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Circuitous Quests:
Passing Through Philip Hoffman's
Family Cycle

— Peter Harcourt

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

There is a moment in Philip Hoffman's *passing through/torn formations* when we see a young boy entering a culvert. At a later moment, we see him coming out again.

Who is this character? What is he looking for? How does he relate to the young girl we see at other moments in the film, sometimes in a field with cows?

As the film evolves, we might be able to infer that the girl is Andrea, a niece of the filmmaker, and that she is standing in for Sue, the filmmaker's mother — for the re-enactment of a story concerning Sue's childhood in Czechoslovakia, one day looking for some cows. But who is the boy?

In *passing through/torn* formations, although most of the references are specific, some seem to float. Cumulatively, we get a feeling of people looking, passing through fields of grass or along endless stone fences, as if seeking something no longer there.

Passing through is the most probing film of Hoffman's Family Cycle. It is the most intricately

concerned with a sense of quest. As a Canadian of European extraction, Hoffman is trying to understand the world in which he lives.

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

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

The notion of home movie is important. Like his friend, Richard Kerr, Hoffman often employs the diary as impetus for more extended inquiries.

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

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

films, as if by examining where he has been Hoffman might better understand who he has become.

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

If the life explored in *On the Pond* is over by the time filmmaking began, the same is true of *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983). Utilizing some "road journals" that he had shot while still at Sheridan College, the film achieves a complex structure for what seems a simple film.

The older footage, shot both on Super 8 and on 16mm colour reversal, refers to previous trips, then going west. This time, however, once again with his friend Jim McMurry and now with Richard Kerr, they are moving east – on their way to Newfoundland. A tension is established between the journeys west – the footage of the past – and the journey east – the footage of the present. The point-of-view also moves from external to internal. Hoffman has explained the structure of the film:

> The first part is the external trip. It's getting on the road and moving forward. There's more of a

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

The idea of "realizations" needs to be explained; but first we might examine how the film jumps around.

Leaping forward in space and then back again, anticipating times yet to come and then returning to them, the film fudges its own sense of direction. We see Dan with his wood-carving before we know who he is; we have a flash-back of Jim in his studio in Ann Arbor, unrecognizable as he manages molten metal; Robert Frank, an icon of the independent American spirit, appears and then appears again. Geography is scrambled as destination becomes unclear.

The structure thus enacts, kinaesthetically, the confusions in Hoffman's mind. *The Road Ended at the Beach* becomes, in Michael Dorland's apt phrase, a "documentary of consciousness." Hoffman wanted to make a road movie in the tradition of Jack Kerouac. "I expected adventure," his commentary explains. "But somehow the road had died since the first trip west with Jim."

The film engages, however, not only through its structure but through the random characters we encounter on the trip. A hitch-hiker is picked up who once appeared in a Robert Frank film; Mark, an accomplished trumpeter, jams with Jim in Ottawa; Conrad Dubé, initially a polio victim, has bicycled several times around the world — a man who, as Jim explains (drawing upon Aboriginal legend)

has perhaps been "touched by God;" and Rup Chan, a Tibetan friend of Jim's, with his Urdu diary establishes appropriate spiritual expectations at the beginning of the film.

The encounter with Robert Frank could have been a destination but is actually a non-event. Like *On The Pond*, *The Road Ended at the Beach* becomes an exorcism of received ideas about male buddy-ism and an adolescent sense of adventure. Although Jim's dog is named (dogs are an important part of buddy bonding), Phil's sister Philomene, who is present on one of their previous journeys, remains unidentified!

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

The beach the road ends at is Burgeo, on the south coast of Newfoundland, about 200 kilometres east of Port aux Basques. The camera holds on the waterfront for an extended period, almost undetectable jump-cuts fore-shortening time as dogs and children gambol back and forth in front of the camera, with no direction and no perceivable goal. An island is visible in the distance and, along with a nonsense verse sung off-screen by a young girl, we hear the sounds of surf. Because we also heard these sounds at the beginning of the film, these sonic references to nature bring this filmic odyssey acoustically to a close.

The quest is over, the scrambled journey at an end. The beach represents the surrendering of desire, a sense

of peacefulness before inevitably moving on. Once again Hoffman the filmmaker prepares the way for Phil the character to mature and expand.

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Since the 1970s, since the time that experimental film found a tiny place in academe and occasional sources of financing through government funding agencies, the practice may have lost its innovative edge. In 1987, in a polemical piece published in the *Millennium Film Journal*, Fred Camper complained that the institutionalization of experimental film has produced schools of supposedly avant-garde practice but with none of the genuine creativity that had marked the works of (say) Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage in the past. "By the start of the institutional period," he contends,

> the fundamental techniques and values of avant-garde filmmaking have already been established, and what once was a movement now becomes a genre.

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

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

Marchessault goes on to suggest that the films of this generation "take on the difficult task of making sense through the fragment" and she concludes:

> The struggle to create meaning out of chaos, to express a different conception of history and experience is one that, in Canada, continues to be strongly inspired by our documentary tradition.

