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The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film*

JONATHAN WALLEY

I

In 1976, the American Federation of Arts organized a major program of American avant-garde films made since the early 1940s. In his introduction to the program's catalog, Whitney film curator and series organizer John Hanhardt argued that the central preoccupation of filmmakers across the history of avant-garde cinema had been with the exploration of the material properties of the film medium itself: "This cinema subverts cinematic convention by exploring its medium and its properties and materials, and in the process creates its own history separate from that of the classical narrative cinema. It is filmmaking that creates itself out of its own experience."¹ Having traced the history of avant-garde film according to the modernist notion that an art form advances by reflexively scrutinizing the "properties and materials" of its medium, Hanhardt turned his attention to more recent developments. But these new developments were not entirely receptive to his modernist model. On the one hand, he argued, filmmakers were continuing to create works that engaged the physical materials of film—film strip, projector, camera, and screen—and the range of effects these made possible. On the other, this engagement appeared to be leading some filmmakers to create cinematic works challenging the material limits of the film medium as it had been defined for over eighty years.

For example, in Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), the focus of the viewer's attention was not an image projected onto a screen, but the projector beam itself, which over the course of thirty minutes grew from a thin line of light to a cone—a three-dimensional light sculpture with which the viewer could interact. Such a work not only eliminated one of the material limits of

* Thanks to Dean Otto, Program Manager of film and video at the Walker Art Center, for his assistance with the Paul Sharits image, and to Anthony McCall for graciously providing the images of his work. Special thanks to Malcolm Turvey for his suggestions and encouragement as I wrote and revised this essay, and to Jane M. Greene for her patient listening and constant support of my work, even when she has so much of her own.

1. John G. Hanhardt, "The Medium Viewed: American Avant-Garde Film," in *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Marilyn Singer (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1976), p. 22.

the film medium as traditionally defined—the flat support—but also acknowledged sculptural values. Hanhardt referenced other filmmakers who had rejected films, cameras, and projectors as necessary filmmaking tools. His remarks about these filmmakers reflect a difficulty in reconciling their work with the model of medium-specific, reflexive filmmaking that was at the center of his essay, and in fact at the center of much of the theory and historiography of avant-garde film for over four decades prior:

The avant-garde continues to explore the physical properties of film, and the nature of the perceptual transaction which takes place between viewer and film. It challenges theories of film which posit as its basis its photographic/illusionistic/representational properties. The traditional coordinates of film/screen/projection are being questioned by “artists who have denied the material and analytical basis of this judgment, not by ideology, but by materiality itself.”²

His attempt to understand these works in the context of the essentialist pre-occupation with what David James has called “pure film” places Hanhardt in the curious position of having to argue that they at once explore the materials of the film medium and reject them.³ It is a contradiction that his essay does not resolve.

Sheldon Renan, writing around the same time as Hanhardt, was less ambivalent about such works, which he referred to as “expanded cinema.” While medium-specificity was the key to Hanhardt’s discussion of experimental filmmaking of the sixties and seventies, for Renan it was the general tendency toward antiestablishment, consciousness-broadening ideals that characterized the period, not only for the avant-garde but for the culture at large. For Renan, the medium of film was not necessary to produce “the effect of film,” and the rejection of the medium by a new generation of experimental filmmakers was a liberating rebellion against the standardization and conformity represented by the traditional materials and processes of film.⁴ Renan heralded a new, radically heterogeneous cinema in the onslaught of new image-making technologies and practices—video and television, computer graphics, multimedia theater, light-shows, and so on. Ultimately, however, Renan returned to medium-specificity to explain expanded cinema, simply shifting the locus of the “essentially cinematic” from the film strip, camera, projector, and screen to *light* and *time*. Thus, any art work that traded in these elements—light and time—could be considered “cinema,” even if it was not film.⁵

2. Ibid., p. 44. The quote Hanhardt uses is from Maria Tucker and James Monte, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures and Materials* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), pp. 36–37.

3. David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 237–79.

4. Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967), p. 227.

