

Ash and Cinder: Photography, Film, and the Archive in Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971)

by Kevin Chabot

Abstract: This article examines Hollis Frampton's 1971 avant-garde work *(nostalgia)* in terms of its representation of photography, cinema and temporality. Comprised of thirteen 100-foot 16mm rolls and running just over thirty-six minutes, Frampton's film contains one photograph on each of the thirteen rolls which are placed on a hotplate and burnt as an off-screen voice narrates. With its unique temporal organization and deceptive use of first-person narration, *(nostalgia)* explores complex relationships between temporality, memory and subjectivity as well as their relationship to photographic and cinematic media. Drawing on the writing of Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, and Roland Barthes, I argue that *(nostalgia)* constructs an archive of images predicated upon loss, absence and destruction. This article thus elucidates the association of photographic and cinematographic art with death and destruction, and the curious relationship photography and cinema, both ostensibly media of preservation, have with temporal progression and archival memory.

Keywords: Hollis Frampton; Photography; Cinema; Temporality; Archive

On the screen appears a close-up of a black and white photograph. An off-screen voice informs us, "This is the first photograph I ever made with the direct intention of making art." The photograph depicts a darkroom for photographic processing complete with basins, chemical products and other equipment required for developing film. As the first-person narration describes the artist's first encounter with

photography as an artistic medium and his subsequent involvement in avant-garde visual art, smoke begins to emanate from the image. The narration continues as the photograph is engulfed in smoke and flames pierce the surface of the image. As the photograph disintegrates, the hotplate on which the photograph had been placed is revealed as the source of the fire. Melted and charred, the once revelatory photographic image is rendered an opaque black mass of ash and cinder, a product of the destructive force of time's passage.

Such is the opening of Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) from 1971, the first film in the series *Hapax Legomena* (1971-1973). Comprised of thirteen 100-foot 16mm rolls and running just over thirty-six minutes,¹ the film contains one photograph on each of the thirteen rolls that are similarly placed on a hotplate and burnt as an off-screen voice narrates. Significantly, as one views the film, one becomes aware that the narration and the accompanying photograph onscreen do not correspond to each other; rather, the narration describes the subsequent image in the series. In the instance of the first photograph described above, the narration is actually describing the next image, a photographic portrait of the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre holding a metronome and picture frame. As such, this first image is never directly referenced in the narration. With its unique temporal organization and deceptive use of first-person narration, (*nostalgia*) explores complex relationships between temporality, memory and subjectivity as well as their relationship to photographic and cinematic media. Drawing on the writing of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, I argue that (*nostalgia*) constructs an archive of images predicated upon loss, absence and destruction.

The making of (*nostalgia*) coincides with a particular historical moment in American filmmaking, and artistic practice more broadly, during the 1960s and 1970s that featured increasing experimentation with film form and style. The documentary genre, and its subgenres biography and autobiography, were no exceptions to such experimentation. Perhaps most radical in his refusal of narrative cohesion and representations of interiority was the work of Andy Warhol. In addition to the incessant repetition of celebrity faces in his screen prints, Warhol's cinematic works deconstruct and subvert the conventional goals of portraiture, which ostensibly aim to reveal the authentic subjectivity of the sitter. The extended durations of banal activities in films such as *Sleep* (1963), *Eat* (1963) and *Blow Job* (1964), the eerily still

and silent cinematic portraits of hundreds of subjects in *Screen Tests* (1964-1966)², and the celebrity portrait of Edie Sedgwick in *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), comprised of a double screen projection featuring Sedgwick interacting with her own mediated image, all attest to the subversive modes of representation in biographical and autobiographical film during the 1960s.

Indeed, Robert Rosenblum has asserted that Warhol's artwork effectively revitalized the traditional genre of portraiture, writing, "If it is instantly clear that Warhol has revived the visual crackle, glitter and chic of older traditions of society portraiture, it may be less obvious that [...] he has also captured an incredible range of psychological insight among his sitters."³ Conversely, Benjamin Buchloh argues that Warhol's work stands in opposition to the aims of portraiture: "In [Warhol's and pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's] hands, the genre now appears not only emptied of all individuality of painterly performance but of any remnants of interiority and privacy of the self as sitter."⁴ The controversy as to whether Warhol rejuvenated the genre of portraiture or solidified its demise thus depends upon how one interprets the degree to which the work represents the psychology, personality and interiority of the subject. This experimentation with interiority is further deployed in (*nostalgia*) in which language, sound, and image function to both reveal and obscure subjectivity.

