

**STUDY GUIDE****PHILIP HOFFMAN** SPOTLIGHT SERIES**CONTENTS**

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**CREDITS** 6**POETRY AND PROCESS: THREE FILMS BY PHILIP HOFFMAN**

Philip Hoffman is a Canadian Romantic. His filmmaking method recalls the English poet William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings from emotions recollected in tranquility." When Hoffman takes out his camera and decides to capture a moment, he works intuitively ("whenever the light and my inclinations met" [Hoolboom 143]) to capture Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow." Avoiding a script, Hoffman works by "collecting images over a long period of time and making sense of them in the editing" (Hoolboom 143). Hoffman's version of "recollection in tranquility" is the long process of viewing and re-viewing images, striving to find connections between them in order to find the theme and meaning of the film's poetic structure. The themes of his cinema—the pain of memory and family trauma tempered with a sense of the world's beauty; the presence of death lightened by the promise of rebirth in memory and film itself—are articulated through the tension between the intense immediacy of the image, and the thoughtful and reflective structures that shape his poetic and narrative structures.

My films, like many experimental films, take on a form that honours what we can't see with our eyes. I work with the photographic image, this art that most precisely can represent real material objects/beings, but eventually my intent is to shed light on the things we can't see... (Sternberg 11).

Hoffman re-defined Canadian "first-person cinema" in the 1980s and 1990s and helped carve a path for a new generation of film and media makers, many directly coming into contact with him through his legendary teaching at Sheridan College, York University, and the summer workshop he initiated, the Independent Imaging Retreat, which meets on his farm in Mount Forest, Ontario. Hoffman describes the "Film Farm" as "a place where making something is the most important thing," where participants learn to work "with a Bolex, with light, with hand-processing and tinting and toning," and where the "process" is key: "they don't have to worry about getting it exactly correct; sometimes the accidents help them find their route" (Sternberg 17).

There is one consistent thread that directs the autobiographic research of his own filmmaking practice: the question of the veracity of the photographic image. Hoffman's films delve into the tension created by cinema's capacity both to offer up traces of moments past and to highlight their loss, creating films that frame the impossible desire to capture time through representation.

\* \* \*

A simple verse begins *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984), a short film Hoffman said was inspired by Japanese haiku poetry:

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

Haiku are three-line poems with a strict syllabic rhythm whose content reflects on ordinary moments. Hoffman set out to capture these everyday yet enigmatic moments on a trip to Mexico, using the 28-second shot length of his spring-loaded Bolex camera as a “structuring principle” (Hoolboom 141). Then, a moment of crisis intercedes:

In the midst of this shooting [I] found myself on a bus between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion. The bus stopped, and a woman came screaming across a field. Her little boy had been run over. I watched from inside the bus with the camera in my hand, trying to decide whether to film or not. And that’s what the film becomes. When I got back to Toronto, I decided to make a film about that moment without the image (Hoolboom 142).

This ethical dilemma—and its sensitive resolution—charges the film’s beautiful México tableaux with raw drama, condensed in the images of a religious procession on the streets of Toronto at the centre of the film, and in the stark black-and-white images of a river, a figure of rebirth, that mark the film’s ending in (re)Encarnacion.

English filmmaker Peter Greenaway was so taken with *Somewhere Between...* that he invited Hoffman to observe his production of *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) in Holland. The resulting film, *?O, Zoo! The Making of A Fiction Film* (1986), plays off the filmic projects of documentary legend John Grierson and documentary rebel Greenaway to furnish an admirably tentative meditation on two knotted ethical problems of film form. One concerns the way that sound/image constructions dictate meaning in conventional documentary. The second takes on film’s photographic claims to certainty in relation to one of documentary’s favourite subjects: the representation of death. These ethical meditations create a turbulence beneath the disarmingly simple and elegant surface of *?O, Zoo!*, a turbulence which accounts for the emotional resonance of its ending(s), and for its troubling aftertaste. In *?O, Zoo!*, Hoffman has expanded the boundaries of the personal documentary, and making films that are not simply diaristic accounts of his experiences but profound explorations of the phenomenal world in which we all live. How do we picture ourselves and make sense of our lives? What is fiction and truth? What are the ethics of making images of others, of filming life or death?

