

Hollis Frampton is widely viewed as one of the most brilliant and important American avant-garde filmmakers to have emerged in the late 1960s. Yet since the publication of an *October* special issue (no. 32, Spring 1985) following his untimely death twenty years ago, his work has received little sustained scholarly attention—this in spite of the enormously rich, complex body of films and writings he left behind, much of which remains unknown or unexplored. *October* is publishing the following cluster of essays, each of which examines hitherto neglected aspects of Frampton’s theory and practice, in the hope that his work will once again receive the attention it deserves.* In “Words into Film,” Federico Windhausen unearths the considerable influence of Hugh Kenner’s version of Romanticism and modernism on Frampton; Melissa Ragona’s “Hidden Noise” explores the role of mathematics in shaping Frampton’s use of sound in his films; and in his essay, Michael Zryd begins the difficult task of charting Frampton’s shifting conceptualizations of his massive, unfinished film project *Magellan*.

October is grateful to Marion Faller and the Whitney Museum of American Art for giving us permission to publish for the first time a lecture Frampton gave at the Whitney in 1979, and to Michael Zryd for editing and annotating this lecture.

—Malcolm Turvey

* Others are also trying to rectify this situation. Keith Sanborn, P. Adams Sitney, and Su Friedrich are hosting a conference on Frampton at Princeton University starting November 5, 2004. For more information, see the advertisement at the back of this issue.

The Invention Without a Future*

HOLLIS FRAMPTON

Hollis Frampton delivered the following lecture on November 17, 1979, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York as part of a seven-part lecture and screening series, "Researches and Investigations into Film: Its Origins and the Avant-Garde," organized by John Hanhardt, Curator of Film and Video at the Whitney (the other speakers were Thom Anderson, Nick Browne, Noël Burch, Regina Cornwell, Tom Gunning, Ken Jacobs, and Maureen Turim). The talk exists only as a typed transcript from a cassette tape, now lost. Slight changes have been made in order to clarify the grammar and syntax of the transcription. Punctuation has been modified to preserve Frampton's distinct speech rhythms, and Frampton's asides, digressions, and informal framing remarks have been preserved better to convey the wit, as well as the substance, of his lecture.

—Ed.

My tentative working title was "The Invention Without a Future." As the date has drawn nearer the true title has grown longer and now probably should be "A Partial Disassembling of an Invention Without a Future: Helter-Skelter and Random Notes in Which the Pulleys and Cogwheels Are Lying Around at Random All Over the Workbench." It seems difficult to make this entity congeal into one or a dozen exact representations or exact theses. The more I look at it, in particular the more I look at that diaeresis in the entropy of the arts during the last couple of centuries that we call the early cinema, the more it looks like a kind of goosebaggy monster. So this is all entirely a tentative projection in which I will begin by reciting an epigraph. This epigraph is a quotation that could, it seems, have been written at almost any moment from the beginning of the industrial revolution, or at least its very early years, to within, let's say, not the past week but the beginning of the past decade:

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of [our] techniques, the adaptability and precision they have

* Edited and annotated by Michael Zryd.

attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful.

Well, to use that phrase in the present time I think we would have to strain certain conventions of terminology. “Beautiful” is even capitalized. Nevertheless, one still hears the word used.

In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

And from a little farther on in the same essay:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.

That quotation is of course from Paul Valéry. It is most widely associated with another text for which it serves as the epigraph, and that is a 1932 essay by Walter Benjamin called “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”¹ Now I don’t think this is the moment to attempt to unpack, repack, explicate, reaffirm, or criticize Benjamin. It is striking though that we still seem to be haunted, almost plagued, by the same concerns, and I mean not only what I might call the anthropological concerns of that essay but as well the political concerns of that essay, which I think we might simply say has aged relatively well in that it continues to irritate us thirty-five or forty years later.