In her book on the film, Rachel Moore describes (*nostalgia*) as a "pseudo-autobiographical" film that regularly and purposefully deceives the spectator.⁵ The most conspicuous method of deception lies in the incongruity between language and image. Accompanying the images on the screen is narration that *prima facie* describes the photograph that the viewer is seeing, and the first images seem to correspond to this narration; however, it is only as the film progresses and the images obviously do not match the narration, does the viewer realize he or she has been deceived. For example, the accompanying narration for the second image of Carl Andre says, "I made this photograph on March 11, 1959. The face is my own, or rather it was my own." Unless the viewer has knowledge of what Frampton looks like, one would assume the photograph is indeed a self-portrait of the artist, rather than Andre. The next photograph in the series is Frampton's self-portrait with the accompanying narration stating, "This photograph was made in September of 1960. The window is that of a dusty cabinetmaker's shop, on the west side of West Broadway,

somewhere between Spring Street and West Houston.” Here is when the deception becomes clear for the first time, as the image displayed is of a lone male figure not at all reminiscent of the scene the voice-over describes. At this point, the viewer realizes that, despite the voice-over’s statements, “this photograph” is not *this* photograph and the viewer is required to remember the previous narration, apply it to the present photograph onscreen and listen to the new narration simultaneously.

The second deception is much less apparent and is not readily noticeable unless the viewer is familiar with the filmmakers and their visages. In a strategy that Moore describes as further distancing the autobiographical project of the film, (*nostalgia*) is narrated by Canadian experimental filmmaker Michael Snow rather than Frampton.⁶ The first-person pronoun *I* does not refer to the speaker of the narration thus violating a central tenant of the autobiographical pact.⁷ To be sure, if one listens carefully to the soundtrack, one can hear the turning of pages as the narrator recites the text, however the identity of the reader is never acknowledged. This device is used to poignant effect when Frampton’s written narration describes a photograph made in Snow’s studio. Frampton’s writing describes a disagreement about the aesthetics of the photograph, to which Frampton is now apologetic: “I regret to say that he was right. But it was too late. There was nothing to do about it. The whole business still troubles me. I wish I could apologise to him.” Of course, Frampton essentially *is* apologising to him as Snow reads the prepared script for the film. (*nostalgia*) therefore subverts central conventions of traditional autobiographical documentary in its manipulation of first-person narration and the similarly deceptive representation of archival photographs. Given such manipulation and experimentation, (*nostalgia*) problematizes photographic and cinematic media’s ability to construct authentic representations of subjectivity as well as subverts photographic and cinematic media’s capacity for archivization. In this way, (*nostalgia*) performs the ontology of the archive as described by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* as that which simultaneously preserves and destroys.

Derrida and Archival Violence

Derrida explains that the etymology of “archive” stems from the Greek *arkhe*, which communicates both a sense of commencement and commandment. Derrida writes:

[*arkhe*] coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* – [the] physical, historical, or ontological principle - but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given – [the] nomological principle.⁸

Within the Greek root *arkhe*, then, are the dual characteristics of temporality in the establishment of a historical starting point and the concept of authority, that is, who or what institution is tasked with officiating the constitution of an archive. Derrida further establishes this double meaning when he writes, “the meaning of ‘archive,’ its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded.”⁹ ‘Archive’ is thus defined as both possessing a physical space or location as well as the notion of guardianship and the authority to oversee such a space. As such, those entrusted with presiding over an archive as well as the very act of archiving itself produce a system of law or discourse surrounding what is worthy of archiving and thus what carries historical value. It is in this sense that Derrida characterizes the act of archiving as one of violence. “[Violence] is thus the first figure of the archive,” writes Derrida, “because every archive [...] is at once *institutive* and *conservative*, but also revolutionary and traditional. An *eco-nomic* archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) or in making people respect the law.”¹⁰ To archive therefore constitutes an historical incision from which fragments are extracted and preserved. In addition to this violence of extraction, archival practise constitutes an act of violence in its tendency to destroy as it preserves.

