

Vulture Aesthetics: Process Cinema at the Film Farm

Philip Hoffman



Monument to Analog, Film Farm

As a medium, film has often been likened to death—it is a moment frozen in time as the great French film theorist André Bazin put it—it is time mummified. Vulture Aesthetics¹ relates both to my own work as a filmmaker and teacher, but also to the work developed through the Independent Imaging Retreat (a.k.a. Film Farm), a hand processing film workshop in Southern Ontario, nearly 25 years in the works. Such practices help to release film from its once and for all death grip on time—to bring film emulsion into the life-world by connecting it to human bodies and the cycles of the earth. The emphasis on community and

¹ Vulture Aesthetics developed through my interactions with those who are a part of or connected to the Film Farm Retreat including: Janine Marchessault, Rob Butterworth, Deirdre Logue, Christine Harrison, Scott Miller Berry, Terra Long, Josh Bonnetta and Marcel Beltran. The initial stages of processing with flowers and plants was done under the guidance of Dagie Brundert and Ricardo Leite.



Monument to Analog, with eggs, Film Farm



Phil's intro session, Film Farm

process (Process Cinema) at the Film Farm Retreat encourages artists to embrace the unexpected and environmental temporalities through film, plunging into celluloid through different chemical and biological (and 'green') processes. The film works made at the Film Farm Retreat are counter-archival, playful and no doubt utopian in their drive for both collective making and singular undertakings.

The idea of the vulture, as a totem creature for this movement of process-driven filmmaking, landed one day when out walking on the farm. We (the Film Farm gang) had erected a kind of monument to the analog gods, which embodied all the film equipment that no longer worked and was irreparable. As I walked past this peculiar heap of steel and gears, I scared up a huge vulture that had been brooding on eggs at the foot of the recycled machinery.

I suppose the sculpture had given the vulture some shelter, and the uncanny experience led me to ponder the similarities between filmmakers and vultures. Vultures hover over the land from high above, with razor sharp eyesight and a keen sense of smell. Together they stalk and share their decaying sustenance. Intense acid in their stomach allows them to digest great quantities of their dead prey without falling ill. The vulture is the ultimate Freegan, in great numbers they stalk out their dead prey and share their finds. They are the ultimate recycler, in their bid to make use of the decaying dead strewn over roads and fields. In a similar way, some experimental filmmakers bring back to life analog technologies and repurpose them for the present. In the shadow of the digital age, we share the gifts of this past knowledge for future development. Also in this making, acid-based fluids transform the silver halide crystals in the emulsion to metallic silver in the developing process, and make the silvery magic of these images possible. So too, the vulture regurgitates acid from their stomachs, as a means to digest their decaying prey, without succumbing to bacteria and disease. More specifically, at the Film Farm and throughout the micro-cinema universe, we follow the vulture's lead of working together to share the things we find with those like-minded, present or away.

This act of sharing is not limited to the exchange of knowledge between people and communities but also relates to a symbiotic relationship with the world, a kind of empathy with natural forces. Allowing these omniscient forces to be in partnership with the making of film work, ultimately puts one in beat with the world.

Your Film Farm Manifesto of Process Cinema

Enter through the big barn doors, without scripts and props... Your films will surface through the relationship between your camera and what passes in front. It may take the whole of the workshop for you to shake away the habit of planning...

Without the blanket of preconception, the processes of collecting, reflecting, revising, emerge and mirror the archeology of your formation. Dive deep to encounter those strange fish that stare without seeing.

Mental processes effect the physical when the mind is open to what appears in front of you. These images you make will be charged with your inner architecture. Don't be surprised if a person, animal, place or thing shows you a way to go. These pathways can be provocative, treacherous and joyful. They are places you have to go to, one way or another, so you might as well start your trip.

The camera holds the film and waits for light to pass through the lens. When you release the trigger, a mechanical shutter lets the image in, focused through the lens, which controls the quantity of the light. What you film will be effected by uncontrollable sun bursts, and the various tones and textures that the camera passes over. With the open field before you, these little gifts can have a say in the making of your film.

*In the darkroom you watch the image surface. The big world you filmed isn't bigger than the small world that slowly appears. Hand processing movie film is a complex soup of various forces. Heat, time, light, movement all work together and an image somehow forms through the silvery magic of the photo-chemical process. **Errors** of*

time and application can render your film opaque or clear, but you still have a latent image burned into your mind, which can be brought forward on another filming trip. Slighter inconsistencies can upset your expectations and pose a question you would never ask if all went perfectly. Leaving the workshop can be as hard as entering. If you have found intensity, it might seem that the normal world you return to, has gone somewhat askew... when perception shifts, the familiar becomes strange.

