

Hollis Frampton "Zorns Lemma"
By Mark Segal
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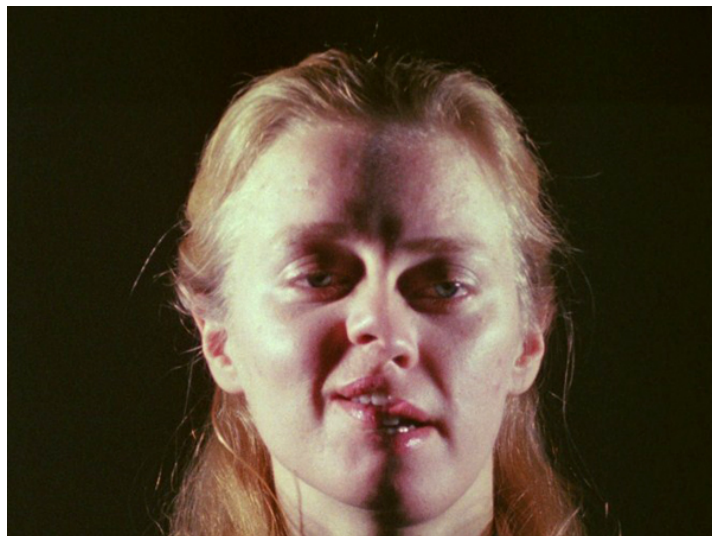
Robert Morris' article in the April 1970 ARTFORUM provides an illuminating context for a consideration of the work of Hollis Frampton. While discussion changes in thinking about the art making process and its relationship to the finished art product, Morris notes that a number of contemporary artists have eliminated decisions based on "quality" and "taste" from the making of their art. By this he means they have substituted new methods of working for series of personal, intuitive, arbitrary decisions based upon what is "felt" to be a "good" or "right" way of arranging parts of the whole. He posits two approaches in this direction. The "materials/process approach" involves receptivity to actual materials once not thought to be the stuff of art, a respect for the properties of these materials and for their behavior under natural laws, and the removal of many arbitrary limits on the physical activity involved in making art. The other approach involves the use of "a priori" systems to determine the structure of the work. In the latter case, structure and process may be fixed before one begins to work with his materials, thus clearly differentiating this from the materials/process approach, where artist-material interaction provides the structure.

In film, what has come under attack is the concept that a film is built up by balancing shot against shot, scene against scene, with different parts carrying different relative weights, and with decisions about where to cut and what to juxtapose being made on an intuitive, arbitrary basis. Hollis Frampton has rejected this method of making a film by formulating "a priori" systems which, once devised, determine the structure of the work automatically. This notion of automation, which Morris talks about, violates the conception of the "artist's hand" as the final shaping factor in the art process. Of course, the artist cannot stop making decisions on some level. But by removing his decisions from the actual making process, by confining them to an "a priori" status, Frampton provides his films with a solid internal logic and a structural necessity which few contemporary films share. (Here, decisions about structure are to be distinguished from the choices of visual material, i.e. the images used, the latter remaining, in a sense, arbitrary. However, Frampton's work seems more fundamentally concerned with the process of revealing its structure than its imagery. Besides, as will be discussed later, even Frampton's images are given a necessity by his structuring.)

Hollis Frampton has made fifteen films in the last five years. Before 1966, his primary interest was still photography (although Zorns Lemma, completed in March 1970, was begun in early 1963). It is Zorns Lemma, at 60 minutes by far Frampton's longest film, with which I am mainly concerned here.

While the structure of Zorns Lemma is so sensible and clear as it reveals itself, it is difficult to explain concisely. There are three basic sections. The first, only a few minutes long, consists of a dark screen accompanied by a reading from The Bay State Primer, published in Boston around 1800. There are twenty-four sentences, each of which stresses a word which begins with successive letters of the alphabet (e.g. "In Adam's fall, we sinned all. They life to mend, God's Book attend. The Cat doth play, and after slay."). After the last sentence there is a pause, followed by the twenty four letters of the Roman alphabet (J and U are missing), each of which remains on the screen for one second. This marks the beginning of the second section, which takes up the next forty-five minutes of the film. While the isolated letters are run through just once, they establish the basic structural pattern of the middle section—each shot is composed of twenty-four frames and each group of twenty-four shots forms a set. The sets, of which there are 109, are separated by a second of darkness. Each shot in the first set after the single letters have been run through is an image in which one sees a word, sometimes on a sign, sometimes on a label, occasionally superimposed. The word in the first shot begins with "A", the word in the second with "I", and so on through the twenty-four letters of the Roman alphabet. The second set follows the same pattern as the first but with different images and different words. It should be made clear that the words are usually contained in the image, not added on. The same pattern continues until, at a point fairly early in the section, one of the alphabetical "slots" is filled by an image without a word. One may not notice this when it first occurs, but because this wordless "replacement" shot is then maintained throughout the section, one does notice the replacement after a few repetitions. For example, at one point the slot for words beginning with "X" is filled with the image of a raging fire. After a few succeeding sets, one realizes that the fire has appeared before, in the same slot, and the at the "X" words have been replaced. This process of substitution continues throughout the forty-five minutes until all the letters are replaced and twenty-four recurring wordless images remain.

