

Philip Hoffman's
**passing through/
torn formations**

The most important Canadian film made in 1987 will not be playing in a theatre near you, neither subject to those journalists charged with turning images into verse nor to an audience whose unflagging allegiance to American stars has so recently nurtured Mulroney's latest sellout of Canadian theatres. Instead this brilliant meditation on violence must be relegated to the backwaters of Canadian expression, unwilling to conform – to change the how of its expression to suit Telefilm's turning of Canadian light into American money.

A turn of a different sort has been negotiated by a group of filmmakers belonging to the *Escarpment School*, so named by Zone Cinema founder Mike Cartmell. Born and raised along the steep slope of the Canadian escarpment (or else subject to its looming beneficence in Ontario's Sheridan College) the filmmakers are technically adept, well-versed in experimental film (most are teachers), inclined towards autobiography and landscape, work in 16mm and have cojoined the formalist traditions of the international avant garde with the Canadian documentary tradition. As a body their works have moved from a lyrical formalism to a concern with the nature of representation and the reconstruction of the autobiographical subject. Central to the emerging mandate of Ontario's *Escarpment School* has been the work of Philip Hoffman.

Hoffman's sixth film in 10 years, *passing through/torn formations* is a generational saga laid over three picture rolls that rejoins in its symphonic montage the broken remnants of a family separated by war, disease, madness and migration. Begun in darkness with an extract from Christopher Dewdney's *Predators of the Adoration*, the poet narrates the story of 'you' – a child who explores an abandoned limestone quarry. Oblivious to the children who surround, it is the dead that fascinate, pressed together to form limestones that part slowly between prying fingers before lifting into a horizon of lost referentiality. The following scene moves silently from a window drape to enfeebled grandmother to her daughter, patiently feeding her blood in a quiet reversal of her own infancy. Over and over, the camera searches out the flowered drape, speaking both of a vegetable life cycle of death and rebirth and the literal meaning of the word 'apocalypse' which means the tearing of the veil or drape. The film's theme of reconciliation begins with death's media/tion – and moves its broken signifiers together in the film's central image, 'the corner mirror', two mirrored rectangles stacked at right angles. This



Passing through / torn formations: joining the formalist traditions of the international avant garde with the Canadian documentary tradition

looking glass offers a 'true reflection' – not the reversed image of the usual mirror but the objectified stare of the Other. When Rimbaud announces 'I am another' he does so in a gesture that unites traveller and teller – confirming his status within the story while continuing to tell it. It is the absence of this distance, this doubling that leads the Czech side of the family to fatality.

Each figure in the film has a European double, as if the entry into the New World carried with it not only the inevitable burdens of translation (from the Latin 'translation' – to bear across) but also the burden of all that could not be said or carried, to all that needed to be left behind. There are two grandmothers in the film – Babji, dying in a Canadian old-age home and Hanna whose Czech tales are translated by the filmmaker's mother. There are likewise two grandfathers, Driououx, married to the dying Babji in Canada and Jancyk, shot by his own son after refusing to cede him land rights. This son is returned to the scene of the shooting by Czech authorities and asked to recreate the event for a police film three months after the shooting. Unable to comply he breaks down instead, poised between death and its representation. The murderer's Canadian double is Wally, the homeless outcast whose wanderings are at the heart of the film. It is Wally who builds the corner mirror and whose accordion-playing marries the notes of the right hand with the chords on the left like the multiphonic layering of sounds and images that must be married by its viewers. Hoffman's imaging strategies recall the doubled tracks of American avant-gardist Owen Land. An avowed Christian, Land posits a simultaneity of expression as the precondition for conversion, parodied in Land's own *Wide Angle Saxon*. But while Land's conversions transform the institutional settings of auto

shows, instructional films and supermarkets into sites of individual revelation, Hoffman's turning is a movement away from the violence that has marked generations already passed, using the home movie to reshape the way history reproduces its truth within the family.

"The darkroom, a ceremony of mixing potions, gathering up the shimmering images, the silvery magic beneath dream's surface. In the morning Babji would tell us what our dreams meant, and then stories of the 'old country' would surface, stories I can't remember... now that she's quiet, we can't hear about where it all came from, so it's my turn to go back, knowing at the start the failure of this indulgence, but only to play out these experiments already in motion." (from *passing through/torn formations*).

This connection between things made in the dark – doesn't this aspiration lie at the heart of every motion picture? We can say this for certain: that this darkness has occupied the centre of Hoffman's film work since *Somewhere Between Jalostotillan and Encarnacion* (1984). While *Somewhere Between* moves around his real-life encounter with a boy lying dead on the Mexican roadside, the boy is nowhere to be seen – Hoffman relates his death in a series of printed intertitles that punctuate the film. Similarly, midway through ?O. Zoo! (*The Making of a Fiction Film*) (1986) an elephant's heart attack is related in voice-over while the screen remains dark and the voice explains, somewhat abashed, that showing its death could only exploit his subject. The centre of *passing through* is likewise 'missing' – while the film performs a series of balletic turns around the filmmaker's uncle, showing as many as three images simultaneously in a counterpoint usually reserved for music – he is usually present only in Hoffman's narration. Unnamed and barely photographed we learn nevertheless of the uncle's homeless vagrancy, his affinity for

pool and the accordion, his building of the corner mirror and his abandoned daughter. Hoffman searches out the reasons for his homeless wandering in the home he never had, in the place of his conception, in a Czechoslovakia ravaged by plague and occupation. That he should bear the stamp of this history, this sickness, without a glimpse of the death camps that would claim his ancestors or the soil that had nourished thousands of his forebears, recalls for us the movement of this film around a figure that is hardly seen. The filmmaker moves in his place – drawing his camera over the places 'he' could never go, looking for reasons 'he' could never guess in his restless quest for dry dock and food, for his perfect game and the delirium of the accordion.