5. Ibid., p. 257.

While both Hanhardt and Renan considered such works to be representative of an important new direction for avant-garde film, subsequent accounts ignored them almost entirely. After the mid-seventies, the camera-less, projector-less, film-less films of Renan's expanded cinema disappeared from the view of avant-garde film scholarship, as did any alternative model of avant-garde film they might have represented. What remains is a general agreement among scholars that avant-garde filmmakers of this period followed the trend within modernist art toward medium-specific purification: the reduction of the art object to the essential physical or material components of its medium. According to this interpretation, the landmark films of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, and many others are all reflexive examinations of the fundamental material parameters of the medium. For example, the putative lack of content in Warhol's long, static, silent films (*Empire* and *Sleep*, for instance) is thought to focus the spectator's attention on the unique physical characteristics of the medium itself: the grain of the image, the shape and two-dimensionality of the support, and so on. The flicker films of Sharits (*Ray Gun Virus*, *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, and *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*) and Conrad (*The Flicker*) are said to foreground the structure of the filmstrip and the mechanism of both camera and projector that make the illusion of movement possible in cinema. In each case, the illusionist powers of the medium compete with, or are eschewed in favor of, an anti-illusionist foregrounding of filmic materiality.

Long dominant in the theory, historiography, and practice of avant-garde film, medium-specificity has been a productive concept for both scholars and filmmakers. While many have seen in Structural film the culmination of medium-specificity (as Hanhardt did), it has been traced across the history of experimental film, in work by such diverse filmmakers as Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Andy Warhol, and in the theoretical writings of Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin, and, again, Eisenstein, Deren, and Brakhage. But a tradition that emphasizes the materials of film or the unique effects produced through those materials (editing, for example) is challenged by works that call themselves "films" but are not embodied in those materials. It is not surprising, then, that works not easily accommodated within this medium-specific tradition have largely been ignored.

My aim here is to provide a historical and conceptual account of the emergence of these works beginning in the late sixties. My contention is that such forgotten works can, and should, be incorporated into the avant-garde film canon, and I offer here a suggestion of how this might be done and an explanation of why it is important to do. I will refer to these kinds of works as "paracinema." This term seems to have been first coined by avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs (himself a key practitioner of this type of work) in the early seventies.⁶ The word has seen limited use (in fact, in contemporary film studies it

6. See Lindley Hanlon, "Kenneth Jacobs, Interviewed by Lindley Hanlon (Jerry Sims Present), April 9, 1974," *Film Culture* 67–69 (1979), pp. 80–81. It is also important to note that Jacobs was one

refers to an entirely different group of films—so-called “cult” or “trash” cinema), but I am reviving its original reference here because I believe it is the most apt expression for this kind of film practice.⁷

Paracinema identifies an array of phenomena that are considered “cinematic” but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined. That is, the film works I am addressing recognize cinematic properties outside the standard film apparatus, and therefore reject the medium-specific premise of most essentialist theory and practice that the art form of cinema is defined by the specific medium of film. Instead, paracinema is based on a different version of essentialism, which locates cinema’s essence elsewhere. In this brief account of paracinematic works, I will discuss two key factors in their appearance. A shift in the major reference points for many avant-garde filmmakers during the sixties and seventies is one factor, such as the trend toward increasingly ephemeral, “de-materialized” forms in avant-garde art. This trend provides a useful context in which to consider paracinematic works, as I shall discuss. But there are also precedents within film theory and the history of experimental film for a cinema beyond, even before, film. First, however, two examples of paracinema.

II

The first is the film and film-related work of Paul Sharits in the mid- and late seventies. During the sixties, Sharits had made a series of films constructed from individual monochromatic frames, which created a strobelike flickering effect in projection. The standard interpretation of these flicker films is that they examine and call the viewer’s attention to specifically filmic properties. This interpretation has been a dominant one in accounting not only of Sharits’s work, but of Structural film in general.

By the early seventies, however, Sharits was embarking on a series of works that expanded beyond the traditional components of film, eventually moving into film- and video-based “locational” or installation art by the mid-seventies. In these works, Sharits first altered, then rejected, the materials of the film medium, seeking to create alternative forms that could still be called cinematic. He

of the founders of the Collective for Living Cinema (see note 7); he continues to work in paracinematic forms and has taught a course entitled “Paracinema” at the State University of New York in Binghamton. See Phil Solomon, “XCXHXEXRXIXEXSX,” *Cinematograph* 5 (1993), pp. 54–57, Fred Worden, “Ken Jacobs’ Chronometer,” *Cinematograph* 5 (1993), pp. 52–53, Paul Arthur, “Creating Spectacle from Dross: The Chimeric Cinema of Ken Jacobs,” *Film Comment* 33, no. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 58–64, and Charles Bergengren, “Febrile Fiber Phantoms: Ken Jacobs at the C.I.A.,” *TDR* 41 (Spring 1997), pp. 72–85.

