Article

The Praxis of the Tractrix

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Abstract This essay analyzes Zorns Lemma (1962–1970), a film made by American artist Hollis Frampton (1936–1984). Noting Frampton’s use of Robert Grosseteste’s thirteenth-century treatise De luce [‘On Light’] as a key aspect of the film’s soundtrack, the essay argues that Grosseteste’s investigations of light as a medium played a key role in Frampton’s theorization of cinema. As such, his interest in medieval light theories spurred him to develop a powerful, idiosyncratic response to prevailing discourses of media and medium specificity during the 1960s. When examined in light of contemporaneous projects by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) and Roland Barthes (1915–1980), Zorns Lemma points up the significance of medieval thought in the period’s conceptions of art and time.

doi:10.1057/pmed.2015.44

Not now is a dynasty
Time stacks up then rises, steaming not-love
Eat it and love it
– Emily Kendal Frey, ‘I Cried So Hard I Cried Rice’

Two figures and a dog pick their way across a snowy field, the picture plane marred by light flares, tail flashes and other filmic artifacts (Figure 1). As they trudge through the drifting white, six voices reverberate in a metrical reading, their words coming at the measured rate of one per second. They read an idiosyncratic, heavily edited translation of Robert Grosseteste’s thirteenth-century treatise on light, De luce [‘On Light’]. ‘Form is light itself or the doer of
its work,’ they chant as the driving snow, inseparable from the image’s ground, dissolves the outlines of the figures. Light: both form and its antithesis, the matter of visibility.

The film, Frampton’s Zorns Lemma (1962–1970), pioneered the defining characteristics of experimental structural filmmaking (Sitney, 1979, 394–397). It now looms large in most accounts of American experimental art. Fascinated by the film’s structural logic and mathematical puzzles, scholars have long noted its studied self-referentiality and concern with the very conditions of cinema (Jenkins, 1984, 54–81). They have, however, given the work’s medieval references short shrift, often misdating and misrepresenting De luce.1 Consequently, the literature on Zorns Lemma generally investigates the film’s structuralist strategies and lengthy central section (composed of a long series of silent shots built around the alphabet) at the expense of the final (Grosseteste-inspired) part, with its thorny issues of time and translation.

Revisiting Zorns Lemma, I contend that the film represents a rigorous, if oblique, exploration of Grosseteste’s thought. Taking up a pre-modern notion of medium, Zorns Lemma intervened in contentious debates about the status of art and time in the late 1960s, discernible in the writings of figures like Robert Morris as well as the practice of artists and filmmakers ranging from Stan Brakhage to

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Stanley Kubrick. If the art and culture of the sixties betrayed an anxious preoccupation with certain shapes of futurity – ‘a vision of the future ever quickening and repeating,’ as Pamela Lee pithily puts it (Lee, 2004, 259) – then Zorns Lemma describes a deployment of the past that more fully fleshes out art’s possibilities for temporal investigation. Turning to Grosseteste, Frampton refashioned the chronological circuits of cinema. Writing shortly after the completion of Zorns Lemma, Barthes savored ‘the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one’ (Barthes, 1975, 36). His language recalls Frampton’s predilection for diagrams and formulae, as well as his preoccupation with the erotics of matter and time (Frampton, 2009). It also models the means by which a thirteenth-century bishop came to authorize a visionary account of film’s long history. As recent scholarship has begun to show, the medieval world haunted a set of avant-garde art practices during the long 1960s (Nagel, 2012, 116–132, 155–195). Frampton’s sharp-eyed account of Grosseteste’s significance demonstrates just how embedded medieval thought was in the period’s critical stance.

Accounting for Time

Although it is possible (and valuable) to describe in great detail the debt of Frampton and his peers to medieval objects and texts, I aim only in part to historicize Frampton’s practice. Rather, I find myself responding to a solicitation posed by the work, an invitation to speculate on temporal flux and the broader stakes of imagined intimacy. A new dimension of Zorns Lemma emerges precisely in the shuttling back and forth between the heady media-saturated, tendentiously secular and unabashedly capitalist world of the late 1960s, and the quite different world of the thirteenth century.

