

Rivers of Time

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The Films of Philip Hoffman

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Circling Stones

The air is crystal,
clear but for the chirping of a family of chick-a-dees in the evergreens.
The lake is calm, like a great sheet of ice.

In the middle, between the beach and the far shore,
has surfaced a large finely textured brick,
its sharp edges shaped by the rising sun.

Beneath the scene, a voice:
I like wrecked bricks, the points pierce my eyes, sending me hurling in space.

I revisited this curious post-adolescent site in 1989 after the completion of an initial cycle of excavations. Formal experiments on super-8 using the single-frame-zoom, which splayed the surround of the filmed subjects, squeezing out their ghosts. After seven years of collect, reflect, revise this form found its place in the film 'Chimera', and the power of its pull lead me into dark gardens of loss. In Mark Doty's words:

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

These films are a circle of stones. Embedded in each is the world,
reaching deeply into the past, rolling on.

Philip Hoffman

Spring 2008



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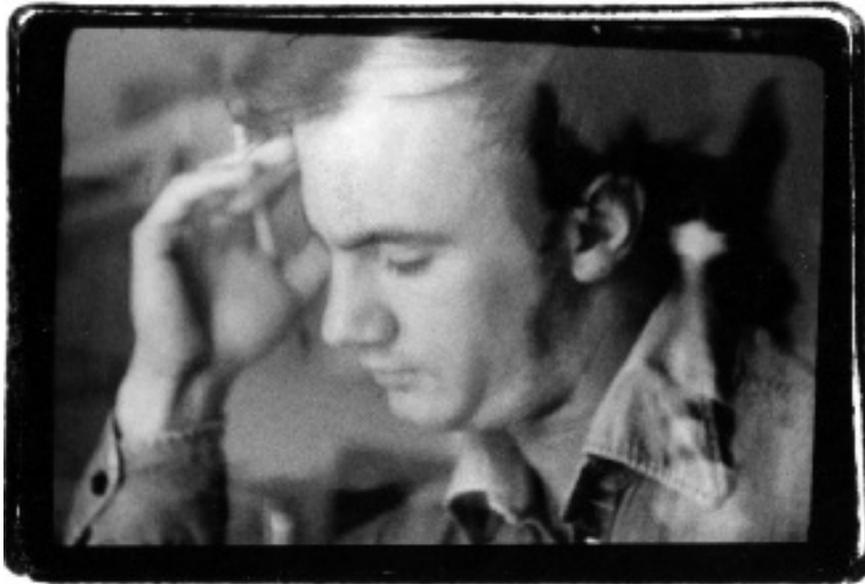
Phil

by Mike Hoolboom

Everything he touches turns into his family. His friends and colleagues, he greets us with a pressing of the flesh, chest against chest, the meat warms together, turns together. At the moment of meeting he pulls me towards him, and in this gesture, repeated time and again, he asks us to regather the many times before this one. We are never all here, in this moment, too much has already passed for that. Our words, the way he looks into my face (are you still there?) and then away again before he continues the story (like me he can't bear up into the full attention of the receiver while speaking, he needs to look away, to let the eyes look inwards while the mouth points out). All this is happening again. It's a way we have of remembering.

I don't think they used words like artist when he grew up. Feedlot and meat packing and carcass and bone but not artist. That wouldn't come until years later, almost as a kind of default. It wasn't something he aspired to, instead, being an artist is something Phil backed into. Oh, where am I now? Being an artist meant doing things your own way, finding out for yourself, never mind trying to break the rules or please or displease anybody. It didn't matter to him where the lines were or the way things used to be done, he was just trying to find a shape for his experience and that led him into small rooms, and he was taken with what he found there. He only learned later that the shape and size of those rooms changed what could be found, but by the time he had that locked it was ok. He had a hunch it would be alright and it's been alright. As long as I've known him he's worked off his hunches, his instincts. Others have money or scripts or five star actors. Phil has a compass inside and he follows it right or wrong.

In his movies Phil returns to the family again and again. Pictures of home.



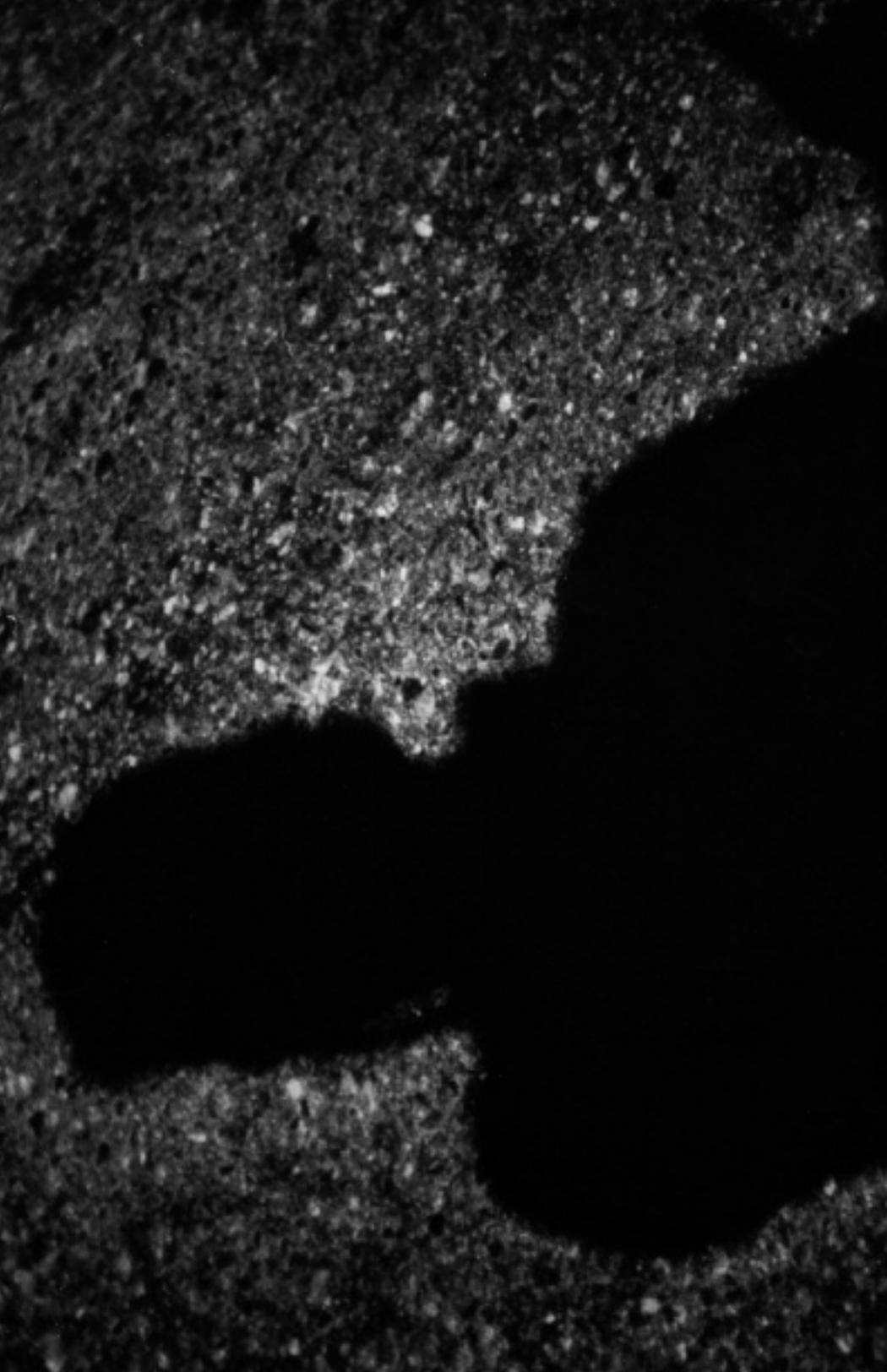
In his first college produced short *On the Pond* he puts a microphone into the room while he dishes a family slide show and records the response. Life happens, and he is there moving alongside, both part of and apart from the group. In *passing through/torn formations*, he takes up residence on both sides of the ocean, drawing together (while keeping apart) the Czech and Canadian sides of his family, circling around the absent figure of his uncle Wally, pool God, street hustler, the monster who cannot be shown. Phil convenes the family as a way to contend with the death of too many around him. Huddled together in this last place, the river of his youth become a suicide site, his partner Marion dead of cancer. He is determined to show memory at work, to make diary moments and stitch them together (his montage produces a family of pictures, a family album).

There are no fathers in this family. The fathers have faded away (they smile and nod and say yes, sure, that's fine, they are not the law but acquiescence to things as they are). Though the specter of the mother (talking, trembling, pulled down from a terrible height, carrier of a mysterious darkness) continues to haunt us in our dreams of waking and sleeping. Mother are you? Can you? Will you be alright? Will we ever be alright again?

He is not afraid to let time seep into his work. This one took years. This one took more than years, all his life. And still it is going on. He stops to



gather another moment and place it next to another moment, years earlier, the red drapes, the butterflies gathering after her death, the pyramids opening, the road which ends at the beach. How fortunate I have been to be alongside him, sometimes, on occasion, when he is thinking through these confusions of past and present and his refusal to forget. We need these pictures more than ever now so that we might become part of this family of remembrance.



On Philip Hoffman

by André Loiselle

Philip Hoffman is certainly one of the most important experimental filmmakers in Canada, especially in terms of his diaristic work, in which private memories, personal genealogies and anecdotal serendipities are assembled into a self-portrait that defies the limits of conceited autobiography. Within the contemporary Canadian avant-garde, Hoffman might very well be *the* leading cineaste of his generation. But Hoffman's contribution to Canada's cultural scene goes beyond his remarkable filmography. His involvement in Toronto's artistic community, his curatorial practice and his work as an educator at York University render him a true public intellectual, whose influence is as diverse as it is lasting and palpable.