7. See *10 Years of Living Cinema*, ed. Vincent Grenier (New York: The Collective for Living Cinema, 1982). In the program notes for the Collective’s ten-year retrospective, the term “paracinema” is applied to, among other works, McCall’s *Line Describing a Cone*, Al Wong’s *Shadow and Chair*, and Jacobs’s *Nervous System* works.

began by committing a kind of violence against the film projector, showing several of his earlier flicker films using a projector from which he had removed the shutter-blade and registration pin. The result was that the film, in projection, was no longer experienced as a series of discrete frames bounded by the movement of the shutter blade and registration pin, but a blur of colors and shapes opposite to the uniquely filmic flicker he had worked with earlier. This initial gesture of disintegrating the physical medium, literally piece by piece, was the first step in a larger process of locating the cinematic outside of film. Sharits spoke to this process in a 1972 essay:

It may be that by “limiting” oneself to a passionate definition of an elemental, primary cinema, one may find it necessary to construct systems involving no projector at all or more than one projector and more than one flat screen, and more than one volumetric space between them. A focused film frame is not a “limit.”⁸

8. Paul Sharits, “From ‘Words Per Page,’” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987), p. 263.



Paul Sharits. Installation view, SYNCHRONOUSOUNDTRACKS. Walker Art Center, 1974. Photo courtesy Walker Art Center.

By putting “limit” and “limiting” in scare quotes, Sharits is signaling that the search for the essence of cinema—for an “elemental, primary cinema”—is not necessarily a matter of limiting or reducing cinema to the materials of the film medium as traditionally defined. After many years of making films that emphasized their literal material, Sharits was recognizing that material’s contingency.

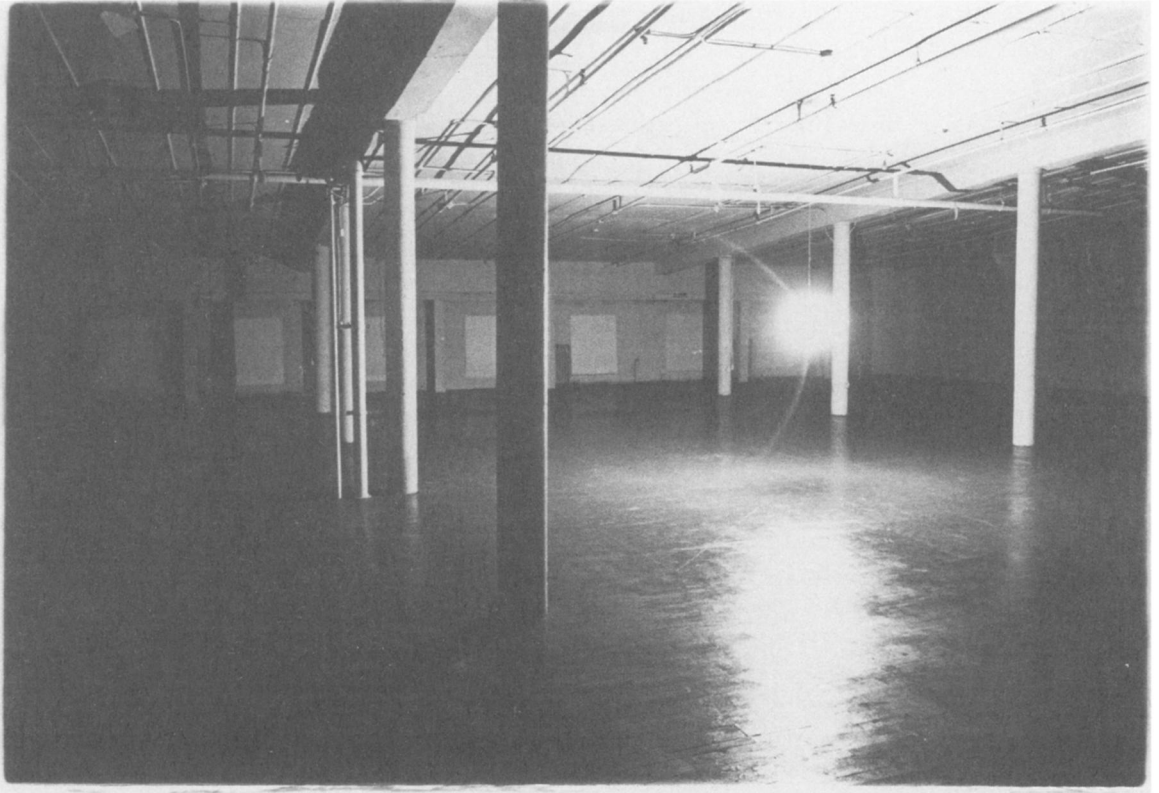
A second and even more radical example is Anthony McCall’s 1975 piece *Long Film for Ambient Light*. McCall’s earlier film, *Line Describing a Cone*, had already begun to eliminate certain physical properties of film. With *Long Film for Ambient Light*, this process of elimination, similar to Sharits’s dismantling project, reached a new level. The film employed no camera, film strip, projector, or screen, taking instead space, light, and duration as its parameters. The work consisted of an empty Manhattan loft, its windows covered with diffusion paper, lit in the evening by a single bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. It lasted for twenty-four hours, during which time spectators could come and go as they pleased, moving about the space at will.