This, I think, has important political ramifications. In the words of Negri, the imagination offers ‘the most concrete of temporal powers’ (Negri, 2003, 22). Marxist criticism, for example, has tended to reduce time to the category of measure (and hence a privileged barometer of exploitation). As Negri points out, this figures time as the homogenous medium of labor. If, for Marx, we are beings constituted in and through time (in Negri’s paraphrase, time becomes ‘the exclusive material of the construction of life’; Negri, 2003, 35), it stands to reason that the disruption of hegemonic schemas of time and medium should animate any project of politicized scholarship. To imagine new futures we must imagine new pasts.2

To that end, I have selected my title with a certain form of praxis in mind; namely, the praxis of thought repeatedly claimed by Marx.3 This praxis is rarely explicated, but rather invoked through elliptical statements. Agamben has convincingly argued that Marx’s notion of being-as-praxis secularizes earlier...

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2 It is important to distinguish this project from the neoliberal sense of history’s paradoxical availability and insignificance, as exemplified in Fukuyama (1992). For a valuable critique of the re-framing of time under late capitalism, see Crary (2013).
ontologies of being-as-divine-operation (Agamben, 2011, 91). Recognizing the intimacies of art and life, time and thought, Frampton’s encounter with Grosseteste discloses a form of praxis that disavows reductive narratives of technological determinism upon which both Greenbergian criteria of specificity and more recent art historical investigations of time in the 1960s are often founded. Frampton’s praxis exemplifies a more radical form of temporal thinking, one that attends seriously to medieval resources (so unlike the common negative deployment of ‘the medieval’ in the arena of electoral politics; Holsinger, 2007), that might help us craft a different, more promising means to unravel the ideological dream of late capitalism.

Grosseteste on Light

Over the course of some thirty-five years, Robert Grosseteste produced a series of sophisticated texts on light among his other pastoral, theological and proto-scientific works.4 He drew on the profusion of light metaphors in the Bible, as well as the writing of theologians such as John of Damascus and the light-inflected language of Neoplatonic sources.5 In exegetical writings, homilies and treatises on phenomena from comets to rainbows, he figured light as a locus of scientific and metaphysical concern. It keyed his attempt to reconcile the matter of the world with the immateriality of God. His writings on light cast a long shadow, becoming talismanic for the Wyclifites and Roger Bacon alike (Southern, 1986, 13–19; Hudson, 2009). Probably written around 1225, De luce comprises Grosseteste’s best-known discussion of the nature of light.6 It plots his understanding of cosmic order, theorizing light as the ‘first corporeal form’ ['formam primam corporalem'] (Grosseteste, 2013, 239). At once a cosmological and an ontological claim, Grosseteste’s thesis makes light the bearer of both mass and meaning. Light shapes and structures the world, ‘multiplying itself and spreading itself instantaneously in every direction,’ extending matter in three dimensions (Grosseteste, 2013, 239). It subtends the very conditions of being for, as Grosseteste continues, ‘corporeity is ... either light itself or else ... introduces dimensions into matter insofar as it is participating in light itself and through the power of light itself’ (Grosseteste, 2013, 240). De luce would serve as the metaphysical background against which Grosseteste’s later explorations of color and vision developed.

In both De luce and his later writings, he yoked light to a set of epistemological and creative procedures associated with the coming-into-being of form. (It is telling that the physicists who conceived the Big Bang theory at the beginning of the twentieth century read Grosseteste with great interest; Gieben, 2003, 228–229.) This, in turn, had implications for the ways light could be put to

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3 Examples abound, notably Marx (1947). For more on Marx and praxis, see Axelos (1976, 123–142).

4 For a recent chronology of his scientific works (not including his Hesâmeron), see Panti (2013a, 185). For a concise overview of Grosseteste’s life and work, see McEvoy (2000).

