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Structural Films: Meditation through Simple Forms

When it was first invented, the medium of moving images, the cinema, intrigued people by its capacity to create an illusion of reality. The thought that real events could be re-experienced was exciting enough to attract audiences to the movie theaters. A simple event like a train coming to a station seemed worth seeing because the new medium was able to reconstruct the space and time of the world in a dark room. This tradition, namely forming an illusion in a two-dimensional space, continued with the Hollywood cinema, where the fact that all was just a representation of the reality was hidden as much as possible. This tendency was most obvious in the writings of many film critics who discussed only the contents of the films without even mentioning their forms as if what was on the screen was the reality itself and not an illusion of the reality. There were many narrative directors who were aware of this and who incorporated that into their style but it was not until a number of avant-garde films in the late sixties came out that it became essential for the film viewers to tackle the issue. These films were called "structural films" by the film critic P. Adams Sitney (347).

The "structuralist" filmmakers were aware that film was until then used as a representation of the reality and they chose to make this the subject of their films. Their films could only be watched in a state of hyper-awareness where the viewer was constantly reminded that the content of the image was no more than an illusion. In 1971, Ernie Gehr, arguably the most important filmmaker who made structural films, wrote: "In representational films sometimes the image affirms its own presence as image, graphic entity, but most often it serves as vehicle to a photo-recorded event. Traditional and established avant-garde film teaches film to be an image, a representing. But film is a real thing and as a real thing it is not imitation. It does not reflect on life, it embodies the life of the mind. It is not a vehicle for ideas or portrayals of emotion outside of its own existence as emoted idea. Film is a variable intensity of light, an internal balance of time, a movement within a given space." (Hi-Beam)

Hollis Frampton, another influential "structuralist", completed his *Hapax Legomena*, a seven film series, in 1972. In *Nostalgia*, the photographs are burnt one by one while the voice-over describes the picture that is going to be burnt next. Both the images and the words used to describe the images are forms of representation and the fact that they do not complement each other helps the viewer recognize the fact that they are representations. There is no possibility of being lost in any illusion, as the images are photographs in the process of burning. The sound and the image negate each other making us aware of their inability to reconstruct a reality. Similarly, in *Poetic Justice*, we read a story from a page in an empty room. There is almost no change in the image but the story keeps changing. It is destabilizing, as it is not easy to understand at first sight why Frampton makes us read so many pages in a film. If the whole idea were to read the story, would it not be better to just give the audience the pages? Why bother to make them watch it? All these questions reflect back to the fact that what is in front of us is not the reality but it is a film. Reading a page is not the same as reading a page out of a film and with a similar reasoning watching events unfold on the screen should not create the same reaction as witnessing the events themselves. Again, Frampton expects us to become aware of the medium and reminds us the limits of what cinema can be.

In his book *Visionary film*, P. Adams Sitney defines the structural film as a "cinema of structure 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" (348). This is a very powerful definition in the sense that it needs very little understanding of the films on the part of the viewer. The definition does not explain what the effect of the simple shape is; it just informs us that the "primal impression" is created by nothing else than the shape. Therefore, it is left to us to make the necessary connection between Sitney's definition and the actual effect the structural films have on the audience, namely the questioning of the medium itself.

In an ordinary film, the form changes over time and the viewer spends his/her energy to understand how the individual choices work to create a meaningful whole. The different choices of camera angles and/or cuts have only significance as long as they complement or oppose the flow of the film. In a structural film, the form is so simple that the viewer does not have to spend much energy on understanding their place in the whole work. Usually, the ideas are repeated again and again so that it becomes a meditative process where the viewer starts thinking only about "the" choice made by the filmmaker that in Sitney's terms can be called "a simple shape". There can be no illusions of reality as the "shape" attracts all the attention, making the content of secondary importance. The fact that an illusion is created by a representation becomes the subject of the film. This meditative process cannot be achieved if there is a story or many different forms that viewer has to make connections with; there has to be a simple form. Thus, Sitney's definition is both valid and useful to understand the structural film and the way it works.

Standish Lawder's *Runaway* is a good example of how the simple form helps the viewer to focus his/her attention to the medium. It does not take long for the audience to realize that the dogs are going to be doing the same movement for the whole film and that the music is going to be the same. When the medium starts changing from a television screen to film, and so on, we can give complete attention to the thought of how we believe in what we see on the screen, no matter whether it is television or cinema, and how even in the case of the animation we do not question the illusion presented to us.

