

“Structural Film,” as Technique of History

“Time” has become something of a signal word, a theoretical catch-all, for historians and critics that have given themselves the task of trying to come to terms with the radical challenges that 1960s art posed to the tradition of aesthetic modernism. It would seem that time is really what aesthetic modernism was all about, with its claims to the Absolute and the latter’s correlate, Eternity. Everything that comes after modernism appears overly concerned with space, which is the lateral extension of some perpetual present, or post-historical moment, or “end of temporality” as such.¹ I would suggest that this has less to do with the art itself—though there is much to point to in the work of that period which could lead us to this conclusion—and more to do with the particular debates that emerged in the late 60s regarding the fate of this modernist tradition and the work and history that would take its place.

Michael Fried, of course, is situated at the center of this controversy. In many ways, his essays from the late 60s, as well as his continued defense of them, have set the terms and the direction of much contemporary historical and theoretical discourse.² If I return to them here, it

¹ On the last see, Frederic Jameson’s “The End of Temporality,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003).

² The bulk of Fried’s essays are collected together in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). I would direct the reader’s attention to “Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella,” “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” as well as to the numerous short “New York Letters” which he wrote for *Art International*; and then, of course, there is the essay from which this volume gets its name. As for contemporary histories that are still circling this prey, Pamela Lee’s forthcoming *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the Sixties*, is sure to be only the most exemplary.

is not to beat the seemingly dead horse of modernism but rather because some aspects of his texts have been overlooked, aspects that provide key insights as well as springboards into a more wide ranging discussion of temporality and history with respect to late 60s art.³ Part of the reason that Fried's criticism continues to shape much of the discourse on 60s art is his alignment, both real and perceived, with Clement Greenberg, whose writings on the subject of modern art can be taken as exemplary of a thoroughgoing ideology of modernism (however conflicted and sometimes contradictory), whereas, and this is my point of departure, Fried's cannot.⁴

Briefly, Greenberg's ideology of modernism was centered upon a theory of aesthetic autonomy, designed from the start as a form of artistic self-preservation in the bourgeois and then the cold-war era, a kind of warding off of all that was not or could not be the concern of the arts—namely the social and the political—if the arts were to gain some purchase on their own narrative of historical development that could be conceived as separate from, but nevertheless inextricably tied to—with an “umbilical cord of gold”—the liberal democratic (read capitalist, bourgeois) order. The doctrine of medium-specificity that followed is only a logical extension of this self-preserving impulse, relying as it does on all that is inherent to the various mediums to drive their own internal development, which also happens to be the development of a singular tradition or history. Thus the history of painting is reduced to the gradual delimitation of this medium's conditions of flatness, both actual and virtual, as figural representation or realism becomes identified with so much subject-matter that can't help but refer to some extra-aesthetic content. But to constitute a truly ideological position, Greenberg's modernism must apply not

³ It is a well worn story by now: The art championed by Fried—Anthony Caro's constructions, Jules Olitski's sprays, Morris Louis's unfurls—has since come to be seen as the last gasp of an expiring age, while minimalism, though not without its critics, has gained pride of place in the history books, even if its—and its contemporary, Pop Art's—progeny have come to seem more like a “Poor Man's Hollywood.” The name is Peter Plagens'. See his, “A Poor Man's Hollywood: The Fallow State of Contemporary Art,” in *ARTicles* 5 (2000).

⁴ Frederic Jameson's work on the question of modernism and modernity has identified Greenberg with this aesthetic ideology. See his, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

only to painting but to all of the arts, which, purged of all that is extrinsic to their mediums, and thus left with their own materiality, have no choice but to tend towards or borrow from one another in order to gain such transcendence. How else might we understand Walter Pater's famous dictum, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," or Kandinsky and Schoenberg's collaboration, or Klee's notebooks?

