CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

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Hollis Frampton at Chatham College

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Hollis Frampton: Speak. Sodium Pentothal. You got me. I am supine! I am utterly yours. I am open to questions. I don't have a prepared rap on this at all.

Speaker: What were you trying to achieve in the last film?

Hollis Frampton: What was I trying to achieve in the last film.

Speaker: My impression was, like, seeing things through the eye of the camera, but twice … through two lenses.

Hollis Frampton: Are you aware of what you were looking through, besides the camera?

Speaker: I thought it was a hand.

Hollis Frampton: It was. First my right hand. Then after the long passage with the hexagon there was a brief switch with the lens open, and then it was my left hand. As you could easily tell if you were extremely observant, because at that time I was still married and there was a ring on the third finger of my left hand. What was I trying to achieve? Yes, well … I never wind up with any one single concern when I'm making a film. In a manner of speaking, I think you've got the gist of it.

We have [00:02:00] this idea that I think comes to us from Renaissance painting or something, when we look at an image we are looking through a window. There is a convention in Renaissance painting that says that you are looking through a window. Which, without very much question was accepted for a long time. It still finds itself accepted in a remote manner of speaking, even in abstract expressionist painting.

I think we assume just from looking at pictures that the same thing is going on when we look at the film frame. But there's a kind of paradox in the situation. In the painting, all we have to … There's something outside the frame, you see. If you look beyond the edge of the painting you see the wall, ordinarily. Or you see something. If you, under ideal conditions, look at the film frame, if you look beyond the edge, you don't see anything at all. It is as if the world stopped.

There's absolutely no reason to infer from a cinema image that there's anything existing in the universe outside of that little rectangle. Just as if, when you went to a strange city … as if you were a stranger to New York and you went to… try to think of a really bizarre intersection of Manhattan… 38th Street and 9th Avenue, let's say. That's not very bizarre, but it will do. If you don't know the neighborhood, it seems to me perfectly possible, [00:04:00] if you were an open-minded sort of person, that you could expect to turn the corner and find yourself in the Mojave Desert.

There's no reason … There are whole bunches of assumptions that you make when you think you're going to turn the corner and find more buildings, or in this case Greek grocery stores, or what have you. So that I think with film, the convention of the frame breaks down very much. It really is not a peephole. So that I thought, then, that I would think about making it into a peephole again, but making something more flexible … making, in fact, a frame that really could change its shape, was not this rigid, rectangular sample.

And then, having thought about that, other things started to overtake me. I wanted to make something that was in the nature of a walk, something that would make perhaps no assumptions about what was coming next. There is no cinema camera rig that is light enough to contain 32 minutes of film and still be walked with and handled with one hand. The smallest thing I know of is an Arriflex with a 1200-foot coaxial magazine, which weighs well upwards of 30 pounds. It's very, very difficult to handle a thing like that entirely with one hand, and fiddle around with the other hand in front of it.

On the other hand, of course, a Sony AV3400 shoulder pack deck is very easy to handle. The batteries and deck weigh 15 pounds, and the camera weighs 2 or something like that – it's not the least bit tiring. [00:06:00] So I thought I would do it with video; that is to say, that I would do something that was necessary to video, rather than merely convenient. I went out and rehearsed a little walk; I went around several times. I wanted to close the circuit, and I came within about 10 feet, actually, of making a complete great circle, as the tape ran.

And as I went around I was noticing that as I made a circle under the sun, the angle changed. So that if I was looking through my hand, for a while you could see it was my hand, and then if I went in the right way, it would shadow my hand. So the film, in the course of a single passage, of a single uninterrupted shot, could go from looking through a hole – a plastic or photographic kind of thing – to looking at the shape of the hole, as the hand itself, as the kind of modulating thing, disappeared into the dark, or became totally unrecognizable, a kind of graphic concern.

