

Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen

INSIDE THE FRAME OF STRUCTURAL FILM

By EDWARD BACAL

Forty years since its heyday, the legacy of structural film remains visible in the work of contemporary artists and filmmakers Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen. Given the rich set of aesthetic terms this avant-garde film movement has provided, these artist/filmmakers demonstrate renewed iterations of structural film's formal investigations into the ontology of the filmic medium—the kind initially exemplified by landmark works like Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970). Beyond echoing the movement's late-modernist experiments with the specificity of the filmic image and the viewer's conscious perception of it, Lockhart and McQueen place new critical attention on what forms these initial preoccupations have generated. Hence, we find them borrowing structural film's static shots, long takes, and self-reflexive camera movements in order to re-imagine films like *Wavelength* and *Serene Velocity*; in doing so, they renegotiate the relation between these formal strategies and narrative and content—two of structural film's main objects of contention. Furthermore, in redefining what these filmic forms can do, Lockhart and McQueen unearth an affective political dimension that rests latent in structural film's formal austerity. With works such as Lockhart's *Lunch Break* (2008), a portrait of contemporary American labour within the intimate interiors of a Maine shipyard, and McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), which recounts IRA martyr Bobby Sands' 1981 prison hunger strike, the political potential of the structural-filmic image finds rich expression. In touching upon these figures and





Wavelength

these works, I hereby aim to uncover what they may tell us about the relation between the formal and critical functions of the structural-filmic image in its renewed guise.

Structural Film, Condensed

Looking back to the avant-garde film culture centred in and around New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s, we find structural film emerging from an interest in the material and perceptual properties of film in and of itself. Like contemporaneous developments in art (namely minimalism), an overarching emphasis on the intrinsic properties of a medium's given form, combined with a newfound investment in the phenomenological conditions such properties entail, underlie the discourse of structural film. Just as minimalist sculptors created works that reflect how sculptural forms exist objectively in space and time, experimental filmmakers created works that address film's specific function in the spatio-temporal field it shares with its viewers. From the material properties of celluloid and light through to the experiential conditions intrinsic to the film-viewing experience, the formal and perceptual nature of cinema figures as structural film's subject and object alike. In turn, the substance of a given film becomes synonymous with its *structure*: the internal "shape" of the image and the underlying filmmaking processes that determine it. Thus, by foregrounding and communicating its own formal structure in tandem with the viewing experience that structure engenders, and by exploring the ontology and phenomenology of the filmic medium together, structural film sought to reflect, *through* film, the viewer's conscious experience of film.

Formally, we can loosely identify structural film's diverse practitioners (including, most prominently, Snow, Gehr, Hollis

Frampton, Paul Sharits, George Landow, Jonas Mekas, Joyce Wieland, George Maciunas, Peter Kubelka, and others) according to the four criteria outlined by the movement's chief theoretician, P. Adams Sitney. According to Sitney, the use of a fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen set the terms for categorizing structural film;¹ such traits, however, are rarely seen together, nor do they exhaust what may operate as a structural film. What unites these tendencies, then, is the overarching way that with these techniques "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified," Sitney writes, for "it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film."² In other words, as R. Bruce Elder notes, "a structural film is a film whose outline form either is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting and editing."³ Therefore, the film's shape becomes a central determining factor in its function, such that form is brought to a point of self-reflexivity at which the film's internal structure is revealed. Meanwhile, content is minimal to the extent that it remains subsidiary to this structural outline.⁴ Viewing a structural film hence becomes an act of perceptive apprehension: divorced from symbolic or narrative content, "the pleasure we take in watching a structural film depends in part on discovering the preconceived schema that determines the variations in the film."⁵

In this respect, structural film embodies a marked turn from the precedent tradition in American avant-garde cinema (that of filmmakers like Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage, who in their own ways were concerned with evoking subjective psychological states⁶) in that it moves away from the representation of subjective phenomena to the presentation of the objective

image. For example, this distinction is best exemplified by the foremost proto-structural filmmaker, Andy Warhol, whose *Sleep* (1963), quite simply a five and a half hour film of a man sleeping, satirically shifts the camera's focus from the representation of interior dream-states to the exterior reality of the dreamer (and further, we can claim, to the real conscious mind of the viewer). No less, by self-consciously distending duration while emptying the image of content—thereby challenging the viewer's ability to pay attention throughout—films like *Sleep* or *Empire* (1964), an eight hour long static shot of the Empire State building, call to the fore both the nature of the film and the corresponding act of viewing it: in apprehending the film in and of itself—that is, a film which refuses to represent anything other than itself, whether through metaphor or symbolic editing—the viewer becomes conscious of herself viewing it (especially when it is as deliberately boring as *Empire*). In turn, Warhol began to uncover the intrinsic elements of film-qua-film, such that he, having set out to blatantly parody avant-garde film conventions, inadvertently laid much of the foundation for structural film's analytic experiments.

