Michael Betancourt
Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia, USA

'Cinema' as a Modernist Conception of Motion Pictures

Abstract: In the 1960s and 1970s the Clement Greenberg's Modernist ideology of 'purity' played a central role in the definition of 'avant-garde cinema' as a serious, major genre of film. This transfer between 'fine art' and 'avant-garde film' was articulated as 'structural film' by P. Adams Sitney. This heritage shapes contemporary debates over 'postcinema' as digital technology undermines the ontology and dispositive of historical cinema. Its discussion here is not meant to reanimate old debates, but to move past them.

Keywords: avant-garde film; postcinema; film ontology; digital cinema

This paper outlines the role played by Modernist ideology in the critical/historical discourse *of* 'cinema,' using the avant-garde film as a case study. In considering the issues around this specific "dispositive of historical cinema"[1] in the period between 1960 and 1980, the focus of the following discussion is on textual analysis of critical/historical writing and issues of the canon emergent from it, rather than on particular close readings of specific films or the parallel developments in commercial 'art cinema'. This discourse-analysis follows from the critical emergence of 'postcinema,' and its problematics for established definitions of cinema-as-art. The conception of 'cinema' has always been linked to Modernist aesthetics of the twentieth century. The neglect of avant-garde film – which is still often excluded from the category of 'art cinema,' as well as the marginalization of animation, motion graphics and visual effects – reveals its continuing impact: in/as presumptive differences between commercial cinema, avant-garde film, and video art. The subtle influence of these restrictions is apparent in the continued separations between different categories of 'art cinema' that began early in the definition of 'cinema' itself. The early history presented in Terry Ramsaye's book *A Million and One Nights* (1924) offered a specific conception tied explicitly to narrative forms,[2] a framework that implicitly continued in Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach's *The History of Motion Pictures* (1938);[3] Lewis Jacob's

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[1] Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, Alena Strohmaier, ed., *The State of Post-Cinema* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 4.

[2] Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1924).

[3] Maurice Bardèche, and Robert Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures* (New York: Norton, 1938).

*Author contact information: michael@michaelbetancourt.com; michaelbetancourt.com

two editions of *The Rise of the American Film* (1939/1948) serve to demonstrate and affirm its consistency.[4] Even the 10 volumes in *Monografieën over Filmkunst* (*Monographs on Art Films*, 1933) edited by C. J. Graadt van Roggen (and famously designed by Piet Zwart) repeats the same choices while making the connections between Modernism and 'cinema' explicit, both in terms of works selected and the scope of each volume in the series.[5] These histories all demonstrate a similar, unifying concern with establishing *cinema* as a serious art. Their same foundational assumptions reappear in André Bazin's writing that influenced the French New Wave, a theorization that impacts the approach to the American avant-garde film developed by historians of the avant-garde film, most notably in the work of P. Adams Sitney.

American philosopher Stanley Cavell's book on cinema, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, is unusual – it makes its Modernist ideology a central part of the theorization, establishing 'cinema' as *necessarily* a reflection of art theory. The formulation he proposes links the realist, narrative forms common to commercial cinema to Michael Fried's conception of formalist art derived from the reductive proposals of Clement Greenberg. This ratification of 'cinema' in these specific terms denies hybrid forms and rejects the avant-garde's challenges to the established conventions of 'dominant media'. Cavell's approach proceeds from the same *a priori* limits, transferring them to motion pictures:

> The requirement for a *certain* indiscriminateness in the accepting of movies (I don't say you have to appreciate Singing Cowboy or Comedy Horror movies) has its analogues in the past of the established arts: anyone who is too selective about the classical composers whose music he likes doesn't really like music; whereas a distaste for various moments or figures in literature may be productive. But this requirement not merely is unlike the case of the other arts now [in 1971], it is the negation of their very condition: for it can be said that anyone who cultivates broadly the current instances of music or painting or theater does not appreciate, and does not know, the serious instances of those arts as they occur. This condition of modernist art has been described by Michael Fried as one in which an art leaves no room, or holds no promise, for the minor artist: it is a situation in which the work of the major artist condemns the work of others to artistic nonexistence, and in which his own work is condemned to seriousness, to further radical success or complete failure. [...] Art now exists in the condition of philosophy.[6]

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[4] Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939/1948).

