
**A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF
HOLLIS FRAMPTON'S
PALINDROME**

AND HOW TO CONSTRUCT FIVE
TYPES OF FILMIC PALINDROMES

CLINT ENNS

Hollis Frampton's 1969 film *Palindrome* is named after a literary device describing words or phrases that read the same backward as forward. For instance, consider the following well-known palindromes:

Madam, I'm Adam
A man, a plan, a canal: Panama¹
Never odd or even
Murder for a jar of red rum

In *Palindrome*, Frampton includes the Latin phrase "et consumimur igni,"² which translates into "and are consumed by fire." This phrase is the second half of the Latin palindrome "In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni" which translates to "We go wandering at night and are consumed by fire"; however, "in girum ire" literally (and poetically) means to "go in a circle." One can deduce from the above examples that palindromes generally allow for adjustments in punctuation and word breaks.

In "Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton's *Magellan*," theorist Brian Henderson concisely describes some of the difficulties involved with creating a filmic palindrome:

In 1969, Frampton made a twenty-two minute film called *Palindrome* (1969 is a palindrome, so is 22). Making a filmic palindrome is far more difficult than making one of words or numerals or a series of headings; while words, numerals, and headings need not be legible upside down to be palindromes, a film must be so. Assuming the requisite double sprocket holes on a given print, *Palindrome* would maintain its identity shown backwards—not only in reverse order but upside down. In principle, at least, the film need not ever be rewound.³

In other words, in order to construct a filmic palindrome the filmmaker must respect some basic mathematical concepts with regards to symmetry. For instance, observe the first and the last image of *Palindrome* (excluding titles). The last image is simply the first image rotated around the centre of the frame by 180 degrees, which demonstrates that Henderson's observation about the necessity of double sprocket holes is indeed correct, since the film would need to be reversed and flipped on playback. With this in mind, it is possible to construct a filmic palindrome using film with single perforations; however, the last image would have to be the first image flipped vertically (or more formally reflected about a horizontal line running through the centre of the frame) since the film would simply be reversed (and not flipped) on playback. It is worth asserting that Frampton's *Palindrome* is not literally a filmic palindrome and would not actually maintain its identity shown backward for reasons that, I believe, ultimately contribute to the aesthetic success of the work.

One of the main reasons the film is not a perfect filmic palindrome is that different variations of the same footage are used. Frampton explains:

Forty phrases of twenty-four single frames were generated by animation. Then a set of variations was made at the lab which produced the following: an image of the original roll (color, single layer); a continuous tone black & white version; a black and white negative; and a color negative. Other sets were produced by printing the original roll superimposed on itself, so that the blocks of image fall on each other, but so that we see images first to last on one level, last to first on the other. A color positive, color negative, black-and-white positive, and black-and-white negative were made that way. Then came a set made from the black and white; on the forward pass, the original was printed through a yellow filter, and on the reverse pass, through a blue; and others were done the same way except with magenta and green filters. Those

generated rolls were intercut with each other, interwoven around the centre point.⁴

In other words, Frampton used variations of the footage in the construction of the film. In order to produce a perfect filmic palindrome, every image in the first half of the film must occur rotated in the second half of the film; however, in *Palindrome* the image may not be perfectly duplicated and may appear in negative or in a superimposition contributing to the overall aesthetic of the work. By employing negative elements in the final film, Frampton also made visible one of the typically invisible aspects of commercial film production. In fact, the images used in *Palindrome* are themselves the detritus of commercial film production. According to Frampton:

At the time the material for *Palindrome* was collected, I was working in a lab where professionals brought in sheets and rolls of film for processing. All the processing was done by automatic machinery. The waste at both ends of the roll, where the machine's clips had been attached, was cut off and tossed into the wastebasket. The physical deformation caused by the clips and the erratic way in which the clips let in chemicals to work on the emulsion produced images. It struck me that by far the most interesting images produced by the process went into the wastebasket. The dull ones were put in boxes and sent back to the customers. I began collecting the waste images and mounting them as slides.⁵

This further contributes to one of the main tensions within the film, namely, the tension between the organic and mechanical.

