

Episodes from a Lost History of Movie Serialism

Interview with Hollis Frampton

- Deke Dusinberre and Ian Christie

This interview took place on 8 September, 1976, at the London Filmmakers' Coop, Fitzroy Road, London, and was intended for a future issue of *Afterimage*. It followed Frampton's participation in the Edinburgh Film Festival's International Forum on Avant-Garde Film, where he took part in panel discussions with fellow-North Americans Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer, Joyce Wieland and Annette Michelson; and with European filmmakers including Chantal Akerman, Willem and Birgit Hein, Malcolm Le Grice and Willian Raban. Behind the Forum lay the influential re-mapping of avant-garde tradition proposed by Peter Wollen's 'Two Avant-Gardes' essay, first published in *Studio International* in November 1975, and reprinted in the Festival's 1976 magazine. There was also much talk of a new narrative tendency in avant-garde film, signalled at the festival by Le Grice's *After Manet* and *After Lumière*, Raban's *After Eight*, Rainer's *Kristina Talking Pictures* and Wieland's *The Far Shore*. Frampton already had a reputation as one of the major theorist-filmmakers of the contemporary avant-garde, although his work was comparatively little known in Britain at this time. An interview by Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury had appeared in *Afterimage* 4 (1972) and *Zorns Lemma* was available for hire from the London Filmmakers' Cooperative, while some of his essays appeared in *Artforum* during the early 1970s. The films by Frampton shown at Edinburgh were from the on-going *Magellan* cycle: *At the Gates of Death*, consisting of *The Red Gate* and *The Green Gate*, each 52 minutes long.

Deke Dusinberre: I'm particularly interested in learning what you've been up to over the last four years – particularly since the Afterimage interview of 1972 was so lucid and suggested a number of possible directions – but perhaps it might be better to start by simply asking what you're doing now.

Hollis Frampton: I'm probably becoming less lucid than I was four years ago. At that time, as I recall, I was finishing one thing and starting another. I was finishing *Hapax Legomena* (five parts of which I had with me in London); in the midst of that visit to England I went to the west and filmed Stonehenge, which was incorporated into another part of *Hapax*. The last of it was finished in the fall, I guess. At the same time, I had begun what I hoped would be a simple project, as outlined in that interview: a catalogue or compilation of films which were limited to exactly one minute – 1,440 frames. They were to be an homage not so much to the early cinema of the Lumières as to an aspect of film that I feel has been lost, to a certain degree, in the period in which we now find ourselves, and which began with the Soviet cinema of the period – roughly speaking – of montage culture (or of the edited or spliced film). What is so difficult to explain about the Lumières' films and other single-shot films made at that time – I'm thinking for instance of the very earliest things done in the U.S., starting with *Fred Ott's Sneeze*:¹ 45-frame cinema that at 40 frames-per-second lasted a little over one second – is their *luminosity*, by which I mean that they seem impervious to analysis. Films made within montage culture, on the other hand, invite and even command a type of analysis that proceeds during the extended moment of watching the films.

DD: *What's the status of that project now?*

HF: At a certain point, what has tended to happen previously happened again: I set out to make a simple inventory or catalogue of the appearances of the world, which I imagined might run to a few hundred short films, but as I actually began to gather these film segments they began to organise themselves – to my discomfiture – in a manner that I suppose is determined by my own immersion in montage: one thing suggests another, and if you have five things there seems to be some best order in which they should be seen. The bits of film, which were as opaque as an isolated word, seemed somehow to be demanding a more intricate organisation than I had originally planned. At first I thought that simply meant sorting them into more intricate categories; I had originally imagined that there would be four categories – ‘ordinary, extraordinary, exotic, and erotic views’ – which were the categories used by the Lumières. So I attempted a more complex sorting, which led to the question of an equilibrium among the categories. I suppose I could give a very detailed history of a series of insights and decisions (though I can't necessarily remember the dates), but what basically evolved from that proposed inventory – or catalogue, or storehouse – is a work whose working title is currently *Magellan*. This is composed of parts, not all of which consist of one-minute segments, not by any means. It's not a work that can be diagrammed in linear fashion, since it uses the grid – among many others – of the cycle of the solar year. In other words, it's a calendar. That is to say, it rotates like a wheel, or rather like a series of wheels that rotate within one another. I now expect, when and if the whole thing is completed, that it will be, very roughly, thirty-six hours long. Within those thirty-six hours there are a series of rough categories – well, the categories are actually quite exact, but they name parts that overlap each other on a kind of two-dimensional map of the work. Those categories are ‘Straits’ and ‘Clouds’ [of



• Hollis Frampton, *Stopping Down* (1973)

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Magellan], and there's a section which corresponds to a 'Birth of Magellan' (itself comprised of subsections), and there's another which relates to adolescence. Then there's a 'Death' and even, heaven help us, a 'Resurrection'.

DD: How much of Magellan do you have under your belt now?