But Fried's inherited version of events switches up the order, and for him it is the tradition or history—in other words, the canon—that guarantees the potential for the arts' achievement of transcendence.⁵ It is the "significant" or "important" work of the "recent past" that, for Fried, is the measuring stick against which one is able to judge whether more contemporary work is capable of "compelling conviction" in its value and quality as a work of modernist art. And it is exactly this conviction that has driven so many commentators to criticize Fried's account of modernism, insofar as it appears as the most contingent and easily redressed concept in his arsenal.⁶ But like any good dialectical coin, we need to recognize that "conviction" has two sides, one phenomenological, the other epistemological, and only one of these will land upright on any given toss. I would argue that the phenomenological side has been coming up with a frequency that has led gamblers to pull all of their chips from the square of epistemology.⁷ Yet Fried's defense of modernism opens a door for just such a look at epistemological questions, not necessarily in what he says about modernism and the arts, but in what he leaves out, or sidesteps, in his account.

⁵ And by extension, Fried suggests that the other, 'temporal' arts, tend toward, or would be rewarded could they tend toward, the conditions of painting and sculpture.

⁶ Fried himself is sensitive to this fact and has attempted to defend this "politics of conviction." See his, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 71. For a more recent account of conviction as a quasi mystical belief, see Hall Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002), 83-89.

⁷ A notable exception is Caroline A. Jones' "The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2000), 488-528.

Fried's condemnation of "literalism" in the art of the 60s, by which he meant the work of minimalists such as Judd, Morris, and Andre, was grounded upon a very acute observation that this work peaked the viewer's awareness of their identity *as* a viewer, and that this awareness caused a proliferation without end of various recognitions: of place, of artistic conventions, of the everyday, of the contingent, etc. But most of all, whereas the best art of the modernist tradition escaped this reduction to what Fried saw as the banal, the quotidian, or the world as such, Fried condemned the fact that these 'awarenesses' took place in and over time, and of course the nature of this experience he dubbed "theatrical."

As opposed to Greenberg's ideology of modernism, what I would call Fried's historical aestheticism is underwritten by the negative experience of theatricality. "Absorption" is the oppositional term here, and it can best be described as an experience in which the observer or viewer or audience member is engaged by the art in such a way as to sense that experience as a contemplative transcendence of the space of the everyday world. The temporal correlate of this transcendence is punctual: Fried describes it variously as "instantaneousness" or "presentness," in which "*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*,"⁸ whereas Fried explains that with theatricality, "the experience in question *persists in time*, and the presentment of endlessness that... is central to literalist art and theory is essentially a presentment of endless or indefinite *duration*" (*AO*, 166). Or, "The literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration of the experience*—is... paradigmatically theatrical, as though theater confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*" (*AO*,

⁸ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 20; reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995 [Penguin, 1966]), 140-141; and in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167. All further citations are from this last, and designated in the text as *AO*.

166-7). Nevertheless, Fried makes one very important concession, which turns on a specific art form and not upon an abstraction of aesthetic experience:

There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely—the movies. This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not. Because cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge—more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction—means that cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art.⁹ (*AO*, 164)

Film is absorptive, but not convincing, and thus it is neither theatrical, nor modernist. Here the dialectical opposition between “absorption” and “theatricality,” the otherwise phenomenological terms of the debate, are interrupted—as opposed to buttressed—by “conviction.” But what are

⁹ I want to point out here, however, an interesting change from the *Artforum* and Battcock printings to the piece’s republication in *Art and Objecthood*. In the preface to the latter volume, Fried states that, “The texts are reprinted as they first appeared or were republished early on, though I felt free to make small improvements of style and punctuation (while longing to make more sweeping changes), to remove italics, to eliminate or simplify footnotes” (*AO*, xv). The passage I have cited contains a short note, pertaining to the third sentence, which was subject to just such a simplification. In *Art and Objecthood* it reads:

Exactly how the movies escape theater is a difficult question, and there is no doubt but that a phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and stage drama—e.g., that in the movies the actors are not physically present, the film itself is projected *away* from us, and the screen is not experienced as a kind of object existing in a specific physical relation to us—would be rewarding” (*AO*, 171 n.20).

