

THE STRUCTURAL FILM: RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES IN AVANT-GARDE ART

R. BRUCE ELDER

Introduction

In 1969, P. Adams Sitney, a precocious film critic of exceptional acuity, issued the most famous and frequently quoted essay ever written on avant-garde cinema. It starts out at high speed:

Suddenly, a cinema of structure has emerged. The dominant evolution of the American (and outlands') avant-garde cinema has been the pursuit of progressively complex forms; so this change of pace is unexpected and difficult to explain. Two points demand immediate clarity. First, what is the tendency towards complex forms? And, second, how is the structural cinema different? (1970: 327)

In answer to the first question, Sitney characterised the formal film that preceded the structural film as one of “conjunction” and “metaphor”. The goal of the makers of structural films was different from that of the earlier practitioners of avant-garde cinema, whose purpose had been to construct a compact cinematic architecture that would make disparate elements cohere – to reconcile diverse elements had been the ambition of Stan Brakhage, of Gregory Markopoulos, of Peter Kubelka, and of Kenneth Anger, to cite only those whom Sitney himself named. Between 1965 and 1969, a new tendency appeared, in the films of Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits. The films of these makers seem to belong to a tendency antithetical to the formal film (Sitney emphasised that the antithesis is only apparent) inasmuch as they constitute “a cinema of structure wherein the *shape* of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film” (Sitney 1970: 327). To the characterisation of a structural film as a film that insists upon its

shape, Sitney appended a list of features any or all of which structural films often possess: fixed camera position (or, from the viewer's perspective, a fixed frame); the flicker effect; loop printing (the reappearance of contents, exactly and without variation); and rephotography off a screen.¹

When he proposed that the films accord primacy to their shape, Sitney also suggested that films possess "minimal content".

The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. This is the clearest in *The Flicker* (1965) of Tony Conrad and *Ray Gun Virus* (1966) of Paul Sharits, where the flickering of single-frame solids – in the former black and white, in the latter colors – is the total field. (1970: 327)

The assertion that structural films possess minimal content seems baffling at first, for it is difficult to see what more he might intend by that description than that the films are not, as Brakhage's often were, replete with visual incidents (both represented and constructed). Sitney likely drew the term "minimal content" from a piece that the philosopher Richard Wollheim had written just four years before, a piece that was still a topic of discussion among people concerned with contemporary art.

If we survey the art situation of recent times, as it has come to take shape over, let us say, the last fifty years, we find that increasingly acceptance has been afforded to a class of objects which, though disparate in many ways – in looks, in intention, in moral impact – have also an identifiable feature or aspect in common. And this might be expressed by saying that they have a minimal art-content: in that either they are to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore possess a low content of any kind, or else that the differentiation that they do exhibit, which may in some cases be very considerable, comes not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory. Examples of the kind of thing I have in mind would be canvases by Reinhardt or (from the other end of the scale) certain combines by Rauschenberg or, better, the non-"assisted" ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. (Wollheim 1965: 26)

By "minimal content" Sitney likely meant much the same as what Richard Wollheim meant: that the films, since they do not strive to reconcile diversity, are "to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves" and that, since the films do not present themselves as an

“outering” of the filmmaker’s consciousness or soul, “the differentiation which they do contain” comes not from the artist but from a non-artistic source. We might understand *Wavelength* as having “minimal content” if we construe that phrase to mean what Wollheim intended: after all the film is basically (not exclusively) a record of a zoom across a room: the camera set-up doesn’t change and the film does not represent a large number of spaces. Its content is, in that sense, pretty much “undifferentiated”.

Today, the appearance of “Structural Film” is commonly regarded as one of the cardinal moments in the discussion of films made outside the context of the sponsored cinema. When it appeared, however, it was subjected to an inordinate number of attacks. The phenomenological description of structural film’s defining feature, its insistence on its shape, was the ground of some of the fiercest rejoinders. However, Sitney’s next point, an effort to distinguish between form and structure was, if anything, even more controversial. Sitney proposed that a formal film’s form arises out of content – formal film strived to evolve “a tight nexus of content” out of the diverse material the artist has collected (Sitney 1970: 327). In characterising the formal (poetic) film in this way, Sitney probably had in mind the point that Robert Creeley had taught Charles Olson: that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (Olson 1997: 240).² At heart, the formal film embodies a myth, and the film’s recurrences, antitheses, and overall rhythm develop out of this “mythic” content. The forms that lyrical films assumed generally evolved during the film’s making, as a response to the varying content; the form developed as the filmmaker learnt how to reconcile the diversity of all the elements of the film’s content.³ As Sitney pointed out, the content of the images suggests the form that the film will assume:

Kubelka, Markopolous, Brakhage, and to a lesser extent, Anger, have discussed working processes, which share in common a scrutiny of the photographed raw material so that the eventual form will be revealed; their faith has been in editing. (1970: 327)

The films of the early phases of avant-garde film, both in Europe and in America, though especially in America, were poetic works in which formal devices were used symbolically; they were essentially complex interrelations of these poetic images. The total form of such films was generally hard to define, for formal films usually possessed no clear,

readily describable architectonic. By contrast, the structural film has a predetermined shape. This shape does not reconcile diversity; and because it does not, the structural film has not favoured complex forms – the overall form of the film has no need to adjust moment-by-moment to the film's changing content, as Olson described the projective poem as doing.