If, as Sitney thus notes, structural film “is an attempt to answer Warhol's attack by converting his tactics into the tropes of the response,”⁷ Michael Snow's *Wavelength* presents perhaps the strongest reply. In short, *Wavelength* consists of a fixed camera that, over forty-five minutes, zooms-in through the space of a loft toward a photograph of the ocean placed on the wall (additionally, various on- and off-screen activity, periodical flares of light, and a sine tone whose pitch elevates in *glissando* also feature). Given Snow's intention to “make a definitive statement of pure Film space and time”,⁸ *Wavelength* articulates its filmic structure by way of a meditation on consciousness—that is, on the self-aware perception of oneself situated in real space and time. As time progresses and the camera's constant zoom shrinks the field of vision (i.e. as it pushes the physical space of the loft and the activity within it out of the frame) the film projects the viewer through the immediate interior setting into the limitless intra-pictorial space of the photograph/ocean—the filmic image beyond the filmic image. Here, as the image's position within filmic space shifts, we experience this transition as a spatio-temporally situated movement of consciousness, or what Annette Michelson identifies via Edmund Husserl as a change in our “horizon of expectation”.⁹ This is to say, *Wavelength* forwards a phenomenology of conscious experience by offering the viewer an awareness of her present situation within a temporal horizon that spans from memory to anticipation (from that which we can no longer see to that which we are heading towards). Meanwhile, in moving from one illusory space to another (from the cinematic image to the smaller yet infinitely larger image of the photograph/ocean) the viewer is transported through the visual space of the screen to the conceptual space of the mind. In other words, as the photograph/ocean overtakes the space of the loft from the inside-out, it comes to serve as *Wavelength*'s ultimate pictorial space, bringing the film to its “metaphysical culmination” at which it breaks through the photograph's surface.¹⁰ Thus, through what Snow calls a “balancing of ‘illusion’ and ‘fact’”,¹¹ *Wavelength* surveys the structures of cinematic space and time through a gesture that self-consciously extends beyond the image, taking residence in the viewer's perception of the quasi-transcendental zoom. As such, the film adopts the processes of consciousness and its projection through time and space as its subject and object, presenting the cognitive apprehension

of the film as both its form and content.

Similarly, Gehr's *Serene Velocity* plays on the gradual movement of the camera's perspective over time, but as processed through a visceral fluttering of the image. Throughout its twenty-three minutes, *Serene Velocity* depicts a single institutional hallway that appears from rapidly alternating standpoints. By adjusting the depth of the camera's zoom in inversely proportionate and increasingly distant measures, Gehr presents the hallway fluctuating between views of increasing nearness and farness, the discrepancy of which shifts from being imperceptible to strongly polarized. Meanwhile, by affording each shot only four frames (which equates to a quarter of a second in time) the film assumes a stroboscopic intensity that is alternately meditative and violent. Like *Wavelength*, *Serene Velocity* articulates filmic space vis-à-vis the passage of time, setting the limits of the frame in accordance with its processual motion (i.e. we experience the passage of time in relation to our perception of filmic space). As such, the film reflects its inbuilt shape, asserting its systematic organization of perspectives which, in effect, create a composition that is grid-like both graphically (given the hallway's significant appearance as a seemingly endless set of serially repeated squares) and temporally.¹² Hence, as Elder describes: “*Serene Velocity* uses a deductive structure that arises from the edges of the frame being reflected again and again in an architectural form that includes the perspectival repetition of that form through depth... Thus, the shape of the film is ‘implied’ in the corridor's structure: there is a deductive relation between the depicted form in the image and the literal shape of the film.”¹³ Indeed, the film functions like two opposed mirrors that serially echo the frame of both the hallway and the image, evoking the grid-like figure that Gehr aligns with the film's mathematically ordered temporal structure. The overlapping matrices of these temporal and perspectival frames are, in other words, analogous in their ordering of filmic space and time, together working to construct and assert the film's intrinsic structure.

Frames and Factories: Sharon Lockhart¹⁴

Fast-forwarding some decades, the work of Los Angeles-based artist Sharon Lockhart represents a close and sustained engagement with the aesthetics of structural film. In short, her film-based practice began in the late 1990s, growing out of her work in photography. In both media (and certainly, her projects regularly use both in conjunction) Lockhart focusses a critical gaze upon the aesthetics and functions of anthropological images and of documented performance, therein examining the ways such imagery frames its subjects. For example, her photographic series have included images of museum workers situated within their respective settings (i.e. “framed” within the museum) and portraits of various families in rural Brazil (each family being allowed to not only arrange themselves as they please, but, after referencing an accompanying polaroid, to further revise their arrangement and poses for subsequent takes). These projects reveal Lockhart's overarching interest in the relation between photo-based documentation and its subjects; meanwhile, by drawing on the anthropological agency of the image—that is, the image's capacity to not only document extant social relations but to engender new ones between the photograph, photographer, and photographed—she plays with the conventions by which such “objective” images function. As such, Lockhart confronts the ways individuals appear—if not perform—for the camera as social subjects, thereby questioning the established anthropological gaze by which such documen-



Goshogaoka



Lunch Break



Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon

tation retrospectively fashions subjectivities. It is in this sense that her images of Brazilian families, for example, renegotiate these power-relations between photographer, photographed, and photograph by affording the families a measure of self-determination that aims to re-situate anthropological knowledge in dialogical terms.

