

# History and Ambivalence in Hollis Frampton's *Magellan*\*

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*Magellan* is the film project that consumed the last decade of Hollis Frampton's career, yet it remains largely unexamined. Frampton once declared that "the whole history of art is no more than a massive footnote to the history of film,"<sup>1</sup> and *Magellan* is a hugely ambitious attempt to construct that history. It is a *metahistory* of film and the art historical tradition, which incorporates multiple media (film, photography, painting, sculpture, animation, sound, video, spoken and written language) and anticipates developments in computer-generated new media.<sup>2</sup> In part due to its scope and ambition, Frampton conceived of *Magellan* as a utopian art work in the tradition of Joyce, Pound, Tatlin, and Eisenstein, all artists, in Frampton's words, "of the modernist persuasion."<sup>3</sup> And like many utopian modernist art works, it is unfinished and massive. (In its last draft, it was to span 36 hours of film.)<sup>4</sup> By examining shifts in the project from 1971–80, as Frampton grapples with *Magellan*'s metahistorical aspiration, we observe substantial changes in his view of modernism.

After an initial expansive phase in the early 1970s influenced by what he called "the legacy of the Lumières," Frampton wrestles with ordering strategies that will be able to give "some sense of a coherence" to *Magellan*, finally developing the *Magellan* Calendar between 1974–78, which provided a temporal map for each individual film in the cycle.<sup>5</sup> But during 1978–80, an extraordinarily fertile

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1. Hollis Frampton, "Notes on Composing in Film" (1976), *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video, Texts 1968–1980* (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), p. 123.

2. Peter Lunenfeld's chapter on Frampton, "The Perfect Machine," in *Snap to Grid* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), notes resonances between *Magellan* and new media.

3. Frampton, "Notes on Composing," p. 119.

4. *Magellan*'s incompletion is all the more poignant given Frampton's early death from cancer at age 49 in 1984.

5. See Hollis Frampton, "<CLNDR>: AN ANNOTATED CALENDAR FOR MAGELLAN / VERSION 1.2.0=DEC 1978," unpublished production notes, Anthology Film Archive (AFA) files. A disclaimer was added to the title: "(SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE)."

period of production for Frampton, the filmmaker turns toward a more ludic modernism to rescue *Magellan* from the reductive logic and arid systematicity, which he comes to think of as one of “modernism’s defects.” In 1977–78, Frampton’s essay “Impromptus on Edward Weston” criticizes the “frowning” modernist masters (Pound, Weston); and in an essay published in 1980, “Inconclusions for Patrick Clancy,” Frampton joins the side of those he called modernist “heresiarchs” (among whose ranks he includes Joyce, Duchamp, and Cage), and the “special heritage” they impart:

impossibly, in the midst of a double effort (repair modernism’s defects, reassume the burden of its emblem) one is required to be efficacious, and to sustain that thing, dogmatically abjured by visual modernism during its last days, which goes by the ancient name of wit.<sup>6</sup>

Frampton seeks to rescue modernism from its defects by combating what he perceives to be its dogmatic flight from “wit,” understood here in its most capacious sense.<sup>7</sup> Frampton’s embrace of wit is evident throughout his career. But, I argue, his critique of *system* becomes more and more pointed through the course of the *Magellan* project, and more discernible in the late 1970s as he encounters Michel Foucault (and his critique of Jeremy Bentham) and confronts the totalizing logic implicit in *Magellan*’s original “rationalized” and “totally inclusive” ambition, embracing instead a self-ironizing form of modernism.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I show how Frampton’s conception of metahistory initially burdens and then finally enables the *Magellan* project. His late-1970s self-critique of *Magellan*’s totalizing modernist aims leads Frampton to turn to a ludic modernism informed by irony, facilitating a conceptualization of *Magellan* in which aleatory and structuring principles are balanced through an engagement with early film history. I conclude the essay with analyses of the two late-1970s films that use early film footage, *Gloria!* (1979) and *Cadenza I* (1977–80), which bookend the *Magellan* Calendar, and which point back into film history as concrete metaphors for modernist masterworks in the arcana of early story films. In *Gloria!*, two short films depicting the myth of Tim Finnegan stand for Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In *Cadenza I*, a Biograph short, *A Little Piece of String* doubles for Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) (1915–23). These framing films signal an ironic relation to art historical tradition as early films are integrated into *Magellan* as naive precursors to modernist classics.

6. Hollis Frampton, “Inconclusions for Patrick Clancy,” *Marginal Works: Atopia—No Man’s Land* (Utica, N.Y.: Utica College of Syracuse University, 1980), n.p. [Catalog for an exhibition of photographs by Patrick Clancy, March 27–April 11, 1980.] Frampton only used the word “postmodernism” once in his published writings, in “Inconclusions,” and understood it to involve an internal critique of modernism.

7. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “wit” refers first to the faculty of “consciousness or thought,” encompassing reason, experience, perception, and knowledge, and later acquired its colloquial meaning of “cleverness” seated in “intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness.”

8. Terms used in Frampton’s *Magellan* grant proposal (to unspecified foundation), ca. 1971.

*Metahistory and Tradition*

In an early grant proposal for *Magellan*, Frampton saw the new project continuing the concerns of his earlier work (time, structure, language), while engaging new aesthetic parameters (animation, sound), all “subsumed within the synoptic working out of a single metaphor . . . the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan, the first circumnavigator of the world.” The two major conceptual goals are, first, the “rationalization of the history of the art. ‘Making film over as it should have been,’” and second, articulating “the notion of an hypothetically totally inclusive work of film art as epistemological model for the conscious human universe.”<sup>9</sup> Frampton recognized the “hopelessly ambitious” scope of *Magellan*: as a metahistory of film, it encompasses not only its past but its ideal form (“film as it should have been”), and models consciousness itself.

