



PHILIP HOFFMAN

All Fall Down, dir. Philip Hoffman (2009)

Barns, Brits and Birthrights

Philip Hoffman's *All Fall Down*: personal, experimental and a documentary feature

To every individual in nature is given an individual property by nature not to be invaded or usurped by any. For every one, as he is himself, so he has a self-propriety, else could he not be himself; and of this no second may presume to deprive any of without manifest violation and affront to the very principles of nature and of the rules of equity and justice between man and man. Mine and thine cannot be, except this be. No man has power over my rights and liberties, and I over no man's. I may be but an individual, enjoy my self and my self-propriety and may right myself no more than my self, or presume any further; if I do, I am an encroacher and an invader upon another man's right—to which I have no right.

—RICHARD OVERTON, "An Arrow Against All Tyrants," a Leveller manifesto, 1646

OVER THE LAST THIRTY YEARS, Philip Hoffman has often been called Canada's pre-eminent diary filmmaker. The release of his first feature film *All Fall Down* (2009) offers one an opportune chance to reconsider his body of work, his diaristic practice and its relationship to documentary.

BY SCOTT MACKENZIE

Revisiting Hoffman's diverse oeuvre is a revelation: it quickly becomes apparent that Hoffman is one of Canada's most important documentary filmmakers, full stop. To make this case,

one only needs to look at the current ubiquity of 'hybrid documentaries' and the critical and ethical debates surrounding their emergence. The term itself is of recent provenance, yet Hoffman has been making what would now be considered 'hybrid' documentaries since his first film in 1978, *On the Pond*.

Indeed, the nature of the documentary—be it material, psychological or cinematic—and its ethical implications have always been a key concern of Hoffman's. Many of his earlier works are quite obviously documentaries of different sorts, which address these issues in a myriad of ways: his city-film *Kitchener/Berlin* (1990), *Technilogic Ordering* (1994), his self-reflexive meta-documentary on the first Iraq war, *?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986), the quasi-'making of' documentary which takes Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (UK, 1985) as its purported subject, *passing through/torn formations* (1988) and *What these ashes wanted* (2001), films which examine his personal histories of family, memory and loss. Hoffman can therefore be best understood as a hybrid documentarian *avant la lettre*.

All Fall Down continues in this tradition, documenting lives and histories. The film tells a number of intermingling stories, from the history of Native life in the Normanby region, to contempo-

rary personal narratives about local inhabitants, including Hoffman and his own family. Farms, barns and the land they inhabit tie these narratives together. Not just the barns and farms themselves, however, but their use, disuse and abuse, and the way in which these fields and structures carry traces of the past. From the cartographic photos that open and close the film, to the aerial photography that determines the site of an original Native burial ground (carelessly moved to put in a road), to the decay and destruction of the barns that pepper the landscape and have been the centre of cultural and economic life for the region for nearly 200 years, *All Fall Down* notes that if the farms and barns aren't used for creativity and growth, for the (re)generation of the land and life that defines the area, they will no doubt be eradicated.

Home on Native Land

THROUGH ARCHIVAL RECORDS, photographs, diaries and travelogues, *All Fall Down* tells many stories. One is that of Nahneebahweequa, an Ojibwa native woman at the heart of a land dispute in the nineteenth century. Married to a white man, she was also known as Mrs. Catharine Sutton. In 1846, she left for Owen Sound to claim 200 acres of land given to her by the Owen Sound Band, which she lived on with her husband. In 1852, her husband went to superintend the working of model farms at the Garden River Indian Mission and she went with him. In 1857, when she returned to Owen Sound, she found out that local natives surrendered a large plot of land to the government, including her own, which was already for sale. Nahneebahweequa became an activist, and went to England to petition Queen Victoria on the issue of

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native land rights—and the Queen promised to do everything she could to help, while knowing full well, as local museum curator Stephanie McMullen notes, that Native issues had been transferred from Imperial to Colonial Powers, thereby making the impossibility of intervention a foregone conclusion. Hoffman uses diaries (including Queen Victoria's), letters and photos to lay out the story of Nahneebahweequa, allowing multiple voices to speak.

