difficult. Abstract in conception, the film is more concerned with ideas than people. "The film is about technology and its rise, which is the machine world," Hoffman has explained. Perhaps

5. By way of Bruce Elder, Dennis Lee, and Martin Heidegger. See R. Bruce Elder's "Forms of Cinema, Models of Self: Jack Chambers' The Hart of London" in *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada*, 264-274.

still: *Kitchener-Berlin.*

desiring to retreat from the insistent family preoccupations of *passing through/torn formations*, in *Kitchener-Berlin* the "here" is contrasted with the "there," activities with buildings; however, in both the new world and the old, a restless camera mounted on a steadicam floats about, collapsing discernible differences.

Although the steadicam is itself an example of technology, Hoffman employed it for metaphysical reasons. "There's an obvious kind of spiritual feel to it, because you're floating in a world where the sky and ground are equivalent," he writes (Inside the Pleasure Dome 145). But this assertion may not make sense. To what extent can "the body of film itself, its flesh and voice," as Bruce Elder once insisted, achieve film's "liberating potential"? (International Experimental Film Congress 45) Although films may aspire to the condition of transcendence, I would argue that if the stylistic tropes of cinema can suggest eternity, they cannot depict it. For instance, about *?O,Zoo!* Blaine Allan has written:

> A scene shot with a static camera captures the sight of Greenaway's camera crew in liquid motion as they track laterally across the screen. The dolly and tracks are concealed below the frame line and the figures float across space, appearing as disjoined from the earth as actors against a painted or projected backdrop. (91)

Here the connotation of weightlessness is arguably more evocative within an observable filmic space than when earth and sky are collapsed, as throughout

Kitchener-Berlin. Furthermore, with the male display of slaughtered animals earlier in the film and the family scenes of enforced Christmas kissing towards the end, *Kitchener-Berlin* seems too reminiscent of Jack Chambers' *The Hart of London* (1970), but without the personal voice that so tentatively concludes Chambers' "transcendent" film.

As part of its patrimony, in *Kitchener-Berlin*, images of aggressive male activities recur. The cannons of war shoot missiles away from the earth; miners drill at its entrails beneath. The Pope makes an appearance, again on television, blessing Aboriginals; a magnificent cathedral in Cologne appears to be "penetrated" by a huge, orange crane.

At the centre of the film is an apparent newsreel item about a dirigible flight from England to Canada. As elderly twins are supposedly involved in filming the flight, the item repeats Hoffman's concern with splitting and doubling. *Kitchener-Berlin* is also in two parts, the second part more impersonal than the first. As Hoffman has explained:

> The second part of the film moves towards the surreal. I tried to make the second half of the film without thinking. So with the sunflowers out of focus and the cave, it becomes like a Brakhage psychic-type film, and especially at that time I was touched by Brakhage.

still: *passing through/torn formations.*

Hoffman has also suggested that "the way the images arrive is a surprise. They don't seem to connect and, formally, they're hard to follow."[6] Many viewers would agree. Although its visceral appeal is palpable, *Kitchener-Berlin* is difficult to grasp conceptually. The references are too arbitrary. Like the ongoing *river* project (1979-89), *Kitchener-Berlin* perhaps works best at a precognitive level—as a film of surfaces, psychedelic superimpositions and kinaesthetic effects. It marks a retreat from the examination of the specificities of Hoffman's family inheritance, as represented by *passing through/torn formations*, and moves through abstractions toward some kind of closure to this family cycle. There is also, perhaps, a sense of fatigue.

6. This "newsreel" footage is itself a ruse, contrived by Dent Harrison, the creator and actor of the sequence. He doubled himself by superimpositions to create his twin brother.

After the achievement of *passing through/torn formations*, a sense of fatigue would be understandable. If *?O,Zoo!* is Hoffman's most public film, *passing through* is his most private. At the same time, through the choreography of its images and through the guiding presence of Hoffman's questing voice, it is the most fully realized of the Family Cycle.

The film begins with the voice of Christopher Dewdney. While the screen remains dark, he speaks about a boy freeing a dead moth from its fossilization within a piece of layered stone, thereby establishing the geological dimension of the film. The story also establishes a specificity of space. Dewdney explains, "You feel sure that you could recognize these clouds with their limestone texture out of random cloud photographs from all over the world."

passing through is dedicated to Babji, Phil's grandmother. She is, of course, the mother of Sue, Phil's mother, but also of Wally, the disturbed uncle who is the unseen victim/hero of the film. A tale told with love, *passing through/torn formations* is full of shadows. Speaking Polish on Czechoslovakian soil that had once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kaczmarzyk family has been afflicted by fragmentation as well as sickness. Europe has been ravaged by two world wars and families are scattered in the pursuit of emigration.