[5] *Monografieën over Filmkunst* [*Monographs on Art Films*], 10 vols. ed. C. J. Graadt van Roggen (Rotterdam: W & J Brusse's Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1931–1933).

[6] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film (Enlarged Edition)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 13–14.

A narrowed scope of consideration is the precondition for 'important art'. Cavell's book, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (published 1971), makes connections between Modernist theory proposed by Clement Greenberg (via Michael Fried) an explicit part of his discussion, connecting Greenberg's formalist 'purity' to the development of 'cinema',[7] a limitation that justifies and reinforces his own logic of selection: *only* those works typically shown in the black box theater are considered, but his limit does not include or overlap with the 'avant-garde film,' or with the media of the 'art world' shown in galleries or museums.[8] Greenberg's teleology creates the illusion that its selections are the only possible ones, the only 'serious' ones, since the works excluded are determined *a priori* to be irrelevant to analysis; a teleology where 'historical progression' is necessarily one of medium-specific reduction and exclusion. This elimination of externalities leaves no allowance for hybridity or changes in media-technology; the convergence specific to the digital is disallowed in advance of its proposition, making the crisis identified as 'postcinema' inevitable, as historians Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger and Alena Strohmaier suggest in their anthology, *The State of Post-Cinema*:

> The concept of post-cinema evolves around issues of medium specificity and ontology. If focuses on the two classical markers of cinema's specificity, namely the photographic index and the dispositive of cinema, and designates a condition in which both the index and dispositive are in crisis.[9]

Cavell's Modernist approach is crucial to delineating 'cinema' as a serious art, making the role of 'purity' and the exclusive, narrowed conception of cinema-as-narrative foundational to 'cinema' itself. Greenberg explains his idea of 'purity' as definition based on *a priori* conceptions of a particular medium, (i.e. painting or film), that determine its logical restriction, excluding any work that develops in the marginal overlaps that lie between *similar* media:

> What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, though its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain. [...] The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific tasks of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium

[7] John Hanhardt, "The Medium Viewed: The American Avant-Garde Film," *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 1976), 22.

[8] Erika Balsom, "Brakhage's Sour Grapes, or Notes on Experimental Cinema in the Art World," *MIRAJ, Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 1, 1 (2012): 13–25.

[9] Hagener at al., *The State of Post-Cinema*, 3.

of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity' meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.[10]

The essentialization of motion pictures that follows from this type of Modernism is a critical assessment reifying commercial productions as the *essential* nature of motion pictures. This basis insures the assumption that photographic representation is necessarily only employed for narrative ends; that the signs of 'cinema' are ontologically linked to their real-world sources as André Bazin claims. Their foundational basis in Modernist 'purity' becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. This recognition requires acknowledging that Greenberg had a central role in the emerging field of 'film studies' in the 1960s and 1970s, and that the organization of avant-garde film as a specific, independent variety of 'cinema' depends on this link to art theory.[11] The general theoretical tendency in the early 1970s entailed an essentialization of motion pictures as photographic representation that then determined its formalist reduction towards 'purity': the assumption that the ontological *source* for photographic images matters more than their apparent form and affect on-screen. This 'purity' required a redefinition of 'abstraction' in avant-garde film to exclude earlier visual music films: *reductivism* is the watchword for Greenberg's theory.[12]

Bazin's realist argument about the relationship between the image and its 'source' is foundational for the post-World War II aesthetic conception of cinematic form: the photographic technology of film is the a guiding principle in his realist aesthetics, adopted by Cavell, and implicit in Sitney. Celluloid films are composed from photographs, thus for Bazin's theory they are evidence of a direct link between what appears on-screen and profilmic events:

> Whatever the objections of our critical faculties, we are obliged to believe in the existence of the object represented: it is truly re-presented, made present in time and space. [...] Seen in this light, cinema appears to be the completion in time of photography's objectivity. A film is no longer limited to preserving the object sheathed in its moment, like the intact bodies of insects from a bygone era preserved in amber. [...] Only the impassive lens, in stripping the object of habits and preconceived notions, of all the spiritual detritus that my perception has wrapped it in, can offer it up unsullied to my attention and thus to my love. In the photograph, a natural image of a world we no longer able to see, nature finally does more than imitate art: it imitates the artist.[13]

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[10] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.