HF: Well, that's also hard to say. I've now finished and released the two parts of the 'Gates of Death', which together come to 110 minutes and represent, within the complete work, a kind of dispersed zone between 'Straits' and 'Clouds'. There's also a cycle of four films for the solstices and equinoxes that could be collectively seen as an epicycle I call 'Solaria Magellani'. (A solarium, by the way, is not only a sunroom – as in a tuberculosis sanatorium – it's also a sundial.) Those four parts together amount to two hours thirty-seven minutes.

DD: Are they exterior to the 'Straits' and to 'Clouds'?

HF: No, they're inside the 'Straits'. Embedded.

DD: But there's more to be done on the 'Straits'?

HF: There is very much more to be done. More, indeed, has been done but hasn't been released: of the one-minute pieces – the *unmodified* one-minute pieces – I have now shot about 700. I don't think I will ever use all of them. There are now also one-minute pieces which are edited – indeed some are highly edited. There are even some that involve performance and directed acting. That is to say, the one-minute pieces alone are stratified or separated out into clusters which are distributed throughout the whole time of the work, which are involved in a longer temporal spectrum within the history of film than simply the primitive cinema of the 1890s.

DD: Will those one-minute pieces form a discrete part of Magellan, or will they be distributed throughout the work? Will people be expected to view all the parts in the same relationship, or will they be allowed to pull out any number of those parts in any of an infinite series of permutations?

HF: Well, we come now to another aspect of the problem – the problem of describing this thing in linear speech. I will propose, then describe, I think, a set of ways for deriving a canonic order for seeing the whole thing. This is something that on certain days of the year, let's say, would be pinned to this imaginary year, to specific segments, while certain other days of the year would be completely indeterminate (or at least partly indeterminate). In particular, as I now see it, there will be not one but two cycles of one-minute pieces, which constitute the panopticon of the 'Straits of Magellan'. One of those wheels – or series – is, as it were, a gear with one more tooth, 366 teeth against 365, so that if they were seen in a real, determined canonic order – in fact, seen along a strictly calendrical model in which there would be something to see for every day of the calendar year – then it would take 366 years to see all the combinations.

In addition to which, there will be a piece of sound – I use that phrase very deliberately: a piece of sound – because I'm envisioning a kind of inventory not only of kinds of sound but of ways in which sound may be used alongside the image attached to each piece. But at any given screening, whether or not the sound will actually be played or the track run silent will be determined by other, local, factors. So a great deal of it is very rigidly structured in one sense, but very rigidly structured in a direction which will tend to place the principles upon which it is structured on a kind of horizon, as it were, in the perceiving of the work, rather than at the centre of one's attention in perceiving it.

DD: Although I expected the implications of the question to be important, I was really asking a

simpler question. Which is: how do you expect the 36-hour film Magellan to be experienced?

HF: In as many ways as possible, save one: I would be horrified if anyone ever proposed to show the whole thing in thirty-six consecutive hours. It's not at all my goal to subject anyone – not even myself – to the kind of exhaustion, the kind of phasing in and out of attention (and the ordeal of wakefulness) that would entail. I just don't think it could be done.

I can imagine a situation in which it could be seen in the course of a week. That's still an awful lot of film. Or, under absolutely ideal circumstances – though I don't care too much if they're ever achieved – over the actual calendar year which the work imitates (but to which it is not absolutely tied down: I mean, one writes a diary, for instance, with daily entries over the period of a year, but that does not necessarily imply that the reader must read the entries at the rate of one a day). It's like a library, let's say, or a compendium, and also like a mechanical analogue computer or differential analyser, something in which the parts can be taken out, put elsewhere, and so forth. Film, after all, does come on reels in tin cans, and these can be lined up on shelves like books, so that one has random access to the 'books' on the shelf (if not instantaneously to the pages within the books). Most of the books on this shelf – or most of the cans, the parts – would in fact be very small; they would be little reels of film with 2 x 36 or 72 feet of film. That would be the case on about 360 days of the year. Some of the reels would be larger, and of course there are some days in which there would be very much to watch. Again with the proviso – or at least the suggestion – that the very large segments intended to be seen on one day are open at certain points – open out, so that smaller epicyclic digressions are inserted into them or balloon out of them.

DD: *I'd like to clarify precisely what that [library] will catalogue, what that analytic machine will analyse, to what particular cycle the calendar*

refers. Two things that spring immediately to my mind, knowing a bit about your work, are: that Magellan will in the first instance be a recapitulation of the history of cinematic representation, and that secondly it will have a strong autobiographical element, situating yourself as protagonist within that recapitulation.

HF: This is where I have to condition the likening to a diary or to a journal. In a certain sense – indeed, in many senses – my work has tended to be autobiographical. That was certainly true of *Zorns Lemma* and *Hapax Legomena*. In any case, with any material filmed by a particular person there's a kind of kinesic autobiographical inscription, is there not? Just one's physiological or motor state on a given day will mark a shot with a gesture that on another day it might not have. The hand-held camera, at least, inscribes the presence of the cameraperson on the invisible side of the camera, and so forth. But to pursue me through these mazes and corridors I think is not what I would recommend to anyone.