Nahneebahweequa's story is one of many documenting Native life in the film, each built on the tension between asserting a voice and having that voice go unheeded. Hoffman finds other traces of Native life on the land, and its mediation through Europeans and colonial North Americans. The Royal Ontario Museum gives him permission to film a painting by nineteenth century artist Paul Kane, who documented scenes from Native life after he returned from Europe in 1845. The painting's curators admit that they are unsure if a tear in the eye of the Native subject of the painting, *Wah-pus*, is in the original or is a by-product of an early attempt at preservation. Here we see the difficulty in hearing voices from the past through images: is the tear *Wah-pus*'s, Kane's creative intervention, or the work of sloppy restorers? What Hoffman implies is that all three must be considered when retracing histories, even if the final outcome of the search must be left unknown.

Death Takes a Holiday

I was gathering images all of my life, storing them away, and forgetting them. Somehow I had to send myself back, with words as catalysts, to open the memories out and see what they had to offer.

—RAY BRADBURY, *Dandelion Wine*

IF THERE IS A THEME that unites Hoffman's work, it is the ephemeral nature of the moment and the way in which these moments can be both captured and transformed by cinema, not to recapture the past, which is always already gone, but to re-deploy images of the past, be they grand-historical or profoundly personal, to re-imagine the present. The capturing of these moments, often in tandem with a voice-over, is a process of revivification. Along these lines, death often plays a central role in Hoffman's work, along with the ethical issues surrounding its representation (and the metaphysical question as to whether death can be represented at all). Dialogues on death are scattered throughout his films, from the off-screen hit and run in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion* (1984) to the coolly formal aestheticised mass production of death in *Technilogic Ordering*, to the questions surrounding suicides and elephants in *?O, Zoo!*

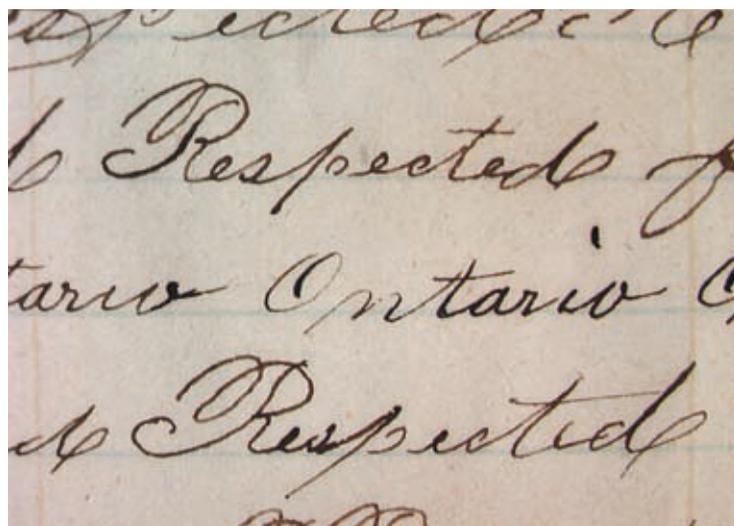
In *All Fall Down*, death again plays a role, but here it marks a moment of reflection on the life led, not the life left behind. Life, death and re-birth are present in *All Fall Down* in both literal and metaphoric senses. A case in point: the title of the film is a not too oblique reference to what happens to the barns of the region if they fall into disuse and therefore die. *All Fall Down* then is as much about birth and regeneration as it is about the death of people, places and things. And unlike many of Hoffman's other films, the question of death only becomes clear in the film's final seconds.

Land Lached

If this is George, then he lived in his car this winter until it was repossessed. He lost boxes



where the garden will hang



PHILIP HOFFMAN



On the Pond (1978)



Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion (1984)



?O, Zoo! (1986)



passing through / torn formations (1988)

of things and is trying to get them back. Photographs of his child's birth, a beautiful family clock, a novel he wrote on the life of a Chinese immigrant, an unfinished dissertation on the radical politics of the Levellers in England, and the secret maps of his life.

—Voice-over, spoken by
JANINE MARCHESSAULT,
in *All Fall Down*

All Fall Down also tells the tale of the late George Lachlan Brown, the Scouser expatriate who wrote a never-completed dissertation on the seventeenth-century Levellers, and is the father of Jessie, Marchessault's daughter and Hoffman's stepdaughter. If Nahneebahweequa's voice is heard through her letters, Brown's voice echoes through the film as a series of increasingly distressed and disturbing messages left on Hoffman and Marchessault's answering machine. Dispirited, and both possessed and dispossessed, Brown's unraveling also tells the story of the effects, among other things, of displacement from both one's land and one's sense of place.