[11] Jackie Hatfield, "Expanded Cinema and Narrative," *Millennium Film Journal* 39–40 (Winter 2003): 63–64.

[12] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[13] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), 8–9.

The realism of narrative form depends on an 'objective' presentation without the apparent intrusion of editing and montage. The long take enables the emergence of the 'reality' of the events shown – their narrative progression – 'events' (actualities) develop on-screen with a minimum of visible mediation. What happens on screen corresponds to what could happen for the audience if they were watching the events themselves, live without the cinematic mediation, discursively functioning as a revelation of a socially-defined reality.[14] Bazin's claim that "nature finally does more than imitate art: it imitates the artist" identifies this selective process with the framing of shots. The mediation of cinema is a transformative action that renders the 'world on screen' as an experiential reality for the audience – this encounter with reality ('photography's objectivity') is the essential nature of motion pictures for his theory. The presentation on-screen thus serves as an articulation of this ontological reality for the audience, a revelation of a world on screen that enables a consideration of the 'conditions of reality' – the way the actual world is organized.[15]

The crisis posed by this revenant, untenable Modernist ideology is especially obvious in the historical conception of the avant-garde film, which provides a more explicit and focused opportunity to consider its role than the multitudinous range of analyses on commercial media. The earliest book-length studies of *only* avant-garde film, such as Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* published in 1967, Parker Tyler's *The Underground Film: A Critical History* in 1969, David Curtis' *The Experimental Cinema* from 1971, and P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* in 1974, repeating the claim that American pre-World War II films were insignificant derivatives of European precursors; only the post-war films were 'original'. While they diverge in their critical elaboration, both arise from the same basic Modernist restrictions: differences between avant-garde and commercial 'cinema' histories result from emphasis and focus – the primary sources (films considered) dictate their scope.

Historical and critical publication on avant-garde film between 1968 and 1972 paralleled the Modernist concerns in Cavell's work. Greenberg's concept of 'purity' informs the discussion and theorization of avant-garde film explicitly, as historian Edward Small's book *Direct Theory* reveals:

> a type of theory, a manifest, immediate, direct theory that bypasses the limiting intervention of separate semiotic systems, especially the spoken or written language upon which the accepted history of film theory depends.[16]

Small suggests the same Modernist ideology Cavell accepts. The proposals of 'self-criticism' and 'purity' are explicitly references to Greenberg's theories. The

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[14] Richard Rushton, *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2011), 44–47.

[15] Christopher Williams, *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1980), 36.

[16] Edward S. Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as a Major Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), xv.

assumption that *ontological* sources matter for their apparent form on-screen – the denotation of imagery – follows the lead of historian P. Adams Sitney's discussion of 'structural film'.[17] However, the reflexive engagement with the semiotic and formal codes mean that the avant-garde is more heterogeneous than Small's comments superficially suggest, as his selection and discussion of works demonstrates. Both Cavell and Small demonstrate Greenberg's implicit role in their convergent definitions of very different types of 'cinema'.

At the same time that Cavell was writing his book, P. Adams Sitney was synthesizing these same aesthetics to produce his history of American avant-garde film, *Visionary Film* (1974) that also fuses Greenberg with Bazin, but in a different way than Cavell. Structural film becomes a revelation of the innate nature of cinema, the teleological destination of the historical narrative he constructs. The works chosen for his history require a series of omissions that makes the 'purity' implicit in his argument apparent: absent from his discussion are the marginal or intermedia works that undermine Bazin's ontology, such as video and computer animation. Also elided from his history are films such as Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* that use multiple projection.