And then some other things happened. I, in fact, made a very clean tape. The piece was shot at Binghamton – the original – in February. I looked at it several times; as a matter of fact it's been pirated onto both ½-inch and 1-inch video, and pieces of it, I understand, are floating around in various places. But I decided that I wanted to make some changes.

So last May I was in Ohio at Antioch College and I made a duplicate of the tape in the video lab there, and changed the contrast, deliberately introduced the [00:08:00] overmodulation, the hash, the video noise, as it were. I sort of goofed the image up a little bit, for two reasons: first of all to underscore, to work against the idea that you're looking at something. You're looking at a film. I try to make little reminders of the fact that you're looking at a film all

the time, and not at Aunt Tilly's birthday party or something like that. And changed the scan, deliberately warped the scan, so that sometimes, if you were sitting within a mile or two of the front and could see the image closely, you would notice that the raster did not pass in straight lines across the screen. It did that kind of swirling thing where the interlace of the two paths of the image failed.

Which I think functions in somewhat the way that a drone functions. I've been thinking about the kind of toil work that the TV raster does, the rows of lines, 540 or however many there are. And I think of them now as a kind of pictorial drone of the kind that's found either in very old or very new music. A constant signal against which the distance of everything else is measured. This may represent an effort on my part to get interested in video images. Ordinarily, they leave me cold. How's that for an answer?

[00:10:00] I can probably supply a little information. The laughing palindrome, which is the split epigraph of the film *Palindrome*, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* means: At night we go down into a gyre, a whirlpool, where we are consumed by fire. It's a very romantic palindrome. It's from the dark side of the mind, more or less, the same place the images appear to have come from. They didn't come from there but … There are very few palindromes in existence, with one freakish exception … I know of only … I don't know. I think there are only…

Speaker: The Fasting one?

Hollis Frampton: Huh?

Speaker: Do you know the fasting one?

Hollis Frampton: In Latin, you mean?

Speaker: No.

Hollis Frampton: In English? English has suddenly become a different story. There are two or three Latin palindromes – sentences, whole sentences. That is one. There is one that's a long sentence that makes a palindrome on Roma and amor, a patriotic palindrome, as it were. There is one in Greek, which I cannot quote, but it's inscribed around the baptismal font in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which reads in either direction, "Wash your sins not just your face."

There are several famous, if somewhat silly, ones in English. The palindrome which is supposed to represent the first words Adam said to Eve: "Madam, I'm Adam." How she got to be a madam before that introduction is not revealed. Napoleon's palindrome, "Able was I ere I saw Elba."

[00:12:00] But then there's a man in Philadelphia, I understand, who is a palindrome prodigy and has made some 26 thousand of them. He's like the person who is otherwise an imbecile, who can't button his shirt or anything, but if you say to him, "What day of the week was July 19, 1741?" he'll say, "That was a Thursday." You can say, "How many Friday the 13ths were there in the 12th century?" and he'll say "192," without thinking about it at all. This person apparently is this kind of idiot savant and has palindromes – not short ones, mind you, but palindromes of 15 words – while he's at a stoplight, and writes them down, and goes on.

Palindromes, of course, obey rather exact mathematical rules, and it's obvious that this man, whose name I forget, just has had his circuits jazzed in a way that they don't usually get jazzed, and just does this automatically, as some people blink or what have you. That's freakish. That's totally ancillary, marginal information. It doesn't have very much to do with the film, but it's a story I like a lot.

The other item concerns the title *Prince Rupert's Drops*. They are not a confection, neither are they a nose remedy. There used to be – this is from the archaic days when physics teachers did little demonstrations in class instead of showing you movies from the Encyclopedia Britannica Company – a demonstration of extreme internal stresses in equilibrium. They were little tear-drop shaped pieces of glass which had been shop-cooled and were just fine as long as you didn't disturb them, [00:14:00] but if you took a tweezers and broke a little end off the teardrop, the whole thing simply disappeared. It didn't just shatter, the stresses contained were so violent they just turned into powder and vanished.

