intermédialités
HISTOIRE ET THÉORIE DES ARTS, DES LETTRES ET DES TECHNIQUES

Nostalgia, Recursivity, and the Re-Performance of Structural Film

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Résumé de l'article

À l'automne 2010, l'artiste contemporain Kerry Tribe a mis en scène une « re-performance » du film structurel de Hollis Frampton datant de 1971, *Critical Mass*, signalant une vague récente de retours nostalgiques dans le passé du cinéma à la recherche de technologies, de méthodologies et de structures d'exposition alternatives. Cet essai analyse la « re-performance » de Tribe aux côtés de la version parodique de l'original de Frampton réalisée par George Landow en 1999, afin de reconsidérer une tension temporelle entre le désir historique de nostalgie et l'avenir de la récursivité intermédiale. Ensemble, ces « films » déterminent un processus de formation du sujet spectateur propre à la spécificité changeante du cinéma, résultant en une tension constante entre la réception et la re-performance du cinéma comme un sentiment de nostalgie envers un événement qui ne s'est pas encore reproduit.

Nostalgia, Recursivity, and the Re-Performance of Structural Film[1]

CHRISTIAN WHITWORTH

For the 2010 Whitney Biennial, the contemporary artist Kerry Tribe staged a live re-performance of Hollis Frampton's 1971 structural film *Critical Mass*.[2] The actors Jasmine Woods and Reed Windle stepped into the museum's café as their stage, reciting verbatim from memory the original's improvised argument before a crowd of unsuspecting onlookers, many of whom at first mistook the commotion as a genuine, albeit strangely stuttered, altercation between a woman and her bothered boyfriend. Thus, the roughly twenty-two-minute performance mirrors the original, which unfurls according to a simple pretext: a young man returns home to see his girlfriend, a young woman with whom he lives, after two nights of being away.[3] He begins with the trace of a coy whisper, repeated with slight variation: "Okay–okay, how are you–okay, how are you–how are you?" She answers with resonant repetition and a slightly greater tone of interrogation, "Just–just fine where the–just fine where the hell were ya–fine where the hell were ya–hell were ya?" As the argument progresses, she becomes increasingly agitated with his enigmatic, circuitous answers refusing to divulge the details of his whereabouts: "I was just–I was just away for a while–I was just away for a while–a while...." Yet, the painful prolongation of the relationship's dissolution sets in motion a recursivity compelling not merely the couple's repetitious dialogue but also the continued re-performance of Frampton's film, of which Tribe's *Critical Mass* is but one instance.

2.   Hollis Frampton, *Critical Mass*, United States of America, 1971.
3.   Many considerations of this film cannot help but take a biographical tack, seemingly positing Frampton's film as a self-portrait. See especially Chuck Stephens, "Exploded View," *Cinema Scope*, no. 55, Summer 2013, p. 80.

For, in 1999, another structuralist filmmaker, George Landow (later Owen Land), released *Undesirables (Condensed Version)*,[4] a video which features a two-minute parody of Frampton's *Critical Mass*. Most recognized for his film *Film in Which there Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc*. (1965)[5] and his penchant for comic antics, Landow exaggerates both the formalist impulse and the historical associations of Frampton's original. *Undesirables (Condensed Version)* exhibits not its fixed position and fragmentary re-assemblage but rather an oscillating, continuous close-up pan between the man and the woman, who only briefly re-perform the stuttering, duplicitous dialogue before straying off-script to posture themselves among the giants of modern philosophical thought that undergirds much of contemporary film theory. While the details of this new couple's dialogue will be considered in greater detail below, the mere frequency with which Frampton's 1971 film has been re-performed across a range of intermedial forms begs us to reconsider why a continual return to cinema's structural heritage occurs within an increasingly diverse field of "cinematic" materials. Why, in short, re-perform a pivotal structural film on video and stage? And how might these remediations assist in reconceptualizing the temporal orientations of viewers' affectual encounters with evolving screen media, in particular the painful longing for the past so often assumed to be the defining drive behind nostalgia?

Tribe's re-performance is one example of a more expansive current in contemporary expanded cinema that has staged a revival of the materials and processes of filmmaking, thereby distinguishing between what Jonathan Walley calls "the material of film and the idea of cinema."[6] Stuart Sherman's "perfilmance" *Robert Beck is Alive and Well and Living in NYC* (2002),[7] for instance, posits a 16mm film documenting Bradley Eros and Brian Frye unwrapping the artist's head from a tangle of 16mm film. Additional "projection performances" by Craig Baldwin blur any such boundary between spectatorship and socialization via the intermingling of bodies with cinema's machinations. Yet, any claim to these projects' nostalgic remediations

4.   George Landow, *Undesirables (Condensed Version)*, United States of America, 1999.
5.   George Landow, *Film in Which There Appears Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.*, United States of America, 1965.
6.   Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October*, no. 103, Winter 2003, p. 15–30.
7.   Stuart Sherman, *Robert Beck is Alive and Well and Living in NYC*, United States of America, 2000.

as reductive longings for a "superior" past's lost object (celluloid) fails to recognize the ways in which they reintegrate film's materials into a new present.