Much – too much, to my view – has been made of the vagueness of the terms “shape” and “structure” that Sitney employed. Sitney's use of the term “shape” was, after all, not so different from Michael Fried's, who said of similar paintings and sculptures being done at the time: “The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of shape” (Fried 1998a: 151). Despite the authority of that provenance, George Maciunas lambasted Sitney's use of the term “structure”, alleging he had utterly misused the term “structure”. He declared that “structure” means, simply, an arrangement of parts, and so a structure may be either simple or complex; thus, he implicitly criticised Sitney's use of the term to suggest the notion of a simplified shape (and the inappropriateness of coining the term “structural film” to refer to films that possess a simplified shape). He remarked scathingly that Sitney's error in coining the term “structural film” could only be traced back to a “misplaced dictionary and ignorance of recent art-philosophy” (Maciunas 1970: 349). A decade later, Paul Arthur again rebuked Sitney for imprecision, protesting that “[t]he interchangeable – and often ambiguous – use of ‘shape,’ ‘structure,’ and ‘form’ is a problem, each term requiring considerably more precision than is given” (1979: 123).

Bruce Jenkins offered a stronger critique yet. He claimed to have begun studying Frampton's films with a structural model in mind, but when he came to analyse *Autumnal Equinox* (1974), a film within a large serial work that Frampton called “*Magellan*”, he could not engage with the film using that model's analytical tools. “Quite simply, the film appeared to have no discernible structure, no set pattern of repetition or development, no strong sense of shape – all the traits necessary for a work to qualify as ‘structural’” (Jenkins 1984: 3). Jenkins thus claimed to have found himself in the position either of having to reject the claim that it was useful to approach Frampton's films as Sitney's model recommends, or of having to reject the claim that there are clear continuities among the different phases of Frampton's career (for some of Frampton's films, he understood, could be described in Sitney's terms).

Because he felt strongly that there are such continuities and that a key task of a commentator on Frampton's films was to elucidate those continuities, Jenkins found himself having to reject the applicability of the model of the structural film to Frampton's complete *oeuvre*. Frampton was universally acknowledged as one of the principal structural filmmakers; yet, Jenkins asserted, Frampton's *oeuvre* doesn't always give the feature that Sitney described as structural film's defining characteristic (and its principal aesthetic virtue) a central role. That realisation brought Jenkins to question the usefulness of the model altogether – he reasoned that if the model of a structural film didn't apply to Frampton's films, then it likely doesn't apply to any broad group of films, if to any at all.

System and wholeness

Despite such protests, it is reasonably clear that the tendency that Sitney was describing was that of using a form whose outline is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in a systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting or editing. Addressing his first film production class at Antioch College, Paul Sharits, one of the filmmakers whose work Sitney treated in his article, expounded some fundamental ideas about form that were prevalent among the makers whose names are associated with the structural film.

The idea of "wholeness" is obviously not new, but recently it has taken on a meaning different than the accepted "organic unity" principle which Eisenstein stated so lucidly: "... in an organic work of art, elements that nourish the work as a whole pervade all the features composing this work." A unified canon pierces not only the whole and each of its parts, but also each element that is called to participate in the work of composition. One and the same principle will feed any element, appearing in each in a qualitatively different form. Only in this case are we justified in considering a work of art organic. [...] Kandinsky's, Mondrian's and Malevich's ideas of "dynamic" asymmetrical balance are quite different from Pollock's influential nonrelational unity of the entire visual field; Pollock's "overallness," directness, flatness gives his works the "presence" of autonomous objects. (Sharits 1972: 27-28)⁴

In this talk, Sharits expounded his belief that recent art had seen the emergence of a new conception of form, a conception that rejected the values that the theory of organic form had proclaimed. He characterised this new conception of form as “non-relational” (compare Sharits’ view on this matter with Sitney’s idea of the repudiation of the ideal of bringing seemingly heterogeneous elements into a unified, organic whole). Sharits traced this idea of non-relational form back to Pollock’s all-over forms. The connection is apposite: Pollock’s all-over, decentralised, and polyphonic forms achieve their unity by being a composition of similar elements that repeat themselves from frame edge to frame edge, and that sort of all-over unity was a predecessor of the unvariegated wholes that Minimalist artists and structural filmmakers favoured. Sharits also stressed the use of constructions that have a similar effect to those of the four devices Sitney identified as devices structural filmmakers commonly use.

Duration, apperception and the structural film

Sharits’ comments also highlight a key distinction between, on the one hand, Minimalist art and Post-Painterly Abstractionist work that relied on reduction and simplification and, on the other hand, all preceding modernist forms that relied on reduction: Minimalist art and Post-Painterly Abstraction demanded to be seen in what Michael Fried called “visual time”, i.e., across a more or less extended duration, while modernist painting could only be grasped instantaneously, i.e., taken in “all at once” (Fried 1998c: 247). The analogous difference in film is between the films of Brakhage, which, like most modernist works, demand to be experienced in the immediate present, and the extended-time pieces that filmmakers (including Andy Warhol and Michael Snow) began to make in the later 1960s. When we watch a Brakhage film, we do not engage in processes of anticipation or recollection – the perceptual demands of the fluxing imagery require such total concentration that we cannot engage in memory or conjecture; in the end, the work nudges us towards apprehending it in an “ek-static”, all-at-once temporality. In the later 1960s, several movements, including task-based dance, process music (or the music of gradual changes, exemplified by the work of Steve Reich) the enormously influential aleatory works of John Cage, and structural film made the duration of the work – its temporal extension –

palpable. The durative qualities of time-based Minimalist works and those of allied movements (including process music, aleatory music, task-based dance and Conceptual performance art) encourage the viewers/listeners to engage in apperceptive processes. Thus, with process music, we apprehend the process that generates the work, and that insight allows us to recall how the work assumed the qualities that, at any given moment, it actually has; and, on that basis, we make conjectures about the outcome of the process. The spatial/processual shapes of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) embody memory and prophesy in a similar way.