5 Notable scriptural passages include Genesis 1:4, Ecclesiastes 11:7, John 8:12, Ephesians 5:13, John 1:5 and Revelations 21:23. For Neo-Platonism, the works of Augustine and Plotinus are of special relevance. Finally, see Marrone (2001).

6 The chronology of Grosseteste’s works has been heavily debated.
purpose. In *De iride*, his treatise on rainbows, he describes the principles of refraction. From his observations, he calculates how ‘by means of a transparent medium of known size and shape placed at a known distance from the eye, a thing of known distance and size will appear according to place, size, and position’ (Dales, 1961, 400). Light, when manipulated by an engaged viewer, could scale and mediate distance. It could serve, essentially, as an investigative medium. Thus, in his analyses of comets, clouds and acoustics, Grosseteste’s understanding of light informs his confidence in the world’s intelligibility.

Grosseteste’s words about form, matter and light evoke a discourse of art. His comments can be productively read alongside the medieval theory and practice of art after the first quarter of the twelfth century (and, as I will discuss later, they resonate proleptically with arguments that suffused modernist thinking about the notion of medium). A century before *De luce*, Abbot Suger’s stained-glass windows at the Abbey Church of St-Denis thematized the interaction of light and form. I am less interested in the heady ‘light mysticism’ famously ascribed to Suger’s patronage by Erwin Panofsky than the way the window plotted sensory and semiotic appeal, what Rudolph aptly calls ‘the unaccustomed light, color, and immateriality of it all’ (Rudolph, 2011, 417). Above all, Grosseteste aimed to affirm ‘the hermeneutic power of visible things in a divinely created world’ (Kumler and Lakey, 2012, 5). In both *De luce* and the windows at St-Denis, manipulated light assumed the privileged status of medium *par excellence*.

**Medieval Cinema**

Grosseteste’s discussions of light afforded Frampton a way to think about his artistic practice. A protean figure before his untimely death in 1984, Frampton was an active member in a fluctuating set of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals centered around New York and, later, Buffalo. Together with the artists Frank Stella and Carl Andre, he moved to New York in 1958 where he began experiments in film, photography and forms of critical writing. Like other artists during this period, notably Allan Kaprow, he read widely in medieval art and history (Nagel, 2012, 180–185). Indeed, he sprinkled his early writing with references to John Lackland and Guillaume de Machaut (cf. Andre and Frampton, 1980, 40).

Although Frampton would not film the final section of *Zorns Lemma* until much later, he began compiling the material for *Zorns Lemma* in 1962. At that time he was already familiar with Grosseteste’s work. In October 1962, as part of a written dialogue with Andre about Duchamp, Brancusi, and the stakes of sculpture, he wrote of Rodin’s drawings: ‘Those drawings are Rodin’s “speculations.” They are his Lincolnian treatise on light, and end at the boundaries of his sheet’ (Andre and Frampton, 1980, 28). Here, he references Grosseteste’s position as bishop of Lincoln. Arguing that Rodin’s drawings realized their promise
neither in the artist’s bronzes nor marble sculptures, but rather in Brancusi’s
disarticulation of naturalist form, Frampton posits both the drawings and *De luce*
as visionary documents, missives to a time beyond their conception.

Frampton’s use of the word ‘speculation’ is significant here. The speculative
disordering of time increasingly characterized avant-garde reformulations of
medium during the 1960s and 1970s. The word also has medieval resonances
that he was surely aware of; *speculatio* generally signified the pursuit of
philosophy to medieval readers, and it came to acquire the meaning of the pursuit
of truth by thought (as opposed to practical modes of reasoning that tilted at the
good) (Marrone, 1983, 3; Haines and DeWitt, 2008, 49). ‘Speculation’ encompasses
questions of knowledge, vision and the mediation of thought. Its appearance
in the dialogue with Andre betokens Frampton’s drive to hotwire the niceties of chronology.