Indeed, Tribe's re-performance reaffirms this persistent nostalgia for cinema's ever-evolving structural make-up. In the actors' embodiment of the original's recursive loop, we find a complex repositioning of cinema within a larger media ecology spanning film, video, and live performance. Yet the motivating principle compelling this movement across varied media is, as I will argue, a drive specific to no one. Drawing upon Frampton's writings and related works within the context of 1970s apparatus theory and its psychoanalytic critiques, I will posit the existence of a repetition compulsion that enforces the dissolution of cinema into ever diffuse spheres of material composition. In this regard the life of Frampton's film as well as the life of cinema writ large is predicated, much like the life of the couple's relationship, on an incessant separation between the idea and inscription of cinema.

This constant negotiation presents a profound opportunity to reconceptualize nostalgia according to the rhythms of intermedial recursivity. The term's curious etymological combination of *nostos* ("return home") and *algos* ("pain") has traditionally determined its understanding as a yearning for the past.[8] Scott Alexander Howard, for example, argues for nostalgia as an "occurrent emotion or affective experience," that is "both unrecoverable and desirable."[9] In his emphasis on the unrecoverability of the past, however, Howard reinforces a misguided understanding of nostalgia as a kind of diffusion or distance that maintains the pastness of the past.

Intermedial recursivity, however, reasserts the looping nature of nostalgia's affectual encounter with the past *in the present*. My working definition of recursivity follows Yuk Hui's metahistorical account of the concept, which traces through such thinkers as Schelling and Norbert Wiener, through such systems as self-reflection and feedback, a fundamental recursive phenomenon preceding the divisions among formal, historical, and technological categories.[10] Yet, I leave aside the cosmological question surrounding the existence of a collective technological imaginary operating on both sides of the opposition between nature and culture. Rather, my concern lies

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8. The term "nostalgia" was first introduced by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer to name the psychological symptoms experienced by Swiss soldiers abroad. Johannes Hofer, *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia*. by Johannes Hofer, 1688, trans. by Carolyn Kaiser Anspach, *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine,* vol. 2, no. 6, 1934, p. 376–391.

9. Scott Alexander Howard, "Nostalgia," *Analysis*, vol. 72, no. 4, October 2012, p. 641.

10. Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, London, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

with the specificity of Frampton's thought and practice, as well as the recursivity at the heart of the cinematic apparatus as it is borne on the bodies of its actors and spectators.

Across all three projects under my consideration, from Frampton's to Landow's to Tribe's, I trace three forms of recursivity put into motion by the re-performance of structural film: a formal loop embodying the couple's problems of difference and identity; a historical loop evidencing the influence of performative imaginaries on cinematic thought; and a technological loop questioning the embeddedness of the cinematic subject within culturally encoded media platforms. These three loops combine to determine a process of spectatorial subject formation proper to cinema's changing specificity, resulting in a mode of perception as stuttered as Frampton's original: a constant tension between the reception and re-performance of cinema as a set of continuous yet distributed memories, as a feeling of nostalgia for an event which has yet to recur.

In this temporal reorientation, media scholar Mark B.N. Hansen finds within Frampton's filmmaking a prudent anticipation of digital new media's interventions in human sense perception. In his compelling essay "Digital Technics Beyond the 'Last Machine': Thinking Digital Media with Hollis Frampton," (2011) he locates within the filmmaker's practice an attempt to both divorce movement from the cinema "as a technically-specified, institutionally stabilized regime of representation"[11] and, in effect, to "[instantiate] alternate, non-(pre- or post-) cinematic temporalities."[12] In short, he argues that Frampton's "cinematic aesthetic was [...] rooted in a media temporal modulation of movement."[13] While one could (as many have) draw upon Frampton's experiments with varying media platforms or his work with the Media Arts Lab at SUNY, Buffalo, my approach remains, like Hansen's, focused on the editing algorithms employed within Frampton's film and repeated in its various re-performances.[14] Yet, I diverge from Hansen's focus on the phenomenological experience of computational media by emphasizing instead a psychoanalytic symptom—a bodily pathology—

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11. Mark B.N. Hansen, "Digital Technics Beyond the 'Last Machine': Thinking Digital Media with Hollis Frampton," Eivind Røssaak (ed.), *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011, p. 47.
12. *Ibid*., p. 48.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Peter Lunenfeld, "Hollis Frampton: The Perfect Machine," *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000, p. 120–121.

inherent to the cinematic apparatus. In this way, I look forward not to digital technics but a form of perverse pleasure from which no spectator can escape.

In 1971, Frampton dreamt a metahistory of film in which he theorized the existence of an omniscient camera conceiving of all images, still or moving. As he famously penned in his essay "For a Metahistory of Film: Common Notes and Hypotheses" (2009):

> a polymorphous camera has always turned, and will turn forever, its lens focused upon all the appearances of the world. Before the invention of still photography, the frames of the infinite cinema were blank, black leader; then a few images began to appear upon the endless ribbon of film. Since the birth of the photographic cinema, all the frames are filled with images.[15]

Frampton's text suggests more than a simple de-empiricization between cinema and photography. It necessitates a *beyond before* cinema that locates the drive of the apparatus—the medium's technological make-up and spectatorial orientation—before its material manifestation. The insistence, in other words, precedes the image; Louis Daguerre's, Nicéphore Nièpce's, and Henri Fox Talbot's firsts began to fill in what before then remained purely virtual. Every photographic or cinematic object since the invention of photography is merely a return to a predetermined frame on this infinite, sacred ribbon of images *to-be*.

