

The following text is an edited transcript of P. Adams Sitney's introduction of Hollis Frampton's films shown by ROOM EAST in Anthology Film Archives on 15 November, 2015.

SURFACE TENSION

The performer is a figure Frampton knew from the art world, Kasper Koenig, who then was a young man having come from both Germany and Sweden to the United States before he went off to Canada where he directed the Nova Scotia College of Art, and then to Germany where he became a great book dealer and professor. Koenig was, like Frampton, a kind of wunderkind, who by the age of 23, had mounted a major Claes Oldenburg retrospective at the Moderna Museet in Sweden. The only thing you should know, if you don't speak German, is that the German Koenig speaks in the middle part of the film is all titled in various ways in the third part of the film; so don't worry that you're missing something.

(NOSTALGIA)

(...) Two years after making Surface Tension (1968) Frampton made an important film, which unfortunately could not be shown in today's program because it's so much longer than those for which we have time. It's called Zorns Lemma and it's an hour long. Many believe it's his greatest film. It's certainly the major turning point in his career, by which point he emerges as an internationally known and deeply respected avant-garde filmmaker. It is his fullest implicit theoretical statement on film about the nature of cinema. The title comes from set theory and it is Frampton's witty invention to think of film shots, and the potential organization of film shots, as equivalent to elements in set theory.

After Zorns Lemma, he began to make one of his pet projects into film. He had always thought he was going to publish a large volume of his poems with a title from Greek, called Hapax Legomena. Instead, he produced a series of seven films entitled Hapax Legomena. Now "Hapax Legomena" is a common expression in Greek philology. Since Greek and Latin are no longer spoken, no longer being written in their ancient forms, there are a finite number of words in either Greek or Latin. Some of those words occur only once in all the surviving literature. The term for a word that appears only once in the surviving literature is a "Hapax" or "Hapax Legomena", "only once read." It causes a particular problem for the philologists; for the way in which they determine the meaning of a word is by comparing its various usages and their contexts. In the case of a "Hapax", you have only the context and the etymology, so we never know whether this is the normal use of the word or if someone is using it ironically or in a special case. Frampton loved this kind of erudite title.

It turns out that Hapax Legomena as a series was like a number of other important serial films. They constitute almost a genre and either coincidentally, or perhaps not coincidentally, almost all of them are allegories of divorce. Hapax Legomena was made during the period in which Frampton's marriage was breaking up. There are any number of elements in the later parts of the film, but not in (nostalgia), that refer to hostility within couples and their verbal wars. Here, however, the implication and part of the autobiographical context is the interpenetration of male heterosexuality with success in the art world and success in art making.

One of the things that is present in Surface Tension is the repetition of the German in the English superimposed titles, but with the slight displacement of their order. The words that we see on the screen which describe a three-part film that, of course, is not the three-part film that we are seeing. Again, this is a very Borges-like device to make a film about the film which is not quite the film that you're seeing. This description of the three-part film is almost exactly what Kasper Koenig is talking about in the middle section of the film where we hear his voice. The first section of the film we hear nothing but a telephone ringing, while his eight minute long description of the film is shown in fast motion some seven times, each lasting only 30 seconds because of the fact motion. As he describes this three-part film, we see the words but they're not in exactly the same order, with some elements introduced and some elements removed.

It's that displacement of sound and picture, or of words and reference, that is crucial to Frampton. (nostalgia) is built entirely upon displacement. The film is about a half-hour long, it will be the longest film we see here today. By the way, the voice speaking in (nostalgia), who says "I" happens to be that of Michael Snow.

The first of the pieces in Hapax Legomena was an autobiographical film called (nostalgia). It is about his transformation from a photographer into a filmmaker. It owes a great deal to the labyrinthine stories of Jorge Luis Borges. It seems also to be somewhat of a parody of an enormously successful film of the 1960s that did wonders for every camera store in the Western world, and that is Antonioni's Blow Up. Blow Up presented a young photographer as a sexual hero; and instantly camera stores were selling cameras all over the place. Frampton had an ironic relationship to this particular work.

