

American Structural Filmmaking of the 1960s as a Means for Political Activism

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“The eye is continuing registering images, both positive and negative”

-Bruce Connor, February 11, 1986

I wish to investigate American structural film practice during its height in the mid to late 1960s in order to understand how contemporary political unrest informed the structural film practice. It is my belief that de-Stalinization, the inauguration and assassination of John F. Kennedy, cold war apathy, and the escalating Vietnam war heavily informed the structural film aesthetic.

. In 1974, P. Adams Sitney defined the structuralist film genre and decided its ideal characteristics using mainly technological and aesthetic studies. In Sitney's Promethean effort at fashioning a history for structural film some years after its demise, Sitney glosses over the range of possible attitudes held by the viewer in his/her cognition of a film's structural relations.

The 1960's saw an America punctuated by some of the most awe-inspiring, devastating, and stressful events that define our nation. For three days straight in 1963, 166 million Americans in over 51 million homes spent from 8 to 11 hours daily watching the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy unfold. July of 1969 would see an interstellar giant leap for mankind. The Russians and Americans had their

respective fingers on a nuclear trigger, and racial equality at home was triggering riots. Structural film is illustrated through these events in that human perception of the natural world was put into artistic investigation. This was accomplished in structural film through the “persistence of vision” so heavily manipulated through the main tenets of structural film: flicker effect, loop printing, re-photography, and the static camera. Perfect examples are Bruce Connor’s 1963 film *Report*, a meditation on the assassination of Kennedy consisting of flickering black and white images representing the president’s slip from consciousness, and Paul Sharits’s *Peace Mandala End War* series.

This thesis will employ an ideological critique of film theory to develop and scrutinize the context within which structural films were produced and consumed in direct opposition to a dominant classical Hollywood style that represented a crumbling dominant ideology. Bazinian theory in the neo-formalist approach will be included to illustrate how structural film is capable of encouraging active spectator interaction capable of renewing perception, rearticulating feeling, and of rationalizing and evaluating experience. Lastly, socio-economic situations will be analyzed in order to understand how aesthetic cognition was enhanced through structural film's privileging and liberating aesthetics and materials. It was through this reflective and reflexive educative process that cultural articulations were de-familiarized in structural cinema.