In the *Artforum* and Battcock versions the note is a bit more revealing, both in what it says and how it says it:

Exactly how the movies escape theater is a beautiful question, and there is no doubt but that a phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and the theater—e.g., that in the movies the actors are not physically present, the film itself is projected *away* from us, the screen is not experienced as a kind of object existing, so to speak, in a specific physical relation to us, etc.—would be extremely rewarding. Cavell, again, has called attention, in conversation, to the sort of *remembering* that goes into giving an account of a movie, and more generally to the nature of the difficulties that are involved in giving such an account” (Battcock, “Art and Objecthood,” 140-141 n.16).

Personally, I find the change of the movies’ escape from theater having become “difficult” after having been “beautiful” is particularly intriguing. But a speculation on the nature of that change will have to wait. More important, I think, is the dropped reference to the author’s discussion with Stanley Cavell, whose *The World Viewed* bears the marks of Fried’s thinking just as much as the latter’s was formed by his conversations with Cavell. (Fried mentions as much in another note to the Battcock edition of “Art and Objecthood,” which was omitted from the version gathered in the later collection.) Again, the

the implications of this interruption? If the most successful works of art are able to compel their audience to be convinced of a work's value and quality, and if this compulsion is a function of the work's ability to be compared to the those of the recent past whose worth is no way in doubt, "conviction," then, is a claim to history, or a claim to having a history, to being a member of a canon of works which are demonstrative of a privileged heritage that can therefore provide the ground for any substantive criticism of more contemporary art. But if film is unable to compel conviction, if it simply maintains an aestheticist experience of absorption in the face of the anti-aestheticist experience of theatricality, then Fried is really making a statement about film's history.

These observations lead us in two directions: First, though Fried has certainly become the *bête noir* of debates about the legacy of modernism and its conflicted relationship to post-war visual art, I think it is necessary to recognize that his statement about film—its implicit recognition of the difficulty film poses to the category of history—is not necessarily opposed to some of the most advanced commentary and theoretical insights to emerge on the subject at the time. And second, given his sensitivity to the issue, it is also worth pointing out that Fried's description of the temporal conditions of theatricality are at the same time perhaps some of the most concise descriptions of the temporal character and experience of both minimalist art and the most advanced avant-garde or experimental films of the late 60s. Furthermore, I want to suggest that these two situations are in fact derivative of one another: that Fried's observations about the phenomenology of duration are inextricable from his specific position on or understanding of how history works within modernism; and in turn, that the vicissitudes inherent to duration demand a reconfiguration of historical knowledge and its presentation, which is necessary if we

epistemological questions at hand—how does the "account" of a movie determine or condition what we can *know* about it—have been dropped in favor of an emphasis on phenomenological ones.

are to rethink modernism itself. It is for this reason, I think, that film plays such an enigmatic yet important—and largely overlooked—role in this debate, insofar as film’s history, and specifically the history of post-war American avant-garde film, was exactly what came to be an issue in the late 60s; and it is the place and the status of this avant-garde that positions film and its history at the crossroads of modernism, between it and some other aesthetic qualification of culture and society, whether it be late- or postmodernism, or some other as yet unidentified variant.

Any discussion of that history, then, must necessarily begin with P. Adams Sitney’s *Visionary Film*, which maintains all the qualities of a foundational document for the history of American avant-garde film.¹⁰ Beginning with the work of Maya Deren, whose contribution to the theory and practice of this cinema cannot be exaggerated, Sitney explores a diverse range of cinematic modes and movements, the single unifying character of which it could be said is their eschewal of the formal and operational conventions of the commercial film industry.¹¹ But Sitney requires a further unifying principle, which he gains through an analogy to the status of “poetry” with respect to “fiction,” by which he means the status of an ever more occult and financially unrewarding dedication to poetic language and theory as compared to the entertainments of narrative fiction. As if ‘poetics’ as a unifying principle could not be sustained at the level of practice alone, Sitney maintains that just as French and Soviet film theories had

