

Against Spectacle: Duration & Anti-Pleasure in Structural Film

Introduction

The New York underground cinematic tradition has most often been emphasized through a lens of transgression, provocation, and formal experimentation. Structural film, however, poses a more austere defiance. Instead of offering alternative images or countercultural narratives, it operates through subtraction and omission; the refusal of cinematic pleasure. By reducing action and extending duration beyond dramatic or aesthetic utility, structural film denies the spectator any of satisfaction that cinema ordinarily promises. Films such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Hollis Frampton's *nostalgia* (1971) offer very little to their viewers, but in doing so, rather than withholding meaning, they withhold gratification through their omission of narrative, affect, and visual coherence.

This paper contends that structural film constitutes an anti-spectacular and anti-pleasure cinema, one that transforms the viewer from a passive consumer to an active participant by reframing spectatorship as labor rather than consumption. This participation forces the spectator to confront the conditions under which their attention, time, and pleasure are mobilized. Furthermore, "anti-pleasure," here, does not refer to the absence of sensation or a temperate aesthetic. Rather, it refers to the refusal of administrators, constructed enjoyment which standardizes pleasure as compensatory and passively consumed. Structural filmmakers in the New York underground did not aim to replace mainstream spectacle with a more oppositional one, rather they dismantled the conditions under which cinematic spectacle and pleasure are authorized to operate.

This argument theoretically draws on Guy Debord's account of the spectacle and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of administered pleasure within the culture industry, situating structural film's formal austerity as a refusal of both representational domination and compensatory enjoyment. Debord's account provides a language for understanding what structural film rejects by complicating the spectator's habitual relation to images; Adorno, in "Culture Industry Reconsidered," argues that pleasure in mass culture is administered rather than being rooted in the ideal of freedom. Furthermore, Sitney's delineation of structural film and Gidal's reading of Warhol's early filmic work provide the formal vocabulary through which the mechanisms of this refusal become visible. Finally, J. Hoberman will provide an account of the cultural context of late-1960s New York, characterized by artistic exhaustion and change. Structural film emerged at a moment when expressive and countercultural modes of underground cinema had begun to formulate their own forms of spectacle. Against this backdrop, the turn toward austerity and procedural drudgery appears as a redefinition of critique. By refusing pleasure, structural film refuses cinema's most reliable upshot.

Theoretical Basis — Spectacle, Pleasure, and the Conditions of Refusal

Structural film's refusal of pleasure can be understood against a broader critique of spectatorship as a relational activity. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* provides a vocabulary for describing this condition, but more critically, it clarifies what is voided when cinema ceases to serve it. For Debord, the spectacle is not reducible to an excess of images or to the mass media modal configuration alone. Rather, it describes a "social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord §4). Under spectacular conditions, spectatorship is denied by a separation between lived experience and its representation; a mode of acquiescence and passive consumption.

Beyond narrative cinema, even cinema oppositional to the mainstream can reproduce spectacular relations through durational comfort and narrative payoff. Herein, the spectacle structures the terms under which spectators are permitted to relate to and engage with them. What occurs as a result is a condition where the spectator consumes images as spectacle, thus accepting the conditions of separation they impose. Structural film, however, intervenes at this juncture of mediation. By refusing narrative progression and compressed temporality, it refuses the spectator's usual alignment with cinematic representation thus rendering identification futile.

This specific mechanism by which cinema gains control of attention toward the image, however, is through pleasure. The endurance of spectatorship is sustained and validated by gratification of expected payoffs—emotional, aesthetic, or otherwise. Theodor W. Adorno's "Culture Industry Reconsidered" posits that pleasure under conditions of mass proliferation of images is administered and stands in opposition to what could otherwise be seen as emancipatory. Cultural commodities, he says, are "manufactured more or less according to plan" and "tailored for consumption by the masses," determining not only what is consumed by the very nature and mode of that consumption (Adorno 12). Thus, pleasure becomes a tool for integration into a collective rather than a manifestation of freedom.

For Adorno, the culture industry produced compliance by standardizing the constraints of enjoyment. "The customer is not king," he writes, "not its subject but its object" (12). Pleasure is offered to consumers as compensation for alienated labor, ensuring that dissatisfaction never becomes consciousness, thus allowing the culture industry to preserve an "eternal sameness" that ensures its dominance over culture (14). The result is a form of spectatorship predicated on ease, immediacy, and recognition devoid of friction or difficulty. Enjoyment, then, becomes an ideological foundation through which meaning is disseminated.