Frampton is faced with two central tensions in relation to the responsibilities that the metahistorical modernist artist in film takes on in a project of this scope: the first formal, balancing order and contingency; the second historical, balancing film’s “immaturity” with tradition.<sup>10</sup> The first tension derives from what Frampton identifies as film’s medium-specific “axiomatics.” Many of these axiomatics are found in the powers of control and articulation that framing, narrative (for Frampton, something closer to the notion of sequencing than story), and montage afford the film artist.<sup>11</sup> Balancing these powers is photographic illusionism, an axiomatic that threatens to escape articulation altogether in the plenitude and contingency of the photographic image, and the “affective universes” it contains. Frampton, taken early on with the long-take Lumières *actualités*, finds himself overwhelmed by the sheer excess generated by their “primal” image, in which you simply “place the frame [and] see what will transpire.”<sup>12</sup> In tension with this plenitude, Frampton attempts a series of ordering strategies, including mathematical, calendrical, and encyclopedic models mobilized for *Magellan* as a whole and for individual films in the cycle. In the end, both illusion and articulation threaten to be inadequate to the ambitiousness of the stated scope of the project, which means to account for both the axiomatic and historical richness of the art.

The second responsibility that the modernist artist in film faces is to film history, a history which, as Frampton understands it, is immature and undeveloped: “Of the whole corpus the likes of *Potemkin* make up a numbingly small fraction.”<sup>13</sup> The prominence of early film in *Magellan* suggests that it applies a partial salve to

9. Ibid., p. 5.

10. Frampton, “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” *Circles of Confusion*, p. 113.

11. Frampton’s turn toward animation, computer imaging, and sound in the latter years of the *Magellan* project suggest even further areas of articulation.

12. Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury, “*Zorns Lemma* and *Hapax Legomena*: Interview with Hollis Frampton,” *Afterimage* 4 (1972), p. 63.

13. Frampton, “Metahistory,” p. 113.

these anxieties, first in the promise that film might have a strong history to metahistoricize, and second, in providing raw material for ironic appropriations and reworkings of modernist masterworks.

Noël Carroll reminds us that Frampton's metahistory is first and foremost important for the fact that it is "artistically generative."<sup>14</sup> Carroll proposes that Frampton develops the notion of metahistory to reconcile productively two opposing approaches to film theory and art criticism of the '60s, '70s, and '80s that were central to Frampton's thought: "the essentialist approach and the historical approach."<sup>15</sup> We find the concatenation of these two approaches in Frampton's proclamation at the conclusion of "For a Metahistory of Film": "The metahistorian of film generates for himself the problem of deriving a complete tradition from nothing more than the most obvious material limits of the total film machine."<sup>16</sup> "Obvious material limits" conform to "essential," medium-specific qualities. "Tradition," however, introduces an historical dimension, situating the metahistorian's work in relation to a sequence of past artifacts.

Carroll notes one option for reconciling these two approaches: "Now the essentialist after Hegel has the wherewithal ready to hand to accommodate a commitment to essences with a commitment to history, [that is] the postulation that history unfolds . . . according to an essential plan."<sup>17</sup> The problem with this option, as Carroll says, is that it posits a teleology that threatens the artist's activity of art making; the new would be, by definition, impossible: "The teleological reconciliation of essence and history implies that once the essential destiny of an artform is reached, the form effectively dies . . . scarcely a viable *modus operandi* for the working avant-gardist."<sup>18</sup> Instead, Carroll proposes that Frampton turns to an inverted teleology that makes the artist an active metahistorian:

The metahistorian of film, though open to the history of film, does not see film history as converging on the present. The actual history of film is mongrel; there is no destiny inscribed within it. Rather, now, in the present, the metahistorian takes stock of the mess of film history and targets certain conditions of the medium, which seem to him to represent its quintessence. For Frampton, these conditions appear to comprise: framing, photographic illusionism, and narrative.<sup>19</sup>

14. Noël Carroll, "A Brief Comment on Frampton's Notion of Metahistory," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (Fall-Winter 1986-87), p. 205.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

16. Frampton, "Metahistory," p. 115. Frampton himself later declared, "That article, which is nine years old, was, in my mind, quite openly a manifesto for a work that I was at that moment thinking quite seriously about undertaking, namely the *Magellan* project." Bill Simon, "Talking about *Magellan*: An Interview with Hollis Frampton," *Millennium Film Journal* 7/8/9 (Fall-Winter 1980-1981), p. 15.

17. Carroll, "A Brief Comment," p. 203.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

19. *Ibid.*

As Carroll notes, these three conditions are enumerated in Frampton's 1972 essay, "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative."<sup>20</sup> Carroll continues:

Now in the actual history of film—the accumulation of footage since Edison—these conditions were not in fact rigorously and self-consciously explored. It becomes the task of the metahistorian to make up for this shortcoming, to, in effect, envision the history of film as it would have been had it been rigorously self-conscious, and to reconstruct it "axiomatically." The metahistorical filmmaker, that is, imagines what the history of film *should* have been (according to his criteria) and then goes on to make it.<sup>21</sup>

As Carroll concludes, "The crucial consequence of this maneuver is that it places our filmic tradition . . . in the future"; it "awaits invention."<sup>22</sup> The avant-garde artist is thus given agency in history.

Carroll's account elucidates the generative aspects of such a metahistorical move: the artist is freed to choose the criteria upon which the systematic "making film over as it should have been" will be based.<sup>23</sup> But Carroll's brief essay only offers two options, i.e., that history either conforms to a version of Hegelian destiny—which Carroll properly says Frampton rejects—or that history is "mongrel," a formulation of history that I would argue is unacceptable to Frampton's sense of tradition. Carroll admits he is less concerned with whether Frampton's notion of metahistory "is theoretically sound" than with recognizing "that this theoretical sleight-of-hand was artistically generative."<sup>24</sup> But it is clear to me that this "theoretical sleight-of-hand" was attended by anxieties and restraints, which stemmed precisely from the tensions that Frampton observed in the relation of art to tradition. For Carroll, "the metahistorian of film proposes to create a fictional tradition in the future, oxymoronic as it may sound."<sup>25</sup> But Frampton's tradition is not simply a freely invented fiction; it presumes a complex past to ground a rich future.