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

The Road Ended at the Beach was followed by *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion* (1984). On the surface a slight film and *supposedly* a documentary, it is extremely evocative and, on examination, may be more complex than it appears.

Apparently shot in Mexico, *Somewhere Between* conveys a sense of suspension, a waiting in the face of an alterity that Hoffman has no heart to penetrate. Although we see Mexican musicians in the film, the sounds of Mike Callich's saxophone come from another space. Mexican footage is abandoned to silence, conveying the sense of nightmare or dream. Unlike the Coca Cola sign that hangs over a village intersection, Hoffman feels he has no right to be in this forbidding place. Privacies occur that ought not to be invaded.

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

The structure of *Somewhere Between* is entirely contrapuntal. The three filmic elements of image, sound, and language (here exclusively in the form of intertitles) are all kept separate, coming together serendipitously from time to time as when, for a moment, the acoustic rhythms of the saxophone seem in synch with the perceivable rhythms of a Mexican drummer.

Although the film conveys the feeling of an impenetrable territory, a space of suspension between two worlds, "the bardo state in Buddhist terms," as Hoffman once explained, attentive viewers may observe that much of the film was shot elsewhere. The religious procession, the Feast of Fatima, was filmed in Toronto. The band we see and the radiant girl at the end of the film, presumably the dead boy's sister, were shot in Colorado – at a conference in honour of Jack Kerouac!

While partly the result of low-budget exigencies, this geographical cheating suggests universality. The film is placed in Mexico, perhaps initially still in homage to Kerouac and Cassady; but death occurs everywhere. Religious processions celebrate the mysteries of existence, and young girls gaze out at us – whether Dan's lovely daughter in Sable River, Nova Scotia, during a telling moment in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, or a

nameless child on her rock shell, supposedly the sister of the dead boy in the streets of Mexico but actually a stranger from Boulder, Colorado.

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

So concludes the final bits of printed commentary in Hoffman's *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion*, anchoring it in a specific place that, in actuality, we have scarcely seen.

If the roads of the Beats are now closed to Hoffman's generation, perhaps so too is Mexico as a site for mystic contemplation. Except by sly ruse. For if we think about it, was there ever, in reality, a dead boy in the streets?

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> *Though my work in film always deals with place, I find it odd that the place where I live and work is near-absent in my films.*
> *… I question to what degree the present place where I am affects the output of the work.*
> — Philip Hoffman (1979)

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

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

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

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

To begin with, there is the fictional grandfather, the newsreel cameraman, who made films supposedly for some federal film agency — an oblique reference to the National Film Board. The "old battle-axe" referred to is obviously John Grierson — the father of documentary and godfather of Canadian film.

There is also the fleeting presence, evidently innocently, of the source footage for *Watching for the Queen* (1973), a film by David Rimmer who is one of the "father figures" of the first generation of Canadian experimental film. There is a fuzzy shot of the Pope as seen on TV and even a decapitated statue of Christ in a

Rotterdam square. Finally, there is the presence of Peter Greenaway with his huge production facilities for the fabrication of his fanciful universe.

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

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

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

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

resurrection!

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

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

Less satisfactory, it seems to me, is Hoffman's *Kitchener-Berlin*. As a family film, it is certainly less accessible. Comprising footage shot by his paternal Uncle John, the images are less anchored in an observable reality and Hoffman seems absent from his own film.

Mapping such a work is difficult. Abstract in conception, the film is more concerned with ideas than people. "The film is about technology and its rise, which is the machine world," as Hoffman has explained. Perhaps desiring to retreat from the insistent family preoccupations of *passing through/torn formations*, in *Kitchener-Berlin* the here is contrasted with the there, activities with buildings; except that in both the new world and the old, a restless camera mounted on a steadicam floats through both parts, collapsing

discernible differences.

Although the steadicam is itself an example of technology, Hoffman employed it for metaphysical reasons. "There's an obvious kind of spiritual feel to it, because you're floating in a world where the sky and ground are equivalent." But this assertion may not make sense.

To what extent can "the body of film itself, its flesh and voice," as Bruce Elder once insisted, achieve film's "liberating potential"? Although films may aspire to the condition of transcendence, I would argue that if the stylistic tropes of cinema can *suggest* eternity, they cannot *depict* it. For instance, about *?O,Zoo!* Blaine Allan has written:

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

Here the connotation of weightlessness is arguably more evocative within an observable filmic space than by collapsing earth into sky throughout *Kitchener-Berlin*.

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

As part of its patrimony, in *Kitchener-Berlin*, images of aggressive male activities recur. The cannons of war shoot missiles away from the earth; miners drill at its entrails beneath. The Pope makes an appearance, again on television, blessing Aboriginals; a magnificent

cathedral in Cologne is "penetrated" by a huge orange crane.

At the centre of the film is a newsreel item about a dirigible flight from England to Canada. As two elderly twins are involved in the filming of it, the item repeats Hoffman's concern with splitting and doubling.

