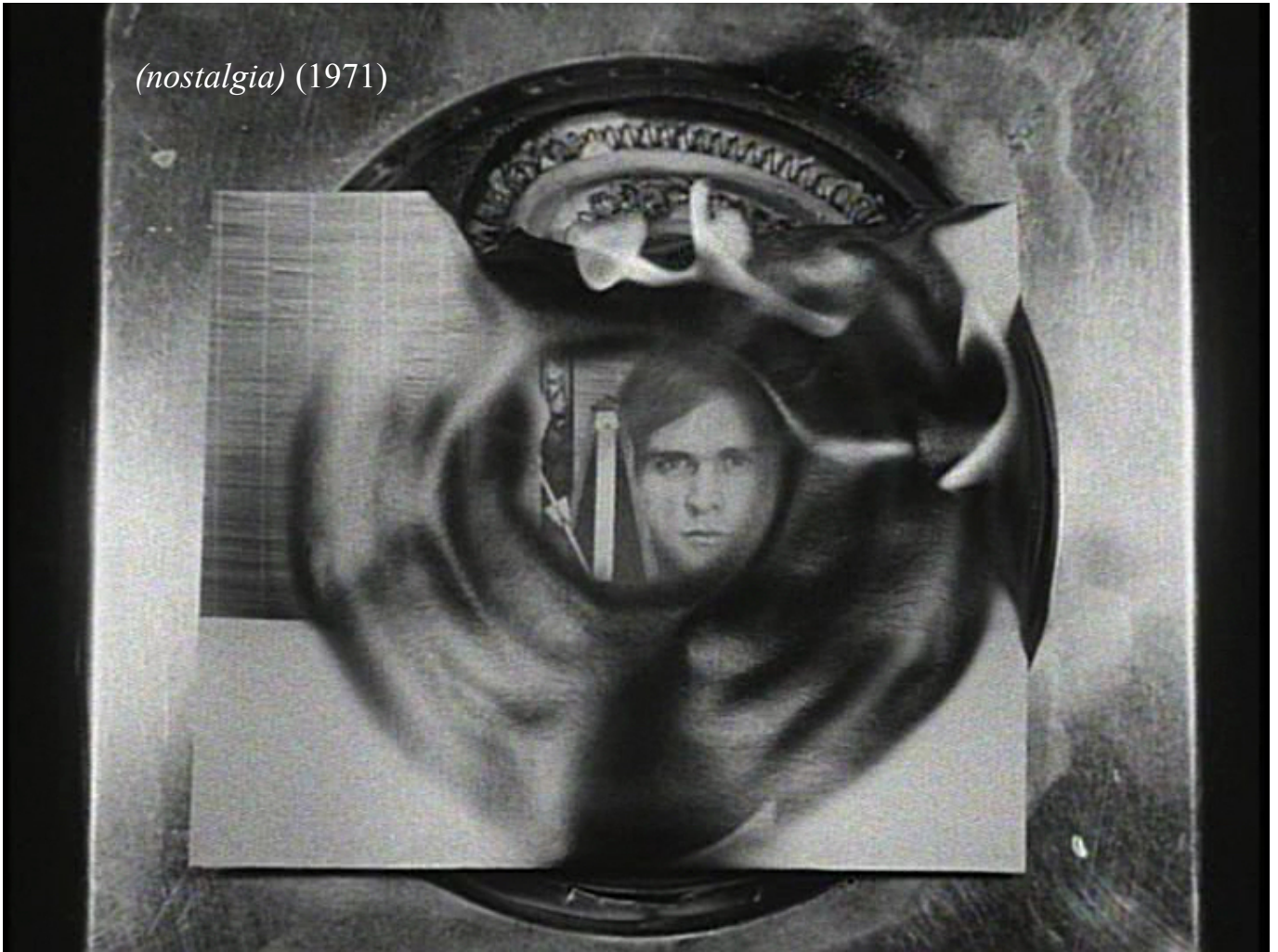


(nostalgia) (1971)



Like many other examples of 'structural film' (defined by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1974) as 'a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film'), the late Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971) is extremely and elegantly simple in its concept and engrossingly complex, as well as highly pleasurable, in its effects and implications.

