

Film Stolen, Borrowed, Found and Lost: Anecdotes About Found Footage Filmmaking by Philip Hoffman

1. Upon returning home from a trip to Egypt in the early 1990s, I was anxious to see how the footage I shot turned out. I telephoned the printer in Montreal to see if the optical work was ready. Carrick had done printing for me before and I found his work to be flawless. His wife answered the phone and she went to get him, but soon I realized there was something going on at the other end of the line. There was panic in the woman's far off voice, and she didn't come back to the phone so I hung up. That evening I called to see what had happened. Carrick's wife answered and told me that he had a heart attack and passed away.

The film that Carrick printed was shot at the Karnak Temple of Amun near Luxor. There were many signs prohibiting the use of cameras which I disregarded. One short shot from outside towards two monstrous Kings, that marked the way into the tomb, was hard to resist, and couldn't cause any harm. I wasn't so vain as to think that my images instigated this terrible event. But I did feel that I had to do something with the footage, perhaps the last footage Carrick worked on. I needed to create a space for it to breathe, within the container of the film I was working on. This turned out to be *What These Ashes Wanted* (2001), a film about grieving and the loss of my partner of thirteen years.

2. In my early teens I worked in a slaughterhouse as a summer job. The business was my grandfather's passed down to his three sons. The youngest son was my father who ran the business. I mostly worked in packing but on Fridays we'd be called onto the kill floor to assist in one of the various tasks in the butchering of the animals.

After my father died in 2011, I was invited, along with 29 other artists, to make an installation at the Markham Museum and Heritage Village in Ontario, Canada for a site specific exhibition called 'Landslide: Possible Futures'. The 'village' was comprised of thirty century buildings and I was given a 1920's slaughterhouse, equipped with a hook, a cutting block and a wooden trough for animal bones and entrails. I found my father's photos of the family business and dove into his archive. As well, I had been working on a film called *All Fall Down* (2009), about the history of the land in Southern Ontario, in the traditional territory of the Saugeen-Ojibway peoples. I stared into the stone of the old house I was living in and wondered who was here before. I thought I could borrow some of the research and footage from that project that was ten years in the making.

As a knot in an old cedar plank ages, it shrinks and eventually breaks away to make a perfect peek-hole. I created a seven channel installation for the Slaughterhouse and used the peak-holes in the cedar building as a framing devise. The different projections could only be viewed and heard from the outside. Inside, the installation

weaves several inter-connected stories of loss: of land and agriculture, of property and business, through political, social, economic and environmental slaughter.

The materials in the slaughterhouse barn-archive were gleaned from public and personal sources such as the Grey Root Museum near Owen Sound, the Homer Watson Museum, Hoffman Meats business archive as well as a personal interview and current film footage from organic farmer Michael Schmidt, along with the Farmer's Advocate and Family Herald publications 1958-1968 found in a flea market. All the stories contained in the archives 'rub up' against one another. As in all of my work, serendipity guides the journey. While the visitors walk around the enclosure and look through the various peak-holes, they piece together their particular 'story', by juxtaposing images and sounds from the exhibit.

One particular archival document continues to stand out for me. It is the 19th century photograph of an Indigenous woman, a land rights activist named Nahnebahwequa (1824-65) who met with, and petitioned Queen Victoria for the return of her land and her people's in the largest land grab of First Nation territory by Canada's colonial government (Treaty 72). Walter Benjamin argued that the photograph can not reproduce the "aura", the presence in space and time of what is photographed. The photograph is always a deficit. I was working with cinematographer Christine Harrison and we wondered how we might film the one and only portrait of Nahnebahwequa in a way that would release it from its 19th century portraiture formality. I had heard about projecting on smoke and thought we might give it a try in the garden, once the sun had set. In the morning we hand-processed the film. The negative was very dark and disappointing. We could only see faint streaks of Nahne's dark hair, eyebrows and shirt, which would never reveal her strong features, especially her searing eyes. Her face and surround was a swirling dirge of darkened silver. The bright smoke had overexposed the film, though something was trying to find its way to the surface. Christine was noticeably distraught as we only had one night to make the image, before she had to go, and that night had passed. If there was some image peaking out of the mass of silver, maybe we could remove its veil. Back into the bucket and a bath of diluted R9 bleach, alternating with water at ten second increments until Nahne's face appeared. In projecting the film, the swirl of silver and smoke created what appeared to be facial movements, her stern expression looks back at the viewer as if from an earlier century.