More than that, *Wavelength* (and other works like it) embody the essential properties of the experience of duration – and, however much modernist devices may try to conceal the fact, the experience of a film really is the experience of duration.

The apperceptive activities that reductive forms encourage open a distance between the viewer and the work. This distance makes viewers or listeners aware of their relation to the work – makes them aware that the work confronts them as an object and that they are subject to the experience the work engenders. Snow remarked on this:

In relation to events one can only be a participant or a spectator or both. Of course one can also be uninformed (events of which one is unaware take place constantly, to say the least). But is that a relationship? Yes.

Experience of an event can only be anticipatory, actual or post facto. Or prophetic, intentional, guessed, planned or total or historic, reminiscent, analytical. And in this (lower) case it should be pointed out that I am using *your* words....

Named, scheduled events: bus ride, concert, Christmas, eclipse, etc. This is not what I'm interested in. Sub-events: not "what is," not "what is not" but what happens in between. In this case: "not."

"Passages" then, wherein or post-facto or in anticipation I may note revelatory unities and disparities. What's interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passages from one state to another without acknowledging "beginning" as having any more importance in the incident as "importance" has in this sentence.

Or as "ending" in this. (Snow 1994b: 67)

Recall Sharits' remarks about forms "which have the kind of cohesiveness wherein shape and edge are indistinguishable, one cannot speak of 'beginning' and 'end'".

The unusually high ratio of expenditure of mental energies on apperceptive activity to expenditure on perceptual activities elicited by works with simplified outlines heightens the viewers/listeners' self-awareness, and that self-awareness makes them aware that duration is a condition of cognition. Donald Judd testified to being interested in "one thing after another" (1968: 78) while Michael Snow acknowledged he has given his attention to "how one thing leads to another" (1994b: 66) – the concern with process and development so characteristic of Minimalist art is an aspect of this more general interest in duration and its role in cognition.

Sharits' ideas about wholeness were among the most radical among the structural filmmakers proposed. Among Sharits' most probing assertions was the claim that the new wholeness (pioneered by Pollock) demands homogeneity throughout the space (or duration-space) of the work and that homogeneity across a duration-space required that the beginning, middle and end of the work be undifferentiated. Sharits recognised, however, that not all structural films have beginnings, middles and ends that are undifferentiated one from another. That realisation brought him to deliberate further about the idea that structural films often seemed to be fragments – the idea of a fragment was useful to his aesthetic theory because a fragment lacks the sense of closure, of having an ending that most works of art possess. He made explicit the implications of his assertion that structural films often seem to be fragments of a larger system, often the cinema itself:

Warhol's "actual scale," in works like *Sleep* and *Empire*, because it documents cyclic ideas such as sleep/wakefulness/sleep and night/day/night obviously implies larger cyclic systems: another homogeneous work, Snow's [actually Wieland and Snow's] *Dripping Water* [1969], does not imply a cycle of any kind because there is no predictable measure of where the dripping began or ended or whether it even began or will end – so, since there is no definable boundary such as "end," this noncyclic work implies that it is a segment of larger non-cyclic system. One can conceive of many forms of homogeneous and nonhomogeneous overall time-shapes. In what senses can these shapes be regarded as cinematic? Snow understood the vectorial implications of the projector light beam and this seems to account at least in part for *Wavelength's* directional structure. Physically, the conic

shape is directive towards the projector lens; yet we sense the internal projectiveness of the beam directing itself toward the screen, as if magnitude was its target. [...] One could say that because time itself is “an arrow,” it is impossible to avoid vectorial directionality in articulating temporal media and that one inevitably ends up with a sort of story form. But this “story,” if it is such a form, is a physical or procedural one and what it tells us is analogous to what we are perceiving while it is being projected. Besides, approaching film form from these new frames of reference, we are free to conceive of not only forward-oriented vectors but any vectorial direction; negative vectors come to mind easily [...]. (Sharits 1972: 34-39)

The phases of experiencing a structural film

A structural film is a film whose outline form either is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in a systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting or editing. The pleasure we take in watching a structural film depends in part on discovering the preconceived schema that determines the variations in the film. Characteristically, the viewing experience evolves through a series of stages: at first, the nature and order of the variations seems inscrutable – the images seem to have no thematic relation to one another, the sequence of variations to expound no theme, and the film’s rhythmic character (if it has one) not to imitate the rhythms of affect. The response is subject to evolution, however. In fact, the phases of a viewer’s characteristic response to a structural film has similarities with the typical phases of a spectator’s response to a narrative’s drama: the first phase in watching a structural film, during which we cannot discern the order of the piece, is analogous to the initial phase of a narrative that presents an image of a world disorganised by strife. The next phase is analogous to the phase in which a drama resolves strife: failing to discover a motivation for the images (for their character or order) in a sensibility or an outlook, or in an expressive or formal problem, we look elsewhere for the film’s determining principle, and, with persistence, we discover it in a preconceived, systematically applied procedure. The remaining phase resembles the phase of denouement in the traditional drama. For, just as during the denouement phase in the traditional drama one watches the conflict work itself out, during this phase of a structural film, one experiences the film’s system working itself – usually with a delight, resulting from the viewer’s being restored to a position of cognitive mastery, that approaches

jubilation. Generally, the “denouement” of a structural film is massively extended, in comparison with denouement in a traditional drama, and the question why this phase, which in traditional drama is usually brief, is so massively extended in the structural film is instructive to ponder. The pleasure of watching a system unfolding seemingly impersonally is central to the aesthetics of the structural film.

