

# WHO'S AFRAID OF STRUCTURAL FILM?

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## AND IS IT ABOUT TO BECOME THE BIG CONCERN FOR A NEW GENERATION OF FILMMAKERS?

**IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION** as to the importance of so-called structural films for new generations of filmmakers and artists, a film scholar friend of mine explained to me, with no little note of finality, that “structural film is far more popular with modernist art historians than with practising artists or academics in other fields... The lyrical film, the trance film and certain modes of film performance have had much more of an impact in the experimental film world today.” I let the dig of “modernist art historians” slide, even though I knew it was meant to write off the concerns of a small group of us who still find the fate of and debates surrounding modernism crucial to understanding the current state of the arts, but the dismissal that it entailed, the notion that we ‘modernist’ critics and historians are the only ones interested in this kind and moment of filmmaking, largely a product of the US in the late 1960s and early 70s, seemed misguided. For, over the past couple of years or so, I had come into contact with a number of works in film and video that, whether acknowledged by their makers or not, were, to my mind, undeniably structural in character, but structural in a way that at once extends and exceeds the historical and aesthetic label that this term has come to serve.

That label, ‘structural film’, was first put into critical play by P. Adams Sitney in two articles of the same name published in *Film Culture* in 1969 and 1970, which then became the penultimate chapter of his indispensable book, *Visionary Film* (1974) – an expansive history of American avant-garde film from the final years of the Second World War to the present. By describing avant-garde film forms in terms such as the lyric, the mythopoeic and the picaresque, Sitney’s narrative armed itself with interpretive models from the history of literature, but the history of art, and the arsenal of modern art in particular, was never far from reach. The achievements of a Stan Brakhage found their logical counterpart in Jackson Pollock’s, and almost by fiat, the work of the next generation of filmmakers – figures such as Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Ken Jacobs and Hollis Frampton – came to be seen in the light of modernist painting’s logical end: the blank canvas and its vicissitudes, namely the colour-field painting and minimalist sculpture of artists such as Frank Stella, Robert Morris and Donald Judd.

The correlation remains to this day. The renowned scholar of avant-garde film Annette Michelson wrote as recently as 1998 that the work of these filmmakers indicated ‘a growing trend toward systematicity, in an era when a notion of structure is seen to predominate over the projection of subjectivity. This 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 coherence of the compositional gestalt.’ Yet Sitney’s original criteria – of which there were four: loop printing, a fixed frame, the flicker effect and rephotography off the screen – remain fixed in the minds of artists who identify with the moment when it appeared that the concerns of painting, sculpture, photography and film aligned under the general banner of ‘structure’. Stan Douglas routinely mentions how the loop, in works such as his newest, *Klatsassin* (2006), is central to his practice of renovating cinematic temporality; and Sharon Lockhart has equated her use of fixed frame, single takes in works such as *Teatro Amazonas* (1999) and, more recently, *Pine Flat* (2005), with the influence of structural film and its focus on, in Lockhart’s words, ‘the basic elements of filmmaking’.

It is this last equation, the perception that these earlier filmmakers’ animation of ‘structure’ in their work was bound up with a search for the essence of film itself, its ontology or, to use a more practised terminology, its ‘medium specificity’, that has hitched structural film to the star of modernism. Paradoxically, these investigations into the fundamental nature of the filmic medium, their attempt, it seemed, to pin down exactly what film was, ran headfirst into the fact that film’s aggregate character, its condition of being an amalgam of different devices and disciplines, a product of diverse and divergent material histories, meant that any such attempt to find something specific to film, something inherent to its enterprise, was doomed from the beginning. If it could be said to have one, ‘structural film’ would have to carry out its modernist project in vain, ‘specific’ being exactly what the medium of film was not.

