**ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MODERNISM**

Entries by Mal Ahern, 2/3

**STRUCTURAL CINEMA**

The term “Structural Film” originally came from an essay of the same title by P. Adams Sitney, published in *Film Culture* in 1969. Sitney’s essay aspired to label a new aesthetic he had observed in the films of North American artists like Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, and Paul Sharits. For Sitney, structural cinema comprised “films that insist on their shape.” He distinguished this new aesthetic from the “mythopoetics” of Stan Brakhage and Maya Deren, who, up to that point, were major representatives of the postwar American avant-garde. For Sitney, Andy Warhol’s early films (which comprised lengthy single takes of actions like eating and sleeping) were a huge factor in shifting the North American aesthetic to the cooler, more detached aesthetic of Structural Film.

Paul Sharits’s “flicker” films, for example, cycle rapidly between single frames of solid colour or bold graphic design, thus emphasizing the materiality of the film strip. The first section of Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma* (1970) adheres to a predetermined, rule based structure (based on the 24 letters of the alphabet) so rigorously that its structure could be said to comprise its content. Another example is Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967), a film that comprises a 45-minute zoom. Sitney argued that *Wavelength* lays bare the very structure of cinematic narrative: *space itself* is a necessary condition of cinematic storytelling, and *Wavelength’s* gradual zoom tells “the story of the diminishing area of pure potentiality.” In all these examples of structural film, we are unable to distinguish between form and content in any meaningful way.

“Structural Cinema” was not a movement organized by filmmakers themselves, but rather a label invented by one critic and imposed from the outside. As such, it took some time to catch on. In a 1971 interview with Charles Levine, animator Robert Breer found himself surprised to be categorized as a structural filmmaker—he had not yet heard the term. Sitney was criticized for his essay, not because it mischaracterized the work of the filmmakers in question, but because it asserted “Structural Cinema” as something entirely new. Sidney’s essay did not acknowledge the influence of Fluxus and minimalism on structural film, or the structural tendencies in earlier avant-garde cinema. Artists like George Maciunas argued that structural film did not represent the stylistic rupture that Sitney thought it might: it developed out of established practices in film and other media.

In the 1970s, a group of British filmmakers started a movement called “Structural/Materialist Film,” inspired by the North American structural filmmakers and the films of Andy Warhol. Structural/Materialist used formal devices like repetition and long duration, which, in Peter Gidal’s words, “result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process.” For Gidal, the ideal film makes its medium-specific qualities apparent, and offers the spectator a sort of Brechtian awareness of his viewing position. Though working in a different theoretical and cultural tradition than the North American Avant-Garde, Gidal’s theory of Structuralist/Materialist film nonetheless influenced contemporary critics who characterize all of Structural Cinema as a modernist exercise in medium-specific aesthetics. The Structuralist/Materialist tradition influenced many UK-based political filmmakers, including the filmmakers and theorists Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey.

In the United States, the late 1970s saw the end of the Structural Cinema tradition. Younger filmmakers like Vivian Dick and Scott and Beth B were pursing a different aesthetic, based in the punk and no-wave scene. And in the 1980s, many would distinguish themselves from the Structural tradition by their explicitly political content: filmmakers and video artists like Peggy Ahwesh, Barbara Hammer, and Isaac Julien maintained a formally rigorous aesthetic reminiscent of Structural Film, but engaged issues of race, gender, and sexuality in a way earlier filmmakers had not.

Bibliography:

Ehrenstein, D. (1985) *Film: The Frontline 1984*. Denver: Arden Press. (This book describes the criticisms of Sitney’s

Gidal, P. (1976) *Structural Film Anthology*. London: BFI.

Maciunas, G. (1970) “Response to Sitney,” *Film Culture Reader*. New York, Praeger.

Sitney, P. (1969) “Structural Film,” *Film Culture* 47.

Paratextual Material:

**Videos:**

Owen Land, *Film in Which there Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, etc*. (1965)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRd3727lwXs

Michael Snow, *Wavelength* (1967):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBOzOVLxbCE>

Paul Sharits, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1969)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihTynFLMy2Y>

Hollis Frampton, *(nostalgia)* (1971)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voMDL1TgTh4>

Peter Gidal, *Clouds* (1975)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2deRSqwZyI0

MAL AHERN

Yale University