Invoking this holy metahistory, however, Frampton was nothing short of perverse. *Critical Mass*, a film completed later that year, begins not with any frame's image but rather complete darkness—blank, black leader enforcing the perceptual distance of the profilmic event. But clues begin to emerge, first through the occasional flicker of dust, the flash of a scratch, and with them, a few ephemeral glints of the projector's light. This primordial cinematic inanimacy, so it seems, may soon open onto its inaugural image. But out of the shadows of this prehistorical realm of pure possibility emerges instead the trace of a coy whisper, repeated with slight variation. Like the prehistory to Frampton's metahistory, the strip of black leader with which Frampton begins his film mirrors the

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15.   Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," Bruce Jenkins (ed.), *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 2009, p. 134.

case of disappearance, of departure, foundational to this incendiary conversation.[16] To begin a film with such an extreme visual latency is to mark not only an affective longing for the past but also a formal repetition of the present.

Fig. 1. Still from the film *Critical Mass* (*Hapax Legomena III*), Hollis Frampton, 1971. 16mm film (black-and-white, sound); 26 minutes.

Two and a half minutes into Frampton's *Critical Mass* (see Fig. 1), the first image appears. The couple, a pair of students at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton, pose before a white wall illuminated by a spotlight just off camera, stage right.[17] Frank Albetta and Barbara DeBenedetto improvise, for twenty-two minutes,

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16. Although Frampton used two one-hundred-foot rolls of 16mm stock to record the argument, which lasted approximately ten minutes, he began recording audio before he exposed the film and continued to record after his film had run out. Thus, the film begins and ends with sections of black screen over (or under) which the couple begins and ends their argument.

17. P. Adams Sitney, "Hollis Frampton and the Specter of Narrative," P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 115.

an unbearable series of profane allegations of infidelity, threats of separation, and false moments of reconciliation. Their divorce is, moreover, painfully exacerbated by Frampton's editing. The filmmaker copied the improvisation onto two additional film reels before splicing every line according to a predetermined pattern the artist termed "phasing": "two steps forward," Frampton later recounted, "one step back."[18]

(nostalgia),[19] another of Frampton's films from 1971, similarly plays with temporal disjunctions of spectatorship. The film is composed of thirteen sections, each of which features a single photograph placed on a stovetop burner. As the photograph melts and its paper substrate catches fire, a narrator describes not the image currently on screen but the one *to come*. As Hansen reports, "The effect of the asynchronous presentation of description and image is to activate the viewer's faculty of recollection such that the appearance of each image subsequent to the first one revivifies the now past description."[20] Upon sight of each image, the viewer's imaginary return to the narrator's earlier description incites the feeling of nostalgia for lost details occluded by faulty memory. As the film progresses, however, viewers train their cognitive abilities to retain such details. The result is an imaginary projection of the verbal description into the future or a prolongation of the imagined image left to the past. Like *Critical Mass*'s phasing, this distention of cinematic temporality reconfigures nostalgia as a longing for the future.

Steeped in Frampton's deep attention to the rhythm of editing and the relations of voice to image, *Critical Mass* invokes some of the basic tenets of structural film as outlined by film historian P. Adams Sitney in 1969: "fixed camera position (fixed *frame* from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation)."[21] Here, Sitney attempts to define a small history of an independent "cinema of structure" whereby the rejection of illusionist narrative for filmic constructions seeks to clarify the "purely" cinematic. But as the couple's insistent interrogation within *Critical Mass* teaches us, such processes of distillation and self-criticism, crucial also to Clement Greenberg's painterly modernist paradigm

18.   Scott MacDonald, "Hollis Frampton," *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 65.
19.   Hollis Frampton, *(nostalgia)*, United States of America, 1971.
20.   Hansen, 2011, p. 65.
21.   P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* [1970], New York, Cooper Square Press, 2000, p. 327.

of medium specificity, go, as the woman in Frampton's film retorts, "absolutely nowhere."[22] Exhausted modernist theories of purity, unity, and autonomy would find their breaking point in the mid- to late- 1960s, due in part, as Rosalind Krauss reminds us, to the efforts of such avant-garde filmmakers as Frampton, Michael Snow, and Paul Sharits, who promoted the aggregate nature of the cinematic apparatus by loosening its cohesive form.[23] Frampton's fugue might be seen, then, as the climax of medium-specificity's crisis, for the parts that once sustained the semblance of the essential whole—source, screen, and script—now remain in perpetual collapse.

If the "purity" of structural film goes, like the couple's argument, "absolutely nowhere," how do we proceed? While it may seem that the dissolution of these axiological principles of cinema presupposes the death of the medium, fragmentation compels new (re)combinations of old constituent parts. The direction of this movement is key: by drawing a horizon before and beyond *Critical Mass* we might start to paint a clearer picture of the ways in which history, in all its strange guises, persists as the re-performance of its own unmaking, the repetition of its structural dissolution. All subsequent reperformances of *Critical Mass* will confront the original, reassessing its material makeup and syncopated stuttering. But they will also point to a time before *Critical Mass*, to its blank, black leader, to uncover within its substructure a more permissive account of spectatorship with which to attend to the more current, *embodied* conditions of film's technics.

