

PHILIP HOFFMAN

FLOWER  
POWER



**(S8)<sup>X</sup>** MOSTRA  
DE CINEMA  
PERIFÉRICO

2019

**(S8)** 10ª MOSTRA  
DE CINEMA  
PERIFÉRICO

Interview and Edition: Alberte Pagán  
A publication by (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico  
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# FLOWER POWER

## PHILIP HOFFMAN INTERVIEWED

**Alberte Pagán**

The first Philip Hoffman film I saw, in London in the early 1990's, was *Kitchener-Berlin*. It was the seventh and last title of the cycle of autobiographical films that had put Hoffman on the map of experimental film. A quarter of a century later the Canadian filmmaker came to Galiza to present a retrospective of his work.

Personal and family life always sneak into Hoffman's films, even into the most formal ones, as when he discloses that the underwater sequence in *river* was filmed while he was sitting in the boat thinking about the very recent suicide of his uncle by a nearby river. An objective film like *?O,ZOO! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, apparently a documentary on the making of *A Zed and Two Noughts* by Peter Greenaway, starts with footage (supposedly) filmed by his grandfather.

Philip Hoffman's personal and autobiographical films are eclectic and polyphonic in style. He mixes together still photographs and film, video and celluloid, color and black and white, found footage and home movies, images and writings, voices and telephone conversations. He uses multiple points of view because there is not such a thing as one objective truth. This idea of the world as a mosaic is made explicit in *Technillogical Ordering*, his most overtly political film, a denunciation of war as spectacle and as business, as Canadian companies get ready for the rebuilding of Kuwait. The editing in mosaic, like war, does not create meaning but provokes destruction/deconstruction.

*By the Time We Got to Expo*, while formally similar to *river* as the same images are treated and manipulated in different ways (negative/positive, color/b&w) till the final degraded and peeled off film, relates to *Technillogical Ordering* in its representation of the world as a fragile endeavor, as fragile as celluloid itself.

Since the mention of the late Jack Kerouac in the early *The Road Ended at the Beach*, death has been ever present in Hoffman's films.

He has filmed his dying grandmother in *passing through/torn formations* and his agonizing father in *Aged*. The accidental death of a boy is at the heart of *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*. And *What These Ashes Wanted* was made as a way to cope with the unexpected death of his partner Marian McMahon in 1996.

Some of Hoffman's more simple and poetic films take the form of haiku, which are themselves a lesson in montage. The melancholy of *passing through/torn formations* seems to be inspired by Jonas Mekas' *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, while *Aged* deals with the same subject as Steve Dwoskin's *Age is...*

*The Road Ended at the Beach* buries its roots in Beat literature and, moreover, in the Beat way of life, life as process, literature/film as life. The importance of process (in life, in filming, in developing, even with flowers, your own stocks) can be glimpsed in *Lessons in Process*, which documents one of his film courses in Cuba, and is at the core of his Film Farm, which every year summons a group of filmmakers from all over the world to shoot, edit and print films outside the restrictions of capitalist labs.

## Filmography

- On the Pond (1978, 10')
- The Road Ended at the Beach (1983, 32')
- Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion (1984, 6')
- ?O,ZOO! (The Making of a Fiction Film) (1985, 23')
- passing through - torn formations (1988, 44')
- river (1978-89, 16')
- Kitchener-Berlin (1989, 37')
- Opening Series 1 (1992, 10')
- Opening Series 2 (1994, 7')
- Technilogic Ordering (1994, 31')
- Opening Series 3 (1995, 6'; made with Gerry Shikatanani)
- Sweep (1995, 31'; made with Sami van Ingen)
- Chimera (1995, 15')
- Destroying Angel (1998, 32'; made with Wayne Salazar)
- Kokoro is for Heart (1999, 8')
- Opening Series 4 (2000, 10')
- What These Ashes Wanted (2001, 57')
- ever present going past (2007, 9')
- All Fall Down (2009, 95')
- Lessons in Process (2012, 31')
- Slaughterhouse (2014, 15')
- Aged (2014, 46')
- By the Time We Got to Expo (2015, 9'; made with Eva Kolcze)
- vulture (2019, 57')

The following interview was recorded on 9 June 2018 at Lavacolla Airport, Compostela. Hoffman had come to Galiza to present a retrospective of his work at the (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico, where he also gave a four-day workshop (Film Farm on the Road). The interview was made possible thanks to Xisela Franco's enthusiasm. In May 2019 Hoffman revised the transcript and kindly answered some further questions by e-mail.

## **POETICS, PROCESSES, FAMILY, RELIGION**

**You never mention your film *Freeze-up* in your filmography. Was it a narrative film?**

Maybe it felt outside of my body of work, because it is a bit more narrative-driven. I was studying McLuhan and I kind of made a film that depicted his theories of Media.

***On the Pond* is a school film. What made you study film?**

What made me study film? Well, I started with photography and the dark room, thanks to a Canadian filmmaker, Richard Kerr, who teaches at Concordia University now. When I was maybe 14 years old and he was around 17-18, he was dating my sister. As you can see in *On the Pond*, I had triplet sisters, so there was lots of dating going on at home. Richard and I became close and we made a dark room in my parents' basement, in the bathroom. So working with photography was the foundation of my film work.

Because my father had a meat business, a slaughter house, I went into business at university. But I didn't do so well. I was more interested in literature and took a great writing course with Prof Gerald Noonan. In his class I wrote the "Death of the Elephant", which is the most important section of my film *?O,ZOO! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*. While studying literature I started to take some courses in film studies from film Prof Paul Tiessen where I saw all the silent German Expressionism works. I started to shoot with my uncle's 8mm camera. But when Richard Kerr went to Sheridan College I left Wilfrid

Laurier University and literature studies and followed him to Sheridan College, Media Arts, where I learned how to make films.

So this is how I started. I don't know why, I think it was just that I didn't want business. I wanted art. But in this little city, Kitchener-Waterloo, there wasn't a place to go, there was not much art, so Richard Kerr was my access to art. When I was younger I was quiet. I had three sisters older than me, all the same age, triplets! And I used photography to kind of participate with the family, because everybody was talking and I would steer away. I realized that photography and then film could be a place to express something.

### **While you were making *On the Pond*, were you aware of the international experimental film scene?**

Yes, because my two main teachers were Rick Hancox and Jeffrey Paull. And also Jim Cox and Harvey Hornsberger. There were some good filmmakers teaching there. This was like 1979, and they were showing us experimental films. I even took film theory courses, [P. Adams] Sitney, [André] Bazin, you know, all this. But the New American Cinema was "in the air", we saw [Stan] Brakhage, we saw [Jonas] Mekas. But maybe not so many Europeans... In Canada experimental film foundation for a lot of Canadian filmmakers, especially of my generation, came by way of the National Film Board. So National Film Board mixed with the New American Cinema equals...

### **Canadian cinema?**

Yes, I think so. More specifically "Escarpment School"! [The "Escarpment School" is a group of personal filmmakers formed at Sheridan College, which is near the Niagara Escarpment from which they take their name.] Because in the early 60s National Film Board was very *cinéma vérité*, interesting documentary cinema, and of course [Norman] McLaren and [Arthur] Lipsett.

### **Were you aware of Jack Chambers?**



My favorite. *Hart of London* (1970) was a model for “personal” film-making. I saw it in school, at Sheridan. To see that film was breath-taking.

**Do you feel comfortable with the label “experimental”? Or do you prefer “documentary filmmaker”, or “diaristic”, or “lyrical”?**

I don't use “experimental” too much. I like “first person” cinema. But that doesn't have to be experimental. Another term is “alternative”. They all are good. And “personal” has its problems too because of Facebook and all this navel gazing. I think that “first person” is one of the best. And “poetic”. I think “poetic”, on some level, is the closest for my work, because I was more influenced by poetry and some kinds of literature... the new novel, [Alain] Robbe-Grillet, [James] Joyce, Gertrude Stein... What they were doing with words was influenced by the cinema. So I came into cinema through the back door, in terms of understanding. I remember seeing a film, *Ulysses* [1967], now I forget the director's name, maybe you know.