After the Dewdney poem at the opening, there is a silent scene of Babji in a nursing home, being cared for by Sue. The silence is eerie, as is the blue wash of colour. Although we can see the women talking, we cannot hear what they are saying. While the camera cuts away to register curtains on a window and flowers on a table, we get a sense of the perishability of life—a perishability reinforced by the end-of-roll flare that keeps recurring on the screen, suggesting by association the end of Babji's life.

The simplest way of unpacking this film might be to deal with two sustaining moments: (a) Wally's instability, his need for a corner mirror, and his accordion; and (b) Sue's recurring depressions and the scene of the missing cows. Both moments embrace healing.

The mirror was devised by Wally in his schizophrenic panic as an attempt to deal with his split personality—to see himself as others see him, in double reflection. Like the mirror, Wally's accordion is also an image of splitting and doubling, since the left hand deals with the bass and the right hand with the melody. Performance is part of healing, of putting the two sides together. As Hoffman's commentary explains, " … while Polish polka turns to Irish jig, turns to German march, and then a note repeats itself, again and again," the scattering of self and of national cultures is contained by music. "The music was a vacant place to return to," Hoffman recites. "Over and over. His playing gave him passage."

Born during sickness, Wally is the victim of historical and personal events. There had been the influenza epidemic at the time of Babji's birth, as there had been a boil on Babji's neck at the time of Wally's. "He is to me," Hoffman has clarified, "the epicentre of the pain of the family." Wally exists at "the point where the old world and the new world collide" (*Inside the Pleasure Dome* 146). Like the cyclist in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, Wally too has perhaps been "touched by God."

The scene of the missing cows addresses the healing powers of memory, both for Phil's mother, whose story it is, and for young Andrea in Czechoslovakia, who helped Phil recreate it. Sue has often been subject to severe depressions, a situation referred to as far back as *On The Pond*. Part of her healing, Hoffman's film implies, involves the recovery of memory through the sharing of stories, central to which is the story of the cows.

The story is both told and recreated—once again blurring past and present, fact and fiction, images and words. For instance, Sue is often framed at the lower right-hand corner of the screen, translating from Hoffman's Polish interviews, and the family references are both specific and general. Family members from Canada and relatives from Czechoslovakia are not easy to identify because their identities continually shift and slide. These characters are transferable throughout the film; for instance, you see an image or images of a certain person with an accompanying voice-over. Later on, different voices are attached to the image of the person earlier seen. The technique is a way of avoiding the conventional approach to character construction, whereby the character's identity gets pinned down and there's less work for the audience.

Throughout *passing through*, the camera constantly pans over the gnarled trunks of old trees and along stone fences, the images sometimes superimposed over photographs of family, sometimes on their own. Not only do the fences echo the opening image of the fossilized rock, but as Gary Popovich suggests elsewhere in this volume, the "blue blood that surges through her [Babji's] body finds its mirrored image in the craggy rock formations of her homeland, where her grandson now makes his pilgrimage" (59).

Are these stone fences barriers against easy entry into the past, into the oth-

erness of a relinquished world? Or are they structures of containment—enduring punctuations of human spaces that have evolved over time? If metaphorically the walls are barriers, with the passing of time they have also become culturally created geological formations. They are part of the natural world that, with our addiction to the practicalities of wire fencing, has been lost in North America.

Like the moth emerging from stone in Dewdney's poem, the present emerges from the past. While there is damage—the formations may be torn—there is also life. As Tucker Zimmerman can transform Wally's accordion riffs into the impulsional portamenti that animate this film, so an equilibrium can be found within this world of veined hands and craggy fields.

After the final shots of the stone fences that demarcate the fields of present-day Slovakia, over black leader we hear Marian McMahon reading from her memoir, *A Circuitous Quest*: "Early one morning, when I was eight years old, I skipped a flat stone across the surface of Lake Kashagawigamog." Momentarily, weight has been defied. A stone has been made to float. Balance has been achieved—and with it, a sense of wonder.

Hoffman's Family Cycle films consist entirely of quest stories. They follow the circuitous movement of away and return. The early journeys of *On The Pond* and *The Road Ended at the Beach* are a questing after self; the later ones—*Somewhere Between*, *?O,Zoo!* and *passing through/torn formations*—register a confrontation with alterity. Perhaps it is the absence of a personal confrontation that renders *Kitchener-Berlin*, to my mind, a less satisfactory achievement.