Sitney's later essay "The Idea of Abstraction" (published in *Film Culture* in 1977) adapts a series of lectures he gave at New York's *Museum of Modern Art* in 1971, prior to the publication of *Visionary Film*. The Modernist conception of each distinct medium, defined in advance precisely by those effects that are unique are specific to it, excluding any potential overlaps with any other art. Sitney's elaboration automatically distinguishes the avant-garde film from commercial films. The particular redefinition of 'abstraction' that he makes becomes progressively more apparent as an modulation of Modernist precepts, as he quotes philosopher Whitehead in building his argument:

> "There is a double sense of Abstraction in regard to the abstraction of *definite* eternal objects […] There is an abstraction from actuality and abstraction from possibility." They run in opposite directions; from the physical situation there is a gradual purification of abstraction; from the idea of the possible (the realm of all possible things) the process of abstraction gets more and more concrete. […] We all know, or have some general idea, what a narrative film is. What is its opposite? Narrative does not have a pure opposite. I postulate the word abstract, using it very carefully, as the opposite of narrative. [18]

Sitney's proposal is a transfer of Bazin's "Ontology of the Photographic Image" into terms for the avant-garde film: the photographic technology of a motion picture functions as a *record* of real things and events that a camera records[19] in a parallel to

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[17] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978 (Second Edition)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 370.

[18] P. Adam Sitney, P. "The Idea of Abstraction," *Film Culture* 63–64, (1977): 2.

[19] André Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13, 4 (Summer, 1960): 4–9.

Greenberg's teleological reduction of painting to the materiality of paint, the flatness of the picture plane, and its non-illusionistic/non-mimetic organization. The earlier understanding of visual music 'abstraction' has been replaced with something else, what Sitney calls "the event" – meaning images made by photographic reproduction as technical process (i.e. the *materialist* medium-specificity of motion picture cinematography)[20]: instead of addressing the visual appearance of the imagery, what Sitney refers to 'imagistic'. Conceiving 'abstraction' *as* opposition to 'narrative' (i.e. as 'non-narrative') reflects the traditional fallacy of *cinema=narrative.* This concern with visual form and the photographic materiality of the filmed image draws attention to ontological relationships and the techniques of cinematic reproduction. The translation of photo-chemical processing and the technology of its presentation into the subject-matter of motion pictures places these works in the same Modernist conceptual framework that Greenberg articulated for painting. Sitney's proposal narrows the scope of avant-garde film, distinguishing it from both commercial films and much of the historical avant-garde as well (including, for example, Maya Deren's 1943 film *Meshes of the Afternoon*). In supposedly "rejecting" narrative forms, avant-garde 'structural films' establish themselves as the antithesis of commercial productions, an independent and opposite cinema to that of the commercial industry: 'structural films' explicitly reduce 'cinema' to the *material* elements of celluloid, intermittent projection and the optical and photo-chemical processes of image creation gives the result a reflexive presentation comparable to Greenbergian 'purity'.

The 'structural film' retains the same representational images of photography familiar from commercial cinema, rather than the non-objective imagery more commonly recognized as 'abstract' in painting, sculpture and the visual music film: they exhibit their medium-specific 'purity' by drawing attention to the reproductive photographic process. Sitney's argument at the *Museum of Modern Art* in 1971 demands a formalist shift in referents from graphic/abstract visuals to live action photography focused on explicitly emphasizing the material technology of celluloid:

> We're going to take a look at another European film, one made by Peter Kubelka called *Schwechater*; [...] – Film Shown – The form of the film is imagistic: that is, it is a film about one single gesture; in this case, the pouring and drinking of beer, seen from an analytic point of view of a number of different shots, different moments synthesized together. Generally, the form of this film follows that established by Eggeling; a theme, its inversion, its variations, its repetitions.[21]

In a formal sense the repetitions and patterns of Kubelka's film *do* have similarities to the general structure of Eggeling's *Symphony Diagonale,* which follows the musical structure of a sonata, but translated into graphic form – the presentation of

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[20] Sitney, "The Idea of Abstraction," 24.

