

MIKE CARTMELL



WRITINGS

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Contents

A person is running on a sandy beach towards the ocean. The scene is captured at sunset or sunrise, with the sky and water reflecting a warm, orange-red glow. The person's silhouette is dark against the lighter sand and water. The waves are visible in the background, creating a sense of movement and tranquility.

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Landscape with Shipwreck

You've left out a lot.

No doubt. But is it ever possible to avoid gaps, ruptures, deficiencies, omissions, even ignorances and stupidities, in a commentary of this sort? Isn't every reading (viewing) always and only partial, the "taking" of a reading, as if checking temperature or humidity or rainfall, which must be re-enacted a vast multiplicity of times before any reasonably valid conceptualization of the climate can be gauged? And isn't that conceptualization at best only "reasonably valid," since at bottom the climatic system is chaotic, borne by uncertain and ungauged disturbances, critically unpredictable, in the last instance outside representation or symbolization? You can never be sure when you'll wind up in peril.

You seem obsessed with the weather. What does this have to do with anything?

Well, you see where I'm living. But I don't think the metaphor's inapt. I've tried to say (as is true for all that we can, with integrity, call "art") that at the heart of this "body" of work lies coiled a disturbing, chaotic, unpredictable, unmasterable "something;" compelling while repulsive, terrifying yet enchanting, offering a serene forecast of shelter, warmth, comfort at the same time that it bodes implacably the perilous risk of absolute loss, fracture, desheltering.

Or, to shift ground a little and bring you back to your theme, we could call this precarious "something" (following your beloved Blanchot) "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs."

I hear that, chère! I'm beginning to think I might could have a twin brother.



Well, we've been spending an awful lot of time together; perhaps we've come to resemble one another. But let me ask you this: I understand your lack of enthusiasm for the seamless text, but this is a pretty herky-jerky collection of observations, quotations (the relevance of which is often questionable), theses (on occasion possibly half-baked, or once in a while even over-baked), reminiscences, rhetorical questions, and so on. It seems at times that you barely have a plan. How is the reader to make sense out of this?

I have no desire to instruct readers on how to read, any more than I'd be inclined to instruct film-goers on how to view (if it can be put that way). All I can say is that the bits that I've put in place to make up this piece arrived via some form of compulsion; in a way, I don't trust them any more than you do. I could go out on a limb and say that these fragments somehow coalesce around the influence of some "strange attractor," which could be the film that you and I have only heard about, but which the reader will have seen presumably. I guess I can hope that at least some combination of my various bits will operate as a productive node to which the reader can link his or her (in principle unique) experience of Phil's cinema, and carry on that experience in an otherwise unlikely direction. I will say that although I haven't tried to be cryptic, the subject at stake here has something to do with the crypt.

OK, another thing: I have to say that this piece sometimes seems as much about you as about Phil's films. I mean, you've been monkeying with the metaphors of shipwreck for years now, and then there's the Blanchot, the psychoanalysis, this idea of singularity, the various references to Mobile and to the blues, . . .

I'm going to take those out, I think.

. . . all right then . . . but also Sam, Jazzbo and his (or your) toothpick, and even your current status as (may I say it?) a bit of drifting debris. And of course (what a surprise!) you work Melville into it. Isn't this a bit hobby-horsical?

In attending to the singularity of the work I recognize the singularity not of its maker, but of myself. This would be true, I would say, for any attentive respondent to any work. But this encounter with my own singularity is neither simple nor simply satisfying. It is precisely that which overwhelms the subject's capacity to grasp it. It defies intelligibility, symbolization; one can't put it into words. And even to talk here about "recognition" or "encounter" is imprecise: maybe I can say that the experience of the work offers, or maybe only figures, an approach. And it is this experience (let's say again, "risky crossing") that draws me into the dangerous unknown of that aspect of my subjectivity that everywhere cuts against the grain of everything I take myself to be: that lacerates my "identity," let's say. And so, while enthralled, I'm also engulfed; while exhilarated, I'm also dispossessed. And therefore it's normal that I or anyone would be inclined to cling to whatever familiar flotsam drifts to hand, and to use it! After all, what else is there? (By the way, I'd say that something like this—or even precisely this—goes on for the maker in the process, the experience of making the work as well.)

I'm not sure I buy that, but I'll think about it. The last thing I have to say you're probably not going to like. But really, this idea of putting our discussion at the beginning of the piece bothers me! Isn't it going to look like some sort of disclaimer, or worse, some obsessional dodge that seeks to qualify or clarify or otherwise perfect or render more palatable (and thus somehow subvert) what you've already written? Can't you just let it stand?

Maybe I just can't stand it. Anyway, aren't prefaces always produced after the fact, after the work is done, and don't they often bear little or no relation either to the style or the substance of what they purport to introduce? They frequently appear to have different projects or agendas from the work proper, don't they? Well, maybe I'm just joshing. But the serious answer would be that one has to start with something, somewhere. I know it could look like an inane stratagem; it's even possible that this part was in fact invented, and written first!

That's true. It does seem odd that we could be eating this succulent black mess (it really is good, by the way!) if you've already washed ashore in Buffalo! After all, where would you have gotten the shrimpheads?

Well, I don't care that readers may think it's completely fictional; surely they realize that even within the realm of documentary film such things can be employed to productive purpose, so why not here? Reality is by no means a sure access to truth. It may be utterly no access. Besides, you know good and well my spintrian history with the act of writing. I need every tool and trick that might ease the release of the thing. Maybe this will only shed more obscurity on what I've written, but that doesn't matter. I'm not trying to clarify or even interpret; certainly not to analyze. I'm here to respond, as attentively as I can, and if it has to be from the saddle of my hobbyhorse (or from somewhere between the stirrup and the ground) then so be it. If I've done a good job, then perhaps my experience of Phil's cinema (at least insofar as it appears in desultory translation here) will resonate, in consonance or dissonance, with some readers, to what I hope would be some useful effect. Finally, I take my maxim from a wonderful former student who, of her poignant, moving and absolutely singular films, once said: "I do what I do." I hope I can live up to it.

Well, thanks for the gumbo. Maybe we should go out. I bet it's cooled off some.

I'm not sure I'm ready. You know I like to be stationary. I think I'll just stay inside for now.



Here at one view are our blighted prospects and the reward of our toil scattered to the winds. (1)

It is a film as yet unseen, as yet, at this writing, unfinished, perhaps unnamed, which is the occasion for this and the other writing in this book, or at least for its collection here. An absent film; a lost object. A work of mourning that I somehow mourn in its absence, its yet-to-be.

I can testify.

I was present when Phil and Marian met. This is what I remember: it was about 18 years ago, in the late spring or early summer of 1983, after a screening of Alan Zweig's *Where's Howie?* at the Funnel. There was a gathering at AZ's place on Palmerston. I remember Marian telling stories of private-duty nursing in Los Angeles involving Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Jackson and Larry Flynt. I remember the rich intimacy of her voice; the fierce grope and exhilaration of her intellect. I can still see (am I imagining it?) the mad glint of wild hilarity in her enormous eyes. At the end of the evening Marian stood at the door to leave, and as if addressing the company in general asked: "So who's gonna take me home?" It was a question the undertones of which were in no way concealed. Phil was on his feet in no time. They went home together and remained together for twelve years. The message always arrives at its destination.



Marian after Marian Day, the feast of Mary, the birthday of god as a mother. Marian the stonemason, burrower, grubworm, worker in memory, digger into the past. That past, too, as maternal: we can go there for safety, comfort, knowledge; to find, as Wayne Salazar suggests in *Destroying Angel*, “peace before we die, contentment not confusion.” A refuge, a safe harbor. And Time itself as supramaternal; in Paul Celan’s formulation, *zitzenprätig*: splendid with teats. Nourishment without remit, the source, the fountainhead—the stuff of cinema.