Holding on to the experience allows it to resonate for months to come, and hopefully fuels the finishing of your film, and the initiation of new ones.²

Philip Hoffman, 2013,
San Antonio des los Baños, Cuba.

I remember the first time I purposely flared an already exposed film to light in the summer of 1985 when I was shooting *?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* on the set of Peter Greenaway's feature film *A Zed and Two Noughts*. At the time, I was less sure about relinquishing control of the film to chance, and pretty intent on full control of my filming. The film consists of many 28 second takes from the breath of the Bolex, and a narrator that discussed what was happening outside the frame.

Most of the shots are exactly 28 seconds in length. I was impressed by the precision and self-control my grandfather expressed in shooting this unusual material, as compared to the erratic camerawork displayed in the newsreels. More clues as to the nature of my grandfather's discipline were found on a piece of paper secreted in the film can.³

2 Excerpted from *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, edited by Scott Mackenzie. (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press 2014), 105.

3 Excerpted from *?O, Zoo! The Making of a Fiction Film* (Hoffman, 16mm, 23 min., 1986).



Philip Hoffman, *!O,Zoo! Swans in Moonlight*, 16mm, 1986

please confirm



Philip Hoffman, *Passing through/torn formations*, 16mm film frame enlargement, 1988

But in a scene around the filming of some swans, I decided to take a chance. After filming the swans just after sundown, I went for supper but returned to the pond at night, opened up the camera lid, and re-exposed the film to the light of the full moon. This, at the time seemed to me, a highly delinquent act – I could have lost it all!!! In photo-chemical work, I was always taught to keep exposed film carefully secure and away from the light for obvious reasons. I don't think I fully understood at the time that this could be a way to make film work, allowing the forces of the world to be a partner in the making of a film... giving up control in varying degrees, and setting my course in filmmaking and teaching.

From the roadway I could see the other end of the pond, and the moon moving arced bodies of the swans, silver silent in soft evening moonlight. I walked cool summer night remembering, my grandfather and his grandson laid quiet in lakecalm, star counting: fishermen; heroes.

Weary walking, I cranked the camera until it locked tight, the taunt spring wound tightlytight... tight.⁴

Ten years later, around 1994, Rob Butterworth, Tracy German and I are dragging an old B & W Kramer Processor down the basement stairs of an old stone farmhouse, and the Film Farm was born. After a few difficult years of low participant levels, the idea of processing celluloid in a barn with a group of like-minded participants caught fire. We later started to process the film in buckets, due to Rob's trip to Europe a few months after our first Film Farm Retreat in 1994, where he attended a hand processing workshop in Leuven, Belgium at Stuc/Kapstuc conducted by Yann Beauvais, Jürgen Reble, Karel Doing, and Xavier Quérel (so the Film Farm has European roots at its foundation). The Stuc workshop directly affected our move from machine processing to hand processing, a move from machine built control to the circuitous processes of serendipity.

4 Excerpted from: *?O,Zoo! The Making of a Fiction Film* (Hoffman, 16mm, 23 min., 1986).

Rob tells the story of being in the darkroom with Jürgen Reble, who worked without a clock and without gloves, and just needed to feel the film to know when it was ready to take it out of the developer. The change to bucket processing allowed for more freedom, and more of a possibility to engage with the image directly, following the path of artist Man Ray, who experimented with celluloid in the early 20th century, making popular, for example, the technique of solarization. This accident occurred often in 19th century photography, but was most often seen as a mistake and only later developed as an artistic technique when Lee Miller and Man Ray accidentally turned on the light during the developing process.

Failure to the scientific method, when a theory is not reproduced perfectly, can be an epiphany to a curious artist. Thinking back on my early days in the photographic darkroom as a teenager, in some ways not much has changed. I have always been excited by the time in the darkroom when the image begins to appear. The time right after the exposed print or film is put into the developer, the fleeting moment when change is most visible – the special time. The moment of transformation.

*The darkroom, a ceremony of mixing potions, gathering up the shimmering images, the silvery magic beneath dream's surface.*⁵

5 Excerpted from: *passing through/torn formations* (Hoffman, 16mm, 43 min., 1988).

PostScript

Over the past few years, I have been developing a new work entitled 'Vulture', following the ebb and flow and peculiar relationships of my next door neighbor's grazing farm animals. The film I have been shooting is developed using flowers and plants from the property, and some films have been fixed in salt (for 3 days!). There are obvious health and environmental reasons to venture in this direction but it has also been a discovery to witness the various effects of the different flowers and plants – due to color tinting from the flower's juices and the varying surface texture changes on the celluloid (caused by the material aspects of the plants used in the hand processing technique). As well as the 25-year-old walnut trees, which are the same age as the Film Farm, now bearing fruit. There is now an abundance of sepia toner for the workshop every year!



Philip Hoffman, *Vulture*,
16mm film, work in
progress, 2018