Paul Sharits' *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* also has a similar effect especially in its use of sound. The word "destroy" would go unnoticed if it were used once in a sentence. However, when it is repeated over and over again our brain starts being tricked and we lose the certainty on what the word is. This is very destabilizing because we are used to understanding the words so that we can put them in the context to make a

sense of the film. Although we hear the same sound; we hear many different words or phrases, most of them having violent meanings. This is very much related to the violent content of the image on the screen. We also start interpreting the image according to what we hear. It is a proof of how our perception can be easily manipulated and how this manipulation is so powerful that after a while any perception is interpreted based on what our brain remembers from the past. This becomes a metaphor for the film viewing (and hearing) experience; except that it is taken to the extreme in this case.

A much better example is Andy Warhol's *Blowjob* where we are forced to watch the face of a guy who is supposedly getting a blowjob for forty minutes. The most obviously erotic part of the event is hidden from us so we cannot really "enjoy" watching it. Moreover, there are no developments in the story except in the beginning and the end, where the guy unzips and zips his pants. All of this forces us to focus on the elements that are existent in any shot filmed. The movement of the light becomes a major attention point. The details of the wall in the background and the simple fact that there is a wall in the background get noticed. More importantly, the issue of framing and the off-screen space make us aware of how crucial and philosophical these decisions are. After a while, we start questioning whether there is someone actually giving the blowjob and whether it is all fake. This leads to the next issue that is whether it is really important that it is real or fake, and so on. Moreover, the fact that the camera is pointed to one single image obsessively reveals the subjective aspect of cinema as whenever an object is recorded to film, it is chosen as opposed to all the others that are left out. When the image chosen is as well known as a blowjob, there is even more meaning we assign to it even before looking carefully at the image. All these questions can be asked for any shot in any film, except that they are not in any way especially encouraged by the shots themselves. Blowjob pushes these questions forward and increases our awareness of what cinema is.

The fact that the forms are simple can lead many people to think that it is easy to make structural films. Once the idea is found, it usually really is easy to execute, unlike the films of Brakhage where the director has to think about each cut so that the film has a deeper meaning as a whole. However, finding the idea is exactly what constitutes the most important part of the process through which the structural films are created. Structural films are almost always conceptual artworks where the actual experience is the process of thinking about the film and not just consuming

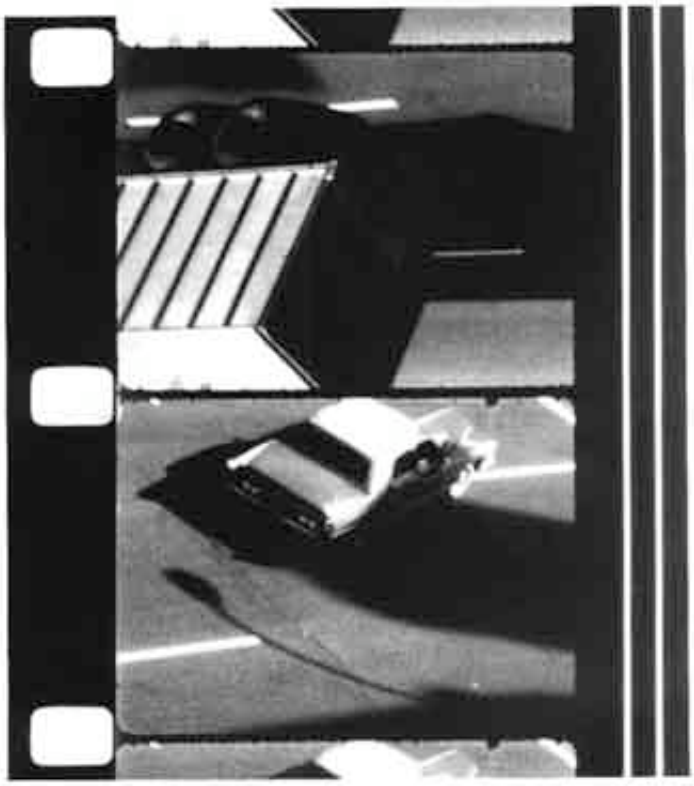
what is on the screen. A very strong participation is expected from the viewer as without understanding why, using again Sitney's term, "the predetermined shape" was chosen there is no way of understanding the work. A profound questioning of the medium is impossible if the film simply states didactically that it is an illusion. That would be a paradox in itself as that would be an illusion claiming to be real enough to convince us it is an illusion. For example, if the sole purpose of the film were to make us understand that the film is an illusion, it would not make sense for a voice-over to tell us this fact, as it will be a conflicting message. This is why the structural films have to find the forms that can encourage us to think and that can provoke our minds to question their mediums. This is not an easy job and for that films have to "embody the life of the mind" as Ernie Gehr puts it.

Ernie Gehr's own films are perfect examples of how the medium can both make us think and create moving experiences despite the fact that we are always aware that they are nothing but films. They question not only the representation and the film medium but also the perception itself.

