

PHIL SOLOMON

1954 – 2019

Phil Solomon and I crossed fateful paths in 1988, at a screening featuring works by him and Peter Herwitz at Henry Hill’s Segue Foundation in New York’s East Village. Phil was new to me and his films took my breath away, culminating in *The Secret Garden* (1988), a 16mm masterpiece hot off the press. It relied on an intricate sensitivity to rhythm, texture, color, light and shadow to interweave strands of found footage Phil had prismatically transformed using an optical printer. The small audience was transfixed by the wondrous narrative brewing in the carefully constellated inner life of the film – a story of paradise at once lost and found, a growingly palpable emotional secret. We were invited to collaborate in the making and unmaking of its feeling sense and the delicate constellation of its atmospheres. To me it hearkened to Dorothea Lange’s “Beauty appears when one feels deeply, and art is a by-product of an act of total attention.” I would later wonder if this ethic was at the heart of Phil’s cinematic practice. It might partly explain why he did not stay in safe zones of successful formulas, often going out on an aesthetic limb leading to anguished self-questioning, a dead end, or groundbreaking discovery.

*The Secret Garden* mesmerized us that night and fulfilled its cinematic promise, or as Phil would say, “I had the room.” But before the audience snapped out of its *Secret Garden* reverie, Phil switched gears, sharing his *Rocketboy vs. Brakhage*, a punky found-footage parody about a rising generation of experimental filmmakers personified by imagery from home movies of Phil as a kid, seen shooting his ray gun and battling big avant-garde daddies of the day including teachers Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka. *Rocketboy vs. Brakhage*, which was never officially released, outed Phil’s playful, gregarious and shamelessly punning proclivities. This aspect was the flipside to his hypersensitive nature and love of immersive solitude, going back to when he was a kid hiding out in his room hours on end listening to music while sister

and friends played outside. The audience tumbled out into the night in high spirits, and toasted the filmmakers at the Circle Bar around the corner. Over the course of that evening Phil and I deeply bonded and soon became closest friends. A few years later I invited Phil to teach an optical printing workshop at Film/Video Arts, to learn the tool that became key to finding my filmic tongue. During a break, Phil surveyed the F/VA bulletin board where he discovered a job listing for a professorship at Boulder’s Colorado University. He wanted to further expand his teaching horizons – especially restless after having been a multi-plex projectionist in Boston for seeming ever. He had figured it was time to go after 7-hour sessions reading Joyce and Pynchon gave way to inhaling one Stephen King novel after the other.

Leave it to Phil to stipulate exact instructions in his will regarding a memorial screening at Colorado University for grieving students, colleagues, friends and family. Little did I know when I visited him the prior Spring that we had organized prints in his home projection booth for this very occasion. I was thankful on flying in from Vienna and landing in a pool of tears at the Denver airport – now as heir to Phil’s artistic and intellectual estate and director of the newly forming Phil Solomon Project – that I could allay alarmed emails questioning the whereabouts and condition of prints pressingly needed for the solemn occasion. When the time came, the playlist Phil had so carefully considered in various permutations had been edited onto a reel and we were ready to go:

- Remains To Be Seen* (1989/1994)
- The Exquisite Hour* (1989/1994)
- The Snowman* (1995)
- Twilight Psalm I: The Lateness of the Hour* (1999)
- Twilight Psalm II: Walking Distance* (1999)



Photo: © Eve Heller, 2003.

Phil would have winced when his favorite projector malfunctioned during the pre-screening tech check and had to be substituted by a dimmer model. But the darker cast was eerily relevant as one film seamlessly flowed into another – no house lights or guest speakers interrupted their procession. And as Phil categorically refrained from the use of spell-breaking titles and end credits, no text distracted from the wordless clarity of their cumulative communication. Discreet figures that originally bordered on abstraction as they dissolved into pools of living color appeared to traverse near monochromatically ambiguous, seething shadow worlds, walking from one film into the next. The uncharacteristically loud volume of the sound heightened the altered state of the films, electrifying the cracking textures and

kinetic emulsion of home movies into telegraphically charged visions of the past. Phil would have brought the sound down a few notches to transmit the subtle nuances of his painstakingly composed soundtracks in mindful interplay with the imagery. But the integrity of his aural architecture held at this overpowering level, blazing new through-lines of harrowing struggle, a charged presence looking back through veils of remembered lifetimes, a hard-won, tender “yes” to shimmering ephemeral existence. The intensity and articulate poetic pitch of the unified spectacle seemed to galvanize the audience into one living breathing being in sync with what Phil’s art was expressing. Once again, he had the room.

EVE HELLER