

FROZEN IN TIME

MELISSA GRONLUND

N ahead Raza's *Frozen in Time* casts a forensic, murmuring eye over the field of cryonics – the freezing of one's body, after death, in the hope that resuscitation might one day be possible. Cryonics expresses an ancient and basic desire – there is nothing, perhaps, more a part of life than wanting to cheat death – but despite this pedigree, it's a palpably marginal phenomenon. It all-too-readily invites scoffing and scepticism, and it's all-too-easy to poke holes in its argument: reason rolling in like a hedgehog on a paper towel. Even if resuscitation is possible, what about human error? Earthquakes disturbing your resting place? Your bequest running out? Why would you not freeze your body at 25, rather than waiting till you're 70? And would you want to live, decrepit and friendless, in the world of the future?

Raza's video, comprised of interviews with members of the Cryonics Institute, just north of Detroit, and of atmospheric shots of the facility, lets its subjects answer these *caveats emptor* simply: there is a chance. 'We're just an ambulance ride to the future. It's really that simple. There's a hospital that may or may not exist on the other end. We don't know.' (This quotation notably concludes the film.) It is a secular form of Pascal's wager. The video keeps the simplicity of the desire in suspension with the audacity of the attempt, and the lineage of the desire for immortality with the day-to-day means by which it is carried out. Detailing the procedures by which the body is prepared and the accompanying financial considerations, *Frozen in Time* seeks to remove cryonics from the crackpot realm of the indulgent rich and restore some dignity to it. Shots of the scientific instruments at the heart of the process resonate with sheer beauty, while the interviewees in the film speak with a note of justification: they know how cryonics (and their belief in it) might look to the world outside, and they are keen to present their choices as rational and enlightened. Their openness and slow, declarative way of speaking befits the sense of explanation that is shared by the video: how exactly does cryonics work, not just in terms of science, but in practice?

It starts with membership to the Institute. As with the pyramids of Giza, financial considerations come into play: how much you have in this life determines how much you can take with you. One man explains the 'neuro', or the cryonics option to simply freeze one's brain – cheaper than a whole body freeze (and one that makes a good deal of sense. Who would want the

slightly spackled skin of an OAP when you can have the future's presumably permanently marble facade?). The friendly FAQ on the Cryonics Institute website underlines the affordability of the procedure. 'Q: What about the cost? I heard cryonics is supposed to be incredibly expensive. A: Good news: you heard wrong!' The people interviewed are not rich nor particularly privileged in terms of life experience. More than one speaks of the future as the place where they can accomplish things they were unable to in this life, yet often these dreams are modest. 'I'm sixty years old... if I had a longer life to look forward to, I'd be looking at a second career ... What's immortality? I don't know. Ask me when I'm 200 if I've had enough. But I know I haven't had enough now.' A lean, thoughtful man in an oversize cheap suit, says 'Just smelling the roses and having another cream cheese sandwich is a lot of incentive for me.'

A second consideration is getting to the Institute to be frozen before the body cools itself or too much degeneration occurs. For this a special team – like an alternative reality ambulance, with equipment to transform death rather than prolong life – is on call in order to respond to death with the utmost of speed. Raza's video shows a specialist explaining the work to a group of new hires; they seem bored and grumpy – a job's a job. The Institute, too, surrounded by cracked pavement and a chain-link fence, resembles any other industrial warehouse or facility. Raza shows the exterior in a slow tracking shot; the Cryonics Institute seems far from the industrial beauty catalogued by, for example, Thomas Struth or the Bechers. The interior feels cold and eerie, and worn around the edges. How are these people going to survive into the next age, when the building that houses them might not? It is hard to see the film – particularly for an American – without hearing the flat Midwestern accents and the class they belong to in the US's rapidly calcifying social system, or without thinking of the city of Detroit, just a few miles to the Institute's south. The era of American faith in progress, and particularly technological progress that brought such wealth to the Michigan area through car production, is at an end. Detroit is the country's most visible defeat: a city blighted, a patient lost. While the possibility of cryonic resuscitation is held out for the future, a more present danger hangs in the background of the Institute: that the centre will break down, and, with the local population's disposable income shrinking, insufficient funds will be available to sustain it. The plane of the everyday might get to these frozen bodies before any future medical complications.