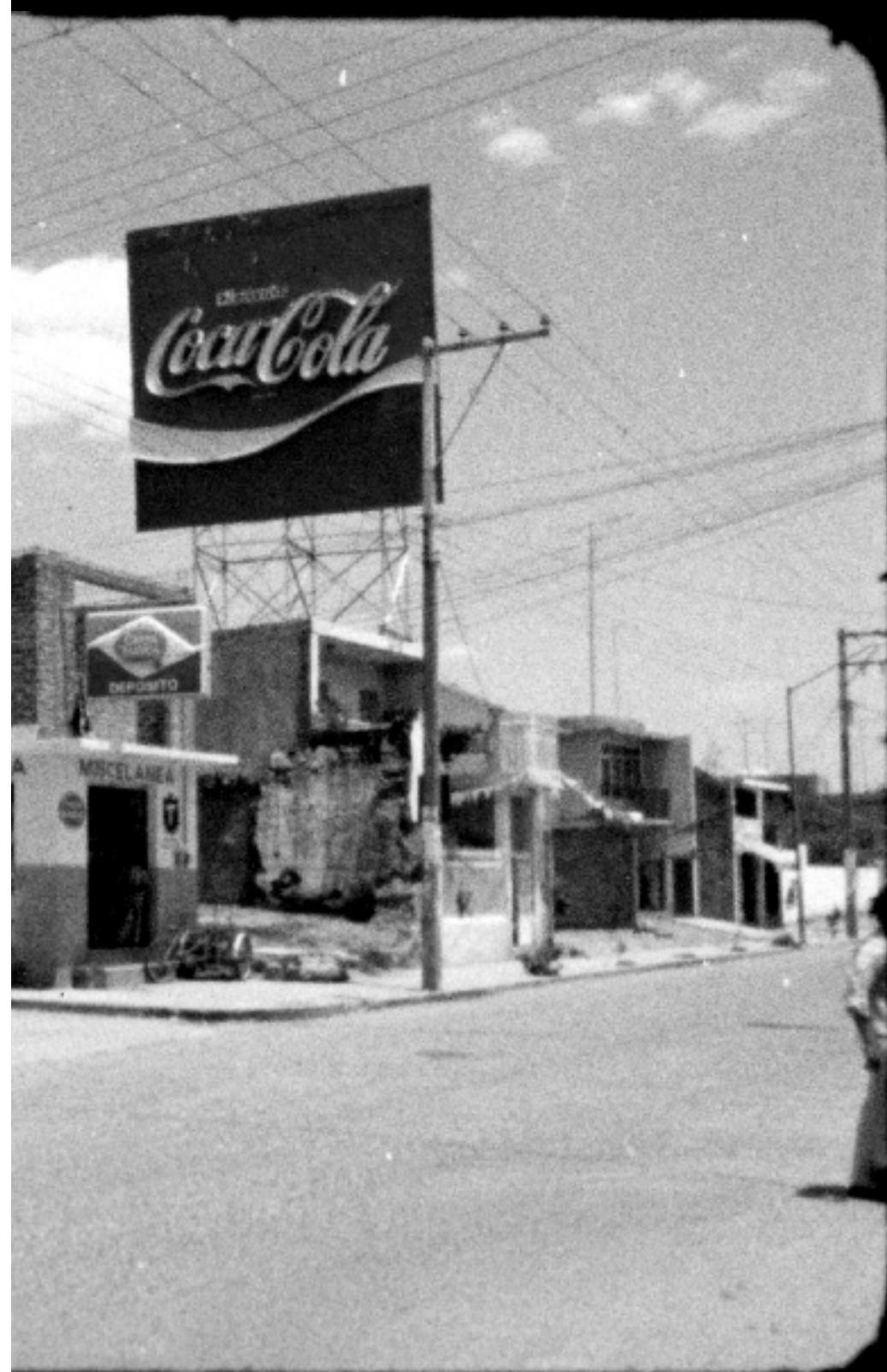
As a scholar of Canadian cinema, I have always admired Hoffman's ability to capture our shared experience of superimposed lives; lives that are at once grounded in the reality of a familiar landscape and propelled into an imaginary web of polymorphous identities. His films are deeply committed to tracing the intimate correlation between the awareness of local spaces and the uncertainties of geographical and cultural otherness.

This is at the core of one of his most celebrated films, *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990). Here nostalgic home movies and WWII footage of bombings over Germany are juxtaposed to create a deeply emotional yet lucidly political commentary on the historical coincidence of immigration that binds small-town Ontario and Nazi Germany. As is always the case in Hoffman's films, the link between Kitchener, formerly known as Berlin, and its European counterpart is not a simple one. The eerie luminescence of the home-movies, the uncanny grayscale of archival stills showing various moments of Kitchener's local history and the haunting soundtrack all combine to

make the familiar Canadian space look surreal; and conversely, it is present-day Germany that looks most authentic and concrete as Hoffman constructs that space through a documentary mode of address. The increasingly intangible sense of locality as the film unfolds gives new form and depth to Frye's famous observation that Canadians are haunted by the question "where is here?"

If there is a "here" to be found anywhere in Hoffman's cinema it is in the surface of things: the grain of old archival film; the light touch of fingers on a keyboard; the translucence of leaves; the coarse façade of brick walls; the texture of aging skin. The tangibility of water, wood and earth in *River* (1979) and *Sweep* (1995) assert that the value of objects is found in the ontology of touch. Even the artificial hues of television screens showing news reports on the Gulf War in *Technilogic Ordering* (1994) draw the spectators attention to the absence of depth in the chatter and auditory chaos that emanate from the flickering cathode tube.

Hoffman's work thus stages film's fundamental dichotomy as a device that records the materiality of existence and a window into memory as the elusive anchor of private and public identity. This is especially true of my personal favorite, *passing through / torn formations*, which stands as one of the most haunting memory films made in this country. This audiovisual journey through the cineaste's genealogy combines the tactility of documentary film with the evanescence of formalist experimentation to construct a multilayered narrative of attachment, impermanence, belonging and fluidity.





Thawing Phil Hoffman's *Freeze-up* (1979)

by Rick Hancox

Every filmmaker has to start somewhere, except that Phil Hoffman's debut in the Media Arts Department of Sheridan College, in Oakville, Ontario, was astonishing. His first student effort, the experimental documentary *On the Pond* (1978) is still in active distribution. In retrospect it was probably a defining moment in the convergence of Canadian documentary and experimental film that has become one of our most critically successful modes of cinema. It is in this context that the student films of this accomplished and internationally acclaimed Canadian film artist deserve a second look. I was privileged to teach Phil Hoffman at Sheridan from 1976 to 1979. The roles have since reversed; after graduation, he became a model filmmaker for me – an inspiration. This is surely the ultimate reward for a teacher.

Calling Hoffman "an independent filmmaker of intricate artistic achievement and philosophical depth," Peter Harcourt includes his second student film, *Freeze-up* (1979), with his Canadian Film Encyclopedia entry – a film other references to Hoffman's substantial body of work omit, including Mike Hoolboom's extensive text, *Fringe Film in Canada*, and even Hoffman's own website. Despite that, this 9-minute narrative anomaly is still available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto. *Freeze-up* is interesting in part for what it says about the ways in which this filmmaker did not develop, yet it flirts with the "exorcism and espousal" Harcourt attributes to all Hoffman's work.

Freeze-up is about internal conflicts he was having at the time about giving in to industrial models versus the more autobiographical documentary approach he had undertaken in *On the Pond* (in which he realizes playing hockey on frozen ponds as a kid was more fulfilling than the competitive

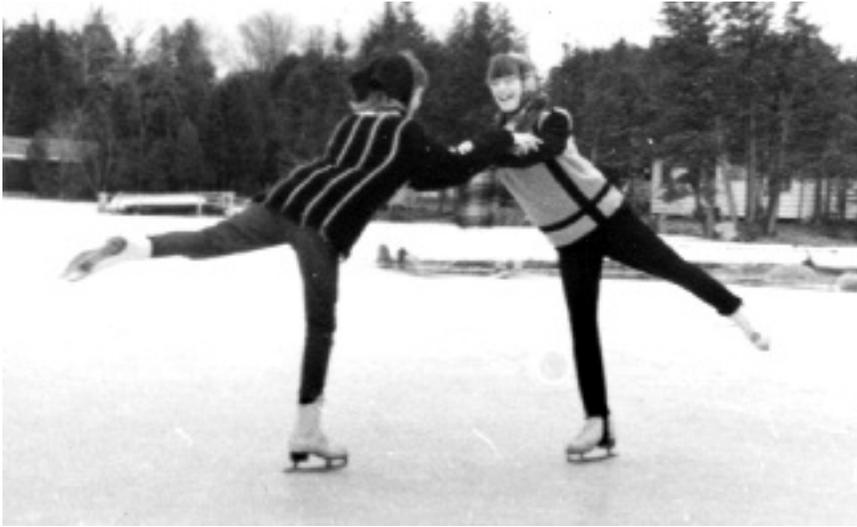
hockey he played later.) In *Freeze-up* the protagonist is ingested by a McLuhanesque electronic mediascape, obscuring his identity, and suggesting – as Phil has warned elsewhere – “if you don’t uncover your past, you freeze up.” This metaphor of freezing, in particular the tension between the imprisonment of ice on the one hand, and the freedom it offers to glide gracefully over its surface, is something that re-occurs in Hoffman’s early films. *On the Pond* is an obvious example, but so is *passing through/torn formations* (1988), which begins with a Chris Dewdney poem about moths pressed between layers of stone which a young boy pries apart: “Freed, they flutter up like pieces of ash caught in a dust-devil,” and in the process escape fossilization. In that film, investigating his mother’s (Czechoslovakian) side of the family, Hoffman said the freed moths represented “the uncovering of family history, making it an open, interactive system.”

Freeze-up begins with the protagonist skating across a frozen pond while a montage of commercial radio sounds gradually intrudes – the beginning of the mediated environment that comes to dominate the film. It’s one of the few occasions where Hoffman ever used an actor, but the fact that he shot most of the skating footage from a subjective point of view suggests the protagonist is really him. Even in this film, seemingly distanced from the autobiographical quest of *On the Pond*, Hoffman cast his sister Philomene, along with long time Kitchener friend, Donny Fitzpatrick. The protagonist (Fitzpatrick) finds himself driving into the city at night, seeking human contact while listening to the radio montage including a hellfire preacher warning, “we are reaching the time of the end – Lord we pray you will work a tremendous miracle!” As in *On the Pond*, these represent the beginnings of Hoffman’s signature collection of sounds, images, and other material which make the filmmaking act itself an odyssey that figures reflexively in most of his films. Back in the car, another disembodied voice blames political apathy on the prevalence of discos and disco dancing... “leading young people to a lobotom...” Here Hoffman has cut the sound and switched to the interior of a discotheque, where the protagonist sits mesmerized by strobe-lit dancers, whom the filmmaker has optically step-printed into a dazzling series of freeze frames, all to the tune of “Disco Inferno” – gruesomely slowed down to half-speed. The roars and rhythmic utterings drive the protagonist back outside, where he is met with the blank stares of disco mannequins frozen in dance poses. We see a girl (played by Philomene) surveying the same window frieze, seemingly as lost as he is. The two of them wind up at home surrounded by an array of electronic gadgets distracting them from any intimacy. Hoffman has filmed this scene in a deep-focus long take, foretelling his fondness for the 28-second “breath” of the Bolex he explores further in films like *?O, Zoo!* (*The*



Making of a Fiction Film) (1986). Back on the couch, the protagonist turns on a TV program warning about violence to follow, but his girlfriend wins back his attention playing a recording of Bob Dylan’s “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight.” No sooner do they begin to embrace when a power failure plunges everything into darkness and silence, symbolically killing the couple. When the lights come back on they are nowhere to be seen – until a cut reveals the lovers swallowed whole by the television set, skating hand-in-hand on the frozen pond where the film started.

Hoffman had read Marshall McLuhan by that point, which obviously influenced him in *Freeze-up*, and while it may not be a mature work (which Phil would be the first to admit), it nevertheless pre-dates David Cronenberg’s McLuhanesque *Videodrome* (1983) by four years – a film in which the protagonist is literally sucked into the TV set. Cronenberg’s cinematographer, Mark Irwin C.S.C., had seen and admired *Freeze-up* when he wrote a reference to the Canada Council in support of Phil’s third film, *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), another personal odyssey. *Freeze-up* is important because it explores some of the themes and methods Hoffman fully engages in later films – death and revival, technology and culture, self-referentiality, layers of reflexive meaning. Not a mature film perhaps, but *Freeze-up* towered above most student efforts. It was a work whose promise of great things to come would still be astonishing for any film teacher to receive today.