T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), an essay to which Frampton frequently refers, usefully recasts Carroll's terms. Eliot speaks of "the relation of the poet to his past": "he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. . . . The poet must be very conscious of the main current."<sup>26</sup> For Eliot, history cannot be entirely mongrel. Nor can the artist arbitrarily or subjectively choose the criteria by which he or she will approach history; Frampton's axiomatics cannot merely be

20. Frampton, "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative" (1972), *Circles of Confusion*, pp. 59–68.

21. Carroll, "A Brief Comment," p. 204. Emphasis in original.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Frampton, *Magellan* grant proposal, p. 5.

24. Carroll, "A Brief Comment," pp. 204–5.

25. *Ibid.*

26. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 441–42.

“one or two private admirations.” Rather the artist must bow to the demands of the main current, i.e., tradition, and tradition “compels” the artist to have historical consciousness:

[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense [that] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole literature of his own country, has a simultaneous existence and compels a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.<sup>27</sup>

Eliot, like Carroll, proposes a solution to the conflicting demands of essence (the timeless) and history (the temporal), a solution that also contains a paradox—and a cost:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the *whole* are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.<sup>28</sup>

Eliot’s formulation provides a neat synopsis of Frampton’s metahistorical project. Tradition exists as an ideal but not inflexible set of patterns; it adapts to change, existing, as Carroll puts it, in the future, awaiting invention by “really new” works. But what are these “great difficulties and responsibilities”? They are not what Carroll sees as the threat of the Hegelian option, the abnegation of artistic invention and the new, both of which are given a place in history by Eliot. Rather, it is that the very agency granted to the artist of the really new to change the

27. Ibid., p. 440.

28. Ibid., p. 441. Emphasis in original. Frampton provides a typically compact and ironic summary of Eliot’s point in a 1972 interview when he catalogs different conceptions of time: “Or: there’s time as an elastic fluid. The frog Tennyson leaps into the elastic fluid and creates waves, which ultimately joggle the cork Eliot. Or, in Eliot’s view, the elasticity travels in both directions; tradition and individual talent. Eliot, of course, says that Eliot has changed Tennyson, and that is clearly true.” In Peter Gidal, “Interview with Hollis Frampton [1972],” *October* 32 (1985), p. 100.

tradition carries a burden of responsibility: the modernist artist attempting to remake his or her art must get it right.

Eliot provides terms that facilitate a combination of appropriation as an aesthetic strategy (i.e., the self-conscious reworking of material into art works) with an understanding of the material's historical nature. Eliot insists, at one level, on a nonevaluative or nonprogressive theory of art history, one that would reject dismissing early forms of art as primitive, yet values the artist's intentionality and self-consciousness in relation to the past:

[The artist] must be aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe . . . is a mind that changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not from the point of view of the artist, any improvement.

Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.<sup>29</sup>

Frampton, via Eliot, escapes a teleological destiny of art—art does not "improve"—but he retains the notion of self-consciousness as a consequence of the accumulation of memory through history. Self-consciousness captures both a resolution of the demand for Carroll's essentialist and historical approaches and the ambivalence that comes with the paradox of understanding oneself as an historical subject. Self-consciousness allows the artist to make certain essential claims in relation to his investigation of the tradition of art by providing him with a subject position from which he can search for origins and attempt to discover what Frampton called "the really binding conditions of the art."<sup>30</sup> The method of that investigation, however, is one that requires a self-conscious understanding of the contingency of that search for origins. Historical origins exist but Frampton can only begin to explore them by considering himself as a contingent historical subject. Frampton *needs* history to ground his search *and* enforce its contingency.

But the artist must have a sufficiently "ordered" tradition to modify. Through the mid-1970s, Frampton often expressed anxiety about his need to complete *Magellan* given that it "needed to establish its own [historical] context." At a discussion in 1977 in San Francisco, he worries about the problem of making a large work like *Magellan*:

OK, *Finnegans Wake*, a bulky work, assumes the existence of literature. I cannot in the same sense assume the existence of film. . . . film has not

29. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," p. 442. Emphasis in original.

30. Field and Sainsbury, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," p. 73.

thus far achieved levels of organization that are in any means comparable with literature, and especially, I think it has not constituted itself as a mode of production on the one hand or a field of cultural potentialities on the other such that it can contain the large work. This is film outside of film, for the most part. So that I'm not interested nearly so much in performing a special task within film as I am of, not seeking, but redefining the boundaries of filmic discourse. So that my worries aren't the same as they would be if I were, for instance, writing a 1,000-page novel. I worry about other things, like, for instance, am I totally haywire? Seriously. Am I going to finish the goddam thing? You see, this is a serious problem. If you don't finish an epic poem it is a more or less magnificent ruin. *The Canterbury Tales* . . . *The Cantos* . . . This I probably have got to finish or I have blown the whole thing, in my own mind, since it has the problem of establishing its own context.<sup>31</sup>

Frampton worries that film has insufficient history, as an art form allied to and commensurate with other modernist projects, to contain a metahistory like *Magellan*. The problem of establishing context, then, falls directly onto his shoulders.

Frampton looks to early film for this context. In his 1979 Whitney Museum lecture on early film, "An Invention Without a Future," Frampton, like Eliot in the beginning of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," addresses himself to those who would make claims to an art's novelty without grasping its history. He concludes his lecture with a plea for historical research:

So that finally, there is one 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 to 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 that Homer of film 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.<sup>32</sup>

31. Henry Hills and David Gerstein, "St. Hollis (part 2)," transcript of post-screening discussion, *Cinemaneus* 3/4 (September 1978), p. 15.

32. Hollis Frampton, "The Invention Without a Future," lecture delivered at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 17, 1979, as part of lecture series "Researches and Investigations into Film: Its Origins and the Avant-Garde." Transcript in AFA files, pp. 17–18. Reprinted in this issue, pp. 65–75.