Kitchener-Berlin is also in two parts, the second part more impersonal than the first. As Hoffman has explained:

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

"The way the images arrive is a surprise," Hoffman has suggested. "They don't seem to connect and, formally, they're hard to follow."

Many viewers would agree. Although its visceral appeal is palpable, conceptually *Kitchener-Berlin* is difficult to grasp. The references are too arbitrary. Like the on-going *River* project (1979-89), it perhaps works best at a precognitive level — as a film of surfaces, of psychedelic superimpositions and kinaesthetic effects. It marks a retreat from the examination of the specificities of his family inheritance represented by *passing through/torn formations*, moving through abstractions towards some kind of closure to this family cycle. There is also in *Kitchener-Berlin* perhaps a sense of fatigue.

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After the achievement of *passing through/torn formations*, a sense of fatigue would be understandable.

If *?O,Zoo!* is Hoffman's most public film, *passing through* is his most private. At the same time, through the choreography of its images and through the guiding presence of Hoffman's questing voice, it is the most fully realized of the Family Cycle.

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

Passing through is dedicated to Babji, Phil's grandmother. She is, of course, the mother of Sue, Phil's mother, but also of Wally, the disturbed uncle who is the unseen victim/hero of the film.

A tale told with love, *passing through/torn formations* is full of shadows. With its Polish language on Czechoslovakian soil which had once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire….Europe had been ravaged by two world wars and families had been scattered by the pursuit of emigration.

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

keeps recurring on the screen, suggesting by association the end of Babji's life.

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

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

…The Uncle is the victim of historical and personal events. There had been the influenza epidemic at the time of Babji's birth as there had been a boil on Babji's neck at the time of his birth. "He is to me," Hoffman has clarified, "the epicentre …of the family." He exists at "the point where the old world and the new world collide." Like the cyclist in *The Road Ended at the Beach*, he too has perhaps been "touched by God."

The scene of the missing cows addresses the healing powers of memory, both for Phil's mother, whose story it

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

The story is both told and recreated — once again blurring past and present, fact and fiction, images and words. Sue is often framed at the lower right-hand corner of the screen, translating from Hoffman's Polish interviews; and the family references are both specific and general.

> Family members from Canada and relatives from Czechoslovakia are not easy to identify because their identities continually shift and slide. These characters are transferable throughout the film, for instance, you see an image or images of a certain person and there is a voice-over with this person. Later on in the film different voices are attached to the image of the person earlier seen. It's a way of avoiding the conventional approach to character construction whereby the character's identity gets pinned down and there's less work for the audience.

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

Are these fences barriers against easy entry into the past, into the otherness of a relinquished world? Or are they structures of containment — enduring

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

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

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

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

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

Hence, except for the "realizations" of the closing shot, the "failure" of the quest in *The Road Ended at the Beach*. When the Beats were in their prime throughout the 1960s, politically the world was opening up. By the 1980s, it was closing down. "The Beats were the fathers I took on the trip," as Hoffman has explained, "but their roads are closed now." Besides which their quest was probably too American, too drug-induced, and perhaps, finally, too homoerotic to serve as a controlling model for a young buck from southern Ontario. Hoffman has had to retreat from such classic allegorical journeys to enable him to move forward in his own life and work.

Similarly with the retreat from modernism. Although Bruce Elder, with his musical commitment to Wagnerian repetition and redundancy, still strives to achieve works of high modernism in a post-modern age, the filmmakers of the Escarpment School espouse more modest goals. Their quests are less concerned with self in relation to metaphysical transcendence than with self in relation to the social world.

The important point, then, about the boy exploring the culvert in *passing through/torn formations* is not who he is or what he might find or even what his relationship is (if any) to Hoffman's family: the important point is

the fact that he is looking. He embodies the curiosity of a new generation, attentive to discovering his own voice within the landscape available to him and to making his own peace with the world.

So once again, we return to documentary. Through the confrontation of self with alterity, with the fractured otherness of the world in which they live, the third generation of Canadian experimental filmmakers seek to make sense of their historical world.

And yet, at their best – supremely in *passing through/torn formations* with its movement through disease, …. and death towards moments of epiphany – this confrontation does achieve a spiritual dimension. Drawing upon a theological term adduced by Dennis Lee when writing about Al Purdy, we might refer to a *mysterium tremendum* – a holy otherness. "An appropriate response to the tremendum," Lee elucidates, "is awe, joy, terror, gratitude" – exactly the emotions we may feel while experiencing Hoffman's most achieved films.

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

Bart Testa once suggested that these films become, finally, "voyages of discovery that shift interest onto

formal questions of how meaning is disclosed and expressed." This self-reflective play throughout Hoffman's work constitutes a large part of its value. If experimental filmmaking is now, indeed, "a tradition which new filmmakers have to face," as Fred Camper has insisted, Philip Hoffman has faced it with courage and originality. The circuitous quests undertaken by the Family Cycle of films enshrine his lasting value as an important Canadian artist working in film.

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