Structure, material and predetermined shape in the structural film

Though the proposition that the forms of structural films are grounded in the film materials has been offered often enough – the militantly Althusserian Marxist Anglo-American film critic, Peter Gidal, even proposed renaming this filmmaking practice the “structural-materialist film” – it has not been particularly well developed. The connection between the monomorphic form of many structural films and the materialist basis of structural film practice is this: the structural filmmaker generally sees that some feature – or, what makes the result even richer, a set of interrelated features – that films inevitably possess can be brought under the control of a system.⁵ For example, Michael Snow must have noted that the perspectival attributes of a photograph change when the field covered by the image varies – that, given a set of images all taken from a single vantage-point (using a single camera set-up), objects in the images that represent a larger area (images taken with lenses of shorter focal lengths) will seem to be placed deeper into the illusory space behind the picture plane, while the objects in the images that represent a more restricted area will seem to occupy a shallower space. Snow must have recognised, that is to say, that the depth of the illusory space of the image and the area that the image represents each changes with alterations in the other. Furthermore, the wider the area of coverage and the deeper the illusory space behind the image, the farther away from the image one seems to be – so the deeper space behind the image reflects a greater distance of the viewer from the objects the image represents. These different attributes – apparent distance from the image, image depth, and field of view – are all interdependent, and the interdependencies of the attributes are of a fascinating complexity. Snow must have recognised as well that the field of view one takes in from a single vantage point can be varied continuously by adjusting

the focal length of the zoom lens. Thus, he struck upon a means for bringing these variables under the control of a simple system. To bring the determining system into evidence and to highlight the interrelation of all features the work subjects to systematic variation, Snow contrived a unifilar form, for that unifilar development made evident that a single force generates the work. The intricacy of these interrelations contributed to making *Wavelength* one of the great achievements of cinematic art.

Seen in this way, structural filmmaking has much in common with the approach to art-making that Robert Morris described in his influential essay in *artforum*. In that article, Morris outlined two modes of artistic production that had attracted the allegiance of his contemporaries: the “materials/process approach” and “the use of ‘a priori’ systems”. Robert Morris pointed out that the first approach is based on principles that arise from the material of the medium – they are the result of the artist’s intuitive response to the particular materials at hand, of what Morris described as a “receptivity” to the actual materials the artist uses. The other practice involves using a system or formula established before the production of work (Morris 1970: 62-6).

The latter approach is the approach that structural filmmakers generally took. Consider the differences between the structural film and the lyrical film: the lyrical form had been predicated on a delicate balancing of shot against shot, with different shots having different relative weights. The principal means of balancing shots having different weights was to vary their lengths (ending a shot before it accumulated too much weight, or before its weight began to wane); determining when to begin and when to end a shot was largely subjective, intuitive and arbitrary (or so it must have seemed to filmmakers to whom the “a priori” approach appealed). In a structural film, on the contrary, key attributes of shots are decided in advance, by an impersonal system – a system as impersonal as fate.

Considering structural films as films that are produced by using a predetermined schema helps counter the objection that Sitney faced, that not all structural films make their primary impression through their shape. It is usually true that when a systematic procedure is used to make a film, the resulting film has a simple, evident shape – this shape is usually highlighted, and this highlighting is what Sitney focused on. However, it is not always true that when a system generates a work that the piece that results has a simple shape: sometimes the process results in a recondite structure (as the

analogous example of musical compositions based on an absolutely systematic approach to producing variations from a tone row make quite clear).⁶ What is more, that approach makes clear that “a set pattern of repetition or development” – or, at least, an *evident* pattern of repetition and development (the features that Bruce Jenkins looked for in a structural film) – is not an essential attribute, or one of the requisites of, the form.

Shifting the mode of apprehension

Another dimension of George Maciunas’ critique of Sitney’s “Structural Film” article demands comment. Maciunas was a leader of the New York neo-dada group, Fluxus. His critique accused Sitney, *inter alia*, of “cliquishness and ignorance of the film-makers outside the *Coop* or the *Cinematheque* circle” (Maciunas 1970: 349).⁷ The social grudge the remark betrayed notwithstanding, his most forceful rebuke to Sitney accused him of having failed to recognise important precursors to the structural filmmaker’s use of monomorphic forms. A key omission, he asserted, was Marcel Duchamp.⁸ One reason Maciunas might have claimed Duchamp was a precursor of the structural filmmakers was that Duchamp had devalued the immediate and sensuous pleasures that the formalist orthodoxy so esteemed and laid emphasis instead on the use of complex conceptual structures. Furthermore, his works highlight the change in apprehension that is required to appreciate a work of art as a work of art – the change required “to get” a work of art (as one “gets” a joke); they also show that a shift of cognitive set (or frame of apprehension) is the characteristic mode of responding to a work of art and the condition for having an “aesthetic experience”.