DD: *Would you recommend pursuing Magellan himself? Have you in fact adopted him as a persona? I know little about Magellan's life other than that he was the first to attempt to circumnavigate the earth, but didn't succeed. Yet his conception – that is to say, the way he conceived the expedition – was sufficient to allow it to carry on beyond his own death.*

HF: Well, at least some of his mortal part made it all the way around the world. He was dismembered, hacked to pieces in a local war in the Philippines, where he had previously been on an earlier voyage that took the Vasco da Gama route around Africa, though of course on this occasion he was coming back the other way. So the few of his crew – plus his friend Antonio Pigafetta who went along as a passenger and kept a diary of the entire voyage – gathered up what they could find and packed him in a barrel of cloves. And so, aromatically preserved, Magellan returned to Genoa.

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- Hollis Frampton, *The Birth of Magellan: Mindfall: VII* (1977–80)

Certainly there are specific things in the voyage – the actual historic voyage – which interest me and which I incorporate more or less obliquely. One of the most interesting finds its way into the work as a behavioural parameter, a generated parameter rather than an allusion: this of course concerns the dating paradox, the time paradox that fell upon them when they did get back. They had kept an exact day-to-day log of the journey, as an aid to navigation and so forth, and Pigafetta had kept a day-to-day journal or diary, so they knew – or they believed that they knew – the date upon which they arrived home, and even the day of the week. They were incorrect by one day. We now know, of course, that they had crossed what we would call the international date line. Except that there was no international date line at the time. They had simply preset – within the cycle of the rotation of the earth – *one* rotation, so that they had gained twenty-four hours. It was extremely puzzling to them. It was some years before all that got straightened out. Although the Arabs had done a certain amount of theoretical work on it in the high Middle Ages, and understood what should happen assuming that the world was round, this knowledge was not available to the Portuguese at the time.

Well, that paradox concerning the misfit of actual experience – even enumerated, modulated, kept careful account of – with one

aspect of the real astronomical calendar of the world, is massively referred to in the phasing misfit of cycles of material in the film. But as far as specific episodes having the same *kind* of relationship to my film as the specific episodes in the *Odyssey* have to the episodes of Joyce's *Ulysses*, no, the relation is not the same.

DD: *Why, then, Magellan?*

HF: *Why Magellan?* OK, it's a voyage, that is to say it's a vast picaresque which, like all successful picaresques, takes the form of a comedy. That means there's a full resolution in favour of the protagonist (which is getting comedy melted down about as far as you can go, making it about as abstract as you can). In a manner of speaking, in the original voyage there's a resolution in favour of the protagonist: he *did* establish the 'spheroidalness' (or what have you) of the earth. He even, in a manner of speaking, got back; because such a voyage is vastly inclusive without there necessarily being a moment-to-moment causal chain or transfer of energy from one moment to the next. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, there's no particular reason why, having escaped the enchantments of Circe, Odysseus should then next come drifting ashore and become Nausicaa's lover. There's no direct causal link between that; it's a model of history which at least *questions* the notion

of causality. There may or may not be causal links. What those links are – the nature of why, say, one shot follows another, or one segment construction, as is the nature of the passage of the energy of attention from one segment, one shot – one frame, even – to another.

DD: And you're contrasting that with the Odyssey?

HF: Well, the *Odyssey* is a vastly sophisticated work, of course. No, I wasn't so much contrasting it, I was likening it: except for the very beginning and the very end, which first enunciate and then resolve a specific set of problems, whether or not what happens in episode 'a' is causing what happens in episode 'b' remains problematical. In other words, that relationship is at all times to be constructed in the imagination of the spectator. At the level of a kind of metalanguage, if we can imagine *Ulysses* as a critical essay about the *Odyssey*, and about prior comic literature, there is a double relationship that is at all times under construction: the first is that from episode to episode, the second is that between the episodes which we are now reading and the palimpsestic corresponding Homeric episode that underlies it and the nature of the distance between them, which at all times is extremely fluid. It's fluid in relation to one's attention; sometimes one feels oneself reading the *Odyssey* through Joyce at the moment of detecting a strong correspondence, at other times the distance becomes very large so that the *Odyssey*, as it were, disappears.

DD: So can we assume that's the way you envisage the relationship between your film and the exploits of Magellan?

HF: For starters. Save, of course, that it's a lot looser. And I wonder if I haven't started to regret, first of all, referring to this filmic object I'm working on by a name of any kind; and I wonder, furthermore, if I don't regret a little

bit referring to the subsections by names. Because of course what this does – and, in a way, it does it in advance of the very fact of the thing – is to polarise examination of the film around a kind of clue-hunting. It's possible, mind you, for me to take a certain kind of pleasure in presenting that kind of extremely intricate but conceivably open and schematised form – I'm not immune to the pleasures of pedantry. But at the same time, the activity of detective work – in which the work presents itself under the guise of scholarship about itself – constitutes, I think, a kind of fool's gold. As time has passed (and now six and a half years have elapsed since I completed *Zorns Lemma*), I have been increasingly disappointed at a kind of insistent failure of examination of that work to get past its participatory and mechanical self-generating quality, self-exhausting quality.² (Which are of course attractive: there has been some expansion of the list of goodies that can be mined out of *Zorns Lemma* and so forth.)