The context provided by film history will form the grounds for its metahistory. And if history as context is formed ultimately by texts, then Frampton can formulate a concrete strategy for working out the paradox of a tradition in the future: early film texts are part of the same tradition that Frampton's metahistorical project is forming—but they do not enter that tradition until they are exhumed. In other words, the construction of Frampton's dynamic tradition through the investigation and recontextualization of historical texts is facilitated both by the work of the artist and the archivist, condensed in the figure of the metahistorian. Early film is simultaneously the scrap heap of history and the monuments of its tradition as found and reworked by the metahistorian. Thus Frampton articulates the rationale and method of appropriation of film texts:

There is no evidence in the structural logic of the filmstrip that distinguishes “footage” from a “finished” work. Thus, any piece of film may be regarded as “footage” for use in any imaginable way to construct or reconstruct a new work. Therefore, it may be possible for a metahistorian to take old work as “footage,” and construct from it identical new work necessary to a tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Film history facilitates and is facilitated by the work of the artist metahistorian. The value of this appropriation is generated by the artist through the scope and intensity of his or her devotion, here “duty,” to tradition:

[The metahistorian] is occupied with inventing a tradition, that is, a coherent wieldy set of discrete monuments, meant to inseminate resonant consistency into the growing body of his art.

Such works may not exist, and then it is his duty to make them. Or they may exist already, somewhere outside the intentional precincts of the art (for instance, in the prehistory of cinematic art, before 1943). And then he must remake them.<sup>34</sup>

The burden of this duty is such that Frampton names “Insomnia,” a figure of exhaustion and restlessness, as *Magellan's* muse.

In the end, Frampton recasts Eliot's essay on tradition via the singularly appropriate figure of Louis Lumière, underlining the crucial role played by early film and the search for history in Frampton's project. Frampton refers to the title of his lecture, Lumière's famous aphorism, “Cinema is an invention without a future” (which also serves as the epigram of the “Metahistory” essay) and suggests that Lumière 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

33. Frampton, “Metahistory,” p. 114.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 113.



*Marion Faller. Hollis Frampton editing filmstrips, ca. 1978. Courtesy Marion Faller.*

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. . . . 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.<sup>35</sup>

All an artist's willfulness and perversity, his creative capacity for invention, is subsumed to historical process. That process requires historical subjects to uncover and analyze the past as a precondition to constructing a tradition in the future. This analysis, crucially, requires and values self-consciousness in the historical subject. Finally, the creation of a historical tradition is always contingent, not guaranteed—but it is at least possible. It is at this threshold of theoretical possibility that *Magellan* as a metahistorical project gets off the ground—and dives head first into the archive.

#### *Foucault and Frampton*

A useful figure to consider in relation to Frampton's shifting sense of history over the course of *Magellan*'s production is Michel Foucault, whom Frampton quotes in a 1978 essay:<sup>36</sup>

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they

35. Frampton, “Invention,” pp. 16–17.

36. I am not certain when Frampton first encountered Foucault's work. Notably, Foucault lectured at SUNY Buffalo in 1970 and 1972 (where Frampton taught from fall 1973 through February 1984), and in New York in 1973. See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 311. Both Frampton and Foucault published essays in the first issue of *October* in 1976. I am grateful to Bart Testa for pointing to early film and Foucault as research avenues for Frampton's late work. See Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Film and the Avant-Garde* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992).

confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.<sup>37</sup>

This quotation can be read as a distillation of the *Magellan* project. The axiomatics of film that Frampton seeks systematically to chart comprise the “order,” “the inner law,” of the network hidden within the scrap heap of cinematic history, that mass of “things” to be expressed in language. That “hidden network” is less exposed than brought into existence through the “grid” of Frampton’s investigation (most explicitly and schematically laid out in the *Magellan* Calendar), generated through Frampton’s “glance,” his self-conscious labor that seeks to manifest a cinematic language, which until now has lain in “silence for the moment of its expression”—film made over as it should have been.

Frampton’s affinity with the Foucault of *The Order of Things* (1973)—another metahistory of grand proportions—is evident in the striking resonance between the playful critique of the Enlightenment outlined in the opening sections of Frampton’s “Metahistory” essay and Foucault’s sketch of the classical episteme in *The Order of Things*. Foucault describes the modifications in consciousness that attend a shift to the classical episteme from the Renaissance episteme:

A complete enumeration will now be possible. . . . Comparison . . . can attain to perfect certainty. . . . Complete enumeration, and the possibility of arranging at each point the necessary connection with the next, permit an absolutely certain knowledge of identities and differences: “Enumeration alone, whatever the question to which we are applying ourselves, will permit us always to deliver a true and certain judgment upon it.”<sup>38</sup>

Frampton too describes a historical shift to “a time of absolute certainty,”<sup>39</sup> a time based on assumptions about the possibility of complete enumeration and seamless comparison in “facts”:

The world contained only a denumerable list of things. Anything could be considered simply as the intersection of a finite number of facts. Knowledge, then, was the sum of all discoverable facts.

Very many factual daubs were required, of course, to paint a true picture of the world; but the invention of the fact represented, from the rising mechanistic point of view, a gratifying diminution of horse-

37. Quoted in Frampton, “Impromptus on Edward Weston: Everything in Its Place” (1978), *Circles of Confusion*, p. 159.

38. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 55.

39. Frampton, “Metahistory,” p. 109.

power requirement from a time when knowledge had been the factorial of all conceivable contexts.<sup>40</sup>

Frampton locates the conceptual origins of the cinema in this time as a product of new defining terms of knowledge and consciousness based in a drive toward complete representation. Frampton asserts that before this time, representations of the world, i.e., histories, depended on “contexts” of understanding. Histories were acknowledged discursive constructions whose aim was not a mechanistic sum of facts but rather a conscious reflection “upon the qualities of experience in the times they expound”: “These artifacts shared the assumption that events are numerous and replete beyond the comprehension of a single mind. They proposed no compact systematic substitute for their concatenated world; rather they made up an open set of rational fictions within that world.”<sup>41</sup> Frampton calls these fictions “metahistories of event.” This version of history calls claims to certainty into question and insists upon the importance of perspective, the “glance”—whose specificity and even humility understood the epistemological limitations that any acknowledgment of perspective imposes.