Despite its simplicity, the film's structure is quite difficult to describe, and an initial description, as so often with 'structural' films (think of the description of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* [1967], as 'a 45 minute zoom across a room'), can be very deceptive. *(nostalgia)* runs for 36 minutes and is shot in black and white. The images consist of thirteen still photographs (several of New York painters, but also some of shop windows and other items, at least eleven taken by Frampton himself in the period 1958-1965, when he was a still photographer, and one or probably two copied from elsewhere, perhaps from magazines). The sound consists of a voice-over narration which describes the photographs and gives some account (often very personal and idiosyncratic) of the circumstances in which they were taken. What makes the film so fascinating and challenging is that this structure is modified to the point of transformation by further structuring elements. First, the voice-over narration always refers not to the still photograph we are looking at, but to the *next* one. Inevitably, this means that the first photograph we see (a formally composed photograph of what appears to be a professional dark room, probably not taken by Frampton) is never described

in the voice-over, while the final segment of voice-over (perhaps the most intensely personal and enigmatic) describes a photograph which we never see. Second, the still photographic prints have been shot, from directly above, lying on an electric heating ring: as we look at each print, the shape of the ring soon begins to burn through and ignite the print, so that by the end of each segment we are looking at the burnt out cinders of the original prints. Between each print-to-cinder segment is a short stretch of black leader, so that each segment 'starts up' anew.

Needless to say, the initial energies of the spectator (certainly any spectator unfamiliar with the film) are largely taken up with imposing some sense on the basic elements of the film's structure or system, particularly the sound / image disjunction. After three or four segments, this system is usually relatively clear and the spectator's energies can be released toward some of the other things that are going on in the film. Yet despite the soon-established familiarity with the basic system, it retains some qualities of enigma. The spectator's mind can never quite relinquish the frustrated memory of the first images and sounds which, as a result of confusion, he / she did not properly take in, particularly the first image, difficult to see anyway but rendered almost indecipherable by an apparently 'wrong' voice-over description. Similarly, since the film ends with a voice-over account of a photograph we do not see, there remain, at the end, tantalising questions about the nature of this unseen photograph and the further possibility that the film may be circular: is the final voice-over the description of that only half-absorbed first image, now already thirty-five minutes in the past? (In fact, it is not, but the film's system sets this up

as a possibility to be definitely entertained, at least on a first or even second viewing.)

For any spectator not totally in thrall to 'the attention-getting density of narrative events in a Hollywood film' (as Fred Camper put it in the American Federation of Art's *History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (New York, 1976), there are considerable 'pleasures' here. Not, self-evidently, the kinds of pleasure associated with narrative (though they may well be related): these are more self-conscious, more consciously participatory pleasures of problem-solving and formal play, the kinds of pleasure often associated with what has sometimes been referred to as 'formalism'. Beyond their often teasing and seductive first appearance, 'structural' films, and (*nostalgia*) is no exception, have a rigorously didactic – or perhaps the more correct term here is epistemological – impulse: they invite contemplation of formal relationships within film and photography. This obvious stress on the formal should not be taken to imply that they are somehow empty of meaning or function; they often have to do with some of the most basic conventions through which we apprehend photographed or filmed reality. *Wavelength*, for example, at one level demonstrates and explores the extreme instability of the supposedly 'objective' photographic process, constantly challenging our perception, while at another level questioning some of the elements and assumptions associated with narrative movement (and this is not by any means to exhaust the possibilities or implications of the film). A powerful relationship between spectator and film is set up, but it is of course a different kind of relationship to the one we tend to enter into with a dramatic narrative (and, equally, different from our relationship with the 'lyrical' films of, say, Stan Brakhage or Bruce Baillie, or with the 'counter-cinema' films of, say, Jean-Luc Godard or Jon Jost). Our relationship to a film like (*nostalgia*) is a very self-conscious and contemplative one. We do not simply reflect on the film: the film's structure encourages and enables us to reflect upon the way(s) we connect with the film. As Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury put it when they interviewed Frampton in 1972, 'your films are about the consciousness of the people who are looking at them, aren't they?' and 'I can see the way I project my thoughts into the film, [...] it's a sort of feedback system' (*Afterimage 4*, Autumn 1972).'