In his program notes for the film, McCall, like Sheldon Renan, identifies light and time as the fundamentals of cinema, putting his work in line with the general emphasis on ephemeral qualities in avant-garde art of the period, particularly duration, which was perhaps the defining obsession of sixties and seventies avant-gardists. Earlier in the same text, McCall implies a relationship between his “film” and the preoccupation with literal space and time that was a feature of Minimalist painting and sculpture, noting the importance of duration even in these so-called “static” art forms. The division, he argues, between object and experience in art criticism is absurd. “Everything that occurs, including the (electrochemical) process of thinking, occurs in time,” he writes.⁹ McCall’s version of cinematic essentialism, a dematerialized essentialism that focuses on less concrete, tangible properties, has the effect of opening up a cinematic work to elements, effects, and values associated with other art forms, placing it in the family of performance-based, participatory forms that were so prevalent during this period.

At the same time, however, it is clear from this text, entitled “Notes in Duration,” that *Long Film for Ambient Light* was not merely the manifestation within avant-garde film of concerns from the other arts, but a response specifically to the trend of medium-specific essentialism in film theory and avant-garde practice. Again, this response was premised on a recognition that the medium of film was only one possible form of the art of cinema.

I am now interested in reducing the “performance” aspect, in order to examine certain other fundamentals, *viz.*, temporality, light. I am presently assuming that it is possible to do this without using the customary photochemical and electro-mechanical processes (which have the

9. Anthony McCall, “Two Statements,” in *The Avant-Garde Film*, p. 252.



*Anthony McCall. Long Film for Ambient Light.
Installation view, 3 A.M., June 19, 1975, at the Idea
Warehouse, New York. Photo © Anthony McCall, 1975.*

disadvantage of being expensive, i.e., slow). I am aware of the dangers of back-tracking, that behind every “first principle” lurks another, and I do not rule out the possibility of continuing to make “films.” However, for the time being I intend to concentrate less on the physical process of production and more on the presuppositions behind film as an art activity.¹⁰

McCall’s suggestion that he might continue to make “films” (in scare quotes) after concentrating on “the presuppositions behind film as an art activity” suggests that a return to traditional filmmaking would have to be informed by an understanding of cinema’s conceptual dimensions, wherein cinema is conceived of as not necessarily embodied in a specific medium. Clearly, *Long Film for Ambient Light* stands in opposition to a practice that seeks to stake out cinema’s unique territory in the materials that constitute the medium of film.

10. Ibid., pp. 253–54.

III

As for theoretical precedents for paracinema, it is important to recognize that in opposition to the long-standing tradition of film theorizing that locates the essence of cinema within the physical materials of film, there is a counter-tradition that has sought that essence in more ephemeral phenomena. Two major examples of this kind of theorizing can be found in Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage, and André Bazin's "myth of total cinema."

For Eisenstein, montage was the central, defining property of cinema, and he elaborated his conception of this property through his films and extensive theoretical writings throughout the twenties and thirties. But while montage was for Eisenstein the essence of cinema, it was by no means limited to the medium of film. Rather, it was a basic cultural principle that could be found everywhere outside film. In a sense, then, film was only the most recent artistic embodiment of the principle of montage.