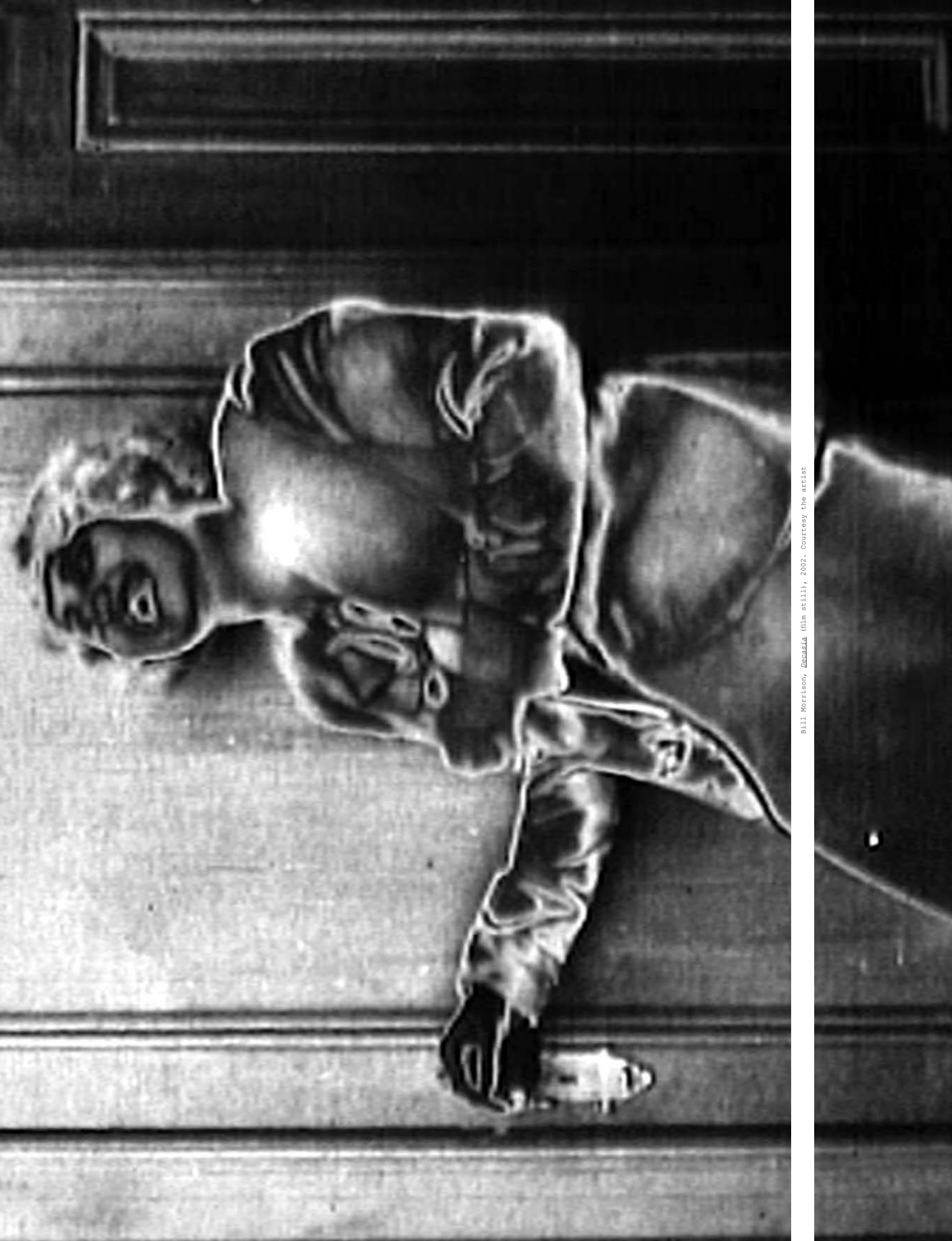
Douglas and Lockhart do not engage this paradox, however. For them, ‘structural film’ serves up a set of techniques whose historical appearance alone offers justification for their use as contemporary aesthetic strategies. For example, the fixed-frame loops of Lockhart’s cinematic portraits from *Pine Flat* – eg *Reader*, *Sleeper*, *Searcher* – are less purely formal reductions or strategies of simplification than means to amplify our attentiveness to the details and subtle movements of her chosen subjects. From this perspective, her decision to shoot 16mm film and, for the works’ exhibition, to install projectors out in the open for the audience to see and hear, appears wholly arbitrary, if not opportunistic: ‘baring the device’ in this way may be meant to reveal the mediated nature of all photographic representation, and thus to call into question Lockhart’s own documentary aesthetic, but that seems like an old lesson to teach in 2006, and one that was of little concern to the filmmakers associated with that moment when, as Michelson noted, ‘structure is seen to predominate’.

Yet there are other filmmakers and artists whose work does respond to the concerns evident in so-called structural films without simply taking their formal techniques as signals of historical precedence. Their work begins the structural filmmakers’ researches anew, takes it in directions that few have thought to explore and consequently allows us to rethink filmic form, structure and material in new and productive ways.