"He stares out, Fingers pound the keyboard. Magically. Melodies repeat, Again and again. Fingers dissolve into fingers. He was past the point of practise. The music took a vacant place to return to. Over and Over. His playing gave him passage." (from *passing through/torn formations*).

Mike Hoolboom ●

PASSING THROUGH/TORN FORMATIONS
d/ed. Philip Hoffman sd. Tucker Zimmerman l.p. Leesa Karczmarczyk, Wally Karczmarczyk, Susan Karczmarczyk, Sue Hoffman, Sam Cartmell, Hanna Sikora, Andrea Sikora. Post P. Bruce Johnson. Still photo. Zviath Rozenewig p. ass. Keith Spencer, Mike Walsh, Hugh Bissett, Phil Hahn. narr. Marian McMahon, Christopher Dewdney, Philip Hoffman. Produced with assistance of Ontario Arts Council. Distributed by Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. color 16mm. running time: 45 min.

Michael O'Herlihy's
**Hoover vs.
The Kennedys**

The year 1988 marks the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Most people in North America, at least those who were over the age of 10 at the time, remember exactly what they were doing when they first learned JFK had been shot. Somehow, we had all been swept up, however slightly, into the mystique of Camelot. Perhaps all that was just a projection, a reaction to the excesses of McCarthyism and the dull conformism of the Eisenhower years. Canada may have been – and may still be – a sovereign nation but political barriers have never been able to stop the zeitgeist of the strongest nation in the world from flowing over the 49th parallel.

Over the past quarter century the lustre of Camelot has become somewhat tarnished by news of Kennedy's excessive philandering, the old man's mob connections, their breeches of civil liberties in the name of anti-communism,

the suspicious circumstances surrounding Marilyn Monroe's death and more. But the Kennedys were kings of the hill at a time, however brief, when people felt hopeful about the future. So they continue to fascinate.

Hoover vs The Kennedys: The Second Civil War, a four-hour-long mini-series broadcast on CTV last month, had therefore a built-in mass appeal. The production focussed on John and Bobby from just prior to the 1960 Democratic convention to JFK's assassination in Dallas, a little over three years later. During that short time the Kennedys not only had to govern a nation made unruly by expectations unleashed by the successes of the civil rights movement, they also had to consolidate power without ruffling too many corporate and bureaucratic feathers. One of these bureaucrats was J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, a man loyal to the ideals and the style of Kennedy's post-war predecessors.

As depicted in the series, Hoover is childish, power-hungry and bigoted. He is obsessed with signs of status. He has so long had a direct line to the presidential ear and, it would seem, the presidential psyche, that the Kennedys' insistence on Hoover's operating through proper channels (i.e., through the Attorney General) infuriates him. The result is a series of kindergartenish power-plays between him and Bobby, that neither completely wins. But Bobby is fighting for a principle, Hoover only for his own self-aggrandizement.

Hoover no doubt cloaked his pursuit of power in the mantle of patriotism, but these were raw ambitions all the same. His anger at the Kennedys' intrusions into what he considered to be his rightful domain seems to have been augmented by his frustration at being kept from elevation to a 33rd-degree Mason. According to screenwriter Lionel E. Siegel, even while Hoover adamantly battled to retain his position, he continually abused his privilege, never officially taking a vacation but spending much of his work time at the racetrack and requiring numerous G-men to work voluntary overtime landscaping his estate. He is also a bully, headily abusing his assistant and reputed lover Clive P. Tolson.

Hoover is shown to have at least emotional ties to the conservative southern political establishment, to be rabidly anti-black (Negroes' brains are 80 per cent the size of white brains, he says at one point) and virulently anti-communist. He operated most comfortably within an old boys' network. His idea of America was that of an orderly straight-laced nation ruled by an oligarchy of white men, a vision not all that different from that of the leaders of many of the countries Hoover so vigorously condemned.

Still, we never get a strong sense of what really made Hoover tick. What was the nature of his ties to the southern power-brokers? Where did his deep-seated racism, his insecurity and his



Jack Warden as J. Edgar Hoover and Nicholas Campbell as Bobby Kennedy



dangerous impulsiveness come from? We are never really sure.

As Hoover, Jack Warden has the dastardly job of humanizing this incredibly vile man. He succeeds all too well. But he is also much too fit and handsome for the bloated, bulldog-faced creature that Hoover was, at least in his later years.