I felt that that was a kind of thing that would be nice to be able to say about an image: that an image itself was completely contained, had very much in it, and was tightly bound, and if you took away anything from any image, it would kind of vanish. I spoke about this to the filmmaker ... the film baker, yes! Ken Jacobs: the film baker. He puts one pie in the oven every five years or so. Let's it bake slowly, but I guess he bakes them. And he said that he had always preferred the analogy of a soap bubble, which left me feeling sort of squashed. I felt that I preferred the analogy of the soap bubble, too, but I had already had made this film and was committed, at least in part, to that view. They're sort of self-explanatory films, I think, on a certain level.

Speaker: Each of those films had a rhythm associated with it, could you explain ... ?

Speaker: Especially the first one.

Hollis Frampton: Yeah, another thing I suppose that I'm very often doing when I'm making a film is I'm not only making that film, but I'm also attempting to state or to work out [00:16:00] some formal dialog that is going to be involved in a film that I'm thinking about making later on. A film that I was thinking about making

when I made both *Palindrome* and *Prince Rupert's Drops* was the monstrosity which has devoured me, *Zorns Lemma*. *Zorns Lemma* has a center section, 45 minutes in length out of the hour, with an iterative rhythm made of 2,700 one-second cuts, all the same length. There are also rhythmic actions which are cut up by those cuts, which have rhythms which approximate one second.

I made *Palindrome* because I wanted to make a film that was the same all the way through, so to speak. It was isotropic. You could sort of slice it anywhere, like a pâté maison or something like that. The arrangement of the goodies might differ slightly inside the pâté, but each slice would pretty much reveal something of each of the goodies. So I made this film with three kinds of the one-second cuts: the one second of darkness, the short one-second hold of a single image, the one-second roll of 24 entirely different images, a one-second hold again of darkness. It's a kind of muffled drum roll, you see, as though you were going to a funeral. [00:18:00] Bum-brrrrdddum-bum, bum-brrrrdddum-bum … and then it goes on for quite some time.

I found in watching it that it was not the same all the way through. Because the thing that actually is the same all the way through generates… not a kind of straight line of perception, but a kind of curve of perception, in which at first you expect, out of your culture and out of your beliefs, that movies are going to change very shortly after beginning with something, they're going to go on to something else. You start out with that; that's a certain level, let's say, of expectation. And after a while it obviously has not changed, and you begin to suspect possibly that it's not going to. That kind of changes your level of feeling about it.

And then after another while it becomes kind of obvious, and perhaps painfully so, that it's not going to change. This is yet another thing. The curve is ascending. At that point you begin to realize that although it perhaps is not changing, nevertheless something else is going on. And you begin to think, perhaps back-think yourself about what has been going on. You try to see if there is some kind of internal organization to it after all. And that is a kind of plateau. If you stay on that plateau and can begin to construct the form of the work within its supposed sameness, then after a while you realize that eventually it's going to work itself out, that it is going to exhaust its material.

And then the curve begins to descend. Then it seems imminent that at any moment it will have exhausted it material. [00:20:00] And then at the very last second you realize that the image you're seeing upside down and backwards is the very first image you saw. At which point the film has ended. So it has this kind of bell shape, you see. It's not a straight line at all.

So as a test situation for a larger film that I was also interested in making, where it was absolutely necessary that the perceptual line is straight, this film was very instructive. It was necessary, first of all, to prepare some of the axes which would -- some of the operations, let's say -- which would maintain that

perceptual straight line. It was necessary to introduce introductory material that would prepare the constant rhythm and would prepare something, at least, about the body of material that was going to be used in that film, which in this case is a one-second cut in the 24-letter Roman alphabet, and that's all, roughly speaking.

And then also at the end I thought that having induced this state, having been responsible for -- it's an improper term, but perhaps midwifing a perceptual state of some kind -- I had also then to drain off the energy that had been built up, so to speak. Not to dump it in the street, but wash the baby off and get him in [00:22:00] a diaper, under a blanket, or something like that.