Exploring the change in experience (and mode of apprehension) that occurs as one comes to understand a representation aesthetically is what Duchamp’s work (in a thousand sly ways) is all about. His ready-mades focus on that shift: just as getting the joke about the chicken crossing the street requires that you see the simple explanation of the chicken’s motivation differently – that you come to understand it within the context of that practice we call “telling jokes” – so seeing R. Mutt’s *Fountain* or Marcel Duchamp’s *In Advance of a Broken Arm* as a work of art also requires a transformation in our ordinary mode of response, from a utilitarian to an aesthetic mode.⁹ Stated more generally, appreciating a work of art requires that you

come to comprehend it through a shift from an ordinary (utilitarian) mode of apprehending objects to an aesthetic mode of understanding.¹⁰ The transformation that occurs when we “get” a joke is similar in certain respects to that which takes place when we look at, for example, a painting of Saint Sebastian shot full of arrows and come to see the representation not simply as an actual rendering of a scene of suffering but as the articulation of a view about Sebastian’s suffering (the *meaning* of the representation): we suddenly “get” the fact that this image does not simply represent a scene of a man shot with arrows but presents a view of life, including notions about the redemptive value of suffering – we see it from another perspective, framed by the aesthetic mode of understanding, just as we come to understand the answer “to get to the other side” from within a form of life that included telling jokes and irony.¹¹ Understanding the representational status of the image of St. Sebastian’s pierced body requires that we cease seeing it as simply an object just like other objects in the world and come to understand it as articulation of a human being’s attitudes, beliefs and feelings about suffering and redemption. This transformation is similar to the transformation between seeing *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), first, as simply another mass-produced snow shovel and then seeing it as a representation that says, perhaps, something about the similarity of shovelling snow and masturbating to ejaculation (and about the similarity between breaking one’s arm and the post-coital tumescence). The transformation depends upon recognising the ironic nature of the object, just as seeing the joke in the hopelessly straightforward explanation of the chicken’s behaviour requires that we apprehend the punch line as irony. Duchamp thus found in his *objet trouvé* a means to highlight this transformation in our mode of apprehension and to encourage us to reflect on its aesthetic importance.

It requires mental alertness to “get” a work of art, just as it demands mental alertness to “get” a joke; thus, “stupidity” (*la bêtise*) becomes an issue.¹² As John Rajchman pointed out, the problem of “stupidity” (*la bêtise*) – stupidity “as distinct from error or knowledge” – was a key issue in the arts of the twentieth-century, a factor artists identified as something that they must struggle against and so served as a factor that stimulated them to produce their art (Rajchman 1998: 5).¹³ Several artists, Duchamp among them, addressed that issue directly. They developed forms that appeared to have none of the elegance, harmony, proportion, and unity of

traditional artworks. The works these artists produced often seem causal, inelegant, inharmonious – indeed, sometimes, even slapdash or downright ugly. It takes effort and the very opposite of stupidity (*la bêtise*) to discern the principles that hold the elements of the work in a unity. If we can discern them, we are elated. A factor in that elation is the feeling that we have confronted a challenge and triumphed. But a more important factor is that it encourages us to think and to feel differently about the elements that constitute the work of art – and even, the world: to feel their harmoniousness, which so often escapes us.

The idea of shape in minimalist art and structural film

Donald Judd made this remark about the painting of his contemporaries.

The elements inside the rectangle are broad and simple and correspond closely to the rectangle. The shapes and surface are only those which can occur plausibly within and on a rectangular plane. The parts are few and so subordinate to the unity as not to be parts in an ordinary sense. A painting is nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and references. The one thing overpowers the earlier painting. It also establishes the rectangle as a definite form; it is no longer a fairly neutral limit. A form can be used only in so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible inside. (Judd 1968: 11)

One might well say of *Wavelength* that the simplicity required to emphasise its conical shape “limits the arrangements possible inside it”.

Lyrical filmmakers had demonstrated the power of the imagination to reconcile evident disharmony by constructing forms that could bring highly disparate elements into a satisfying unity (so that the imaginative power of the artist, in reconciling the evident disharmonies among them, might be underlined). Consequently, their work frequently seemed highly disjunctive. Minimal art, on the other hand, stressed the value of wholeness and indivisibility. So, in “Notes on Sculpture”, Robert Morris highlighted the use of unitary forms that create a strong gestalt, and so avoid divisiveness (a practice the structural filmmakers also adopted); so, too, Donald Judd, in “Specific Objects” emphasised the value of repeating identical units (and the

repetition of identical, or nearly identical, units is a feature of several of Hollis Frampton's films, including *Zorns Lemma*). Such gestalt forms avoid part-to-part relations, as emphasis on part-to-part relations highlights the role of the human maker. Part-to-part relations also make the overall unity of the work so much less palpable. Thus Judd:

[...] when you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole – the rectangle of the canvas – and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite *whole* and maybe no parts, or very few. (Glaser 1968: 151-54)

Robert Morris contrasted art works that have “clearly divisible parts which set up relationships” with

certain forms [...] [that] do not present clearly separated parts for these kinds of relationships to be established in terms of shapes. Such are the simpler forms that create strong gestalt sensations. Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum of resistance to perceptual separation. (Morris 1968: 225-26)

Paintings or sculpture made of definite parts were said, in the jargon of the time, to be “composed”. Minimal art thus represented a reaction to the compositional ideal, an ideal that had been articulated most clearly by Immanuel Kant, who understood the free play of imagination (according to Kant the source of aesthetic pleasure) to involve the relating of part to part, of part to complexes of parts, of complexes of parts to larger complexes of parts, etc., to determine whether the parts are mutually adapted to one another. This conception of the nature of aesthetic pleasure had dominated aesthetics, art criticism and (implicitly) much artmaking from Kant's time right up to the 1960s. It was Minimalism that first thought to challenge it.¹⁴ The challenge to the idea of composition was more radical even than that which Dadaist collage activities had offered in their time.