PHIL, FILM, AND HOCKEY: A PERSONAL FOOTNOTE

Phil Hoffman not only made us look good as teachers. There was also hockey. His first student work, *On the Pond*, made for my “Basic 16mm Production” course, revealed just how serious he had been about hockey. After playing Junior B in Kitchener-Waterloo, Phil was snapped up by the Sheridan varsity team, where he played alongside Richard Kerr, equally accomplished member of the so-called “Escarpment School” of experimental filmmakers that emerged from Sheridan. Phil was a digger in the corners – a hard worker with intense concentration and skill. But the competition was too much for his self-effacing and peace-loving nature, so he quit and simply switched his hard work and talent to filmmaking, contented just to play intramural hockey. Somehow I found myself on that Media Arts team. One time, while I was lazily hanging out by the blue line waiting for a miracle pass, he fed me one – right on the tape. Now on a sudden breakaway and unsure what to do with the puck, I weakly backhanded it at the goalie’s pads. Somehow it went through what I later learned was “the five hole,” turning out to be the game winner. Years later, when Phil started teaching at York University, I watched him play in an industrial league with guys fifteen years younger. He was still digging in the corners, coming out with the puck and scoring with imagination. This is what Phil Hoffman continues to do with his intricately crafted films, inviting audiences to join him “on the pond,” where we too can unfreeze our creativity and our hearts.





Tales of Hoffman (Expected Time of Arrival)

by Scott Birdwise

looking through the lens
I recall what once was
and consider what might be

Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion (1984)

It seems so often the case with experimental film in Canada and elsewhere that one hears or reads about a film or filmmaker before one experiences any of the work; if one is tenacious or lucky enough to come across the work at all, that is. Indeed, in the Information Age, it is far easier to come across commentary on an experimental filmmaker than it is to see the work, especially in a public screening. One, it seems, is always either too late or too early: if you read about the film first, you have of course arrived after the fact, for textual commentary is only ever secondary, at (at least) one remove, delayed, somehow inauthentic. Ideally, one sees the film first, with fresh eyes and an unbiased perspective, without the taint of someone else's interpretation; to see the film after a text is to somehow spoil the authentic experience. Paradoxically, one has arrived both too early (interpretation too soon) and too late (always after *the* screening, after *the* event, etc.). Too early, too late: this is how I arrive(d) at the films of Philip Hoffman.

The ambivalent nature of my arrival at Hoffman's films finds an illuminating parallel in what philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies as the three modalities of human temporality: *post festum*, *intra festum*, and *ante festum*. Agamben focuses his discussion on the subject's experience of it-

self - the subject's body as well as its subjectivity, its "I." According to Agamben, "*Post festum* temporality is that of the melancholic, who always experiences his [sic] own 'I' in the form of an 'I was,' of an irrevocably accomplished past with respect to which one can only be in debt" (125). The melancholic is directed toward the past, ever seeking to reclaim the lost moment of an event only to feel that she is "after the celebration," always already late, and, therefore, guilty. On the other hand, *ante festum* temporality "corresponds to the experience of the schizophrenic...For the schizophrenic, the 'I' is never a certain possession; it is always something to be attained, and the schizophrenic therefore always lives time in the form of anticipation" (126). The schizophrenic of *ante festum* only ever looks ahead, experiencing the present in relation to a projected future "celebration," where she becomes in essence all of her potentialities, without remainder. For this reason, the schizophrenic constantly risks arriving too soon, thus missing the moment. The schizophrenic is poised just before the event, the melancholic, just after.

Does Agamben's second category, *intra festum*, reconcile these two poles of human temporality and describe the event of "living in the moment," however fugitive and fleeting it may be? Agamben says no, for *intra festum* takes two shapes: one is a kind of obsessive neurosis, where "the obsessive type seeks through repetition to document his [sic] own presence at a celebration that constantly eludes him" (127). In her efforts to assert and record her self-presence in the moment, the neurotic in fact splits the moment, fractures its unity through the force of repetition. (In terms of media, I would place much of what is called Reality TV in this neurotic category.) Agamben takes epilepsy as his second example of *intra festum*, where the subject loses consciousness at the moment of self-presence, the result of a kind of "ecstatic excess over presence" (127). The subject's experience of presence either leads to a physical transformation or death, both cases where the subject is altered irrevocably, where, especially in death, the subject ceases to exist as such. The epileptic of *intra festum* would then not be a middle point between the melancholic and the schizophrenic but rather a zone of indistinction between the two, an undecidable oscillation between past and future, before and after. Indeed, for Agamben, "man [sic] seems necessarily to dwell in a disjunction with respect to himself and his own *dies festus* ['day of celebration'] (128). Ultimately, the "I" is the space of disjunction as such. I am tempted to offer, then, that the film screening itself is such a disjunction, its own "ecstatic excess" flickering between multiple temporalities, light and dark, the image and nothingness. To repeat, this is how I arrive(d) at the films of Philip Hoffman.

For me Hoffman's films are a beautiful example of the strangest of coinci-

dences and of the absolute workings of inexorable fate. In their having given cinematic shape to the temporal condition of humanity, Hoffman's films are testimonies to a continued engagement with discontinuity, to a coherent and sustained exploration of life before and after the "celebration." At risk of overshadowing the specificity of each of his works, I think that if we refer to Hoffman's oeuvre as a kind of "first person cinema," we can do so in the (implicit) terms of Agamben's discussion of the melancholic and the schizophrenic, the obsessive neurotic and the epileptic. Subjectivity, the "I," caught in the intermedial, ever-changing flux of time, is the disjunctive marker of time itself. The "I" is the contingent and mutable, yet necessary, spectral presence of the body and the voice differentially related in and to a community of speakers and listeners. That is, the performative utterance of the "I" is always struggling to catch up to the body (just as criticism struggles with its object, the film); the "I" shifts from body to body, offering and exchanging its power.

Hoffman's films stage (embody) the encounter (relation) between the "too early" and the "too late," which often turns on the function of memory. Indeed, if humanity's temporal existence is the ongoing to and fro of past and future, Hoffman addresses this by making memory's workings explicit in the very construction and reception of his films, which meditate on the conditions of cinema as such. Again, Agamben is valuable in setting the terms of the issue. In one of his articles on cinema, he states:

Memory is, so to speak, the organ of reality's modalization; it is that which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real. If you think about it, that's also the definition of cinema. Doesn't cinema always do just that, transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real?...Cinema takes place in this zone of indifference. (316)

Often critics writing about Hoffman stress how his films blur the boundaries between experimental and documentary film, and it is to Hoffman's credit that his work explores both but abandons neither. Rather, the two categories are exposed in their mutual implication: Hoffman shows us how experimental film is also a document of people, places and time; of bodies and voices and breath and gesture; of how it can affect the very stuff of the world in a direct way and is not merely a question of aesthetics. He shows us how documentary is an intervention in and transformation of the world, as much an exploration of the (im)possible as an archive of the known. It is as if Hoffman's films somehow remember back to when documentary and experimental practice were one, before their solidification and objectification into distinct categories and discursive systems. Against the pos-

ivist epistemologies and certainties of state documentary, Hoffman's experimental documentaries are nonteleological and noninstrumental, open to the wellspring of difference that animates the world. Concomitant with this openness, however, is the avowal of a profound unease and disturbance, a perpetual threat of disconnection that leads to a sort of unreality, a corrosion of all foundation. This is a risk in Hoffman's films.

This risk is something that never really seems to trouble Canada's neighbour to the South, at least in so far as its mythology is concerned. In Agamben's sense, the US is schizophrenic, for in its emphasis on the individual and manifest destiny it looks ahead to the celebration when all things coincide, when one is oneself and no one else, in *the moment*. In *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), for example, Hoffman meets beat generation filmmaker Robert Frank in Nova Scotia, only to find that he has arrived too late, that *the moment* (so heralded in the writings of Kerouac and Ginsberg) has passed. The mythology of the beats runs up against what I am reluctant to call a "Canadian experience," which seems to partake of a melancholic temporality, where one is never fully oneself as they perpetually ask where they are and why and how they got (t)here. Indeed, our (colonial) past weighs heavily on the past/future as an "I was" (I was British, Indian, German, Czech, Chinese, etc...), and the landscape, far from offering itself as the (American) frontier, responds with a kind of echo of the question - an effect, perhaps, of its vast nature. Again, Hoffman's films navigate these questions by traversing the paradoxical space of *intra festum*, epileptically traversing the space between the past and the future in their use of the "I." Allow me to furnish all of this with a couple of examples from two of his films.

Hoffman sets seemingly innocuous images from a trip to Mexico and elsewhere against a poetic text telling of the death of a young Mexican boy in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984), a travelogue involving 28-second takes with a Bolex camera. The image and text are intimate with one another, not didactically affirming the same point in unison, but maintaining their relative autonomy - together, intimate, by virtue of their difference and disjunction. We never see an image of the dead boy and, in this way, it acts as a kind of absent centre to the film. The event of the death is suspended, apprehended as something past that cannot be grasped, yet continually suggesting the possibility of future meaning in every potential association each viewer constructs. Indeed, the space of *intra festum* in *Somewhere* is between, and, it seems to me, the strongest authorial imprint Hoffman makes in the film is his editorial choice to exclude the image of death. Hoffman's "I," then, is an absent centre manifest in the suspension of the image.

In one of his most well-known films, *passing through/torn formations* (1988), Hoffman attempts to take stock of memories from his mother's side of the family, crossing back and forth between Czechoslovakia and Canada. Histories of birth and death, mental illness and war overlap in the peripatetic trajectory of the film, with Hoffman adopting a multitude of perspectives from which he perceives the fragments of family history. The "I" narrating the film is a singular-plural "I," a shared signifier of subjectivity. The centre of the film, so to speak, is Hoffman's description of his mentally disturbed uncle Wally's corner mirror, which, mirroring itself, is said to show "the real you." We are told the mirror was constructed for the purposes of restoring Wally's sense of self, which he believes was fractured in his youth. The central metaphor of the corner mirror, then, embodies the experience of *intra festum*, at once situated between a past traumatic event and a projection into a future sense of wholeness (doubled, of course, in the superimposition of past and present in the images and narrative of the film). *passing through/torn formations* is a sustained attempt to possess one's own ungraspable nature, to articulate the epileptic experience of the "celebration."

In this piece I have considered Philip Hoffman's films in three superimposed, yet ostensibly distinct, levels: one, my own experience of his films within the context of access, exhibition and reception (a situated, historical perspective); two, in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben (an ontological perspective on the human condition); and, three, in terms of his films' form and content (analytical, critical). For me, the consideration of one illuminates the other, especially in regard to gaining a sense of humanity's (temporal) condition. Indeed, whether the result of convention or ideology, if we wander through our lives in arrogant bliss or miserably without history or connection, Hoffman's films help us to clear away our assumptions and readymade conclusions. In his attention to the disjunctive connection between historical and personal memory, between the subjectivity of the "I" and the body, Hoffman's practice subtracts ossified certainties and adds to our collective spectrum of experience, reinventing our relation(s) to the past and the future. If I arrive at Hoffman's films in the paradoxical state of too early, too late, so be it: it fits. I arrived. I arrive. I will have arrived.

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**I know you are, so what am I?:
*passing through/torn formations***

by Chris Robinson

My grandmother's Alzheimer's got so bad that we had to put her in a nursing home in 1997. The move devastated my grandfather. They were in their 56th year of marriage. For the first time since 1941, he was alone.

Fall 1990. Sheridan College. I was taking Media Arts. One of the teachers was a guy named Phil Hoffman. I'd never heard of him. After his first (okay, maybe they were his twenty-fifth) words to the class, I never forgot him. "Do what you know," he told us. That seemingly simple and obvious philosophy was about the only thing I took of value from Sheridan College. I ended up flunking out, more intent to drink and fuck around than to learn industrial cinema. Almost eighteen years later, though, I've pretty much stuck (albeit often unconsciously) to Hoffman's credo.