It is therefore noteworthy that Frampton turned to *De luce* in the midst of the
charged debates about media that convulsed the 1960s and 1970s. Together with
his peers, he was forced to confront pointed questions about what it meant to work
in, or against, a medium. Robert Morris’ writings in *Artforum*, which were fre-
quently invoked in early critical responses to *Zorns Lemma* (Bershen, 1971; Segal,
1971, for example), help elucidate the problem. In a series of provocative essays and
artworks, Morris argued that the blurring of process, product and viewing experience
shifted the stakes of media. As he put it in an essay published in 1970:

… as ends and means are more unified, as process becomes part of the
work instead of prior to it, one is enabled to engage more directly with the
world in art making because forming is moved further into the presenta-
tion. (Morris, 1970, 92)

Eulogizing the ‘existential gap’ between the studio and the space of display,
Morris framed a subtler notion of medium than that articulated by, say, Clement
Greenberg. Tangled in process and presentation, the *work* of art – its ‘making’ or
‘forming’ – transgressed its material support.

An untitled Morris sculpture from 1966 shows how a work’s medium could
outgrow its matter (Figure 2). A ring of painted plywood activates its environ-
ment via two sets of fluorescent lights. Critics have proposed many ways to
understand the work of Morris and his minimalist peers; here, I simply want to
observe that light, contrasting with the matte surface of the ring’s form, vexes
easy circumscriptions of medium. The viewer becomes ensnared in the ground of
media much the same way that Grosseteste’s light makes the *minor mundus* of the
human body extensible with the *maior mundus* of the material world. The work
also directly challenged Greenberg’s well-known investment in areas of competence (Greenberg, 1940).

Other key players in the New York avant-garde drew on the Middle Ages to re-
examine questions of medium. While I am unable to explore their work more
fully here, Dan Flavin’s light sculpture dedicated to William of Ockham and

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8 He contributed to a conversation taking place among artists and critics during the rise of communications technologies – such as the Sony Portapak – and shifts in visual culture occasioned, in part, by coverage of the Vietnam War.

9 For the relationship between light and cosmic order in Grosseteste’s works, see McEvoy (1982, 149–205). An updated critical edition of the Latin text may be found in Panti (2013b). Although Gieben argues for a distinction between the two, light constitutes a universalizing discourse for Grosseteste (Gieben, 2003, 228). Compare Crombie (1961, 131). See also related developments in...

McLuhan use of Grosseteste scholar A.C. Crombie in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962) offer suggestive comparisons for Frampton’s work. More importantly, other experimental filmmakers also drew on medieval theories. Many of Frampton’s peers in the postwar period turned to alternative, paracinematic histories of light in attempts to describe genealogies for their work.10 American filmmaker Stan Brakhage, for example, singled out Johannes Scotus Eriugena, Duns Scotus, Roger Bacon and Grosseteste (Brakhage, 1975a, 7). In works such as *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972b), *The Stars are Beautiful* (1974a) and *The Text of Light* (1974b), Brakhage explored the range of light’s visual possibilities. He told interviewers that the pithy formulations of Bacon and Duns Scotus inspired his experiments, but his actual knowledge of medieval philosophy left much to be desired (Brakhage and Williams, 1973, 94). He seems to have learned what little he knew from Ezra Pound’s glosses of medieval thinkers in his Cantos.11 For example, consider these lines from Pound’s seventy-fourth Canto: ‘in the light of light is the virtù/“sunt lumina” said Erigena Scotus’ (Pound, 1996, 449). Here, Pound – whom, not coincidentally, Frampton visited almost daily during the completion of the Cantos – conflates two very different medieval

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10 There is, of course, a longstanding interest among filmmakers in light. For a perspicuous scholarly investigation, see Wees (1992).

11 Brakhage attributed the genesis of his films *The Process* (1972a) and *The
philosophers. At the premiere of his *The Text of Light*, during a public conversation about Grosseteste at which Frampton was present, Brakhage repeated Pound’s (probably intentional) mistake and muddled Francis with Roger Bacon. Tellingly, he quoted Eriugena while equating the (historically specious) thirteenth-century struggle to prove ‘that intellect was light – that thought actually was electrical’ with the project of legitimating film as art (Brakhage, 1975b, 43). As experimental filmmakers parsed light with growing subtlety, they eagerly enlisted medieval thinkers.