¹⁰ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-1978* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹¹ It could be argued that the film industry, at its peak in the 50s, had usurped the older, Fordist model of the division of labor, insofar as the stratification of positions was much more difficult to define than the standard worker/foreman/manager/owner hierarchy allowed; and as the shift from industrial ‘object’ to consumer ‘entertainment’ can be taken as a figure for the change of the post-war economy in general.

their corresponding aesthetic practices, so too do the theoretical interests of the American avant-garde “coincide with those of the post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters.”¹²

In three moves, then, Sitney has laid out a thoroughgoing modernism of his own, in which the American post-war avant-garde assumes its requisite opposition to mass culture through a commitment to an individual, artisanal mode of production, which then finds theoretical correlation with the romantic image of the artist as outsider seeking to renew the world through an aesthetic experience, that, given the necessity of innovation for ‘renewal’ itself, comes to resemble the system it sets out to oppose. Sitney’s analogy quickly establishes a singular history for avant-garde film, which can then be narrated according to the internal development of certain universal themes and motifs, cycles and returns, all of which are given as proper to the project of the avant-garde and to the medium of film itself, though they are in fact borrowed from an entirely different discourse and history.

There is a sense, however, in which we can regard Sitney’s history as the result of his particular confrontation with the latest and in his own words, “the most significant development of the American avant-garde cinema” since the early 60s.¹³ “Structural film” was the name he gave to this emergent cinema, which, we might say, was concerned less with the renewal of perception than with the conditions—phenomenological, epistemological, ontological—of film as such, though these are not the terms in which structural film was originally introduced. Those terms themselves are quite confused, however. Enough so that it is worth returning to their development in the series of essays that culminated in the penultimate chapter of Sitney’s study.

¹² Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. xiii.

¹³ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 347.

Let me state at this point that it is not my intention to take to task Sitney's codification of "structural film."¹⁴ I am more concerned to detail what I see to be the features of Sitney's description and analysis that pose specific problems to his construction of history and which find their accompaniments in Fried's lamentation of duration. The comparison between structural film and minimalism is not my ultimate concern, insofar as both categorizations are necessarily problematic, but this does not mean that the discourse surrounding these developments cannot have its uses. If we can still accept that structural film "followed upon the advent of Minimalism in painting and sculpture, and shares with them the deployment of monochrome, of patterns of repetition, and the concern with the coherence of the compositional *gestalt*,"¹⁵ we would be well to explore some of the generative conditions of these enterprises as opposed to settling for their mere descriptions and loose historical affiliation.

Sitney's chapter on structural film was derived from two previous essays by the same title, originally published in 1969 and 1970.¹⁶ In the earliest essay Sitney stated that the structural film, "insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline" (*FC*, 1). It is identified by three significant technical characteristics, "a fixed camera position (fixed *frame* from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, and loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation)" (*FC*, 1). A fourth characteristic, "rephotography off of a screen" (*FCR*, 327), was added in the revised version. By then, Sitney identified Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Ernie

¹⁴ This job has been done by Bruce Jenkins. See his, "The Case Against 'Structural Film.'" *UFA Journal* 33 (Spring 1981), 9-14; and his unpublished dissertation, "The Films of Hollis Frampton: A Critical Study," (Ph.D. Diss., Northwestern University, 1984). In his interest to free Frampton from the restraints of the 'paradigm' of structural film, Jenkins overlooks the more productive attempts on Sitney's part to come to terms with the significant features of this new enterprise.

¹⁵ Annette Michelson, "Gnosis and Iconoclasm: A Case Study of Cinephilia," *October* 83 (Winter, 1998), 16.

¹⁶ P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* n. 47 (Summer, 1969), 1-10, hereafter identified in the text as *FC*; and "Structural Film," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000; [1st ed. 1970]), 326-348, hereafter identified in the text as *FCR*.