Grandpa tried to limit his visits to the home, but soon he was making the half hour drive on a daily basis. He'd help feed her, bring movies and music for the residents, and continually care for her. Eventually, Grandpa, tired of the long lonely winters and sleepless nightmares, moved to the nursing home to be with my grandmother.

When I eventually saw Hoffman's films a few years later, I saw those words come to life. Forget all this abstract/experimental thinking and theory. That didn't (and doesn't) interest me. They're too often tools for fleeing and denying emotions. I'll let the eggheads address form, structure and all that. No, what lured me in and soiled my socks was the blatant openness of Hoffman's work. He took deeply personal images and memories and put them right up there on the screen for us to savour, share, and decipher. Through Hoffman's history I found my own.

A few months after he moved to the nursing home, my grandfather died in an Ottawa hospital. He didn't want to go this way. He moved to the home to die beside my grandmother. He died alone inside the anonymous hospital walls at 6:30am. An hour later I was staring down at the only real father I ever knew. Now he was the first dead man I ever knew.

He sure had a lot of nose hair.

passing though/torn formations has always been among my favourites of Hoffman's works. The opening, silent images of his mother feeding her dying mother haunt me even more today. Yes, that is Hoffman's grandmother up there on the screen, or at least a fragment of her, but she is also my grandmother. In that ghostly, sunken face more dead than alive, I see my grandmother. In the familiar room that could be in any nursing home, there are pictures of the past pinned to the wall. Like WANTED posters, they are putting out a call to someone not there. Desperate pleas from loved ones to help them find the woman, the child lost to them now.

On some Sundays I visit the nursing home and feed my grandmother. To still my discomfort, I think back to when she fed me as a baby. It makes me feel good. I am caring for her, I think, as she once did for me.

"Do not forget us," the pictures whisper from the walls of Babji's room.

A few days after his death I drove out to the nursing home with my cousins. Inside a drawer in my grandfather's room, I found his birthday card for grandma. He was not an affectionate man. Outside of occasional bursts of anger, he did not show emotion. He never really seemed to be enjoying life. So it was a shock to open the card and read: "To my darling wife. I miss you. I need you. I love you. You are everything to me." He probably never said anything like this to her before. He never felt he had to. Life would go on. There would always be tomorrow.

With his grandmother silent, Hoffman realizes that it's his turn to go back, to bring the old stories forward. This is no easy task. While the pictures and home movies make it all look "so neat and tidy", his memories tell him otherwise.

Grandma loved to whistle with the backyard birds. Sometimes she spoke of her love of music. As Alzheimer's was devouring her, wartime music would, momentarily, call her back to us. Did she live the life she wanted?

Hoffman's non-linear journey reflects the chaos of history. Voices, landscapes, sounds and memories pass through and overlap as they convey

tales of abandonment, migration, and violence. We're never entirely sure where we are, and that's okay.

One winter, I went to visit my grandfather's grave. It's in this small village outside of the town. The cemetery was unplowed so I had to park the car near the highway and walk from the road. His grave is way at the back, I think. The grave is unmarked because the family decided that it was best to wait for my grandmother (that was 4 years ago!). In arctic conditions, with no one around, I start talking aloud to my grandfather. As I'm doing this, another voice emerges and takes over as a sort of meta-commentary. Why are you doing this? Shit...if he can actually hear you so can the others here. Good thinking. I say hello to them and then figure... well... if they can hear me then they likely know all that's going on in the world and don't need me to spell it out, besides, if they're spirits, they probably ain't here anyway... they're likely off haunting.

This goes on for about 10 minutes until I say bye and walk back to the car. I sit a bit and wonder what the fuck was that all about.

Being in Hoffman's world is like doing a shotgun with a friend.

Your turn. You're it.



***Kitchener-Berlin* as Aesthetic Allegory**

by James Missen

Phil Hoffman's 1990 film *Kitchener-Berlin* evocatively explores the subtle intersections between personal historiography and shared cultural memory through the layering of multiple image sources. Hoffman's film can be seen not just as a representation of remembering but, more accurately, as signifying the complex cognitive and perceptual processes by which individuals arrive at constructing memories within culture. In this experimental audio-visual work, 'making sense' of the past by bringing together fragmented bits of archival reference in a logical way is rendered a complex endeavour. Consequently, the sense – of history, of memory, of culture – signaled by the dense layers of images throughout the film can be read as *aesthetic allegory* for the processes that enable cinematic constructs of meaning.

The images in *Kitchener-Berlin* are allegorical, in that they deal with representations of histories and their socio-cultural implications in a manner that is not easily understood as story. An understanding of allegory here is informed by Judith Butler when she writes, "Allegory is in its most general formulation a way of giving a narrative form to something which cannot be directly narrativized." The film's meanings are conveyed not in language, but in aesthetics and appearance; the look, the sound, and the structure of the work itself. As scholar William C. Wees notes in his seminal 1991 study of avant-garde film *Light Moving in Time*, "Film techniques such as superimposition pose questions about seeing and confront the viewer with a more complex and dynamic experience of visual perception than is normally the case in film viewing." The formal technique of layering images one atop the other – a visual effect accomplished either in the optical printing lab, through double exposure in camera, or via digital editing (depending on the project's medium of production) – is curiously po-

sitioned as an aesthetic, allegorical device in experimental works like Hoffman's *Kitchener-Berlin*.

Certain compelling visual motifs recur throughout the sonically sparse *Kitchener-Berlin* that sensuously signify what theorist Vivian Sobchack calls an "expression of experience by experience," although their meanings are ambiguous and never fully explained. Most noticeable to the eyes are Hoffman's camera's slow, sweeping, oft-repeated 360-degree pans of public spaces – a city parkade, an urban street, an office building – over which he often lays in footage of expressive faces of people in crowds; images presumably culled from private home movie archives of parades and other staged civic events. Hoffman's Canadian fringe film peer Mike Hoolboom describes these visual passages in *Kitchener-Berlin* in his 1997 book *Inside the Pleasure Dome*, when he writes, "Juxtaposed with images of the past, the Steadicam is filled with a sense of returning. Because its movement isn't attached to a body or person, and its movement is so uniform, it's as if the ghost of technology had ventured back to visit what it had occasioned, to look over all that's been constructed in its wake."

In terms of the film's form and aesthetics, the recurring superimposed Steadicam images can be read with respect to the structural strategy of the film as a whole. There are numerous instances where Hoffman uses optical printing to problematize the singularity of meaning evoked at the surface of the screen. Not only are his images unstable at their base, in that his pans are disembodied expressions that register in the body and produce disorientation in the viewer, but the address of the images in the foreground offers merely traces of objects and people that/who are not quite there. Hoffman's intent is not simply for the viewer to sit in evaluation of the fragile materiality of the film itself. He also provides the audience with coded images – from both a recognizable archival past and those of another time that are rooted in his own autobiography – to look at, to ponder. The images are thus loosely organized in terms of a formal structure, albeit an abstract one that appears motivated by a construction based on theme. Again, the effect on the viewer initiated by way of the layering of particular image sources is more effectively understood as *aesthetic allegory* than as narrative. The film's referents of landscape and identity are never entirely connected, nor finitely resolved. In looking upon the pasts visually represented in *Kitchener-Berlin*, it is as if notions of history and memory – whether collective or personal – may never be fully known. Even when cinema is at its most abstract and materially reflexive, film is not understood by the viewer as merely the sum of its constructed physical component parts unless it is constructed by its maker in order to be experienced as such.



In other sections of the film Hoffman, explores the arbitrariness of expression at the level of the cinematographic image. Early on in the work he incorporates what appears to be a faded archival photograph of a train station bearing the sign 'Kitchener.' Mere minutes later, followed by a loosely-bound sequence of underexposed home movie images of an iconic 1950s family at play, the same train station image returns to the screen; however, this time it bears the sign 'Berlin'. Whereas the audience is able to have access to other sites of knowledge – libraries, museums, and the like – in order to sift out the temporal historical logic implied by the shifting 'Kitchener-Berlin' sign, Hoffman's juxtaposed images appear as a challenge to such 'rational' forms of history-making. His visual allegory is not simply a challenge in terms of questioning the finite results arrived at through linearly motivated historical inquiries; it is also a problematization of the way traditional history-making is carried out by an uncritical eye focused through the technological apparatus of the cinema. The film artist's re-visualization of past times and places invites the viewer to re-view the meanings of historical memory, loosening the chains of traditional logic that bind us to 'making sense.' The allegorical layered images of *Kitchener-Berlin* are thus structured in order to encourage readings of history that are less focused and fall outside of more conventional ways of seeing. The film favours the recognition of a complex audio-visual life that is rarely addressed in more traditional narrative cinema.



Kitchener-Berlin

by Penny McCann

Structured in parts, Phil Hoffman's *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) is a sprawling work that moves through time, space, and memory. In this elegy to family history, the filmmaker's presence lies in dim re-photographed home movies and in archival photographs of Berlin, Ontario, a place that, like the substance of memory, has receded into the past. What remains are markers of personal and collective rituals of family, church, and society. *Kitchener-Berlin* is a film about relations – of families with each other and with the place in which they live, of cities with history, and of images to other images that move back and forth through time, doubling back upon each other to form superimposed layers of converging moments. Throughout, a bell tolls, summoning the return, time and time again, to ritual and memory.

This place, Kitchener - Berlin, is the space that lies between history and memory. There are literally and figuratively two Berlins, one in the past and one in the present; one here and one vanished. A blue sky spins, revealing a glimpse of the Berlin of the present (now past) – where one is becomes where one was, and, if not you, then others before you.

In the Berlin of Hoffman's present, a steadicam effortlessly glides across pavement, across a history that lies within view and above ground. In the Berlin of Hoffman's past, memories are found within the earth. Miners' lamps move through the darkness, revealing the traces of past lives scrawled upon cave walls. The ghost figure of a woman in red is superimposed – a flickering remnant of a home movie. The anonymous woman moves through the cave, disappearing into the space that lies between history and memory, returning to Kitchener-Berlin.



Time Sweeping Space

by Tom McSorley

At once an epistemological road movie and, in its own idiosyncratic way, a buddy picture, *Sweep* also represents Philip Hoffman's first of several explicitly collaborative films made in the 1990s. Co-directed with Finnish filmmaking contemporary Sami Van Ingen, *Sweep* is also an elaboration upon the thematic preoccupations found in previous Hoffman films such as *Road Ended At the Beach* (1983), *?O Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986), as well as *passing through/torn formations* (1988) and, to a lesser degree, *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990). As in those earlier films, co-director Hoffman examines how knowledge is constructed and, perhaps more urgently, how memory is remembered, imagined, insinuated, and articulated. In the great 'sweep' of time and history, as the saying goes, just where do we stand, either as individuals or as collectives? How do we know what we know? How do we remember? What is the relationship between how we know and how we remember?

All of these vertiginous lines of inquiry thunder along beside Hoffman and Van Ingen while they travel by car to northern Ontario, as Hoffman tells us, "to make a film about where Sami's great-grandfather had been." Van Ingen's great-grandfather is none other than the legendary documentary film pioneer, Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, *Moana*, *Man of Aran* et al). Where he had been is Fort George, on the east coast of James Bay. Along the way to this absence, this place where Flaherty had been, the duo sojourns in Kapuskasing, where Hoffman's mother's family had first settled in Canada. Merging multiple personal reminiscences with archival footage of the north, family photographs, home movies, and the ephemeral and ubiquitous images of television, *Sweep* weaves together investigations of documentary film practice, the intersections of personal and collective memory, the incursions of white Europeans into northern Cree landscapes and dreamscapes, and the cinematic process itself.