There are numerous instances of this idea in Eisenstein's writings; perhaps the clearest expression of it occurs in his essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in which he draws an analogy between montage and Japanese pictographic writing. In an afterward to a 1929 Soviet publication on Japanese cinema, where this essay first appeared, Eisenstein points to montage, the essence of cinema, occurring "outside the Japanese cinema," in Japanese culture itself: "Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage. The Japanese cinema is excellently equipped with corporations, actors, and stories. But the Japanese cinema is completely unaware of montage. Nevertheless the principle of montage can be identified as the basic element of Japanese representational culture."¹¹ Eisenstein's argument here is that in Japanese writing, two or more adjacent symbols produce through their combination—or in Eisenstein's words their "collision"—a meaning not inherent in either one of these symbols. Thus, the symbol for "eye" placed next to the symbol for "water" produces the more abstract meaning "to weep." This is equivalent to Eisenstein's associational montage, in which two adjacent shots produce through their juxtaposition an abstract meaning not inherent in either one of them.

In other essays, Eisenstein argues that montage can be found not only in cultural forms like Japanese pictographic writing, but in natural phenomena such as human perception:

This [associational montage] is not in the least a circumstance peculiar to the cinema, but is a phenomenon invariably met with in all cases where we have to deal with juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomena, two objects. We are accustomed to make, almost automatically, a definite

11. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), p. 28.

and obvious deductive generalization when any separate objects are placed before us side by side.¹²

Eisenstein's claims about the ubiquity of the principle of montage suggest that the medium of film embodies something that existed before film had been invented, and that the invention of film "as we know it," so to speak, *is* the culmination of a long-standing endeavor to find an art form that exemplifies this principle. The idea of cinema, then, is not a function of the materials of film, but the other way around—the materials of film are a function of the idea of cinema. If Eisenstein's essays can be thought of as working out an ontology of cinema, then a major dimension of this project is the affinity between certain properties of cinema, and broad cultural and natural phenomena that predate the invention of film.

This teleological conception of film history can also be found in the writings of one of film theory's great essentialists, André Bazin. Bazin's belief in cinema's essentially photographic nature must be seen in light of a broader historical view he advances in his essay "The Myth of Total Cinema." Here Bazin argues that cinema was a fantasy more or less fully developed in the cultural imagination before the invention of even the most rudimentary motion toys like the phenakistoscope. Cinema existed before the invention and combination of the technological machines and chemical and optical processes that constituted the film medium, and any history of cinema that does not acknowledge this is faulty: "Any account of the cinema that was drawn merely from the technical inventions that made it possible would be a poor one indeed," he writes, and later in the same essay, "It would be a reversal then of the concrete order of causality, at least psychologically, to place the scientific discoveries or the industrial techniques that have loomed so large in its development at the source of the cinema's invention."¹³ Rather, the technological history of cinema's invention is the history of a long endeavor to realize the myth of a "total cinema," a cinema that provides "an integral realism, a re-creation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."¹⁴ Film is a fulfillment of this desire, though an imperfect and temporary one, for at the time Bazin was writing film had not yet fully acquired, according to him, the technical means to provide this "integral realism," this total cinema. Hence Bazin's assertion, "the cinema has not yet been invented!"¹⁵ Like Eisenstein's, Bazin's ontology of cinema is not simply a matter of film's physical qualities; cinema is as much a conceptual phenomenon—a dream, a fantasy—as it is a tangible medium. In short, it is an idea that has temporarily taken the form of certain materials.

12. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947), p. 4.

13. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 18, 21–22.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

15. *Ibid.*

Returning to the period with which I began this paper, a similar reference to a nonfilmic cinema appears in the writings of Hollis Frampton. In his production notes for the landmark Structural film *Zorns Lemma* (1970), Frampton uses the term “paracinematic” to describe objects or events that appear in that film. In *Zorns Lemma*, a series of images of the letters of the alphabet are systematically replaced by images of objects or events. In considering his rationale for choosing replacement images, Frampton employs the notion of the paracinematic, claiming, “To my mind, any phenomenon is para-cinematic if it shares one element with cinema, e.g. modularity with respect to space or time.”¹⁶ This definition of the paracinematic echoes Eisenstein’s montage/ideogram analogy. In each case there is the suggestion that cinematic qualities can be observed in nonfilmic objects and events.