DD: What direction would you like to see analysis of Zorns Lemma take?

HF: Shall I say 'deeper'? I'm not sure –

DD: Analysis has tended to dwell on the images –

HF: Well, the images contain so many to the n-th power bits of information per frame and so forth. And the fact that there are words within them that can be read, let's say, is an aspect of those images.³ At a certain point, your question engages with all kinds of problems of artists explaining their own work – and whether they should or not.

DD: I didn't say I was going to believe you, I was just asking for your version.

HF: Good. You leave me free to spin all sorts of fiction.

DD: Do you want to pursue that question about Zorns Lemma?

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HF: No, not too much. I just feel that there are other dialogues which are being rehearsed in that film that are not much touched upon by the kind of empirical retrieval of its scheme, about which, needless to say, I know a very great deal. Mercifully, I'm starting to forget some of it.

DD: But you raised that in the context of being afraid that Magellan would just amplify, because of the conceit . . .

HF: I just utter it as a kind of caution. I certainly know that all these Ptolomaic and post-Ptolomaic wheels with wheels are there [in *Magellan*]; indeed, I talk about them all the time, and exhibit them at considerable length in the work. At the same time, I would offer simply that they do also constitute a highly ornate façade – or smokescreen – behind which the meaning of the work is contained, as it were, *in camera*. But, for me, the meaning of the work is in the process of making it, precisely what is under construction, and not the scaffold. And the meaning of the work is what it has always been. To put it as generally as possible, it is an essay – in this case, a particularly massive and inclusive one – about what meaning is or may be, or various things it is or may be in film (that is to say, in the mechanical joining of images together in space and time). An essay, if you like, on how the notion of meaning itself is constituted. Which, if the work is eventually clear to anyone, should build the substance of that essay from within – from an experience of the work – rather than diagramming it from without.

Ian Christie: I recently read your 'Notes on Composing in Film' in October, which is the one piece of yours that seems to engage with some of the current modes of descriptive and analytic terminology, but actually doesn't.⁴ You say that denotation is one of the privileged areas of connotation, which seems like a sideswipe at various forms of semiotic analysis, and I realise that you've tended to avoid speaking about filmic signification.

HF: That's true – I try not to. That particular text was written for a conference about researching composition and it turned out that those who organised it understood the word composition to be, of all things, writing. There were no musicians there. I was, of course, the only filmmaker. I don't know whether painters would take very happily to the word composition anymore, because it has come to mean things like triangles and receding diangles and so forth – fixed stencils to be applied to the picture plane. So it's a dead word for painting. I felt I was under some constraint to be a little more specific, a little less belle-lettristic, than I usually tend to be. Which led to two results. One was that things became rather severely schematised; the other was that, having gone through examples of four kinds of axiomatic change derived from reading and one from misreading, they were all drawn from literature and music. To produce the scientific postscript to that text with respect to film is, of course, exactly what we are about – but we are not, I think, very close. No, that's not true: we may be a little closer than we were a while ago, to the point of being able to give examples from film of any given category or any operative principle that we can discern as applying to the making of other works of art. If we are at the incipience of a period of precision, then we are at its very first moments. So it would have taken me, let's say, ten years to write the other part of that essay. No one knows enough to write a book in three parts, the name of that book being *Principia Cinematica*. Part One is called 'Definitions', Part Two is called 'Principles of Sequence', Part Three is called 'Principles of Simultaneity' –

IC: A rationalist approach, which identifies your operation as an attempt at a modern mathesis universalis – the kind of enterprise that would have been entirely comprehensible to Descartes, or to any of the philosophers of the Encyclopédie period.⁵ That would seem to be your working model?

HF: Right on the button. At the same time, of course, I know very much more than they did, because they are precisely what I know. What interests me among all those interactive, closed rational systems is the particular manner – the particular point in their operation – where they most begin to resemble the universe. And that is the point where, after they have been in operation for some time, they begin to generate discrepancies, irrational values, accumulations of error. Where the operations begin to interfere with themselves or with each other to such an extent that what is generated appears not to permute but to be absolutely smooth and continuous, becoming – if we believe in causality – causally seamless, but at such a level that it seems incessantly to just fail to dis-intricate the lines of self-interference from the system –