Structural film positions itself in direct opposition to this form of pleasure by eliminating the ordinary guaranteed satisfaction associated with film as a medium. By refusing the very efficacy identified by Adorno as central to cultural influence, structural films also refuse the pleasure associated with it. Furthermore, in refraining from offering an alternative mode of pleasure, structural film outright nullifies its potency. The genre's austerity can thus be understood as a protest against the "petrified relations under which human beings lived," a feature of culture Adorno points out as being threatening to the autonomy of art (13).

Formal Strategies of Refusal: Sitney, and Gidal on Warhol's Early Films

Structural film performs its critical reconfiguration of spectatorship via an explicit foregrounding of form, effectively dissolving the distance required between the spectator and the film object to generate pleasure. In *Visionary Film*, P. Adams Sitney posits that the defining feature of structural film is that "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film" (Sitney 379). The spectator encounters a film whose temporal and perceptual structure precedes and governs any possible content. As such, content, when present, is "minimal and subsidiary to the outline" (379). These films withhold meaning by displacing it and subordinating it to form.

Sitney's predetermination marks break from the lyrical and mythopoeic traditions that preceded this phase of the New York underground. Structural film's advent points toward a shift in perception towards cognitive activity, rather than treating perception as a function of bodily experience. In Sitney's formulation, structural cinema foregrounds "apperceptive strategies," thereby becoming a "cinema of the mind rather than the eye" (380). By diminishing the primacy of sensation and affect, structural film retools spectatorship as a task of sustained attention rather

than immersion. Sitney identifies a variety of formal signifiers that operate in tandem with each other to produce this effect (Sitney 379). These techniques subordinate representational fidelity to an overarching formal schema. The form, then, itself becomes the primary object of perception.

The fixed camera position immobilizes both the cinematic apparatus and the spectatorial gaze. By refusing to reframe itself, employ movement, or vary perspective, the image ceases to guide attention dynamically. Instead, the spectator is confronted with a durational field that must be actively negotiated and made sense of. As a result, the frame disregards cinematic emphasis or hierarchy in favor of a condition wherein attention drifts, returns, and reorganizes itself. The spectacles demand for visual stimulation and narrative propulsion is effectively replaced with a condition of sustained looking that foregrounds the labor of perception, further highlighting the automaticity involved in consuming cultural objects. Loop printing and rephotography, in destabilizing cinematic time, collapse linear progression of narrative and action into repetition and foreground the mediation of the represented image respectively. These techniques introduce redundancy and delay as a substitute for narrative continuity, thereby making the spectator aware of both the image's duration and its persistence beyond necessity. Meaning accumulates, as a result, through exhaustion and critical redirection away from stimulation toward a "cinema of the mind".

Peter Gidal's account of Andy Warhol's early films offers a crucial bridge between Sitney's formal taxonomy and the emergence of structural film within the New York underground. Although Warhol's work precedes the classification of structural cinema as a genre, Gidal purports a clear continuity between Warhol's silkscreen practice and his manipulation of cinematic time. In films such as *Kiss* (1964) and *Sleep* (1964), Warhol's deliberate slowing of

projection speed renders action “even more minutely watchable, and clinically observable,” by transforming everyday gestures into events stripped of dramatic or narrative function. (Gidal 80).

Gidal, rather than contesting accusations of boredom leveled at Warhol’s films, redirects them to suggest that boredom itself must be redefined. Warhol’s films highlight what is otherwise dismissed as empty time, insisting that “what is defined here as ‘boring’ is the substance of a large segment of life” (84). In this reading, cinematic boredom becomes a mode of confrontation with the otherwise passively consumed image that inadvertently fills that empty time. Debord’s conception of the spectacle insists that its demands for “passive acceptance...is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances” (§12). In contrast, neither Sitney nor Gidal describe the camera as neutral. Instead, they emphasize the exact opposite. Gidal’s “clinical non-moving camera” intensifies confrontation between spectator and image by omitting cinematic mediation (92). This further pushes spectators to consider their own perceptual limits and performed labor when watching film. Thus, Warhol’s early filmic work anticipates structural film’s systematic eradication of cinematic “efficacy,” derived from Adorno as the sensation of pleasure. Structural film thus articulates its critique at the level of form and immediate recognition of its own limits, producing images that render spectacle inoperative and defunct.