On a seashore in Newfoundland, at the close of *The Road Ended At The Beach* (the apotheosis of the “road film”), we hear a little girl singing a vaguely menacing improvised song about who her mother loves and doesn’t love and why.

But none of the temporal as maternal without an attendant threat: Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Wayne asks, “when we reclaim the past, what do we unleash?” Is the devouring, superegoic aspect of the maternal apt to assail us as we pursue our personal archeologies? Does it threaten to invade us and operate within us—like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—until we are consumed? Must we go there anyway? Marian thought we must.

Maurice Blanchot: “Reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty—at bottom it doesn’t exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend.”

I want to extend what Blanchot calls “reading” (would it be “the experience of literature?”) to include the experience of cinema, and point out what may be obvious: that to take the risky leap does not guarantee that the abyss will be crossed without incident, or at all.





A Cano-centric bowdlerization of the first line of Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*: "I take the LAND to be the central fact to man born in Canada, from the last Ice Age till now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy." Unlike the American SPACE which is Olsen's concern and which is precisely space in that it exists to be occupied, the hostility of our LAND was and is unmasterable, impossible to fill up. It remains there, pitiless, pernicious, pristine (the Bowron clearcut and similar inanities notwithstanding).

It is well established that the landscape figures crucially in Canadian art, and critical discussion of Phil Hoffman's cinema has often embraced that thematic, and not without reason. Consider just about any of the films: the camera frequently dwells on fields, forests, rocky shores, horizons, even visually interrogates in close-up detail the elements that give the land its scape: bark of trees, surfaces of rocks, beach sand, tide pools, grasses and leaves, and so on. And *Sweep*, a film in part about cinematic forebears, opens with an Arctic landscape followed by some clips from a film called *On To Ungava*, which was the site of the limit-text of Canadian (we might as well say all) landscape film: Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*.

I recall that around 15 years ago, in a spurious gesture toward taxonomy (if not taxidermy), some wag came up with the idea that a particular set of stylistic features or themes (I forget which) could be discerned in a group of films which he designated by the major geographic formation near which the makers worked and/or grew up. It was called the Escarpment School, and in its uncontrollable sprawl eventually came to include, along with Hoffman's films, the work of Richard Kerr, Rick Hancox, Gary Popovich, Steve Sanguedolce, perhaps even Mike Hoolboom. Maybe there were others. I think that my own work was implicated. I'm fairly sure that this started out as a joke, but I can attest that I've since seen it referred to in critical articles of the most redoubtable nature.]

I am interested here not in the landscape, but in what appears in the landscape of Hoffman's cinema: something unsettlingly homely and disturbingly familiar precisely in its brokenness, fracture and

disjunction. An unapproachable, uncanny, impossible yet enabling fragmentation of the true, without which this, Hoffman's, or any truthful testimony would not be possible.

Here lay our beautiful ship, a floating and dismal wreck,--which but a few minutes before appeared in all her glory, the pride and boast of her capt and officers, and almost idolized by her crew, with all sails neatly set and trimd to the breeze presenting to the eye the fac similie of a ship about to leave the harbour on a summers day under the admiring gaze of hundreds to witness such a scene.

I can call it shipwreck.



When I taught filmmaking, I described it as a process of fragmentation, of dealing with the fragmentary. One used a camera and possibly a sound recorder to fracture the profilmic world into bits: decoupage. Through selecting, realigning, combining, adding to, superimposing, and mixing those bits one altered their contexts, gave them new power and meaning: collage. And by giving the bits a definitive arrangement, a final and intractable temporal order, one had a film: montage. I think this is a fair, though perhaps idiotically simplified, account of what filmmakers do, and I think it's more or less what Phil Hoffman does. But what Hoffman doesn't do is respond to the pressure toward an ultimate seamlessness in the final product. It's obvious from where this pressure comes; there's no need to rehearse its origins here. Hoffman responds, is responsible to, a different calling, a distinctly inexorable, though perhaps more discreet, demand.

A speculative etymology, in the manner of Blanchot: *the fragmentary asks a question* (Ger. *fragen*, to ask or to question).

If we give the name "reality" to that which corresponds to the field of the symbolic, to that which can be, precisely, symbolized, represented, given fully to experience, then it is the impulse of its other to which Hoffman responds. We can call this other "the real:" that which escapes or exceeds symbolization; the unrepresentable, the impossible, the fragmentary, the disastrous, the unconscious, the sublime; the singular. Perhaps it is not exact to speak of a response to this call, since it is unclear in what way it might actually be "heard." Say instead that one maintains an openness, an availability; a passivity before and beyond any possible activity. One is responsive by being responsible to and for one's own passivity which, although it resides with the subject, is encountered (passively, passionately) as if it were an exterior force; one suffers it, endures it and remains (by means of this passion, passively) available, open to the possibility of the impossible, the presence of non-presence, the inexhaustibly, intransigently other, the negative. Or, I will say again, the singular.

George Oppen: "The shipwreck of the singular."





Emmanuel Levinas: ". . . two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides and the holocaust--have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the 'I think'... doing its utmost to reassemble the fantastic of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82, 5: 'All the foundations of the earth are shaken.'"

When experience is already torn to shreds, what does the film become when it, when its maker (as subject), responds to the radical demand of what I am calling the singular? There is no need to repeat (unless we are, as I am, unable to avoid the compulsion to do so) that it cannot be seamless, cannot achieve a total closure; can't, in some sense, ever be wholly finished. It can't in any way pretend to be an imitation of life or a representation of reality. It can't look to the modernist consolation of formal purity, and it must stand on the other side of modernism's melancholy, nostalgia and regret. Instead, this is the cinema of the accidental stab, the innovative risk; it follows no rules other than the rules invented in the immediacy and responsibility of its every instance of making.

Father: "What is a catastrophe?"
 Daughter: "The first stanza of a love poem."
 (from *Passion* by Jean-Luc Godard)



Not documentary cinema, but the film as essay. And I take “essay” here in its full dump etymological sense: to try, to try out, to test, to test the value, to take a chance, to experiment (O.Fr. *essai*, *assai*, a trial; Vulg.L. *exagiare*, to weigh out; Late L. *exagium*, a weighing, a balance; and more speculatively, L. *exaggerare*, to pile up, exaggerate, from *agger*, pile or heap). In the film essay, it is not the fragment as an end in itself that is at issue (that would be modernist nostalgia); rather the fragmentary as the infinite heap of fragments, whether found or made. A cinema of the collection, the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir: elements of longing, but not a melancholic longing that abides incomplete, caught in the defensive web of desire; rather longing that motivates, that moves and impels, that tasks and heaps the maker in the making, invoking the unrepresentable in presentation itself.

James Joyce: “Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling that arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.”

The encounter of desire with the beautiful arouses pity, gives rise to intelligibility, and leads the subject into the domain of knowledge (the symbolic). The (non-)encounter of the drive with the sublime arouses terror, gives rise to non-sense, and leads the subject into the domain of truth (the real).

If modernist cinema is a cinema of desire, whose affect is pity attended by pleasure, and whose nostalgia for some lost plenitude of the past leads to a melancholic (and so, in principle, incomplete) mourning for the trace of that loss in the ruined fragment as such, then I will say that the film essay exemplifies a cinema of the drive, whose affect is terror attended by enjoyment, whose mourning is accomplished in the future anterior, whose movement circulates, and circulates around, its fragmentary objects, and whose passive passion / passionate passivity gives itself as an approach and a

witness to what will have been made. The film essay is in this sense postmodern.