Following this logic, Lockhart's work in film moves from the self-consciously "straight" photography of anthropological convention to an analogously straight cinema that finds its influence in structural film as much as in the minimalist dance of Yvonne Rainer and the anthropological *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch.¹⁵ For instance, consider *Goshogaoka* (1997), a film composed of six ten-minute segments in which the camera, which throughout remains fixed in the centre of a high school gymnasium, looks upon a Japanese girls basketball team doing warm-up drills. Given the simplicity of the camera's extended stillness, the film finds its power in the serialized repetition of sounds and body movements it witnesses, which respectively coalesce into arrangements that come to resemble the music of minimalist composers like Philip Glass and the experimental dance of Rainer. But beyond simply documenting this phenomena (which is fascinating to observe as something equally alien and mundane) the film posits an all the more interesting reflection on the (unacknowledged) presence of not only the camera in the gym, but also the *frame* in the film itself: before the team periodically returns to the middle of the court and sets into an ordered grid that, placed directly in the camera's line of sight, invokes the rationalizing and "objective" vision of linear perspective, the girls run around the gym in alternate exercises that span the entire floor. As individuals run from side to side,

distant bodies move through the length of the frame while close-up torsos momentarily flash across it, such that the film alternates between the direct sight of a surveying gaze and the relatively chaotic movement that occurs in, out, and around its liminal limits of sight.¹⁶ In passing through the camera's field of vision the girls articulate the film's finite pictorial space, invoking the constitutive outside that the frame (indeed, that *any* frame) necessarily excludes in order to function *as* a frame. In turn, the film gestures toward the conceptual space beyond the frame, which is made accessible to us only by the sounds that, transferring between the on- and off- screen, imply that this imaginary space does exist and is contiguous with the film's pictorial space. In this capacity, Lockhart's debt to structural film is evident in her tracing of the filmic frame vis-à-vis the borders it draws between the real/visible and the virtual/imaginary of filmic space. Whether focussing on a certain set of cultural rituals or the hypnotic aesthetic they produce, her films consider the cinematic dimension of a kind of anthropological imagination—one produced by what is, as much as what is not, in frame.

While this impulse runs through Lockhart's oeuvre, it finds its sharpest expression in her engagement with images of labour. Evident in photographic series like *Lunch Break Installation...* (2003),¹⁷ which concentrates on the typically unseen labour activity that permeates museums, Lockhart extends her project of framing to the worker subjectivities that escape the field of vision. Depicting workers installing a Duane Hanson installation at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, these images represent, on one hand, the institutional frames that contain cultural and artistic value and, on the other, the coterminous architectural frames wherein the labour that underlies these

sites of cultural production remains obscure. Thus, as art handlers camouflage into Duane Hanson's hyper-realistic tableau of construction workers, *Lunch Break Installation* overlays the representation and reality of everyday physical work so as to expose the differential value of art and labour within the gallery. Indeed, as viewers inevitably do double- or triple- takes in order to distinguish which figures are real, an implicit distinction is made between whose work is art and whose is relatively menial. In thereby self-consciously reframing these scenes, these images acknowledge that within the museum's walls the labour of skilled workers becomes abstract, failing to earn the cultural valuation or visibility that is afforded to the auratic objects their own work often resembles.

To this end, Lockhart echoes previous generations of institutional critique artists who have explored the relation between the physical architectures of institutions and their social function as cultural frames. Where she comes into her own, however, is where she translates her interest in labour into the terms of structural film, imbuing the latter movement's formalist rigour with a marked conceptual ethos. Indeed, her 2008 film *Lunch Break*, which carries over this eponymous theme, represents her most ambitious and inventive project yet. Here, Lockhart breaks with her use of static cameras for the first time, instead channelling *Wavelength* in her movement of the camera and *Serene Velocity* in her shaping of the image. Comprising a single ten and a half minute shot, slowed down to a snail's pace at eighty-three minutes, the film gradually moves the camera down a seemingly endless corridor within the Bath Iron Works shipyard in Maine. Filmed during the shipyard's daily lunch break, Lockhart captures a brief moment of respite within the work day and distends it to boundless lengths ("boundless" insofar as viewers are not likely to witness the space and endure the time of the film in whole). Like Warhol (who similarly slowed down his films' projection rates in order to exaggerate their length), Lockhart trains her camera on the utterly mundane and stretches it out to vast expanses; like Snow, she introduces into the viewing experience a temporal horizon of memory and expectation vis-à-vis the movement of the image; and like Gehr, she employs the given space of the hallway in order to articulate the structural space of the film's frame. From here, *Lunch Break* exploits its sluggish movement and abiding duration in order to make the time and space it concentrates within the frame palpable to the viewer. Thus, as the camera moves through the corridor and as details otherwise only glimpsed command assiduous scrutiny, the film asks the viewer to invest considerable perceptual attention into a scene of typically overlooked spaces. Moreover, given the visceral intensity of its duration, *Lunch Break* amplifies the content of the image, accentuating not only its movement through the corridor but also the social space contained therein.

