

Local Spotlight

Philip Hoffman, diarist filmmaker

by Monica Nolan

Philip Hoffman is not afraid of death. You might even say he's a bit obsessed with it. In four of the five films the San Francisco Cinematheque is showing as a mid-career retrospective of his work, death is the brooding presence that shapes the film's explicit subject matter. Whether it takes the form of an elephant with a heart attack in *?O,!Zoo (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986), the unseen dead boy in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984), or the filmmaker's dying grandmother, to whom the camera returns repeatedly, as if magnetized, in the stunning opening sequence of *passing through/torn formations* (1988), death is always there.

In Hoffman's most recent work, *What These Ashes Wanted* (winner of a 2002 Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival), he confronts mortality head on. The film grew out of the mourning process that followed the 1996 death of Marian McMahon, his life partner of many years. It begins by taking the viewer through his grieving process and ends by circling back to an earlier encounter with death, a bizarre assignment Hoffman was given as a boy to photograph his dead grandfather in his coffin. The disparate elements tie together in the particularly organic way that has become a hallmark of Hoffman's style. The filmmaker, who's been making films since the late '70s, has married his life and his art in a complete disregard of the conventional boundaries between the two. Often referred to as Canada's preeminent diary filmmaker, Hoffman makes his films from an archive of footage—16mm, Super-8, video—built up from years of filming regularly, almost obsessively, with no specific purpose in mind.

"The process has always been collecting without necessarily thinking exactly what I want," says Hoffman, adding, "I tend to let my personal life navigate me through the things that I want to film." *What These Ashes Wanted* includes footage from as far back as 1983, and Hoffman points out that much of the material was collected without a film in mind. One of the first images in *What These Ashes Wanted* is of a long ago snowy day, Marian and Philip out taking a walk, passing the camera back and forth and filming each other goofing around. The reworking of this image, almost 20 years after it was first produced, is what gives meaning to the home-movie fragment. The same footage is repeated later in the film, now re-photographed so it's grainy and drained of color and weighted with a poignancy not present at its first appearance. "I break lots of rules," says Hoffman, "but if there's one rule, it might be that I try to let the life process come before the filmmaking process, and then the residue of the life process can sometimes be in the film."



Philip Hoffman's *What These Ashes Wanted*

Hoffman's films blend this exploration of complex ideas about death, memory, and documentary practice with endlessly energetic technical experimentation. At times the images' sheer beauty can take your breath away. Hoffman has the eye of a painter, and the ability to look at camera accidents—variable speeds, malfunctioning shutters—and see possibilities in footage that another filmmaker might discard. Discussing filming his grandmother in the hospital for *passing through*, Hoffman says, "I started editing it and trying to make it look better,

which is very funny, 'cause, why? I realized that, no, I have to just leave it how I shot it. The camera movement states a lot of different things, like the circling and the trying to bring her back maybe, or not knowing what to do, like all those nervous things.... It was so rich."

I am not surprised to learn that Hoffman has been running the Film Farm Retreat for almost ten years. A project he began with Marian McMahon, the Film Farm takes place for two weeks every summer on Hoffman's farm in Ottawa, and was conceived as both a how-to workshop and a way of fostering community and creativity. It's two weeks of shooting, hand-processing, communal dinners, film screenings, and conversations that last far into the night. Past attendees (including several Bay Area filmmakers) rave about the experience. "Phil has spawned a generation," says Maïa Carpenter, who put together the Hoffman screenings in her role as part of San Francisco Cinematheque's curatorial committee. She cites herself, Jennifer Reeve, Ken Paul Rosenthal, and Al Alvarez as local examples of the filmmakers Hoffman has influenced through Film Farm. According to Carpenter, Hoffman has "fostered a renewed interest in hand-processing as well as personal diarist cinema," adding, "A lot of films that come out of the workshop are combinations of the two." Of Film Farm, Hoffman says simply, "It's my vision of, if I could teach any way I wanted, the way I'd teach all the time." It's a method that makes sense for a filmmaker who ignores the conventional distinctions between art and life, between documentary and fiction, and maybe even between life and death.

Monica Nolan is a San Francisco-based filmmaker and writer.

San Francisco Cinematheque presents "Passing Through: A Philip Hoffman Retrospective" April 1 & 4. For more information about this and other Cinematheque programs, visit sfcinematheque.org. To learn more about next year's Film Farm Retreat, e-mail phoffman@yorku.ca.