[21] Ibid, 14.

a theme, followed by increasingly complex modulations of a simple formal pairing of elements along diagonals crossing the screen – but in these general terms, so does the "Odessa Steps" montage sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*. What Sitney has done in this discussion is reframe montage (a process Bazin specifically *banned* as a violation of cinematic ontology) as equivalent to the graphic abstraction of Eggeling's absolute film; thus enabling a parallel to Greenberg's Modernist ideology that simultaneously connects to Bazin's ontological, realist 'cinema'. Those abstractions that work to divine the essential characteristics of physical things in the avant-garde becomes the identification of the 'purity' of cinema. However, the specificity of mechanical reproduction employing optics is incompatible with Whitehead's Platonic distinction; the abstract films from the 1920s by Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Marcel Duchamp, followed by films by James Whitney, Harry Smith and Jordan Belson that fall within the scope of Whitehead's proposal are fundamentally different in visual organization from Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (and 'structural film' as a whole). Proposing 'structural film' as the inheritor and continuation of the hybrid abstract tendencies of the visual music film was controversial; it prompted an internal debate within the avant-garde film community in the United States. This Modernist conception of 'cinema' continues to inform its historical, critical, and theoretical discussion, whether in the avant-garde film, video art, or commercial motion pictures.[22]

However, the digital convergence characteristic of 'postcinema' makes these Modernist separations problematic, a demonstration of the Postmodern challenge identified by cultural critic Craig Owens in 1983 as an embrace of alternatives and ambivalence that anticipates the fragmentation and decentering accompanying the rise of the digital. His "crisis of cultural authority"[23] is a natural consequence of leveling established hierarchies: an awareness of alternatives subverts Greenberg's Modernist 'purity' that isolated each field. It is logical to expect a multitude of Postmodernisms as symptoms of the 'corrective' pluralism and hybrid processes denied by Greenberg's formalism. Differentiating the moving image from other media, is a problem *only* when one mistakes a singular type of work for the entirety of all possible statements. Film historian André Gaudreault describes this transformation as a self-consciousness of constraints that argues against a teleological conception of historical inevitability:

> 'Traditional' film history, which the new generation of film scholars began to dispute following the Brighton congress, was known for an idealist conception of cinema and a teleological vision of its history. In this vision, events are only stages at various degrees of distance from the ideal to be attained: so-called 'classical' cinema. Because of this ideal standard of cinema yet to come, early cinema, for traditional film historians, could

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[22] Tom Sherman, "Vernacular Video," in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink, and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 162.

[23] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism" *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: The Bay Press, 1983), 57.

only be a 'primitive' cinema whose sole goal was to strive towards cinematic potential.[24]

The 'classical' cinema that Gaudreault describes is always conceived in terms of an essential expression of the 'nature' of motion pictures: the Modernist aesthetics ascendant for the first half of the 20th century based in 'purity' are reductive, relying on an *a priori* definition to realize their idealization. The role of Modernism in the critical and theoretical elaboration of cinema cannot be underestimated, since these aesthetics were the pervasive model for understanding the (art) world when 'cinema' was being articulated. The persistence of this ideation remains apparent through the choices of works and artists for consideration. A "crisis of cultural authority" emerges for cinema with the challenges posed by digital technology to the established order created by the merging of live action and animation, for example in commercial productions such as *The Polar Express* (2004), *Avatar* (2009) and *The Adventures of Tin-Tin* (2011) – what Gaudreault and Marion identified as the "image-animation problem"[25]. These changes are forcing a recognition of Modernist ideology as establishing 'cinema'[26]; thus, postcinema has a theoretical urgency from its challenges to the assumed medium-specificity, teleological history and ontology linking the image and its (presumed) source.

In collapsing the distinctions between established categories of motion picture, the system of valuation and authority accrued to the gate-keepers of those values comes into question. The shifts and transformations already wrought by digital technology are challenging to the established 'cinema' precisely because they are developments which undermine the dominant Modernist approach, based on the independence and separation of media. The history developed in *Visionary Film* is teleological. It presupposes an inevitable refinement towards an essential and absolute foundational nature, that once achieved signals a foreclosure on the future, as filmmaker Grahame Weinbren noted about *Visionary Film*:

> [Paul] Arthur's article "The Last of the Last Machine? Avant-Garde Film Since 1986" compared structural film and the 'new narrative' that had emerged in the later 70s and early 80s, and [Fred] Camper's article 'The End of Avant-Garde Film' was an expression of regret at what he saw as the demise of creative filmmaking. Both Arthur and Camper are in general agreement with Sitney – Camper's A-list of filmmakers is coincident with Sitney's, and Arthur explicitly embraces the concept of Structural Film, refining and sharpening the definition but applying it to the same

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[24] André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 9.