With *Magellan*, Frampton was attempting to “open” further the “set of rational fictions” that would provide “contexts of understanding” for art and film, and move beyond his earlier acclaimed work like *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and *Hapax Legomena* (1971–72), which he had come to see as schematic. But this move, again, creates a dilemma, one that he saw reflected in the relative lack of university film rentals for the *Magellan* films:

What the hell are you going to do with *Magellan*? . . . I myself have the fondness that everybody has for things that are clear, for summary works, but it can't all be like that. Indeed, most of it cannot be like that. To use a favorite example of mine, the summary work is like the fictions of chemistry. Inorganic chemistry purports to study such things as “cobalt.” Well, in a certain sense, yes, there is such a thing as cobalt, but it is a product of the laboratory. It's a fiction. There is no such thing in nature as the chemistry of cobalt. There is dirt, but nobody wants to have anything to do with the chemistry of dirt because dirt is in fact genuinely complex. So you can teach *Surface Tension* [1968] or *Zorns Lemma* because they are like the chemistry of cobalt, but if you're going to get involved with *Magellan*, then, of course, you're up to your eyeballs in the chemistry of dirt.<sup>42</sup>

This is the central problematic (and pleasure) of *Magellan*: Frampton's metaphorical voyage is in search of the “genuinely complex.” But the problem is a double one. On the one hand, we have the chemistry of dirt, of reality, which exceeds the

40. Ibid., p. 108.

41. Ibid., p. 107.

42. Scott MacDonald, “Interview with Hollis Frampton,” *Film Culture* 67/68/69 (1979), p. 175.

complexity of our laboratory (or artistic) fictions. On the other hand, as Frampton said on another occasion, “We have this awful problem, of course, and that is that the universe is far simpler—infinately complex as it is—than any of our explanations of it.”<sup>43</sup> *Magellan* is Frampton’s attempt to confront this paradox: how to chart the already infinitely complex—the world—with the even more cumbersome aesthetic forms and languages at our disposal.

*Panopticon*

In his Whitney Museum lecture on early film, Frampton conjectures

that the photograph and then film and now, heaven help us, that thing that begins with “v,” may eventually be seen . . . 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.<sup>44</sup>

Frampton’s understanding of visual forms as an arena of power is most explicitly signaled by his allusions to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (and Foucault’s reading of Bentham’s device in his essay “Panopticism”).<sup>45</sup> From 1972 on, Frampton shot numerous one-minute films in imitation of Lumières’ *actualités*; in the 1978 *Magellan* Calendar, they are labeled “Pans,” short for Panopticon.<sup>46</sup> This renaming takes place concurrently with a number of shifts in the project: the earnest and then ironic working through and appropriation of modernist masterworks through the mid- to late-1970s films; a conceptual shift from the “chemistry of cobalt” (system) to the “chemistry of dirt” (the world); and Frampton’s increasing anxiety about the prospect of finishing *Magellan* even as the project expanded in length and complexity. The character of these shifts and the ambivalence they express are caught in a short fabula that Frampton published in 1978, “Mind over Matter,” which contains an invocation of Bentham’s Panopticon within a dark metaphor for *Magellan*.<sup>47</sup>

The seventh and concluding section of “Mind over Matter” describes a “becalmed . . . barge” on whose decks a surreal, Beckettian tableaux of modern horrors is depicted. The barge is a prison ship, a figural condensation of *Magellan*’s fleet with Bentham’s prison. It is escorted by battle cruisers and guarded by a nuclear bomb: “Somewhere beneath us, a thermonuclear device that

43. Lecture at Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, December 1977. Transcript in AFA files.

44. Frampton, “Invention,” p. 15.

45. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

46. Seven-hundred-and-twenty “Pans” were planned for inclusion in the final version of *Magellan*; forty-nine extant films are collected in *Straits of Magellan: Drafts and Fragments* (1974).

47. Hollis Frampton, “Mind over Matter,” *October* 6 (Fall 1978), pp. 81–92.

may be armed and exploded by remote control is our only warden.”<sup>48</sup> The Panopticon is named as a means of avoiding punishment: “THE COLONY SEEMS more distant, now, than the panopticon we were offered as an alternative.”<sup>49</sup> This complex concatenation seems to replace the fear of visual policing that was meant to invite the submission to order in Bentham's Panopticon with the contemporary, but equally indiscernible and ominous, threat of nuclear obliteration. The architecture of the Panopticon as a figure of containment, meanwhile, is replaced by the colony, here presented as an invisible point at the edge of an ever-receding horizon of expansion. In the same way, the cyclical temporal structure of *Magellan*, what Frampton likened to an architectural sculpture in time, allows for a simultaneous containment and expansion of Frampton's aspirations for his project.<sup>50</sup> *Magellan's* voyage in 1519–22 was similarly a figure of both the powerful drive behind the aspiration to expansionism and of the ultimate global limits of Western exploration.<sup>51</sup>

The narrator describes the contents of the ship and the purpose of the voyage:

I HAVE NOT MENTIONED OUR cargo: a small box, or casket, bolted or welded amidships, made of quartz and bronze. By night it is lit, blindingly, from underneath. Inside, there is nothing more than a double handful of greyish pellets. They are all that is left of the brain of René Descartes, exhumed on the suspicion that it might still contain the germ of a truly complex thought. The outcome of the inquisition is still to be revealed; but the transportation of that relic is the secret motive of our voyage.<sup>52</sup>

If we read the becalmed ship as the *Magellan* project, this description of its cargo points to the heart of Frampton's anxiety and ambivalence about the project. The more complexity Frampton seeks for *Magellan*, the more expansive and ambitious the project becomes. But despite the critique of certainty and system articulated in “Metahistory” and elsewhere—echoed here in Frampton's disparaging invocation of Descartes—*Magellan* remains an Enlightenment project attempting to redefine essential limits. However much subjectivity is problematized, *Magellan* relies on a claim to self-consciousness perpetually attempting to end around its own foundations.

