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Zorns Lemma

+ intro by Laura Mulvey

Hollis Frampton on 'Zorns Lemma'

I first began using a movie camera at the end of Fall of 1962. At that time I was being systematically forced into cinema in a way by my still work. I'd been working for a long time in series, sometimes long series, and there were things that began to trouble me about the still series. Such as, if you have a bunch of photographs that you believe cohere even in book space, let alone on a gallery wall or something like that, there's no way to determine the order in which they're seen, or the amount of time for which each one is seen, or to establish the possibility of a repeat ... so that had already made me think of the film. As a kind of ordering and control, a way of handling stills.

Then at the same time I was thinking a lot about the standard paradoxes about photography. You have all these spatial illusions, tactile illusions even, whereas there is a cultural reflex somewhere to believe that when you're looking at something it's real. Let's say. Even if that is the impression you're assembling only from the barest of abstract kind of thing ... and at the same time the thing is undeniably absolutely flat, it doesn't have impasto, it has nothing, it is perfectly superficial, it only has an outside. That paradox seemed to me most strongly embodied in some stills I had made of words, environmental words, where the word as a graphic element that brought one back to reading (and being conscious of looking at a mark on a surface) emphasised the flatness of the thing. And at the same time the tactile and spatial hints that were compounded with it, the presence of the word within the image, were full of illusion. So that I'd begun to make a bunch of these still photographs. And I thought, 'Well, I'll make them into a film', and I shot better than 2,000 words in 35mm still. With the idea that I was going to just put them on a stand and shoot them. And I did a little of that as a matter of fact. It's perfectly dead.

It was simply going absolutely no place ... Well, that's how the thing began, as a concern with that spatial paradox or set of spatial paradoxes, and the kind of malaise that it generated as you get farther and farther into it. There still are a few of those original black and white photographs. They all have some real object lying on top of it. The oldest one is the word 'fox', from the old Brooklyn Fox theatre, that I think is the first one I made ... dark blue sky, some little straw flowers or paper flowers on top of it as a memento to the sentimental nature of the occasion.

There are 3 parts, first part is 5 minutes long, soundtrack with no image, a woman recites in a schoolteacherly voice 24 rhymes from the Bay State Primer which was designed to teach late 18th-century and early 19th-century children the alphabet. The primer is oriented towards death, towards accepting authority, a kind of rote learning in the dark, I suppose. The second section opens with an enunciation of the Roman alphabet itself, with as little context as possible. The letters are made of metal, actually they were typed on tin foil and photographed in one-to-one closeup. That's how it developed.

In the body of the second section, the main section of the film, which is 45 minutes long, there are 2,700 one-second cuts, one second segments, 24 frame segments, of which about half consist of words; the words were

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Chelovek s kino-apparatom **+ (nostalgia)**
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Wed 10 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);
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Wed 10 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);
Tue 23 Dec 18:15

Xala
Thu 11 Dec 18:15; Sat 27 Dec 11:45

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alphabetised. The reason for alphabetising them really was to make the order of them as random as possible, that is to say to avoid using my own taste and making little puns out of them or something like that, much as the encyclopaedists of the Enlightenment thought they could somehow categorise all human knowledge or a large part of it under the initial letter of the name of the subject. So that it just happens that quaternions are found in volume so-and-so under 'Q' – it's crazy when you think about it.

As it is, it does generate some intelligible phrases, some odd pairings anyway. Let's see, there's a kind of Hart Crane line early on that reads 'nectar of pain', there's a phrase of Victorian pornography, 'limp member', which sticks out like a sore thumb, a limp thumb or something – straight out of *My Secret Life* or *A Man and a Maid*. Well, that happens of course – the words were mostly, not all of them but mostly, shot from the environment. They're store signs, posters and so on. And one finds out very quickly that very many words begin with 'c' and 's' and so forth, very few begin with 'x' or 'q'. One quickly begins to run out of 'q's' and 'x's' and 'z's'. What happens here is that essentially one is using a chance operation. What always happens when using a chance operation is that along with generating some things that you want it also generates holes. Fate has problems. It's always true. And one has to think a great deal more about the holes, having taken care of the operations.

Well, I don't know at what point the notion of substituting other images for words as they disappear in each alphabetic slot supervened. Particularly, I first thought all the images would be different. It would be what John Simon called (fake German accent) 'Just a jumble of imaches' ... And for quite a long time I held that notion of the film. The greatest bulk of time was really shopping in Manhattan for the words themselves. I can't say I did it day after day for seven years, but I did it for seven years, and I shot actually four times as many words as I used, as well as duplications. The word 'shot' comes up again and again; I think I used the word 'shot' five times. From which to choose essentially. Some just didn't work out for one reason or another. Rather than make 1,350 entirely separate shots. I didn't want to use stock footage. I could achieve essentially the same degree of randomness by using 24 and by dissecting them, exploding them, and once that occurred to me, the possibility of developing an iconography ... as separate from the words and what they were doing and so forth, presented itself. From then it was easy, I did shoot some images that I did not use in fact. There's one image I remember of sawing wood, sawing a board, that I tried several times to get together. Many of the images are in some sense sculptural, to do with kind of generative acts concerning 3-dimensional space rather than 2-dimensional space.

Hollis Frampton interviewed by Peter Gidal, 24 May 1972
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