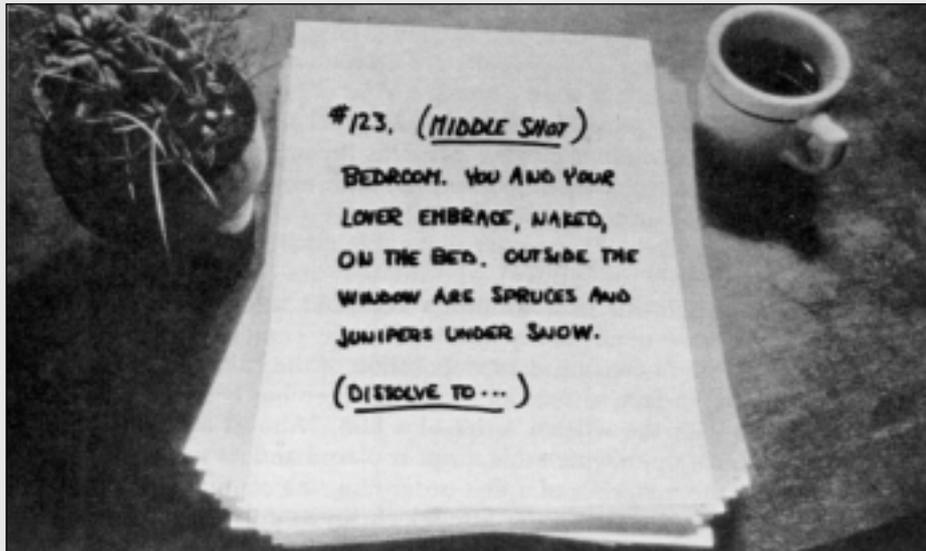
IC: That recalls a point you made about building errors into Zorns Lemma; and it leads on to a possibly irrelevant speculation about how one builds free will into a rationalist system . . .

HF: The last person to deal with that problem was God, by the way.

IC: There's a point you make in the October essay about Pound's notion of reading and writing being intimately connected. Doesn't this also connect with the current idea of reading film as a text?

HF: It comes not only from Pound but also from Eisenstein, who likens a film to a text, and shots to words. He speaks of reading the shots as though they were words, hence *Zorns Lemma's* very obvious debt to Eisenstein, which somebody did finally remark. The film tends, at that very frontal level, to take Eisenstein at his word. Literally. And to act out his suggestion, his insight, even while turning it about, re-directing that energy back into the enterprise of filmmaking – into practice. Pound simply was handy at that point of introduction, because he came right out and said it. There are other, notable praxes that intimately connect reading to writing, or connect an understanding of the detailed textural and textual history of the enterprise of film, painting, or what have you on the one hand, to practice on the other.

I think as we look at modernism it tends to seem, to a great extent, as though on one



• Hollis Frampton, *Poetic Justice* (1972)

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level or another most artists have done that. The action painters, after all, were incorrigible museum hounds; they were, in fact, a generation of art historians. I think their rhetoric of silence tended to camouflage – as it was intended to – that historicisation, to deliberately sink it to a deep layer. It's clear, again and again, that – how to put it – they were not making those paintings because those were the kinds of paintings they personally found pleasant or interesting or wanted to see, they were making those paintings out of some version of what they perceived to be historical necessity. For a certain amount of time, that current in painting persisted. Now, it's not always a simple path – this notion of perceived necessity – but it's one that does look into the tradition of the art (or that part of it which is available and known), re-evaluating it, discerning within it what seem to be operative principles that can be of use (or, on the other hand, should be argued with, engaged with).

IC: One implication of Pound's idea is that we're not so much reading the mind of a text's producer as tracing the history of the production of that text, and what its agent, as it were, encapsulates because of his historical location. But the reading of Magellan that the spectator is capable of seems to be history sub specie aeternitatis. Not history viewed critically or dialectically, but as if from God's point of view, if you follow me?

HF: I follow you, but I wonder if you're right – I don't know.

DD: That's an interesting contradiction, because clearly the adventurousness of the Magellan project re-foregrounds that act of making or reading. I don't know what sort of time-scale you envisage devoting to the project; but can I infer that it follows in a line from Pound's Cantos through Zukovsky's A and Brakhage's Songs, in terms of being a work that is conceived over such a long period of time that it inscribes into its own making a history of its

permutation and change? Which would undermine the idea of a perfect holistic work, challenging its own hermeticism.

HF: Absolutely. I suppose I would like for them both to be there, for them both to be present: at once the hermeticism that you detect – which is widely detectable, too – and the simple fact that in undertaking something very large one does not know how to do it. What marks all projects of a certain size is the 'learning how' to do the thing as you go along. Now, characteristically there are serious problems with this. I suppose the *Cantos* are something of a case in point, though there are other cases. On the side of both the signifier and the signified, the *Cantos* are heavily dependent on what Pound happens to find out, or run across, or get interested in at any given time. The circumstances of his own life constitute a kind of aleatory control voltage or something.

IC: I suppose it's the scale and also the complexity of the framework, or the reassurance of the massiveness of the work, that enables a structure such as the Cantos to take on so much empirical material?

