

# Zorns Lemma (1970)

A film by Hollis Frampton



This is an amazing experimental film from American avant-garde filmmaker Hollis Frampton. It begins with a dark screen and a woman narrating from *The Bay State Primer*, an early American grammar textbook that teaches the letters of the alphabet by using them in sentences derived from the Bible, then the rest of the film is mostly silent. It presents us with a recurring structure that perpetually moves throughout a 24-letter alphabet via various signs in New York with words that propel the film along. Gradually other images are added to the loop, some of them themselves slowly developing as we arrive at them the next time around. It concludes with a man, woman and dog crossing a snowy field, while several narrators each narrate one word at a time read from an 11th century treatise, "On Light, or the Ingression of Forms", by Robert Grosseteste. Ambiguous, metaphorical and fascinating. A veritable masterpiece of structural filmmaking.

The film is also a major influence on [Peter Greenaway](#) - it is one of the films he most admires.

"Zorns Lemma is divided into three sections: an initial imageless reading of the Bay State Primer; a long series of silent shots, each one second photographed signs edited to form one complete Latin alphabet; and finally a single shot of two people walking across a snow-covered field away from the camera to the sound of a choral reading.

The first of several intellectual orders which Frampton provides as structural models within the film is, of course, the alphabet. The Bay State Primer announces, and the central forty minutes of this hour long film elaborates upon it. Within that section a second kind of ordering occurs; letters begin to drop out of the alphabet and their one-second pulse is replaced by an image without a sign. The first to go is X, replaced by a fire; a little later Z is replaced by waves breaking backwards. Once an image is replaced, it will always have the same substitution; in the slot of X the fire continues for a second each time, the sea roll backwards at the end of each alphabet once the initial substitution occurs. On the other hand, the signs are different in every cycle.

The substitution process sets in action a guessing game and a device. Since the letters seem to disappear roughly in inverse proportion to their distribution as initial letters of words in English, the viewer can with occasional accuracy guess which letter will drop out next. He also suspects that when the alphabet has been completely replaced, the film or the section will end.

A second timing mechanism exists within the substitution images themselves, and it gains force as the alphabetic cycles come to an end. Some of the substitution images imply their own termination. The tying of shoes which replaces P, the washing of hands (G), the changing of a tire (T), and especially the filling of the frame with dried beans (N) add a time dimension essentially different from that of the waves, or a static tree (F), a red ibis flapping its wings (H), or cat-tails swaying in the wind (Y). The clocking mechanism of the finite acts is confirmed by the synchronous drive toward completion which becomes evident in the last minutes of the section.

In Zorns Lemma Frampton followed the tactics of his two elected literary masters Jorge Luis Borges and Ezra Pound. From Borges he learned the art of labyrinthine construction and the dialectic of presenting and obliterating the self. Following Pound, Frampton has incorporated in the end of his film a crucial indirect allusion; it is to the paradox of Arnulf Rainer's reduction. In Grosseteste's essay, materiality is the final dissolution, or the point of weakest articulation, of pure light. But in the graphic cinema that vector is reversed. In the quest for sheer materiality - for an image that would be, and not simply represent - the artist seeks endless refinement of light itself. As the choral text moves from Neo-Platonic source-light to the grosser impurities of objective reality, Frampton slowly opens the shutter, washing out his snowscape into the untinted whiteness of the screen." - P. Adams-Sitney, Visionary Film

"The term structural describes his work even more aptly because he is concerned with the development, arrangement, and juxtaposition of structures. He isolated an idea, a theory, a concept, usually concerning a particular aspect or problem in the cinematic experience and creates a structure that demonstrates and elucidates it. Frampton is less involved with the immediate sensuous experience of an art object. While Serene Velocity may be enjoyed for its kinetic quality and La région centrale for its spatial effects without necessarily engaging the viewer on an intellectual level, the excitement of Frampton's films stem largely from the ideas that are presented. His films have a sensuous intellectuality; they thrill by their engagement in ideas. If Brakhage's great gift is what he does with light and Snow's what he does with space, Frampton's is what he does with conceptual structures." - Bill Simon

"The ultimate Frampton film, so far... he looks back on several of the dialogues his earlier films rehearsed: the tension between words on the screen and concrete images arose in SURFACE TENSION, it explodes here; the cyclic repetitive variations of ARTIFICIAL LIGHT, are less repetitive, less varied, than the alphabetic cycles here; ZORNS LEMMA exaggerates the fixed rhythms of PALINDROME and insists upon the pulse of one second with incredible obdurance...

At a time when radical uniqueness seems progressively less probable, Hollis Frampton has made a film that is absolutely one of its kind." - P. Adams Sitney, 1970

"In his most important work to date, and the most original new work of cinema I have seen since Brakhage's *Scenes From Under Childhood: Part IV*. Frampton's film is an exercise in mathematical logic in cinema. Or is it a mechanical logic? Three viewings do not help me to explain to you what the film is all about. It's about alphabet. It's about the unities of similarities. It's about sameness in a confusion. It's about logic in chance. It's about structure and logic. It's about rhythm. Ah, what a difference between *Zorns Lemma* and all the 'serious' commercial movies that I occasionally praise!" - Jonas Mekas, *Village Voice*

"This radical example of reductive cinema is a warning of things to come: 'Meaning' (political, psychological, personal, or whatever) has been eliminated and the work exists purely for itself, demanding attention to structure, pattern and orchestration. Reality is declared impalpable, faceless, incoherent, existing in inexplicable grandeur, independent of us." - Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*

"*Zorns Lemma* is a major poetic work. Created and put together by a very clear eye head, this original and complex abstract work moves beyond the letters of the alphabet, beyond words and beyond Freud. If you don't understand it the first time you see it, don't despair, see it again! When you finally 'get it,' a small light, possibly a candle, will light itself inside your forehead." - Ernie Gehr

"A phantasmagoria of language." - Scott MacDonald



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