**Joseph Strick.**

Strick, yes. I saw it at Wilfrid Laurier University, where I was before going to film school. I can understand this non-linear and kind of dreamy way of telling a story, something that's less obvious, more immersive.

**You were also interested in Beat literature, Jack Kerouac and so.**

Yes. In my late teens early twenties this was like the freedom that you looked for, so I was most interested in the way Kerouac wrote, without stopping. His spontaneous prose became very important for me. I even wrote a paper about that in Rick Hancox's class. We had to write a film theory and mine was “Spontaneous Filmmaking”, coming from Kerouac. And you know, this was funny... I suggested small doses of drugs or alcohol to prep you before filming.

**And then you discussed Kerouac with Robert Frank in *The Road Ended at the Beach*. Did you already know Frank's film *Pull My Daisy* at the time, a good example of spontaneous filmmaking?**

Yes. All his later films are also actually first person cinema. *Pull My Daisy* is a little more dealing with narrative. It works with Kerouac's voice who tells a story, but of course it was somewhat spontaneous. Kerouac read the narration spontaneously to the picture, watching the film; and I did the same thing in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* with Mike Callich on saxophone. We had the saxophone play to the finished film. And the seventh take was good.

**Why is hand processing important to you?**

Well, it's a return to the darkroom of my childhood. Maybe that's my need. Hand processing allows people to continue to work with celluloid. Hand processing is inexpensive and it is personal... you have control. You are not giving it to the man with the white lab coat. This came first as a function of the Film Farm, to create a place that could help people continue to work with celluloid. And I thought at one point, in the early years, that the Film Farm would turn to digital, but then I realized, when I started to work with digital, that it's so different that it was important to maintain the quality of celluloid and the working processes of celluloid, because, you know, the digital can learn from celluloid as well, analogue methodologies have had a long time period of experience.

**As you have mentioned, you have also worked in digital, and you have mixed video and cinema in some films. From your experience, what are the main differences between celluloid and digital?**

In video and digital it is so much easier to do sync sound. I wouldn't throw out digital, because if I want I can either edit a digital film within a celluloid work and finish on digital or I can shoot a digital film off a screen with a film camera. That's something all my students are do-

ing, because they can't afford a lab. They cut the film and then they shoot it off the screen. My film (made with Eva Kolcze) *By the Time We Got to Expo* is an example of this. Somehow it is a conversation between digital and analogue.

## **What is Process Cinema?**

Process Cinema was a course I started maybe ten years ago at York [University in Toronto]. Later I realized that I could look at process philosophy, at [Henri] Bergson and the philosophers that deal with the idea of process, this idea that you can't step in the same river twice, as the river is flowing. In the course we worked with both digital and celluloid. It allowed the participants to work spontaneously and try to create a cinematic experience, spontaneously rather than with planned scripts.

Process Cinema came out of all this work in photography and at the Film Farm because with celluloid when you are hand-processing there's a lot of variables to try and control, because there's always aspects of heat for the chemistry, aspects of time, aspects of light, and the real possibility of "accidents". This connects to Carl Jung's theory of synchronicity. In the making of a film there is energy around its making that you can access where the mental processes connect to the physical processes. And Process Cinema is about this, about not just the technical aspect of processing but to work "in process" and with the world so that the world can be a partner in the making of the film.

**Family is ever present in your films, even when you are talking about something else. We can also glimpse some self-portraits, you reflected in a mirror, always behind your camera. But your figure is very elusive. In that way your cinema is not that "personal" — you talk about your family but not so much about yourself.**

Well, I think any expression is a look at yourself. Anyway, it is not like "Oh, this is my family. I have three sisters, and that's the reason why I

am like this”, you know, that kind of analysis. I think it is more a poetic analysis. I don’t think it is a straightforward analysis.

### **But family is important to you.**

Yes. Well, I think for me family is important because I know it has a great effect on who I am. So, to try to understand that hopefully will help me to understand myself. My films are not my portrait, they are not a documentary about me. It’s more about my experience and a reflection of what I see.

### **How did you feel when you learned you had an unborn elder brother who was also called Phillip?**

As I thought about it I changed my name to Philip with one “l”.

### **As your father’s name was Phillip with double “l”.**

When I was looking in the wallet of my father, after he had died, I found out that on his birth certificate he was Philip with one “l”. He changed his name from one to two “ls”.

### **So your grandfather was called Philip as well.**

Yes. Philip with one “l”. So the name went from one to two to one “l”. Both my father and I yearned to be unique! I didn’t change my name out of disrespect. It was more the freedom to choose your destiny, to be something else. Once you change your name you don’t have to be exactly what you are supposed to be. My father was generous and had empathy, and he did not care about this kind of stuff. He asked me to take over the family business, and I said, “No”, and he said, “Fine”. He just wanted to give me the opportunity, but he didn’t have resentment or anything, he was very generous. But yes, there’s actually a grave with this unborn child in Kitchener, my big brother, who was named Phillip Hoffman.

## One “I” or two “Is”?

Two. This would be a good feature film that I should make. Ha! My parents wanted the priest to bless this grave, and the priest said no, because it was unborn. It could not be sanctified, even though my mother carried it for more than 8 months. And that’s when my father stopped going to church. He lost his faith in the Church at that moment. And that was the reason why he would do things like eat meat on Friday — you’re not supposed to eat meat on Friday, as a Catholic, but he would. He was not so religious, my mother was more. But anyway, I think I was lucky that I wasn’t the first-born, because the first born are always in charge of the family. And this way I could be myself. That responsibility went with the first boy that was unborn.

**There are many religious and Catholic images in your films — processions, cathedrals, a Christ in a stained glass window in *passing through*. Are you a religious person?**

No, but that was my formation. And it was influenced from catholic school more than a family formation. My family wasn’t overly religious, except for my grandmother. So I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual, I guess. And I’m more interested in the social aspect of religion.

Derek Jarman said that the best filmmakers are Catholic, because we turn the wine into the blood and the bread into the body... the transformation and the imagination and what’s, I won’t say magic, what’s not physical. Of course many religions have these kinds of ornate rituals. So it’s kind of an odd proposition.

## **?ZOO! (THE MAKING OF A FICTION FILM) (1986)**

**What brought you to film the set of Peter Greenaway’s film *A Zed and Two Noughts*?**

I met Greenaway at the Grierson Documentary seminar in Ontario. He was interested in the poetic aspects of my work, and that I made films on very low budgets, compared to the NFB [National

Film Board] and CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] who were also screening films at the seminar, because we kind of all lived together intensely for one week. I liked the intensity of that seminar and later I thought, I could create a workshop that held that kind of intensity, and of course that became the Independent Imaging Retreat or Film Farm.

**You include some scenes from Greenaway's film. Are they taken from the original film, or were they shot by you?**

I was allowed to follow Greenaway's film, during the shooting. I shot the film myself with the Bolex. It was Greenaway's first 35mm feature and he had a huge entourage. He said he was jealous of my freedom to just truck around with my Bolex, and shoot what I felt. And of course that is the way I still work, and couldn't really work any other way, with producers and scriptwriters. My work is fueled by the moment the camera connects and interacts with the world and people.

**Why the “?” in the title?**

A reference to questions, rather than answers. And also when Greenaway told me the title of the film, “A Zed and Two Noughts”, at first I didn't know what it meant as it is using British slang, “Noughts”, so there was first a questioning, and then “Oh... ZOO!”.