Gehr, Paul Sharits, and Ken Jacobs as makers of structural films; Frampton and Jacobs were not included in the first version. In both versions of the essay Sitney is quick to qualify his listing of the technical characteristics shared by structural films, explaining that, “very seldom will one find all four characteristics in a single film, and there are structural films that avoid these usual elements” (*FCR*, 327). This list of characteristics thus falls short of supplying sufficient descriptive criteria for identifying any given film’s particular character or specificity as “structural.” Some filmmakers will use them, and some films will exhibit them, while others won’t. Structural film’s identity must be secured through other means, which is why Sitney’s discussion of “origins” is a bit more revealing.

Andy Warhol’s early film experiments, such as *Sleep* (1963) and *Eat* (1963), among others, are given as precedents of the fixed frame and loop printing strategies adopted by the structural filmmakers. Sitney’s description of these examples, however, reveals an insistence on something other than the appearance of certain technical characteristics that were taken up by the next generation: “*Eat* (1963), forty-five minutes of the eating of a mushroom; *Harlot* (1965), an eighty-minute *tableau vivant* with offscreen commentary; *Beauty # 2* (1965), a bed scene with off and on screen speakers for ninety minutes” (*FCR*, 328). It would seem that Sitney’s attention to Warhol’s fixed, largely unmoving frame begs the question of exactly *how long* that frame holds onto its profilmic material. Sitney details the duration of these films, as if, with the contraction of content to the simplicity of a single action, any substantive description, no matter how brief, must accord significance to the amount of time devoted to exhibiting the fact of that contraction.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Harlot* and *Beauty #2* certainly do not fall into the category of the earlier single-subject films where the duration of the film figures prominently. But Sitney’s inclusion of them as examples of the fixed-frame character of structural film, rather than diminishing my argument for the primacy of duration in Sitney’s thinking, demonstrates the pervasive nature of his sensitivity to it.

Sitney would simply rewrite this quality as “elongation,” though he does not discuss it with respect to Warhol’s early films specifically: “[the structural filmmakers] elongate their films so that time will enter as an aggressive participant in the viewing experience. This is a radical shift of aesthetic tactics” (*FCR*, 329-30). “Elongation” is the structural film’s answer to the “condensation” associated with the “formal” cinema’s hand-held camera and montage editing (the allusion to the condensation and displacement of Freud’s dream-work is certainly intentional). And in describing the necessary effects or purpose of this filmic elongation, Sitney devolves to the terms of Russian Formalist criticism, which, on first glance, seems appropriate, insofar as Sitney is interested in the aesthetic strategy of “defamiliarization,” whereby some cultural or social material is subject to a set of techniques that peel back the habituated, or to use Shklovsky’s term, the “motivated” perceptions of our everyday, mundane experience.

Defamiliarization as a technique, then, would seem to correspond more closely to Brakhage’s desire to renew perception through the cinema, to resurrect an “eye unrul[ed] by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic.”¹⁸ Sitney’s selection of citations is important, however. He chooses passages where the “de-automatized perception,” this most sought after effect of *ostrananie* or “making strange,” is affected first through a change of speed: “A work is created ‘artistically’ so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception;” and second through a change of length, “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”¹⁹ In the first instance we are dealing with a defamiliarization at

¹⁸ Stan Brakhage, “From *Metaphors on Vision*,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1978), 120.

¹⁹ Victor Shklovsky from *Art as Technique* (1917), quoted in Sitney, “Structural Film,” *FCR*, 335; emphasis my own.

the level of the content; and in the second instance, we are given it at the level of form. Warhol's work again serves as the signal example. Much of that work was filmed at 24fps (frames-per-second), which is the convention for 16mm sound film, and projected at 16fps, which is the convention for silent. The shift in speeds creates a subtle and perceptible slow motion, which transforms the most banal content—eating, sleeping, a haircut—into an eidetic visual display. But then the length of the film itself is distended, so that in *Eat*, we watch a man eat a mushroom for forty-five minutes. *Empire* (1964), is the most distended example, lasting just over eight hours.