On the 2002 New York Film Festival's web site, *The Glider*, a film he shot on DV in 2001, is described as "a voyage into pictorial space-world that seems to be governed by extra-terrestrial optical and gravitational laws" The film was shot using an optical mechanism so that it rounds everything in front of the camera. The camera turns around a building near the seashore but it is really hard to discern the people or objects as they are distorted by the optical mechanism. The speed of the film also changes frequently, making it impossible for us to understand the real time of the events (the waves, etc.). First, we think everything is abstract. Then, after a few minutes, we realize that what we are watching is actually a "representation" of the actual world, except it is distorted. This leads to the conclusion that what we usually see on a film using the three-dimensional perspective is only one way of looking at the world around. We start questioning how "objective" the camera really is and how "realistic" it is even when it is recording simple events in real time. The thirty-seven minutes running time of the film causes us to get used to "that way of looking at the world" The rounded vision, with a lack of perspective and an extra-ordinary sense of depth becomes a way of looking just as normal as our usual way. Therefore, Gehr forces us to make

the parallelism between our eyes and the camera. They both record the world outside in perspective and they both seem to “represent the realistic way things are”. However, we should understand that the camera, and a more shocking discovery, our eyes see the universe in only one of the infinite ways it can be seen. As the comment on the FilmLinc website describes powerfully, we should experience the objects we know very well such as the sea and people with the “extra-terrestrial eyes” to realize that our perception of the world is not complete. Therefore, using a very simple idea, Gehr explores a subject as complex as the human perception. What makes it an even more valuable experience is the fact that nothing is told to us in a didactic way. We are led to make a “voyage” where our minds are provoked gradually.

An older film, *Serene Velocity* that Gehr made in 1970, deals with very similar issues, except in this one the optical illusion is created by editing. A simple setting like a corridor begins to have different shapes. The usual sense depth is lost and sometimes the whole image seems like a two-dimensional figure that has a few squares. Again, something usual is represented in a very unusual way. Thus, our perception of it is changed, creating the sense that there are other ways of perceiving it. The fact that the dawn is breaking at the end is also very significant. It gives life to the idea that what we perceive differently is really the universe itself and not just an imaginary setting.



In *Shift* that he made two years later, Gehr reveals again the vulnerability of our perception of perspective. The cars driving in different speeds in an auto park are shown in either usual perspective or upside down. In both images the white lines look alike so much that whenever there are no cars on the screen we cannot be sure whether the image is the right side up or not. That encourages the audience to imagine a world where humans saw things upside down. Eventually, they would be used to it and they would be sure that that was the only realistic perception.

In all three of these films the ideas are very simple. They do not require much technical knowledge on the part of the filmmaker but a deep understanding of how human brain reacts to images and how the thought process can be incited to make the profound philosophical "brainstorming" that I described above. There is content in these films and all the other ones I mentioned but it has to be discovered by the viewer. In structural films the only content is in the form and the only narrative worth telling is the story of our thinking process. If seen in this way, there is also a very clear beginning, development and an end in each film. Again, they cannot be pointed out by looking at the film alone. For example, in *The Glider* the first reaction of uncertainty on whether all is representational or abstract is the introduction; the realization that cinematic process can represent only one way of reality is the development; and finally the understanding that our perception is nothing but "a" representation of the reality is the conclusion. The content of the film is representation and perception.

It might be easy to "fake" structural films but it is incredibly hard to create ones that are as valuable as Gehr's or Warhol's films. Loop-printing anything can produce amusing effects or can make us think about them for a few minutes but

that would not create an experience like the *Serene Velocity* and that would not make us think about anything as much as *Blowjob* does. Like any other language, cinema is complex and it is not easy to understand how we are manipulated by it. By questioning the way the images or sounds work, structural films help us understand the medium and therefore enhance the experience of watching other films.

Some of the great structural filmmakers go beyond exploring the limitations of the medium. For example, by creating optical illusions Gehr uses cinema as a metaphor for the perception of the universe. Similarly, Frampton uses cinema as a metaphor for the way our mind perceives the different ways of representation. Warhol tries to understand how and why we are so much obsessed with images, especially the ones that circulate regularly in the society. All of these three filmmakers take the questioning of the medium as a starting point and then take it to a new dimension that they choose.

In order to achieve either kind of meditation, on cinema or on perception, the simple forms are essential. They emphasize that in order to analyze or comprehend anything; we first have to try to understand the way we experience that. They force us to meditate on the problems any kind of representation cause. The structural films never try to impose a way to think about the world or cinema. Instead they suggest that we should take a closer look at the limitations on our knowledge about the world due to the constraints drawn by our perception and the complexities that we face because of those while experiencing a work of art.

Sources:

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Hi-Beam Website: http://www.hi-beam.net/mkr/eg/eg-bio.html

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7 Hours web site that discusses Frampton's work. That's where I got my *Hapax Legomena* pictures from.