So that in *Zorn's Lemma* I also introduced, then, epilogue material which I was also able to use for my own subversive purposes. It wasn't just a piece of time, but then of course there was the possibility of putting something into that piece of time and maybe saying more, making a more complex statement than I had originally intended to make.

Prince Rupert's Drops was a film that I did not realize for a very long time was a film. I had been commissioned by a box magazine, which died as all box magazines die: very abruptly. The box becomes a kind of coffin and the organization slips quietly into it and is buried. But there were three or four issues of this thing which was called SMS. It involves a very, very obscure joke about an ant; I'm not going to go into that at all.

Anyway, they asked me to make an object for this box, and I didn't want to make a movie. It seemed silly to put in a little roll of 8mm showing me brushing my teeth or picking my nose or squirting water out of my mouth like Bruce Nauman or something like that. So I thought instead that I would make a very much more primitive cinema, a phenakistoscope, which was a round wheel. It was Plateau's ... cinema of 1832. It was a thing you spun on a spindle and peeked through little slots and there were 24 little pictures. And I then had to think about, since it's an infinite cinema, [00:24:00], an endless cinema, I had to think of endless actions that would go on. I thought about licking a lollipop for one, and I thought about bouncing a ball for another.

So the easiest way to make that was to film with a cinema camera, to make enlargements from the film frames, and to then make the wheel itself oversized as a mechanical, so the printers could blow it down. So I shot a hundred feet of film, about half of which was ball bouncing, and about half was this lady licking a lollipop in the sunshine. Both of them were done to a metronome. It's difficult to lick a lollipop once per second, you see, because it's sweet and you have to swallow occasionally, and that gets sort of spastic. And then also the metronome was a mechanical metronome, and it was old and had begun to syncopate, and I had just said, "Follow the metronome," so this person was licking the lollipop clip-clop, clip-clop, instead of bing-bong, bing-bong.

At any rate, what happens of course is that the mean interval is one second, but the event that goes on within it, the event itself, is extremely elastic. There's a kind of continuous rubato going on inside the … I'm beating Beethoven over the head with lollipops and basketballs, I see… within the measure, within the constant measure. There's great variation; there's great elasticity. Anyway, I had these two little, short ends of film. I looked at them a year later and I said to myself, "By gum, that's a movie! I do believe it's a movie."

[00:26:00] There were in fact not nine lollipop-licking takes but three. There were in fact not six basketball-bouncing takes but two. I thought that in a rational version of the history of film, in which people made the movies that historically, perhaps, should be made in a given timeline, rather than the ones that they just happened to like the idea of making, this film should have been made maybe at about the time *Chien Andalou* was in fact made. So I put it through four generations of duplication to get that harsh, grainy, kind of cruddy quality that the Dalí/Buñuel film has. And then I used the last two generations, which is why you see it flopped this way once, flopped that way once, and flopped this way again. Each of the things, each of the five takes, appears three times, for 15 takes altogether. It's not entirely obvious until you reflect that very few men can bounce a basketball equally well with their right hand and with their left hand.

The evidence is in there, you see. Film is a highly visible art. If you can't see it, you're sort of cooked. But it can take perhaps more than one time through. It's kind of a terrible thing to bombard people with film on this intentional level until you are used to it. It's like arsenic eating: there are people in the world who live by the Caspian Sea and eat arsenic every day. It makes their hair glossy and they live to be 109 and so forth. At advanced ages they eat very large quantities of arsenic, but little children are not immediately fed a pound of arsenic. [00:28:00] I suppose perceptual habits are not very well educated by cinema as we have had it from … Oh, I don't know, what is the name of that place in California, that place where they used to make movies?

Speaker: Hollywood.

Hollis Frampton: Oh, yeah. Where the millionaires used to live.

Speaker: Where the sun shines.

Hollis Frampton: No, no, those days are gone. The man who asked me about the rhythms in my films, I see, has left. So perhaps we can pass on to another question. Yes?