Frampton thought of cinema as the place to explore the nature of time, the associations and disassociations of sound and image, and the paradoxical nature of representation. In Surface Tension, he was illustrating these notions: the problem with time is self-evident there; so are the displacement of sound and image and the paradoxical image that he creates by putting a fish tank by the sea and letting the sea wash over the fish tank, although we

can't see, obviously, that the fish is enclosed in glass; in this way, the image is such a paradox. But by the time of (nostalgia), he had discovered a fully articulate cinematic form for all of these elements of displacement of temporality and of paradox.

Actually, what we are seeing most of the time in this film is a silent ash burning on a hot plate. The same shot, the same camera position time and again, and each time a different ash appears. Only the ash is different. But that's only apparent after we have looked at the image and put together a kind of story about the images. Very soon in the film we realize that we are first hearing a description of an image that will come later. Once we realize that, a very curious mechanism has to go on in our minds; that is, in our noetic imaginations. We are imagining what the next photograph will look like. Of course it never can quite fit what we think. At the same time as a new photograph appears, we are trying to remember everything the voiceover narrator said about the previous one. These two mechanisms of anticipation and retrospection are going on while we are looking at the image; and the image itself is paradoxical insofar as it is photographically vertical, only to be reduced to a kind of horizontality as the flames reach up towards us and the picture is destroyed.

All the time we are getting a kind of elliptical narrative of the career of a photographer who becomes a filmmaker. As he does it, he is giving us elaborate parodies of various aspects of art historical discourse. Most obviously and hilariously, Panofskyan iconography for the two toilets in the loft he was building. But there is also a kind of Greenbergian formalism for the description of the man with the grapefruits, or Harold Rosenberg's version of Abstract Expressionism for the spaghetti. And, all through the film, a kind of Vassarian gossip about how artists make what they make and what is involved. So we are in the language of artists and finally, in that final image, in that final story, we are given a mystery story.

One other thing, the language, the "I", the very self that speaks is Michael Snow, and thus Frampton gets Michael Snow to apologize to Michael Snow for fucking up his poster, a wonderful Framptonian gesture. So, even the term "I", which is so personal, the name we call ourselves by, can be put into another place in this film about the paradoxes of the selfhood in which the entire body is transformed and only perhaps the nervous system remains. So finally, in the end, there is an allusion to the most prominent filmmaker in the domain of the avant-garde cinema at the time this film was made, which is Stan Brakhage. His entire enterprise consisted of making cinema in order to show what he sees, realizing the complications and impossibility of a mimesis of his vision. So when Frampton says "Do you see what I see?" he is in a sense being a Brakhagian parodist because of course you cannot see what he sees. The answer is 'No, I don't see what you see,' or else, thinking of the structure of the film, you might ask yourself 'What was that first image?' I think it was his studio. That would be really uncanny. If a truck

pulls in and it reflects a window and you see your own studio, that would be really uncanny. If that should happen, there's a terrible solipsism suddenly descending upon one, an uncanny chance occurrence in the art— photography— that has so much to do with otherness. Or else, even if what we see is his own monogram, "HF"— we see it at the end too— he is suffering from a kind of terrible solipsism. The whole thing is an elaborate, Borgesian, witty comment on the very nature of what constitutes cinema and its relationship to representation.

APPARATUS SUM

The next film, which was made at the same time but was later put into a work called Magellan, an elaborate master film --it was supposed to be the longest film ever made, the most complex film ever made, but Frampton didn't live to finish it. He was obsessed with his entire life with the figure of Ferdinand Magellan, the first man to try to sail around the world, but he didn't get to sail around the world because he died in the Philippines. Ironically, Frampton, who was projecting this film that was to be shown over 365 days, one film each day, with special films for the equinox and a whole celebration of films for Frampton's birthday, a kind of Joycean, Finnegans Wake project, which also could be seen in one sitting of 25 hours long, never got to make the whole film. He would incorporate into that film the little film we're about to see, called Apparatus Sum.