This counter-intuitive and seemingly contradictory characteristic of the archive is best explained in relation to memory. Derrida emphasizes the distinction between *anamnēsis* and *hypomnēma* in which the former defines a strong ability to remember and the latter characterizes a weakened memory. As such, he defines the archive as hypomnesic as it involves the exteriorizing of memory into a physical and spatial location and therefore destroys our need and capacity to remember.¹¹ Derrida writes:

[I]f there is no archive without consignation in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization,

of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction.¹²

This is the key passage that will come to define what Derrida terms *le mal d'archive* (archive fever). To produce an archive, and exteriorize memory in the process, is to continue to reproduce a sense of loss and absence. In other words, the act of preservation simultaneously initiates the destruction of memory.

In invoking Freud's theory of *todestriebe*, or death drive, Derrida situates archivization within the natural propensity and desire to return to a previous state of existence. Freud writes, "If we may accept as an observation without exception that every living being dies for *internal* reasons, returning to the inorganic, then we can only say that *the goal of all life is death*, and, looking backwards, that *the nonliving existed before the living*."¹³ Although Freud does not make this connection between the death drive and the archive, Derrida points out that Freud's own metaphor of the operation of memory within the human psyche, the Mystic Writing-Pad, warrants such an association as the infinite palimpsest of this device constitutes an exteriorization of memory. In "A Note on the Mystic Writing-Pad," Freud describes the eponymous device, called a *Wunderblock* in German, as a celluloid sheet laid on top of a wax cylinder upon which one writes using a stylus.¹⁴ Because of its layered structure, the user may remove the celluloid sheets and continue writing anew while a permanent trace of each writing remains etched in the wax cylinder beneath. As such, the Mystic Writing-Pad mirrors the operation of our memory in its capacity to register new information while a lasting trace of all previous information is stored beneath the surface.¹⁵ In this way, Derrida writes, "Far from the machine being a pure absence of spontaneity, its *resemblance* to the psychical apparatus, its existence and its necessity bear witness to the finitude of the mnemonic spontaneity which is thus supplemented. The machine – and, consequently, representation – is death and finitude within the psyche."¹⁶ The compulsion to exteriorize memory thus precipitates death and destruction as mechanisms of recording and preservation destroy our capacity for *anamnēsis*. Therefore, this process of exteriorization constitutes a certain degree of death in our psychical operation.

Following this Derridean and Freudian analysis of destruction as the result of creation and loss as the result of preservation, Frampton's (*nostalgia*) is an explicit performance of the paradox of memory, representation, and the archive. The photographs depicted in the film function as archival documents that testify to biographical instances in the life of the artist. As such, the photographs not only amount to an exteriorization of memory that Derrida and Freud describe, but Frampton further emphasizes the destructive nature of the archive by incinerating the images. The temporality of the film is crucial to understanding this point. The viewer witnesses the disintegration of the photographic image as the voice-over narration is spoken, suggesting the evanescent quality of photographic means of preservation. However, this evanescence is doubled as the image corresponds to the preceding narration; as such, the memory of the narration is *always already* vanishing as one's recollection of the previous narration is supplanted by the narration currently occupying the soundtrack. The burning photograph as a visual metaphor for the evaporation of memory thus finds its corollary within the soundtrack and editing of the film as it performs the fading of memory within the viewer as one observes the film. (*nostalgia*) thus represents the transition from form to formlessness, legibility to illegibility and, reminiscent of Derrida and Freud, life to death.