In Hoffman's work, the quest can be seen as a personalized enactment of everyone's journey through life. The quest embodies a search for more individual goals, not all of them attainable. Although the past may be explored, it cannot be claimed. If you do manage to go back, as Franny wanted to do in *On the Pond*, you cannot stay there. As Janine Marchessault has declared, "Memories are immutable cells that can be rearranged but never made to speak" (28).

Hence, except for the "realizations" of the closing shot, the quest in *The Road Ended at the Beach* is a "failure." When the Beats were in their prime throughout the 1950s, politically the world was opening up. By the 1980s, it was closing down. "The Beats were the fathers I took on the trip," Hoffman has explained, "but their roads are closed now" (International Experimental Film Congress 116). Besides which the Beats' quest was probably too American, too drug-induced, and perhaps, finally, too homoerotic to serve as a controlling model for a young buck from southern Ontario. Hoffman has had to retreat from such classic allegorical journeys to enable him to move forward in his own life and work.

Similarly, the films of the Escarpment School signal a retreat from modernism. Although Bruce Elder, with his musical commitment to Wagnerian repetition and redundancy, still strives to achieve works of high modernism in a post-

modern age, the filmmakers of the Escarpment School espouse more modest goals. Their quests are less concerned with self in relation to metaphysical transcendence than with self in relation to the social world.

The important point, then, about the boy exploring the culvert in *passing through/torn formations* is not who he is or what he might find or even what his relationship is (if any) to Hoffman's family: the important point is the fact that he is looking. He embodies the curiosity of a new generation, attentive to discovering his own voice within the landscape available to him and to making his own peace with the world.

So once again, we return to documentary. Through the confrontation of self with alterity, with the fractured otherness of the world in which he lives, Hoffman seeks to make sense of his historical world. And yet, at his best—supremely in *passing through/torn formations*, with its movement through disease, derangement and death toward moments of epiphany—this confrontation does achieve a spiritual dimension. Drawing upon a theological term adduced by Dennis Lee when writing about Al Purdy, we might refer to a mysterium tremendum—a holy otherness. "An appropriate response to the tremendum," Lee elucidates, "is awe, joy, terror, gratitude"—exactly the emotions we may feel while experiencing Hoffman's most achieved films (141).

The experimental cinema of Philip Hoffman embodies some of the finest attributes of the work of his generation. Like his colleagues, Richard Kerr, Gary Popovich, and Mike Hoolboom (among others), through the diary format Hoffman achieves a cinematic poetry that is as distinguished as any experimental films today. In a world in which theatrical film has become a big brass band, the filmmakers of the Escarpment School content themselves with chamber films—with trios or string quartets, sometimes made for instruments with only two or three strings!

Bart Testa once suggested that these films become, finally, "voyages of discovery that shift interest onto formal questions of how meaning is disclosed and expressed" (92). This self-reflective play throughout Hoffman's work constitutes a large part of its value. If experimental filmmaking is now really "a tradition which new filmmakers have to face," as Fred Camper has insisted (35), Philip Hoffman has faced it with courage and originality. The circuitous quests undertaken by his Family Cycle films enshrine his lasting value as an important Canadian artist working in film.

Works Cited

I would like to thank Barbara Goslawski and Alan McNairn of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto for re-screening Hoffman's films for me; Mike Hoolboom for having invited me to write this article and for his most helpful suggestions; and, of course, Phil Hoffman himself, both for his trust and for his films.

Allan, Blaine.
"It's not finished yet (Some Notes on Toronto Filmmaking)." *Toronto: A Play of History*. Ed. Louise Dompierre et. al. Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987.
90-91.

Camper, Fred.
"The End of Avant-Garde Film." *Millennium Film Journal 16/17* (Fall/Winter 1986/87).
99-124.

Dorland, Michael.
"The Void is Not So Bleak: Rhetoric and Structure in Canadian Experimental Film." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory 14*, No. 1-3 (Montreal, 1990).
148-159.

Hoffman, Philip.
"A Play of History." *Toronto: A Play of History*.
100-101.

Hoffman, Philip.
"Philip Hoffman: Pictures of Home." *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*. Ed. Mike Hoolboom. Toronto: Gutter Press, 1997.
138-147.

Hoolboom, Mike.
"A History of the Canadian Avant-Garde in Film." *The Visual Aspect: Recent Canadian Experimental Films*. Éditions des Archives du Film Experimental d'Avignon, 1991.
43-44.

International Experimental Film Congress. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989.

Lee, Dennis.
Body Music. Toronto: Anansi, 1998.

Marchessault, Janine.
Lift Newsletter. November 1988, Toronto.
28.

Povovich, Gary.
"passing through/torn formations, by Philip Hoffman." *LIFT Newsletter*, 1988.
26-28.

Testa, Bart.
Spirit in a Landscape. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989.