To be sure, both the physical and social space of the factory, and no less the *time* of the factory, have played an ambivalent role throughout the history of cinema. Dating back to arguably the first ur-structural film, the Lumière Brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), the trope of workers leaving factories has reverberated throughout the history of cinema. As Harun Farocki has analysed, cinema since the Lumière's original film has consistently represented the figure of the worker leaving the factory. Consequently, the inner spaces of labour often remain obscured by the outer space of leisure where, Farocki indicates, the life of the individual seems to begin.¹⁸ Therefore, the factory-as-frame serves to delineate the

visibility of the spaces and subjects of industrial production, abstracting not only the labour but also the subjectivity of the modern worker that the factory produces. In entering the factory, then, *Lunch Break* addresses this ambivalent visibility; at the same time, it also aims to circumvent the abstraction of workers' subjectivities either by dismissing their work or by reducing them to it, as if they were simply faceless appendages of the factory. Indeed, we do not see any work done, but this is not to alienate these subjects from their labour; instead, *Lunch Break* focusses on the interstice between labour and leisure, finding in the lunch break the small scale cultural rituals that comprise the community of workers who share them. In this sense, it is entirely significant that the film comprises only part of a larger, year-long project that keeps with Lockhart's anthropological impulse. Taking care to not simply document or fetishize the figure of the worker from afar, she spent a year interacting with electricians, welders, pipe fitters, machinists, tinsmiths, and insulators at Bath Iron Works in order to earn their trust. Out of her quasi-field research she produced the aforementioned film, photographs from around the shipyard (e.g. images of snack tables or union posters, as well as portraits of workers and still-lives of lunch boxes), and, perhaps most remarkably, *The Lunch Break Times*, a freely circulated newspaper edited by Lockhart containing germane texts from shipyard workers and art world figures alike. And of course she also produced *Exit* (2008), a separate forty-one minute film that depicts, yes, workers leaving the shipyard over the span of a week.¹⁹

Proving Lockhart's awareness of the established conventions and pratfalls that attend the depiction of industrial workers and their environs, *Lunch Break* finds in its namesake quotidian ritual the substance of a certain kind of experience that is otherwise lost in available frames of representation. Accordingly, the language of structural film assists Lockhart in foregrounding a critical self-reflexivity of the image, but without allowing the film's structure to marginalize the content of its subject matter: unlike *Serene Velocity*, for instance, where the depth of the hallway is mirrored in the formal repetition of the hall's shape, *Lunch Break*'s employees do not mirror any pre-given internal form; rather, they draw attention to the space between the inside and outside of the film's frame as they, like the girls in *Goshogaoka*, move through it. Nor, on the other hand, does Lockhart allow the film's conceptual content to foreclose the sensory presence of the filmic image: by intensifying the experience of duration and by radically sharpening our perceptive focus of the corridor, she animates the space-time configuration of the shipyard, articulating the phenomenological experience it yields so that it may affect the viewer. In this capacity, Lockhart's politics of the structural-filmic image emerge as more than just representation, but as a deeper invocation of the space-time frame of the factory. To be certain, the phenomenological experience of the workplace is entirely significant in light of the context of the rationalized ordering of space and time ushered in with the industrial revolution. As a paradigm of modern capitalism, the invention of the nine-to-five, five-day work week, and henceforth the social division of life and work across temporal terms (not to mention the spatial organization of the factory and urban space alike), reflects a pervasive perceptual experience of modernity.²⁰ In this broad respect, *Lunch Break*'s impact grows to the extent that the sensation of duration and the amplified sense of space that the film engenders works to unsettle this social division of time and space. Our experience of the film, in other words, is not organized by the established schema in