HF: Yes, Pound said that an epic was a poem including history. He tended, rather selectively, to shove history in wholesale. He is furthermore supremely open to the criticism that he merely included history without having, as it were, a theory of history. *Finnegans Wake*, after all, is also an extended work of art in a language that includes history, though Joyce appears not to have a theory of history but to maintain every theory of history that he knows equidistant from the fusion point at which the prose is being generated.

IC: Vico stands to Finnegans Wake like Copernicus to Magellan?

HF: Yes. There's also obviously a psychological, or psychoanalytic, theory of history which stands ready at all times to inflect or deflect

not only the shape of an episode but the very choice of words in that case. The *Cantos* have, of course – well, I shouldn't say 'of course' – but they have always been a particular kind of thorn in my side because there is, it seems to me, a real disparity – well, the work is *not* rigorous. It has a certain kind of architecture; it's possible, let us say, to separate it out into massive blocks. In due course, one way or another, Pound even manages to inform us that there is a kind of subtext to the *Cantos*, as there is to *Ulysses*, and that subtext is the *Divine Comedy* in a general sort of way. But it doesn't wash too well to have spent two *Cantos* on the *Inferno*, separated by a very short distance in the poem from the first incursion of Pound's orientalism (at that point in an almost pre-Raphaelite or Swinburnian form); it is, without being very detailed about it, a hell of a long way from the use *Ulysses* made of the sub-text of the *Odyssey*, to keep returning to those examples. The *Cantos*, of course, stands in ruins, repudiated by its author for reasons that one can only guess.⁶ I suspect, in fact, that one of the reasons it was repudiated was that Pound perceived in one way or another that the very thing the poem needed, since it was and is an essay about history, was some controlling view of what history is. Pound seems, literally, to subscribe to the view that history is just one goddam thing after another; that there is not, say, a vector within it (or that the vector is relatively simple, not multiple, and has a downward direction), but that there is a bugbear – so to speak – in the works, and the identity of the bugbear changes from time to time. And at a certain point the poem, for all its extraordinary local inventiveness, begins to teeter.

Okay, I'd like to make something that is simply not in pieces, one after another, in the order that I happen to be able to make them. Which, again, is Pound's problem. Joyce, as he worked on the text of *Finnegans Wake*, of course, did not write it from beginning to end. He wrote *at* the whole book, as it were, until the whole book was written. That seems to be a more useful model. On the other hand, we

seem to be spending an awfully long time on the literary.

IC: *We're guilty of encouraging that. Where would you like to go next?*

HF: Maybe a swoop back to music, or more particularly the theory and practice of serial music in this century, in which stereoscopic enterprise has developed in an exemplary manner.

DD: *I'm not sure what you mean by 'stereoscopic'.*

HF: I was simply trying to develop a little metaphor in passing, in which theory and practice converged upon one another, each inextricably informing the other. At the same time, this is a music that has produced objects which command a serious examination but do not require any critical salvation in order to sustain themselves. One can listen to and be moved by *Wozzeck* long before one has the benefit even of the score – in which, as I point out with some relish, the various sections of the work are developed musically with extreme rigour.⁷ I have a predilection for that work of Schönberg, Berg and Webern, and that which their successors have continued. We understand a non-serial composer differently than we would have before. I like things that are as tense as a soap bubble, that account for themselves completely. At the same time, I don't like things that give out their favours too freely, that can be had, as it were, for a nod and a knowing wink.

IC: *Am I right in thinking that there is no objective summary of Magellan laid out in writing anywhere?*⁸

HF: There are various pieces on various tapes – I don't really know what to do about it. I'm beginning to suspect something that I might do about it. I have tried on various occasions – I may or may not try this evening – to situate a segment shown on a given occasion within

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• Hollis Frampton, *Zorns Lemma* (1970)

larger and larger sets of schemes and so forth. I don't know why I should want to do that beyond the fact that I'm excited about it, like someone bound to a Catherine Wheel that is likely to turn for some years. On one occasion, I spent two and a half hours spinning this gossamer out into space, in order to situate about two and a half hours of real film somewhere within it. And everybody seemed to find it just a puzzling as if I had said nothing – which suited me fine. On the other hand, on that occasion I felt as though I had shot my wad. Now, what to do?

IC: It's a matter of 'local interest', as you have said a propos the Cantos. An expectation is created as the scale of the whole work becomes known. So the problem of maintaining interest in its parts becomes crucial; there is a real pull in an intellectual as well as a perceptual sense, for a viewer who is scurrying around trying to see parts within a developing sense of the whole.

HF: At the possible cost of having to theatricalise the production of the work, it is exactly the pleasures and terrors of that experience . . .

IC: . . . which you have knowingly evoked for us all?

HF: One thing that Joyce did that has caused me second thoughts was that he never did reveal the name of the thing, but would draw people out by the hour, like Molly Bloom talking about heavy petting, as to what they thought the title might be. If anyone got too close to it, he would blanch and withdraw. Pound, of course, pulled somewhat the same thing and died, presumably with the name of his poem *in pectora*, as John XXIII did.⁹ There are three cardinals in the world who don't know who they are.