At the most literal level, the cinematic process investigated in *Sweep* is that of the documentary. Van Ingen wants to go to the place where documentary's most famous practitioner once stood and recorded, shaped, and disseminated images of the north with a new technology known as cinema. Flaherty is not seen, but he is present, as is the unidentified 'old battleaxe' invoked in *O, Zoo! (The Making of A Fiction Film)*, John Grierson, the so-called father of documentary cinema, who described the documentary film as a "creative treatment of actuality." Both Grierson and Flaherty and the epistemological claims to truth that their cinema represents hover outside the frames of Hoffman's, and in *Sweep*, Van Ingen's work. When they reach Fort George where Flaherty had been, of course, there is to be found only the presence of absence. It is in the discovery of the outlines of absence that *Sweep* finds its own peculiar power as a species of documentary filmmaking, as a kind of empirical record of a search, but also as a dialogical testimony to the silence of time. As Hoffman himself observes in a voiceover at the outset of the film, "All I know is that the process will happen, and we'll go along to see what develops." The film-specific resonance of terms such as 'process' and 'develop' are deliberate and suggestive, as what will come from this journey will be a finished film about the unfinished flow of experience, about what happens and what does not.

It is within this sense of process, or rather a poetics of process made concrete in the film's final form, that *Sweep* probes the densely textured underbrush of individual and shared memory. The film's visual and aural structures insist that meaningful memory can be evoked by a mother telling a story of a childhood fall from a train bridge, by a Cree family talking about the benefit and the harm of modernity in their community, by the silence of an abandoned trading post, by the opaque ferocious power of a remote northern river, by cloud formations at dusk, by barroom photographs of hockey players, by distant familiar radio programmes, by a shovel overturning rich brown earth, by the undulations of water beneath a summer raft, by a bee's benevolent patrolling of flowers, by human shadows upon the land. The collaborative construction of the film not only reflects Hoffman and Van Ingen's experiment with the experience of memory as individual family history in the anecdotes of Hoffman's mother and as cultural history in the figure of Robert Flaherty, but also suggests the potent force of the accumulation of intersection of individual and collective memory. For a Finn and a Canadian, the experience of such force may be expressed technologically in the cinematic assemblage of *Sweep*, but it is also present in that very assemblage's articulation of a sense of its own limitations.

Fellow Canadian experimental filmmaker Chris Gallagher once asked: where is memory? Together and separately, Hoffman and Van Ingen answer: memory is everywhere. What is clear from *Sweep* is that memory, as a mode of constructing forms of individual and shared knowledge, cannot be adequately expressed or preserved within the documentary approaches of Flaherty, Grierson, cinema verite, or home video. Of course, what *Sweep* also makes clear is that it cannot be adequately expressed or preserved *without* them, either.

On a broader level, beneath our (read: white European) tenacious and tenuous technological constructions and inscriptions of time and place (roads, bridges, cars, trains, paper mills, hydro electric power lines, radio, television, cinema itself), *Sweep* hints at a haunting which Canadian philosopher George Grant spoke about when suggesting that Canadians of European origin do not have their own gods inhabiting the landscape in which they live: the spirits in the vast Canadian landscape belong to the aboriginal peoples. As *Sweep* so effectively uncovers, there are other times, other histories, other mappings of experience and memory that persist in this land of the Cree where Flaherty had been. The building of dams, the displacement of Cree people, the flooding of their sacred sites, the erosion of traditional Cree culture all threaten erasure. And yet the camera and the telling of stories create ambiguous resistance to the barren inevitabilities of 'progress' and insinuates that new spirits have begun to weave themselves into those already there.

Ultimately, *Sweep's* co-creators have undertaken a journey to disinter memory, to remove the accumulations of soil and dirt from what Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes calls 'the buried mirror,' a metaphor for our often obscured personal and collective identities. Repeated images of the Canadian terra firma, which is also now a terra nostra, suggest that the sedimentation of memory here in our old new country must be overturned for careful, critical examination. What *Sweep* offers is an exhumation of time, a resuscitation of time in Canadian northern space, an attempt to recognize ourselves in our many and elusive buried mirrors. *Sweep* illuminates those inexorable processes of change and erasure which we cannot elude but whose outlines, with the extraordinary and limited powers of film, we can at least begin to perceive.



Experiments in Disorientation: *Chimera*

by Christopher Rohde

Without wishing to do a disservice to the incredible breadth and depth of the works that comprise a filmmaking career spanning thirty years, I would like to propose that Philip Hoffman is a maker of travelogues. His voyages have been documented in such films as *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984), *passing through / torn formations* (1988), and *Sweep* (1995). Even *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) can be considered an account of travels, as despite that the voyage taken in that film does not 'go' anywhere in the traditional sense of crossing physical geographical borders, it nevertheless stages a journey from home and the present deep into the past and the imagination.

In general, Hoffman's films have little in common with the conventional forms of travelogue familiar to us like the tourist's guidebook, with its checklists of requisite stops, suggested itineraries, and catalogues of famous and obligatory sites to visit and sights to see. Nor do Hoffman's travelogues resemble the typical autobiographical or diaristic travel account, which privileges the witty digressions and egotistical observations of the stranger abroad in a foreign land. Instead, many of Hoffman's works perform an erasure of recognizable, accessible ideas of 'place,' and simultaneously challenge notions of the selfhood or subjectivity of both the traveler and the viewer. Focusing on Hoffman's 1996 film *Chimera*, I intend to demonstrate that what connects all of these experiments in disorientation is the pursuit of a new and unverified way of exploring space and time, through an unstable model of the explorer. In short, Hoffman's films amount to the proposal of an experimental mode of geography.

Chimera is a record of the sights and sounds Hoffman experienced whilst traveling through Banff, Finland, Russia, Egypt, England and Australia

over a period of roughly seven years. Neither a narrative of travels nor an essayistic disquisition on travelling, *Chimera* is more of a poetic flow of images and sounds that represent Hoffman's experience of simply being where he was at the given moment in space and time, in the fleeting moment of impression. The film in itself represents a series of experiences of aesthetic transportation, of the travelers being 'moved' by what they see and hear to take a moving picture. Yet, on account of the formal approach Hoffman has taken with *Chimera*, we are seeing less of what he 'saw' and more of what caused him to 'see.' Hoffman shot the film by exposing only a few frames at a time while zooming or otherwise moving the camera forward. The image track was then slowed down by re-photographing it using an optical printer. The effect is something like what would happen if you smeared your thumb across a freshly developed photograph while it was still wet. The images become impressionistically blurred, but not exactly in the typically soft, fuzzy way. Rather, the process causes objects to warp, to take on a flexible or elastic quality, and for places to be either indistinguishable from each other, or to literally blend into one another. Subsequently, the specificity of event and place become less important than the represented intensity of being, in space and time and at the moment.

While some images in *Chimera* can be more easily ascribed to a certain place and time, the majority of the locations in the film are hard to pin down. Only a handful of locales are immediately recognizable, like an Egyptian sphinx and the CN Tower, and it is at these sites that we see signs of tourists and touristic activities. It is telling that it is the visible presence of sight-seers, pointing and taking photographs, that impels Hoffman to allow us a glimpse of something that confirms the image's geographic identity. This is not to suggest that Hoffman depicts these spaces in a touristic fashion, using the language of the picturesque or the iconography of postcards. It is more accurate to suggest that the presence of tourists points to the way in which these specific sites have already been coded, worked upon, and made 'universal' by touristic activities, which enhances their superficial accessibility. Even in cases like these when the immediate context is supplied, however, the film still refuses to fix the bulk of its images into a preestablished cartographic grid of landmarks, cities and countries. How far is it from Finland to the CN Tower? Where does the footage from Egypt end and footage from Russia begin? *Chimera* does not concern itself with such relativities. It is not so much the case that one image 'precedes' or 'follows' the other either in geographic space or chronological time, but rather that they mutually coexist on a plane where such distinctions are irrelevant. Hoffman's filmic technique here formally traces commonalities among the elements it presents, irrespective of the surface differences of place and time that ostensibly separate them. Hoffman claims that *Chimera* "shows a



world breaking down, and the images express the energy of change. 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."

In order for spaces to be mapped, in the traditional sense, it is necessary for them to be named and defined by way of successful and 'accurate' description and delineation. If an image of a place makes that place legible, and secures the spatio-temporal coordinates that connect place to traveler to text to observer, then that place can be successfully 'brought back' home, reconstructed and synthesized, for the purpose of usefully aiding future travelers to coordinate themselves. In *Chimera*, by contrast, space has the tendency to either deconstruct itself or persistently escape from any attempt to lock it down as soon as it is introduced into the borders of the visible, which has a significant impact upon the imaginative conceptualization and mapping of real spaces. By making the frame itself unstable, the film suggests an inherent limitation upon perspective for representing 'real' space, that there are intangible aspects of these spaces that remain inaccessible to representation and cannot be summarized as neatly as picture postcards might suggest. Hoffman seeks out and explores the edges, the unknown or indeterminate spaces and times that resist attempts at containment as much as they sometimes defy description. *Chimera's* tendency

to abstract its subjects, making their specific context and origin frequently indiscernible, has the effect of making the object-hood of what is shown on-screen less important than the aesthetic vibrancy it generates at the moment of observation. Hoffman is committed to discovering new ways of experiencing and describing space, even at the expense of legibility, and *Chimera* ekes out a more deconstructive and less linguistically determined approach to making the world accessible to the observer. *Chimera* insists upon a divestment of presence and an immersion in the moment, but this is not necessarily presented as a problem or a frustration of learning and knowledge. Rather, the engrossing and poetic uses of cinematic techniques here promote a kind of Truth based primarily on sense.

These deconstructions of conventional ideas of space and geography are intertwined with complimentary operations that similarly challenge ideas of fixing, locating and cohering identity and subjectivity, which historically have been equally essential to the travelogue. What we see and experience of the world, after all, only makes as much sense as what we bring to the table about ourselves. This is why so many conventional travelogues push the character and personality of the traveler to the forefront, so that we have a stable 'center' in the text against which to measure any foreign, unfamiliar or potentially upsetting input thrown our way. The more secure the idea of the traveler, the more reliable we think the information they can provide to us. Rather than attempting to maintain a fixed ground of observation, Hoffman shows a willingness to relinquish the stable grounds of objective spatio-temporal relations on which empirical observation is traditionally conducted. Not only is there no traveler figure present in the film to guide our journey, but also *Chimera* simply moves too fast for the viewer to be able to secure a sturdy foundation on which to be able to discern precisely where and what they are viewing. It is not so much that the film's often breakneck pace casts the observer into some permanent state of chaos and uncertainty, but rather, that it continually oscillates between moments of calm tranquility and shocking disorder. While at times *Chimera* seems to offer an infinite flow of chaotic impressions, it also regularly halts the picture and sound tracks for a few moments of black leader and silence to provide a brief window of closure and respite. It never allows us to get perfectly comfortable or adjusted to its perspective of the world. Further, the ratio of the spatio-temporal intervals presented on the image track is not set at a fixed rate. The length of shots as well as the relative speed of the frame rate often varies from shot to shot, thereby erasing any sense of stability or constancy in the relation of observer to 'world' soon after it is introduced. In *Chimera*, the formal rules of engagement with the external environment at hand keep changing, its operations remain in flux, disallowing possibilities for total apprehension and security, and keeping the

process of readjustment open and ongoing.