IV

I have outlined, albeit schematically, an alternative theoretical tradition to the medium-specific one that has dominated film theory. The radically dematerialized paracinematic works of the sixties and seventies represent the most fully developed artistic equivalent to this alternative theoretical tradition. While it is outside the scope of this essay, it is important to at least briefly note the work of László Moholy-Nagy as a major historical precedent to the dematerialized film works I have already discussed. In the fascinating body of theoretical writing he produced in the twenties and thirties, Moholy-Nagy espoused a medium-less art practice based on the manipulation and display of light, which he saw as an element that unified painting, sculpture, and film. Light, and the modulation of light over time, Moholy-Nagy argues, should be the central concern of modern filmmakers, and should not be limited to the context of the traditionally defined film medium:

... in the film of the future we shall have constant change in the speed and intensity of light; space in motion constantly varied through the medium of light refracted from efflorescent reflectors; flashes of light and black-outs; chiaroscuro, distance and proximity of light; ultra-violet rays, infra-red penetration of darkness rendered visible—a wealth of undreamed of optical experiences that will be profoundly stirring to our emotions.¹⁷

It was not until the sixties and seventies, however, that paracinema emerged so forcefully. In the remainder of this paper, I speculate as to why this happened, and

16. Quoted in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 396.

17. László Moholy-Nagy, “From Pigment to Light,” in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), p. 34.

how the theories and practices of paracinema extended the tradition exemplified in the writings of Eisenstein and Bazin that I have just discussed.

The most obvious historical reference that has been hovering in the background of my discussion of paracinema is Conceptual art. If paracinematic works take “cinema” as a concept, or generative idea (Sharits’s “primary, elemental cinema” for instance), and if such works challenge the medium-specificity of Structural film, then Conceptual art would seem to provide a useful point of comparison. Following the initial gesture of the Minimalists, Conceptual art radically deemphasized the importance of the medium—of any material—in artmaking. This move toward what Lucy Lippard and John Chandler called “dematerialization” is typically understood as a reaction against the prescriptive modernist purism of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, on the one hand, and the commodification of the art object on the other.¹⁸ Conceptual art rejected the medium-specific notion of many modernist critics that an art form is defined by the materials of its medium, refusing to aspire to the condition of autonomy held in such high esteem by those critics and attained, according to them, by way of the practice of jettisoning any element not unique to a medium (e.g., narrative representation in painting). At the same time, Conceptual art attempted to subvert the function of art objects within capitalism, precisely by not being objects. Heralding this potential of Conceptual art, Lippard wrote:

It seemed in 1969 . . . that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for a work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market orientation.¹⁹

It would be difficult to compare paracinema and Conceptual art in terms of commodification, for within the context of avant-garde filmmaking there was no equivalent to the commodification of the art object that artists working within the traditions of painting and sculpture faced in the sixties and seventies. That is, there was little or no capitalist co-optation of avant-garde film for filmmakers to subvert. Though avant-garde film became a part of museum and gallery culture in the sixties, and found support in the pages of *Artforum* and from the same institutions that supported the other arts, there were factors unique to the medium that ultimately prevented it from becoming commodified

18. John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, “The Dematerialization of Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

19. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. xxi.

to the same extent as painting or sculpture. David James sums this situation up succinctly:

Though Structural film was an avant-garde art practice taking place within the parameters of the art world, it was unable to achieve the centrally important function of art in capitalist society: the capacity for capital investment. Massive public indifference to it, its inaccessibility to all but those of the keenest sensibility, and finally its actual rather than merely ostensible inability to be incorporated excluded it from the blue-chip functions, the mix of real estate and glamour, that floated the art world. . . . Film's inability to produce a readily marketable object, together with the mechanical reproducibility of its texts, set very narrow limits to the possibility of Structural film's being turned into a commodity.²⁰

But while paracinema differs from Conceptual art in that it cannot be construed as a challenge to the commodification of avant-garde film (since there was no such commodification), the two are similar insofar as they reconsider the assumptions about artistic media on which much modernist theory and practice was based. Specifically, paracinema challenges a potentially prescriptive modernist purism in film theory and practice equivalent to the one challenged by Conceptual art in painting and sculpture, by questioning the nature of the film medium and its value for continued cinematic practice. Thus, Conceptual art surely provided many filmmakers with a reference for paracinema (and so it provides some of the vocabulary with which we can talk about paracinema).