Brown tries to reconnect with his daughter while, in the same missives, terrorizes Marchessault and Hoffman, detailing the inside information he has on the collapse of capitalism and the global economic system on and around September 11, 2001. As his life unravels, he stops living in B&Bs, moves into his car (until it is repossessed) and is eventually picked up by Canadian Immigration. Having no identification or passport in his possession, he is held indefinitely in a converted hotel for detainees out by the airport. Finally released, he plans to move back to Europe.

In one of his last answering machine messages, he says: "I'm getting a bit tired of this, and I'm getting a bit tired of being in this shithole of a country so I'm gonna go ... Hope you enjoy your life." Ten messages later, he dies in the streets of Toronto at the age of 43. The story of Lach is the tale of what's left behind: the traces of

his life found at Internet sites, old video images and in phone messages—and the part of him that lives on in his daughter. His presence is as haunting and as ephemeral as that of Nahneebahweequa's. In radically different ways, both are trying to hold together and gain control of the narratives of their lives.

A History in Ruins

It's not that what the past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, it is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.

—WALTER BENJAMIN,
The Arcades Project

INDIVIDUALS, LIKE HISTORIES, have their paths to follow and their stories to tell. Constructed from shards and traces of the past, *All Fall Down* opens and closes in a similar manner to Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (West Germany, 1977), with a black screen with white light shining through at points, resembling the night sky. Like Syberberg's film, Hoffman's work is both grand-historical and profoundly personal, drawing both on the 200-year history of the land of Southern Ontario, and ten years of his personal life. As Hoffman notes in subtitles early on in the film: "A year ago, I was commissioned to make a film about the house where I live in the Normanby Township and its surrounding area. At the same time, I became involved with a new love, and so she, her daughter and their history, naturally became part of the film."

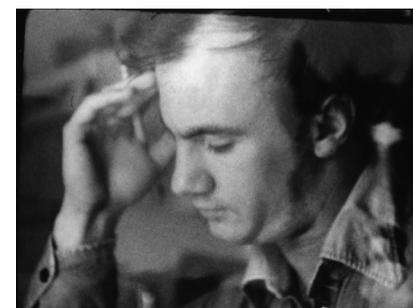
The many voices of *All Fall Down* are not limited to its interweaving narratives; they also reflect the aesthetic of the film

itself. The editing structure of *All Fall Down* cannot be reduced to the usual touchstones of experimental film: it does not resonate with the influence of Brakhage, Lipsett or Eisenstein. Montage is deployed to dialectically juxtapose different temporalities in *All Fall Down* and is more closely related to diary films such as Chris Marker's majestic *Sans soleil* (France, 1983) or Jean-Luc Godard's multi-layered *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (France, 1988-1998). A materialist collage at its heart, *All Fall Down* draws on many sources, both written and visual. Hoffman uses found footage (some from a heritage film for which he was a cinematographer-for-hire as a young filmmaker), messages left on answering machines, maps, paintings, letters, and essays to weave together a polyvocal, cacophonous and dialogical account of the land, its dwellers and their stories. He shows how disparate voices, when put into dialogue, become not accounts of the past but a dialogue between past and present.

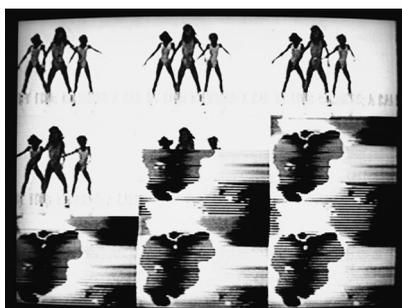
From Nahneebahweequa's story of dispossession from her land to expat Lach's damning of the land and the country in which he now inhabits, *All Fall Down* follows numerous discourses on how a sense of place is so central to the understanding of one's own history and identity. In an ironic twist of fate, while the Native woman has to petition Queen Victoria to attempt to preserve the ownership of her land, it is the English subject Lach who comes to feel dispossessed in Canada, becoming a man without a country.