One way of thinking about how Frampton evades this contradiction is to observe the increasing self-consciousness of his critique of authority and power over the course of the 1970s. Frampton does not abandon the metahistorical project but he is more and more skeptical of master narratives of cultural and artistic history.

48. Ibid., p. 91.

49. Ibid., p. 92. Emphasis in original.

50. Lecture at Carpenter Center.

51. Frampton's consciousness of the colonial aspect of his *Magellan* metaphor is signaled in his use of imagery filmed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in *Cadenza I*, the first film in the *Magellan* cycle.

52. Frampton, “Mind over Matter,” p. 92.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” one of the “difficulties and responsibilities” that Eliot projects for the artist is a responsibility to “the mind of Europe”—“the whole of literature of Europe from Homer.” Frampton understands that he is constructed by and subject to the cultural “mind of Europe,” as is the cinema whose metahistory he will (re)make in *Magellan*. Frampton also acknowledges what Eliot calls a second “difficulty” of “the historical sense,” i.e., remaining limited by the consciousness of one’s own contemporaneity, a mere “factorial of conceivable contexts,” subject to the demands and limitations of historical process. The success of Frampton’s mediation of these two difficulties is directly proportional to his ability self-consciously to understand and contain tradition as historical but not masterful. Frampton will reject submission to the “mind of Europe” and its universalizing cultural claims.

This rejection is grounded in the ambivalent and ultimately ironic relation Frampton develops to art historical tradition. The quality of this ironic relation echoes Schlegel’s conception of a nonreductive form of ironic skepticism that nonetheless remains generative for the artist. In “The Paradigm of Romantic Irony,” Anne Mellor summarizes this impulse:

The romantic ironist must begin skeptically. He must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness and of all man-made structures or myths. But even as he denies the absolute validity of his own perceptions and structuring conceptions of the universe, even as he consciously deconstructs his mystifications of the self and the world, he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas. Thus the romantic ironist sustains his participation in a creative process that extends beyond the limits of his own mind.<sup>53</sup>

Romantic irony acknowledges the limits of human perspective and is skeptical of totalizing “structures or myths”—and indeed, as Mellor states, Schlegel’s romantic irony emerges from a “post-Enlightenment distrust of the capacity of human reason to ascertain the laws of nature, or, indeed, any absolute truths concerning the ways of the world.”<sup>54</sup>

This ironic perspective can historicize the “mind of Europe” and the “order” it dictates but retain the possibility of an order and patterning to the past which resists history becoming merely “mongrel.” Thus, on the one hand, as part of the “rational fiction” of his metahistory, Frampton will aspire to make a “grammatically complete synopsis” of “the infinite cinema.”<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Frampton will ironize his own quest as impossible and contingent; in his lecture on early film he says,

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

53. Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 5.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

55. Simon, “Talking about *Magellan*,” p. 15.



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.<sup>56</sup>

Frampton does not give up on essential claims, but he places the hypothetical text that would articulate that essence in an absurd and impossible future.

The tone of Frampton's escape from a slavish relation to tradition, and this embrace of an ironic perspective is, I think, best echoed in Frampton's essay on Edward Weston, one of the modernist fathers—like Pound, Eliot's contemporary—whom Frampton had ultimately to encounter and defeat in order to work as an artist: "As an intellectual parent, he amounted, finally, to one of those frowning, humorless fathers who teaches his progeny his trade and then prevents them from practicing it by blackballing them in the union. We are under no obligation to put up with this sort of thing."<sup>57</sup>

Frampton's relation to tradition was always fraught. His artistic biography, as he freely admitted, consisted of a movement through a series of artistic fathers whom he needed, eventually, to outgrow: Ezra Pound when he wanted to be a poet, Edward Weston when he was a still photographer, and, I would speculate, Stan Brakhage in film. One rationale for Frampton stating that the histories of the other arts are perhaps no more than a footnote to the history to film is that it displaces the anxieties of influence that had plagued his earlier "failed" artistic careers. It is in this active spirit—full of humor, confusion, and ambivalence—that Frampton will engage Eliot's tradition, that "mind of Europe," by remaking modernist masterworks from the relics of early cinema.

Gloria!

In speculating about the "intellectual parents" he would prefer, Frampton suggests that

since some sort of choice must be made, I would state a personal preference for a chimera . . . a hybrid of Venus Geneatrix, who broods over the mountains and the waters, indifferently donating pleasure and pain to everything that lives, and Tim Finnegan, who enjoyed everything, and most of all his own confusion, and ended with the good humor to preside happily over his own departure.<sup>58</sup>

56. Frampton, "Invention," p. 17.

57. Frampton, "Impromptus," p. 159.

58. Ibid.



Hollis Frampton. *Gloria!* 1979.  
 Courtesy Canadian Filmmakers  
 Distribution Centre.

In *Gloria!*, Frampton cites two early tableaux comedies to represent the story of *Finnegans Wake*, using early film to prefigure a classic modernist art work.<sup>59</sup>

Appropriately, as the concluding work of *Magellan*, *Gloria!* is less concerned with birth than with death and—given the cyclical nature of the *Magellan* calendar—resurrection. There are two early films in *Gloria!*: a very short one-shot comedy opens the film, while the longer two-shot Finnegan story all but concludes the film. The actual conclusion is a text that dedicates *Gloria!* (and all of *Magellan*) to his maternal grandmother, Fanny Elizabeth Catlett Cross, born November 6, 1896 and died November 24, 1973. She lives from the beginning of cinema to the birth of *Magellan*. She also presides over the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, from the height of what Frampton calls in the “Metahistory” essay “the mechanical age” to the dawn of the electronic age.<sup>60</sup> This transition is pointed to in *Gloria!* by the use of both early film and a video computer screen to generate the text that constitutes much of the film. (The screen is green, connoting the Irish roots shared by himself, his grandmother, Finnegan, and Joyce.)

