

**THE CINEMA LOUNGE:  
PHILIP HOFFMAN On THE FILMS OF RICK HANCOX**

*A curatorial essay by Philip Hoffman to accompany a Cinema Lounge screening of the films of Rick Hancox on Nov. 6 / 2010*

***Some notes on beginnings, first person cinema, and Rick's contagious passion for living through film....Phil Hoffman***

In the Mid 70s I left my hometown Waterloo, and followed my friend Richard Kerr down the 401-highway east to the Media Arts Department at Sheridan College in Oakville. I left, I suppose, what would have been a doomed career in business, at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. The Hoffman's all went into business, so this was a steep leap up to a relatively new idea, a school for filmmaking. Richard had been dating my older sister and we became friends in Kitchener-Waterloo through the basement darkroom and the backyard hockey rink.

Sheridan sits at the foot of the Niagara Escarpment; you used to be able to see it from the classroom window, along with the curious deer that peered back at us, as they grazed in a time just before the townhouses filled up the fields. At Sheridan, there was Dean Peter Mallet, ex-beatnik, if Canada ever had beatniks - he gave me Kerouac's first book and a fossil. Mallet had hand-picked a stable of young film and media teachers - my deepest learning came through Jeffrey Paull, Joan and Jim Cox, Harvey Honsberger and of course Hancox. The Media Arts Department, in the 70s was to be an experiment in media education, practice and theory, the first department in Canada that used Media Arts rather than Film Studies as its masthead and, took apart the varying aspects of the media as per McLuhan's practice - his brother Maurice taught there, and Marshall himself visited as guest in the 70's, documented by Kerr - see his reconstruction of that visit in his film 'McLuhan'.

Rick Hancox's classes were very serious, and substantially rigorous which perfectly balanced the buffoonery of after hours outings, like delirious trips to the Ann Arbor Film Festival when smoke still filled the screening rooms, and where we were introduced first hand to beautiful films by the likes of James Benning and Richard Meyers, as well, department hockey tournaments and weekend shoots which slowly dissolved into media bashes, complete with ever-changing slideshows and films as backdrop. Within 3 or 4 years I made many lifelong friends, and was inspired by independent artists like Janis Cole, Holly Dale, Alan Zweig, Richard Kerr, Mike Hoolboom, Carl Brown, Gary Popovich, Steve Sanguedolce and later non-Sheridan types like Marian McMahon, Lorne Marin and Mike Cartmell. It was Cartmell, who coined the

name, 'escarpment school' described by Mike Hoolboom in Cinema Canada in a 1988 article, as a group that 'have cojoined the formalist traditions of the international avant garde with the Canadian documentary tradition. As a body their works move from a lyrical formalism to a concern with the nature of representation and the reconstruction of the autobiographical subject.'

This was the one school, that didn't cater to the mainstream, the Hollywood dream. Rick Hancox and Jeffrey Paull set the tone, and got us to look deeper, mostly deeper inside.

In the mid to late 70s, in class, Rick Hancox screened his autobiographical project. His films fuelled me like a house on fire! Suddenly, all that I was doing somewhat secretly with poetry, photography and music could be brought to film. I will never forget Hancox's dictum to young filmmakers, which was passed on to him by his film teacher George Semsel, -that in order to make a film about the world you must first, in some way, use film to look at your 'self', at your family, friends, lovers, inside and out....

Walking into Hancox's Basic 16mm Production course was walking into a course that demanded a mastering of both technical skills and aesthetic sensibility. The teaching of tech was not separated from the idea, or aesthetic issue, as is so often done in film schools where technical experts teach the tech, using usually a macho disposition, and the ideas are separated from the technology. And the teaching of tech was not necessarily dry, for example I learned about sync sound recording through Rick's hilarious 'Wild Sync', in which a lesson in sync sound recording is delivered, surprisingly, using a camera that was never made for sync sound shooting: the wind-up Bolex. Hancox deconstructs the technique and at the same time critiques the studio system, and the big feature films, where the industrial hierarchical formula is applied to filmmaking. In the film, Hancox, through a deadpan delivery that would make Buster Keaton smile, states that through this method of 'Wild Sync' you can be your own cameraman, sound recordist and sound boom man.

It was in the Basic 16mm course that I made my first film, 'On the Pond', my debut into autobiography. Making a personal film was safe in Rick's class, actually, it seemed the norm within that class, and Rick had a basket full of inspiring short personal films himself for us to see.