Utilizing these shards of history as its building blocks, *All Fall Down* has strong affinities with German philosopher Walter Benjamin's Arcades project. Benjamin spent over a decade collecting quotes, traces and fragments of the nineteenth century and, in the process, invented a new form of historiography. It was one that didn't totalize the century into a grand narrative, but instead let the different traces and images emerging from the past to speak to—and

ALL PHOTOS: PHILIP HOFFMAN



Kitchener Berlin (1990)



Technilologic Ordering (1994)



What these ashes wanted (2001)



All Fall Down (2009)

against—each other, in order to allow the present to be radically re-imagined through this dialectical dialogue. Benjamin noted in his never-finished *magnum opus*, “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own—by making use of them.”

This could have just as easily been written about *All Fall Down*. Like Benjamin, Hoffman is a collector, spending a decade amassing images, sounds and texts: shards from the past put in juxtaposition with each other in order to reveal the history of the land and its inhabitants. If Benjamin’s central image of the nineteenth century urban landscape is the Paris Arcades, then Hoffman’s is that of the barn—and it is the barn both in ruins and inhabited by new forms of life and creativity that dominate the film.

Philip Farm

All Fall Down is as much a product of a farm as the cows, wheat and windmills that populate the film. The farm is a central character in the narrative. It is built on the land of the Natives who lived in Southern Ontario for centuries, the site where agricultural development emerged in the nineteenth century and the place where Hoffman, his new spouse and the film’s co-author Janine Marchessault and her young daughter Jessie escape to and begin their life together.

We see Jessie growing up on the farm, skating, dancing around a bonfire and learning to shoot—not with a gun, but with a Bolex. The farm is also the location of what is colloquially known as the Film Farm (its more formal title is ‘The Independent Imaging Workshop’), which Hoffman has run most summers since 1994, where filmmakers come to shoot, hand-process and edit films over a one-week period. Since its

inception, over 100 filmmakers have participated in the retreat, producing a wide variety of completed films, including Jenn Reeves’ *We Are Going Home* (1998), Deirdre Logue’s *Scratch* (1998), Helen Hill’s *5 Spells* (1999) and Barbara Sternberg’s *Praise* (2005).

While in the first instance, it may seem incongruous that films, a product of a nineteenth-century *fin du siècle* technological revolution could be made in an agrarian setting, Michael Schmidt, a local organic farmer states in the film that if things are not created on farms, the barns will come down. Schmidt notes: “Barns fall down because our culture does not understand the need for cultivation ... Anything connected to the human spirit which can fill these barns—that keeps them alive.” Indeed, the barn and its surrounding natural environs play a key scenic role in many of the films made at Film Farm.

This too can be seen as part of Hoffman’s continuous documentation of the landscape of which *All Fall Down* is but the latest installment. Hoffman’s first feature is an exemplary work, questioning traditional forms of narrative, history and documentary film practice, while at the same time demonstrating a profound respect for the past, allowing the myriad of voices to speak in juxtaposition with each other without drowning any of them out. Like memory itself, *All Fall Down* presents itself in a series of flashes, shards and traces which, taken as a whole, allow history to speak in a way traditional documentary seldom does. As such, it is Hoffman’s most compelling work to date. **POV**

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Philip Hoffman filmography

- *On The Pond* (16mm, 9 min., 1978)
- *The Road Ended at the Beach* (16mm, 33 min., 1983)
- *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion* (16mm, 6 min., 1984)
- *?O,Zoo!* (The Making of a Fiction Film) (16mm, 23 min., 1986)
- *passing through/torn formations* (16mm, 43 min., 1988)
- *river* (16mm, 15 min., 1979-1989)
- *Kitchener/Berlin* (16mm, 34 min., 1990)
- *Opening Series 1* (16mm, 10 min., 1992)
- *Opening Series 2* (16mm, 7 min., 1993)
- *Technilologic Ordering* (16mm, 30 min., 1994)
- *Opening Series 3* (co-maker, Gerry Shikatani) (16mm, 7 min., 1995)
- *Sweep* (co-maker Sami van Ingen) (16mm, 30 min., 1995)
- *Chimera* (16mm, 15 min., 1996)
- *Destroying Angel* (co-maker Wayne Salazar) (16mm, 32 min., 1998)
- *Opening Series 4* (16mm, 10 min., 2000)
- *Kokoro is for Heart* (16mm, 7 min., 1999)
- *What these ashes wanted* (16mm, 55 min., 2001)
- *ever present going past* (DV, 7 min., 2007)
- *All Fall Down* (HDCAM-DV, 94 min., 2009)