Barthes, Temporality, Photography

The temporality of the photographic image and its relationship to cinema is also pivotal in understanding the film and, through utilizing the term 'nostalgia' as the title, Frampton provides us with a starting point for considering how the film represents time. The etymology of nostalgia stems from the Greek term meaning 'the wounds of returning,' and as Frampton elaborates, "Nostalgia is not an emotion that is entertained; it is sustained. When Ulysses comes home, nostalgia is the lumps he takes, not the tremulous pleasures he derives from being home again."¹⁷ In addition to the longing one experiences for a foregone past, then, nostalgia refers to the pain associated with such longing and the realization of the impossibility of such a return. Given this connotation, the use of photographs within the film takes on added significance. The photographs function as preserved records of past experiences that resonate in the personal and professional life of Frampton, prompting the meditative narration delivered by Snow in the film. However, simultaneous with the act of recollection is the recognition of the irretrievable past and inexorable progression of lin-

ear time. This sense of melancholia associated with photographic images is shared by Roland Barthes in his foundational treatise on the photographic image, *Camera Lucida*.

Similar to the works of Derrida and Freud described above, Barthes also understands the photographic image to be haunted by the spectre of death. In the foreword to the 2010 edition of *Camera Lucida*, Geoff Dyer quotes Barthes telling an interviewer, "If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death." Barthes continued, "It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more."¹⁸ Here, Barthes associates the photograph's relationship with death to the indexicality of the photographic image. Rather than a representation predicated upon resemblance, as in a painting or a sculpture, the photochemical process of photography creates a physical trace or imprint of the object being photographed, as it existed in pro-filmic space before the camera, upon the emulsion of the filmstrip. As classical film theorists such as André Bazin¹⁹ and Rudolph Arnheim²⁰ have noted, mechanical reproduction provides access to reality in ways that other representational media cannot. As such, the taking of a photograph inscribes the filmstrip with an image of a temporal instant that survives as a representation, but can never be recovered: "What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."²¹ It is this indexicality and existential link between the photographic representation and the historical instant that prompts Barthes to describe the photograph as a testament to existence: "In photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past."²² This sense of *the thing has been there*, however, constitutes a kind of "return of the dead"²³ for Barthes as it simultaneously signifies that the thing *no longer is here*. The essence of photography, then, is in the recording of an ephemeral instant that is irretrievable. This becomes most salient in Barthes' discussion of a photograph which, significantly, is the only photograph discussed at length in *Camera Lucida* that is not reproduced in its pages, the famous Winter Garden photograph of his mother.

The photograph depicts Barthes' mother at the age of five standing with her brother in a "glassed-in conservatory," or winter garden to which it was referred at the time. As Barthes' mother had passed away before he discovered the photograph, this particular im-

age resonated with him more than any other as he claimed it “achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*.”²⁴ For Barthes, this discovery of the photograph that brought about a “utopian” sense of knowing the essence of his mother was accompanied by the painful awareness that this human being is no longer present. Barthes writes, “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder [...] *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”²⁵ Barthes therefore demonstrates that photography conflates all three temporal registers of past, present and future. The photograph is a past instant that is looked at in the present and is also taken with the anticipation that it will be looked at in the future. Frampton emphasizes the multiple temporal dimensions of photography in (*nostalgia*) especially in its use of the cinematic medium in order to communicate duration.

As mentioned previously, one of the thirteen photographs featured in the film is a self-portrait of Frampton. In describing this self-portrait, which will be revealed as the next image in the series, the narration states, “I take some comfort in realising that my entire physical body has been replaced more than once since it made this portrait of its face. However, I understand that my central nervous system is an exception.” This somewhat comical statement is reminiscent of the catastrophe Barthes identifies as inhabiting every photograph: the inevitability of age and subsequent death. Assuredly, in addition to the sense of *this is no longer here*, photography also signifies that we all, one day, *no longer will be*. This sense of loss marks the entirety of the film, not only in its representation of the destruction of the photographs, but also in the inexorable forward momentum of time. The narration is replete with references to individuals with whom Frampton no longer associates, including sculptor Carl Andre, painter Frank Stella, pop artist James Rosenquist and a myriad of neighbors and acquaintances, whom Frampton had encountered during his time as a photographer in the early 1960s. The captured photographs thus prompt the recollection of such encounters with these people and, like memory, eventually fade into oblivion. Such is the cruel temporality of the photographic image.