The text that scrolls up the screen begins: “These propositions are offered numerically in the order in which they presented themselves to me and also alphabetically, according to the present state of my belief.” The “propositions” about “I,” “we,” and “she” follow, and serve to describe Frampton’s thoughts and feelings in relation to his grandmother. The numerical order of appearance of the propositions is apparently random and chronological, a kind of automatic writing. The alphabetical order of importance (denoted by bracketed letters at the

59. One of the two early films is probably *Murphy’s Wake* (Am & B, 1903), although I have not positively identified either.

60. Frampton, “Metahistory,” p. 112.

end of each proposition) attempts to evaluate and structure the propositions, according to the “present state of my belief,” i.e., after a period of self-conscious reflection upon the first series of propositions. The metahistorical method of *Magellan* as a whole is encapsulated in this matrix, both contingent and ordered, except now, instead of “footage,” video/linguistic transcriptions of Frampton’s thoughts (also materially based in electronic signals) are worked through. This matrix is grounded in a most concrete form of tradition: Frampton’s genealogical relation to his grandmother. The first proposition, ranked “[A]” alphabetically, reads: “That we belonged to the same kinship group, sharing a tie of blood [A].” This genealogical relationship and the simultaneous continuity and gap it proffers enables Frampton’s elastic sense of history and the poetic power of resurrection. In *Gloria!*, narratives of birth and death are linked by the principles of genetic continuity and variation, ontogeny metaphorically recapitulated in phylogeny. The legacy of Frampton’s grandmother is formed by the memory of her offspring, “according to the present state of [his] belief.” And in the field of cinema, early film is resurrected, and animated with remarkable emotional resonance.

#### Cadenza I

The prelude of *Cadenza I* offers two creation stories that contain an elaborate set of allusions to origins and beginnings, both physical and metaphysical. The metaphysical origins refer to genesis: “In the beginning was the Word.” The film begins with a pan right on a brick wall, which ends on a hand-drawn letter *A*: the first letter of the alphabet (and of the encyclopedia), the beginnings of language. A graphic *A* also refers us to the first image of *Zorns Lemma* (an *A* typewritten into tin foil and magnified), but this letter is found in the world. In the long middle section of *Zorns Lemma*, the “replacement image” for the *A* (which Frampton called a “word image”) contains, according to Frampton, a man (Michael Snow) flipping the pages of a book—Antonio Pigafetta’s account of Ferdinand Magellan’s circumnavigation.<sup>61</sup> *Zorns Lemma*, Frampton’s seminal film on language and the encyclopedia, has inscribed within it the genesis of the *Magellan* cycle.

The second creation story in the prelude to *Cadenza I* is scientific and begins after the letter *A* fades to black. The screen soon begins to flicker; flares increase in intensity and frequency, like the effects of light leakage on the beginning (or end) of a film roll. Over this light play is heard the sounds of an orchestra tuning up. Then a thunderclap erupts into the sound track followed by the sound of rain; the colors of the light flares deepen from yellow to red and blue. The tuning of the orchestra just prior to the outburst of natural sound, like the letter *A* preceding

61. Scott MacDonald, “Interview with Hollis Frampton: *Zorns Lemma*,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4 (Winter 1979), p. 27. Also see Charles E. Nowell’s edition of *Magellan’s Voyage Around the World: Three Contemporary Accounts* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1962), which includes Pigafetta’s text.

the light flares, readies the organization of a signifying system (here harmonic music and written English). The physical world is created when lightning animates the dark elements, transforming a black void of matter into life. The sound of rain accompanies the final image of *Cadenza XIV*, a fade-in from black to an extreme long shot of a rain forest at daybreak (or dusk).

Frampton's elaboration of light as a metaphor for creation—moving from abstract components to the depth and substantiality of the three-dimensional photographic image—is embedded most directly in the fifteenth-century text by Robert Grosseteste (as translated and edited by Frampton) that is read in the third section of *Zorns Lemma*. Frampton suggests the resonance of the text:

The key line in the text is a sentence that says, "In the beginning, light drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world." Which I take to be an apt description of film, the total historical function of film, not as an art medium, but as this great kind of time capsule . . . that led me later to posit the universe as a vast film archive.<sup>62</sup>

This metaphor of light drawing itself out to form the world can be seen in terms of Frampton's metahistory of representation: if time expands like the waves created in Eliot's puddle, so the human elaboration and modulation of Light constitutes the human history of (visual) representation. Crucially, Frampton here suggests the need to understand film in relation to the total cultural history of Western representation; film, as the "Metahistory" essay argues, is the ultimate product of the Enlightenment quest for *total* representation. Frampton's metahistory will be the metaphor that points, in Borgesian fashion, to the enormity and absurdity of that quest:

This is my metaphor because I am a filmmaker. Borges has a wonderful story called "The Library of Babel," in which the entire universe has been transformed into a library of books. While conjecturing as to the actual structure of the library, he manages to reconstruct the entire history of human thought. All through this one metaphor! The cinematic metaphor seems to me more poignant, more meet.<sup>63</sup>

It is this model of a total representational machine that he posits to be devouring, in ways that evoke André Bazin's "total cinema," the substance of the world:<sup>64</sup>

It is not surprising that something so large could utterly engulf and digest the whole substance of the Age of Machines (machines and all), and finally supplant the entirety with its illusory flesh. Having devoured all else, the film machine is the sole survivor.

62. Gidal, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," p. 98.

63. Ibid.

64. André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, ed and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 17–22.