What we need to recognize here is that duration is an integral part of both the form and the content at once. Though Warhol's selections of mundane and necessarily transitive actions seem less and less like subject-matter of any import, they cannot be discarded, insofar as the subject-matter, the motivation of the content, is what calls out for defamiliarization. But then it is exactly the separation of the action from its temporal referent—that is, the amount of time one of these actions usually *takes*—that guarantees the autonomous treatment of the film's duration in the first place.²⁰

All of this is to say that Sitney is fixated on the question of duration in his discussion of structural film, though in the early essays on the topic he appears hesitant to address it directly. It is there in his descriptions and analyses, but it is not until *Visionary Film* that “duration” is named and becomes the “temporal gift” bestowed upon the list of characteristics already enumerated.²¹ Nevertheless, Sitney needs to distance Warhol's activities from structural film in order to maintain the latter's historical and aesthetic specificity, which he does through an appeal

²⁰ With *Eat*, the duration of the film was meant to run to eight hours, thereby reduplicating the standard sleep cycle of an adult individual. Later films discard this referential intention in favor of more arbitrary but not less lengthy mediations.

²¹ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 351. That gift, he claims, is Warhol's, but it could very well be that of minimalism's too.

to their differing aesthetic attitudes and alignments.²² But in the process, he maintains structural film's distance from minimal art as well, even though anyone familiar with the debates over modernist and minimalist painting and sculpture would immediately recognize Sitney's terminology when he reiterates in *Visionary Film* that the structural films were ones "in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film."²³

"Shape" was the word that Fried had originally invested with the potential to supercede Greenberg's "flatness" as a concept that could express the ability of modernist art to transcend its material or literal manifestation. But "shape" was also central to contemporary discussions of the psychological *gestalt*, which, animated by minimalist sculpture's deployment of regular geometries and serial organizations, was understood to organize the gallery or museum goer's immediate perceptual experience. It was the immediacy of that perception which nevertheless led to the recognition of minimalism's radical contingency. The experience of "shape" (and later on, "place") as an ideal could not withstand the transfer of attentive energies to the process of cognition itself, in which conceiving of the ideal necessarily gave way to understanding the aesthetic experience as a sedimentation of built up, historically determined conventions. Minimalism aligned itself with modernism, even as it revealed the latter to be nothing more than an ideological position. As has been argued elsewhere, such was minimalism's unique "crux."²⁴

²² "Yet Warhol, as pop artist, is spiritually at the opposite pole from the structuralists... In fact, the antithesis of the structural film to the pop film (basically Warhol) is precisely the difference between Pop and minimal painting and sculpture, where the latter grows out of and against the former. Here the analogy must end, because the major psychologies of structural cinema and minimal art are not usually comparable" (*FCR*, 328).

²³ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 348. The relevant texts concerning the discourse concerning "shape" are: Michael Fried's "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," *Artforum* 5 (November 1966), Donald Judd's "Specific Objects," *Arts Year Book* 8 (1965), and Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2," *Artforum* (February and October 1966).

²⁴ See Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *The Return of the Real* (New York and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).

This foregrounding of the viewer's experience, its temporal unfolding and constitutive "duration," was exactly the condition that Fried had lamented in literalist art. Sharing Fried's acuity, but not his sentiment, Sitney explains that, "the great challenge, then, of structural film became how to orchestrate duration; how to permit the wandering attention that triggered ontological awareness...and at the same time guide that awareness to a goal."²⁵ "Shape" comes to play something of the same role for Sitney as it did for Fried: it is an operational term that mediates the pure duration which threatens to dissolve the autonomy of the aesthetic. But we should recognize that "shape" is being called upon to operate in two very different registers: the spatial for Fried, and the temporal for Sitney. The latter requires a temporal organization that provides some sort of unity, but without recourse to narrative, a sense of closure without an ending. Sitney's solution is nothing other than the filmic technique itself.