The idea of shape plays a key role in this radical challenge. Much as Sitney did regarding structural film, the art critic Michael Fried pointed out that for the Minimal artist, the crucial thing is shape.

Morris's “unitary forms” are polyhedrons that resist being grasped other than as a single shape: the gestalt simply *is* the “constant, known shape.” And shape itself is, in his system,

“the most important sculptural value.” Similarly, speaking of his own work, Judd has remarked that

the big problem is anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing should be able to work and do different things and yet not break up the wholeness that a piece has. To me the piece with the brass and the five verticals is above all *that shape*.

The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of the shape. (Fried 1998: 150-51)¹⁵

Michael Fried traced the role that shape played in the modernist painting of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella; what he produced as a result of that investigation was a historiography of mid-twentieth century art that explains the drive that led to the idea of shape. Fried’s notion of “literal shape” depended on his taxonomy of different types of shape in painting: “literal shape”, which he described as the silhouette of the support; “depicted shape”, which he described as the outlines of the elements in the picture; and “shape as such”, shape as a medium in which choices can be made about literal and depicted shapes. The artist’s choices about “shape as such” determine the shape of the support (Frank Stella’s shaped canvases of the 1960s were a major inspiration for Fried’s ideas on the importance of “shape as such”) and the depicted shapes represented on the canvas (for the shape of the canvas is echoed in the shape of the elements within it, as the vertical edges of the painting’s boundaries are echoed in the narrow nearly central vertical bands – the “zips” – in Barnett Newman’s paintings).¹⁶ By the 1960s the history of painting brought literal shape to the fore – thus, in “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons”, Fried pointed out that in the years 1960 to 1966 (when the article was written), literal shape assumed increasingly greater importance (Fried 1998b: 81).

The passage could just as well describe the change that occurred with the transition from the lyrical to structural film: the lyrical film places more emphasis on depicted shape, while the structural film places much more weight on literal shape (and this interest in literal shape arises from a concern with shape as such); and in structural film, depicted shapes are dependent on literal shape.

Fried’s writing of the mid-1960s tried to show that the desire to make depicted shape dependent on literal shape led artists to develop what he called “deductive structures”. Fried’s conception of deductive

structure focused on the relation of depicted shapes to the framing edge. In *Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella*, Fried discussed one of the earliest examples of deductive structure:

[...] [T]he “zips” provide a crucial element of pictorial structure, by means of what I want to term their “deductive” relation to the framing edge. That is, the bands amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing edges; they relate primarily to those edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge – as having been “deduced” from it. (Fried 1998c: 233)¹⁷

The remark is apposite to the structural film: Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity* uses a deductive structure that arises from the edges of the frame being reflected again and again in an architectural form that includes the perspectival repetition of that form through depth. The rapid alternation of the brief shots taken with the lens set at different focal lengths produces an effect related to superimposition that echoes the repeating architectural form while, at the same time, suggesting the effect of recession through depth.¹⁸ Thus, the shape of the film is “implied” in the corridor’s structure: there is a deductive relation between the depicted form in the image and the literal shape of the film. Paul Sharits’ remarks about the edge of a film being generated by the internal structure of the film articulates the idea that there is an implicative relation between the contents of the film (the boundaries of the “depicted” shapes) and its overall literal shape.

The range of films to which Fried’s remark seems apposite expands if we take into account the temporal forms of structural films that might be considered to be analogous to the spatial forms favoured by Minimalist painters of the mid-1960s. Consider Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*: the literal shape of that work is not, before anything else, the space that image claims for itself – it is the time the film carves out as its limits. *Wavelength*’s deductive structure arises from the implications that a temporal form might have for the image – from the phenomenological effects of an image’s closing in on a region of space and from various phenomenological, photographic and cinematic analogues of that process. It offered a simple form, based on a remarkably pure process – simple to the point of being essentially an eidetic reduction – a pure process that implies the progress from a ‘before’ to an ‘after’. In doing so, it offers a very pure description of time’s essential features.

Fried expanded on his idea of deductive structures by discussing Frank Stella's stripe paintings.

Like Newman and Noland, Stella is concerned with deriving or deducing pictorial structure from the literal character of the picture support; but his work differs from theirs in its exaltation of deductive structure as sufficient in itself to provide the substance, and not just scaffolding or syntax, of major art. As early as 1958-59 [...] Stella began to make paintings in which parallel stripes of black paint, each roughly 2 1/2 inches wide, echo and reecho the rectangular shape of the picture support until the entire canvas is filled. [...] [Over time] Stella's grasp of deductive structure grew more and more tough minded, until the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edge, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape of canvas. (Fried 1998c: 251-52)

Stella's use of boundary echoing devices created an evenness across the picture surface that countered the tendency of Cubist paintings to make the central area of the picture the most important and to fade out towards the edges. The Cubists, Fried suggests, built their paintings out from the centre towards the edge, while Stella generated the structure of his paintings from the edge towards the centre.¹⁹

Stella often used irregularly shaped canvases; when he did not, his method of "deducing" shape from the boundaries of the canvas (or whatever he used for the painting's support) resulted in symmetrical compositions.²⁰ Painters traditionally had avoided formal symmetry, since it arrests the eye in the centre of canvas – generally, painters strived for asymmetrical balance, to produce a more dynamic effect. In defiance of this tradition, Minimalist painting made formal symmetry common. The effect of stasis that formal symmetry produces served the Minimalists' interest in heightening the effect of presence. Structural films, too, often gravitated towards formal symmetry, and for much the same reason.