Case I - *Wavelength*: Duration as Exhaustion

Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967) offers a precise realization of structural film’s anti-pleasure logic by reducing experience to a single, inescapable action: a forty-five minute zoom across a loft interior. During this zoom, the room’s spatial field gradually collapses toward a photograph mounted on the back wall. From the outset, the film’s structure and main idea is foreground and presented as-is, avoiding narrativization. The spectator, as a result, is left with no

expectation of deviation, escalation, or reward. Although minor events occur, *Wavelength* refuses novelty outside of brief figures occupying the expansive frame, a suggestion of death, and the shifting light suggesting transitions from day to night. Separate from these, the primary feature—the zoom—remains incremental and imperceptible. All of these moments, however, are constantly being reiterated as subordinate to the film’s primary operation and never truly arrive at narrative climax. The culture industry’s products, including film, are governed by “the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy” (Adorno 13). As a result, the film points away from that efficacious payoff.

Sitney characterizes *Wavelength*’s construction as a cinema where space itself becomes the subject, gradually closing in “on the diminishing area of pure potentiality” (Sitney 384). Action, consequence, and closure are denied through its durational constraints. Duration in *Wavelength* is made legible as a condition of perceptual strain rather than narrative anticipation. As Sitney observes, the events of the film initially appear as “discrete actions of irreducible performances,” only later hinting narrative implications through the telephone call that punctures the film’s otherwise punishing temporality (384). Critically, this moment does not motivate the film’s trajectory as it continues its operation, i.e., the zoom. However, it does succeed in exposing the insufficiency of narrative itself as an organizing principle. The phone call, Sitney says, “bridges the space between their self-enclosure and the narrative,” only to withdraw that expectation soon after. Snow refuses to allow the incident of apparent death to function as narrative resolution. Had the film concluded at the moment of discovery, as Sitney notes, the perceived image would have “satisfied all the potential energy and anticipation built up through the film” (386). Instead, however, Snow deliberately suspends that form of satisfaction. The zoom persists, resets, and destabilizes itself beyond the point where narrative meaning could

materialize into something meaningful, continuing through superimpositions of ghost-images and an escalating electronic soundtrack until it finally arrives at the static photograph of waves pinned to the wall. In this way, *Wavelength* converts what might have been some form of pleasurable narrative closure into a structural lapse.

Moreover, Sitney's observation that Snow "exposes his cinematic materials" points to a more politically charged takeaway (Sitney 385). The material intrusions of lens flares, filters, shifts in film stock, and splices do not, in his view, serve atmospheric ends as much as they fracture spectacle. The spectator is made aware of both the film's cinematic construction and their position within and against it. Attention becomes deliberate and active, taking on a repetitive slowness that throws the spectator's conception of time off-balance.

In Adornian terms, *Wavelength*'s generation of boredom and exhaustion becomes an act of resistance. For Adorno, pleasure functions in mass culture as compensation for alienated labor, pacifying dissatisfaction by offering easy gratification (Adorno 12-14). Therein, Snow pushes against Adorno's described condition of pleasure by demanding a form of spectatorship that offers no gratification. The spectator's endurance becomes the *point*, effectively mirroring labor without relief. Watching *Wavelength*, then, is deliberately fatiguing. Snow himself describes the film as an attempt to "state issues about film," emphasizing a balance between illusion and material reality, rather than a focus on expressive content (Sitney 387). His concern, put simply, is the problem of representation amidst a condition where perception is either sustained or exhausted over time. *Wavelength* uses duration to destabilize the zoom—its only identifiable undertaking—through fleeting moments of superimpositions and illusory gestures, effectively rendering perfect representation impossible.

In refraining from labeling its duration, *Wavelength* replaces the gratification of image with the exhaustion of spectatorship. By outlasting the spectator's tolerance for stasis, the film produces what Sitney calls a "continually changing experience of cinematic illusion and anti-illusion" (Sitney 386). This experience enacts what Adorno identifies as art's critical function and refuses reconciliation where it would be false. In demanding endurance, attention, and complete submission to temporal inefficiency, *Wavelength* causes the spectator to succumb to an identity of a consumer while simultaneously becoming privy to their status as a laborer. By denying pleasure, *Wavelength* further denies the culture industry's promise that time spent watching will be repaid with meaning, affective impact, or narrative coherence. "Insofar as the culture industry arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry," Adorno notes, "the substitute gratification which it prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness" (Adorno 18).

Duration in *Wavelength* thus operates as a critique of the culture industry prescribed by Theodor Adorno by dismantling the expectation that cinema exists to efficiently organize calculable time into easy-to-consume units. In this sense, *Wavelength* exemplifies structural film's anti-pleasure credo by exposing the conditions under which viewing becomes labor, further prompting the spectator to become an active participant in the illusion that controls this viewing, rather than a passive casualty of it.