The final section of the film is 12 1/2 minutes long and, in contrast to the middle section, consists of one, continuous shot. As a man, woman, and dog walk slowly down a snow-covered hill toward the woods in the background, several voices read, in a one-second cadence, a "translated, mistranslated, bowdlerized" (according to Frampton) version of On Light or the Ingression of Forms, an 11th century text by Robert Grosseteste, the Bishop of Lincoln, dealing with the nature and organization of matter in the universe. The figures disappear into the woods as the text of 642 words concludes. The image is held briefly, then dissolves slowly into a white screen.



The first section of the film primarily prepares one for the alphabetical progression to be found in the long middle section while, at the same, according to Frampton, "emptying the eye." It is in the middle section that Frampton introduces the one-second shot—the all-important module or, as he calls it, "pulse." While the individual frame is the basic unit of the film, the one-second shot is the most basic structural unit which one can perceive. The use of a pulse or module (something he has employed before, in Palindrome) eliminates the whole compositional procedure of balancing differently weighted parts since it gives each part equal weight. Loop printing can offer a similar solution, as in Joyce Wieland's 1933 and Sailboat, but in those cases it is the repeating image, not its duration, which is the primary perceptual module.

I have been using the words pulse and module interchangeably, but there really is a distinction. While a module can refer to any basic unit of structure with permutations of which a work is structured, the word

pulse implies a rapidly occurring constant unit of measure—like a beat in music. Indeed, Frampton's pulse functions, as he has said, as a kind of sound track. The visual impact of a cut every second becomes transmuted into an aural effect. There is no actual sound track during the entire middle section—the pulse is enough. This is an extremely important area of his work. He has said that he doesn't feel very many filmmakers use sound effectively. One might add that most which don't use sound rely exclusively on the visual content. But Frampton quite consciously evokes other than purely visual responses to his pictures, and does so by his structure. It is not at all the same as if, in watching silent footage of artillery being fired, one can hear the guns. Here the picture suggests the sound and this is fairly easy to do. But for the structure to do this is something else. It seems somewhat similar to the way in which certain minimal sculpture was involved with kinesthetic responses, e.g. seeing a static object can also involve the perception of its weight. What Frampton is doing is not audience manipulation, something he has said he eschews. It is, rather, an expansion of the field of perceptual possibilities available to the viewer.

Frampton has said he is "interested in making a film that reveals its form and method at the same rate as the film artifact is expended." This is precisely what happens in Zorns Lemma. There is no one point at which one suddenly realizes what is happening; there is no climax. It is only when the film is over that the entire structure is clear. Along the way, one is constantly adjusting one's ideas about what is going on, as new elements are introduced. The viewer is actively involved in understanding the method of the film throughout his experience of it. Just as one thinks the alphabet sets will go on uninterrupted, one perceives the first substitution. After a few substitutions, one becomes involved in looking for others. Then, as more letters are replaced, one's attention shifts to the activities which make up the replacement images. These replacement images are basically of two types—a continuous, non-climatic activity such as meat being ground and activities which can be completed, like the peeling of a tangerine. Each of these is in turn divided into rhythmic and non-rhythmic, e.g. turning the pages of a book vs. changing a tire or dribbling a basketball vs. a raging fire. The activities are continuous from set to set. Thus, as the middle section nears its conclusion, the climactic activities complete themselves—the man changing a tire completes his work, another man finishes painting the room he has been working on, someone walking along the street turns a corner out of sight, etc. The completion of the substitution process, of the activities being shown, and of the middle section itself coincide. The entire section has been an ongoing process leading to this completion, and it is this process in which the viewer is directly involved.

As far as the images themselves are concerned, the structure virtually demands that Frampton focus on the world's variety and multiplicity. The need for hundreds of shots produces all kinds of images, camera angles and movements, and focal lengths. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, the hundreds of arbitrarily chosen images are given a necessity, a logic, by the structure. Consider the final twenty-four wordless images. If the film had consisted solely of this repeating set of activities, despite their visual strength one would have been aware of their arbitrariness. Giving each image a job to do, a slot to fill, provides them with a "genealogy," a reason for being where they are. Because they are "born" out of the structure or system set up by the filmmaker, they became intimately related to each other and to the film as a whole.

Frampton has said that the purpose of the long, static shot of the final section is to "bleed off" the tension built up while watching forty-five minutes of one-second cuts. It lets one ease one's way out of a very demanding visual situation. By fixing the camera and making the shot continuous, he still avoids arbitrary procedural decisions. And because the cadence of the sound track consists of a word a second, the pulse is maintained until the end.



Despite the discrediting of "meanings" and "messages" by much contemporary art, so much of what one sees in films still tries to be meaningful in the sense of posing moral/metaphysical problems or of implying solutions to such problems. Frampton's work assiduously avoids this. The images are what they are—they are not metaphors, they do not connect with their alphabetical slot on any metaphysical level, and they are all the stronger because of that. Thus, not only is the personal and arbitrary removed from the making process by use of a system of structuring, but metaphysical statements are avoided as well. At the same time, Frampton is exploring some of the many new possibilities inherent in the film-perceiving situation.

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