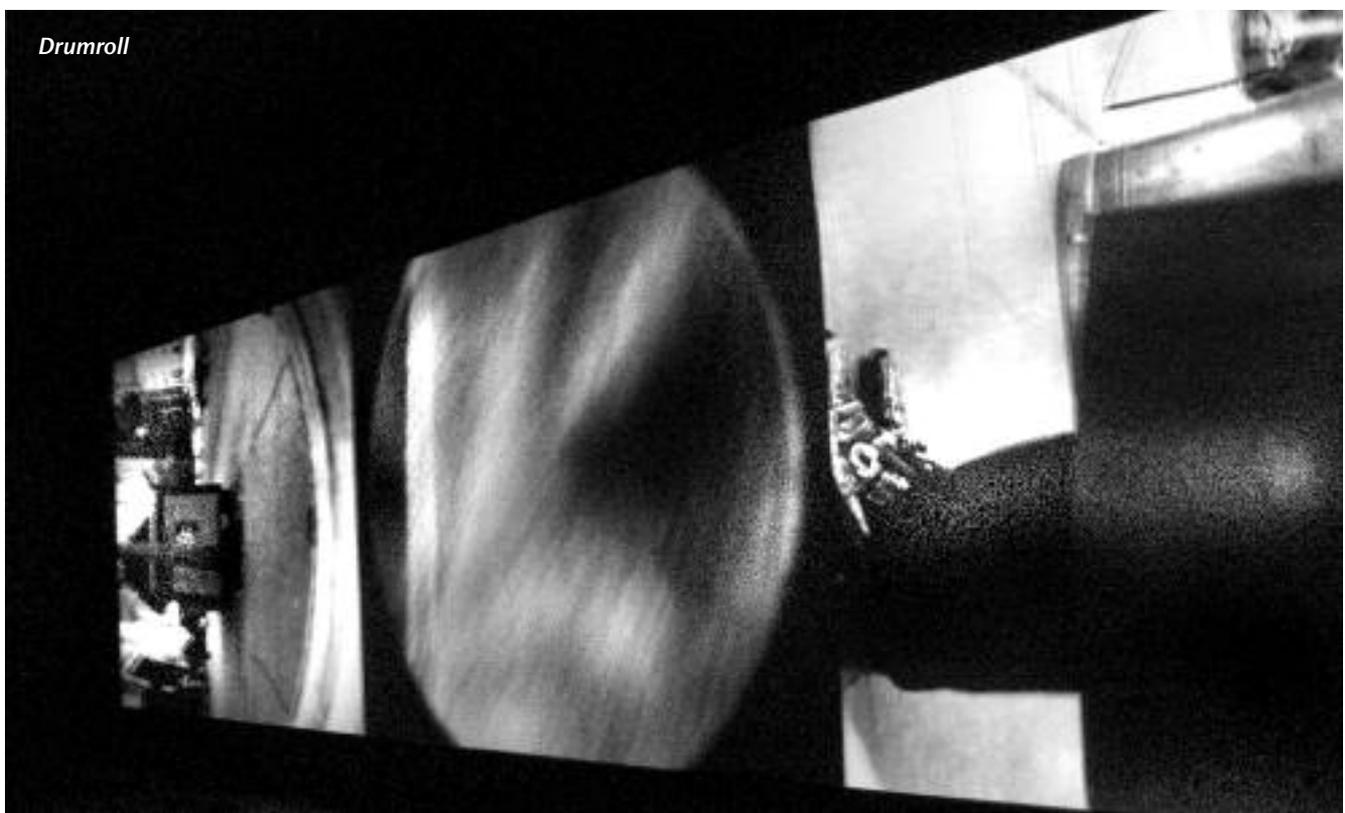
which the lunch break comprises an hour or so of leisure within the work day, or in which this corridor serves a strictly functional purpose in accordance with industrial production imperatives; rather, our experience falls to the side of *filmic* time and space, through which Lockhart wrests the scene of the factory from its typical capitalist instrumentalization so as to rearticulate it in different terms. By extending this brief interval that interrupts the day and by exaggerating the corridor's spatial immediacy, she places the viewer amid a rendering of time and space that does not conform to its given conventions—i.e. the given spatio-temporal frames through which it is typically perceived—and henceforth foregrounds the ground-level social relations, activities, and worker subjectivities that arise from the cultural milieu of Bath Iron Works. Therein, Lockhart explores the culture of the lunch break as more than a social ritual but also an experience that demands new forms of attention and depiction.

Cameras and Corporeality: Steve McQueen

Like Lockhart, London-born, Amsterdam-based artist and commercial filmmaker Steve McQueen has regularly invoked structural film in his engagement with cinema. Ranging from his initial non-narrative video installations to his recent turn to conventional feature-length film, McQueen's work emerges from a pointed interest in formal experimentation with the camera and filmic image alike.²¹ Accordingly, his body of early work from the 1990s consists of short films that experiment with the possibilities of what one can do with the camera. For example, *Catch* (1997) features McQueen tossing a camera back and forth with his sister as it rolls. Between catching the camera and briefly turning it toward one another, the McQueens disrupt the fundamental stability of the image by dissociating it from a subjective point of identification. This is to say, as the image is thrown into an illegible blur, the film's point of view shifts from the holder of the camera to the camera itself, such that McQueen, Michael Newman writes, "recalls, in his decentering of the camera from any possible subject position... early film,

before the camera assumed its identity with the point of view of subjective consciousness...".²² But rather than simply invoking early cinema, this exercise in the transferability of the image's perspective points toward a more incisive and effectively structural look at how the image materializes as the product of its apparatus. For instance, consider *Drumroll* (1998), wherein McQueen attaches three cameras to the side of a barrel, each of which films as he rolls it down a New York sidewalk (the respective footage is then shown in a row of three projections). Like *Catch*, this film manifests the impression of its pre-established shape, divorcing the image from any kind of imaginary perspective so as to collapse the image with the physical movement of the camera itself. In doing so, McQueen avers the indexical relation between the film's frame and the tangible reality of the camera, experimenting with the latter so as to set the limits of the former. In this sense, his earlier film, *Just Above My Head* (1996), similarly sees McQueen following the path of a moving dolly, on which a camera pointing up toward him is attached. As the artist's head varyingly appears upon the background image of the sky, bobbing in and out of frame as he tries to keep pace, the film echoes Lockhart's emphasis on the liminality of the frame's limits, inasmuch as the film's shape (a fixed camera aimed upwards and moving forward) asserts itself as the figure appears and disappears from the image's ground. Once again, movement through the frame articulates its presence in the film, such that McQueen reveals the frame, in relation to the movement of the camera through space and over time, as constitutive of the filmic image.