A departure from the cool surfaces of *?O, Zoo, passing through / torn formations* (1988) is an ambitious examination of his mother’s side of the family, delving into their roots in the former Czechoslovakia and in Canada and unearthing a number of uncomfortable family secrets; the film is, as Hoffman says, “full of passion and chaos” (Hoolboom 143). Hoffman interweaves a number of family narratives,

including the stories of two “outsider” uncles, but in a way that is both revelatory and respectful: “I wanted to take the emphasis off the individual members of my family so that we could deal with things other than ‘personalities’ of certain people—like history, memory, and the imagination” (Cantrill and Cantrill 41). American filmmaker Stan Brakhage was struck by the beauty and eloquence of the film, which he described as both “a poetic document of family” but also “true to thought process, track[ing] visual theme as the mind tracks shape” (*CFMDC Catalogue*). Hoffman described the film’s form as “polyphonic recitation,” a combination of music and poetry that captures the importance of the complexity of the rhythms that he uses to present his family’s story (Cantrill and Cantrill 41).

*passing through* begins with a fragment from Canadian poet Christopher Dewdney: “Pale grey moths are pressed between the layers of stone. Freed, they flutter up like pieces of ash caught in a dust devil” (Dewdney). For Hoffman, freeing the moth from the rock is the “moment of creation and transformation” that capturing images on film involves, and which speaks to the passages in all of Hoffman’s cinema: between life and death, experience and memory, tradition and imagination, past and present—and future:

If you don’t uncover the past, you freeze up. There’s pain involved in both states but the continued uncovering is alive—it feeds a living cinema (Hoolboom 144, 145).

**Mike Zryd**

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## QUESTIONS

1. What possibilities are open in “first-person” and “diary” filmmaking that are not available in more traditional modes of filmmaking? What are the limitations of personal filmmaking?
2. Both *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* and *?O Zoo!* deal with the ethical implications of photography and filmmaking. What responsibility do filmmakers have to the subjects they film (if any)? How does Hoffman deal with this question in each of these films?
3. Discuss the relationship between sound and image in all three films. For example, what gaps are there between the sound and image in *?O Zoo!*? Are there instances when the image reveals something different than the soundtrack, and vice versa? How does the use of sound differ from traditional documentaries?
4. Michael Zryd defines an “anti-documentary” film as one which calls into question “the documentary genre’s easy claims to epistemological certainty.”<sup>1</sup> Discuss the ways in which *?O Zoo!* can be considered an “anti-documentary” film. For example, what documentary conventions does it challenge? In what ways does it question documentary’s claim to “authenticity”?
5. Janine Marchessault has said that post-modern filmmakers “take on the difficult task of making sense through the fragment.”<sup>2</sup> Filmmaker Mike Cartmell describes filmmaking “as a process of fragmentation, of dealing with the fragmentary.”<sup>3</sup> Discuss how these statements apply to *passing through / torn formations*. For example, why is the film’s story told in a fragmentary manner? How is this fragmentation expressed formally?
6. The cinematography in each of the three films is quite different. Discuss how the cinematography (e.g. film stock, camera movement, framing) functions in each film in relation to its themes.

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<sup>1</sup> Zryd, Michael. “Deception and Ethics in *?O, Zoo!* (*The Making of a Fiction Film*).” *Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman*. Eds. Karyn Sandlos and Mike Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press & Images Festival, 2001. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *International Experimental Film Congress*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Cartmell, Mike. “Landscape with Shipwreck.” *Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman*. Eds. Karyn Sandlos and Mike Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press & Images Festival, 2001. 228.