Speaker: I was wondering why on *Artificial Light*, if the reason that you use just those four or five people doing the same actions over and over again was to sort of get across the idea that the different things you were running across the screen were what was most important, not the actions?

Hollis Frampton: That, in general, would be my view. In fact I did not – even I'm not that much of a sadist. I did not make my five unfortunate friends go through those actions 20 times. No indeed. I filmed them once and had the lab do the film 20 times.

There is this piece of film which is an object of some kind. It really is a physical object, anyway. Suppose we said instead that it was a chair. And suppose this were my chair, and I saw this chair every day. [00:30:00] It was sitting in my house or something and I walked by it. Presumably I've seen this chair five thousand times, ten thousand times, or what have you. It's gradually getting seedier and so forth. But after looking at that chair supposedly for 20 years, I suddenly notice something or other, I wouldn't care to say what it is, about the chair that I've never seen before. Not because I'm a dolt; not because I don't look at things with reasonable deliberateness, but because my experience of the chair is already compounded with all the other experiences I'm having at the same time... The chair is this certain color, let's say, and on one day I look at this color and it looks fine to me, and on another day the lobster dinner has failed on me the night before, and after a morning of nightmares I look at that chair and say, "Holy Christ! Why didn't I do something more subdued about it? Maybe throw it away."

So that what I'm seeing ... I'll try to get an analogy. There is a thing that electronic musicians use called a ring modulator. The name is perhaps slightly misleading; it's not used in Wagnerian operas, though that's an idea. It's a black box, as all those devices are, which accepts two inputs on the audio level, and generates from them a single output, which is a sum and difference thing. [00:32:00] Both of them must contain information, or there will be no output whatsoever. So that if one stops, they both stop and the whole thing goes silent. It's not a simple mix; it's a kind of interference between the two things, a figure which is generated by their interaction which produces the output signal.

I rather suspect that our perception of anything is rather what comes out of a kind of ring modulator than a transcendentally pure perception of the object itself or the experience itself. So that this film, like many of my films, I guess, is in one way or another about the problem of knowledge, as far as I'm concerned. I made this up later; I made the film first and then waited to see what I saw, or to see what I said. Every time you see the thing, you still don't see it. And when at the very end you actually do see the prime form of the loop, the kicker at the end has changed. The little picture of the moon, the zoom of the moon. You get down to an obviously unmodified piece of camera original that's being printed. Nothing has happened to it at all. And at that moment the constructive element, the juxtaposition of the two images, fails, and you're left exactly where you were before -- somewhat in the dark about what the thing really is all about.

And it's also ... [00:34:00] I was trying out a new camera at that time and there were six of us sitting around drinking wine and talking, and I wanted to make that little piece of footage, which is just a sort of virtuoso bunch of dissolves. And then I put it in the can and I really didn't do anything about it at all for four or five years. I looked at it a couple of times, and it looked like one of those things that you see on TV where young Methodists discuss whether God is still alive. CBS is always doing those sort of endless roll-over dissolves and cutaways and two-shots and so forth. Kind of garbling it all up tremendously because they want to be arty. They would like to do something creative.

I didn't know what to do with it, but I wanted to do something with it. Eventually I thought of what I'd like to do with it. Making a film is a very slow process for me. I sit on things to see what kind of frightful mutations will hatch out of them after awhile.

Speaker: On the first piece of footage, what was your editing technique?

Hollis Frampton: The first piece of footage. What are you talking about? The first film, *Palindrome*. No, no, no, not so long. When I decided what I wanted to do... the original material from which [00:36:00] I shot it – there have been conjectures about this. It looks like stuff under the microscope or something. It is not. It is chemically mutilated, still, Ektachrome film. If you've ever seen it, it's absolutely unmistakable. You get a big nod out of it right away for those who have seen it. I worked at one time in an Ektachrome processing lab, a still processing lab in New York. Zillions of slides went through every day, and they were mostly pretty disgusting, I thought. They were very dull. But there were these pieces of film at the end and it had the processing clip on them, you see, that were being thrown away. It was really, I thought, a case of throwing the baby out and sending the bathwater off to school. Nobody wanted these things, some of which were just awesome.