Notes

¹ Sitney granted that these are not necessary features of structural films, as there are structural films – films that insist upon their shape and possess only a secondary and minimal content – that have none of these features.

In 'Thoughts on Recent Underground Film' (originally published in *Afterimage* No. 4 [Autumn 1972], pp. 78-95, and anthologised in Le Grice 2001: 13-26), an article

written in response to Sitney's seminal piece, Le Grice's article offers a thorough and precise taxonomy of concerns of the structural film (especially structural film in Britain) that expands on Sitney's list of common features of structural films:

1. Concerns which derive from the camera: its limitations and extensive capacities as a time-based photographic recording apparatus.
Limitations: frame limits, lens limits (focus, field, aperture, zoom), shutter
Extensions: time lapse, ultra high speed, camera movements (panning, tracking etc.)
[...]
2. Concerns which derive from the editing process and its abstraction into conceptual, concrete relationships of elements.
[...]
3. Concerns which derive from the mechanism of the eye and particularities of perception.
[...]
4. Concerns which derive from printing, processing, refilming and recopying procedures; exploration of the transformations possible in selective copying and modifications of material.
[...]
5. Concerns which derive from the physical nature of film; awareness of the reality of the material itself and its possible transformations into experience and language; celluloid, scratches, sprockets, frame lines, dirt, grain.
[...]
6. Concerns which derive from the properties of the projection apparatus and the fundamental components of sequential image projection; lamp, lens, gate (frame), shutter, claw and the screen.
[...]
7. Concern with duration as a concrete dimension.
[...]
8. Concern with the semantics of image and with the construction of meaning through language systems.
[...]

Note that Le Grice turns Sitney's devices into the film's subjects: this accords with the British theorist's assumption that material and form are the subjects of structural films – and, even more, that modernism in the arts is defined by self-reflexivity. According to this conception, which Paul Sharits shared (see "Words Per Page") self-reflexive devices serve the same end as the use of abstract forms: twentieth-century artists often used quotidian subject matter in tandem with self-reflexive devices to shift attention from the object-matter of the work to its construction. In this way, they emphasised artworks' autotelic character.

² Capitalisation in original. Olson immediately adds the “corollary” that captures Sitney’s point exquisitely: “that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand”.

³ In suggesting that the process of the film’s being made evolves the form, Sitney pointed out the relation “the lyrical” and “the mythopoieic” film have to the Open Form poetry of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson. (*Visionary Film* propounds the thesis that the American avant-garde cinema is a Romantic practice. Open Form poetry was really a development of the Romantic tradition of American poetry: to point out the relationship between Open Form poetry and the formal cinema was a way of highlighting the Romanticism of the American avant-garde cinema.) Sitney’s reference to the mythic character of the content of the formal film must be understood in this context – as must be the close proximity of that assertion to his statement that the formal cinema works by recurrences, antithesis and overall rhythm: Sitney’s assertion that the content of formal films is mythic in character stakes the claim that the formal film activates a primitive mode of consciousness. Northrop Frye, too, pointed out that the oracular, meditative, irregular, and essentially unpredictable rhythm of the lyrical evoked a dreamlike, or mythic way of thinking (see Frye 1957).

⁴ Note that Sharits’ repudiation of representation in favour of objecthood are apposite to his films, but not to the work of all structural filmmakers. I point out in *Image and Identity* that Michael Snow has insisted on creating forms that reconcile representation and “objecthood”.

⁵ These features can often be thought of as being under the control of parameters that range over a set of discrete values. This is how Ernie Gehr treats the zoom’s focal length in *Serene Velocity*.

⁶ I do not mean to say by this that serial music is analogous to the structural film. Usually in serial music, when a systematic approach is taken, the system is not evident. The hallmark of the structural filmmakers approach is to make evident that some systematic process has been used (though discerning the features of the system can be quite difficult sometimes). In this regard, structural film has much more in common with the “process music” of the early Steve Reich than with serial composition. Reich and Snow recognised the affinities of their work, and Reich wrote a piece about *Wavelength* shortly after it appeared (it is reprinted in Shedden 1995) while Snow occasionally appeared in ensembles playing Steve Reich’s music (e.g. *Pendulum Music*).

⁷ Maciunas’ reference to the “Coop” and the “Cinematheque” are to the New York Film-makers Co-operative and the Film-makers Cinematheque, avant-garde cinema institutions that had close relations to *Film Culture* magazine, largely through the magazine’s owner and editor-in-chief, Jonas Mekas. I point out that Maciunas’ “article” is in the form of a table, setting out the various “errors” Sitney committed, the “category” to which the error belonged, the “cause of the error”, and the “proposed correction of the error”.

⁸ Michael Snow's aesthetic ideals, for example, were massively influenced by Marcel Duchamp. I have written at length on the influence that Marcel Duchamp had on Michael Snow (see Elder 1995).

⁹ A shift authorised by understanding the works' relation to those practices and institutions we call the art world. Duchamp analysed those relations keenly.

¹⁰ Duchamp referred to the transformation, in rather poetic, occult (alchemical) language, at a Convention of the American Federation of the Arts, held in Houston, Texas in 1957, at a panel at which he appeared along with Rudolf Arnheim and Gregory Bateson. Duchamp said:

The creative act takes on another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scale. (Tomkins 1996: 510)

¹¹ That is one reason that irony is a central topic of aesthetics. Irony, too, highlights the change in mode of apprehension that takes place when something comes to be apprehended in the mode of aesthetic understanding.