The most obvious example of this process derives directly from the displacement between voice-over and image, once we become familiar with the system. During each segment of the film, we are involved in looking at the still photograph, taking in what is represented in it before this represented content disappears as the photographic paper, the 'material' as it were, begins to be consumed by flames – a relatively short time – after which we are looking at a different image, of burnt paper (which nevertheless has a relationship to the original photograph). While looking at each photographic image, we need to try to recall as accurately as possible what the voice-over had provided in the way of description and context for it in the previous segment. Naturally, it is rather difficult to 'see' the image, since we have already formed an expectation of it, and when we do see it, a process of readjustment takes place. While readjusting and seeing in this way, we are listening to, and realising that we need to remember, a new section of voice-over commentary, describing the next image. Even when the film's system is perfectly clear, it is still almost impossible not at least to make an effort, however briefly, to relate the voice-over to the simultaneous image.

As I have indicated, the process of storing up the voice-over in order to bring it to bear on the next image inevitably

involves forming certain expectations, imagining what the next image might look like (and very often it is a surprise in one way or another). In this process, we become acutely aware of time as duration, acutely aware, as in so much 'structural' work, that the time allowed us to perform certain operations is being strictly regulated by the filmmaker and the system he / she has set in place. Despite its apparent minimalism, (*nostalgia*) is in no sense a 'slow' film; there is a lot for the spectator to do. All the mental activity involved and the agility it demands do not take into account the fact that for a lot of screen time we are looking not at the still photograph but the burning or burnt-up still photograph on the hotplate, which sets up an entirely different set of questions. Before considering some of these, it is worth remarking that the processes occasioned by the system of displacement can be usefully compared, in a perhaps rather abstract or schematic way (but, again, a way that we are very conscious of) with the (largely unconscious) processes that the spectator of a traditional narrative engages in: noting (narrative) information for future use, projecting forward narrative hypotheses, drawing on previously given information or clues to understand new narrative situations, and so on. Not that there is much evidence of any conventional narrative here: if there are residual 'narrative' elements of any kind in (*nostalgia*), they are certainly residual, consisting of certain tensions about the forward projections, perhaps, or about the precise way in which the heat will penetrate and consume the still photographic prints, since no two are consumed in the same way. In the sense that the photographs (at least the eleven which are Frampton's own) are chronological (if the voice-over is to be trusted, which is not entirely clear) and that the commentary is often strongly personal recollection, there are plainly autobiographical, and hence perhaps residually narrative, dimensions here too (concerned largely with the crisis that caused Frampton to change from still to movie photographer).

One of the common concerns of 'structural' films, or those sometimes placed in the subcategory of 'structural-material' films, was the nature of celluloid and the film / photographic process, as in *Wavelength*. Hence, for example, Paul Sharits' observation that: 'by reexamining the basic mechanisms of motion pictures and by making these fundamentals explicitly concrete, I feel as though I am working toward a completely new conception of cinema [...]. I wish to abandon imitation and illusion and enter directly into the higher drama of: celluloid, two-dimensional strips; individual rectangular frames; the nature of sprockets and emulsion; projector operations; the three-dimensional light beam ...' (statement at the Fourth International Film Festival, Knokke le Zoute, Belgium, quoted in Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, British Film Institute, 1976). Such an ontological approach to the material reality of film (discussed by Peter Wollen in his essay "Ontology" and "Materialism" in Film' (in *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 1976, reprinted in Wollen's *Readings and Writings*, Verso, 1982) was not entirely characteristic of Frampton – nor indeed of Snow – but (*nostalgia*) nevertheless asks us to consider a number of important questions related to the nature and status of photography. The burning photographs on the hotplate, for example, set down a number of delicious paradoxes. The photographic prints themselves have a kind of dullness which seems to emphasise their photographic status as frozen, 'dead' moments of past time. 'Deadness' and time past are then exploded as the 'presentness' of the heat beginning to consume the print asserts itself. The prints give the impression of 'coming alive' as their represented content disappears, their edges curl, the charring extends to

cover the whole print and the curled cinder of the print continues to bounce and twist with the heat. This 'coming alive' is itself, of course, being recorded on film in a new act of freezing. These observations are further marked both by the absolute immobility of the camera position and by the initial domination of the image by the flatness of the photographic print being replaced by the illusion of (albeit very shallow) spatial depth provided by the curled photographic prints and the now more visible hotplate itself. Similarly, although we soon know that the camera is positioned above the prints, looking directly down, the spectator has a strong urge, repeated with each new print (again, due to the force of convention), to see it as upright, as if photographed on a wall. Thus, each time the photograph begins to burn, a renewed minor spatial reorientation is required.