Accordingly, McQueen's films appear deceptively simple, if only because his work finds its effect less in formalist exercises *per se* so much as in the affective dimensions they create.²³ To the extent that structural film foregrounds the viewer's experience in space and time, McQueen recognizes that such reflections on the medium's shape present the opportunity to mobilize the sensory power of the filmic image. Beyond the relatively simple formal experiments and visual puns that characterize





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the aforementioned films, his works exploit the affective material dimensions of cinema in ways not fully explored in structural film proper. In turn, his work extends well beyond its analytic dimensions, manifesting a cinema that is very much felt as an embodied experience. For these reasons, installation plays a vital role in McQueen's work, for it enables his films to communicate with viewers while, recalling Sitney, keeping content minimal in relation to the presence of the film's structure. As such, McQueen exerts exacting control over the conditions of his art's display, ensuring that the perceptual environment in which his films are situated remains sufficiently appropriate to establish the viewer as an embodied subject rather than a "pure look," as Michael Newman notes.²⁴ Indeed, McQueen has himself noted that "I want to put people into a situation where they are sensitive to themselves watching the piece,"²⁵ and to that end configures the space of projection so that an affective space opens between the image and viewer in which the form of the image actively corresponds with the embodied perception of it. Hence, McQueen projects his films in separate darkened rooms wherein the image fully covers the wall and where the floor is made of a polished black tile that sharply reflects the screen. For instance, this is the case in *Deadpan* (1999), a four and half minute silent film in which McQueen recreates the Buster Keaton gag where, as the façade of a house topples over, Keaton absent-mindedly stands within the trajectory of its open window. Repeating this scene numerous times from different angles that range from long shots to close ups of McQueen's boots, the artist never flinches, standing immobile with an appropriately deadpan look that changes neither before nor after the action occurs. Thereby departing from Keaton's startled physical comedy, McQueen embraces the scene as "one of the wonderful things one can do with film; one can take a silly idea and give it compelling, powerful, emotional resonance."²⁶ And certainly, as the scene is serially repeated and we systematically experience it from changing perspectives, the film

becomes deeply affecting in its simplicity. For the viewer standing in this silent and dark room, the presence of this stoic figure onscreen, unflinching amid an endless cycle of anticipation and narrow avoidance of catastrophe, is oddly moving.

To this end, the unfolding of the film's structure—the serial repetition and variation of the same action, but also the cyclical re-staging of this moment of affective impact—serves as the vehicle by which the film's form affects the viewer without recourse to narrative or content. Indeed, McQueen's work in general takes on a quasi-abstract quality in which the minimal (or at least indirect) presence of representational content drives the experience of film in its full force. As such, the aforementioned films remain consistent with structural film's late-modernist ethos, in which the self-conscious use and experience of the medium foregrounds the work's objective properties over subjective content or narration. To be certain, it is this absence of narrative in favour of a more self-conscious, embodied, and affective experience of film that McQueen wields so well: by amplifying the direct spatial and temporal experience of cinema he not only suspends narrative, but in doing so furthers the phenomenological terms of filmic experience. Hence, just as McQueen's emphasis on installation accentuates both the physical and pictorial space of his films, his internal structuring of these elements forwards a temporality that, like *Lunch Break*, frees viewer's from conventional determinations of experience. Indeed, as TJ Demos explains in a discussion of *Just Above My Head*: "With film, the interval [of exposure times] multiplies through the succession of frames, offering extended periods of duration. McQueen's *Just Above My Head* captures exactly this sense of time by fixing on the drawn out passage of a single shot of a figure walking down the street; in the film, protracted duration replaces narrative development. The monotonous simplicity of the activity emphasizes the interval as a prolonged extension of time..."²⁷ Furthermore, when this interval "no longer logically connects before and after, organizing it into

narrative continuity and temporal chronology, film unlocks a new sense of time experienced as an open ended possibility, one that escapes from the slavishness of the movement-image, from its sequential actions, from the inexorable progression of plot lines."²⁸ Therefore, just as Lockhart offers the intensity of prolonged duration in order to open our perceptual attention to alternate experiences of time and space, McQueen undoes the conventional temporal linearity of filmic experience. And as Jean Fisher similarly writes (here in reference to 2002's *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap*, albeit in a description equally fitting of both McQueen and Lockhart's work in general): "McQueen's play with space-time elucidates the fundamental processes at work in our non-rational relation to art: an encounter with an event; dropping out of everyday time into duration in which the play between image and memory generates new associations; transformations of our perceptions of reality."²⁹ Hence: "Through the combination and relay of affects, the film seduces us into a forgetting of time—of the chronological time of everyday and its extant knowledges, expectations, assumptions—and surrenders us to the immobilised time of duration."³⁰ Within this immobilized time of duration, then, the intensity of distilled time, and no less our physical experience of it, becomes McQueen's conduit for expression.

While these strategies are by no means exceptional in video installations and avant-garde film, they are in the context of narrative cinema, including McQueen's astounding debut feature, *Hunger*. In short, *Hunger* presents a loosely organized yet acutely precise depiction of the Irish HM Prison Maze in 1981—a time at which republican-loyalist tensions were at a fever pitch and at which this prison housed numerous IRA members, including Bobby Sands, who famously led a series of hunger strikes there. Against the Thatcher government's refusal to grant IRA members the status of political prisoners (as opposed to common criminals), the inmates spend the film routinely protesting in the meagre yet extreme means available: coating the insides of their cells with excrement; collectively pooling urine into the main hallway; abstaining from bathing, wearing prison clothes, and cutting their hair; and finally, Sands' hunger strike (which does not actually commence until the final fifth of the film; in fact, Sands does not appear until half an hour into the film's ninety minutes). Meanwhile, the film follows inmates and guards alike as they endure life in the prison (save for one guard whose domestic life features in several sequences), therein witnessing beatings, riots, forced cutting of hair and beards, family visits to inmates, and the quotidian alienation of cell life. Thus, while the film is about Sands it also has no true protagonist, for we experience the prison from the various perspectives, events, and environments McQueen depicts. As such, *Hunger* stands at a far cry from conventional story-telling: rather than outlining a coherent narrative it seeks to provide a broader impression of the reality inside the prison, such that, McQueen writes: "it's less about the narrative than it is about the abstract, which would have contained some kind of, for lack of a better word, truth."³¹ And to be sure, it is precisely this sense of the abstract—the "truth" of feeling rather than of fact—that affectively evokes the reality of the prisoners' incarceration and the precarious political and physical condition they embody therein.