Case II — *nostalgia*: Misalignment and the Labor of Interpretation

Hollis Frampton's *nostalgia* (1971) presents a sequence of still photographs placed on a hot plate, each gradually burning as a voiceover narration describes a photograph that has not yet appeared. Image and narration are systematically misaligned in that the voice consistently refers

to the next image, never the one presently visible. Meaning is thereby perpetually deferred, and the spectator is denied the consonance required for cinematic comprehension. No image is ever granted interpretive presence at the moment of its visibility, until it is too late; until it is a pile of burnt embers. In place of aesthetic reward and dramatic progression, *nostalgia* establishes a pattern of delay that converts spectatorship into an act of mental bookkeeping, memory correction, and anticipatory labor. In Debord's terms, the spectacle "monopolizes the majority of time spent outside the modern production process" by filling leisure with representations that demand assent (§6). Through that delay, then, *nostalgia* and structural film as a whole occupy that time without justifying itself. Its images cease to offer remedial immersion by exposing spectatorship as a form of temporal labor, pointing to a critique at the spectacle's demand for the spectator's attention.

This misalignment between image and meaning, read through Debord's claim that the spectacle obviates lived time by reorganizing experience as representation, resembles a simultaneous critique and reappropriation of spectacle. As Debord notes, "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord §1). Frampton structurally enforces and liberalizes this recession by severing the decaying image from meaning. While the narration refers to an image only in anticipation, lived presence and experience are displaced twice over. First, by photographic mediation, and then by temporal misalignment. As a result, *nostalgia* performs a continuous deferral of immediacy, a condition in which representation never truly confronts itself as interpretive. *nostalgia* offers a similar mode of temporal interval, yet, critically, it refuses to administer a meaningful end. The film consumes the spectator's time and effort without reward, offering neither narrative synthesis nor aesthetic closure. Attention is sustained and nearly granted relief every time the film cuts to the next image, but the memory of

the representation has disappeared from the mind of the spectator. The labor is involved in retaining information about the image, then, is transformed into critique of the logic of spectacle. Therein, the spectacle becomes a site of strain and tension and by hollowing out time, representation is merely a trace of something once lived but not meaningfully whole.

This entire operative mechanism depends on a degree of cognitive destabilization and mistrust. The spectator, in being compelled to remember the previous narration, holds it in limbo and retroactively tries to apply it to an image that has already begun vanishing. Interpretation, by design, becomes delayed and the spectator encounters only destruction. Debord characterizes the spectacle as “the autonomous movement of the nonliving,” suggesting a system in which images circulate among society independent of the experience of the viewing, *nostalgia*'s images inherit the power of that autonomy while stripping it of its efficacy (§2). The photographs, already an index past moments, are further neutralized by both their status as unchanging objects and their subsequent incineration. As a result, the spectator must actively negotiate their position opposite the images as well as their role in its creation. Representation no longer produces a “passive acceptance,” instead it converts the viewing experience into a self-conscious labor of reconstruction.

Furthermore, the title of the film is too instructive. In denying simultaneity between image and meaning, *nostalgia* opposes the spectacle's promise of presence. The spectacle presents itself as immediacy while maintaining separation whereas Frampton removes even the illusory element of immediacy. The present tense becomes unusable as is evident in the narration's consistent use of past-tense, further structuring the film's negative temporality with delay and loss. Nostalgia is literally channeled. However, not in the sentimental sense, but as a procedural process of memory as mediation, not representation.

nostalgia advances structural film's critique of the spectacular and the pleasurable by refusing gratification through misalignment. Adorno's conception sees pleasure as depending on efficacy, recognition, and administered, deliberate resolution. Frampton withholds all three via a simple, singular, predetermined mechanism: descriptions of images past. His film interrupts the spectacle's demand for passivity by offering a form of spectatorship that is active yet unrewarded. The spectacle is channeled here, ironically, by forcing labor with no reward—a confrontation with the spectacle that, to Debord, fills daily life. What emerges as a result is a cinema that does not oppose spectacle by offering an alternative, rather it makes spectacle itself look fruitless.

Consequently, as these cases demonstrate, structural film produces a mode of spectatorship that is reflexive and effortful by refusing spectacle and pleasure, as they are generally circulated. The genre's demand for time and attention makes its aesthetic and formal strategies legible through deliberate refusal of the two modes of consumption. Thus, the structural filmmakers of the New York underground emerge as practitioners of withholding which exposes the mechanism through which mainstream cinema mobilizes gratification.