The underlying palindromic structure of *Palindrome* creates a further tension, namely, a tension between the generative nature of the work and the viewer's ability to decode the structure. Frampton relates this to a similar tension that one experiences while listening to music:

Unless one spends a long time with the score, and sometimes not then, one can never quite get back the full set of rules. There's always a certain tension, a certain malaise in listening; one listens with double effort, a double concentration because it seems at once an oddly willful, mutable music, and yet at the same time it is not the willfulness of a composer, of an artist, that one is hearing but the generative power of the set of rules whose consequences are being systematically worked out. That fascinates me.⁶

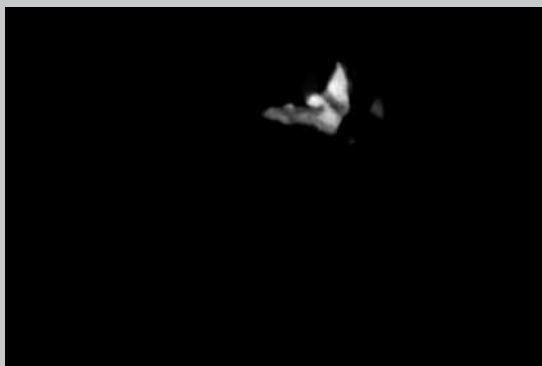
Frampton's choice of source material and variations within the palindromic structure is one of the ways he inserts himself into "the generative power of the set of rules whose consequences are being systematically worked out." In other words, deviations from the overall underlying structure create a space within the system for the artist.

Finally, Frampton incorporated *Palindrome* into his most ambitious project *Magellan*—an unfinished 36-hour film cycle. As observed by Henderson,

Given the importance of the palindrome figure throughout *Magellan*, it is entirely appropriate that the film [*Palindrome*] appear among the *Dreams*, that is, in that section devoted to *Magellan's* unconscious, wherein the material of the cycle as a whole is recycled in condensed, displaced form.⁷

In his current research into *Magellan*, film scholar Michael Zryd examines one of the major tensions Frampton is navigating in the cycle, namely, the tension between fragmentation and totality.⁸ One of the ways a fragment can be turned into a totality is through the loop.

Given the cyclical nature of the palindrome and its role in *Magellan*, it is worth asking what type of structure is a filmic palindrome. Creating a loop out of Frampton's *Palindrome* (on film strip with double sprockets) forms a Möbius strip, a non-orientable surface with only one side and one edge.⁹ This simple object raises cosmological questions about the shape of our universe. In addition, it challenges many common intuitions (for instance, that a flat surface must have two sides). Finally, the structure of *Palindrome* provides the viewer with an additional way of conceptualizing the underlying structure of *Magellan* which, if finished, would have been "the largest loop film ever made, the longest film ever looped."¹⁰



FIVE TYPES OF FILMIC PALINDROMES

VARIATION/ILLUSTRATION 1: (FOR FILMS WITH SINGLE OR DOUBLE PERFORATIONS)

This construction will create a filmic palindrome that simply mimics the literary structure. The last frame of the film should be the same as the first frame of the film, the second to last frame should be the same as the second frame and so on. If the frame count is odd, the frame in the exact middle of the sequence does not need to be duplicated. For instance, consider the C in the palindrome ABCBA.

VARIATION/ILLUSTRATION 2: (FOR FILMS WITH DOUBLE PERFORATIONS)

This construction will create a filmic palindrome that allows the same film to play forward as backward. The last frame should be the first frame of the film rotated around the centre of the frame by 180 degrees, the second to last frame should be the second frame of the film rotated around the centre of the frame by 180 degrees, and so on. If the frame count is odd, the frame in the exact middle of the sequence must remain the same image when it is rotated around the centre of the frame by 180 degrees.

VARIATION/ILLUSTRATION 3: (FOR FILMS WITH SINGLE PERFORATIONS)

This construction will create a filmic palindrome that allows the same film to play forward as backward. The last frame should be the first frame of the film flipped vertically, the second to last frame should be the second frame of the film flipped vertically, and so on. If the frame count is odd, the frame in the exact middle of the sequence must remain the same image when it is flipped vertically.

VARIATION/ILLUSTRATION 4: (FOR FILMS WITH DOUBLE PERFORATIONS)

This construction will create a filmic palindrome that mimics the literary structure and allows the same film to play forward as backward. The last frame of the film should be the same as the first frame of the film, the second to last frame should be the same as the second frame and so on. In addition, all of the frames of the film must remain the same image when they are rotated around the centre of the frame by 180 degrees. If the frame count is odd, the frame in the exact middle of the sequence does not need to be duplicated, however, it still must remain the same image when it is rotated around the centre of the frame by 180.