So I decided that I wanted them, so I kept them, and mounted them and eventually I had something like 2,200 of them. And then there was nothing to do about them. It's essentially a kind of proto-surrealist vocabulary, sort of has overtones of Gorky and Matta and the surrealist, international style and so forth. It was a vocabulary that I found nauseating, really. It's pretty old stuff. But at the same time it was gorgeous, really gorgeous. It was sort of better than anything Gorky had ever done, except for portraits. I admire Gorky. But I sort of kept the stuff anyway. And it had that kind of nightmarish quality to it that I wanted to maybe work with.

I slowly came to realize that one reason I had disliked that imagery, not the Dalí imagery, not the sort of limp this-es and broken thats-es and so forth, [00:38:00] but the international style of nonrepresentational surrealism, was that it represented to me something spilling out of ... or a code, at least, for something that was spilling out of a part of my own cortex. That's a nice

neutral term -- my own circuitry that I didn't ordinarily traffic with or care to traffic with. So I sort of also couldn't bring myself to throw it away either. And then I thought about this film. What I did in making it was to plot it out completely. I got it down, to begin with, to 160 slides. It was set up on a one-to-one. Forty variations, only 40 variations, which consisted of a one-second hold, a one-second roll, and a one-second hold, were shot. And then – let's see – they were, obviously, printed in black and white and duped in color, and then the color was shot in such a way that the roll could be turned around on itself and its own retrograde printed against it on a second pass on the printer. So it's printed against itself in color, and it's printed against itself in black and white.

Then there's a second generation material in which the first black and white pass is printed through a magenta filter and the second black and white pass through a green filter. [00:40:00] That's in the first half of the palindrome and to distinguish the halves, that material and that material only is varied with a set that was made blue on the first pass and yellow on the second pass. Then all those overlaps were also printed as color negative and black and white negative. At that point … I had two of those things done, actually, because it had to go in twice: once forwards and upright, and once upside down and backwards. So that there were two times eight times 40 pieces of film, each of which was a complete, discrete unit. And they were on the roll in the order in which I wanted to use them. All I had to do was rotate the roll in the cutting room. So that I spliced the whole thing together in 13 hours, not so long. Not very long at all for that one. That was relatively easy to do.

I don't like to make work for myself. If you've ever made A- and B-rolls at all, you can imagine making 48 consecutive splices on A and B, just to cut in one second of film on single frames – life is too short. If I had had to do that, I would have done that. But as the very long-deceased poet Alfred Kreymborg used to say on the subject of chess, "If you see a good move, don't make it. Look for a better one." It's possible to simplify almost any problem, you see, to the point, at least, where it's physically possible.

When I made *Zorn's Lemma*, I had just plain 7,000 splices to make and there was no getting around it. That was a whole different trip, and that was 18 days for 14 hours [00:42:00] a day nonstop, splicing to a metronome that ticks once a second. You don't waste any time by rolling the splice more than 20 seconds. I can accept that kind of thing. If I'm really being crucified, okay, hammer in the nails, if it's necessary to redeem the sins of mankind. I would much rather do it by sitting down and having a nice little talk over tea or something. So I find everything very, very, very, very deliberate. Otherwise they're impossible because of this complexity. That's advice to young filmmakers, for free.

Enough things will happen anyway. What, I guess, I'm trying to do in being so deliberate is not to abolish chance; a throw of the dice will never abolish

chance. But if everything can be very defined, then I feel sometimes that I have a kind of metaphysical test of the worth of what I'm doing. And if it's working and it taps into something, then every accident that happens works in the film. If it doesn't tap in, then I'm at least home-free, having done a craftsmanly job without having blown five years' effort on it.

Peace.

[END 00:44:01]

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