Landow's unfinished experimental video *Undesirables*, an intertextual satire on the pretensions of American avant-garde filmmakers and their critics, was first screened at the 2002 New York Film Festival's Views from the Avant-Garde program. Through five enigmatic vignettes (referred to as "excerpts"), Landow parodies some of the pillars of structural film, like Paul Sharit's *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968)[24]

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22. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, no. 6, 1939, p. 34–49; and "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review*, no. 7, 1940, p. 296–310.

23. As Rosalind Krauss writes, "the medium or support for film being neither the celluloid strip of images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of light behind it and the image projected before its eyes," Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2000, p. 25.

24. Paul Sharit, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, United States of America, 1968.

as well as Frampton's *Critical Mass* and *Poetic Justice* (1972).[25] The film is largely its own metahistorical account of the movement of which Landow was (and still remains) a marginal figure. As the story of its inception goes, *Undesirables* stemmed from a flippant suggestion from Stan Brakhage that "someday Hollywood will probably make a film about us [experimental filmmakers]."[26] Landow took the challenge upon himself, constructing not a Hollywood style biopic of Brakhage and friends but a strange collection of historical allusions. True to his filmic style, these allusions remain coded within comical renamings and restagings to be deduced through active audience participation. The opening scene, for example, locates a meeting of two men within a nondescript "old movie house" on the Lower East Side (akin to Anthology Film Archives) where a group of experimental filmmakers and critics have gathered, such as "Stanton Verbeek" (Stan Vanderbeek) and "Carl Shytas" (Paul Sharits). "We're all saints here!" exclaims the theater manager in a seeming nod to P. Adams Sitney's devotional text *Visionary Film*,[27] "Saints, madmen, and geniuses!"

Central to Landow's *Undesirables* is a parody of *Critical Mass* in which a close-up pan between the man and woman mimics Michael Snow's ↔(*Back and Forth*, 1969)[28] while attempting to follow their stuttered, back-and-forth dialogue (see Fig. 2 & 3). The couple's conflict still centers around the man's absence, his lack of communication, and the presence of an unnamed woman with whom he is having an affair. Yet, their argument quickly strays from Frampton's original, improvised script:

Woman: What were you so busy doing–what were you so busy doing–what?

Man: I was just–I was just being interviewed. It was only an interview.

Woman: You know you could've called me. I was expecting you on Friday night.

Man: I'm sorry but I didn't have time. I just didn't have time. I couldn't get to a phone. It was a very spontaneous thing.

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25.   Hollis Frampton, *Poetic Justice*, United States of America, 1972.
26.   Owen Land & Mark Webber, *Two Films by Owen Land*, London, LUX, 2005, p. 122.
27.   P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.
28.   Michael Snow, ↔(*Back and Forth*), United States of America, 1969.

Woman: You know what I can't understand is what you see in her. I mean you can't be attracted to her physically. It *must* be something else.

Man: It *is* something else. It *is* something else! It's the fact that she's brilliant! For one thing, she knows a hell of a lot about Christian Metz. She's interviewed him for God's sake! She's read Barthes, Baudrillard, Lacan, Baudry, Saussure, Foucault, Derrida—some of them in French!

Woman: Are you trying to tell me that she has been lecturing you on semiotics and structuralism?

Man: Among other things, yes.

Woman: Oh, please. Don't tell me that you haven't been screwing her!

Man: So what difference does that make? I thought that we agreed to have an open relationship, Marsha.

Woman: You bastard! You have been screwing her so that she would write about your films!

Fig. 2. Still from the film *Undesirables (Condensed Version)*, George Landow (Owen Land), 1999. Video transferred to DVD (black-and-white, sound); 15 minutes. Reproduced with the kind permission of Office Baroque and Estate Owen Land.

Fig. 3. Still from the film *Undesirables (Condensed Version)*, George Landow (Owen Land), 1999. Video transferred to DVD (black-and-white, sound); 15 minutes. Reproduced with the kind permission of Office Baroque and Estate Owen Land.

Changes in both the form and content of their argument clearly evidence the film's evolving preoccupations with the political, ideological, and material shifts of the cinematic apparatus. Through its allusions to 1970s theorists of semiotics and structuralism, *Undesirables* clues its viewer into the key thinkers of Frampton's theoretical milieu. And while we might read in the cheating man's mention of "other things" an equivocation for the physical intimacy of the affair, *pleasure* arises also as a contentious concern in the naming of apparatus theory's earliest exponents, Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry. Landow's parody not only edifies the tenets of their film theories but draws out the well-worn conditions of their critiques—a history of post-medium mantras and identity politics since. But only by situating Frampton at slight

remove from Metz and Baudry might we see how *Critical Mass* presciently provided the conditions for its sustained re-performance by enforcing its own obsolescence in the face of two ensuing affairs: video and feminism.