Water and gas and electricity are, it would seem, distinctly allied in Valéry’s mind as needs (rather than desires, let’s say, or some form of entertainment)—with a need, personal and social, for images, auditory and visual images. That need is one that has been fostered, has assumed its present state of power, by the very inventions that we may imagine Valéry was talking about. It’s also striking that Valéry situates the new technologies of which he speaks (and it hardly matters what those technologies are) not only within an arena of desire, but specifically within one of power, one in which he sees power wielded, formed, organized, as it were—and I would simply

1. Quoted in Paul Valéry, “The Conquest of Ubiquity,” *Aesthetics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 235. The first two quotations appear as the epigraph to Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” published in *Illuminations*, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 217. (The last quotation from Valéry appears on p. 219 of the Benjamin text and p. 226 of the Valéry text.) Benjamin’s text was first published in 1936, not 1932.

point out that it is a relatively novel insight. It is still true in this culture that, aside from those poor powers which are wielded in the realm of the purely physical, the supreme arena of power is language, the dominant code of culture, as they are fond of telling us. And I find it quite striking that Valéry at this moment discerns a corresponding arena of power, an extension of the old arena of power of language, a new domain for the wielding of power, if that power only be that of persuasion, within what he refers to as visual and auditory images, one which is furthermore created by the very existence of a reproductive technology, a mechanical technology very much of the scope and somewhat of the kind that had at a much earlier moment made his own craft, that of a public and disseminated literature and criticism, possible.

The essay to which this is an epigraph (well, I guess it still is its epigraph) is one from which I would like to conserve only a single line for the moment. This is Benjamin: "For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."² The argument with which he prepares and supports that is, I think, quite familiar, and it has been subject to a certain amount of challenge within the past few decades. It is, roughly, that the ancient and traditional arts, or at least the visual arts, began as a kind of sympathetic magic; one painted the elk on the wall of the cave surrounded by little men with bows and arrows in the hope of catching more elk the next day (or what have you). That, I think, now is probably seen as a questionable assertion, but in the 1930s perhaps it was not. And as the thing to be caught, the goal of the sympathetic magic, becomes more intangible, if the game afoot is the trapping not of an elk but of the good will of the Almighty, then the ritual which art serves is translated, becomes somewhat more abstract, becomes, so to speak, the ritual of systemic religious belief and practice.

There are, however, other rituals. The supreme ritual of our time is not probably either that of bagging live meat on the hoof or appeasing the alleged mysterious forces of the universe. It is the ritual of possession, the creation of possessible things, the conservation of the possessible, the ritual process by which the things of the world and then their reproductions or representations are validated so that they can become ownable, so that they can become possessible. I would point out in passing that we are engaged here today in a fairly complex variation on exactly that ritual in an edifice [the Whitney Museum] that houses all manner of validated, possessible works of *art*, I believe they are called.

Benjamin, in his essay, says that the new image-making and reproducing technologies challenge, at the root, the notion of authenticity, or the unique aura of the possessible thing, and thereby tend to subvert, to undermine the vintage, ownable thing. The new work of art, the work made through the agency of the machine, because of at least its alleged infinite reproducibility, escapes, or at least has the possibility of escaping, the problem, or the characteristic uniqueness, by which something that is in potentially finite supply—that is to say, the work of art

2. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," p. 224.

(we can go on making it in one form or another to our heart's content)—is moved laterally in its characteristics to resemble something that is in strictly infinite supply, that is, real estate. The real estate industry, I believe, has never succeeded in manufacturing any more of its commodity. It has only manipulated the manner in which that commodity is valued. So that it is a collateral assertion, or at least suggestion, of Benjamin's that because reproducibility rescues the work of art from the predicament of real estate, it democratizes it. If it is impossible to own the *Mona Lisa* (in fact, it is inadvisable to, since presumably the responsibility is much too large, whether you like the thing or not), nevertheless it is possible to have for free, if you are willing to dispense with its unique aura (*he* uses the word "aura"), with the specific fact of that specific mass of pigment on that particular panel guided by the fine Italian hand of that particular aura-ridden artist—if you are able to dispense with that, if you can give it up, then you can have something like the *Mona Lisa*. You can have it, so to speak, for nothing, or next to nothing. Its cost is low. You don't have to have a palace to house it in; then you don't have to heat the palace; then you don't have to hire armed guards to defend it. And we can ask ourselves whether it's worth it or not to dispense with that aura in the interest of the likeness. I think it is probably in the general vicinity of the arguments with which Benjamin surrounds the notion that the reproducible tends to democratize the work of art that he is most vulnerable. He is, of course, eager in that circumstance, and it is an eagerness that we reaffirm, to produce some tentative proof, if not a fully rigorous one, that *something* has democratized the work of art, that it is not now in that time, and had not been for quite some time, that thing which it had been before.