## **SOUNDTRACKS**

**In *On the Pond* you record a conversation while watching some family photographs. How did you record the sound?**

On a cassette tape recorder. I had two microphones, one on each side of the room, and I set it all up before. And then I asked my family to come into the room. They didn't know they were being taped. And then when I showed the finished film to them they were laughing and talking again while the film was going. They added more comments to the original recording on the film, rather than really watch

the film. They watched and commented on the pictures a second time... overlapping the original dialogue!!!

Similarly, in *All Fall Down* and *ever present going past* you also record the voices commenting on the images, in this case a home movie of your stepdaughter dancing around a bonfire. Was that also recorded on a tape recorder?

**Yes. It might have been on a digital camera, I can't remember. *ever present going past* is a film I don't see that often. I should see it again. In my early years of filmmaking I used tape recorders, reel-to-reel and cassette. Later I just used a digital camera to record audio.**

**You usually commission musicians to compose the soundtracks to your films. When traveling, don't you collect sounds, as well as images?**

I recorded the voices and effects in *passing through*. I worked with Tucker Zimmerman in that film, to find the right music. Toni Edelmann (*All Fall Down* and *Aged*) gave me original music, which I edited into the piece, sometimes reworking in fragments. For *Aged*, I played the changed music for him and he liked it a lot, even though I used his music as a kind of source. It was beautiful foundational sound to work with. Marcel Beltran did the sound edit and mix for *Aged*... I think it's brilliantly subtle and evocative. I don't think there is a film where I didn't connect directly to the soundtrack. In *vulture* I had Luca Santilli make the tones, and then I edited them in. Isiah Medina actually composed and mixed the ending of *vulture* beautifully, in his way! I knew what I wanted, and because I know and love Isiah's work I figured he could create the "sonic explosion" which I wanted for the end of *vulture*. It is a magnificent mashed-up in both sound and image. I worked very closely with Isiah, but also got some help from Clint Enns who had an idea to add rapid drumming. Luca Santilli's "metal" band Kennedy can also be heard underneath the last section of the film. Yes, in many of my works I collect audio and do the sound edit. Also Marcel Beltran who I met while teaching in Cuba at

EICTV has helped in this way in my more recent films, as well with final mixes.

**In the travelogue that is *Chimera* we can see images from Australia, Egypt, Europe. Did you record sounds in those places that were eventually mixed in the music you commissioned?**

Yes. My friend Vesa Lehko worked for Finnish Broadcast company and got some found sound, and mixed them with some of my recorded sounds, both personal recordings and field recordings, and then he created soundscapes. I then strung out these sounds and gave them to Tucker Zimmerman for the soundtrack. The music element is his compositions, in *Chimera*, but I fed him the wild sounds and soundscapes. I always work closely with the sound artist. Tucker commonly gave me different versions for me to choose from.

**Do you pronounce “Chimera” /tʃ/?**

You can say “Chimera” /k/ or “Chimera” /tʃ/, but I say “Chimera” /tʃ/ because it sounds more like the film. “Chimera” /k/ is more like the Greek myth, with the head of the lion, body of the goat and a snake tail.

## **TRAVEL FILMS**

**While you were travelling and filming these two travel films, *Chimera* and *The Road Ended at the Beach*, did you already have in mind the final shape of the film? Or did you just collect images and then you create the film at the editing table?**

For *The Road Ended at the Beach* I just collected images, and it took seven years to edit. I was used to working with narrative, in a way. I don't think I understood experimental form as much yet. I was just trying to slowly work with narrative and memory. I wanted to use film for its inherent gift, that is, to represent different aspects of time. In *The Road Ended at the Beach* I wanted to film the past and the



present at the same time. This first version of *The Road Ended at the Beach* was one hour long, edited on film, and I wish I had that version, but we didn't transfer it to digital then, this was 1983. I would have liked that version. It's less narrative, much more lyrical, but it's gone. I had a screening of it. I lost it because I started cutting it, and it changed. It's like a sculpture — you make changes and unless you take a picture of it you don't have the first steps anymore.

Now I store the digital files of first versions or older versions of films I make. *passing through* was very much like *The Road Ended at the Beach*, but more fragmented. I also had a longer version, but I am happy with *passing through* as it is now. But it followed the same process, first I collected the images and then it took seven years as well to make, so, you know, it went through a lot of changes. "Collect reflect revise".

With *passing through* what I knew was that I wanted the feeling of the camera moving over landscape, over people... horizontally... "passing through". It's always less about how it's going to turn out and more about the formal uses and why. *The Road Ended at the Beach* suggests film is like concrete form of memory... so the images are on the tripod, mostly... this also comes from origins working with the still camera... Collecting living "gems" gleaned from life and used to remember. Then trying to organize it. *passing through* and *Chimera* have a similar relationship to form. *Chimera* uses a single frame zoom in super 8 as its starting point. I collected footage for a few years, during my travels (being asked to screen my first group of films at festivals allowed me to travel). I transferred all the material to digital to experiment with frame rates. Once I determined the frame rate for each sequence, I then optically printed the original Kodachrome super 8 film to 16mm color interneg stock, so that 50% speed on the computer meant 2:1 on the 16mm optical printer, for example. So, you know, you can print at 50% speed, which is 2 [frames] to one, or 3 to one would be 33 % speed on the computer... 5 to one, ten to one and so on. So the computer was used to give me a sense of the motion. I think I started shooting *Chimera* in a Banff residency, and I was very much influenced by [Dziga] Vertov. I was thinking of him, when I started to make the film, a kind of travelogue of various places and spaces.

It took you a very long time to make the film, but the style is very coherent.

I usually have the form in mind. As in *vulture*. It's mostly 100-foot reels, two-and-a-half-minute continuous takes. I have formal interests, I have the form worked out ahead but I don't know how it's going to end.

### **Do you leave out much footage?**

Sometimes, sometimes not. A film like *Somewhere Between* was a 2 to 1 shooting ratio, very little. *passing through* was a lot. *The Road Ended at the Beach* not quite so much. *passing through* was done over a very long period, 6 years. In *All Fall Down* lots of digital shots were left out. I left out a lot of footage in *Chimera*, because I had collected quite a lot of footage with the super 8 camera. In *vulture* not so much. So it depends. I also shot in digital for *vulture* but I didn't use that at all. *vulture* is a bit of a homage to analogue film so there ended up being no reason to use digital. I thought it was stronger to have it all as film both from a lab, black and white processing and color processing, to the flower hand-processing.

### **Do you ever film just for the sake of it, or do you always have a film in mind?**

Often some of the most important moments of my work have been filmed spontaneously, without a plan. In some films I just take the images from the archive that I've already filmed. It's a kind of borrowing from shooting periods like around *What These Ashes Wanted* and around, in that time, *Chimera*. This was sort of a time period, and I sort of relate a way of filming with a time period in my life. Right now I'm working with flowers, that seems to be the most interesting thing for me. There's lots of possibilities working with less toxic processing, and to me it's a place to go with celluloid. Processing with flowers and plants is something new, which I am attracted to.

***Chimera* is a travelogue where you can see a lot of iconic plac-**

**es, but then you can see trivial domestic actions like somebody cooking inside a kitchen. This scene looks a bit out of place.**

Yes, that scene is in Finland. It was part of that trip. Do you know [Paul] Virilio's idea that in the digital age everything is moving forward, without looking back? So in part I and part II of *Chimera* we are moving forward. We even start with a car, and it's always moving forward, and because it's going so fast you can't look back, there's no time to look back... we're in the moment moving forward! In the third part of *Chimera* you have to go home. Maybe it's cool to say you're embracing the digital, living in the present and future, and not looking back, as Virilio suggests the digital age demands, but in reality we want and need to go home. In the third section of the film it's kind of bouncing back and forth in time, but the cooking scene in the kitchen brings us back home, and stands as a kind of backbone for that part of the film.