**FILMOGRAPHY**

*What these ashes wanted*, 2001, 16mm, 55 min.  
*Opening Series 4*, 2000, 16mm, 10 min.  
*Kokoro is for Heart*, 1999, 16mm, 7 min.  
*Destroying Angel*, 1998, 16mm, 32 min. (co-produced with Wayne Salazar)  
*Chimera*, 1996, 16mm, 15 min.  
*Sweep*, 1995, 16mm, 30 min. (co-produced with Sami van Ingen)  
*Opening Series 3*, 1995, 16mm, 7 min. (co-produced with Gerry Shikatani)  
*Technilogic Ordering*, 1994, 16mm, 30 min.  
*Opening Series 2*, 1993, 16mm, 7 min.  
*Opening Series 1*, 1992, 16mm, 10 min.  
*Kitchener-Berlin*, 1990, 16mm, 34 min.  
*river*, 1989, 16mm, 15 min.  
*passing through / torn formations*, 1988, 16mm, 43 min.  
*?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, 1986, 16mm, 23 min.  
*Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion*, 1984, 16mm, 6 min.  
*The Road Ended at the Beach*, 1983, 16mm, 33 min.  
*Freeze-Up*, 1979, 16 mm, 9 min.  
*On The Pond*, 1978, 16mm, 9 min.

**ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

Philip Hoffman's filmmaking began with his boyhood interest in photography. As semi-official historian of family life, Hoffman became intrigued by questions of reality in photography and later in cinema. After completing his formal education, which includes a Diploma in Media Arts and a Bachelor of Arts in Literature, Hoffman began working on his films, as well as teaching film, electronic and computer-based media. He is currently a faculty member in the Film and Video Department at York University.

Since the mid-1980s, Hoffman has been giving workshops in film co-operatives and schools throughout Canada and abroad. He has been a Visiting Professor of Film at University of Helsinki and University of South Florida in Tampa. Hoffman also teaches a summer workshop, The Independent Imaging Retreat, to support hand-made short films. Participants learn to process their own film, and develop a short project. Films made at the workshop have received several awards, and workshop programs have been screened in San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Regina, Toronto and Helsinki.

A filmmaker of memory and association, Hoffman creates highly "personal" yet universal works, which weave fiction and documentary in an experimental "diarist" cinema. He has screened his work in England, Holland, Australia, Estonia, Germany, Belgium, Italy, France and the USA. In 1987, *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* received a Genie Nomination (in the Documentary Category), and First Prize in the Experimental Film Category at the Athens International Film Festival. In 1991, the Sydney International Film Festival in Australia honored Hoffman with a retrospective of his work. In 1994, *Technilogic Ordering* received jury citations at the Toronto International Film Festival and the Ann Arbor Film

Festival, *Chimera* (1996) won a 1st Prize at Athens Film Festival, and *Destroying Angel* (1998) has won three awards at festivals in the USA. In 2001, Hoffman was featured at the Images Festival for Independent Film and Video. *What these ashes wanted* (2001) premiered at the festival and received the Telefilm Canada Award. As well, at the festival a book about his work was launched: *Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman* contains over twenty-five essays/writings by academics and artists. He has also received a 2002 Golden Gate Award, New Visions, from the San Francisco International Film Festival, as well as the Gus Van Sant Award from the Ann Arbor Film Festival for *What these ashes wanted*.

For more information on Hoffman, visit [www.philiphoffman.ca](http://www.philiphoffman.ca)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Zryd is Associate Professor in Cinema and Media Studies in the Department of Film, York University (Toronto), and past President of the Film Studies Association of Canada. His research on experimental film has been published in *Cinema Journal*, *October*, and *The Moving Image*, and his essay on Hoffman, "Deception and Ethics in *?O, Zoo!* (*The Making of a Fiction Film*)" is included in *Landscape with Shipwreck*.

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