Landow's naming of Metz and Baudry in the same reverberating breath calls to mind the significant roles both repetition and pleasure play for their shared definitions of cinematic identification. Their attention is paid less to the profilmic scene, to the reproduction of reality, than the processes of return within the filmic apparatus and its psychic conditions of spectatorship. Thus, they postulate the presence of a film viewer who slips into the "artificial darkness"[29] of the hall as he does the dream, compelled, as Baudry writes in his 1975 essay "Le Dispositif," or "The Apparatus," by the "compulsion to repeat [...] a former condition," or "the desire as such [...] the *nostalgia* for a former state. [our emphasis]"[30] Cinema, according to this theorization, fulfills the viewer's wish—arguably an organic need—for sameness, for the "survival [of] bygone periods" and the repetition of oneness.[31] Metz echoes Baudry's claim yet offers in his pivotal 1977 publication *The Imaginary Signifier* a cinematic interpretation of the dream motivated more by the *economy* of the pleasure principle, a circuit of return to and from *pleasurable* films sustained by the viewer's good-object relation with the imaginary "Other" (the formation of the ego by way of identification with an illusory image) on-screen.[32] Thus, the auto-reproduction of the institution of cinema, which includes, according to Metz, the historically internalized "mental machinery" of the individual spectator, depends upon the viewer's endless pushing of filmic lack, the continual return to the absence of the object seen.

Metz and Baudry may have reserved their theories, like Frampton's *Critical Mass*, for the architecture of the movie theater and the celluloid material of film, but their descriptions of these psychological conditions find a corollary beyond the medium-specific demarcations they set out for themselves. Once *Critical Mass* finds new form as Landow's video, the terms of its spectatorial identification are forced to confront the immediacy of the medium's feedback loop. And while Landow's video does not model the accounts of "liveness," "synchronicity," and "presence" declared

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29. Noam Elcott, Artificial Darkness: *An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 4.
30. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura*, no. 1, 1976, p. 108.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
32. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Celia Britton et al. (trans.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 7–8.

foundational to the televisual medium by early critics like Krauss, Douglas Davis, and David Antin, it nonetheless parodies these "limiting conditions" by enacting its own symbolic fusion of Frampton's earlier fragments.[33] While the formal fluidity of the oscillating pan evokes the continuity of video's electronic transmission, the subtle transition from repetitious to continuous dialogue ("I was just–I was just being interviewed. It was only an interview") mimics the turn to synchronized sound that other videos, like Richard Serra's and Nancy Holt's *Boomerang* (1974),[34] actively resist.

Each medium, then, writes the conditions for its own repetition, a nostalgic return *to* and recursive return *from* a regulated order of spectacle and its renewal of a desirous subjective state.[35] Whether that desire be directed at the lost object of the filmic medium or the self's performative renewal depends upon the medium's ability to illusionistically close the distance between subject and object. ("Facing mirrors on opposite walls squeeze out the real space between them.")[36] Yet, this closure is also the parenthetical marking of identification, which has the effect, as Joan Copjec argues:

> of heterotautology. Of interiorizing difference, contradiction, distance, making them self-same. Of converting contradictions into "metaphysical pitch and toss," that is, into an idealization of movement itself whereby pitch is absorbed by toss, hurly by burly, fort by da, death by life, body by soul and so on and so forth.[37]

Landow recognizes the force of Frampton's drive, the movement of a history supported by the pleasure in identifying the similarity within the repetition. But this movement risks no movement at all; a discourse speaks its own stultifying demise through the indistinguishability of its variants and, what is more, the exclusion of

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33. Douglas Davis, "Filmgoing/Videogoing: Making Distinctions," John G. Hanhardt (ed.), *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, Rochester, Gibbs M. Smith, Peregrine Smith Books, 1986, p. 270–273; David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Feature of the Medium," *Video Art*, Philadelphia, Falcon Press, 1975, p. 57–72; Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1, Spring 1976, p. 51–64; Anne Wagner, "Performance, Video and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October*, no. 91, Winter 2000, p. 59–80; David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007. See also William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism*, Hanover, Dartmouth College Press, 2016.

34. Richard Serra & Nancy Holt, *Boomerang*, United States of America, 1974.

35. For a discussion of "cine-repetitions," Raymond Bellour, "Cine-Repetitions," trans. by Kari Hanet, *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 2, Summer 1979, p. 71.

36. Krauss, 1976, p. 57.

37. Joan Copjec, "India Song/Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta desert: The Compulsion to Repeat," *October*, no. 17, Summer 1981, p. 41.

any slight semblance of difference. The disappearance and return of the same, the "boomeranging" of the self, distends the present to include the past and the future.

Intervening in this cycle necessitates a more insidious wish, one that dispels the perpetuity of the present and imagines an interim in which the subject is denied the pleasures of succession. Frampton's *Critical Mass* may evoke Metz's and Baudry's repetition compulsion, but it resists their pleasures of narrative continuity through its own investigation of the cinematic apparatus, one which fetishizes the violence of the drive by returning to the unrecoverable past at the heart of nostalgia. Rather than attempt a return toward satisfaction, *Critical Mass* highlights structural film's return to the originary wound that triggered the catastrophic failure of the relationship on screen. But as we have already witnessed, this is not a singular moment. The compulsion to picture the couple's dissolution repeats itself, exemplifying that which had been previously interiorized and made to exclude: those differences, contradictions, and distances that threatened the homeostatic systems of the apparatus and its periodizing discourses.