In this light, structural film's four basic characteristics are not really characteristics at all but techniques that demonstrate a particular dominance in one or another of the films addressed in Sitney's study. Thus the fixed-frame, loop printing, the flicker effect, and rephotography off of a screen find their counterparts in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), George Landow's *Bardo Follies* (1966), Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) and Ken Jacob's *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* (1969). But technique itself is problematic here, insofar as it circumscribes a specific kind of change to be enacted over the body of the film. So, for instance, Jacob's film subjects a piece of found footage to close examination or working-over by the film camera, thereby undoing the original's narrative unity in favor of a largely graphic one. The technique, distilled in this case into rephotography off of the screen, is given as an explanation of the transformation exhibited by the film. According to Arthur Danto, this explanation of the change

²⁵ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 351.

or transformation from one set of conditions to another is itself the basic form of historical narrative.²⁶ And the history that these films are given to narrate is that of their own emergence.

Russian Formalism returns here to shed some light on this point: the foregrounding of this or that specific technique can be compared to Shklovsky's notion of the "baring of the device," through which "art is a means of re-experiencing the making of objects," and where "objects already made have no importance for art."²⁷ Here, in terms of literary theory, the process of perception is renewed through the drawing of the reader's attention to the devices inherent to literary form. For film, it is through the revelation of the role that specifically filmic techniques play in the illusion of narrative or the construction of poetic unity.²⁸ This revelation has been the purview of structural film since Sitney first set out its defining characteristics, and it is has designated structural film as thoroughly modernist in its intentions.²⁹ But once one encounters a film practice about itself, one which is its own cause, we are confronted with a form of film activity that suggests a radical discontinuity with its past and at the same time a dawning of historical consciousness. Just as film secures its autonomy, not only from the social and cultural world but also from the psychology of the individual filmmaker, either heroic or administrative (Brakhage or Hollywood), film's past, in this respect, is positioned as some radical "otherness," which is now laid out as so much raw material for perusal and manipulation. To put it differently, the taming of "duration" that structural films were called upon by Sitney to orchestrate, the goal to which they must lead, the shape that they must take, is the one of their

²⁶ Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 233-256.

²⁷ Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

²⁸ Frederic Jameson has pointed out how the various techniques of literary defamiliarization lose their impact when transferred to film. The "montage" and "cross-cutting" he mentions, though derived from the cinema of Eisenstein, with whom Shklovsky collaborated, are equally applicable to the cinema of Brakhage, though there they are deployed without any narrative intentions. See Jameson's, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 61.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss is only the most recent commentator to describe structural film in these terms. See her, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 24-25.

own historical emergence; and this not only mediates the notion of structural film as an essentialist pursuit, in which it is seen to interrogate the limits of its own medium, but also the notion of it as an historical category, which must construct a history of itself in order to know just what it is interrogating.

It is no mere coincidence, then, that Sitney's coming to terms with the conditions of the films he called structural would develop against the background of another historicizing project: the conception the Anthology Film Archive, a collective product of a cluster of intellects: Jerome Hill, Peter Kubelka, Ken Kelman, Jonas Mekas, and Sitney himself. Anthology was conceived, not on the model of the cinematheque, but on that of the museum, which would secure, institutionally as it were, the place and status of "film as an art." Its purpose was dual: "to construct a theater in which films can be seen under the best conditions;" and "to define the art of film in terms of selected works which indicate its essences and its perimeters."³⁰ The conjunction of these two purposes led to the repertory screening of the "Essential Cinema" series, which was designed as a pedagogical device for instruction in both the history and the aesthetics of the art of film. And as Annette Michelson has pointed out, for this Essential Cinema, "the exhibition principle of this theater adopted the form of the loop (subject to amplification if not to fundamental revision), designed to unwind and rewind year after year for the edification of successive generations, ever recommencing the canonical series of films presented in the alphabetical order of the filmmaker's name."³¹ Michelson views this manifestation as growing out of Peter Kubelka's own work, for which both his films, such as *Adebar* (1957), and his position as director of the Vienna Cinémathèque, suggested the museological potential of such a device.