The paracinematic works of this period are premised on the *historicized* conception of the medium of film we find in the writings of Eisenstein and Bazin—namely, that the film medium (again, “as we know it”) is not a timeless absolute but a cluster of historically contingent materials that happens to be, for the time being at least, the best means for creating cinema. Along with Conceptual art, this historicization of the medium of film is in line with a broad shift in the preoccupations of the avant-garde that was under way by the late sixties, and this shift played a role in many filmmakers' reconsideration of the essentialist dictates of modernism in the arts. Writing in 1985 about the film theory of Hollis Frampton, Noël Carroll summarized the shift this way:

It seems to me that over the past twenty-five years there has been a shift from essentialism as the basic form of analysis and, at times, of commendation in film theory and art criticism to an emphasis on history as the privileged discursive framework. . . . By the eighties . . . faith in essentialism has given way to a preference for history—especially for social and institutional history—as the accepted means for understanding film and the arts. Semiotics, genealogy, reception theory, all putatively

20. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, pp. 273–74.

sensitive to historical variability, have become favored tools of artworld theorizing, while, in film studies, these developments are also accompanied by the rise of an intensive interest in historiography.²¹

The sixties and seventies can thus be seen as a transitional period in the avant-garde wherein the reigning essentialist paradigm and the emerging historical one faced each another, the latter challenging the former.

In the context of avant-garde film, this shift happened partly in response to the unique situation that the medium faced beginning in the sixties. At that time, a great number of artists from other media turned their attention to filmmaking, some simply dabbling in film, others replacing their earlier artistic careers and becoming full-time filmmakers. Not since the initial appearance of avant-garde cinema in 1920s Europe had film figured so importantly in the activities of the avant-garde. The filmmakers most commonly connected to Structural film—Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, and Hollis Frampton—all came to film from other art forms. At the same time, the artists associated with Fluxus (including Sharits and George Landow) produced a series of quasi-structural films. Scores of painters, sculptors, and performers made films as well, including Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer. The avant-garde's predilection for film was such that the medium became, in the words of Bruce Jenkins, "a sort of lingua franca for the avant-garde."²² And what the otherwise quite heterogeneous films of these artists-turned-filmmakers had in common was that they all tested, explored, and otherwise experimented with this language, putting the medium through its paces, so to speak. This could take the form of the radically reductive, "one idea/one film" approach of the Fluxus filmmakers, or the more complicated reflexive meditations on film exemplified by such "late" Structural films as Snow's *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974) or Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*.

The intense scrutiny that film underwent at the hands of the avant-garde suggests an attempt to return to a sort of "film degree zero" or "pure film." But inevitably this project reached a crisis point—a moment when the rigorous testing of film's limits and possibilities in Structural film seemed to have exhausted itself. Historians have typically argued that the result was the transition from Structural film to what has been called the "New Talkie" or "New Narrative" film.²³ These new forms of avant-garde film rejected, or at least rethought, the medium-specific

21. Noël Carroll, "A Brief Comment on Frampton's Notion of Metahistory," in Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 313.

22. In *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), p. 202.

23. See Carroll, "Film in the Age of Postmodernism," in Carroll, *Interpreting the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and "The New Talkies: A Special Issue," *October* 10 (Summer 1981).

essentialism of Structural film. Among other things, they reintroduced narrative, barred from “good filmmaking” by certain types of medium-specific film theory and practice.

But the New Talkie was just one among several alternatives to Structural film that emerged in the seventies. Paracinema, I think, was another, introducing a historical perspective on what Carroll has called the “pure artistic, formal, and perceptual research” of Structural film, thereby disrupting the faith in the physical materials of the medium that was basis for such films.²⁴ Paracinema questions the historical necessity of the film medium and insists instead on its contingency. Like the theories of Eisenstein and Bazin, it looks for the essence of cinema in the more ephemeral, conceptual realm rather than the material one.

Here can be seen the shift from essentialism to history that Carroll has argued signaled a major transition in the interests of the avant-garde. Within Structural film, this shift manifested itself in the conscious effort by several filmmakers to make “first films” or to remake film history systematically, following what David James has called “an atomized model of the entire cinematic process.”²⁵ Frampton’s notion of the “metahistory of film” is an example, as it called for filmmakers working in the present to return to film’s history and, working by hindsight as it were, rebuild it according to an essentialist model of what film history *should* have been. According to Carroll, Frampton’s turn toward film history revealed the filmmaker’s anxiety about the possibility of continuing to make films in light of achieving “pure film” or “film degree zero” in the era of Structural film.²⁶ Frampton’s historical turn allowed him to find new cinematic concerns to explore—ideas that had emerged across the history of film but which had not been investigated rigorously.

Frampton’s quandary, and his solution, comprise another important point of reference for paracinema, in that paracinema also represents an attempt by artists to continue to work within the context of their chosen medium but to escape the limits of the “pure film.” If Structural film can be thought of as creating “an atomized model of the entire cinematic process,” then paracinema takes the next logical step, creating an atomized model of the entire concept of cinema. That is, paracinema provides a way for avant-garde artists to continue to make “films” by allowing them to access the conceptual dimensions of cinema, whatever each artist thought those might be, without limiting them to the medium of film—without forcing filmmakers to merely reiterate the materials of film again and again, which was one of the charges against the second generation of Structural films made in the mid-seventies.