Celan: *Neimand / zeugt für den / Zeugen.*



In Mexico, during the collection of footage for what eventually became *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, a bus on which Phil Hoffman was riding stopped, and a woman came screaming across a field. Her little boy had been run over and killed (by the bus?). Phil watched from inside with camera in hand, trying to decide whether or not to film. He didn't. He can attest to the event, he says it happened, but he doesn't have evidence to back up his claim because he didn't turn the camera on. Later, at the Grierson Seminar, *Somewhere Between* is screened, an entire film structured around the death of a child and the absent image of it, and a news correspondent who'd made a number of films about Vietnam approaches Hoffman: "Phil, I really enjoyed the discussion, but you know when you were in the editing room, didn't you just wish you had the footage?"

I put the camera down. The film is a cinemato-poetic account of an event, of the experience of an event, the evidentiary image of which is missing; the maker attests that it never existed, was never made, and does not reside undeveloped in some freezer. So what we have is his testimony. He testifies to what was apparent to him, to the visible, to what was available to experience: "on the road dead, lies a mexican youth"; ". . . the white sheet/ is pulled over the dead boy's body/ the children wept"; "the little girl, / with big eyes/ waits by her dead brother"; and he testifies to the unseen, the non-experience, as well: "the boy's spirit left through its blue." But he doesn't have the hard evidence, the documentary proof, for either sort of testimony: we know the camera never lies, but it's possible that Phil could.

For testimony to be what it is, to remain precisely testimony and thus retain its character as something other than a direct access to "truth," it must necessarily be haunted by what it excludes: the documentary evidence that we suppose never lies, but also, and more to the point, the possibility of the lie itself, of perjury, mistake or lack of fidelity. In short, testimony is inevitably haunted, even possessed, by the possibility of fiction. The witness is himself riven by this possession. His passion is a desire to avow, to confess without reserve, to bring forward an utter truthfulness in the face of the other's "Tell me

everything!" But this passion is also to be understood as a martyrdom (Gr. *martis*, witness) in the sense of putting oneself on the line, making truth and bearing bodily witness to it through the attenuation of one's being, as martyrs bear witness with their bodies in dying; as passivity in its autonomic or heteronomic relation to the Law of Truth; as endurance of some indeterminate limit which invites the inclusion (potentially) of everything and is at the same time overwhelmed by this everything, raising the question of how to include by not including.

They might for aught we could know have foundered during that awful night, and ourselves be the only survivors to tell the tale of woe. And we too might at any moment sink beneath this vast extent of ocean leaving scarcely a momentary bubble to mark the spot or tell that we once was.

On our way to the death. So I'm saying that experience cleaves the witness, foregrounding both the split in the subject itself (inside/outside, consciousness/the unconscious, desire/enjoyment) as well as a rift between what can be made available for public attestation and something else, some secret testimony, evocative yet incomprehensible: "the boy's spirit left through its blue." The elements resulting from this cleavage are radically asymmetrical and incommensurable; they threaten to engulf each other and the subject, are ruinous to any simple transparency in truth-telling, and bring the word "experience" closer to the disaster secreted in its etymological root (L. *ex-periri*, to try or test, to lead over or cross something perilous). The witness, as he testifies, feels the hot flush of color in his cheeks; the possible pride he might feel in doing his duty gives way to embarrassment, or further, to something else.

Primo Levi (on the arrival of Russian soldiers at Auschwitz on 27 January 1945, the definitive mark of the prisoners' liberation): "They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and

every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime, at the fact that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defense."

Levinas: "What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves. It reveals not our nothingness but the totality of our existence. . . . What shame discovers is the Being that discovers itself."



Shame is the lack of distance; too much intimacy, too much proximity, on our way to the death. It is precisely the lack of lack itself (our lack of lack of presence to ourselves). The subject has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own

disorder, its own fracture, its own rivenness, its own oblivion as subject. A double movement, both subjectification and desubjectification: shame.

Having now consumed their last morsel of food the captain with his three surviving companions after a due consultation agreed to cast lots.

Levi: "It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother's Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say "us" in a much vaster, indeed, universal sense) has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead."

The flesh of those unfortunate men constituted the only food of the survivors whilst it lasted.



"If I make films instead of children, does that mean I'm less human?"
(from *Soft and Hard* by Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville)

Father (not my father, but me, a father): "What is a catastrophe?"
Son (toothpick jauntily engobbed, eyes demonbright, gleeful):
"Goddammit!"

Susan Howe: "Love changes besides he's / damned . . ."

Date: Sun, 23 July 2000 23:14:09 -0500 (CDT)

From: <bmlaugh@southalabama.edu>

To: <mick@yhammer.com>

Subject: Re: your email

Dear M,

So what were MY reasons for wanting out of the situation? One reason was the atmosphere of gloom that permeated the household. Nothing ever seemed to create joy for you, and I was/am under the impression that to be happy is not one of your goals, and not one you would advocate for others.

Another reason is that I didn't see you taking much responsibility for your life—it always seemed to be up to me to make your life worth living. And as I've said before, I don't think that's an appropriate burden to put on another person, even if that person is your spouse. I felt very oppressed by the weight of that responsibility, and I don't think I'm one who takes the easy route. That is to say, I don't think I am a carefree, callous type who shirks accountability or responsibility, but I think what was being asked of me was unreasonable, and although I tried to take it on for a number of years, I just couldn't continue to do so. It was making me miserable.

I also felt that I was always on duty as caretaker, and that I never had an opportunity to be the sick one. It seemed to me that you were constantly complaining of not feeling well—feeling old, etc., as if your life were over—and so I never got any relief. I always had to be well. Perhaps that's why I lost so much weight in the early months of this year: I was sick myself but didn't have much of an opportunity to be so and then recover. And although I'm turning 41 tomorrow, I certainly don't think my life is over. It's still in high gear, and I want to continue thinking in those terms until I'm on my deathbed.

Another thing that was very troubling to me was our inability to communicate. There were moments, far too many of them, when I felt as if we were from completely different planets. Your reasoning/logic seemed to me to be upside down, or skewed so that there was no way for me to respond to it. Except with silence... which you hated, and which I hated, too, but I could think of no words that were up to the task.

I feel ridiculous saying all of this, because I've said it all so many times before that it seems completely shop-worn.

Well, I'll continue nevertheless.

Yet another thing I felt quite acutely was the lack of action that we took. I can't blame this on you because I felt a kind of inertia myself, but I HATED it. This may be ego discourse speaking, but I think I am generally a person who likes to take action. If I say I want to do something, I'm not just blowing hot air. I do it. Damn it, you must remember that there were times when I'd say, "Let's do this, or let's do that," and you'd say, "Not now. We'll do it tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never came. I couldn't stand the paralysis... the procrastination... the dwindling hope that anything was EVER going to get done.

Anyway, I hope you're beginning to recover from the horror of these events. There really IS a way to put it into perspective, if you want to do that, and there really IS a way to think beyond the (stupid) confines of a (stupid) institution such as marriage. As someone once said, "Don't live in the penitentiary. Try bemusement." Or, as I might amend it, "Try laughing heartily at yourself and your predicament on occasion." In fact, that's what I'm trying to do.

love, B

Here she now lays, snatched untimely from her stateliness, into a mere shadow of what she was, and our selves deprived of the home which her goodly sides had so long afforded us.

Roland Barthes: "Whenever you give anybody anything to read, you are giving it to your mother."

Blanchot: "To be lost. To capsize."