**Frampton’s Speculations**

*De luce* has been read as a proxy in Frampton’s film for the achievements of Christian rationalism. Critics see the use of Grosseteste as an example of Frampton’s interest in the esoteric tradition and of his work’s omnivorous sensibilities, a piece of pastiche rounding out the *bricoleur’s* material stock. In short, the specifically medieval elements of his practice have been marginalized, leaving unanswered the question of what a medieval treatise on light might be doing in a highly self-conscious meditation on the filmic condition. Not only do such glosses ignore Frampton’s long-standing interest in Grosseteste’s thought, they foreclose a critical aspect of *Zorns Lemma*’s intellectual apparatus.

Indeed, Frampton’s turn to Grosseteste during the slow dismantling of Greenbergian medium specificity points to the significance of medieval thought for his reimagining of art’s parameters. In particular, Grosseteste’s nuanced framing of light helped form Frampton’s understanding of the critical possibilities of film as he turned from photography to the moving image in the mid-1960s. Although Frampton grappled with Grosseteste before then (probably using Claire Riedl’s 1942 translation of *De luce* and Etienne Gilson’s analysis in *La philosophie au moyen âge*, given Pound’s heavy reliance on both sources), it was during this period that he began translating Grosseteste himself (Benn Michaels, 1972, 39). He most likely worked from Ludwig Bauer’s 1912 edition, and his own rendering of *De luce* would feature in *Zorns Lemma*.

In contrast to Brakhage, Frampton worked through specific aspects of Grosseteste’s thought in order to develop a comprehensive theory of film. In an interview given some years after *Zorns Lemma*, Frampton described the treatise’s import:

> The text itself is, I think, apposite to film and to whatever my epistemological views of film are. The key line in the text is a sentence that says, ‘In the beginning of time, light drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world.’ Which I take to be a fairly apt description of film, the total history of film, the total historical function of film. (Gidal, 1985, 98)
The quote is significant for understanding how Frampton positioned himself and his work. It posits a long history of cinema, one that encompasses paracinematic phenomena. Frampton put this more succinctly later in the same interview, calling cinema ‘the oldest of the arts,’ and arguing that ‘the cinema of the eye is light ordered in time to perceptual ends’ (Gidal, 1985, 105). He drew on Grosseteste’s suggestively architectonic language to ally the work of cinema with broader considerations of time and perception.

This longer genealogy of film made untenable technologically reductive notions of medium. As Hansen notes, Frampton’s work embodies a studied disregard for the ‘artifactuality of [cinema’s] institutional apparatus’ (Hansen, 2011, 47). Stressing the work of light as a transhistorical medium both enabled him to decouple the moving image from the camera (with its attendant questions of expertise) and to unravel the fabric of linear time. He famously posited the universe as a vast film archive, an updated version of Grosseteste’s universe structured by moving light. (He cites Grosseteste as the catalyst for this notion; Gidal, 1985, 97–98.) As I have attempted to show, these hitherto-marginalized medievalisms serve as the framing device underpinning the theses of form rendered by Frampton’s camera.

I read Frampton’s expansion of medium in the flickers and flares that mark the final sequence of Zorns Lemma. Produced by five separate camera rolls
spliced together to make the final shot (the color balance also shifts slightly with each roll), the interference indexes the physicality of film. While scholars have read the visual noise as a self-referential gesture pointing to the materiality of the camera – and thus a nod to Greenbergian specificity – Frampton’s deep-seated opposition to technological determinism suggests a more complex set of motivations. Much of his work toys with spectatorial expectations, disrupting conventions of labeling and narrative. His ludic energy often centers on the act of perception. Rather than simply highlighting the ‘radical delimitation’ of cinema, these flares more probably signal Frampton’s investment in a perceptual spectrum shot through with sly impossibilities (Greenberg, 1940, 32). They attest the manipulative processes intrinsic to picturing, the *ars* and *artificium* of the translucent media (Grosseteste’s *perspicuum*) in which light becomes embodied.14