I have a big archive of super 8mm films that I've had for years and I am always using for a sketchpad. Some of these super 8mm rolls have ended up in *The Road Ended at the Beach, passing through, All Fall Down* and a few other films. I used super 8mm film throughout my life up until about 2001, I think, until it was harder and more expensive to get processing. I used super 8 as how nowadays one may use a cell phone for filming. A future project of mine is going to be go back into that archive and look and see what is there, because I know there's lot of really strong sketches there, and I'm going to work with them.

## **IMAGES LIE**

**In *passing through/torn formations* you discuss your mother's family history. They come from Czechoslovakia but they speak Polish?**

Yes, they came to Canada in the 20's... Borders shifted... It was a village close to the Moravian/Slovakian border called Jablukov. The area still holds a mix of Polish and Czech people. I have been back

twice over the past 10 years, as I showed *All Fall Down* and *Aged* at the Jihalava Film Festival.

**The film reminds me of Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972). Was this film a model for you?**

It reminded Mekas of his film too. I had met Brakhage in the late 80's and he connected me with Mekas. But I saw Mekas at the Autobiographical Film Conference in the late 70's at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I was still a student at Sheridan, and I was walking up the steps and there he was beside me. He showed me his Bolex in a shopping bag and said that he carried it like that so he wouldn't get robbed. He reminded me of my family so I felt very at home with him and his films. I visited him at Anthology [Film Archives, New York] and showed my films there and he paid me in books! He also gave me a print of *Cassis*, and I gave him a print of *passing through/torn formations*, that later went to Stan Brakhage. But I hadn't seen *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, which Brakhage suggested I see when I met him at Queens University, after seeing *passing through*. Suddenly he was sitting right beside me watching *passing through*, and that is where we met.

**You call *passing through/torn formations* “polyphonic”, as “there is no such thing as one objective fact/truth”. You have stated that pictures lie, in reference to the photograph of the cave in *What These Ashes Wanted*. When you make films, are you aware that images can lie and that it is difficult to get to the truth?**

It's less about how the images lie, and more about how you use them. I think a lot of artists and filmmakers use forms that allow more questions than answers. I think that polyphonic uses of words in Joyce's work can migrate to cinema, and this method allows for free association and therefore allows for many answers, not just one. The exciting thing about Joyce's writing is that people can interact with it with their own backgrounds and then take from that what they inter-

pret, which is always unique. And *passing through* has that quality, because sometimes there's two or three voices on the soundtrack at the same time, so you can hear all the three voices together as music, or you can pick up only one, for example, the girl's voice and just listen to that, or you can pick up my narration and just listen to that. So, how many times do you have to screen the film to be able to get the whole film? Earlier I was talking about the polyphonic structure of my *Slaughterhouse* installation, which was part of the Land/slide exhibition in the Markham Museum. You peek through the knotholes of the barn, a 19th century slaughter house, and the various views offer different films running, and you make up your own interpretation from the combined viewings, which are projected onto the various surfaces inside the barn... the barn board, the container that is used to hold the remainders of the slaughtered animals, etc... The installation uses this polyphonic form that allows for free association, an interaction and interpretation that's less fixed. So to me what is a lie in cinema would be a film that purports that what you're seeing is one truth. I think even a one-shot film could also have many ways to interpret it, if the filmmaker has thought about that.

## **AGED (2014)**

**You filmed *Aged* in 2014. Two years before, Stephen Dwoskin had made his last film, *Age is...*, which deals with the same subject, i.e. aging and death. Have you seen it?**

No, I have not seen that film by Dwoskin, but would like to. I think *Aged* is a really good film about aging, that reflects perception changes as we are moving out of our corporeal bodies. The film follows my father in his decline and blends celluloid and digital aberrations, scratches and glitches. My father lived in the analogue age and was swept away by the digital. The film had about 3 screenings in festivals and won two awards. But it didn't play much. An old man in his decline isn't a big draw for "hip" film festival programmers, but Patrick Friel at Onion City programmed it and it got a bit of recognition there. Andrea Picard at Wavelength in Toronto said she wanted

to “champion” the film to other festivals but she couldn’t fit it into Wavelength. But nothing much happened with that film.

### **There are images of Knićanin, Serbia. Why did you go there?**

My grandparents are from there. It was a community of Black Forest Germans who settled there in the 1800’s, and it was called Rudolfsgnad. The town changed to Knićanin, Serbia after the 2nd World War, ruled by Communist Yugoslavia, and around 20,000 Germans living there were put into internment camps after WWII. Around 10,000 Germans died there. Apparently they were crafts people living in this small somewhat idyllic community on the Danube. My grandparents immigrated to Winnipeg, Canada in the 1920’s before World War Two erased the little village of their homeland. As far as I know this story hasn’t been told. In *Aged*, my father dips into the history through images of his family “tree”, which his uncle made, and his remembrance of riding a train from Winnipeg to Ontario as a boy in the 1920’s, eating peanuts for the first time. I went to Knićanin with Rob Butterworth. We were showing “Film Farm” films in Zagreb and we just did a 24 hour road trip into Serbia. People were a bit hostile about us filming there so we had some food and drove back to the festival, but I got the trip on film. A kind of return to my father’s heritage that I felt needed to be in the film. The rooftops were reminiscent of some still pictures I saw in my grandparents’ photo album, so I filmed that when we arrived at dusk.

### **The scene of the family opening the presents was already in *passing through*, I believe. Are they the same images refilmed?**

Yes, those images were in *Kitchener-Berlin*. I worked with Marcel Beltran who helped me repurpose those films from an old VHS tape. So the level of mediation gets more intense and the original pristine images of *Kitchener-Berlin* get more distorted, and faded.

### **How long were you filming your father?**

I filmed my father on mostly digital for 5 years, collecting images as I took my shift, caring for him. I also dipped into my archive and found older VHS and Hi-8 which is in the film. It was a beautiful time to reconnect with him at the cottage where he chose to die. We were a good father and son team, Richard Kerr said in “Landscape with Shipwreck”.

I miss my father a lot and for awhile I felt lost without him around. Maybe I still do.

## **TECHNILOGIC ORDERING (1994)**

***Technilogic Ordering* may be your only political film. Years later, in ever present going past, you state that you are tired of the Persian Gulf War. What leads a personal filmmaker like you to make a political film?**

It's funny, because I never thought about it like that. It started before the Persian Gulf War, with the first Bush. I was working with two other students at college, Heather Cook and Stephen Butson. We were making the film together. This war seemed crazy, in terms of the bizarre hyped up television coverage. Life just somehow went on and it seemed no one was doing anything, so we wanted to make something to put out into the hallway of Sheridan College, the school I was teaching at.

This was the first war where they had already premade the logos. You could see the construction had been done beforehand. It suggested it was all really just propaganda.

The making of the film was a kind of survival thing. Rather than sitting and watching the news on TV we chose to work on the film to try to understand what was happening.

**It's more about the media and the image of the war through the media than about war itself. And about the lies on TV.**

Yes, it's definitely about the media's handling of the war.

**And you insert a kind of déjà vu when you mix Kennedy with Bush, and the Vietnam War with the Gulf war.**

Yes, to make the understanding that this war keeps going on.

**One can hear a lot of different languages, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese. Did you order the tapes from the different channels, or did you just record them live?**

We got some of this from Canadian TV. I think I got some from Finland, because I was traveling there around the time. I think the Spanish comes from Spanish TV in Ontario. This was when the satellite was coming, and we recorded them live. There's a technical formal aspect to it. I bought a consumer super VHS VCR, which had a "kitsch" mosaic function in it that you could play like music. It was like a musical performance. We made one stream of images for like one hour, two hours, three hours, whatever. Then we cut up sequences, and then we loaded them into the mosaic function, and different configurations could be played live. These sequences were recorded and then later reordered into a final sequence. It was then edited and some sections that weren't working were deleted, to create a flow.