¹² That is not to say that this issue alone gave the matter of "stupidity" (*la bêtise*) the importance it had to twentieth-century artists – not at all! But that issue did raise the matter of "stupidity" in a specific, and especially important, manner.

¹³ Rajchman, to be exact, offers a more restricted statement of his thesis than I have used, confining his remarks to Warhol, Deleuze and Foucault. But I do believe his insight can be generalised. The Futurists explicitly condemned modern society in exactly these terms. The Dadaists, and later, the Surrealists, and then the Abstract Expressionists, pushed for an expansion of experience because, they contended, a constricting rationalism had engendered a true "stupidity" about the life force. The Cubists sought to present the active, hard-edged truth about the process of perception, which the Impressionists had reduced to a passive "stupidity" about our means for apprehending moments of flux. And the Minimalists and Conceptual artists used dense, and generatively potent, ideas to formulate their art.

¹⁴ Actually, John Cage had anticipated the Minimalists' challenge to the compositional ideal; but the Minimalists represented the first broad movement that challenged that ideal.

¹⁵ The Morris citation is from "Notes on Sculpture" and the Judd citation is from "Specific Objects".

¹⁶ Fried uses the example from Kenneth Noland to illustrate the interrelation between depicted shape, literal shape and shape as such :

In those paintings – the asymmetrical chevrons of 1964 – the exact dimensions of the support become important in this sense: that if the edge of the bottommost chevron did not *exactly* intersect the upper corners of the canvas, the relation of *all* the chevrons – that is, of the depicted shapes – to the shape of the support became acutely problematic and the ability of the painting as a whole to compel conviction was called into question. (Fried 1998b: 80)

¹⁷ Fried later dismissed the term “deductive structure” – in *Jules Olitski: Paintings* (1967) – and in its place offered the concept of “acknowledgement”. Fried came to recognise that his earlier formulation could be taken as implying that whenever the elements of a structure are aligned with the frame edge, that structure could be taken as deductive. The advantage of the term “acknowledgement”, Fried suggested, was that the structure must call attention to the shape of the support.

¹⁸ This emphasis on virtual depth relates to Hans Hofmann’s ideas about volume.

¹⁹ Not everyone agreed with Fried that Stella constructed his paintings from the edge towards the centre; and in fact some critics maintained exactly the opposite: that Stella’s paintings assume the centre as the focal point and (as far as the phenomenological effects of the paintings are concerned) the forms move outward from that centre towards the edges. William Rubin (1970) argued this in *Frank Stella* (see specifically p. 65); John Coplans did as well in his ‘Serial Imagery’ (1968) (see specifically p. 37).

²⁰ His striped paintings also avoided according priority to the centre.

Works Cited

- Arthur, Paul
1979 ‘Structural Film: Revisions, New Version, and the Artifact. Part Two’ in *Millenium Film Journal*. 4/5: 122-134.
- Coplans, John
1968 ‘Serial Imagery’ in *Artforum* Vol. 7, No. 2 (October).
- Elder, R. Bruce
1995 ‘Michael Snow’s Presence’ in Shedden, Jim (ed.) *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Alfred A. Knopf Canada: 94-139.
- Fried, Michael
1967 *Jules Olitski: Paintings. 1963-1967*. Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art.

- 1998a 'Art and Objecthood' in Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 148-171.
- 1998b 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons' in Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 77-99.
- 1998c 'Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella' in Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 213-267.
- Frye, Northrop
1957 *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jenkins, Bruce
1984 *The Films of Hollis Frampton: A Critical Study*. PhD dissertation. Northwestern University.
- Judd, Donald
1968 'Specific Objects' in Agee, William C. (ed.) *Don Judd*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: 10-15.
- Lippard, Lucy R. (ed.)
1966 "'Questions to Stella and Judd" (Interview by Bruce Glaser)', orig. pub. *Art News* (Sept. 1966) and reprinted in Battcock, Gregory (ed.) *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton: 148-164.
- Le Grice, Malcolm
2001 *Experimental Cinema in The Digital Age*. London: British Film Institute.
- Maciunas, George
1970 'Some comments on Structural Film by P. Adams Sitney' in Sitney, P. Adams (ed.) *Film Culture Reader*. New York: Praeger Publishers: 349.
- Morris, Robert
1968 'Notes on Sculpture [Part 1]' in Battcock, Gregory (ed.) *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton: 222-235.
- 1970 'Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated' in *Artforum* 8: 62-66.
- Olson, Charles
1997 'Projective Verse' in Allen, Donald and Benjamin Friedlander (eds) *Collected Prose*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 239-249.

- Rajchman, John
1998 'Jean-François Lyotard's Underground Aesthetics' in *October* 86: 3-18.
- Rubin, William
1970 *Frank Stella*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Sharits, Paul
1972 'Words Per Page' in *Afterimage* 4: 26-42.
- Shedden, Jim (ed.)
1995 *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Alfred A. Knopf Canada.
- Sitney, P. Adams
1970 'Structural Film' in Sitney, P. Adams (ed.) *Film Culture Reader*. New York: Praeger Publishers: 326-348.
- Snow, Michael
1994a 'Converging on *La Région Centrale*: Michael Snow in Conversation with Charlotte Townsend' in Snow, Michael. *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 57-60.
- 1994b 'Passage (Dairy)' in Snow, Michael. *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 66-67.
- Tomkins, Calvin
1996 *Marcel Duchamp: A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Wollheim, Richard
1965 'Minimal Art' in *Arts Magazine* 39(4): 26-32.