³⁰ P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the film in the collection of Anthology Film Archive* (New York: Anthology Film Archive and New York University Press, 1975).

We are presented with another possible model, however; and this one is constituted by structural film itself, or rather, by the four techniques Sitney enumerates for the making and identifying of structural films. In this instance, the repertory loop takes its place besides three other components of Anthology's canonizing impulse. The fixed-frame stands as a figure for the premise of the 'canon' itself. The canon, or rather the very idea of the canon is predicated upon the binary opposition of inside to outside, of what is admitted to what is rejected, of what belongs and what doesn't, each side of the opposition mutually defining the other by what itself is not. The "Essential Cinema" is involved in just such an opposition, insofar as its frame was drawn down upon "monuments of cinematic art." The selection committee, of which Sitney was a part, fixes "perimeters" of their frame in order to define the essence of this new discipline called the art of film.

To understand the analog of the flicker, however, we need to consider briefly its mechanical referent. It was the development of the film projector's rotating shutter, which, increasing the effective frequency of frames-per-second (from 24 to 72 for 16mm film), created the illusion of seamless motion. Before the advent of this shutter, films presented a distinct "flicker"—the perceptual registration of the seam between frames—which imposed upon the movements on the screen a perpetual reminder that what one was seeing was, in fact, an illusion. The avant-garde's rehabilitation of this effect is also the rehabilitation of this reminder, so the flicker effect's conjuring of distinct perceptual effects is also a laying bare of film as a mechanism for *representing* reality, rather than reproducing it. Thus, if the loop stands as the principle behind the repertory and Anthology's pedagogical impulse, we could argue that flicker effect is there in its alphabetical organization of filmmakers, which lays bare the mechanism behind canonization and the history that it implies. Annette Michelson is particularly eloquent

³¹ Michelson, "Gnosis and Iconoclasm," 7.

on this point: “Thus Bresson and Bañuel, following upon Brakhage, were all equally implicated in a continuum that respected neither chronology or hierarchy of age or reputation—a continuum within which, it must be observed, history was elided in a step propaedeutic to its critical reconfiguration.”³²

Finally, rephotography would describe the very process of this “reconfiguration,” which is not just the addition and recuperation of specific films and movements to be entered into the repertory loop, thereby expanding its field as if through the reversal of the camera’s zoom. Rather, it is an entire rethinking of the history of film and the kind of knowledge that it affords. It is the self-reflexive, self-conscious, and self-critical impulse at the heart of such a museological enterprise. One might even deign to call it meta-critical, or better, “metahistorical,” as Hollis Frampton did a mere nine months after Anthology Film Archive opened on December 1, 1970. Acutely aware of the historical consciousness necessitated by the new filmmaking in which he played a signature role, Frampton proposed one such reconfiguration when he stated that, “the metahistorian of cinema...is occupied with inventing a *tradition*, that is, a coherently wieldy set of discrete monuments, meant to inseminate resonant consistency in the growing body of his art. Such works of art may not exist, and then it is his duty to make them. Or they may exist already somewhere *outside* the intentional precincts of the art (for instance, in the prehistory of cinematic art, before 1943). And then he must *remake* them.”³³ It would appear from this that Frampton’s history, then, is much like Sitney’s, bent upon determining the closed quarters of an aesthetic project that develops according to its own internal necessity. That is, until we realize that Frampton’s history is not complete. The discrete films of this tradition are made and remade, to the point where the tradition itself becomes only

³² Ibid.

something of a working or “rational fiction” as Frampton calls it elsewhere. These are what constitute his “metahistory,” which lies somewhere in the future, rendering Frampton’s proposal something more like the possibility of writing a history of film that is at the same time the history of the present.

³³ Hollis Frampton, “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” *Artforum*, 10, no. 1 (September, 1971), 35.