If we are indeed doomed to the comically convergent task of dismantling the universe, the fabricating from its stuff an artifact called *The Universe*, it is reasonable to suppose that such an artifact will resemble the vaults of an endless film archive built to house, in eternal cold storage, the infinite film.<sup>65</sup>

A final correlative of Frampton's metaphor of light drawing out the fabric of the world is his description, via Piaget, of the development of consciousness itself:

To the undifferentiated consciousness all the sensible world must be continuously, and infinitely, replete. The act of distinguishing an image, that is, of partitioning a "figure" from its proper "ground" is, if we are to believe with Jean Piaget, one of the first heroic feats of consciousness. . . . The infant mind erects a structure that is as intricate as the world, because, for the purposes of the animal within, it *is* the world.<sup>66</sup>

Film as a "vast metaphor for consciousness" is grounded in a metaphysics of light—within which Lumière is the prime mover. In what is the first written reference in Frampton's texts to the Lumières and early film, we discover, in a handwritten note on one of the *Zorns Lemma* production matrixes, a description of the word images: "With the exceptions noted, all were carefully framed tripod shots. I wanted Lumière's static camera—for which all cinematographic images were numinous and replete."<sup>67</sup>

The prelude of *Cadenza I* (also the prelude to the entire *Magellan*) gives way to the main section of the film, which consists of nine intercuts of two scenes. The first scene, shot by Frampton, is in color, a handheld long shot captured by a telephoto lens, of a man and a woman dressed in formal clothes, standing on a bridge, being arranged and shot by a wedding photographer in a lush garden. The second scene is an early film, *A Little Piece of String* (1902), which features two men ripping the dress off an unsuspecting woman. These two scenes are punctuated by a piece of animation, a dot zooming in and out of the frame.

The couple in the garden are, of course, Adam and Eve, just after their union, which sends them out from the garden into the world.<sup>68</sup> From the creation *ex nihilo* from God's Word, we fall into sexuality and history. The presence of the photographer satisfies the complaint of the female historian in Frampton's 1974 essay, "Incisions in History/Segments of Eternity":

The trouble with the Universe, seen from a rigorously historical point of view, is just this: no one was there to photograph the beginning of it—and

65. Frampton, "Metahistory," pp. 114–115. Emphasis in original.

66. Hollis Frampton, "Incisions in History/Segments of Eternity" (1974), *Circles of Confusion*, p. 93. Emphasis in original.

67. Frampton, production notes, *Zorns Lemma*, ca. 1970, AFA files. Emphasis in original.

68. This continuation of the biblical creation story is echoed and interwoven with the scientific creation story in the rainforest/Eden that concludes *Cadenza XIV*.

presumably, at the end, no one will bother. After all, history, like pornography, couldn't really begin until photography was invented. Before that, every account of events is merely somebody's panting prose fiction.<sup>69</sup>

*Magellan* as Borgesian metaphor for the history of Western representation begins, in *Cadenza I*, with a creation myth presided over by the photographer, who, within the cosmology of the Genesis story, is either God or the devil. Metahistory will begin intact with its witness, photography.

The first shot of the scene in the garden (which, significantly, contains only the bride) is followed by the first shot of *A Little Piece of String*: a woman exits a store and is engaged in conversation by a man. The two scenes are intercut; in the garden a nonlinear series of events ensues as the photographer gives directions, the couple pose, with all three figures variously exiting and entering the frame. The gag film proceeds in linear fashion. The man to whom the woman is speaking notices a loose thread near her skirt. A second man approaches; as the woman turns to speak to him, the first man begins to pull on the thread with various expressions of surprise and delight. Finally, with a flourish, he pulls the dress off; Frampton cuts, and when we return to the scene, we see the eighth and final shot of the gag film as the dress falls, the woman picks it up and runs back inside the store, and the two men laugh. The ninth and final shot of the garden features the bride alone and then fades to black.

Frampton points to the allusion to Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*):

Among the things you saw, by the way, was another ancient film that is in the *Cadenza*, the film about the bride in which two gentlemen, who we may presume to be bachelors, strip more or less bare a putative bride of some kind. It's a very muddled situation that, given its context, I think someone might get a chuckle out of eventually.<sup>70</sup>

That Duchamp and *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* should have an important place in an ironic meditation on points of origins is appropriate, both within Frampton's own development of *Magellan* from a sculptural project based on Duchampian "hoaxes" from 1964, and more substantially in Duchamp's concern with language understood as a grand contextual framing device constantly threatened by the eruption of sensual and sensuous energy from the phenomenal world. Frampton points to his own affinities with Duchamp's ambivalent place in modernism, and Duchamp's use of aleatory strategies and appropriation, by choosing to begin *Magellan* with this ironic emblem.<sup>71</sup>

69. Frampton, "Incisions," p. 88.

70. Simon, "Talking about *Magellan*," p. 26.

71. Reno Odlin, "Letters from Frampton 1958–1968," *October* 32 (Spring 1985), pp. 43–52. The film project, as outlined in early grant proposals (ca. 1971–73), has two parts with the same titles as the sculpture "hoaxes," "Straits of Magellan" and "Clouds of Magellan."

The conclusion of Frampton's discussion of the Duchamp allusion above is instructive in relation to the importance Frampton attaches to self-conscious appropriation. He continues, "There are films in that collection [Library of Congress] which are interesting now and important now as their posterities have modified them. In itself, the one man engaging the lady's attention while another one unravels her skirt is idiotic."<sup>72</sup> Material from the point of origin of cinema is not valued for its own sake (Frampton does not share certain archivists' fetishization of early film). In fact, in itself, *A Little Piece of String* is "idiotic." The metahistorian searching for the quintessence of early film is faced with its "infantile" rawness. However, by appropriating *A Little Piece of String*, segmenting and intercutting it, and placing it within the larger conceptual framework of *Magellan*, Frampton transforms its slim narrative into a grand metaphor. This metaphor doubles back to ironize the grandeur of its correlative, the already self-ironic Duchampian modernist masterwork it echoes. Frampton, moreover, establishes the metaphor precisely by crosscutting linguistic and visual texts: while the iconography of *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* bears no relation to the title of the early film, the narrative of *A Little Piece of String* alludes only to Duchamp's title.

Frampton here echoes Foucault's ironic relation to historical origins in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971):

History also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin. The lofty origin is no more than "a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth." . . . The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes

72. Simon, "Talking about *Magellan*," p. 26.



*Frampton. From the Protective Coloration series. 1984. Courtesy Albright-Knox Art Gallery.*

before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation.<sup>73</sup>

Frampton ironizes the Genesis myth and the modernist masterwork with an “idiotic” early film, a concrete instantiation of the cinema’s lowly historical beginnings, and thereby grounds the opening of *Magellan* in a productively ironic relation to history and origins.

73. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in his *Language, Countermemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 143.