This is not, however, to suggest that subjectivity is in any totalizing sense radically destroyed by the operations apparent in the film, but rather that an understanding is established that concepts like identity, vision and presence are multiple and heterogeneous. *Chimera* is chiefly concerned with the production of conditions where perspective and selfhood are kept in an ideally constant state of emergency, always negotiating relations between the body, the text, the object and the world that surrounds them. Instead of imposing universalizing principles on space, time and the observer, *Chimera* rehearses a mobile set of relations between them that insists upon their fundamental contingency, whose only claim to Truth is based upon their production of wonder and other intensities of experience. The film can be claimed to conduct a set of purely theoretical relationships to space and time, and though this means it works beyond the strict Cartesian mapping of spatiotemporal coordinates, another kind of 'mapping' is nevertheless at work. This is an approach to geography that seeks to guide the movements of future travelers, but not in the traditional cartographic sense. It privileges travel above destination, transportation over arrival and departure, and subordinates the securing of 'knowledge' to the discovery of aesthetic experience. Truth is only accessible here in the poetic sense, as the deepening of the observer's sensitivities, and the suggestion of strategies for the enlivening of perception. *Chimera* functions not only as a poetic evocation of Hoffman's own travel experience, but also as a primer for the experience of travel itself, instructing us in the art of observation. It shows us not where to go, but how to be moved.

WORK CITED

Philip Hoffman, quoted in *Landscape with Shipwreck: first person cinema and the films of Philip Hoffman*, edited by Karyn Sandlos and Mike Hoolboom. Toronto: Images Festival of Independent Film and Video & Insomniac Press, 2001, pg. 212.

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Travelling Companions

by Tom McSorley

I. ON THE POND

We arrive.

A hard road pocked by salt and sand traced the shoreline, brought us to this point, and ended. The snow is down. The lake is solid. We decide to walk upon it. Your bright red brittle coat crackles and creases as you try snowshoes for the first time. You fall often in the deep windswept whiteness. Your bald head covered in a toque, your antipodean cheeks flushed crimson in the Laurentian cold, and you smile into the diamond teeth of all this ice and snow. Off in the distance, sounds of skates and sticks scratching and clattering on a cleared portion of the lake. Voices. The steam of breath. Ski doo drones. The ice inhales and prepares to crack quietly beneath us. These sounds, I think to myself, must be strange to you. To me, they are the aural ghosts of childhood memory. All this remembrance of cold triumphs and humiliations at the rink, of the warm awkward comforts of going home, of the ghosts of totality before the rupture. It's all glare and brightness here in this moment, but my mind remembers winter as deep darkness, with scars of light etched into it by light bulbs trembling suspended over our makeshift rinks. Dreams of sweet hockey futures, faraway luminous cities, other people. Lakes, rivers, frozen water: the mystery of a liquid made solid by the air itself.

You are from Australia. I have no idea what you are remembering at this moment.

We are outside a cottage in St. Adolphe, Quebec, an hour and a half north of Montreal. It is February and you are in Canada to look at new films for

the film festival you organize in a distant city that knows no snow. You ask about Canadian experimental filmmakers. Looking closely at the thin traces of ice on your gloves and glancing at the arcs of my convex reflection in your sunglasses, I think, perhaps inevitably at this moment, of Michael Snow. Knowing you as I do, however, I recommend the work of Philip Hoffman. Knowing me as you do, you say you will look at his films. Several months later, you invite Hoffman to your festival in Sydney, Australia. As it will turn out, there he will meet an American filmmaker, Wayne Salazar, with whom he will make a film almost a decade later. Poetic images of Australian landscapes will also find their way into several of Hoffman's films.

After a while, the sun slides down under western hills. The hockey game ends somehow, and the lake falls still. We turn and walk towards the cottage. The ice beneath this flannel of snow issues a muffled crack. Another new fissure. We can't see it, but we know it's there.

We leave.

II. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN

We grow old. Apart. Together.

Sitting in the midst of this very Australian party in Sydney's fashionable Rocks district of bars and restaurants, I am struck by my reflection in the moist glass of the window next to our crowded table. Outside, it is raining. The now dripping Harbour Bridge stands gray and stoic, surveying the smudge of Circular Quay and the Opera House. I can see the back of my head in certain positions, and I note that my hair is thinning. I remember time here in this foreign, oddly comforting faraway space. The temporal in my body. I observe the speed and the beauty of the younger people at this film festival party, all timeless and supple and mobile and light. I remember the ghostly images of the children in *Kichener-Berlin*, all that family footage and oral history rattling under my skin from *passing through/torn formations*, all that troubling awareness of time and trauma that permeates *Destroying Angel* and *What these ashes wanted*.

A voice. An Australian drawl comes to me. Someone leans into view and smiles. I return the smile and we talk. I speak of Canada and she speaks of Australia, echoed soon after by her husband's broad, smiling face as he brings me a beer. There is communion at the table. Her voice reminds me of the someone far away, someone I miss and remember, someone who is



not here and here. There is a small image of you in my wallet and fine sounds deep in my brain. All the while, the whole room is getting drunker as the late afternoon passes into evening. While smiling and speaking, in my head is an incantation. Others arrive, and the party moves on.

Weeks after, remembering this remembering, I will write:

Voice

There is another woman
with your voice,
I swear.

How she got it,
I'm not
sure.

All I know
is that
when

she speaks
she shapes
the hush of your absence.



Sydney harbour offers up whitecaps now, as the winds have picked the darkening waters up and shoved them into the air. We continue to talk and that will change us. What will happen next? What is happening now? Another glimpse of thinning hair, another drink, another shudder of memory of how far I am from home. In my mind's crowded diary of elsewhere come images of Marian in the elegiac *Destroying Angel*. She stands in the kitchen where she stands no more, and all the images in the world are not enough. Thinking of the courage of these films, and a little more aware of my perch along the edges of a profound solitude, I dispatch a humble poetic epistle to Phil, who stands before the loss of his beloved Marian, and whose work illuminates the grammar of longing and the joyous pain of remembering.

Grief

In this tangle of
grief.

You are there.

Not darkening her
light.

Later, at another party at some Australian film agent's condominium overlooking the Botanical Gardens, we all stand on the balcony and look at the Sydney skyline. Above the city, the small luminous traces of airplanes approaching Kingsford Smith International Airport prompts me to tell Canadian filmmaker Peter Mettler what my aviator brother once told me about time and space. At such high velocities, time is almost space itself, he told me. You must not look forward, as you are already there. You must imagine time spatially and space temporally. I remember telling him that cinema is like that, constructed and delimited with and by time and yet capable of enormous spatial expression. It can prompt profound perceptual recalibration. I showed him *River, O Zoo*, and *Sweep*. Does he understand? Sort of, I remember him saying.

Where is here? Where is there? When is here? When is there? When is now? Where is now? All those extraordinary Hoffman palimpsests of memory, desire, time, space, knowledge and forgetting reconcile me to my confusion.

III. EVER PRESENT GOING PAST

These places. Australia. Canada. North. South. These times. Before. After. During. The work of Philip Hoffman follows you around from the inside. It reminds you to remember, reminds you that empirical observation can become, *pace* Grierson, a form of metaphysics, reminds you that you are all alone and not alone at all. Carrying pasts and presents along in their promiscuous temporal image flows, his films have carried me to remarkable places of interior recognition. They have also prompted conversations, even catalyzed friendships, with people from places worlds away from the brittle rich Canadian clatter of skates, sticks, and pucks on pond ice. They too have seen themselves and, of course, Canada evoked, expressed, and explored in Philip Hoffman's generous, protean vision.



Interview

by Tom McSorley

What keeps you going as a filmmaker?

There's a moment in the darkroom, when the paper or film is put into the developer and the image starts to come....a kind of magical moment where I'm transfixed by what is surfacing...

Right.

It's the same moment that's described at the beginning of *passing through/ torn formations* (1988). Christopher Dewdney narrates his poem from "Predators of the Adoration, Out of Control: the Quarry,"

It is a warm grey day in August. You are in the country, in a deserted quarry of light grey Devonian limestone in Southern Ontario. A powdery luminescence oscillates between the rock and sky. You feel sure that you could recognize these clouds (with their limestone texture) out of random cloud-photographs from all over the world. You then lean over and pick up a flat piece of layered stone. It is a rough triangle about one foot across. Prying at the stone you find the layers come apart easily in large flat piece. Pale grey moths are pressed between the layers of stone. Freed, they flutter up like pieces of ash caught in a dust devil. You are splashed by the other children but move not.

This kid is transfixed on this piece of sedimentary rock....and I think that's me ...I'm always trying to get to that moment when I'm filming and I'm not thinking of anything but what's before me. I stop thinking about myself or others...I just get into the process...

The director told me that the production was a slow massive wheel. All you could do was get on it, and let the momentum of the wheel carry you where it would.

FROM ?O,ZOO! (1986)

Is that the same reason you still play hockey?

Yes, I'd say so.

You're outside of yourself.

It all happens so fast you're not really thinking...you're in the game.

It's a Zen kind of thing. You dissolve into it with your team, dissolve into something larger than 'you'.

I think when I collect images, in this way, without a script, just the camera reacting to what is happening there is a sense that the world is a partner in making the work....it's partially leading me...so rather than using script as blueprint, rather than preconceiving what the film will be, I try to stay open to what comes at me...like in hockey I have to react with my reflexes....and when the images are gathered and I start screening them, I discover all kinds of connections, all kinds of little gifts !

And then, the second thing that keeps me going is my connection with others while I'm working on a film...I like to show my work to people who are close to me through the long torturous editing process.. For my new film *All Fall Down*, my partner Janine Marchessault has been working with me and it's been wonderful.....she reflects what I've done, back to me, in ways I wouldn't see on my own. It's been about 6 years in the works and its almost completed.

If you were to use a literary analogy for your work, would it be poetry? Would it be prose-poetry? Does it really mean anything to have those analogies, or when people try to locate your work verbally, how do they, how would they talk about it, and is that really the point of it?

When I went into film, I thought it was the most effective medium to bring together all my passions: photography, poetry, music, first person film-making. I think it's the connections between these forms, the poetic connections between words, images, music, experience, that moves me. I suppose it is a poetic process overall.

Do you have favorite filmmakers? Influences? They don't have to be experimental, necessarily. Do you have people who get access to that zone that you admire, maybe have, in some way, nudged you to do what you do?

There were a lot of things affecting me, all at the same time in the late 1970s



early 1980s. Jonas Mekas came to Toronto, to the Art Gallery of Ontario for the Autobiographical Film Series. He just walked up the stairs with his Bolex in a shopping bag, and spoke about film from the heart, like a long lost uncle or something. His diary films made sense to me and I had already been collecting photos of family and friends and trips, since I was in my teens, so he fit like a glove. Later, he saw *passing through / torn formations* and he said it was a cousin of his *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972).

Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) was a huge film for me. I remember a bunch of us experimental filmmakers, maybe Gary Popovich, Mike Hoolboom, Mike Cartmell walking out of a screening of it in Toronto, kind of stunned.....so sublime and riveting. I think I probably connected to the literary nature of Marker's narrator; that the narrator could be personal, but clearly still a literary force weaving through the film, asking the audience questions...Brechtian techniques, which I think I picked up on in *?O,Zoo!*. And then there's all the Canadian influences Jack Chambers, Arthur Lipsett, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, David Rimmer, Rick Hancox, Bruce Elder, Al Razutis, Vera Frenkel...Jean Pierre Lefebvre on the fiction side, and then documentarians like Jacques Leduc and Boyce Richardson.