IC: Given that we are in that situation, can we look at the local and structural aspects within a section that is now available?

DD: For instance, by comparing Gates of Death with Solarium Magelani?

HF: If we're going to compare *Solarium* and the *Gates of Death*, then I think the first thing we notice is that they seem to behave pretty much in the same way, except that *Gates of Death* seems to be even more complicated. I think it's virtually impossible to retrieve or determine what shot goes where in any of the five or six films – or film segments – under discussion. At the same time, it becomes clearer all the time that there is some set of rules, some set of operating principles, at work ever more clearly and powerfully, hovering just beyond the point where they can be retrieved.

DD: I was hoping to address that. After one viewing, I was struck by the fact that the structure of Gates of Death seems so eminently graspable – even though I never managed to grasp it – whereas Solarium gives me a much greater feeling of an organicism that is harder to assimilate, which I think pertains to all the parts. Is there, in fact, a significant difference in terms of the conception of the way those films are ordered?

HF: As it happens, the rules become somewhat more complex. That is to say, if we use serial music as an analogy, the ways in which the row can be modified or inflected increase in number. What seems to change the issue is that one of the rules in *Gates of Death* allows the material to be redoubled; that is to say, each image is seen twice. Another concerns its more overt dispersion into strophes (or stanzas or what have you), each of which carries a refrain. So there's a kind of lap dissolve in the progress of this double group of films in which they are at once more complexly rigorous and rule-bound, and at the same time the quotient of shape-markers on the surface increases, which tends to make the formal structure of *Gates of Death* look clearer than it is.

IC: The shape-marker frequently takes the form of repetition. This is the problem of seeing the

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nature of the structure, but not being able to grasp it at the time, since a lot depends on repetition which can only be appreciated retrospectively. Towards the end, you see the shape, how it's working, by which time you have, of course, lost –

HF: – what is shaped.

IC: It does create a curious interplay between the realisation that comes at the end and the recollection. Can we assume for the moment that this is a form of filmic serialism, like serial procedures in music after Schönberg?

HF: Let's say it bears analogies. All the charts and graphs that precede the editing of a film like this are a kind of 'lost wax', if you understand me.¹⁰ Actually they hang around, but I have never exhibited them, as Sharits does.¹¹ Let's just go back to a slightly different aspect of this double group of films, one that becomes more vehement as you pass through them, not in the order of their making, but, let's say, from 'Autumnal Equinox' to 'Winter Solstice'. Or we could start with 'Summer Solstice' and go to 'Autumn', to 'Winter', to 'Spring', and to the 'Red Gate' and 'Green Gate'. In all of them, there is a punctuation between individual shots; that punctuation tends, first of all, to force the shots apart. It certainly forces them out of immediate juxtaposition with each other. In the case of the first three, it is a brief flash of a colour field in one of the Maxwellian primaries;¹² in the case of the film that I'm still calling 'Vernal Equinox' – although I may have to contribute a massive footnote on that – it's a dotted line, the trembling dotted line that outlines the frame.

In the *Gates of Death*, the punctuation – the diaeresis, if you like – is even longer and even more vehement: a superimposed pattern of moving hexagons. The moment between the ending of one film strip of photographic or illusionist material and the beginning of the next one is marked by a very abrupt return of the pictorial space to frontality. It's a flat field of red or blue or green, or an interference of

two patterns of geometric figures, the flatness of which tends to make even more pointed – even more disjunctive – at the moment when one shot encounters another shot. In fact, they don't encounter each other; that is to say, there's no direct collisional montage anywhere in any of these films. This, it seems to me, begins to place them in dialogue with the very notion of collisional montage itself, which at a certain point, as we know, degenerated – or was degraded – into a set of rules about something called 'continuity'.

IC: One way leads to the disguised montage of continuity, the other way to the theory of enhanced emphasis, dramatic intensification.

HF: Very well. What I'm doing, in a way, is just describing these.

IC: But are you not also implying a move – a change of compositional principle – from the neo-Eisensteinianism of Zorns Lemma, to something which actually abandons the principle of montage?

DD: Not so much abandoning it as opening up a space between it and . . .

IC: What's montage if you open up the spaces?

HF: You see, one of the pleasures of the pursuit of the design is to find out whether all of the large design is going to behave like this. Quite simply, the answer is: no, it is not. What is always at issue in this particular group of films – or this particular bunch of pieces – to which I have now put an end, is what I take to be an opening up of the pathway to meaning from one shot to the next shot. If you can imagine all the shots – all the film pieces – that make up a film as a grid or chess board, then on that chess board there is for the knight, let us say, a particular tour: there is a way to see all of the shots in that as at least united by a rule; there is a way to visit all the squares that is united by the manner in which a knight can move. In fact, there are a very large number of

knight's tours; so there are presumably a very large number of pathways through a body of illusionist material. We have tended toward the view that there is some *one* pathway through that material, understood to be the most meaningful, the one that the artist chooses. First, I'd like to call into question the concept that seems to lie behind the phrase 'most meaningful'; and second, of course, I'd like to call into question the notion of choice – the artist's choice – in that situation. I think these films do so by holding open, at all times, the pathway through the set of all shots that compose the film. That is to say, the nature of the tour itself – or the manner in which one constructs meaning (inventing it as the spectator in the midst of witnessing the work) – is under construction again.