VARIATION/ILLUSTRATION 5: (FOR FILMS WITH SINGLE PERFORATIONS)

This construction will create a filmic palindrome that mimics the literary structure and allows the same film to play forward as backward. The last frame of the film should be the same as the first frame of the film, the second to last frame should be the same as the second frame and so on. In addition, all of the frames of the film must remain the same image when flipped vertically. If the frame count is odd, the frame in the exact middle of the sequence does not need to be duplicated, however, it still must remain the same image when it is flipped vertically.

A simple example has been provided that satisfies all five variations. Enjoy creating your own filmic palindromes.

1 This palindrome was used in Owen Land's *Wide Angle Saxon* (1975). Land also uses the palindrome Malayalam.

2 ET CONSVMIMVR IGNI.

3 Brian Henderson, "Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton's *Magellan*," *October* 32 (Spring 1985): 137.

4 Ibid.

5 Hollis Frampton interviewed by Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 45.

6 Ibid, 46.

7 Henderson, "Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton's *Magellan*," 137. This is an excellent resource for information about the palindromic nature of *Magellan*.

8 Mike Zryd, "Hollis Frampton's Comic Inventory: Parables of Photography and Totality in *Magellan*," work-in-progress presented at Propriomedia: Colloquium Series in Media Studies at OCAD University in Toronto, Ontario on October 24, 2014.

9 In simple terms, a non-orientable surface is one in which it would be impossible to distinguish between left and right. In contrast, creating a loop out of a film with single sprockets forms a two-sided, double edged object with an orientable surface.

10 Henderson, "Propositions for the Exploration of Frampton's *Magellan*," 136.

CONTRIBUTORS

Patrick Ellis is a PhD candidate in the Film and Media Department at the University of California, Berkeley. His research on early simulations of the aerial view engages with the histories of cinema, science, and cartography. He has curated silent film programs at the Pacific Film Archive, the Wolfsonian Museum, and Cambridge University, and has published in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *N+1*, among other venues.

Clint Enns visual artist living in Toronto, Ontario. He has a Master's degree in mathematics from the University of Manitoba, and has recently received a Master's degree in cinema and media from York University where he is currently pursuing a PhD.

Alfred Guzzetti makes documentary and experimental films and videos. He is Professor of Visual Arts at Harvard University.

Steven Jacobs is an art historian specialized in the relations between film and the visual arts. His other research interests focus on the visualization of architecture, cities, and landscapes in film and photography. His publications include *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (2007) and *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (2011). He teaches at Ghent University, Belgium.

Kim Jihoon is an assistant professor of cinema and media studies at Chung-ang University. He is completing his first book *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-media Age* (Bloomsbury Academic, July 2016).

Barbara London is a curator, writer and consultant who founded the video exhibition and collection programs at MoMA, where she worked between 1973 and 2013. Ms. London integrated the Internet as part of curatorial practice <<http://adaweb.walkerart.org/context/stir-fry>> She is an adjunct professor in the Yale University School of Art, and lectures widely.

Lucy Reynolds has lectured and published extensively, most particularly focused on questions of the moving image, feminism, political space and collective practice. She runs the MRES Art: Moving Image course at Central St Martins.

Martin Rumsby is an independent filmmaker, curator and writer. For a decade from 1985 he toured experimental films throughout North America. His films include *American Sketchbook* (2000) and *Brown's Barbeque* (2006).

Tina Takemoto is an artist and associate professor of visual studies at California College of the Arts. Her current research explores the hidden dimensions of same-sex intimacy and queer sexuality for Japanese Americans incarcerated by the US government during World War II. Her film *Looking for Jiro* received Best Experimental Film Jury Award at the Austin LGBT International Film Festival. Her essays appear in *Afterimage*, *Art Journal*, *GLQ*, *Performance Research*, *Radical Teacher*, *Theatre Survey*, and *Women & Performance*. Takemoto is the board president of the Queer Cultural Center and co-founder of Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts.

Rachel Valinsky is an independent curator, writer, and translator based in New York. She is a doctoral candidate in Art History at The Graduate Center.

William C. Wees is an emeritus professor at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. He is the author of *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found-Footage Films*, and numerous essays and reviews, most of which deal with experimental/avant-garde film and video.

Ellen Zweig is an artist and filmmaker. At VOOM-HD Lab, she made *The Lonely Girl*, a short documentary about a Chinese opera star living in New York. Starting in 2001, she created an on-going series of video portraits of Westerners who love China. She is now working in China on an homage to the documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens and his last film, *Une Histoire du Vent*. Her documentary film, *Heart Beat Ear Drum*, a film about Z'EV was completed in 2015.