Nevertheless, Frampton's main interests in the nature of photography seem to lie elsewhere. Two areas in particular become foregrounded. First, (*nostalgia*) opens up a large gap or disjunction (primarily, of course, through the voice-over / image displacement) between verbal description and photographic images, which are here shown to be both essentially different from and inadequate to each other. For example, the tenth image of the film is described thus (while, of course, we have been looking at a different photograph and then at its ashes):

Late in the Fall of 1964, a painter friend asked me to make a photographic document of spaghetti, an image he wanted to incorporate into a work of his own.

I set up my camera above an empty darkroom tray, opened a Number 2 can of Franco-American spaghetti, and poured it out. Then I stirred it around until I saw a suitably random arrangement of pasta strands, and finished the photograph in short order.

Then, instead of disposing of the spaghetti, I left it there, and made one photograph every day. This was the eighteenth such photograph. The spaghetti has dried without rotting. The sauce is a kind of pink varnish on the yellow strings. The entirety is covered in attractive mature colonies of mold in three colors: black, green and white. I continued the series until no further change appeared to be taking place: about two months altogether. The spaghetti was never entirely consumed, but the mold eventually disappeared.

Almost inevitably, the (black and white) photograph which follows is a 'disappointment' and requires some conscious effort to be related back to its description, an effort which begins to point to some of the possibilities and limitations of each medium.

Similarly, every description / contexting suggests circumstances which are personal and anecdotal. The twelfth image is described thus:

This posed photograph of Larry Poons reclining on his bed was made early in 1966, for *Vogue Magazine*.

I was ecstatically happy that afternoon, for entirely personal reasons. I set up my camera quickly, made a single exposure, and left.

Later on, I was sent a cheque for the photograph that I thought inadequate by half. I returned it to the magazine with a letter of explanation. They sent me another cheque for the amount I asked for: 75 dollars.

Months later, the photograph was published. I was working in a color film laboratory at the time. My boss saw the photograph, and I nearly lost my job.

I decided to stop doing this sort of thing.

Here as elsewhere, Frampton provides a very strong sense of the past (his past, real or invented) being (re)constructed around the photographs. The point – made very clear when we see the photograph previously described – is that the stories which the photographs evoke are virtually 'absent' from them: the circumstances surrounding the taking of the pictures and what they mean personally to Frampton. In this sense, crucial parts of their potential 'meaning', simply can- not be read from the images themselves, and we are constantly reminded of this.

Frampton does in fact directly address the question of 'reading', in what P. Adams Sitney describes as 'parodies of several kinds of art-historical discourse' ('Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film', in Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film*, New York University Press, 1978). Most notable are an interpretation, which Sitney calls 'Panofskian', delivered in a very straight manner, of the religious iconography of a photographic study by Frampton of two toilets ('As you can see, it is an imitation of a painted renaissance crucifixion. The outline of the Cross is quite clear. At its foot, the closed bowl on the right represents the Blessed Virgin. On the left is St Mary Magdalene: a bowl with its lid raised', etc.) and a description of a found photograph, apparently of a fruit grower crouched amid flooded orange or grapefruit groves (the last image we see). Here again, of course, we get the description before we see the image; the description raises significant doubts about the interpretation of different elements of the image, stressing their potential ambiguity, then suggests 'a plausible explanation', then ends with an extremely enigmatic further retreat into doubt. When we subsequently see the image, our 'spontaneous' interpretation (insofar as the film has left us with a belief in such a thing) tends to correspond very closely to Frampton's 'plausible explanation' but at the same moment is significantly undermined both by the doubt which has been engendered and by a sense of the way denotation and connotation operate in image reading: a little lesson in the semiology of the image.