**What about the sound?**

The sound goes mostly with the image, through the mosaic function, but sometimes there are delays, and the sound from one image ends up on another, because that's how this mosaic function works. You can hold on one image but then the sound continues. So we were playing with that and then we did a super VHS master and then I made this transfer from VHS to 16mm at the National Film Board. It was the first time I got help from the National Film Board, but in Montreal, not in Toronto. In Toronto the producers didn't really support experimental film, in the way that artists like Lipsett and McLaren were supported in the 60's.



**So it was a professional transfer.**

Yes, at that time you couldn't really do it at school, and I wanted a clean transfer.

**You include ads and fragments of the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Was this footage found or looked for? Was it a chance operation?**

Yes, chance, while I was recording, but of course I chose them. It was obviously to show the complacency of the media, but also of the spectator — you just turn the channel to a sitcom and leave the war behind, or rather the constructed war from television. The juxtapositions are so obvious and crude in some ways, but I wanted that because it's kind of what it is, you just sit on the couch and turn on to the channel. John Berger did this with a [copy of the Sunday Times] magazine in *Ways of Seeing* [episode 4, BBC, 1972]. He would open it up and it's like, you know, seeing the boat people, trying to [escape from East Pakistan to West Bengal], and immediately after you see the Pimm's gin [advertisement]. I was doing the same thing as what he was doing. So my teaching is probably more overtly political than my filmmaking in terms of using the camera as a hammer. But *Technilogic Ordering* really was using the camera like a hammer. I think there are people that can do that really well, better than I can. I think the quotidian is the sort of place where I like to be.

**You state at the beginning of *ever present going past that*, in 1991, you are tired of the Persian War. And then we see a shot of the wind on some palm-trees, and a micro recording the sound. Where was that filmed?**

The text in the film is from a poem by my collaborator on the film, Gerry Shikatani, who also worked on *Kokoro is for Heart* with me. The footage is from a film shot in Egypt in the early 90's that didn't make it into *What These Ashes Wanted*. I also gave that shot to Mike Hoolboom who wanted to use it in one of his films, though I don't know where.

## **KOKORO IS FOR HEART (1999)**

**In *Kokoro is for Heart* you allow a camera malfunction, the flipping of the image, to become part of the film. How important is chance in your filmmaking?**

Oh, it's everything. It does tell me a direction to go in. I like the aspect of chance that allows what is outside in, and I stop being in control. I'm like a medium, part of something larger. This stuff flows through us. And it's possible to find things that are attracted to us, and maybe sometimes it's going down the wrong path, but it's never wrong. It can't be wrong. It just takes you to a different place that maybe you don't like, but that's not wrong. It may take you into darkness or it may take you into light, but that's the quality of life, where we have both, the light and the dark.

Yes, the whole thing is about chance... I can probably think of every film where chance was a part of the film. Even in *vulture* I was recording and processing with flowers, and suddenly I shot a roll and said, "Well, I am going to use all the flowers that I had used already, mixing them all together". In *vulture* there is a snow storm, and there are horses underneath the surface manipulation, so the footage became very dense on the surface, and that was done in a way by chance, by combining several potions and heating the chemistry up higher than normal. I didn't know what I was doing. I just said, "I'm going to put this material into all this old chemistry and see what happens". It came out a very thick negative, that's why it's so white. But the actual surface was beautiful. It looks like a Kandinsky painting! So, by taking these chances you can find this beauty that you wouldn't have otherwise. I sometimes do things on a whim through a spontaneous idea.

**In 1995 *Kokoro* was called *Opening Series 3*. How did it become *Kokoro is for Heart*? What are the differences?**

Well, I can use it both ways now. *Number 3* is one of the *Opening Series* films I show a lot. I use *Opening Series 3* in performance with

Gerry Shikatani, the poet and performer in the film. In the performance he's on the screen but he's in front of the screen as well, in person at the screening. Gerry actually comes to Spain a lot, I was supposed to go to the writing workshop he has just recently completed in Lorca's Granada. He's a Lorca lover.

**You also worked with poet Gerry Shikatani in *ever present going past*. Why did you get interested in his poetry and performances? How did you start working with him?**

We both taught at Sheridan College. After I studied there I almost right away started teaching, up until 1999, when I left Sheridan for York University. Gerry was teaching in the writing department. He had written poetry books and performed. And we became friends. He came up to the Farm and we just said, "Let's go for a walk", and I just took the camera and we went to the gravel pit and he started doing things, moving rocks around for example, and I started filming. I shot one roll but I was disappointed when I saw the flipping of the image when I got it back. The camera had a malfunctioning pull down claw. But my partner at that time, Marian [McMahon], said, "Oh, the flipping is like his poetry", because he was repeating words. And Gerry liked the piece and he gave me a recording, "Kokoro", which he had performed on the radio. So I started working with the film and I optically printed it twice, I printed it 2 to 1, and then I printed it 3 to 1. Did you see the paintings for the *Opening Series*?

**Yes, on the film cans.**

I made six paintings, not twelve, and then, for each one, I took a blank canvas and I put it on top of the freshly painted one, and drove over it with my truck, so the picture was doubled, like Gerry and me, the two people making the film. And then the 2 to 1 and 3 to 1 printing, you know, just echo the reverberations of form that follows with the piece. I ended up with 12 short film fragments and 12 paintings. I made a color xerox of each painting and fastened them to 100 foot film canisters. Then I randomly put the 12 films each into a film

canister. The films would always live in the same canister. The order of the piece is determined like this — The canisters are laid out on a table, with the painting up. As the audience enters the theatre they are asked to arrange the 12 canisters, by using the paintings as a guide. When the screening is about to begin I collect the canisters making note of their linear order, and then splice the film together in that order. I do the splicing while other films are running and then present *Opening Series* at the end of the program. After screening the film many times, in many different configurations, I got to know the material very well. The chance juxtapositions that surfaced were different from what I would have edited with my conscious mind. Eventually I felt I wanted to fix the film in a linear order, and I used the past screenings of *Opening Series* to assist in figuring the order of the images. In the end, I named that fixed film *Kokoro is for Heart*. I still screen the film both ways.

It's one of my favorite films, maybe because the materialism of the flipping.

Working in a more materialist way is something I have always done in my body of work. Yes, sure. As an artist I believe I can use film in different ways, and not just stick to one way of making; hopefully touching people in different ways. But they are all different parts of myself. Also I learn from other filmmakers, usually when I meet them and get to know them.

## **COLLABORATIONS**

**You made *Sweep* with Sami van Ingen, Robert Flaherty's great-grandson. And one of your latest films, *By the Time We Got to Expo*, was made with Eva Kolcze. Was it difficult for you, a personal subjective filmmaker, to work with other people?**

There was a point after I made my first 7 films, when I felt a need to collaborate. I had made films in the 1980s, up to *Kitchener-Berlin*, as an autobiographical cycle. After these first seven films it was time to explore something different, and I started shooting in super 8 what became *Chimera, What These Ashes Wanted*... And I wanted to col-

laborate, to open up to other ideas. I made a film with Sami van Ingen called *Sweep*, and then a collaboration called *Destroying Angel*, which was made at the same time as *What These Ashes Wanted*. It's a documentary of a friend [Wayne Salazar] who had been diagnosed with HIV. But in the middle of that my partner Marian suddenly died. I had always used film to help me through the present, and did so during this traumatic time. Her death is looked at in different ways through *Destroying Angel* and *What These Ashes Wanted*.

**Your earlier partner, Marian McMahon, was also a filmmaker.**

She came a bit more from writing, and then she made some films too.

**Her *Nursing History* (1989) is a beautiful film.**

Yes, it is.