But of course in 1978, personal film was anything but the norm. Festivals were looking for films that mirrored the mainstream feature film world; film schools were pumping out students crew-ripe for the new growth of US shoots in major Canadian cities - Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. On the left, Marxist film theory suggested that one must put the world of the 'other' onto the screen, no doubt an important way to represent the whole of the world and its interconnections, but I had trouble pointing the camera

at someone I didn't know well. Bringing yourself, into the film's content, clearly reflected the way meaning is shaped by filmmakers. This was just before the feminist critique that the personal was political, or probably this was in the air at that time, but it seemed no one in the film 'world' was listening.

'House Movie' is an elegant personal film in which Hancox's meandering, melancholic camera gently witnesses the break-up with his partner Barbara. The film sidesteps the usual pitfalls of personal film through a conceptual stance. The day-to-day activities in the house seem to be from the perspective of the house itself, and so an 'objective' distancing permeates the piece. When I saw the film in 1977 it suggested to me that film could be music, in the way that music suggests mood over narrative, rhythm over plotline. But the story of a life is underneath it all, in 'House Movie'. Through a chorus of breakups and reconciliations, and movements through several homes, the couple succumbs to the darkening hallway of their relationship. In this film, as in life, change come about slowly and repetitively.

I remember an interview with Rick Hancox that was published in the local newspaper around my time in Media Arts. In it he suggested that if the Romans made film, we would be more interested in their home movies, than in their feature films. Like Robert Frank, who mastered the personal snapshot - 'every time I take a picture of someone or something it is an instantaneous reflection of myself', R.F. - Hancox saw the psychological and social value naively embedded in the home movie - and he used this form triumphantly in 'Wild Sync'...but the fact that 8mm and later super 8mm home movies were largely without sound, allowed for a visual interpretation of the subject. The arrival of home video in the 1980's and 90's, repositioned the family archive towards a language-based form. Like the arrival of the talkies, sound and words became chained to the image, and with that the process of filming home movies became less concentrated on visual representation.

In 'Home for Christmas', another Hancox film that pays homage to the home movie, Hancox further develops his technique of 'wild sync', and the possibilities offered when sound and picture are free to move on their own, in a collage guided form. Through this process of filmmaking, there is a juxtaposition of reality-based material - the sync-sound bits - and a more interpretive delivery, through collage of music, conversations and images collected.

In seeing the new digitally mastered version of 'Home for Christmas', I was struck by the way the 'public' images on the train; looking out the window at landscapes and rural towns and people slogging their way to work, evoked precisely a sense of place and time -Canada in the 1970's. And concurrently, this cinematographic record of the time runs parallel with a personal tale: the story of Rick's melancholic home-coming to the east coast of Canada, at Christmas. It is this blend of the 'real', the inherent nature of the photographic image, with and through a deeply personal vision, which makes Rick's films powerful

and innovative. In the 1970's, Rick Hancox's films, his teaching and his passion for independent filmmaking influenced a generation of film artists and contributed to the development of a form, uniquely Canadian.

*Philip Hoffman - November 2010*

### **About Philip Hoffman**

Perhaps one of Canada's finest experimental filmmakers, Philip Hoffman has also had a huge impact on filmmakers across the country from the "Film Farm" filmmaker retreat in Ontario. Films made with the support of the Film Farm have received several awards, and retrospectives of this have been screened in Canada and the US. Hoffman is currently a faculty member in the Film and Video Department at York University. His noted work includes *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion, ? O, Zoo!, (The Making of a Fiction Film), Kitchener-Berlin, what these ashes wanted* and the recently released *All Fall Down*.

### **About Rick Hancox:**

Rick Hancox - filmmaker, professor and musician - grew up in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island. All three locations infused his poetic and finely crafted experimental documentaries which fuse personal landscapes with issues of time, memory and history. He was introduced to film at the University of Prince Edward Island by American documentary filmmaker George Semsel. He went on to do graduate work in film and photography at New York University and Ohio University where he earned an MFA in Film in 1973. After working briefly in film in New York City he went on to teach at Sheridan College from 1973-1985 where he influenced a generation of Canadian independent filmmakers. Hancox often blends the poetic with the cinematic as in the trilogy of "poetry films" *Waterworx (1982), Landfall (1983)* and *Beach Events (1985)*. He is also known for autobiographical documentaries best illustrated by *Home for Christmas (1978)*. *Moose Jaw (1992)*, which was recognized in *Take One* magazine as one of the ten best films ever made in Canada, marks a new direction for Hancox. Like all his best work, *Moose Jaw* charges the term "landscape" with extra meaning. His work demonstrates, through the cinematic image, how personal memory is mediated by social and historical contexts. In 1986 he joined the communications department at Concordia University where he currently teaches.