Much of the voice-over commentary of the film refers to the past in apparently relatively unproblematic ways, but photography and film engage with time and memory in troublesome ways, and (*nostalgia*) opens some of these up. As well as the account of when, and the circumstances in which, the photographs were taken, the commentary speaks in the *present* tense about the photographs being looked at 'now' (though the commentary's 'now' is inevitably rather uncertain in relation to the spectator's 'now' and the 'now' of the filming process, and so on), as well as about making negatives and prints in the period between the taking of the photographs and 'now'. The moment of re-photography on film is also, of course (again paradoxically), both the recording of the destruction of the photographs by burning (Frampton speaks in *Film Culture* nos. 53-55, Spring 1972, about being embarrassed by the evidence of his earlier aspirations, so humanely destroying it) and their preservation in the film (*nostalgia*).

As these comments begin to suggest, (*nostalgia*) has an active interest in the relationship of film to language, grammar and modes of 'address', an interest shared with a number of other 'structural' films, such as Paul Sharits' *Word Movie* (1966), Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), Martha Haslanger's *Syntax* (1979), George Landow's

Remedial Reading Comprehension (1970) and *Institutional Quality*, not to mention Frampton's own *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and *Poetic Justice* (1972). Generally speaking, we can say that film is very weak on grammar, unable to provide very much in the way of tense or person as compared with spoken or written language. Dramatic narrative cinema generally implies the present tense: devices such as misting images, dissolves and / or dialogue, were traditionally thought to be necessary to put narrative images into the past, to imply 'then' as opposed to 'now', although, once there, images seem to revert very quickly to the present tense. Similarly, the general tendency of narrative film has been to presuppose it is being told in the third person, even where a voice-over speaks of 'I'. Although the question of who is doing the telling is very unclear in most narrative film, this lack of clarity is not perceived as problematical, since the very act of telling tends to be suppressed: stories 'tell themselves', or so it seems, and the spectator does not feel him / herself specifically or explicitly spoken to or 'addressed', despite the fact that everything in the film is being organised for him / her. Direct address to the spectator is almost always a sign of opposition in film (think of Godard, for example, or, in a less 'fictional' register, Jon Jost's appropriately titled *Speaking Directly*, 1974). As we have seen, the voice-over commentary in *(nostalgia)* does directly address the spectator although, unsurprisingly, the directness is subverted. For example, the commentary gives a very definite feeling of being both read out and recorded and of there being more than one 'voice': it begins with a voice blowing into a microphone and asking 'Is it all right?' to which another voice replies 'It's all right,' and there is a renewed impression of 'switching on' the sound each time the commentary resumes. More difficult to pin down is the sense of ironical distance Frampton seems to take to his own past (in his notes on the film, he says he 'determined to comment upon the photographs as if in the first person'). For the *cognoscenti* there is an additional distance in the fact that Frampton has Michael Snow, a close friend and colleague (Frampton appears in Snow's *Wavelength*), read the voice-over, so that it is Snow who is in fact saying 'I – no real confusion here until this Frampton / Snow 'I' begins talking about a photograph which was a commission for Snow which went wrong, concluding, 'The whole business still troubles me. I wish I could apologise to him.'

The ease of spoken language and the difficulty of film images in marking person and tense is fully exploited in *(nostalgia)* to unsettle the spectator. What are known as 'shifters' in language – words like 'I' / 'you', 'now' / 'then', 'this' / 'that', which shift meaning according to who is speaking and to whom, and where and when – are central to the film's design. Typical of the commentary is a description like this: 'I chose the one photograph that pleased me most after all, and destroyed the rest. That was years ago. Now I'm sorry. I only wish you could have seen them!' or this (for the final description, of the picture we never see, and which fills Frampton 'with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again'): 'Here it is! Look at it! Do you see what I see?' By using 'shifters' in this way, particularly in combination with the disjunction between voice-over and image, *(nostalgia)* draws significant attention to structural differences between verbal language and the narrative process in film: who are / were 'I' and 'you'? What is / was 'this' and 'that'? When is / was 'then' and 'now'?

Though the impulses continue today, the 1960s and 1970s represented an extremely productive and historically significant rediscovery of 'formalism' by the North

American avant-garde. *(nostalgia)* is an exemplary work from that period of rediscovery marked indelibly by the singularity of Frampton's witty and contemplative sensibility. These are impulses and qualities we should continue to value very highly.

I have taught and discussed *(nostalgia)* enough times with Laura Mulvey that I no longer remember whose ideas are whose. Clearly, however, this essay owes a considerable debt to her always stimulating thinking.

Jim Hillier

Movie 34/35, Winter 1990. ©Estate of Jim Hillier

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