Date: Wed, 23 Aug 2000 19:09:46 -0400

To: bmlaugh@southalabama.edu

From: mick@yhammer.com

Subject:

Last night I had a particularly horrible dream in which I came to Mobile to see Jazzbo. You had several people staying in the house, including a young girl whose hands did not function properly and which were supported/contained within a web-like contraption that moved the fingers for her. When I finally spotted Jazzbo he was standing with his back to me and wouldn't answer me when I called his name. I went up to him and turned him around to hug him, and he was limp and thin and pale and silent and wore glasses and had moist swollen lips on an impossibly large mouth; he looked like an infantile Stephen Hawking. I was so shocked at this I immediately woke up, relieved that it was a dream, but stayed awake the rest of the night feeling awful, both because I had invented this, and also because it somehow meant that he was lost to me forever.

I don't know if I can stand this much longer. I have been thrown out because I no longer have any value as a husband or as a father. It's still not clear what I have done to deserve having this judgment passed on me, and while I rationally know that neither of its propositions are accurate, I nevertheless cannot avoid buying into its "truth," at least on some level. This is having very damaging effects. I do not know if I will ever see Jazzbo again, but I do know that I will not be permitted to participate, in any important way, in raising him; I will miss seeing and helping him grow and develop and learn and I will be deprived of the pleasure and heartache of all that those things entail (and I know what that pleasure and heartache is). I can't understand what I did that made this deprivation necessary, and I do not see how it can possibly be construed as "best" for me, or for Jazzbo, although I guess I can imagine how you might see it being in your interest, though the only reasons I can come up with for that pertain to some version of your symptomology.

For me, this is a disaster in the fullest sense. I have lost my bearings completely, am totally separated from the star that ought to guide me somewhere. I tried very hard to act and to be OK, and was able to do that for a while, but I've lost it now and I don't know how or if I'll find it again. If there is some inherent gratification in shipwreck, I must be wallowing in it. There is little doubt that the drive seeks its fullest satisfaction in annihilation.

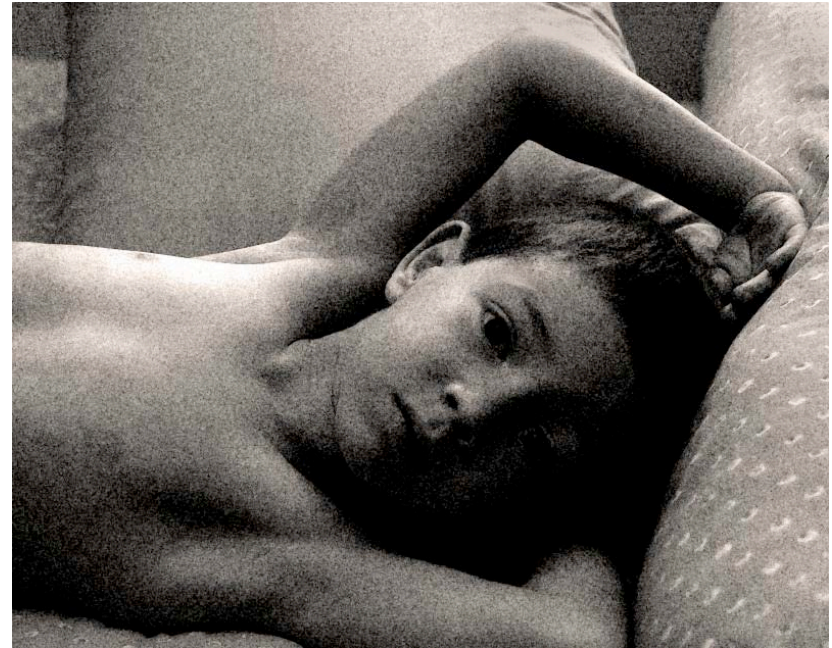
To shake things up, to "jolt" out of paralysis, would seem to me to be a preservative act, an effort to keep something alive, to prevent its loss. It would not be the way one would describe the termination of a marriage, of a family, especially when a child is involved, and when one's feelings can still be described as "love." I think your rhetoric betrays your confusion as to what you've done or are doing. Not that this inspires me with any hope.

When will I see Jazzbo again? It's been 2 months, already too long in some people's minds. Upon whom does the onus reside to facilitate my seeing him? Given the distance, and my present circumstances, it seems like a pipe dream, a fantasy. Do I want to see him? Yes, I want to see him, hold him, talk with him, kiss him, and love him and keep him near me until he's grown up. Is that going to happen? No. Why? Because you've decided it is better if it doesn't. Why? I don't know why.

Well, I don't know what to say beyond this. It's not easy to write anything. I'm not getting anywhere with the Phil thing, let alone writing to you. I can't sleep, I can't read because I can't see worth a damn. I can't stop crying so I'll just stop.

m

If I make children instead of films, does that mean I'm less inhuman?



The moment of inscription: I am in Buffalo in my tiny, boozesweat-besotted apartment, \$325 a month including heat, of which there is either none or too much. It is Wednesday, 20 September, 2000, 7:34pm EDT. I'm listening to Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground" (1928), perhaps one of the greatest blues recordings ever made, in part because it's postmodern avant la lettre. If you don't believe me, listen to it. Like Babci, Johnson lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918, and he wrote at least two songs about it.

Marguerite Duras: C'est un lieu de détresse, naufragé.



I am way late with this, but I'm distracted again (I almost want to say, distracted in the etymological sense, i.e. torn limb from limb). Yesterday after work I made a tape for Jazzbo on which I read some stories, and sang a few songs. His favorites, since he was a baby, are "Death Letter Blues" by Son House ("I got a letter this mornin', how do you reckon it read? It say 'Hurry, hurry, you know the gal you love is dead.'"), "The Greenland Whale Fisheries," and "Lord Franklin," about the shipwreck in the Northwest Passage.

It is stunningly pointless to say that I miss him. Somehow writing this makes the anguish more acute, as if he is in some way implicated in the domain of filmmaking; as if making or even writing about films somehow demands writing or making films about him. I guess that's how it was with Sam too. Once James Benning stayed at our house in Hamilton, and Sam made him a picture, a city seen from a distance, with the caption "Keep your eye on the brown structure." When I went to visit Jim in New York a couple of years later, Sam's picture was still on his fridge. Did you know that the boy flailing the stick through the dewy field in *passing through* is Sam? I'm his da now, but then I was his daddy.



Memory is always construction; a remembering, a re-articulation (in every sense of the term) of pieces, fragments, members. In some sense it raises the problem of the psychoanalytic “primal scene:” the moment of trauma invented as pure construction. One’s memory, what one remembers, becomes reified precisely as fact (*this* is what happened; I can testify), as the truth of the past, but it is everywhere and always founded upon, founded by, the personal, the equivocal, the aleatory, the fictitious.

A certain fetishistic modality is apt to be entailed here in the visual domain of cinema, namely the instance of the (memory) image as such: plenitude, seamlessness, completion, talismanic charm, the maternal as ideal. The film essay, Hoffman’s films, operate to oppose this entailment; they seek to remain open to the rents, fractures, the “torn formations” that the fetishistic is concerned to elide.

Now could be seen the pale and wan features, the wild and vacant stare thrown upon each other and ever and anon, turning to view the fast receding remnant of the hulk, which had borne us so gracefully over the bosom of the ocean, as though it were possible that she could yet relieve us from the fate that seemed to await us, untill at last it sunk from our view beneath the horizon.