Lyndon Johnson (Richard Anderson) seems to have much the same values as J. Edgar Hoover. The difference between the two men, it is suggested, is that Johnson was more controlled and patient, capable of biding his time until the moment proved more propitious. Johnson was also more attuned to public opinion. One senses that the passage of the civil rights bill the summer after Kennedy's death was motivated not by any personal commitment to liberty but by his understanding that the public wanted this bill to go through in honour of the slain president.

On the other hand, we are led to believe that John F. Kennedy (Robert Pine) did have a strong vision of renewed American life. The civil rights bill did seem to be of relatively high priority, but his agenda timetable seems moulded by the restraints of *realpolitik*. One result is an explosion of verbal outrage by some understandably angry and frustrated black activists.

Perhaps Kennedy's commitment to civil rights was formed by his knowledge of how badly the Irish were treated when they first began emigrating to the United States and his awareness that being a Catholic made his candidacy more chancy. Again, we are never

really sure where he is coming from except that his strongest belief seems to have been in the family, particularly in his father and his brother, Bobby.

Like Hoover, Kennedy seems most comfortable within an old boys' network. His advisors were mostly liberal-minded college conferees. The civil war between Hoover and the Kennedys was in one sense a battle between two conflicting notions of oligarchy. The Hoover version is restricted, mean-spirited and lawless. The Kennedy version was more expansive in spirit, had a sense that governments have some role in protecting the interests of the governed and a belief in lawful procedure, at least within the bounds of the United States. The Bay of Pigs fiasco suggests that in external affairs, commitment to above-board process was not as great. Both Kennedys, Robert and John, seem to be as anti-communist as Mr. Hoover himself.

But the series never gives us enough information to draw such conclusions. We are rapidly introduced to a number of advisors whose names are probably quickly forgotten. With a couple of exceptions the longstanding connections between these men are not made particularly clear by the program.

At one point, a technical gaffe provides some unwanted hilarity. A recording problem during the shooting of one scene made it necessary to dub some lines spoken by White House advisor Byron White (Stan Coles). Coles was unavailable at the time the producers wanted to do this, so they substituted an actor whose voice and accent in no way resemble Coles'. The dubbing is so

badly done that White comes off as a man unexpectedly possessed as by a demon.

At the start of the series Bobby Kennedy (Nicholas Campbell in a fine performance), is presented as an idealistic, fairly conservative young man who still hero-worships his father and his older brother (despite objecting to John's infidelities). Unlike John, who seems fairly set in his ways, Bobby appears capable of substantial change, the motivating force for which is not ideological but personal. A major turning point occurs after a close associate is brutally beaten during a civil rights demonstration. Instead of the traditional close-up, a bowed and grieving Bobby is seen in long shot surrounded by the empty accoutrements of power. With all his status, Bobby has been unable to protect his friend. But he has also come to the realization that civil rights is not an abstract legalistic notion; civil rights is a matter of flesh and blood.

Martin Luther King (LeLand Gantt) was also a man capable of political growth, moving from a purely civil rights orientation to an analysis which included anti-war activism. In that, he was like Bobby Kennedy. His frequent philandering showed him to be, in terms of women, like JFK, rooted firmly in mainstream sexist America. By showing King with black women only, the production panders to the presumed racial prejudice of the audience. Perhaps this was a misguided attempt to protect King's heroic status. But King was a hero because he kept working toward ever more generous ideals even while succumbing to human sexual frailties.

King's dismissal of female concerns is highlighted in a discussion he has with his wife after receiving the Nobel peace prize. Coretta pleads for a new vacuum cleaner and fridge but King is determined to donate the entire sum to the movement. Never mind that she has served the cause well, providing domestic services for him and for his followers for years.

Despite its flaws, *Hoover vs The Kennedys* is a cut above the run-of-the-mill TV drama. It provides no last word but at least it attempts complexity.

Randi Spires •

HOOVER VS. THE KENNEDYS: THE

SECOND CIVIL WAR p. Paul Saltzman exec. p. Daniel Selznick. Joel Glickman d. Michael O'Herlihy sc. Lionel E. Siegel exec. pro. Paul Quigley assoc. p. Barbara Kelly d. o.p. David Herrington 1st a.d. Brian Cook sc. sup. Penny Cook untlloc. man. Debra Beers p. des. David Jaquest art d. Ian Brock cost. des. Patti Unger makeup Irene Kent hair Bryan Charboneau sd. mix Doug Ganton ed. Ralph Brunjes cast. Karen Hazzard untl pub. Laura Goldstein l.p. Jack Warden. Nicholas Campbell, Robert Pine, Barry Morse, Richard Anderson, Leland Gantt, Marc Stange, Tom Butler, Errol Sive, Elliott McIvor, Paul Taylor, Paul Soles, Michael Hogan, August Schellenberg, Djanet Sears, Jennifer Dale, Linda Goranson, Heather Thomas, Stan Coles, Dick Grant, Charles Gray, Helen Hughes, Lloyd White, Robert O'Ree, Damon Redfern, Broni Farrell, Enid Rose, Phil Aiken, Carlton Watson, Peter Williams. A Sunrise Films Production in association with Selznick/Glickman Productions.