This note of reality is underscored by the film's final, generously paced shot of a worker checking the nitrogen levels of one of the pods. He could be, and might have been some time ago, on a car production line; here he is servicing a resting body. While cryonics in theory is a shot at immortality, a bid for technology to best – finally! – the hand of inexorable death, in practice it is a down payment; a subscription model; a team stuck in traffic as it gets to a cooling body; a part-time job for an unskilled worker.

Raza's film lets these facets appear for themselves, in an understated way. The quiet sadness of the subjects' hope, too, arises unforced from her interviews. For the video chooses to fly alongside the idea of cryonics, neither overtly contradicting it nor backstabbing its ideas, but supporting it through its visualisation of the practice. A palette of greys and blues dominates – cool colours, in muted, dark shades. White smoke emerges and wafts, friably, about the screen. The scientific process is given its own exquisiteness, irrespective of the contended ideas that sustain it. The film's visual language favours right angles, often showing the subjects head-on or in profile. This mimics, among other things, the representation of corpses in teledramas, in which they seen from overhead or, almost reverentially, from the side on a level with the body. In *Frozen in Time* the plainness resonates with the simplicity of the idea of cryonics: both in its motivation, and in the method used to carry it out.

In a recent article, I discussed the propensity for films of the past ten years, particularly those made by women, to explicate various systems: films that showed the organisation of a bequest (Elizabeth Price's *A Public Lecture & Exhumation*, 2006); the unpacking of a medical library (Megan Fraser's *Arkhe*, 2007); the exhibition of museum artefacts (Nashashibi/Skaer's *Flash in the Metropolitan*, 2006). Many of the systems discussed are outdated – a return of visually apprehensible information at a time when information and communication are being digitised and immaterialised. There is an element to this of art's continual catch-up nature – the minute the rest of the world has moved on and rendered something obsolete, art returns to find beauty in the forsaken object: the postcard, the index note, the spindly typewriter. It also speaks to, I would argue, a recurring fascination with administration and with how things are systematised – a philosophical concern of the twentieth century, and one that affects, in a workaday way, all our lives, but which is impossible to depict or adequately represent. In what ways are

we constrained by different routines and the different codes we submit to in order to remain in an organised society? The 'aesthetics of information' identified in 1960s Conceptualism similarly sought to visualise this invisible organisation; this return of visual systems is more embedded in the idea of the administration of the body in particular, which might explain its appeal for women artists. Raza's breaking down of the means of cryonics's freezing its subjects suggests an extreme form of bodily regulation, and one pointedly at odds with the reigning medical establishment.

Indeed, the body here acts both as stumbling block to immortality and the means by which immortality will ultimately be achieved. A lofty sentiment, and one whose grandeur is echoed by the video's visually arresting images, but one which at the same time belies the reality of the practice. Once dead, the body is another material good to be stored, checked and regulated for a set amount of time. Cryonics is as much a belief in future medicine as a belief in the continuity of the bureaucratic administration the patient subscribes to, and the legal structures that subtend it – the assurance that the Institute will honour one's fee and one's wishes. Underneath the hope for immortality is the assumption that things like wills, membership schemes, electricity will continue.

This is why much of the grounding of the Cryonics Institute in the present – and even a little, in its shabby, worn-down nature, in the past – feels doubly ironic. If the purpose of cryonics is to send oneself into the future, the hope would be to make oneself futuristic: to make the body ready for the future, rather than simply hope (but why not?) the future will someday be able to cope with the past. No one wants to be the man in the great coat and the broad brim in time-travel comedies. But *Frozen in Time* shows the sheer inability to imagine life as substantially other than as it is. In its portrait of the people and the means of the practice, the video lends beauty not just to the practice of cryonics but to the holding onto of the present, ordinary though it might be, and even as it tries to escape into the future.