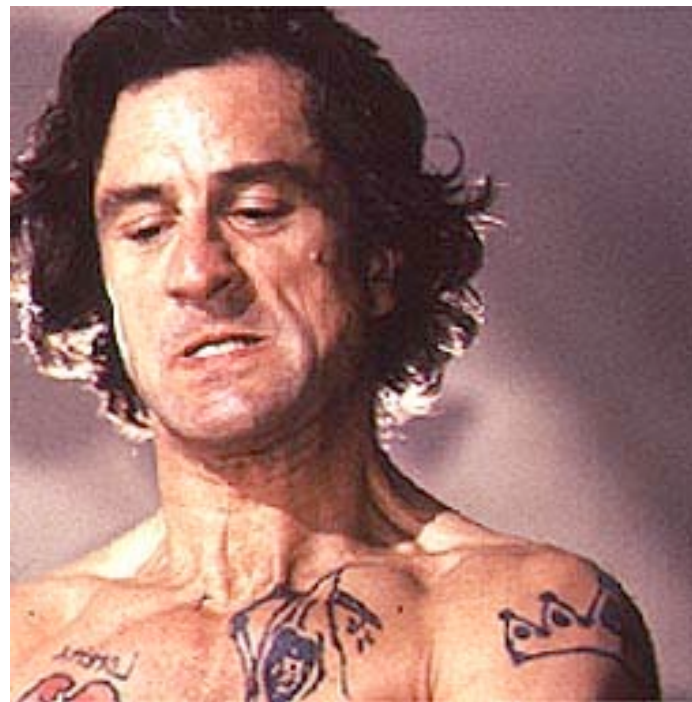
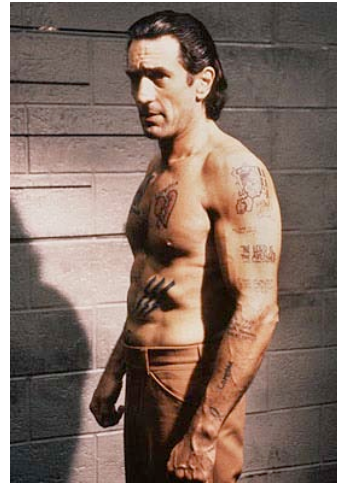
PH, speaking of *river*: “What ensued was the chaos of the trip.”

A chaotic memory trip, this journey toward what will have been mourning accomplished, because it is one not undertaken solely within the register of the visible and the tranquility of the fetish. Hoffman’s cinema frequently guides us in the direction of what is off-screen, beyond the dimension of the frame. “The possibility of mourning lies in the unseen.” (PH) And we might add: in the silent, the unspeakable, the ungraspable, the foundered.



A distinctive feature of the film essay is that it gives its viewers access to a feeling of its “aboutness,” but in such a way that any link between this “aboutness” and the manifest content of the film is broken, or at least seriously in question. Suppose I’m teaching a class dealing with, say, Martin Scorsese’s *Cape Fear* (which is, I would argue, a film essay and not in any way, except satirically, a nostalgic repetition of the “B” movie whose namesake it is), and I ask “What is this film about?” The inevitable student response will be some sort of plot rehearsal, and occasionally something involving a more synthetic rendering of the drama, but each of these begs the next question: “What is it *really* about?” The possible answers are manifold and varied, but all would demand a careful scrutiny of those elements of the film that are likely to be missed (that is to say, unrecognized as significant) by an unsophisticated viewer attending mainly to the “story” (for example, and not exhaustively: the framing of the narrative within the daughter’s “what I did last summer” class presentation; Max Cady’s invocations of Silesius, the Epistle to the Galatians, and “the book between Esther and Psalms;” the obviously fake wreck of the houseboat; the name of the houseboat: *Moana*, after the Flaherty film; the daughter’s encounter with Cady as a theatre arts teacher; etc.) Once attention is drawn to these elements, viewers are able to re-encounter them with new zest; the multiple vectors of the film are opened to interplay with whatever each viewer can bring to bear of his or her own intellect, emotion, experience, history in a voyage of interpretation and understanding which is not necessarily terminable. While this might prove another “risky crossing,” the subject is no longer wholly “at sea.”

The question “What is the film about?” is not, in the case of the film essay, to be divorced from the questions “What does the film do?” and “What can its viewers do with it?”



"Where I was born, you filmed." (from *passing through/torn formations*)

A primal scene? Somewhere east of Bratislava, a young girl romps along a fenceline in a steep meadow. Grown men are reaping, then stand to chat as they hone their scythes. The sexual menace that pervades here is only exceeded when the child enters a field and confronts a bull.

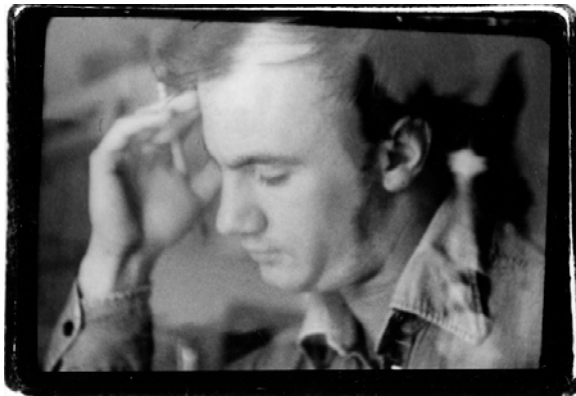
The male gonad: testis, testicle (L. testis, a witness {to virility}).

On tape, the girl speaks the Czecho-Polish dialect of this polyglot land. Hoffman's mother translates, haltingly. "Where I was born, you filmed." This girl could be her doppelganger, retracing the ground that Susie Kaczmarzyk trod in her own girlhood: one apparently fraught with penury, upheaval, illness, accident, leading eventually to emigration. When Sue returns after the war, she suffers "a hole in my leg that wouldn't heal." One night she's awakened and obliged to dance the Cassock in her bedclothes before an audience of Russian soldiers. At the beginning of the film, Chris Dewdney's voice over black leader: "The layers came apart easily."

We had travelled about three hours over the meadows and through the woods toward the hunting grounds, when we heard the most dismal howling set up before us, that can be imagined. We continued on our way untill we seemed to be approaching nearer and nearer the spot whence the dismal sounds came, when the two captains came to a full stop, looked at each other a few moments as though they wished to say something which each was ashamed to open first when they turned simultaneously around making good their retreat simply remarking that the walking was so bad and the sun so extremely hot they would return and take a cooler day for the excursion.



The menace of sexuality gives way to the disaster of engenderment. There was a huge boil on Babci's neck while she was pregnant with Wally, "the boy born at the cone of our time's most explosive moment." The notion is put forward that one could be poisoned by history in the name of justice. Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Like Blind Willie Johnson, Babci lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918. She wrote no songs, but contracted Parkinson's disease, the final stages of which she is suffering, comforted by her descendants, in the opening sequence of the film.



Wally, the wayward son, the blacksheep uncle, housebreaker, former deadbeat dad, accordion maestro, optics theorist, maven of the mise-en-abyme: "Are you taking a picture of us looking at the picture? . . . You're taking a movie of us watching a movie!" The mad genius constructor of the appalling "corner mirror," which corrects the lateral inversion of normal reflection, so that you can "see yourself the way others see you." He builds one as a gift for his daughter. We watch her struggle to put on makeup, her womanchild face bisected by the bead of solder conjoining the mirror's two panes; the vertical split-screen reverberating the pop-psych "schizo" trace of schizophrenia, possibly her father's affliction. Can a virus be transmitted if you see yourself seeing yourself (*en-abyme*) the way others see you? There's an eating sequence in *Destroying Angel* shot up at Phil's farm where Wayne is making dinner for Phil and Marian. "In the early 90s there was still such a fear of casual infection, you know, he could cut himself and infect us, but instead there's only celebration."(PH) How would others see you seeing yourself see yourself as others see you if you ate the poison mushroom?

Phil's trip to the motherland: the stop at Dachau with Zvia, the brutal silence of the *Muselmänner* ghosts who haunt the place provoking a wince at his patronym; the sudden violence on the Czech train; the encounter with the foreign relatives, the photos and the drinking and the amiable smiles and the eager messages to Susie; the recording of the story of Karol and Uncle Janyk. Was this legend of patricide the cryptic point of trauma for these family members scattered across two continents and four generations, each one of them, as Rilke would have it, "wet with the spittle of fate?" Can the poison of our secret histories invade us and operate within us—like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—until we are consumed? Who can be a burrower, a grubworm? Marian thought we must.