In fact, something had happened by 1932, indeed had begun to happen a hundred years before, which was not, I think, in the least special. The arts had begun what might be understood from a look at the rest of the culture a process of normalization. By normalization I mean a very, very simple thing. By a particular moment in the seventeenth century, let us say, it was no longer necessary to pump the water out of coal mines and tin mines in England by animal power or by bailing or by complicated processes of drainage and siphoning and so forth. The walking-beam engine had taken over that process. By a very short time later, three or four decades, a large proportion of Western manufacture of all kinds had been, as we say, industrialized, or it had at least been mechanized. The process was a slow and very helter-skelter one. Transportation, for instance, our current plague, only became mechanized very late. In fact, I think we could say that the arts were among the very first generalized activities to undertake that process of normalization, as I will call it, and it is thus the more striking, and in an intelligently managed universe, the more puzzling, that that process of normalization within the arts has been the last—it is now, I think, almost the only—process in which mechanized normalization is still seen as problematical. It was true by 1932, as Gertrude Stein put it, that we have all forgotten what horses are. We seem, however, not to have forgotten to this day what pre-normalized art is like. We even seem to hear still the niggling objection to it.

I was at a conference a week ago in Rochester, which was a different sort of ritual, one in which Xerography, and in particular the color Xerox image, began its process of validation, of valuation, in a museum given over to photography—to, if nothing else, very large holdings of objects, possibly works of art, which definitely have intrinsic value because they're silver prints; if nothing else, you can reclaim the metal. (We'll get to that later on, literally, as well as in my remarks.) Xeroxes are a kind of thing that anyone can make by walking up to a machine and dropping in fifty cents. Not only are Xeroxes made out of paper and a little bit of hydrocarbon but worse, nothing much more than pigmented paraffin, and bad paper at that, at least as far as the standard Xerox goes.

I was experiencing a little trouble, a little pain, in being forcibly jerked up the slopes of Helicon, as if with a winch. In fact, it didn't work. There was constant objection on the part of the Xerox artists themselves. We now have, it seems, a unique class or tribe of artists for every single medium and sub-medium. They found themselves feeling extremely uncomfortable in those circumstances, and finally there came a moment of hysterical crisis, as one might say, an interlude, in which one of the chief exponents of the practice stood up in the audience in the midst of a panel and delivered herself of a twenty-minute encomium to the effect that, as a Xerox artist, she wished to say that Xerox copies, Xerox images, definitely were not works of art, and she hoped that, after the grant from the Xerox Corporation which had created the exhibition and the symposium to begin with had run out, the whole matter would be dropped as quickly as possible because she was not, and she felt no one else was, prepared for the onslaught of yet another art within living memory.

We seem, of course, to have had quite a few of them, but the one that concerns us here—and presumably there are still a few Civil War veterans around who can remember its very beginnings—is that of film. And I think perhaps there a few things after all to be said about film (in fact, I know there are, if I can find out what they are on these pieces of paper here) that are not as they seem, or they are not at least as we are accustomed to think of them. I suppose we could group our discussion under a rubric of contrasts—old and new, *staroe i novoë*³—and try to examine the predicament *then*, that is, in that opalescent time before D. W. Griffith had cast the shadow of his mighty bulk upon film, the proto-cinema—and *now*, an extended period, which has seen the growth of that moment that we have called the New American Cinema or the avant-garde (an art paramilitary organization). We are accustomed to think that now we are in possession, in the practice of film, of a high technology. In fact, that is not true. In the 1890s, at a time when every project amounted to a fresh creation under a new logos, everyone who made films did so not only under the re-normalization of a genuinely new technology but one of which they were entirely possessed. That is to say, if you had a camera (or if, like Billy Bitzer, you had a camera that actually made perforations in

3. The reference is to Sergei Eisenstein's *The Old and the New*, aka *The General Line* (1929, Sovkino, USSR). Ed.

the film at the same time it was making images on it, spitting the one thing out a little chute at the bottom and winding the other up in a roll at the top),⁴ and a tripod to put it on more or less, and some way to develop the stuff, you were at that time living at the cutting edge of a new technology, and you were in complete possession of it. That now is simply not so.