In this way we see Frampton's film and Landow's video embrace the changing conditions of their mediums. To return to the wound (jump cuts, stutters, aporias) structuring both the relationship on-screen as well as the apparatus's screen relations is to press upon the ontological dissolution of both the films and their hegemonic spectatorial subjectivities. This is how *Critical Mass* seems to anticipate early feminist film critics like Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, and Jacqueline Rose, who challenged Metz's and Baudry's putative "universality" by recognizing the disavowal of the woman as symptomatic of cinema's "field of vision."[38] "[T]he perception of an absence," Rose tells us, "can have meaning only in relation to a presence or oppositional term, to a structure—that of sexual difference—within which the instance of perception *already finds its place*. [the author's emphasis]"[39] "Sexual difference" appears as the missing term in apparatus theory, the referent always external to the text yet latent within their formulas. Yet, in *Critical Mass* it

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38.   Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 198–209; Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity," *Ciné-Tracts*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1980, p. 25–32; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984; Jacqueline Rose, "The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso, 1986, p. 199–214.

39.   Rose, 1986, p. 202.

resurfaces and risks never receding. For the feminist viewer, identification involves less the virtual disappearance of that screened absence than an aggressive disclosure of difference, a bodying forth of the *soma* active alongside the *psyche* and the perceptual variations afforded by either sex on screen.

If Landow's video is a continuation of the couple's dissolution without any such promise of resolve, it reignites in its return to the original's wound that studied focus on sexual difference latent within its lack. But something curious occurs in the video's equivocating reference to its source. Landow does not presume a one-to-one mode of identification between *Undesirables'* viewer but rather opens up, through a system of intertextual allusion to Metz, Baudry, and their implied critics, a more dynamic, albeit unstable, mode of identification that underscores the social dimension of spectatorship. This is not to say that the video is not founded, like Frampton's, on sexual difference, but that it redirects the viewer's gaze off-screen, in particular toward the position of the mistress, where a game of imaginative, pleasurable, and most importantly labile identification ensues. An expanded and de-hierarchical field of object-choices permits a more polymorphously perverse oscillation between spectatorial positions, offering viewers the freedom to indulge in a more "deviant" mode of looking beyond the confines of the screen.

The implications for this re-theorization are crucial, since it reassesses the Sausurrian-Lacanian teleologies subtending Metz's, Baudry's, Mulvey's, and others' theories. By returning to the pre-Oedipal experience in which Freud's "polymorphous perversity" abounds, the aim of the look is less a filling of phallic lack than an expression of libido or drive.[40] Freud describes this infantile sexuality as a dispersion of desire, a re-direction of pleasure "into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities."[41] But Landow's emphasis on the ultimate unintelligibility of the subject of the affair

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40. Film scholar Damon Young locates this "polymorphous perversity" in the film works of Andy Warhol: "Cinema," he determines, "solicits and satisfies a passion for perceiving, predicated on the object's absence, thus displaced from the world of means and ends, a functionless looking that serves no instrumental purpose, that emanates from a body that cannot be quantified in terms of its purely physical or physiological dimensions, and that is 'driven'—but not determined," Damon R. Young, "Vicarious Look, or Andy Warhol's Apparatus Theory," *Film Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 2, Winter 2014–2015, p. 43–44. He draws the phrase "passion for perceiving" from Metz, 1982, p. 58. Elsewhere, James Snead theorizes a minoritarian spectatorship conditioned upon a "polymorphic perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened freedom of identification." James Snead, Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (eds.), *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 23.

41. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], trans. and ed. by James Strachey, New York, Basic Books, 2000, p. 57.

democratizes this disposition, making even the adult viewer capable of regressing into such scattered perversions. Doing so liberates the viewer from the burden of becoming a unified, transcendental subject (i.e. recreating the entry into the symbolic through film and video's reenactment of the mirror stage), instead actively fostering shifting relationships to the self's and others' identities and subjectivities. Moreover, it liberates the apparatus from its technical support—in these previous cases, the screened image—and opens up the deviant pleasures of the viewer to *social* and *spatial* processes of identification.

Since Tribe's re-performance at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, the artist has staged *Critical Mass* at the Hammer Museum (8 April 2011), the Tate Modern (27 October 2012), and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University (3 October 2015). In these latter restagings, a new couple—actors Emilie O'Hara and Nick Huff—recites Frampton's script from memory, retaining the original film's repetitions and jump-cuts with breathy excess (see Fig. 4). But before

Fig. 4. *Critical Mass*, Kerry Tribe, 2010–, production still 2013, featuring Emilie O'Hara and Nick Huff. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist..

their argument even begins, the performance is underway: the young woman enters from stage left, leans against the wall, and folds her arms across her chest. Without hesitation, the young man enters from stage right, folds his hands at his waist, and pauses. The couple's bodily comportment adjusts in preparation, and with a subtle turn of his head, the young man looks to the young woman, asking, with words we know all too well, "Okay–okay how are you–okay how are you–how are you?"