**You insert a text by Marian McMahon at the end of *passing through/torn formations*. And she is credited as “collaborator” in *Technological Ordering* and some other films. To what extent was she a collaborator?**

Marian was quite busy with her own studies through the 80s, but we talked a lot about things I had never talked about, and she helped me think through my earlier films and I helped her make *Nursing History* as she hadn't made films, only studied film at University. So she kind of helped me grow in those early years and I helped her grow. I think the first relationships are like this, especially when you are just getting out of adolescence. At times it was tortuous, for both of us, probably. But that's because you are getting to know yourself, probably, through looking at yourself through your partner's eyes. I would say she collaborated but not so directly, not as my partner Janine Marchessault does with me now. But because Marian came from writing sometimes she helped me with the writing of the films as in *?O,ZOO!* And she helped talking me through those films in the '80's.

Janine, my partner, was the writer for *All Fall Down*. She is credited as the writer for the film, and plays a part, as the film has a personal thread in it, telling the story of us settling at the farm together in the late 90's. When we met, I suddenly had a family, with Jessie, who she had from a previous relationship. Jessie was 7 when we met! This autobiographical thread is all in the film, and in a way *All Fall Down* follows directly out of *What These Ashes Wanted*.

## **WHAT THESE ASHES WANTED (2001)**

**Marian McMahon is ever present in *What These Ashes Wanted*.**

At the time, from 1991 to 1996, before Marian's death, I was filming with a super 8 camera, making use of single frame, but zooming or moving the camera during the instant I snapped the single frame so you would get a blur. I worked spontaneously, using the camera like a musical instrument, in a way, trying to create rhythms, as I traveled from place to place, screening my previous works from the 80's. During this time I had three encounters with death that happened right in front of me. First, I went to Egypt. I didn't know what I would use the footage from Egypt for. Initially, it was part of *Opening Series 1*. I had given the footage to someone in Montreal to optically print it. When I phoned to see if the copy was ready, the woman on the phone, his wife, became very agitated and just left the phone call. I didn't know what was going on. The next day I found out that he had had a heart attack and passed away. I wrote this story into *What These Ashes Wanted*. It was very strange but I didn't know the person who died, though he worked on my footage. Tragic and very upsetting because I had no direct connection with this person, but I experienced his death through that telephone call.

Another time during that period I was walking along Waterloo Bridge in London, U.K., and a guy was right in front of me and he jumped over into the water. As a witness I gave the police my number in London, and the British police called me to say the man was saved. They said, "The man who jumped in the creek", it was the Thames, "is OK".

And then the third death was Marian's. So there was a premonition of her impending death during the shooting of *Chimera*. It was very sudden. She had just started having coughing. We found out she had cancer and then she died in the biopsy operation. She died in one week, less, five days from when we knew she had cancer. It put me out of my mind.

### **Did you shoot any of the images in the film after her death?**

Yes, because some of it is with Jessie, my daughter, with the ladybugs on her hands. And some of the windows. I'm shooting in the time of mourning. Mourning Marian, and starting a new relationship with Janine. All the black and white shots of the windows, at the beginning, with the telephone conversations, that's all shot after. I took five years to make that film. That's when I was connected with Sami as well. Marian died in November of 1996 and I finished *What These Ashes Wanted* in 2001. I was supposed to go to Finland to do an installation and I talked to Sami and he said, "Come anyway, we'll take care of you". Which was beautiful. The installation was quite raw, and I used it to help me through those dark days immediately following Marian's death. My Finnish friends helped me a lot by just being with me at that time cause my life was in shambles. Parts of the installation ended up in the other two films, *Ashes* and *Destroying Angel*. I just dove into the images during the mourning period. The photograph (or film) tells you that the body is gone. Freud says in "Mourning and Melancholia" you get protected when death happens (suddenly), so I shot, and I used the filming and editing to get through the present.

### **You went to Spain as well.**

Yes, to Guadalest, in Valencia. Marian had issues with her father, and that was her lifelong work. She used it as part of her dissertation. I think my personal filmmaking helped her as well think about dealing with her personal aspects in her writing and filmmaking. But she was doing this already, in a way dealing with family issues as we all do one way or another.

Marian had health issues, but she felt that somehow if she worked out these issues through writing and filmmaking they would solve her health problems. In a certain way it did, as she was much more grounded and at ease with her self, closer to the time of her death and after all of this difficult memory work. But maybe the stress was hard on her body. I don't really know for sure, of course. But still she had to do it. And so after she died I moved her ashes to different places, and Valencia was one place because it seemed to be a kind of emblem for her own sickness, and her quest to make things better for herself, and pass on these experiences through her writing and filmmaking.

She was writing a thesis and bringing the personal into academia, which was difficult at that time. She had on her wall this picture from a cave looking out to the sea, that she took at Guadalest, and she wrote this story in her dissertation *Racing Home. Memory Paradoxes: How Forgetting Forms Subjects, Experience and Knowledge Production*, which is in my films *What These Ashes Wanted* and the interactive work I did with her posthumously *Racing Home: A Korsakow film by Philip Hoffman based on an unfinished film by Marian McMahan*.

I went with her friend to Valencia and to Guadalest castle to find that cave, and we couldn't find it, there was no cave. It was just a tiny hole in a stone wall in an open area, but you had to crawl down as it was near the ground. It was a hole in the wall, just maybe four inches by three inches, that was the exact same shape as her photo. In the photo it feels like it is taken from the inside of a big cave. I laughed, because I imagined her lying on the ground taking the picture. A German tourist asked what I was looking at, lying on the ground. I showed him the picture and he laughed too. Then I put some flowers in there. I traveled to Spain to do that. To find out where that picture was taken.

And later I put her story in *Ashes*.



## **SOMEWHERE BETWEEN JALOSTOTITLAN AND ENCARNACION (1984)**

**Death is also present in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*. It seems you pursue death, or death pursues you.**

Yes, it does. It pursues us all.

**Text and image complement each other, one is never the illustration of the other.**

Yes, they follow their own path. I had been to this Beat conference in Boulder, Colorado. It was the 25th anniversary of *On The Road*. There's a school that Allen Ginsberg started, The Jack Kerouac's School of Disembodied Poetics, and I was doing meditation classes there. So I went there with my sister and a friend from Colorado.

In the late seventies or early eighties I had met a woman on the train to Vancouver, so I was going to see her in Mexico. So I was on a bus travelling from Mazatlán on the coast through to Guadalajara. So in between these two towns, Encarnación and Jalostotitlán, the bus stopped because a boy had been run over. The story was depicted in the film through text. I had to decide whether to film it or not, because I had my camera ready on my lap, it was right there. And the choice was not to, that was just gut reaction not to. I don't know what would happen now, maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. I can say ethically "Oh I'm glad I didn't", but I'd never know because I also filmed my grandmother, Babci, near her death [in *passing through/torn formations*]. But that was probably because I'm connected with her. And in Mexico I was a visitor. But I still had experienced this death, and when I returned to Toronto I took the images and I was thinking about this death that I had experienced and I filmed some more scenes with a blue wall and a painter superimposed, and then I went into my journal where I had scribbled some poetry, some haiku, and I worked with them. I worked with Carl Brown on the writing of those haikus. He's a Canadian filmmaker. He makes quite long energetic and beautiful hand-processed films since the 80's.

## **Are the superimpositions in *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan And Encarnacion* made in camera?**

Yes, the great thing about in-camera camera work is you cannot control everything, so there are little gifts that come to you, from the world. I love including those gems that seem to come from nowhere, in my film, and maybe it is the reason I make films.