Film is probably a high technology. It is, of course, a deeply hybridized, bastard technology as well, as rickety a collection of electromechanical devices as a Model T Ford, of which anyone who engages in film practice has available at any given moment only a very constricted segment. Obviously I'm talking about those practitioners we call filmmakers; I'm not talking here about those practitioners we call Francis Ford Coppola, who presumably believe themselves to be in full possession of the high (and stagnant) technology of film. But in fact, within filmmaker practice, there has been not only a constriction of the available, there has also been a factionalization within that constriction, so that one hears denounced in certain quarters, for instance, all those persons who engage in the impunity of the optical printer. Let us return to old times and simple means, the argument seems to go, and that will be progress. In fact, the early cinema insisted absolutely, as it properly should have, upon the entire possession of its tools, of its materials, if you will, of its means of production. So that within films even at the present time, I think we can see atavistic remnants of the reaction against mechanization, normalization, from which photographers, filmmakers, certain others whom we will not mention—it begins with a “v,” or it begins with a “c,” and that's a little more rarefied but the juncture's still there⁵—an internal crystallization of a reaction that has so often been brought to bear upon those new image-making arts of which Valéry speaks from without. Again, I don't think this is the moment to unpack the psychological implications of that. Perhaps it is just the hollow and unctuous tones of the cultural superego speaking out of an unexpected mouth, let us say.

Another notion that I think should be challenged has to do with the cost of the work of art. First of all, in general, it's alleged that film is expensive. That probably is open to debate. As far as I know the most expensive art currently practiced in the West in total cost is symphonic music, because you're supposed to hire a hundred and twenty people for six weeks, and put them in a big building, and heat the building, and so forth. It is only for the composer that it's cheap. In an economic environment that tends to demand that nothing can be printed unless you print a hundred thousand copies of it; whole forests fell for Saul Bellow to become a Nobel laureate, for example; vast tracks in Idaho were the raft that floated Mr. Bellow to Sweden on that occasion. Then, the notion of the cost of the work of art was defined to a certain degree—it still may be on a certain

4. Billy Bitzer (1872–1944) is best remembered today as D. W. Griffith's cameraman. Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), which was one of the first avant-garde films to take up early film, reworks an early film Jacobs claims was made by Bitzer in 1905.

5. Frampton is referring to video and computers, media viewed with suspicion by many American avant-garde filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s.

horizon—because it was initially a technology that was a by-product. I would remind you first of all that the old film support, cellulose nitrate, was military fallout just as surely as microelectronics are today. It was gun cotton, very simply. A large manufacturing technology existed to produce the stuff in quantity. The flexibility and transparency of the stuff were what was at issue in this case, not its explosiveness, but that has continued to be a problem. Nitrate, as we know, still undergoes slow motion explosion, and nineteenth-century military technology is (after all) working its revenge upon the early cinema silently in millions of dark tin cans all over the West.

The emulsifying or suspending agent is gelatin. The Eastman Kodak Company still insists that the very best photographic gelatin is made from selected ear and cheek clippings of Argentinean beef cattle that are fed on mustard greens. How's that for magic? Take one cow—steer, I beg your pardon (that's quite important, too, probably, in some total reckoning of the thing)—five pounds of mustard greens. . . . There's a recipe book for the imagery of a high art. But that gelatin could only become available in quantity after a specific economic moment had been reached in the West. That was the development of vast latifundia for the raising of beef cattle in the Western United States and in the Argentine. The gelatin was, again, a fallout from a process of exploitation of an entirely different kind. And finally there was that brief moment during which the photographic industries fastened upon silver-halide technology as the material basis of the image, which proceeded also from an unusual circumstance and that was the great silver strikes of the 1870s and '80s in Colorado and in Idaho, which released vast quantities of that element into the market within the period of a decade. The total quantity of silver in the world increased by something like three decimal orders of magnitude. Nevertheless, it had always been rare. It was made available again, briefly and in quantity, through a process of real-estate exploitation. So that it would appear, in a way, and there's nothing unusual in this for our arts (if the Romans had not practiced slavery in Spain, the sulfide of mercury called cinnabar would never have been found in quantity in the Mediterranean, and thus certain reds that we treasure in the paintings of the Renaissance would not be around to this day), it is simply and normally that the usual bad commercial karma was settled from the beginning on film just as it had been upon everything else.

Now, however, we have crossed into a temporal domain where the cost is not deferred, and probably we should give momentary attention at least to what a film costs now, or to what something that is called a film, costs now. The sociable presentation of film, which is itself a ritual of the right of free assembly, produces some rather odd side effects. I calculated, in the small town that I live a few miles from upstate, that one single screening of *Apocalypse Now* [1979, Francis Ford Coppola] produced, among other apocalyptic figures, the use of approximately 390 gallons of gasoline to take an audience of 250 people to see it—this is one screening—about seven thousand road miles of travel for those people. If you translate that