By resituating Frampton's film as a "cinematic" live performance, Tribe's *Critical Mass* revives not just the original's script but the bodily enactment of its staging.[42] In a slightly morbid fascination, Tribe reconfigures those bodies until now thought relegated, as if in a state of endless, inanimate purgatory, to the history of the film. As such, we might closely categorize this "post-medium post-mortem"[43] re-performance as a strange re-embodiment, a final fusing of the *psyche* and the *soma* through the theory of the "the Uncanny." Earlier, we might have analogized Baudry's repetition compulsion, constituted by the pleasure principle, with Freud's *Heimlich*, or the canny, which is "friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house."[44] *Critical Mass*—in particular, Tribe's reperformance—serves as a radical antithesis to the neat comfort of Freud's metaphorical home; it terrorizes the domestic space of the cinema, burning down its walls altogether in order to interrogate its reproductive norms and embrace its *Unheimlichkeit*, or uncanniness. In this way the drive motivating Frampton's *Critical Mass* continues to push beyond the immediate realm of the apparatus's economy and its expected modes of representation. In other words, it opens expanded spaces for its viewer's deviant pleasures outside the socially coded registers of its cinematic and videographic forms of fetishism.

The strange perversity of Tribe's performance emerges in its insufficient replication of Frampton's profilmic scene, its radical relinquishing of the *da* of repetition, the "here" of comfort, recognition, and mastery, for the *fort* of alienation. Though the body may not be responsible for the cinematic apparatus, it remains a

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42. Pavle Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 27.

43. I draw this phrase from Erika Balsom, "Filmic Ruins," *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2013, p. 70.

44. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny [1919]," *On Creativity and the Unconscious: The Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, and Religion*, New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009, p. 126.

constant structuring function. We may have left the movie theater (see Fig. 5), in other words, but the cinematic apparatus remains inscribed within the mind of the actors as well as the audience, not as some "immortal soul" with a life of its own, unthreatened by the prospect of the death drive, but as a persistent *otherness* constructed from the conflictual relations between body and language, between live performance and film, between the immediate present and the history from which it stems.[45]

Fig. 5. *Critical Mass*, Kerry Tribe, 2010–, performance still 2010, Tate Modern, *Tanks at the Tate: Art in Action*, featuring Emilie O'Hara and Nick Huff. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Tribe's *Critical Mass* plays with an oscillation between continuity and disruption by staging both the reality of Frampton's representation *and* the otherness of the unconscious, here evoked not through the sight of the couple but rather the emotive

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45.   Copjec, 1981, p. 51.

residue of their conflict. Hence the power of a shadow in the corner of the screen which, for Virginia Woolf writing in 1926, "seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid'."[46] Tribe forces us to recognize the shadow as a material presence off-screen yet never fully separated from it, something *obscene* to our standard modes of viewing. And it is in this swelling shadow that we draw as near as possible to Frampton's own, to the blank, black leader of the unconscious structuring the apparatus. Only here do we find not the representation but the libidinal excess driving the couple's conflict.

Distant yet never removed from the screen, the young man and woman find themselves composed of feelings *in reality*, what Roland Barthes famously described as "something *sopitive*, soft, limp, [...] a little disjointed, even [...] irresponsible."[47] The flickers of fascination earlier emitted by the retroactive repetition of Frampton and Landow's films now give rise to a more perverse scenario: the joy in repetition itself, an affirmation, as Eugenie Brinkema writes, of "the idea of recurrence by recurring without regard for forming a meaningful narrative for *what* recurs."[48] In this formula, what matters is not so much the simulacrum, the substance, or the content of an image on Frampton's "endless ribbon of film" than its very recurrence. An *acinematic* interpretation of Frampton's film, Tribe's re-performance promotes the force of the film's repetition over its material.[49] In effect, a "live" structural film relishes in the combustion of the original image, "burned in vain" like a child lighting a matchstick: for sterility, for consumption as pure *jouissance*—in short, for fun.[50]

Tribe's bodily surplus, a spilling over of libidinal excitation, serves to reconceptualize altogether the order of *Critical Mass*'s drives and, with them, the order of the history in which the various re-performances have been enacted and

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46. Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," *Collected Essays Vol. II*, London, Hogarth Press, 1966, p. 270.

47. Tribe's performance, to be clear, remains within a theater in all its conventional staging, a theater without a screen yet a darkened "hall" nonetheless, which provides each time an unfamiliar, albeit titillating, reception, a sort of perversion on behalf of the viewer that does not find the body reflected in the mirror of the screen (as Metz dutifully noted) but rather remains always cognizant of an *other* body suffused within the seat before her "as if," continues Barthes, "[in] a bed, coats or feet thrown over the row in front." Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater [1975]," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, p. 345–346.

48. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 249.