Significantly, I have not yet remarked upon the status of the film *as a film*, that is, as a series of photographic images projected at 24 frames-per-second. This adds a further temporal dimension to the

already complex representation of memory and temporality at work in (*nostalgia*). In an autobiographical sense, the film represents Frampton's transition from photographer to avant-garde filmmaker and appropriately bridges these two professional pursuits through filming the destruction of photographic images before the cinematic camera, thus signalling the triumph of cinema over the fragility and pastness of photography. In his championing of cinema, Frampton describes an 'infinite cinema' that has always existed and will continue to exist. Frampton writes, "There is nothing in the structural logic of the cinema film strip that precludes sequestering any single image. A still photograph is simply an isolated frame taken out of the infinite cinema."²⁶ From the flow of time that constitutes cinematic images, the photograph is but one instant that fails to convey a sense of presence. As Barthes continually asserts throughout *Camera Lucida*, it is the stillness and historicity of the photograph that produces such a sense of longing and loss.

Similarly to Barthes' refusal to display the image of his mother in the Winter Garden photograph, despite his prolonged discussion of it, (*nostalgia*) also ends with a refusal of display. The narration describes Frampton's attempt to photograph an alleyway near his home only to have his composition obstructed by a passing vehicle. Rather than discard the image, Frampton opted to develop the photograph and in so doing discovered something standing in the street beyond the alley that, although not visible to him, was reflected in a window. The narration describes Frampton enlarging the portion of the photograph containing the image of the figure prompting Frampton to assert, "what I believe I see recorded, in that speck of film, fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare make another photograph again." The narration ends with Snow, reading Frampton's words, directly addressing the spectator: "Here it is! Look at it! Do you see what I see?" What follows the narration is not an image of the photograph that has just been described. In breaking the formal pattern of the film, the spectator has (somewhat) become accustomed to by the film's end, the subsequent shot is simply a black screen. After being told about a figure that inspired such fear in Frampton that he now refuses to take another photograph, the viewer is left looking into the dark abyss of a blank film frame.

Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) is an extraordinary example of avant-garde filmmaking that is an intricate and complex meditation on

the nature of photography, film, temporality and archivization. Within its rich tapestry of image and narration, the film demonstrates photography's inextricable associations with loss, destruction and death, as supported by the theories of Derrida, Freud and Barthes, while graphically representing the evanescence of the image and the vanishing of memory. In addition to serving as an autobiographical account of Frampton's early work as a photographer and his transition to film-making, the film challenges its viewers to rethink how we perceive both the photographic and cinematic image.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Rachel Moore, *Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia)* (London: Afterall Books, 2006), 2.
 - ² It is worth noting that although these *Screen Tests* were filmed in the typical 24 frames-per-second, they were subsequently projected at 16 frames-per-second creating a slow-motion effect.
 - ³ Quoted in Nicholas Baume, "About Face," in *About Face: Andy Warhol Portraits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 87.
 - ⁴ Ibid.

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- ⁵ Moore, 7.
- ⁶ Ibid, 18.
- ⁷ Philippe LeJeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 5-8.
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25.2 (1995), 9, original emphasis.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Derrida, 12.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 14.
- ¹² Ibid, original emphasis.
- ¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. Todd Dufresne, trans. Gregory C. Richter (New York: Broadview Press, 2011), 77, original emphasis.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 129-130.
- ¹⁵ Freud, 130-131.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Derrida, 16, original emphasis.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Moore, 1. Here, Frampton alludes to Homer's *Odyssey* in which Ulysses (or Odysseus in the original Greek text) embarks on an epic journey back to Ithaca, his homeland.
- ¹⁸ Geoff Dyer, foreword to *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, by Roland Barthes, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), xi.
- ¹⁹ Bazin states that with the invention of photography, "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man." André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004,) 13.
- ²⁰ Arnheim writes that film as an art form must move beyond its ontology as a recording medium, stating, "Art begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off, where the conditions of representation serve in some way to mold the object." Rudolph Arnheim, "The Making of a Film," in *Film as Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 57.
- ²¹ Barthes, 4.
- ²² Barthes, 76, original emphasis.
- ²³ Ibid, 9.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 71, original emphasis.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 96, original emphasis.

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- ²⁶ Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," in *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video, Text 1968-1980* (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), 11.

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