Frampton returned to problems of perception time and time again, thematizing the optical apprehension of light in a photograph from the series *Protective Coloration* (1984), where he wears a t-shirt depicting a cut-away diagram of an eyeball (Figure 3), and in the staged self-portrait *Portrait of Hollis Frampton by Marion Faller, Directed by H. F.*, in which a band of light blasts his eyes

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14 In this way, Zorns *Lemma* seems to reprise Grosseteste’s discussion in *De colore*, in which he argues of the person well versed in light’s workings that ‘through skillful manipulation they can show visibly, as they wish, all kinds of colors’ (*per artificium omnes modos colorum quos voluerint uilibisiter ostendunt*) (Dinkova-Bruun *et al.*, 2013, 18).
into blankness. This last photograph has increasingly served as the defining image of Frampton’s creative legacy, and adorns the glossy boxed-set of his work released by the Criterion Collection (Figure 4). It recalls the final sequence of Zorns Lemma, in which overwhelming light flattens the depth of field into a snowy expanse.

Further, the flickers of light recall Grosseteste’s tropic insistence that transparency is neither possible nor desirable. Invoking the figure of the cloud (following the lead of a litany of medieval thinkers), he argues in his Super Psalterium that the obfuscating cloud allows us to see the sun. Similarly, since we cannot behold the divine directly, we reckon God’s works in these very obstructions, through objects, masses and forms of contrast that demarcate presence. Light flares hint at film’s power to image the unseen, so that, rather than a privileged technical support, the camera becomes a kind of sensory prosthesis.  

Zorns Lemma thus bears comparison with Hiroshi Sugimoto’s series of cinema photographs, in which the photographer exposed his camera for the entire duration of a film. Ostensibly transcribing the rapid sequences of filmic information, all the camera captures is overwhelming light (Figure 5).

15 The flares, resulting from marks made on the film’s surface, are the culmination of earlier experiments by Frampton (compare Process Red, 1966). On the general
The works of Sugimoto and Frampton trace out the imbrication of light and time. They suggest that the activity of beholding one implicates the practice of beholding the other. Despite Frampton’s transhistorical rhetoric, his figuring of this isomorphism is redolent of pictorial strategies employed by other filmic practitioners during the 1960s. As I have already noted, different forms of light production throng Brakhage’s works, ranging from the refracted glass of an ashtray in *The Text of Light* to words scratched onto the surface of the film itself. ‘By scratching them,’ he said, ‘I can at least make them more intrinsic to what film is – they become carriers of light’ (Brakhage and Ganguly, 2008, 13). This work would culminate in his *Chartres Series* (1994), a 16-mm film hand-painted in homage to the stained-glass windows of the Gothic cathedral that explicitly hearkens to medieval ekphrases of colored light (Meiss, 1945).

The lure of outer space, with its heady expansion of time’s scale, also marked the visual culture of the 1960s. Where Grosseteste and Roger Bacon looked to the light of the sun, moon and stars to understand the procedures of light and time, the artists and filmmakers of Frampton’s age did so with similar enthusiasm. In a telling parallel, Annette Michelson has compared the filmic experiments of Michael Snow with the cinema of Kubrick and the televised mediation of the Apollo Mission (Michelson, 1979, 121–122). Cult films such as *The Time Travelers* (1964) and *Journey to the Center of Time* (1967) deploy similar kinds of light-based visual effects to signal the rupture of time. Indeed, the overlap of seeing and temporal estrangement is made explicit in the voice-over accompanying the opening sequence of *Journey to the Center of Time*:

> The cold vast reaches of the universe are a giant time keeper. Time has a quality as hazy and distant as the perimeter of our own galaxy. The haze occasionally clears for those minds which inquire into the very fabric of time itself, and a glimpse of the true meaning of time is revealed. Time, from creation to now, tugs to all yesterdays almost as strongly as the unborn tomorrows which stretch towards all eternity.