Susan Susie Sue Kaczmarzyk Hoffman translates an aunt's or cousin's account of Karol's murder of his father. The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap. She falters, hesitates; Neil Schmitz once told me that stuttering is a form of knowledge. There are "remains in her trembling speech. This is where our forgetting, and the things we care not to tell, come to reside." (PH) "And Karol shot Uncle Janyk seven times." The re-filmed black and white video image of Susie's face, distant, now close, closer, close-up, its motion slowed down, slower, slow, as she switches off the machine and turns aside in anguish. Who can watch this? Who can film this?

What's the difference between filming a death, and a cinema that by its nature, as Cocteau said, "films death at work?" Why is it so compelling? Why can I look at it forever? How can it be that it affords me some kind of feeling of comfort and peace? Is there something beyond the border of the frame?



Géricault's painting usually known as *The Raft of the Medusa* was actually called by its author *Scène de naufrage, Scene of Shipwreck*. I remember the press of the crowd before that picture in a gallery of the Louvre nearly thirty years ago now. What is the attraction, the fascination, of that image of disaster? My friend Pedro can't abide reading about the holocaust, about the camps; he is too much assaulted by the ordinary human capacity for extraordinary brutality. Why do I go endlessly back to Claude Lantzman's Shoah, to Levi, to Elie Wiesel, and so many others? Is there an arcane sadistic enjoyment at stake when we witness scenes of shipwreck, maritime and otherwise, from positions of (I'll say relative) security? Would it

be better to avert our eyes, stop up our ears? Do we or don't we put the camera down?

The constant and vivid lightning seemed to envelope us in a fearful blaze, and the awful thunder of an angry element threatened every moment our final extermination.

While on his deathbed, the maker of *Scène de naufrage* was asked to assess his masterpiece. He is said to have snorted with contempt: "*Bah, une vignette!*" Perhaps the unfortunate contemporary correlative of Géricault's painting is former Niagara Falls, Ontario resident James Cameron's *Titanic*. (Would he be a candidate for inclusion in the Escarpment School?)

To be human: to lend a voice to the inhuman.



Polyglot girlchild reclines in summerwhite meadowbliss. Whitenight brightsky, hicon sunsparkled haystalks. Firephantom ghostgirl upjumps from supine girlbody. Nightbright shadowgirl fencescampers rhythmrurning. Emulsionslash colorbursts. Lyric, recuperative doppelganger. "I fell asleep and dreamed."

Early in *Kitchener-Berlin* there is an image of a backhoe with the word "Zeppelin" painted on its arm. Then . . . a countdown leader: "The Amateur Cinema League presents . . . The Voyage of the R-100: The Highway of Tomorrow or How One Makes Two." The "first Canadian surrealist film"(PH) features the trans-Atlantic voyage of a rigid airship, with twin brothers documenting the trip from the air and

the planetary surface. The ship arrives in Canada, "safe at last." "Twin brother comes to visit me and finds me still dreaming." These twin brothers, staggering in their indistinguishability, seem to communicate by telepathy.

Later, a phantom form rises from a sleeping twin. "Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?" The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap.

The psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham describes the presence of the phantom as indicating the effects in the descendants of something that had inflicted catastrophe on the parents. The phantom is equivalent to the drive: it has no energy of its own; it pursues its work of disarray in silence; it eludes rationalization; it gives rise to endless circulation and repetition ("I don't have a drive to repeat.")(PH) If we are in possession of, or possessed by, the phantom, we are being haunted not by ancestral ghosts, but by our ancestor's secrets, the nature of which we do not know.



Sami Van Ingen, the great-grandson of Robert Flaherty, in *Sweep*: "What have I inherited?" The ancestral weight of Flaherty, maker of *Nanook of the North*, and perhaps only the most famous whiteman to go into the Canadian Arctic and impose his whiteness on it, has

compelled Sami to retrace his great-grandfather's steps to "somehow get even with who I am."

The headlamps of miners emerging from the shaft; candles in a cave; cave drawings; dinosaurs; the miners again. Finally a little girl in a red dress, an extenuated image, a phantom, "slips into the emulsion." (PH) From the rocky meadowhills east of Bratislava, a generation or two ago? Or is she the remnant of my mother's secret, or your mother's? Or ours, twin brother?

Hoffman's cinema resides, is at home, with the chimerical, the phantasmatic, the spectral, the anomalous; its economy touches on the touch of the untouchable (and with Cézanne it can say: "with each touch, I risk my life.")

Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?



"Improbable accidents of an acausal nature, that is, meaningful coincidences, have entered the picture." (from *Sweep*)

PH: "The only guide I've had in my filmmaking are these so-called coincidences."

Blanchot: "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental."

This day the wind has hauled to east south east, with torrents of rain falling, and at midnight had increased to an awful gale with a frightful sea, which seems to threaten our total annihilation.

The moment of inscription, 2: in *Sweep*, Christopher Herodier, hotel manager and sometime second-unit cameraman, makes an offer to Sami and Phil. "Here are two pens. Write a story about me!" Herodier is a Cree filmmaker (*Chiwaanaatihtaau Chitischinu*) who understands, along with his French counterpart Robert Bresson, that cinema (even a cinema such as this which seemingly privileges decoupage) is precisely cinematography, a writing. But under whose authorship? And what could authorship be?

Herman Melville: "The names of all fine authors are fictitious ones."

Richard Kerr, Jim McMurray, Rup Chand, Conrad Dubé, Mark, Dan, Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Peter Greenaway, John Grierson, Tucker Zimmerman, Chris Dewdney, Babci, Driououx, Walter Kaczmarzyk, Sue Hoffman, Uncle Janyk, Karol, Saugeen, Karol Witoya, Dent Harrison, Twin Brother, Richard Massey Williams, Gerry Shikatani, Robert Flaherty, Dante, Sami Van Ingen, Christopher Herodier, Wayne Salazar, Mickey, Marian McMahon. Phil Hoffman. Boneyard of names.

"The taut spring wound tightly tight. Tight." (from ?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film))



PH on *Chimera*: "The film doesn't insist that market people in Cairo's Khan Khalili and London's Portabello are the same, but that they share an energy related to colour, shape and form. That's why some of the film is abstract, to evoke these pleasures of sharing."

Melville: "Masonry--and is it man's? The lines of stone do not seem like courses of masonry, but like strata of rocks. . . These are the steps Jacob lay at."

Chimera: cinema of intercontinental ballistic single-frame zooms, a film with no author at all, Hoffman suggests. A striking moment: Marian, sunshaded, in front of an Egyptian pyramid. Two modes of preservation, care for the departed. The layers come apart easily. "A terrible mixture of the cunning and the awful. It was in these pyramids that the idea of Jehovah was born." (Melville)



"Do you chance to look out? Can you make a different picture? Image yourselves into a place that lets you speak to each other, and to others, more closely?" (from *Sweep*)

And if you do look out, what sort of look could it be? Neither a furtive glance, nor a close perusal, nor a wideband scan, nor a lonely masthead watch by night; but let's say a reconnaissance. A risky crossing into enemy territory, a clandestine witnessing, a cracking of codes, a theft of secrets, perhaps the hard won validation of information already possessed. Reconnaissance: exhaustively translated as a knowing again that we are born together. Where I was born, you filmed. To evoke these pleasures of sharing. Marian thought we must.

Jacques Derrida: "Any testimony testifies in its essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof."

Dewdney: "You are splashed by the other children, but move not." (from *passing through / torn formations*)



The gusts of wind were very hard and the night very dark, but our little whaleboat glided away like a thing of life.