You've given the Canadian context of your work that, while not the starting point, the documentary tradition is a productive departure point for avant-garde filmmaking.

And I think at Sheridan College when Rick Hancox showed us all that New American Cinema (avant-garde films), he was also showing us at the same time National Film Board films. We'd see Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* alongside the NFB's *Paul Tomkowicz: Street Railway Switchman*, you know.... those two in the same program! [laughs] Rick was just connecting us to what was here, a film about the guy that works on the train tracks in downtown Winnipeg. I appreciated getting those films alongside the more esoteric....he didn't just show us what was new in art film. The other important teacher was Jeffrey Paull. He pushed us to dive deep inside, reflecting on where our ideas were coming from. For me, that was important, because it pushed me to thinking that there's something I'm not seeing, something in the shadows to uncover. So a strong group of filmmakers and artists came out of that time and place: Richard Kerr, Holly Dale, Janis Cole, Allan Zweig, Lorraine Segato, Mike Hoolboom, Carl Brown, Steve Sanguedolce, Gary Popovich. I met them all at college, all independent spirits!

And were you ever attracted, or are you, as you age, attracted to a more fictional narrative form, or is that something you never thought was necessary?

I think several times I've kind of had that in mind and it always turned into something else. I've used actors in my films, but they are usually relatives or friends in *passing through*, the girl running through the fields is my mom's niece from Czechoslovakia. The scene could be picked out of a European art film or something, and in my new film *All Fall Down* Mike Hoolboom plays 'the walker,' more at a distance but he walks through the film. So, there are definitely fictional mechanisms in my films, but I don't really have an interest in organizing some kind of big fiction film. Richard Kerr tried it and it almost killed him, and then there is Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore*, which I do not think worked out very well for her. I think fiction feature filmmaking is very different than what I do; my process is more akin to a painter or something.

Peter Mettler's work, although he has done more feature films, is still more like yours. He did do the narrative feature, *The Top of His Head*, but even its style is experimental and exploratory, in the way that you construct your films.

He makes films over long periods of time too, in that way. While he's making the film he diverges from the script. If something interesting comes up it's fair game! He's tried for bigger budgets, and that's kind of more painful than what I'm doing. I know the limitations of working in that way. I don't want to spend time chasing money for larger budgets.. but he's good at that, though I don't think he likes it that much. I like to stay within the realm of something that I can control. I like to be in a process where someone else isn't setting my deadlines. Also, since the other half of what I do is teach, I've developed a way to work over long periods, and somehow the teaching, the filmmaking combine and affect each other.

Let's talk about your process of creation. What gets you started on an idea to make a film? Is it an image? A sound?

It's usually thought of years ahead. Between 1976 – 1983, when I was making my early road film, *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), I knew I would be making a film about my mother's side of the family in the future, which turned out to be *passing through / torn formations*. I started shooting that film in earnest in 1984, but there is footage in that film that was shot in the early 1980s. Since I'm always collecting, there's a kind of well or archive I draw from to make my films.

So these are ideas in your head, thoughts that recur, and you think, 'well, that thought deserves a bit more expression or exploration'...

Well, sometimes it feels like it is already made, it's sort of predestined or something. Most poignant to this is in the making of *What these ashes wanted* (2001). As I was shooting film in the early 1990s, incidents of death appeared before me, once on a train, another on a bridge and when on a telephone. I was traumatized, wondering why this was happening and it sure shaped what and how I was filming. Then Marian died suddenly in 1996 and the filmmaking was a place to go, during that time. It was pathetic. I was just watching images of her over and over...video, film, photos. I felt better in that world, than with people, but gradually I surfaced. When I finished the film in 2001, those three stories of death ended up in the film, along with many of the images of Marian and our life together. So, I mean that's where I think somehow past, present, and future are kind of melted within the art; slipping, as if the future is already with us. That was a good question you asked, because it made me think of how these films seem to be already planned, already in the unconscious, when you work in a process-driven way, I think it's more apt to happen in that manner. Like I said earlier, the world has a say in what the film will be when your method partners with it.

And has that approach to the process changed over the years, even as you move into new media? Is the process of exploration motivated in the same kind of way?

All the processes of new media make things faster and easier; celluloid editing, and with sound in particular, is much more cumbersome. The mind works non-linearly, of course, so we've just built machines now that work closer to the capabilities of the mind, but experimental filmmakers were developing these forms way before the computer was being used. Think of DzigaVertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and of course the Avant-Garde of the 1960s and so on.

I've always liked the idea of you working with the materiality of the celluloid, with all of the optical printing that you do. It's so physical in a way, and now you have this other way of constructing that has another effect.

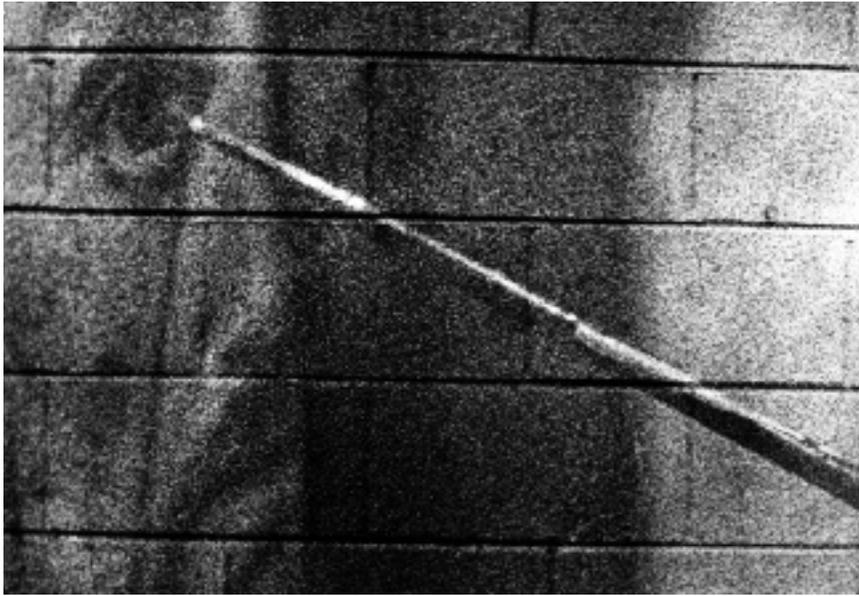
Yes, and I still work with hand processing of celluloid. The Film Farm workshop I do in the summer is exclusively film oriented, because people like the physicality of film and it is different. I just came from the 2008 Rotterdam International Film Festival, where a whole section of the festival is devoted to handmade filmmaking. It is called 'Starting from Scratch', and it was hugely popular, with everything from hand-processed work to 16mm projector performances. As a new art form comes in governed by



the digital realm and of course fueled by the commercial film industries, the old forms like 16mm and super-8 are used entirely as an artistic practice, not driven by commerce. People are even making their own emulsions, I suppose readying themselves for when celluloid is gone altogether. I think this is all happening because people realize that film is different from the digital. So it's not going to disappear. It would be like, in the late 1800s, saying that painting will disappear because we can now make our pictures with photography. I like to work in what ever is around and use it for its own inherent qualities, what the medium offers. At the same time, it's exciting to use all these possibilities and see what happens when they rub up against each other. But the computer can be uncomfortable to work with.

Really?

There's a lot of energy going into your hands through the mouse and alot of shoulder work, and of course the TV screen shoots light at your eyes, rather than the softer reflected light of the film screen. That's the McLuhan hot cool medium thing.



But you find it productive, though, in a certain way. I mean there's no alternative at some level, technically, but you do find a way, right?

Yes. I mean, I'm an archivist in a way, an archivist of the everyday, experiences that I collect. It's fantastic to be able to organize everything on hard drives and have it all there at your fingertips. I think there are good things about the digital medium. It gives you so many choices. It's easy to make more than one version of your work, and of course this can be an asset but also a hindrance.

Well, I think now we can talk about other interesting things. That's interesting too, don't get me wrong. [Phil laughs] But a larger question, Phil, the big question. The idea that your work is an extended form of autobiography, does that mean anything, or...

By extended, do you mean like...

Like it's a long, fragmented, interwoven...

Yes...

...set of autobiographical explorations. Do you see the work in that way? Definitely. I mean, I think any artist does anyway because what ever you do is a reflection of the time in your life, when you are doing it. But as a filmmaker I am collecting reflections of 'the real' in motion pictures and in

sound -- everyday moments. And in a way this is the residue of where you've been, what you've done.

I use this practice not just to document my life, but to help me through it...how to get out of this mess and into the next one. [laughs] So over time all these films go together and can be seen as a grand autobiographical project, with each film looking at things from a different angle, mostly through a different lens.... and then I think there are threads that connect one film to the next, for example *?O,Zoo!* the dark centre of the film is a scene of an elephant falling down, unable to get up and then its subsequent death. In the film the narrator talks about his trauma of filming the death of the elephant, and so he consequently put the film into the freezer, into limbo. But it wasn't till later that I realized that what I had written (and experienced in Rotterdam in 1985) was a replay of what had happened to me in my late teens when my Grandfather died and I was asked to take pictures of him in the casket! I took the pictures, and then put the film in the freezer...I repressed the images for a number of years but then during the shooting of *?O,Zoo!*, it all surfaced again, through my experience and by working through it with the elephant story....after I finished *?O,Zoo!* I took the film out of the freezer and developed it....those images of my grandfather in the casket found their way into *What these ashes wanted* in 2001, which is another meditation on death. So you see, there are threads that connect films over the years, and I guess the more threads, the stronger it all holds together as a kind of life long project.

I think the use of family footage, or of that kind of intimate, strangely intimate imagery, that is ghostly on the one hand, is embedded in ideas of time. Jack Chambers explored that idea of time, too, and that really comes through in your work.

Yes, I saw *Hart of London* at college and it really blew me away. Really, Chambers was important for me in my beginning years because he dealt with death as an everyday part of life, and I was thinking about that a lot.

It is an incredible film. It doesn't necessarily remain autobiographical in the sense of the use of that footage of the family, but it does have a very powerful and strange, eerie quality. Both in *Hart of London*, and obviously in your films, that it is connected to you and your family history. Like you said, the meaning of the images transcends that as years go by. Yeah, I mean there's some that I often come back to myself, how I watch and all that kind of, the community notion and the idea of place and where you're from, all that stuff is so vivid in that film, in so many ways, and so haunting and moving as well.

What else was influential about Chambers' work?

Well, he uses public records, the found footage from the television network and turns it into a meditative form through repetition and through the meditative soundtrack....within that form we see people jumping into the creek in winter, and it's very strange without the usual TV commentator. This 'makes the familiar strange'.

That's right, absolutely. That's a perfect thing, everything seems strange all of a sudden if you look at it in a particular way. But that's the power of experimental cinema in general.

And I think with regards to making a grand autobiography project, I think I connected to Jack Kerouac's project. I read *On the Road* while I was hitching out west, in the days when that seemed alright, and that led me into all the other Kerouac books, and then Ginsberg, and all the Beat Poets. Even though at the time in filmmaking there weren't that many people working in 'First Person', and I remember a lot of criticism of putting yourself into films in the 1970s, which is the time when Rick Hancox was starting to do it, and influenced a number of us. But it wasn't really until the 1980s, later in the 1980s that it sort of became more acceptable. I think it came in stronger with the feminist idea that the personal is political. Now, of course, that idea is everywhere.