IC: *The spectator is certainly under construction, or his perceptual processes are. The producer of the text, or of the set, is presumably also under construction by the text?*

HF: That's right. But I think, at least for the time being, that in these parts of the overall work, *Solarium* and the *Gates of Death*, I've carried this way of expanding the field of choices for a pathway about as far as I can. Now, to get back to your 'eye of God' trope. If there is announced or believed to be a grand design, which seems to be the case for this film, this is in anticipation of a kind of hindsight, you understand. That eye is something that changes its colours and its configuration. I winced internally when you said that, because there is a two dimensional map or diagram of the whole thing which, when seen from a distance with all its construction on a hexagonal lattice and with various kinds of coding marks (colours, numbers and so forth), when seen from that distance reduces it to a kind of pantheist mush. That notation, or map, is a very large rendering of the human eye. But at the local level – and of course one sees the film locally in time, and then invents the real, fictive structure of the film with whatever

equipment and tools one has – one invents, as it were, the actual *concrete* intellectual space within which the film transpires. That process is one of continuous dialogue, a constant re-opening of as many questions as I can cram into it, so to speak. And it is precisely at the level of the self-interference of operations, at the level of disjunction between the signifying apparatus and what it is perforce linked to, that that dialogue takes place. I wonder if that was a complete sentence? It may have been.

Notes

- 1 What Frampton knew as *Fred Ott's Sneeze* is now more formally catalogued as *Edison Kinetoscope Record of a Sneeze*, and appears to have been made as a series of stills primarily intended for publication in *Harper's Weekly* in January 1894, to illustrate Edison's moving-picture achievements, and only later printed as a 'film'. See Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900*, Smithsonian Institution Press/Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 1997: 87–88.
- 2 *Zorns Lemma* was first shown in 1970, and at 60 mins. was Frampton's longest film to date. Almost immediately, it attracted wide attention, mostly influenced by P. Adams Sitney's presentation of it as typifying the 'structural' turn in avant-garde film (Sitney, 'Structural Film', *Film Culture: An Anthology*, ed. P. A. Sitney, Secker and Warburg, 1970). Much subsequent criticism took this as its starting point, to Frampton's despair. For a discussion of the critical legacy, see Virginie Guichard, *An ABC of Film: Hollis Frampton and the Cultural Tradition of Film*, Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of London, 2003.
- 3 All the initial images of *Zorns Lemma*'s central section are of words or letters in alphabetical order, many appearing as public signs, which are then substituted with word-free images to form an alternative alphabet.
- 4 'Notes on Composing in Film' appeared in the first issue of *October*, Spring 1976; and had originally been given at a Conference on Research and Composition at SUNY Buffalo in October 1975.
- 5 In his early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628), Descartes spoke of a 'universal mathematics' [*mathesis universalis*] to deal with all matters causing 'problems about order and measurement' (*Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Cambridge, 1970: 13). The *Encyclopédie* (1751–78), edited by Diderot and D'Alembert, aimed to provide a

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comprehensive, materialist account of the world and human knowledge.

- 6 From 1961 until his death in 1972, Pound made various despairing or dismissive remarks about the *Cantos* – 'I have lots of fragments. I can't make much sense of them' (to Michael Alexander). 'It's a botch. I knew too little about so many things . . . I picked out this and that thing that interested me and jumbled them into a bag' (to Daniel Croy).
- 7 Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* was completed in 1922, following the serial method of Berg's teacher Arnold Schönberg, in which permutations of a basic 'tone row' determine all aspects of the work's musical structure.
- 8 From 1978 onwards, Frampton outlined and spoke about the structure envisaged for *Magellan* with increasing frequency. For a discussion of these accounts, see Brian Henderson, 'Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton's *Magellan*', *October* 32, Spring 1985: 129–50.
- 9 Pope John XXIII died in 1963 during the Second Vatican Council which he had summoned, with many of his reforms of the Catholic Church unfinished – and later to be reversed by his successor.
- 10 The 'lost wax' or *cire perdue* technique is used for casting bronze sculpture. A model in wax is placed within a clay and plaster casing, then heated until the wax runs out, and is replaced by molten bronze poured into the resultant mould.
- 11 Paul Sharits, another participant in the Edinburgh Avant-Garde Forum of 1976, had been exhibiting portions of film strip from some of his of his solid-frame 'flicker' films, such as *Ray Gun Virus*.
- 12 The Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–79) laid the foundations of electrical and optical theory, identifying the primary colours, red, green and blue.