Famously, the final sequence of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* features an extended, headlong ride through pulsing light produced by slit scan photography (Kubrick, 1968). The recent appropriation of a 1966 light composition by Thomas Wilfred (one that recalls his earlier *Spacedrift* [1960]) in Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (2011) attests an enduring afterlife of that historical matrix of film, light and slippery time.16

In sum, I want to argue that Frampton’s engagement with Grosseteste offers a nuanced entry point into the filmic imaginary of the late 1960s. Light, long a constituent feature of cinema, became a charged subject. Frampton’s creative untethering of moving light from camera technology thus served not only as a riposte to critical debates about medium, but also triangulated a new set of possibilities for thinking the historical freight of film.
Liquid Wreckage

Frampton’s encounter with Grosseteste posited a radical reworking of the relationship between past and present. Indeed, Hansen has argued that Frampton’s ‘seemingly outrageous claim for the radical temporal flexibility of cinema’ can be read as ‘a shift in focus concerning the operation of movement and its relation to time’ (Hansen, 2011, 47). By way of a coda, I will turn to two essays that shed some light on his complicated understanding of history. Given the recent attention to anachronistic approaches in art history, as well as other delirious methodologies (cf. Didi-Huberman, 2003; Nagel, 2012; Powell, 2012), Frampton’s thought seems ripe for revisiting.

In an essay published in *October* in 1978, Frampton obsesses over procedures of decay and renewal. ‘The accumulated force of six decades of evasion cascades, avalanches, cataracts, *simultaneously* destroys his body and replicates it,’ he writes of the essay’s subject (Frampton, 1978, 82). Forms, structures and images encode the past. Continuity is predicated on structural constraints. He follows this passage with lengthy descriptions of bodies composed of treasures, bodies entwined with mountain basalt, bodies as walking museums. Renaissance

![Figure 6: Sam Derbyshire. *Catenary as Evolute of a Tractrix*. Available at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tractrix#/media/File:Evolute2.gif under a creative commons attribution 3.0.](image-url)
daggers lurk between ribs. Jeremy Bentham’s spectacles straddle a renal vein. Greek sculptures hide behind the eyes.

Like Grosseteste, Frampton sought to marry scientific thought with other forms of intelligent production. As Ragona has argued, he deployed elements of conceptual mathematics to blast open the strictures evolved by 1960s film semiotics (Ragona, 2004, 100). He wrote, for example, that mathematical operations have ‘graphic consequences’ (Frampton, 1978, 84). Mobile structures of pastness, such as the walking body museum, image the present in order to reveal both the continuity of perceptual modes and the temporally disruptive power of the visual. The essay concludes with a meditation on the geometric shape of the tractrix. Described in the seventeenth century by Leibniz and Huygens, the tractrix might be summarized as ‘the orthogonal trajectory of a set of circles, of constant radius, whose centers lie on a straight line’ (Lockwood, 1961, 123). Poignantly described as a ‘curve of pursuit,’ the tractrix is (in physics and applied mathematics) the curve along which an object moves, impelled by its necessary and unbreakable relation to a second object (Figure 6). That second object, which is connected to the first by a line segment of consistent length, produces the curve. (The line originated as an imaginative construct that helped visualize a thought experiment of the tractrix as the product of tethered, co-dependent motion in the real world; Yates, 1947, 221; Steinhaus, 2011, 249–251.) The tractrix, for Frampton, describes a plunge, a predicament, a cargo of unseen strangers, mutual desire uncomprehended, a woman transforming imperceptibly into a man, a series of incessant trajectories in which we understand the different lives we might have lived, unspeakable liquid wreckage.

Figure 7: Piero Paolo Pasolini, dir. Source: Still from The Decameron (Il Decameron) (1971).

17 Interest in these problems is signaled by the title of Zorns Lemma, which refers to Ernst Zermelo’s Axiom of Choice and its equivalent statements. This will be treated in a forthcoming article, to be published in Leonardo, which I am grateful to Clint Enns for sharing in advance.