### **LESSONS IN PROCESS (2012)**

**The ethical dilemma of what to show and what not to show is also present in *Lessons in Process*, when Jean Jean, in Cuba, cannot get funding to go to Haiti and film the effects of the earthquake, because it would be “disrespectful” to film them in their tragedy.**

Jean Jean, who was in the first Process Cinema class I taught in Cuba at EICTV, is from Haiti. He was in the darkroom with us when we found out about the earthquake in Haiti and we all felt his pain because he wasn't allowed to go back. He wanted to help with the recovery and as a filmmaker he wanted to shoot some film of the tragedy. The film school wouldn't assist him, saying it would be disrespectful for him to film at this time. The film juxtaposes this with Spanish TV footage of CNN in Haiti... I found it to be a terrible irony that a citizen of Haiti was told it would be morally suspect for him to film his own country's tragedy yet CNN has carte blanche.

So I was trying to show that disparity between who gets to tell the story. I think that he should be able to film. I didn't feel that he shouldn't. Right away, in the next shot, it's this white reporter, Anderson Cooper, carrying this black boy to safety. I slowed it down and you can tell that it's all staged of course. Later I saw that CNN gave Anderson Cooper some kind of Hero Award.

**Very unethical.**

In the film the students are shooting visual haiku, which is a practice

that helps one have respect and take responsibility for one's own intimate world. So I would trust what Jean Jean would shoot. We have a problem if all the images in the world are done by the newscasters and we don't have poets being able to film. I found it very evocative that poet Leonard Cohen died the day after [Donald] Trump was elected. The poet had to go! In *Lessons in Process* I was trying to make the point that what television is doing is unethical.

## **RIVER (1978-89)**

***river* is a simple film where you question the material and emphasize the importance of the camera and the material in the meaning of the film.**

To me these formal experiments are as personal as the family films. When people work with the material they are putting themselves into it in some way. Maybe they are filming something other than themselves, but they are making a choice that comes out of their subjectivity. I think that formal experiments, that show the raw material, might end up in a personal film, and what one learns through making a personal film might end up in a formal work. *Chimera*, *river*, *Kokoro*, even *Expo*, are all much more formal-materialist based. Even *Kitchener-Berlin*. There's a play between my formal work and my more outwardly personal work. They go hand in hand and they are part of the practice.

*river* was done over 12 years, from 1978 to 1989. The first two parts were done in school, as a challenge by my teacher Jeffrey Paull. The first [made in 1977] was an exercise which I now use in my classes, which is to make a film edited in-camera. In the film I used in-camera dissolves on the Bolex, in the first part, on a color reversal stock. Richard Kerr steered the boat, while I shot the beautiful scenery of the Saugeen River I used to fish in, as a boy. The second part [1978] was a black and white ½ inch video, made with a very heavy Portapak camera, with the boat just floating down the river, me shooting, no one steering. I later transferred the video to film by way of a kinescope. This was another exercise, a 20-minute continu-

ous take of going down the same river, the Saugeen. Letting the flow of the waves take me where they would.

### **Was it the first time you shot on video?**

In a film, yes, for sure. Our school was divided between video- and film-makers. Some were working with Portapaks, doing documentaries, and the filmmakers were doing experimental or celluloid films, not all experimental, but we had a disposition to experimental. But over time I had the disposition to film in different ways.

For the third part of *river*, which was done a few years later [1984], I was thinking of deconstruction of the image. I suppose I used a Brechtian technique, though I am not sure if that was an influence. I just set up the first [16mm] film again and I filmed it off of a rear screen with a video camera. And whenever it got to a dissolve, you could see the screen, because the light meter on the video camera automatically adjusted. As well because I was using a rear screen, the first part is reversed, left to right, in this the third part. This was also transferred to film, later. So the romantic narrative of part one, the trip down this beautiful river, is deconstructed in part three. And then part four [1989] was kind of more influenced by Stan Brakhage. (I developed a bit of a friendship with him when he moved to Toronto around that time.) In the last section the camera goes underwater, and the section is edited quite fast. To shoot it Garrick Filewod helped with the underwater cinematography.

On the way up to the river shoot, for the 4th section, I had received a call from my mother, who lived near the river at the family cottage. My mother told me that my uncle had killed himself with a gun by a river, in my home town, the day before. I didn't say anything to the people who I was working with. There was a strange synchronicity, the fact that I was going under water with the camera, into the underworld, at the same time that this terrible tragedy happened. *river* was a more formal-materialist project, but aspects of the personal seeps in. The material still has an energy to it that connects things. So I just used that part as an ending. I edited the section with fast edits, and the film goes into the white light, 3 times near the end, a reference to

*the bardo*, as I was getting immersed in Buddhism at the time.

As I worked on *river* I showed the first two parts and I noticed people laughed at the boat, you know, when it kept hitting those logs in the second part. I didn't realize until then. I see why it's funny now. I learn as I show. I just don't make a final piece. I showed the first two parts in Hamilton Artist Inc., at Zone Cinema, and found out some things about *river*. The different processes used through film and video, and interaction of different formal applications to the same river, sequentially extends the life of the river.

**It's never the same river.**

You never step into the same river twice, or 4 times!

**The underwater footage is very high contrast and saturated. It almost looks like color. What kind of stock did you use?**

The same one we are using in the workshop [at the (S8) Mostra], basically. Kodak 3378. But I think it had some issues, it was old stock or something, or in the processing there were lots of aberrations on it, and that sort of came through. The lab said it had pressure fog. It was black and white and processed as reversal. That was before I got into hand processing, though my teacher at Sheridan College, Jeffrey Paull, did teach us that already in the late 70's. Other Sheridan filmmakers like Carl Brown and Gary Popovich were working with hand processing already in the 80's. It wasn't until the 90's that I used hand processing for the Film Farm, which originating Film Farm member Rob Butterworth implemented after attending a workshop at STUC in Belgium, with Jürgen Reble and Karel Doing, among others.

## **NAHNEEBAHWEEQUA AND THE FIRST NATIONS**

**In *Kitchener-Berlin* you talk about colonization and the First Nations. There is a scene of a film crew shooting a native village. What is that?**

I got the footage from a student who was on a film shoot, and he was filming the IMAX because he said it was so “cool”. He was filming on video and I asked him if I could have it, and it’s this really terrible depiction of the First Nations putting the paint on their face and so.

**The Prelude to Part 2 in *Kitchener-Berlin* is very funny. Where did you find that film, “The Highway of Tomorrow”? Did you edit anything out?**

Yes, I only edited it a bit tighter. It is pretty well the original film. This is the scene from a film made by Dent Harrison from England, who apparently came to Canada penniless in the early 20th century and invented a mechanism to rotate food in an oven, made enough money, I guess, to have a movie camera and hobby. The film to me is the first Canadian surrealist film, though it’s not known as such in the history books. It’s just a found piece of film. A home movie. How I got it goes back to *?O,ZOO!* Well, when I screened *?O,ZOO!* at the Grierson Film Seminar in 1984 the curating of the program was totally taken in by the images of animals in a zoo that I purport to have been shot by my grandfather in the early 20’s. Actually I shot the footage with hi-con film, to make it look like the 20’s. Others believed the story as well and I didn’t give it away during the Q&A. After the screening an archivist named Pierre “Trap” Stevens from the National Archive in Ottawa came up to me very excited and wanted to know where I got the footage. He said there are no shots of animals in close-ups in existence in Canadian zoos, from that time period, and he wanted to acquire it. Well, I took the white lie far enough so I told him I shot it. He was impressed and we had a good talk.

Later in the late 80’s he gave me a call and said he found this interesting footage from Dent Harrison, that I should take a look at. Well, it fit right into the section of *Kitchener-Berlin*, where it kind of goes into a meditative trance in Part 2, so what surfaces is this little known surrealist film called “Prelude to Part 2: The Highway to Tomorrow or How One Makes Two”, about a dirigible (airship) trip from England to Canada. I saw it as technology coming to Canada from Europe, all that it represents. There are shots of Dent Harrison himself in the

film, double exposed, and the text in the film reads about him and his double.