[The passages in italics are from the Desultory Sketches of Thomas Nickerson (1876) who, at fourteen, was the youngest crew member of the whaleship Essex, stove and sunk by a sperm whale in the south Pacific, 20 November 1820.]

Howe: "Peace thereafter / Rest fathom over"

Pace Wayne Salazar, not peace before we die, but peace thereafter—so that not we, but rather our secrets, don't haunt the living after we're gone. "The dead carry on longer than the living, and it seems that the force of a life lived is stronger once it ceases to exert itself . . . its silence and mystery . . . majestic."(PH) Rest fathom over. Marian thought we must.

I can testify.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*: "So help me Heaven, and on my honor the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true. I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney."

"I've never seen a whale." (Richard Kerr in *Road Ended*)













Stet

It means “let it stand.”

Without explanation, for now. Instead, let me oblige you to indulge in the fantasy of a moment of inscription: imagine Phil Hoffman darkly embunkered in his digital basement, bringing to fruition several years’ hard work on his cinematic response to Marian’s death, a task whose already formidable cargo is further laden by an apprehensive public, friends and colleagues (and critics?) poised in anticipation, festival spotlight in the offing, book in preparation; and there is a deadline! And now consider that upstairs the bright world teems - new loves, new job, new life abundant, loud, alive, living on, waiting for Phil to join in, to live there too.

Under these conditions, how is the work of mourning even possible? How possible is the making of the work mourning demands? How could one manage the intimacy required, or the courage, or the vulnerability, or the generosity? How could one avoid distraction, and I mean “being torn limb from limb.” How could one endure the thought of all the scrutiny about to ensue? To say that the task would be daunting is hardly adequate. It would have to be unbearable.

Fortunately, we’re only fantasizing.

Merely daunting is the present task (an altogether different sort of fantasy): what sort of address is possible toward a work so personal, so charged with grief, so apparently non-political as Hoffman’s *What these ashes wanted*, and how can it meet the demands of its venue, a magazine about cinema but also about action, whose name inscribes a certain militancy, a politics? How can one avoid the temptation to offer a respectful bromide, especially given the tragic loss out of which the film is built. Is it possible to wish to celebrate this filmmaker, his films, this film, and yet meet the work critically, engage it politically? I don’t know the answer to any of these questions.



The last time I wrote about Phil's work, I employed the device of having an imaginary conversation take place as a sort of preface to the piece.[1] I think I was trying to be entertaining. In it, I used an expression that has wide currency among (mainly white) people in the deep south, where I was living at the time. It's an instance of what my friend Neil Schmitz would call "confederate discourse." I wrote: "I might could have a twin brother." Not surprisingly, a copy editor figured that I'd neglected to delete either the might or the could, and so deleted one of them for me. When I got the edited copy, I wrote "Stet" in the margin, and appended an explanation of the usage.

So when the book came out, and the deletion remained unstetted (yup, that's a word), I was hotter, as the Mobile gumbo-queens might say, than a black roux on a high flame. Editors were decried, publishers slandered. In retrospect, one sees how these things can happen, that nobody's to blame. Pressure of deadline. Mere oversight. Might could happen this time, too. But I hope not.

I like this phrase, this "might could," because it seems to combine (or let's say "confederate") notions of capability, possibility and intention, while subsuming them under the sign of doubt. It's not reducible merely to the sum of its parts; instead its meaning is disturbed by something which strictly is not part of it. It offers something while taking it back; it withholds while revealing. The statement "I might could help you clean up that kitchen" means, or could mean, something like "I'm quite willing and would like to help you clean up that kitchen, but only if you agree to it, I don't want to insist, not that you'd really need help anyway." There's a sense in which it's a more sociable, even more ethical idiom. At the same time, an advantage of "might could" lies in its ability to veil just about any assertion with a moderate ambiguity, and to leave the speaker at a certain remove from whatever he asserts, from any proposition about whose status he may not be entirely secure; not quite taking him off the hook, but leaving him a bit of squirming room, so that he may get off it eventually should he squirm to sufficient effect. Given that, consider what these statements might convey (or dissemble): I might could

like to try that gumbo; I might could make a film about losing a loved one; I might could never forget you; I might could love you always.

You might could get it by now.

So to come, at last, back to the raft: despite my inability to answer the questions I posed above, I propose to carry on, insufficiently, with my merely daunting task to address, in this place, on this occasion, Hoffman's What these ashes wanted, but to do so under the rubric (if there can be such a thing) of the "might could."

To do so, and then to let it stand.



Here's one way of putting it: when a loved one dies, a hole opens up in the Real. A flood of images rushes in, as if to fill the gap. Mourning would work (might could work?) to marshal those images, to subject them, with no guarantee of success, to some form of symbolic constraint in a process not necessarily terminable since that gap, that hole, will have a persistence. In any case, we have a difficult, uncomfortable, unstable articulation of psychic registers: Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. The subject is in disarray, adrift, at risk even. Disastered, he no longer knows where to look to find the star that ought to guide him; no longer can he rely on familiar locators to let him know who it is that he takes himself to be. Is it any wonder that Freud described the process of mourning, with its dramatic intensity and hallucinatory hypercathexes, as resembling psychosis?

In her commentary on an earlier version of the film, Brenda Longfellow makes an astute point concerning the issue of the other's inscription in cinema.[2] Speaking of the sequence of Phil and Marian in the car as Marian makes her visiting nurse rounds, Longfellow writes:

...she confronts Phil (hiding behind his heavy 3/4-inch camera in the back seat), accusing him of not understanding how difficult it is to be filmed and how much the camera mediates and makes strange their relation. It is an important moment precisely because it honours the otherness of the other....[I]t anchors Marian in her lifeworld not simply as an image, idol or memory, but as a sensate and intentional subject in her own right, and one, furthermore, who explicitly defies the naturalness of a camera recording her image.[3]

There is another aspect to this sequence, however. Marian's complaint quite forcefully registers a valorization of the psychological (her feelings of unease regarding her place in front of the camera) over the physical (Phil's struggle with the heavy camera), a notion that she seems to regard as transparently the case, but whose validity hardly goes without saying; certainly it could be subject to dispute (to say the least, given the brute sovereignty of the physical in the region of illness leading to death). In addition, her protestations

are a little excessive ("Oh Philip, you're nuts! You really are nuts! Sometimes I think you're so insensitive, really!"); once he explains, she becomes rather condescending, speaking to Phil as if he's a bit of a nob ("Well, that's a little different, you know. Do you understand the difference?"). Now it's true that all of this is carried on with good humor, and I'm not about to embark onto the terrain of how couples work out their private modes of communication. My point is that here and occasionally elsewhere, the film accords Marian some over-exposure, allows her to be presented in what may be other than the best light. Besides the idealization and aggrandizement of the lost other that might be expected, this film permits a certain aggressivity or even hostility to be advanced in her direction. That this may be so need not be seen as a weakness; it may be a sign of inconsistency or contradiction on the part of the maker (though I might could rather not speculate as to the specific operations of his psyche), but that would be something worth registering since it's something to which we are all likely to be subject. And that we are permitted to recognize Marian as some kind of imperfect creature, whether as a result of the irruption of someone's aggressivity or no, is part of the film's value; it provides a bit of purchase from which to resist (and to recognize the need to resist) the tendency to mythologize the lost loved one, to obliterate her faults, to reduce her in elevating her to the level of the ideal.

A black dog at loose ends, standing on a sidewalk; a kid on a front stoop conducting an imaginary orchestra (or is he a filmmaker quelling an applauding crowd at some festival awards ceremony?) This might could be what mourning is.