Bill Morrison’s *Outerborough* (2005) is one such film, and its



Sharon Lockhart, *Fine Line* (film still), 2005. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Neugerriemschneider, Berlin



Bill Morrison, *Deceasia* (film still), 2002. Courtesy the artist

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dedication to Ken Jacobs makes the historical connection at once explicit and specific. Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), a touchstone in Sitney's history of the period for its analytical reshooting of Billy Bitzer's 1905 film of the same name, offered Morrison a glimpse of how found footage could offer not only a raw material but also an operational logic for filmmaking itself. Like *Tom, Tom, Outerborough* is composed entirely of an earlier film, in this case an 1899 American Mutoscope and Biograph production of *Across Brooklyn Bridge*, which shows the path taken over the East River to Brooklyn by New York City's old elevated IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit). Morrison subjects the footage to a series of superpositions and accelerations, and then doubles its projection, so that the film runs not only as a diptych but as a palindrome as well, with the centre (and thus reversal) of the film apparently occurring at the moment when the train reaches the midpoint of the bridge span.

Morrison's other films, such as *Decasia* (2002) and *Light Is Calling* (2004), also owe much to Jacobs's mining of cinema's earliest artefacts, but whereas these works make films' decay due to age and the elements the primary content of their art, *Outerborough* takes the train's formal movement in both time and space as the organisational basis of the work, which, upon reflection, we can recognise as mirroring the function or character of the bridge itself: a manifold with two primary dimensions, or 'degrees of freedom' – the number of variables associated with an entity's operation – in this case, speed and bidirectional movement, which is much like film itself.

This notion of 'degrees of freedom' proved fundamental to the work of another seminal filmmaker gathered under Sitney's label. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and  $\leftrightarrow$  (*Back and Forth*) (1969) each explored, to one extent or another, the restricted movements of the film camera's zoom and pan – the latter becoming completely unrestricted in Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971). But Snow's reduction of the film form down to the function of such singular mechanisms, a modernist strategy par excellence, has limited less orthodox readings of his work.

Oliver Michaels has made a video recently that, when taken in concert with Snow's works, asks us to reconsider how the latter's functionalist reductions are dependent upon specific partnerships with their profilmic spaces – that is, the space captured in front of the camera, which, in the case of *Wavelength*, is a Soho loft that is traversed over the course of 45 minutes by the film camera's attenuated zoom.

Michaels's *Train* (2004), exhibited at P.S.1's *Greater New York* 2005 show, constructs a distinctly filmic space by piecing together

footage of its 'actor', a toy train, passing through rooms, corridors, halls, across roofs, through auditoriums, etc, each time using the threshold of a tunnel as a splicing point. What results is the experience of an impossible yet virtual architecture, one built upon the foundation of invisible cuts that happen within, or rather across, each threshold. (Michaels has even gone so far as to map the architecture described by the toy trains' continuous forward trajectory, using an axonometric drawing, which shows just how impossible it is to reconcile this virtual space with any standard, three-dimensional graphic convention.)

Now *Wavelength's* attenuated zoom across the expanse of its loft is integral to creating what other critics have identified as the film's sense of suspense, a psychological creep created as the camera slowly closes in upon the loft's far wall and a photograph of the sea located there. This final image, however, marks an antithesis to the architectural enclosure of the loft, which serves as the very precondition for the slow zoom to even register in the audience's experience of the film. With Michaels's *Train* in mind, we can see that the picture of the sea upon which *Wavelength* comes to rest is itself a kind of threshold, an invisible cut, whereby we are taken from inside to outside, from a restricted enclosure to a limitless expanse. Snow's *Wavelength*, it seems, exhibits a virtual architecture all its own (and a similar claim could be made, I think, for Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*, 1970).

There are still other filmmakers and video artists whose work opens up new dialogues with structural strategies first evident in the 1960s, such as David Dempewolf, whose *Time Travel Project – Glenn Gould* (2005) marshals both the palindrome – put to effective use not only by Morrison but by Hollis Frampton in early films such as *Information* (1966), *States* (1967) and, of course, *Palindrome* (1969) – and the flicker, which Tony Conrad introduced to audiences in a 1966 film of the same name; and Redmond Entwistle, whose *Paterson – Lodz* (2006) constructs an analogy between place, memory and filmic material which takes Morrison's and Michaels's virtual architectures into the realm of history, topography and psychology.

These are only a handful of examples to be sure, and it would be premature to suggest that we are seeing a wholesale shift in the arts towards greater applications of structural approaches. But as Michelson pointed out, the moment of structural film followed upon the heels of a period when subjectivity – internal, intrepid, triumphant – reigned supreme. Today we have seen such subjectivity replaced by notions of celebrity and, perhaps more acutely, the artist's persona. As our tolerance for the former wanes, and the latter can no longer offer reasonable justifications for aesthetic moves, 'structure', in one complex form or another, may indeed be finding new life. •