into the number of times that film will be screened before Francis Ford Coppola gets his money back (it's a process of infinite convergence, of course) and do the bookkeeping on it, you will cease to wonder why the petroleum industry or indeed the manufacturers of automobiles in Detroit seem to approve of the movies and indeed perhaps understand something of the not-very-secret affinities between those manufacturing processes. There are also, of course, movies that teach you how to drive automobiles, you understand, so there's some reciprocation there. . . . The real competition is from the electronics industry, not from coinage, which was once its only competition, and that is an industry that, if it builds it into the right circuits, can convert two milligrams of silver into a potentially endless series of images. That same two milligrams ends up being about one frame of 35mm camera negative, which is tied up, is, as it were, quarantined forever, or as long as we are quite sure that we wish to hold onto that image. In order to get the material back, we must release the image itself from the culture, we must cast it out.

So what has happened is that what was once seen as a copious popular art is very rapidly becoming paradoxically fragile, rare and bounded in time. The figures that are usually given (and they are not mine, I heard this two weeks ago from Beaumont Newhall who is, at the very least, venerable enough to quote) that the silver print (he was talking about still photography but this means our film process as well) will be all washed up in thirty years, that is to say, within the lifetime of most of the people in this room. So that it probably behooves us—yes, I know, Bucky Fuller: we will make movies out of cornstarch or something like that—it is incorrect, it is inaccurate for us to speak of copiousness, of ready availability of a common product. Ironically, the very fact that film and the photograph escape certain conditions of ritual, the fact of their reproducibility, has virtually assured their disappearance. The more copies of it we can make, the more we are assured we don't have to make any because we can always make them, and eventually, of course, none will have been made, and it will disappear. So it seems that, like the exercises of speech and sexuality, film and its allied arts of illusion are at once limitlessly plentiful and painfully fugitive.

Unless, of course, we wish to massively intervene, and the cost of that massive intervention is itself something that we had probably better examine pretty carefully. The industry—that is, that of the Detroit of the image, certain hills around the Los Angeles basin—has managed their share of the problem very nicely, that is to say it has arranged to have its product retrieved, archived, reproduced, cared for at the public expense. But the early cinema that we are talking about, and our present one, are, in that regard, totally vulnerable. It tends to be true of most of the proto-cinema that one print, or two, or half a dozen exist. It tends to be true also now that that an infinitely reproducible artifact exists in one copy or fewer than a dozen. There may be a hundred *Window Water Baby Movings* [1959, Stan Brakhage] strewn around the planet in various states of disrepair, but that itself is a completely anomalous situation, which will tend to mean, in about the year 2050, for instance, if we're still interested in such things, that *Window Water Baby*

Moving will appear to constitute virtually, in its entirety, thirty-five years of cinematic arts. Thus, we will seem to have been ground slowly but exceedingly fine.

At the very onset, then, of this tremulous, momentary phenomenon, one of its real inventors—no, I certainly don't mean Edison—said that the cinématograph was an invention without a future. And that remark continues to puzzle me. It puzzled me for a very long time, but after a while I began to construct a tentative reading of it. What did Lumière mean when he said that the cinématograph, and of course he was referring to his machine, had no future? I think there are two possible readings, or I can imagine two at least, of that remark that are neither complementary nor convergent but are coeval, and I will present them in a brief sketch.

There's a story, and I might as well quote it since I always do, a story of Borges—yes, he's going to quote Borges again—in which he speaks of a series of circumstances that surround a project that was never completed, and that project was the pleasure dome or pleasure garden or system of palaces or what have you of Kublai Khan.⁶ I think most of us know the circumstances surrounding Coleridge's attempt to say something about that project. He had received, very much in the terms of the times, the entirety of the poem, all its assonances and alliterations, during an opium dream from which he awoke, and, like a good servant of the Muse, he began to transcribe the instructions. This is rhetoric familiar enough, I think, from our own time. And a knock at the door interrupted him. A person from the neighboring village of Porlock, whom he did not know, barged into the house, took up his afternoon, and then vanished back into that Porlock from which that person had proceeded. And when the stranger was gone, Coleridge found that his poem had evacuated along with him. Borges then goes on to point out that not only was the poem never completed, not only was the pretext never built, but the original architect of Kublai Khan's system of palaces received his instructions, his blueprints so to speak, also in a dream, a dream that he, the architect, was never quite able to remember in its entirety either. And Borges closes his brief pseudo-essay with the remark that we may have here a series of events in which a new idea was struggling to come into the world, not necessarily the specific palace perhaps, something glimpsed thus far only in outline. There is, of course, an implied prediction in that, presumably some centuries hence, when we have perhaps changed the forms of our ratiocinations and reserve our dreams for less technical matters, someone may find himself or herself confronted with Kublai Khan's system of palaces, whatever it is, in broad daylight, so to speak, and at that point the idea, heaven help us, will have found its way into the world.