3. Growing up, I found myself alone a lot, away from the constant roar of family. With triplet sisters, two years my senior, and a rather extroverted sometimes manic mother, I had to find places away to vacation. What was offered was the far reaching extremities of the house. In the basement crawl space where there were old newspapers and magazine slowly rotting that I could ponder. In the upper attic which I'd get to by climbing up a wooden ladder in the garage, and where I could find all kinds of holdings from my parent's past. I remember a very special place at the side of the house, near the milkbox, where four bottles were delivered each week. There, under the stairs, on the cool damp dirt floor, I dug holes and buried

things. I can't remember what they were, or why I did it, but I remember digging deep down with my red shovel.

In these early years, my mother's kid brother, my uncle, took me fishing and taught me how to play pool and the accordion. He was a fantastic musician who went another way after losing his kids during a hard divorce. After this difficult time, he built a portfolio of minor crimes and misdemeanors, that eventually landed him in jail to serve a sentence for a seriously big crime. While he was there he kept himself occupied with several creative acts including, rewiring his electric piano so that the keys would play notes mirroring symmetry, rather than linearity. This was his antidote for his declining mental state. Practicing symmetry would make him better, as he waited for time to pass. During those long prison days and nights, he also carved a sculpture from a block of hard maple.

After his time in prison, I encountered him around my childhood home. When my parents were away, we'd experiment with music and film, late into the night. These get togethers fuelled the making of my film *passing through/torn formations* (1988), a film about my mother's family's, migration to Canada from Czechoslovakia. Around that time, he lived with his mother, my grandmother, Babji, who was like a second mother to me. She showed me how to shoot photos from the hip, her little joke that always got the party rolling. I'd go over to visit her, for a taste of polish food and warmth. In the kitchen, perched on the counter was, what my catholic upbringing suggested, a demonic roughly carved wooden sculpture, with a pointed tuft of horse hair protruding from the top of its narrow oblong head. Babji said he had made it in prison and she didn't like it, and asked me to get rid of it. I took it to an old drinking haunt one night, in rural Waterloo, broke it into pieces, and flung it down the gorge. I took a picture of it the night before, with my desk lamp lighting up its already glowing body, centered amidst a penetrating blackened surround. Cued by Babji's fear, the photograph bothered me, and I wondered if the malevolent energy of my uncle's bad deeds were manifested photo-chemically. So I rested the photograph on the cement chimney pad, in my workspace and set it ablaze. The silver-laced portrait went both ways. Smoke to the ceiling, and black cinders dropping into an abstract form, permanently staining my workspace floor.

In 2010 I reconnected with him. He was living on the street in Kitchener-Waterloo, playing music for admirers and chasing less fortunates up the street after unreasonable disagreements. Our relationship had not changed much. He still made a point to suggest home remedies for all my ails, and continued his intrigue with every little photographic experiment I could muster, adding his inventive two cents. After he passed, which was a month before Covid arrived to the Twin-Cities, I continued to work on an unending and unscreenable film, *The Show* (unfinished). I have many hours of media from family albums and cassette recordings, outtakes from my 1988 film *passing through/torn formations*, and from footage and sound I took on our many visits. This is a way I continue our conversations. Somewhere in that vast reservoir of images and sounds, cassettes, videotapes, films, photographs, drawings and papers, is a negative that I'd love to find. After destroying the wooden

sculpture and later incinerating the photo of it, I stashed away the negative.
Somewhere hidden. Somewhere dark. Somewhere dry and under plastic.
Somewhere in the archive.

Films by Philip Hoffman referenced:

Slaughterhouse (2014) <https://vimeo.com/90820797>

Slaughterhouse Installation Excerpts (2013) <https://vimeo.com/107588976>

All Fall Down (2009) <https://vimeo.com/114826860>

* for password contact hoffmanphilm@gmail.com

What these ashes wanted (2001) <https://vimeo.com/38759710>

passing through/torn formations (1988) <https://vimeo.com/video/469132970>

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