To me the film [*Kitchener-Berlin*] is a kind of meditation on technology and spirituality. How the floating and whirling high-tech camera – we used a steadicam on the shoot – can take us out of our normal state of consciousness, but at the same time technology, as depicted in the film, is a destroyer, as bombings from World War Two is shown at the beginning of the film. And the large camera operated by a white cameraman (the found footage of the IMAX shoot) swoops in on a fictional film that tries to depict First Nations people. I show the behind the scenes parts of a made for TV doc, in this section, that shows them putting on makeup, getting dressed for their roles as “Indian” people in a village. Some are white people, costumed as First Nations people. Adding to the slaughter!

**In *Slaughterhouse* and *All Fall Down*, where you continue exposing your family’s history, you include the story of Nahneebahweequa, as if you wanted to acknowledge that white Canadians, coming from Europe as immigrants, had ended up by taking the lands and the rights of the First Nations.**

Yes, even in *Sweep* from 1995, it was acknowledged in my work. Living near the Saugeen River pushed me into researching where that name “Saugeen” came from. It means “mouth of the river, or where the river flows out” in Ojibway. I chose for one of my first school assignments, again from Jeffrey Paull, to go and “document a place” and I went up to Saugeen First Nations, at Chipewa Hill, near Southampton. I saw these beautiful cedar chairs for sale at the side of the road and asked the vendor if I could take a picture of the chair. And he said, “No, because you might use the picture to figure out how I made the chair, and then you will make and sell chairs down the road...”, down the road meaning in white Ontario. So that was my first lesson in cultural appropriation. I understood him and put down the camera.

**How did you get to know Nahneebahweequa? Is she well-known in Canada?**

I found her story in a presentation at Grey Roots Museum in Owen Sound. Janine and I went up to Manitoulin Island, which is basically an Island-rock that the First Nations were pushed to when the government stole their land. They were kicked off the good land to where you couldn't really even grow anything, Cape Croker and above that towards Manitoulin Island. It's in the Georgian Bay region. The Farm is maybe two hours south. So we went to this island. On the way we stopped at a museum in Owen Sound where there was a history installation of Nahneebahweequa. And we found out how she fought to get her land back after she was booted off. She'd lost her land and she actually sailed to England to have a meeting with Queen Victoria, quite an amazing story that really nobody knows. Nobody knows that story! In the area they do, of course.

We are doing a workshop next week in this area for Saugeen First Nations, through the Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film and the Film Farm, and they are going to show us the dying of the baskets and we are going to shoot and tint film and exchange plant knowledge... and they are going to make films which we will screen at the "Fab Fest"! Debbie Ebanks and Adrian Kahgee from the "Fab Fest" are organizing it, and Gail Maurice and Terra Long from the Film Farm are helping with the workshop.

Anyway, the film [*All Fall Down*] wasn't meant to be like this. It was a totally different film. But then Janine's ex-partner [George Lachlan Brown], who was a British expatriate, turned up, moved to Canada from England, and wanted to reconnect with Jessie, his biological daughter. I saw that he and Nahneebahweequa had both lost things, he'd lost his daughter, my stepdaughter, and Nahnee had lost her land, and I found that those two threads would be the two threads in the film. The film would be partly about the collision of white Canada with the First Nations people.

### **Did you actually meet George Lachlan Brown, your stepdaughter's father?**

Yes. He came to Canada after Janine and I got together. And we felt it was important that he saw his daughter again, and he loved her, as



you can see in the film. He would have her for short periods, but then he just got really difficult and disruptive, and ill. I would pick him up at the bus station, when he came to see Jessie, in Mount Forest, a small town, and then he could take her in Mount Forest for the day. He wanted to live with us. He thought it would be a good idea. And then one day his car broke down and then I drove him back. So there was an interaction, and I think in the end it was OK with me that at least he was able to see Jessie during those days... But he was trying to get back to Janine as well, in some way, it was a very sad and difficult story.

### **Did he go back to Britain?**

He died in Canada. He left his last message about the “shithole of Canada”, which is connected to the colonial aspect in the film, how the First Nations are treated. It can work both ways. He died when Jessie was eleven. I’d met Janine and Jessie when Jessie was seven, so it was four years after. And then we had all these telephone recorded cassette tapes because they were in a legal battle, and he probably called 4 to 5 times per day. We moved to the farm, during that period, to get some peace. We were trying to start a new life together. Going to the farm helped to slow down the interactions, without cutting it off completely, because Jessie needed to know who her father was too. But we also had to start our new life.

### **She has complained that in *All Fall Down* everybody has a voice, except her.**

I said to her, “You are right”. She was too young to really understand what was going on at 7, and I didn’t want to pull her directly into the film in that way. That time was a kind of explosion for her, especially after he passed away. So I said to Jessie, “Let’s make another film”, but she didn’t want to. She said to me that it was my version of the story. But, you know, she used the film in her adolescence to show to her friends to talk about it, and then she had friends who also didn’t have fathers, and I think it helped her, not that that’s the only purpose of the film. But I was worried, at the time, how the film would

affect her. I feel in her twenties she blossomed. And there are other reasons, but I really do feel that the film took that pain and put it outside of her... and made it concrete, so she could reflect on it. Maybe it was a help for her in some way, I don't know for sure. If things had gone wrong for her perhaps I wouldn't be so optimistic about using film in this way. Jessie is an amazing person. She always just gets back up on the horse!

My experience is when it's all hidden, that's when you get sickness. When I finished the film I showed it in Berlin and I said, "I'd like you to see the film before", and she was by the time 17, she was not really concerned about it... at 17 she had other interests. But I said, "You have to see the film before I show it in Berlin". She decided "OK", so I phoned her from Berlin and she said, "I'll watch it at exactly the same time you screen it".

I think it's because the film is open enough that she can hear that her father loved her, but she can also see who her father was on some level. It's like this thing that comes outside of the body you can look at. What you do in dealing with personal problems is you put them outside so you can look at it.

## **VULTURE (2019)**

### **In *vulture*, is it your Film Farm you are filming there?**

Yes. But the animals belong to a neighbor, who uses my land, and then he gives me things, he helps me with the shoveling of the snow, and gives us meat from his livestock. We have an exchange.

### **Whose are the voices in *Vulture*?**

Bryn Wigley, a young boy, is talking to me. His father, Ben, did an unofficial residency at the Film Farm the year we didn't have a workshop. Ben had funding and a trip planned so I let him come and use the place. I thought it was odd and brilliant how precise this young boy spoke and like in *O,ZOO!*, I allow a young boy to be an authority in the film.

## Is the film we see hanging from the line part of the film we are watching on the screen?

Yes, it would be... The previous shots are Mennonite neighbors working the field across the road from our farm. The whole family is there “in” the earth. Kids sticking their hands into the warm spring soil. And then there are shots of the Film Farm crew preparing some potions. I shot *vulture* and processed a lot of it with the plants and flowers as they were blooming. I used many different flowers and plants to make the image. It was a kind of research, and now most of the Film Farm workshops have an “Eco-Processing” component to it. It seems to me the only place to go with celluloid, considering the times we are living. It’s easier on us and easier in terms of pollution. We can also fix the film in salt, which means the worst part of the process in terms of chemical is that we have to use some washing soda, which isn’t near as toxic as Dektol or Fixer. But I like the colors I get from different flowers and I like the various kinds of surface etchings that come, from using different plants, which can be seen in *vulture*.

*vulture* is about inter-species relationships on a family farm when animals are allowed to mingle with each other. The film is 16mm film in various forms: machine processed black and white and color to hand processed with flowers, and sometimes toned with the walnuts from our farm. The surface scratches from the flowers and plants in the processing of the celluloid, and the aberrations from the digital transfer, strobing and blurring, creates a conversation between analogue and digital processes which is one thing I am interested in right now.



**(S8)<sup>X</sup>** MOSTRA  
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2019