Film-based performance offers an example of this benefit of paracinema. Several artists turned the moment of projection/exhibition into a live performance,

24. Carroll, “Moving and Moving: From Minimalism to Lives of Performers,” *Millennium Film Journal* 35/36 (Fall 2000), p. 3.

25. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 243.

26. Carroll, “A Brief Comment on Frampton’s Notion of Metahistory,” pp. 315–16.

typically featuring the interaction of the artist with projected light, the screen, or film itself. In his American Federation of Arts essay, Hanhardt describes a series of film-related performances by Tony Conrad, in which the Minimalist composer-turned-filmmaker threw film onto a screen after cooking it in front of the audience. “Conrad’s performance/presentation,” Hanhardt writes, “orchestrated an awareness of what film is—a celluloid material—by creating a series of metaphors for the production and projection of film.”²⁷ While Hanhardt’s interpretation once again relies on medium-specific essentialism, it is nevertheless suggestive of paracinema’s connection to Conceptual art. Conrad’s play on words (throwing film as a form of “projection”) reveals how film in its standard form could provide the ground for a conceptual piece that referenced that form, but from a distance, that is, in a dematerialized state. Conrad’s performances featured film production, but without camera, chemicals, or editing equipment. They ended with the “projection” of the film onto the screen, but without a projector. Film in its traditional, materialized form suggested the shape of these and other paracinematic performances, but did not provide the materials (or at least not all of them).

A similar relationship between traditional medium and dematerialized work can be found in Conceptual art. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood have argued that while Conceptual art may have rejected painting and sculpture as mediums, it nonetheless continued to reference them as concepts. If painting, for instance, was no longer a viable medium for a Conceptual artist, it might still be taken as a generative idea for a different type of art work.²⁸ Lippard points to a similar instance of such thinking, quoting Joseph Beuys: “For me the formation of the thought is already sculpture.”²⁹ For Lippard, this seems to have been one of Conceptual art’s weaknesses: “However rebellious the escape attempts [of Conceptual artists], most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor aesthetic ties to the art worlds were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).”³⁰ But if Conceptual art was never able to fully shake off the art market, perhaps it was because it needed a sense of the artistic tradition that a medium represents, even if it rejected the physical matter of which each medium is made.

In a recent essay on the work of James Coleman, Rosalind Krauss argues that the importance of a medium throughout art history is precisely that it provided this tradition: “For centuries it was only within and against the tradition encoded by a medium that innovation could be measured, just as it was in relation to its reservoir of meanings that new ranges of feelings could be tested.”³¹ Krauss claims

27. Hanhardt, “The Medium Viewed: The American Avant-Garde Film,” p. 44.

28. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, “Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered,” in Paul Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with Open University, 1993), pp. 201–02.

29. Lippard, *Six Years*, p. xvii.

30. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

31. Rosalind Krauss, “. . . And Then Turn Away?’ An Essay on James Coleman,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997), p. 5. I am grateful to Malcolm Turvey for recommending this essay as a resource for thinking about paracinema.

that the “post-medium age” ushered in by Minimalism and Conceptual art left artists without a means to “test the meaningfulness of forms.” In order to continue making art, the artist in the post-medium age has two options, according to Krauss: a return to traditional media like painting and sculpture, or the invention of a new medium, something she believes Coleman has done.

I think paracinema represented a third option for artists working at a moment when the notion of a medium was under siege. By seeking out cinematic qualities or effects in nonfilmic materials, and often fleeting or ephemeral ones like light and time, paracinema opened up a much more heterogeneous range of cinematic practices than what the film medium as we know it could offer. It allowed artists to work within the aesthetic tradition of film in a form (or forms) fluid enough to incorporate the meanings and effects of other media (e.g., the “sculptural” quality of the light cone in McCall’s *Line Describing a Cone*). Studying paracinema, then, is valuable not merely because it expands the range of works in an avant-garde film canon long dominated by Structural film and the rhetoric of medium-specific essentialism that heralds it, but because it forces us to reconsider the role of the film medium, and mediums in general, during a key moment in the history of the avant-garde. Thus I offer the “idea of cinema,” in opposition to the material of film, as a suggestive concept for further research in avant-garde film studies.