49. Jean-François Lyotard, "Acinema," Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 351.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

addressed. For, despite the in-person re-enactment's exacting ability to fulfill the need for prolongation, a satisfaction of a different sort emerges from elsewhere. Surplus resulting from the gratification of repetition produces another, accidental satisfaction, which inaugurates the drive of yet another repetition *within* the primary repetition. The need to re-film *Critical Mass*, the need to prolong and relocate the drive of the cinematic apparatus before and beyond its medium specificity, remains secondary in Tribe's iteration to the re-performance of the surplus of excitation within the apparatus.[51] Tribe therefore threatens the life of the film not by withdrawing the young man and woman from the movie theater onto the reality of the stage but by persisting the tension inherent to the film's negativity. As Jean-François Lyotard asks, "must the victim be on stage for *jouissance* to be intense? [the author's emphasis]"[52] In short, no. The "victim" need not be present at all. Re-performance does not destroy the life of Frampton's film (does *not* mark a point of finality along a linear progression of the re-performances) but rather continues to *enjoy* the detriment of its life. Like the figures on screen and stage, the foundation to Frampton, Landow, and Tribe's relationship is a negativity around which circulates a positive, evolutionary order of being. Nostalgia, then, becomes a structuring device for the persistence of the present tense; it aims not toward the finality of the orgasm but the masturbatory pleasures of recursivity's repeated desires.

As Landow's and Tribe's re-performances make clear, any attempt at continuity will only re-insinuate the vicious drive of Frampton's original. While the many afterlives of this structural film provide a break, an opening, in the homogeneity of apparatus theory, they instantiate a new vision of repetition compulsion before and beyond the limits of cinema. Reconciliation, after all, was never the goal. The unification of the medium as an attempt toward defining its essence will always succumb to the conflict structuring its materials and modes of viewing. Yet the perverse pleasures afforded by its material variations will always open the relationship to new and expanded forms

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51.   As Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič supports: "If the surplus is first a by-product of satisfying the organic need for food, satisfying the organic need for food now becomes a by-product of repeating the surplus satisfaction. And this now functions to the detriment of life (and against lowering tension): not because it wants to destroy life, but because 'it' wants to enjoy," Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, p. 103.

52.   The translations of this line differ slightly according to source. For this version, see Jean-François Lyotard, "Acinema," trans. by Paisley N. Livingston, modified by Peter W. Milne & Ashley Woodward, Graham Jones & Ashley Woodward (eds.), *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, p. 33–42.

of cinematic identification as varied as the fluctuating identities and subjectivities we both hold and desire. The primal affects of Frampton's pre-history occlude any easy articulation. Still, *Critical Mass*'s repetition compulsion provides a suitable model for the continued re-interpretation of temporalities of nostalgia and recursivity in the re-performance of structural film. In the jump cut, the gap, that both separates and sutures the young woman's lines, "I don't ever have to see you again–to see you again," we read the origins of Frampton's metahistory; the perverse pleasures of cinema—the drive of the apparatus—writes their own re-telling. From Frampton, to Landow, to Tribe, this drive compels the couple's continued dissolution and enforces the endless work of their relationship, the desire not just to see but to return, again and again, to the infinite possibility of the seen.

In the end, nostalgia for a history of structural film is not a painful longing for the retrieval of seemingly obsolete materials and exhibition spaces but an opportunity to return to a set of truly innovative experiments in cinematic temporality, spectatorship, and subjectivity. Tribe's and Landow's re-performances, each unique to their own aims and contextual interests, nonetheless reaffirm the idea of cinema as no one single, total, functioning system. Rather, it is a series of break-ups and new beginnings in which the debate over its life and its death might carry on. Within these endless evolutionary breaks, we discover a second order, a *drive*, from which we cannot look away. It is a perverse desire to prolong our nostalgia for cinema's past into the future, to anticipate new forms and different figures by breaking up with film more furiously each time.

Nostalgia, Recursivity, and the Re-Performance of Structural Film

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Abstract:

In the fall of 2010, contemporary artist Kerry Tribe staged a live re-performance of Hollis Frampton's 1971 structural film *Critical Mass*, signaling a recent wave of nostalgic returns to cinema's past in search of alternative technologies, methodologies, and exhibition structures. This essay reads Tribe's re-performance alongside George Landow's 1999 parody of Frampton's original to reconsider a temporal tension between the historical longing of nostalgia and the futurity of intermedial recursivity. Together, these "films" determine a process of spectatorial subject formation proper to cinema's changing specificity, resulting in a constant tension between the reception and re-performance of cinema as a set of continuous yet distributed desires, as a feeling of nostalgia for an event which has yet to recur.

Résumé :

À l'automne 2010, l'artiste contemporain Kerry Tribe a mis en scène une « re-performance » du film structurel de Hollis Frampton datant de 1971, *Critical Mass*, signalant une vague récente de retours nostalgiques dans le passé du cinéma à la recherche de technologies, de méthodologies et de structures d'exposition alternatives. Cet essai analyse la « re-performance » de Tribe aux côtés de la version parodique de l'original de Frampton réalisée par George Landow en 1999, afin de reconsidérer une tension temporelle entre le désir historique de nostalgie et l'avenir de la récursivité

intermédiale. Ensemble, ces « films » déterminent un processus de formation du sujet spectateur propre à la spécificité changeante du cinéma, résultant en une tension constante entre la réception et la re-performance du cinéma comme un sentiment de nostalgie envers un événement qui ne s'est pas encore reproduit.

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