I hadn't thought of it that way. And your whole generation of experimental filmmakers, using this form, like Rick Hancox, and others, were few and far between.

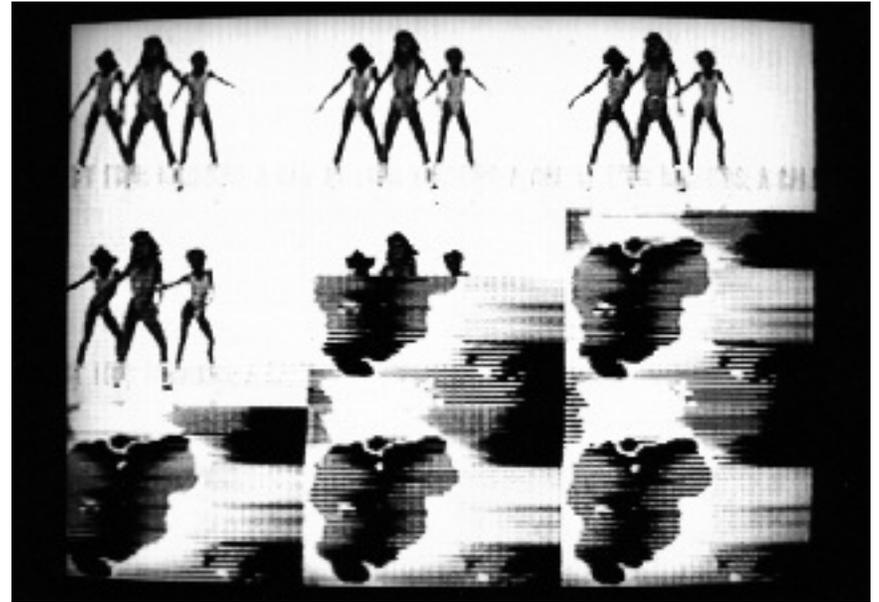
Right.

Here's a question that might connect up with the idea of autobiography: how would you describe the impact of Canada on your films, and what is Canada in your films? Do people ask you that at foreign festivals about your Canadianness? What is Canada to you, and how it might be translated in your work?

Yes, well...that's a big question.

While you're thinking about that, I'll ask you another question. [laughs] Film scholar Peter Harcourt had this great phrase, which goes something like: what is inside the frame is only meaningful in as much as it has a relationship to what is outside the frame. How does that question resonate for you?

Maybe that's being Canadian...being outside the frame..or at least showing that what is outside the frame, outside of the big (American) event is something of what is Canadian. I think that's been a big part of both my filmmaking and the screening of my films, because I think the way that I



work, the way I collect image and sound, often not synchronous results in a form that is anti- realist and strengthens the contrapuntal aspect of my work with image and sound...and of course this means that as a viewer you have to put the two together and the new meaning that arises is that thing that is outside of the frame.....in our imagination. It breaks with a realist connection to the world of what we normally see and hear physically. Again like in *O Zoo!* there are stories being told about what's outside of the frame throughout that whole film, and I think that it's not just that I didn't film it, I think it's that it allows the viewers to participate and have this image surface in their own mind that comes from let's say the story of the elephant trying to get up, narrated over a black screen. And there's a kind of crisis that happens at the end of the film when the elephant shot is shown, because the viewer has an image in their head, probably stronger, or at least different, than the one that's on the screen.

And I've really learned in showing that film the power of that darkened screen for the viewer, and I think there's always a sort of space between the screen and the viewer, right in the middle, right where you bring your own experience to the screen, and this tells us that every film is different for every person... the black screen sets that realization up. And that idea advances in *passing through / torn formations* and *Kitchener-Berlin*, because there



are huge black spaces with just maybe dialogue or no words at all, but time for the mind to rest from the visual, and to go into other imagined images. I remember in Sydney, Australian, Canadian filmmaker Gail Singer said how the meditative nature of *Kitchener-Berlin* suddenly flung her back into some deep past memory of her childhood that she had forgotten, and Ann Marie Fleming said that *passing through* made her hallucinate...[laughs]...so what is this but cinematic processes that engage the viewer to look at their own mind...once you break that normal link of synchronous, use of picture and sound you create the possibility for the imagination to do its work.

And the cinema has a very peculiar ability to allow you, as you say, to engage with it in that way. You are looking at reflected light, but you're also projecting into the image as well. The 'dark spaces' you mention are an apt good metaphor for that, because they're not really dark at all.

And the fact that it's a medium that can represent so well what we see.

Exactly.

So it certainly is like the mirror, or my uncle's 'corner-mirror' which Leesa looks at in *passing through / torn formations*. She actually uses the fragmented corner mirror, 'two mirror slabs that fold into each other', and sees something she wouldn't see with a normal mirror. I use film in the same way, to see something I normally can't see. Vertov called it Kino Eye. By slow-

ing down the footage of himself jumping off a building, he was able to see his hesitation...something he didn't notice at the normal frame rate. Film and photography are often used as evidence for the 'real' but it's a construction. At a dinner party someone showed Picasso a picture, saying 'this is my wife', and Picasso said 'my, she's awfully small and very flat.'

Let's tackle the Canada question again. I wonder if there's something about your relationship to space and time and Canadian landscapes that can somehow account for the poetics of your work.

I think Bruce Elder kind of exhausted one side of that topic, and I agree with him and others who look at the way the harsh Canadian environment effects our psyche. I think the idea of being outside the frame mentioned earlier is a good one, because of course as a child of immigrant parents I was brought up in the atmosphere that maybe we don't really belong. My grandfather used to say the Hoffmans are 'a little bit on the other side.' And even in the family meatpacking business, we were kind of the 'little guy' that offered good unique product until we were gobbled up by the bigger multi-nationals. I think my dad's workplace was unusual too, as I look back on it. My dad would arrange the work schedule so that the factory would close down by Friday morning which would allow the guys to get up to the cottage, ahead of Friday evening traffic (!), and on Thursday afternoons he would buy cases of beer and there'd be a little party at the back of the plant, which usually ended with somebody socking somebody, but you know that was all part of it... So there was something about resisting the status quo in favor of an independent spirit. I don't think I ever equated this background to my own independent filmmaking practice because I sort of put the family business into another category, but of course my dad had a great effect on me and who I am. This all makes me think that these are Canadian attributes, being a little bit on the other side, which makes me think of our Canadian experience of being in the shadow of Goliath... as Harcourt suggests, outside the frame.



Filmography

ON THE POND

16mm | 9 min. | 1978

Hoffman's first completed student film, *On The Pond* is a diaristic excursion into experimental autobiography. A self-reflexive study of family and the construction of memory in images.

FREEZE UP

16mm | 9 min. | 1979

Hoffman's second student film, after *On The Pond*, *Freeze Up* explores themes that are taken up and expanded upon in his later work. The film stages an encounter between mass media images and sounds (television, radio, popular music) and the seeming simplicity of a man skating on a frozen pond.

THE ROAD ENDED AT THE BEACH

16mm | 33 min. | 1983

Film images, stills and sound collected for over six years coalesce in *The Road Ended at the Beach*. Hoffman interrogates both the journey, involving famed American photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank, and the process of its documentation as/in film.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN JALOSTOTITLAN AND ENCARNACION

16mm | 6 min. | 1984

A cinematic travelogue that traverses Mexico, Toronto and Colorado. The absent centre of the film is the image of a young Mexican boy's death; the filmmaker questions the ethics of capturing such an image.

?O, ZOO! (THE MAKING OF A FICTION FILM)

16mm | 23 min. | 1986

Ostensibly a film about the making of Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, *?O, Zoo!* is a subversive engagement with documentary convention and first-person filmmaking.

PASSING THROUGH/TORN FORMATIONS

16mm | 43 min. | 1988

A kaleidoscopic and labyrinthine study of a family's migration from Czechoslovakia to Canada. Images and sounds are layered upon one another in a highly allusive and suggestive fashion that generates multiple interpretations of tragedy, loss and the potential of the image to document and transform reality.

RIVER

16mm | 15 min. | 1979/89

River is a meditation on the interrelationship of nature and technology, stasis and flux. Shot and constructed over a ten-year period, the film returns to the same river only to find that, of course, it is not the same river.

KITCHENER-BERLIN

16mm | 34 min. | 1990

A portrait of two cities divided by geography and language but united in repressed history and the question of home. *Kitchener-Berlin* is divided into two movements, combining archival film, television footage, home movies, and documentary material to sculpt a multi-layered cinematic experience.

OPENING SERIES 1

16mm | 10 min. | 1992

Opening Series consists of twelve segments, each segment in its own hand-painted film canister. Using the visual references on the canisters, the audience, prior to each screening, makes an arrangement of pictured canisters, which orders the flow of the film.

Described by Hoffman as a film about "looking and listening to light," *Opening Series 1* is composed of silent, static, long takes shot at home and in travel, structured in a 3-shot rhythm.

OPENING SERIES 2

16mm | 7 min. | 1993

A free-associational work involving chance encounters and ephemeral instants.

TECHNILOGIC ORDERING

16mm | 30 min. | 1994

A diary of the gulf war composed of images culled from the television and manipulated by the VCR. A study of war, representation and image saturation.

OPENING SERIES 3

16mm | 7 min. | 1995 (co maker, Gerry Shikatani)

Featuring the poet Gerry Shikatani, *Opening Series 3* explores the relationship between language, sound and image, set to the backdrop of a gravel pit. The film would later become *Kokoro is for Heart*.

SWEEP

16mm | 30 min. | 1995 (co maker Sami van Ingen)

A travelogue that explores both the history of the 'founding father' of documentary, Robert Flaherty, in Fort George, and Hoffman's familial roots in Kapuskasing. The film reveals an interconnection between the history of documentary film and the filmmakers' family memories.

CHIMERA

16mm | 15 min. | 1996

Composed of disparate shots taken from around the world – London, Helsinki, Egypt, Leningrad, Uluru, and Sydney – *Chimera* is an impressionistic experimental travelogue about people and places bound together by and in images.

DESTROYING ANGEL

16mm | 32 min. | 1998 (co maker Wayne Salazar)

A narrator confronted by his own mortality explores the interwoven tapestry of past and present, illness and oppression that is the human condition. A work of intimacy and time.

KOKORO IS FOR HEART

16mm | 7 min. | 1999

Poet Gerry Shikatani narrates as various images and motifs, among them a gravel pit, merge into an associational meditation on how images affect reality. The film asks the question: “What is nature?”

OPENING SERIES 4

16mm | 10 min. | 2000

Hoffman describes the film as “Plain and simple...a reflection of grieving.”

WHAT THESE ASHES WANTED

16mm | 55 min. | 2001

Bridging the divide between the personal and the public, *What these ashes wanted* is a document of grief and loss, centering on the death of the filmmaker’s partner, Marian McMahon. Composed of fragments of telephone conversations, video diaries, and hand-processed film, the film-essay probes the point at which death and cinema coincide.

EVER PRESENT GOING PAST

DV | 7 min. | 2007

Again featuring the poetry of Gerry Shikatani, *ever present going past* is composed of impressionistic takes from an ephemeral reality, combining to form a visually poetic ode to the quotidian. “There is a catch after all, in every story, ever present going past.”

ALL FALL DOWN

ca. 80 min. | 2008



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