Frampton knew Latin quite well, and he knew Greek. "Apparatus Sum" in Latin means either "I am thoroughly prepared," or it could mean "I am a machine." Now Frampton would've read in Film Culture Magazine, just about the time he was getting interested in becoming a filmmaker, translations by Val Telberg of the writings of the great Soviet filmmaker, Dziga Vertov. Vertov proclaims in the English translation: "I am apparatus. I have made a man more perfect than Adam. I can take the fastest legs from one. I can take the strongest arms from the other, I can take the most handsome head from one and I put them together. I am apparatus." So here Frampton is addressing yet another theoretical issue. The film is, if my memory is correct and it seldom is these days, silent.

Apparatus Sum is a deliberately shocking film, beginning in the style of his friend and colleague Paul Sharits, with color flicker, and suddenly what appears to be almost a Mayan head of an old man appears. Only gradually through the camera movement, we realize that this is an autopsied corpse as the camera makes its circuit of it. Dziga Vertov optimistically declared a kind of cinematic Soviet hero whose body could be reconstituted. Frampton is reminding film theory of the real nature of the body in this "memento mori" film. I think it has been misinterpreted as an intimation of his own demise. But it was made at the time of (nostalgia), long before Frampton had any intimations of the cancer that would slay him.

GLORIA

Although some of my colleagues have taken from the Latin title, "I am thoroughly prepared," and the memento mori of this film an intimation of his own imminent death. He was well into the making of Magellan before he was diagnosed with cancer. He had in fact made any number of autonomous parts, the most charming of which is surely the film called Gloria. It takes its title from that part of the Latin Mass in which the choir and the priest and the congregation declare the glory of God's creation and call for peace among all people of good will.

Here, Frampton creates a dedicatory film and in this act of dedication, he is using an early computer screen. I can see in the audience that many of you probably were born after the period when computer screens were all green. In those early computers, the words very slowly emerged. But at the time this film was made, the presence of the computer screen and the nature of the computer screen would've been obvious to absolutely everyone.

There was something else that happened at that period that is very important for the entire history of the American avant-garde film. In the early days of American filmmaking, the only way to copyright a film, the only acceptable way, was to provide the Library of Congress with a still photograph of every single frame in the film. Films are now shown at 24 frames a second, they were shown slower then, about a thousand images per minute. So these early five-minute films would have required a deposit of some 5000 photographs to be stored in the Library of Congress. At a certain point, the Library of Congress determined they had to change this system. So, in about 1908 or so, it changed, but all of these photographs remained in storage. Most of these films disappeared. Some of them were scrapped down for the silver on them; others thrown away; still others burnt. So the National Endowment for the Humanities, not the Arts, got the idea of an incredible thing to do: to remake a film on 16mm of every single one of these films. Take one frame for every photograph, and then reduce to 16 mm and make available to the American public at print cost (4 or 5 dollars each). The paper print collection is a collection of several thousands of them. The first filmmaker to explore this creatively was Frampton's friend, Ken Jacobs. He made a film called Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son, by reconstituting one of these films in elaborate detail. Frampton went down to the Library of Congress, spent weeks there, and collected a great number of these films, some of which he incorporated into Gloria.

I'm not going to say too much about the film, only that one might pay attention to the fact that the deeply unfortunate situation of the filmmaker's mother's insanity allowed him to improve his life imaginatively by virtually eliminating her from the story of this narrative. In the film, Frampton is also aware of the instability of his own memory and his own tendency to mythologize, so he gives us a coded system for his sense of the

veracity of all of the things he is showing us.

The two archival films are versions of an Irish drinking song called "Finnegan's Wake", which the brick layer, Tim Finnegan, falls to his death. But in the funeral, whiskey falls on him and he revives. That song was the nominal basis for Joyce's last and wildest novel. Also, John Cage, had often said that the most exciting thing in all films is to watch the dance of the dust that accumulates on the celluloid strip; it is better than anything else in the film. (Of course, all of that is lost on video, but we see that here.)

Finally, I believe that the allusion to the a "bushel basket of empty quart bottles" being the last request of his grandmother, was for the moonshine that would be served at her funeral, and the film itself constitutes her resurrection.