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Bruce Elder

**Image: Representation and Object**

**The Photographic Image in Canadian Experimental Film (Michael Snow and Jack Chambers)**

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Writing with a confidence arising from the authoritative position he held in 1962, the American art critic Clement Greenberg asserted:

By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture.

At the very time Greenberg was writing, events were occurring that would cast doubt on the adequacy of his critical theories. In New York, Andy Warhol had already begun to exhibit his serigraphs based on popular photographic imagery. In Toronto, Canada, Michael Snow (b. 1929) had abandoned purely abstract painting and was producing works that incorporated representational elements. And, in the small southwestern Ontario city of London, Jack Chambers (1931-78) was making paintings that revelled in the glory of the fully detailed rendering made possible by copying photographs.

Clement Greenberg was the foremost exponent of the artistic theory known as modernism. Modernists claimed that the progress of art lay in the elimination from artistic media of everything that was accidental, so that only that which was essential would remain as the material with which an artist would work. Consequently, much of the experimentation that took place under the banner of modernism can be described succinctly: artists tried to make works that remained within the boundaries of the media in which they were realized (that is, to write novels or pieces of music that remained novels or pieces of music), even though they lacked certain traits (e.g. narrative line or tonic centre) that are commonly believed to characterize these media.

Nearly two decades have elapsed since our best artists employed their energies in the effort to realize these ideals. One can easily identify, in retrospect, certain exemplary products of this effort. There are, for instance, Malevich's white-on-white paintings. Among more recent works, one could cite the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, which narrate the stories of their stories being narrated. And, at the source of the tradition, there are the works of Gustave Flaubert,<sup>2</sup> particularly the project he announced in 1878 that he intended to undertake after finishing *Bouvard et Pécuchet* — a novel that would be about nothing. Flaubert, unfortunately, was captured by Nothingness before he could succeed in catching nothing in the net of his fiction. Had he lived to carry out his idea, the art of the past century would likely have been quite different. As it is, his proposal has taken on the status of a legend, for it defined the *telos* of the artistic currents of the century after his death. In the last two decades many have come to realize, as Flaubert had indicated a hundred years before, that the process of reducing artwork to its essential elements was destined to culminate in a work that was about nothing at all.

Modernism's attraction was widespread: indeed, among the arts, only photography seemed, by and large, reluctant to submit to its appeal. That photography should resist reformulation according to the modernist ideal is hardly surprising. Just try to imagine what a photograph would look like if it reached Flaubert's ideal of being a work about nothing. While one has no difficulty in

imagining a painting that represents nothing, to conceive of a similar photograph seems impossible. It would be nothing more than an empty piece of paper or an empty screen.

Film, on the other hand, has not proven so resistant to modernist reformulation; indeed, some of the finest examples of modernist art are to be found in the cinema. While no one has yet found a way of making an interesting film that would consist of nothing but projected white light, several American avant-garde filmmakers (e.g. Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad and Taka Iimura) have come pretty close, for they have created rich and interesting works out of nothing except bursts of white or coloured light projected at regulated intervals for various periods of time.

There exists no similar body of work in photography. The reason that filmmakers have been able to come so much closer to Flaubert's "zero-point" of artistic construction than have photographers is that film possesses one property still photographs lack, namely, the attribute of unfolding at a measured and regulated rate. The works I have just cited demonstrate that the essential capacity of the film medium is its ability to articulate forms that provide temporal structures for changes in light. If the film medium is not embarrassed by the elimination of referential forms, it is not because a reserve of features that withstand the elimination of reference is inherent in its photographic basis, but, rather, because film possesses properties in addition to those that derive from its photographic basis.

The modernist movement in Canada produced no experimental cinema<sup>3</sup> whatsoever. The closest approximation one could find would be the works of Vincent Grenier, and even these were produced only after the filmmaker had lived in the United States for several years. Grenier's films typically employ forms that present the illusion of possessing processive areas and recessive areas; this illusory depth generally appears quite shallow and extremely fragile. Moreover, his visual forms appear, for the most part, to be non-representational, although, in most of his films, a few brief passages disturb this appearance by revealing that these apparently abstract images are in fact direct recordings of real objects.

Grenier's main concern is to illustrate how slight changes in the tonal relations in a form affect our impression of the relations between the volumes in that form. However, I find more intriguing his treatment of the theoretical issues involved in the concept of representation. These issues are treated with particular clarity in Grenier's World in Focus (1977). The development of Grenier's thoughts on representation reflected in this film parallels the course of late modernist thought during the early-to-mid '60s. A prevalent notion in modernist circles during the 1940s and '50s was that the incorporation of representational images in a work of art degraded its ontological condition by downgrading it from an object to an image. Accordingly, early modernists eschewed representation entirely.

In the early 1960s, however, artists found a way to make representational works the ontological status of which was not, in relation to the original, a debased one. Jasper Johns, in his Targets series (1955-61) and American Map series (1960-63, 1965-66), pioneered the use of images that "represented" other representational images. Such images avoid the problem of opening up the ontological gulf between image and original that plagues most representational practices, since an image of an image has much the same status and can serve many of the same functions as the original image itself. The images of maps in Grenier's World in Focus are a case in point. The image of a map can serve the same functions as the original map does, and is, in fact, a map. Thus, in this film Grenier found a way of using representational images in a fashion completely consistent with the modernist programme.

One of Michael Snow's favourite tactics accomplishes exactly the opposite of what Grenier achieved in World in Focus. He demonstrates how an image is transformed when it is made the subject of another medium. In One Second in Montreal (1969), for example, a series of still photographs is reproduced in a motion picture. A viewer reacts to these lengthy, motionless film images differently than he or she would to the equally protracted display of slides or still photographs. When watching these unchanging film images, one is conscious of the length of time during which they are presented in a way one would not be when looking at the stills. The difference points up the fact that temporality is inscribed in a film image. Duration is thus shown to be one of the filmmaker's fundamental materials, even more fundamental (pace such theorists as Siegfried Kracauer and Slavko Vorkapich) than motion, a trait of the film it makes possible. In a similar vein, Side Seat Painting Slide Sound Film (1970) shows that a photograph of a slide produces different effects than does the slide itself, and that a slide of a painting produces different effects than does the painting itself.