I might conjecture in parallel with that, and this is entirely conjecture, but one whose eventuation will be drastically forced in the near future in any case, that the photograph and then film and now, heaven help us, that thing that begins with "v," may eventually be seen not as a series of separate but somehow

6. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Dream of Coleridge," *Selected Nonfictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999). Ed.

mysteriously related—what to call them?—in the technical sense perhaps “excrements” would be reasonable—more indeed as parts of something, as tentative attempts, at once complete and approximate, to construct something that will amount to an arena for thought, and presumably, as well, an arena of power, commensurate with that of language.

My other conjecture makes Lumière perhaps a more philosophical figure than he was. One finds out, I guess, who the philosophers were by a process of historical Monday-morning quarterbacking. Philosophy is not of the present. After all, a decade ago, Andy Warhol was a philosopher for five minutes. But in Lumière’s case, he was touched for a moment with an insight, newly implied if not original, about history. From a certain point of view it was impossible at the beginning, as Lumière said “let there be light,” for the cinematograph to have a future because it did not have a past. Now the future is, after all, something that we manufacture. We can be willful about it and perverse, if we wish, but nevertheless even our willfulness, even our perversity is ordinarily understood to be subsumed by a temporal machine containing and originated and guided by human beings called historical process. Until such time as there is a past of some sort, a history, furthermore, of some sort, that is, a past which has been examined, has been subjected to a critical, a theoretical analysis, there can be no future because there is no apparatus for prediction and for extrapolation. I do not mean, of course, that history in any exact sense is something that is guaranteed by the possession of a past. Only its possibility is guaranteed. But the first work of the proto-cinema, in that light, was to begin to provide films with a past. Well, heaven knows, it has done so. In fact, it has quite a few pasts. There is now the gradual and sketchy discernment of something that we might call a history. There is also that quite regular past that everything has, which is a big pile of rubbish. There was a long period in between during which film as a general practice even has finally managed to acquire its share of guilt by having worked both sides of every street it could find.

So that it is only now, I think, that it begins to be possible to imagine a future, to construct, to predict a future for film, or for what we may generically agree to call film and its successors, because it is only now that we can begin to construct a history and, within that history, a finite and ordered set of monuments, if we wish to use T. S. Eliot’s terms, that is to constitute a tradition. After a century, nevertheless, it is still true that no one knows even how to begin to write the sort of thing that film through its affiliation with the sciences might expect of itself, that is a *Principia Cinematica*, presumably in three fat volumes entitled, in order: I. Preliminary Definitions; II. Principles of Sequence; III. Principles of Simultaneity. The wish for such a thing is somewhat like the wish of a certain aphorist who said—I believe the last of his aphorisms, or at least the last that I have read—that he would like to know the name of the last book that will ever be published.

So that finally, there is one last thing we should stop doing. We should stop calling ourselves new. We are not. They were new. We are old, and we have not

necessarily aged as well as we should. To cite Eliot again: he reports himself as answering someone who objected to, I suppose, Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer on the grounds that we know more than they did by replying, “yes, we do, and they are precisely what we know.” We also know more than that very early cinema did. Unfortunately, they are not precisely what we know. We are only beginning to penetrate the phantom, the fiction of the copious and the readily available, to poke around in dusty attics, into the sort of mausoleums guaranteed by a rapacious copyright system, for example, and to retrieve heaven knows what—probably not Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer—it would be nice to know who the Homer of films will ultimately be perceived as, by the way, let alone the Dante—but at least something of the context in which those texts, if they ultimately are exhumed, will be perceived.

To that end, then, I have brought along thirty minutes or so of such rubbish, which presumably contains embedded in it a Stradivarius or a scarab or something priceless. This is simply a roll, upon which I won’t comment at all, from the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress. I wouldn’t be surprised if other such things have been exhumed at this party earlier in the week. My principle of selection is so embarrassing that I don’t propose to tell you anything about it at all, but it demonstrates something of that past which, like all pasts, is self-proclaiming, repetitive, redundant, naughty, sometimes astonishing, and, in this case, on the principle that nothing much was made of it at the time, essentially impenetrable to us. It is by that mechanism that this body of material, whatever it is, then imposes upon us the responsibility of inventing it.