In this regard, *Hunger* (and for that matter, almost all of McQueen's work, which regularly focuses on the physicality and machinations of human bodies) is a film that is definitively corporeal. Essentially concerned with the extreme states of bodies, whether in their vulnerability or in their potential as tools of

political resistance, *Hunger* dwells upon the lived and felt experiences of bodies within spaces where their social and political rights are reduced to almost nothing. This precarious relation between the political body and the imprisoned body (respectively the material embodiment of a political subject and an object of power by which political subjectivity can be violated) stands at the core of the film and the sensory ambience McQueen evokes. In sum, *Hunger* exemplifies what Vivian Sobchack defines as a carnal cinema, whereby the embodied perception of film earns relative priority over the dominance of rational meaning. Perceived less in the terms of concrete meaning (a set of signifying, representational elements) than in the relay between the preconscious bodily sensations that sound and image effect and the viewer's subsequent apprehension of identifiable elements, *Hunger* is effectively a "cinesthetic" film (to borrow Sobchack's neologism combining cinema with synesthesia and coenesthesia).³² In communicating sensations between bodies, McQueen evokes the physical and political conditions of spaces wherein the bodies are brought to its limits. As such, the abstract sense of the smell of human waste, of the brutality with which prisoners are viciously beaten, and of Sand's emaciation and fragility all work to conjure the experience of those for whom the base matter of their bodies has become more politically valuable than their existence as political subjects (more valuable and, in turn, more useful, inasmuch as fighting back, growing hair, or smuggling contraband in orifices, for instance, become legitimate means of resistance).

In working to encapsulate this condition, *Hunger* aims to not simply articulate a coherent statement but to register a multivalent and intense affective force. For this reason, the film toes the line between the progression and suspension of narrative, resulting in a story that is, for lack of a better term, *flat*. This is to say, the linear coherence of events does not take priority over the abstract ways in which scenes affect the viewer's experience. Hence, the film takes its time, stretching shots longer than is necessary to "get the point," while keeping cuts minimal, thereby encouraging viewers to linger over images and fully absorb them. Two scenes do particularly well to elucidate this ambivalent relation between narrative and affect: the first is a single static shot that, for a full three minutes, looks down the cell block hallway as a custodian mops urine which inmates have poured under their doors. The second is a sequence principally built around a nearly eighteen minute static shot in which Sands discusses his hunger strike intentions with a visiting priest. While the former scene, despite serving no narrative purpose, devotes remarkable attention to an utterly banal task carried out in real time, the latter constitutes the bulk of the film's dialogue and directly provides its core exegesis. While these two scenes thus work to seemingly opposite ends, they nevertheless do so in effectively the same way: through long, static shots that recall those of structural film, they amplify the viewer's perception, fixing the frame in order to render pictorial space palpable while distending duration in order to make viewers conscious of time's passage. Indeed, the former shot figures as almost an inversion of *Lunch Break*, insofar as it consists of a long institutional hallway (uncannily reminiscent of *Serene Velocity*) alongside protracted motion that recalls *Wavelength* (although here it is not the frame that moves but the custodian as he gradually approaches the foreground). Likewise, the latter scene works to similar ends: refusing the shot/reverse-shot convention associated with dialogue—and through which the illusionism of invisible editing renders real

space virtual—its theatrical *mise-en-scène* conjures the space and time of the prison, thereby articulating its experiential and affective (rather than representational) dimensions.

The exegetical purpose of the discussion, therefore, does not subordinate the shot's structure to its narrative function, for this most explicit of scenes is also among its most intense. Words and meaning become tied in with the affective intensity of their spatio-temporal context, such that, Elizabeth Lebovici notes, "speech serves to convey the experience of duration."³³ Therefore, the narrative and non-narrative (both in this scene and in the film as a whole) intertwine without synthesizing, which is to say that the film alternates between advancing and interrupting narrative as McQueen smuggles in *avant-gardist* techniques or presents explicatory dialogue as demanding experiences of duration. If, as Lebovici incisively claims, all of McQueen's films are about *endurance*,³⁴ then these two shots exemplify this tendency, combining narrative cinema (in this case, a film about the experience of endurance) with structural film's self-conscious perception of space and time as a real experience of perceptual endurance. The content of the narrative and the film's structure, in other words, correspond in articulating this experience, for the phenomenological quality of the film's structure, the affective intensity it produces, and its narrative function all work together in expressing the film's aims. Ultimately, it is through this interaction between narrative content and a kind of affective abstraction, and between the representation of a scene and the presentation of its structural properties, that *Hunger* employs film as a political medium. Indeed, in its dual articulation of political content and the phenomenological conditions that attend its enunciation, McQueen creates an exceptionally powerful and brilliantly crafted film.