Structural Film in Historical Context

J. Hoberman situates the mid-1960s New York underground at a moment when alternative practices begin to harden into recognizable cultural forms. In *Everything Is Now*, he establishes 1964-65 as the period in which "rock 'n' roll becomes a Thing," a designation that refers to more than a musical shift (Hoberman 162). Rather, it cites a broader transformation of underground culture into a highly visible object of attention and circulation. Underground art and activity, here, become locatable and visible as a scene. The New Cinema Festival, Hoberman

notes, plays a decisive role in this shift by consolidating previously scattered practices and “transform[ing] Happenings into multimedia spectacles” (159). What had once been diffuse, provisional, and resistant to categorization increasingly assumes the form of an *eventized* practice.

Hoberman emphasizes festivals, venues, and crowds, further clarifying the pressures and representational tensions that structural film confronts. Underground cinema, in this conception, begins to lose its oppositional potency to mainstream culture and becomes increasingly organized through the pre-codified mechanisms of attention, novelty, and collective experience. Mixed-media programs, rock performances, and expanded cinema coverage all coalesce to produce an environment wherein stimulation and immediacy are expected and preferred. Even radical forms risk being spectacular. Hoberman’s historical narrative thus explains why, in the mid-to-late 1960s, escalation and provocation stopped being a viable critical approach. To intensify sensation within a condition of glut would be to reproduce the same economy of attraction governing other commercial culture and the underground’s emerging institutions.

Hoberman recounts the reception of Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1964) as emblematic of this tension. Viewers reportedly protested during the film’s premiere: “This is not entertainment! This movie doesn’t move!” (Hoberman 172). This reaction, while implying irritation and boredom, also points to a frustration with the fact that the film refused to behave as an event at all. This marks an incoherence within underground spectatorship, revealing a growing expectation that cinema, even that of the alternative kind, should reward attention with some kind of payoff. The complaint that *Empire*, or Warhol’s other early work, “doesn’t move” represents a demand for efficacy, in accordance with Adorno’s identification of pleasure as being administered by the culture industry as a form of control.

At this moment of departure, structural film's procedural drudgery and formal austerity becomes historically traceable. Hoberman's account suggests that by the time Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton began working, underground cinema had already entered a phase of consolidation in which novelty became an end in itself, not for ideological purposes but for purposes of circulation. Structural film's turn, then, toward durational longevity, stasis, and cognitive strain signals a refusal of this development at the level of spectatorship and experience. *Wavelength*, in isolating the spectator within a single operation, and *nostalgia*, in withdrawing the availability of meaning altogether, reject the underground's drift toward ease of consumption, and thus, spectacle.

In this regard, Snow and Frampton build on the underground's early critical impulse by denying it one of its newly developed pleasures, that of being events; of becoming "multimedia spectacles." Structural film withholds participation in a cultural economy that had begun to equate popularity with sober visibility, as if the spectacle offered unmediated representation. Anti-pleasure, at this historical juncture, is mobilized to calibrate a critique against conditions where even once oppositional forms risked becoming spectacular.

Conclusion

Overall, structural film's refusal and aversion to spectacle does not operate as opposition for its own sake, nor does it propose an alternative mode of cinematic consumption. Rather, it interjects at the spectatorial level by exposing the conditions under which pleasure had come to be a normalized, expected outcome of viewing. Consumption of film assumes organized attention and compliance, thus offering stability to the viewing experience. However, through

duration, misalignment, and formal austerity, films like *Wavelength* and *nostalgia* reappropriate this assumption by devaluing narrative, affect, interpretive clarity, and the time spent watching.

Therefore, structural film reframes spectatorship as labor by rendering visible the operations of spectacle and administered pleasure expressed by Guy Debord and Theodor W. Adorno. Snow's utilization of spectatorial exhaustion and time-stretching, and Frampton's systematic delaying of meaning result in sustained attention without payoff. Viewing, then, transforms into an effortful and self-conscious, participatory activity. The spectator is forced to confront the mechanisms through which pleasure, time, mediation, and spectacle are ordinarily circulated and consumed.

Within the merging of the New York underground and more mainstream forms, structural film's refusal offers a bold recentering of oppositional ideology. As Hoberman's account demonstrates, the underground's increasing institutionalization risked converting alternative practices into events governed by the appeal of novelty and attraction—the very same mechanisms that the mainstream uses to seduce. Structural film's response resembles a withdrawal from that economy of spectacle. Anti-pleasure, in this context, functions as a realignment of the critical stance of the underground, under a societal condition where even resistance comes under threat of easy consumption. So, as a whole, structural film redefines cinematic opposition through what it withholds, not through what it shows; and in that opposition, efficacy, immediacy, and the reward promised by the spectacle comes irrelevant and inert.

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