Though I met her the same day Phil did, I never had any extensive first hand experience of Marian as an intellectual, writer or artist. But I do remember an afternoon a year or two after they got together. Phil was out somewhere, and Marian and I talked for a few hours. I was going through some kind of a bad patch, as they say. She was generous and encouraging. I think it was the last time I spoke with her for more than a minute or two. I left that kitchen feeling quite uplifted, a feeling which lasted for some time afterwards.

What these ashes wanted, I felt sure,
was not containment but participation.
Not an enclosure of memory,
but the world.

The key phrase in the film's epigraph (something which Marian had extracted from the work of American poet Mark Doty) is the "I felt sure." Participation and the world rather than containment or enclosure (or incorporation) is not the other's desire, but arises within the bereaved. It is the mourner who does not wish to be enclosed (trapped, embunkered) within or by his memory of the lost loved one; the "I felt sure" operates to project these wishes onto the departed, concealing, in what would appear to be a gesture of generosity or sacrifice, a flight from or defense against the affect, anxiety, which threatens him on account of what may not be loss, but rather, excessive proximity. Photography, and thus cinema, always functions in the mode of bereavement (recall Benjamin, Bazin, Barthes, et al.); making a film such as this one, making it public, is a way of securing this projection, a way of keeping this (projected) pact with the other, and at the same time an effort at underwriting one's own defense. Thus Benjamin's beloved Kafka: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds." [4]

This kind of "I felt sure" (under the sign of which the film proceeds) precisely bears the sense of the "might could."



In the sequence featuring a photograph from Guadalest, Spain, whose "dark surround" may house Marian's "after image," the on-screen text continues:

if I could brighten up this part of the picture
I might illuminate
the condition of her death
the mystery of her life
and the reason why
at the instant of her passage
I felt peace with her leaving
a feeling I no longer hold

Here it is in precisely the place of no information (the blank, silver-free part of the negative that allows all light to pass, thus giving black on the print) that the other, and the answer to her enigma, is sought. It is as if the subject knows without knowing that there is a constitutive failure inherent in his project, that it must fail in order to in any sense succeed: that is, to relinquish, to recuperate, to remain, to remember. And that photography (or cinematography) has a necessary relation to that necessary failure. In the mode of bereavement. I felt sure.

Her snow dance, the second version, black and white, high-contrast. The scratches, dirt and hair, visible splices, the slow bleachout as she skips away. This might could be what mourning is.



In the section called "Four Shadows," an apostrophe to Marian (but which also, by its second person address, implicates, ensnares, the viewer), Hoffman replays a series of chance encounters with death experienced "not long before you died." Crucial here is the figure of Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh, whose presence in the film implicitly but nevertheless forcefully identifies her with Marian. Because she was a woman, and to prevent her from living on in eternity, Hatshepsut's name had been written out of Egyptian history, her image defiled, her body robbed from its tomb. And yet her story and her name have been recovered, her image reclaimed; now there's a website promoting a biopic called "The Daughter of Ra"; the other day, Phil told me he'd heard that archeologists think they may have found her mummy at a recent dig. Hatshepsut oscillates, then, between presence and absence; her cartouche is both erased and legible; her crypt is empty and it isn't. A strong, active woman (socially, intellectually, artistically), Marian had a pharaonic bearing; we might say that in the film (the figure of) Marian is borne in the same oscillation as her ancient avatar, but with a twist. Neither presence nor absence, but some remnant, a something-other-than, is encrypted here; or better, resides here cryptically: that is, available, should we be up to it, for decipherment.

Two kids discussing an infestation of ladybugs, and the different varieties among the swarm. One relates an accidental squishing, to general amusement. This might be what mourning is.

Your death is only available to me as your absence or as my loss. You are gone, outside me, and are now nothing since I am consigned to memory, to mourning, to interiorization. But this death that I cannot know, your death (or my own?), makes my limit apparent in my obligation to mourn, to remember, and thus to harbor within me something that exceeds me, is other than me, and is outside me: a remnant of your intractable absent otherness. In me without me, your trace. Without which no "in me" at all, no within to me. Your absence, irrevocable, carves me out, hollows me, leaves me with your trace, which is other than you. Else but that other, I

relinquish. What remains, non-totalizable, non-composable, is fragment, scrap, ort, morsel. Them I savor, mourning.

Hoffman's practice is to work with leftovers, scraps, and the mode of his work is fragmentary. His approach is from the margins, and features the marginal: this grandmother; that body on a Mexican road; this twin and his brother; this one, this very one I loved, lost. It can be excruciating at times. There are even occasional bits that stick in the craw, refuse to be processed (for me, this time: Hasselhoff.) But in general, what it preserves, harbors, secretes, what opens in it, what swoons and ranges and percolates and dodges in this broad corpus is surprising, rich and deep. The work exceeds itself, is more than what it's made from, and becomes itself its own trace, its own remnant. Available for decipherment. At a theatre (not terribly) near you.



More Egyptology: during the filming at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, the zoom barrel on Hoffman's lens jams, we are told, and later the camera stops working altogether. What gorgonizing Medusa's gaze has come within its field of view? It is not absence that makes the dead so disturbing to encounter (Hoffman's claim that each of his encounters made death "less strange" doesn't seem to me altogether plausible given the details); it's that the dead are somehow all too present, even too enjoying, we might say. Instead of lack, we come into contact with a lack of lack, a non-positive overabundance exceeding our capacity to grasp it, and it provokes a petrifying anxiety. I might could make a film about a lost loved one, but to do so means that the apparatus itself will stiffen and break, that what I wish to record will utterly resist presentation; and it turns out that I can (and perhaps should) only avert my gaze, and in so doing merely mark the (lacerating) place/trace of what was to have been my subject.

The brilliant poetic reduction of the young Polish cousin in passing through/torn formations ("Where I was born, you filmed") re/deformed here (chiasmatically; under erasure perhaps) as "You filmed, whereon my trace was born(e)." This might could be what mourning is.

One of a number of beautiful, singular and compelling images in the film: sunlit Marian walking behind a line of columns at a temple of Horus, image replaced by shadow, not-presence and not-absence, and trace. A haunting. Mike Hoolboom's voice on the answering machine, delivering another potshard, a find from his dig:

In a later century, someone dropped and broke the cup, but it was too precious simply to throw away. It was repaired, not with glue, but with a seam of gold solder; and I think our poems are often like that gold solder, repairing the break in what can never be restored, perfectly. The gold repair adds a kind of beauty to the cup, making visible part of its history.

It's a comforting story, but there's another version: you might could never gather up all the pieces; one or two wind up down the cold air return or the sinkdrain, never to re-emerge. Some bits are so tiny you can't see to pick them up; eventually they're carried away by swarms of ladybugs. The molten gold solder drips on your hand, searing into your flesh, working its way through your system till it's lodged in your hot heart. The cup is repaired with Scotch tape and rubber bands, and you put it at the back of a shelf. Every time you happen to see it you're stiffened with an anxious rigor, and look away. This, too, is part of history. Is it visible?



Now think of Auden's meditation on Breughel's Icarus in "Musée des Beaux Arts" (with the son of Daedalus a figure both of the lost loved one and the artist who tempts the limits of the possible, flying too close to the sun):

...how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

New loves upstairs, loud alive in the brightteeming day. This might
could be what mourning is.

Perhaps in What these ashes wanted we have seen (at least the
remnant of) something amazing. We might could sail on. And in the
wake of the final frame, one word:

Stet.
It means "let it stand."

1] Mike Cartmell, "Landscape With Shipwreck" in Landscape With Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman, ed. K. Sandlos and M. Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2001, pp. 222-244.

[2] Brenda Longfellow, "Philip Hoffman's Camera Lucida" in Landscape With Shipwreck, pp. 201-210.

[3] Ibid., p. 207.

[4] In Gustav Janouch, Gespräche mit Kafka. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1968, p. 54.