In sum, through a critical engagement with the formal and experiential nature of cinema, McQueen and Lockhart reconcile the formalist austerity of structural film with the political content they draw through its techniques. As such, they make relevant inroads into the movement while expanding its possibilities, working in and beyond the self-reflexivity of the medium in order to turn attention to the real environments in which subjective experience occurs (but without, however, relying upon the representation of subjective phenomena). To this end, their work encapsulates the spatial and temporal organization of everyday life through which different environments determine the experience of their respective subjects. The factory or the prison, for instance, present more than just the acute formal configurations of institutional spaces (as a film like *Serene Velocity* might suggest), for they also encompass the affective ones in which the experience of space and time is politically charged. In turn, Lockhart and McQueen animate the subjectivity of the worker or the prisoner for whom conventional forms of representation are lacking; by situating the filmic depiction of these subjects in relation to their appropriate phenomenological dispositions, they give rise to an alternate phenomenological experience—that of filmic time and space. Thus, through their examination of film's capabilities, Lockhart and McQueen test the possibilities of inflecting a political consciousness into the medium, experimenting not only with formal and conceptual strategies, but with the ways that film—indeed, *film-qua-film*—can intervene within and affect lived experience.

Photo Credits

Sharon Lockhart stills courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles;
Steve McQueen stills courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery NY.

Notes

- 1 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2002), 348.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Art," in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 127.
- 6 In short, the "trance film" of Deren, developed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, is marked by a concern with expressionistic explorations of dream-like states; the "lyric film" of Brakhage, developed in the 1950s and 1960s, consists of semi- or fully abstract films (often made by painting directly onto celluloid, for instance) which typically feature a constant stream of images that change faster than the eye can see. While formally opposed, these two modes of film work to approximate a hypnagogic vision of subjective psychological phenomena. See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*.
- 7 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," 351.
- 8 Ibid., 352.
- 9 As she quotes of Husserl: "To every perception there always belongs a horizon of the past, as a potentiality of recollection that can be awakened; and to every recollection there belongs as an horizon, the continuous intervening intentionality of possible recollections (to be activated on my initiative, actively), up to the actual Now of perception." Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," in *The Avant-Garde Film Reader*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, (New York: New York University Press: 1978), 185.
- 10 P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," 359.
- 11 Ibid., 352.
- 12 Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40.
- 13 R. Bruce Elder, "The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Art," 135.
- 14 Thanks are due to Kelly Montana, whose work on *Lunch Break* provided my introduction to the work as well as my implicit basis for thinking about it.
- 15 These films are, of course, principally displayed within a gallery context, although works such as *Lunch Break* have, in the context of experimental film festivals, shown in theatres.
- 16 Thus, as Norman Bryson describes the film: "space comes before the figure; it is the primary ground across which the figures pass as transients, as qualifications of the depth of field or as incidents placed within it." Norman Bryson, "From Form to Flux," in *Sharon Lockhart* (Chicago and Ostfildern: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Hatje Cantz, 2001), 29.
- 17 The full titles of this work is *Lunch Break Installation, "Duane Hanson: Sculptures of Life," 14 December 2002—23 February 2003, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2003.*
- 18 *Workers Leaving the Factory*, directed by Harun Farocki (Harun Farocki Film Produktion, 1995).
- 19 None of this, regrettably, is to mention *Lunch Break's* score, specially created by the experimental composer Becky Allen and filmmaker James Benning. The score collages together ambient sounds recorded around the shipyard, ranging from the abstract drone of machinery to, at one point, a Led Zeppelin song playing in the distance.
- 20 See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, "Free Time," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 21 Indeed, such interests date back to his film studies, during which he dropped out of NYU's Tisch School because "they wouldn't let you throw the camera up in the air." Steve McQueen: Profile," *news.bbc.co.uk*, last modified December 1, 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/544419.stm
- 22 Michael Newman, "McQueen's Materialism," in *Steve McQueen* (London: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1999), 32.
- 23 This simplicity does not factor in the subtle themes of racial and post-colonial politics that run throughout McQueen's oeuvre, a topic that is regrettably beyond the scope of this essay.
- 24 Ibid., 24.
- 25 Ibid., 21.
- 26 Quoted in Okwui Enwezor, "Haptic Visions," in *Steve McQueen* (London: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1999), 49.
- 27 TJ Demos, "The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen," *October* 114 (Fall 2003): 71.
- 28 Ibid., 72.
- 29 Jean Fisher, "Intimations of the Real: On Steve McQueen's *Western Deep* and *Caribs' Leap*," in *Steve McQueen: Caribs' Leap/Western Deep* (London: Ibid., 122).
- 30 Ibid., 122.
- 31 Gary Crowdus "The Human Body as Political Weapon: An Interview with Steve McQueen," *Cineaste* 34.2 (Spring 2009): 24.
- 32 See Vivian C. Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
- 33 Elizabeth Lebovici, "Steve McQueen: Framing Endurance," *Artpress* 359 (June 2009): 59.
- 34 Ibid., 55.