18 For a readable overview of the tractrix, see Nahin (2012, 23–27).
The relationship between two points, one setting the other in motion, their span co-dependent, might model the bond between Frampton and Grosseteste. In its evocative disregard for the sureties of distance and death the tractrix forces us to think, as Harris might put it, ‘contrapuntally’ (Harris, 2007).

This kind of methodology rhymes with other filmic projects that sought to build connections with the past. In his Trilogy of Life films, Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini adapted three literary classics for cinema: The Decameron (Il Decameron, 1971), The Canterbury Tales (I racconti di Canterbury, 1972) and Arabian Nights (Il fiore delle mille e una notte, 1974). He modeled much of the look of these films on historical images, going so far as to literally restage key paintings. In a pivotal scene in The Decameron, a painter – played by Pasolini himself – has a vision (Figure 7). The vision blends two paintings by Giotto; the larger scheme is derived from Giotto’s Last Judgment (ca. 1304–1305) in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. In place of Christ, however, stands the Virgin Mary, derived from Giotto’s Ognissanti Madonna (ca. 1310).

Pasolini aimed not just to refer to past art objects, nor to arrogate a patina of authenticity to his project. Rather, he aimed to contaminate the present with traces of the past. He understood images as wormholes. They encoded historically specific forms of spectatorship, summing up kinds of cultural memory. Giotto’s cosmologies and visual strategies radiate through the film, impressing the stains of the past onto the images of modernity. As he put it: ‘Now I prefer to move through the past, precisely because I believe that the past is the only force able to contest the present: it is an aberrant form … capable of putting the present into crisis’ (Rumble, 1996, 58). Giotto – and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Bosch, Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino – held out the promise of a re-visioned present. Both medieval and postmedieval images militated against the oppressive social conditions of postwar Italy.

Another piece of writing by Frampton, provocatively titled ‘Erotic Predicaments for Camera,’ similarly muddles the now and then. Arguing that erotic photography lays bare the connective tissue between image and referent with particular force, he inserts himself into four historical episodes. He becomes, variously, F.J. Moulin, Charles Dodgson, a detective examining the tableaux of Jack the Ripper and Leslie Krims. In the course of telling the history of eroticism, he luxuriates in the eroticism of history, the seductive immersion in the images of the past. Tellingly, Frampton referred to the first part of Zorns Lemma as ‘the lesson,’ and the final, Grosseteste-inspired section as ‘the drift’ (Frampton, 2012). In his invocation of Grosseteste, Dodgson and Moulin, he reprises Barthes’ discussion of pleasurable drifting, skimming and sinking in the liquid wreckage of the past (Barthes, 1975, 18).

The projects of Grosseteste and Frampton – linked by the relationality of light as a form – prompt us to reconsider the epistemological stakes of media. If Lee has shown how conflicting notions of time subtended debates about media during the sixties, and if Zorns Lemma beautifully stages what she calls ‘the phenomena of non-contemporaneity,’ the particulars of Frampton’s engagement with his thirteenth-

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19 My discussion of Pasolini in the following paragraph closely tracks that found in Rumble (1996).
century interlocutor bespeak the multiplicity of historically suffused responses to Greenberg and his ilk (Lee, 2004, 223). These particulars also urge us to recognize the fruitful encounters between the modern and the medieval, which we must continue to plumb, since art history tells the story of connectivity as much as it tells of rupture. It repays the explosive – Barthes might say blissful – undoing of time and space. This is where we might militate against the ideology of time-as-measure. Frampton’s thought, still poorly understood, remains critical for this project, distinguished by the peculiar rigor of his vision. Only by articulating these discursive formulations of knowing and looking can we begin to construct an appropriately dynamic history of moving light, recuperating imagination for the ends of art history.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Faye Gleisser, Solveig Nelson, Victoria Salinger, the Research in Art and Visual Evidence workshop at the University of Chicago, and (especially) Jason D. LaFountain for their comments.

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