[25] André Gaudreault, Philippe Marion, Timothy Barnard, *Kinematic Turn: Film in the Digital Era and Its Ten Problems* (Montreal: Caboose Books, 2012), 39.

[26] Hagener at al., *The State of Post-Cinema*, 3.

group of films originally defined by Sitney. He even goes so far as to explicitly describe these films as 'the Structural Canon'.[27]

Weinbren links the definition of a avant-garde film canon to this same Modernist teleology. The critical articles Weinbren mentions all neglect then-contemporary avant-garde film: *Visionary Film* articulated a canon for avant-garde film in parallel to that of commercial cinema. The totalizing historical account provided by the institutionalization of 'structural film', demonstrates the 'finality' that this Modernist account of history generates: there is nothing more to do, 'no more lands to conquer' – once the reductive process reaches the final materially-determined limits, the demonstration that is the force moving history forward in Greenberg's account dissipates, and art/history arrives at its destination. A side-effect of this conception is a foreclosing on history and the denials of significance for new work/artists that Weinbren described ten years later, in 1986; the challenges posed by contemporary 'postcinema' arise as a necessary result of digital convergences created by computer technologies.[28]

Writing nearly thirty years later, cultural critic C. B. Johnston described "the Contemporary" in *Modernity Without A Project* as the eclipse of Modernist futurity, apparent in denials of both future developments and in the illusion of a severed link to the past:

> This was modernity: a time that oversaw vastly different ideological movements all trying to bring their own visions for the future into being, however opposed, ghastly, or desirable. It was the last time that society really believed in a future that was grasped as better than the present. [...] Upon examination, 'the contemporary' can be seen as elitist and rigid in its own way, often concealing order within 'openness' and surface change. At its most mainstream or democratic, 'the contemporary' appears more like the brutal past that Post-Modernists thought was outmoded than the future free from oppression that Modernists so dearly desired. It might be viewed in this sense as a weird or incoherent restoration of the experience of the high modern.[29]

The historical, reductive theorization continues to constrain and direct the present[30] as a restoration of Modernist ideology without a coherent conception of the future (without *futurity*) – yet, Johnsons' proposal takes this analysis further, suggesting that the Contemporary is the product of a teleology the historical avant-gardes

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[27] Grahame Weinbren, "Post Future Past Perfect," in *Experimental Film and Video*, ed. Jackie Hatfield (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 9.

[28] Gaudreault, and Marion, *Kinematic Turn*, 40.

[29] C. B. Johnson, *Modernity Without a Project: Essay on the Void Called Contemporary* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 6–9.

[30] Jeffery Keedy, "Zombie Modernism," in *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, ed. Steven Heller and Philip B. Meggs (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 159–67.

created. The abandonment of *futurity* in favor of an ongoing, interminable *nowness* accommodates and valorizes the particular recombinant strength of digital technology as an autonomous productive system: evident in the convergence of motion picture technologies in the advent of digital technologies for production, distribution and exhibition. The re/construction of history makes the Modernist restrictions appear historical, but it precisely eliminates the possibility for novel developments and divergences from the newly-established paradigms. The impact of this Modernist framework, 'cinema' remains in the works chosen for discussion – even if the ways those works are discussed has changed. This transformation of Modernism into the Contemporary that Johnson identifies was part of the avant-garde from its inception: successful avant-gardes become the status quo – rebellion becomes the new dogma.[31] It is easy to recognize the transformation of the early avant-gardes into academic procedure, as dominance was the end-goal for all Modernist movements. The Postmodern comes as an end-game attempt at a final shattering of all restrictive dogmas, beyond which the freedom promised by the Modernist *project* leaves no room for new dogmas to arise. Johnson's analysis recognizes the success of the Modernist project was aligned with the success of the avant-garde. The Postmodern ends with the *same* avant-garde success – institutionalized as the academy; it answers Paul Virilio's question posed about the teleology of the avant-garde in *The Information Bomb*: "*In advance of what?*"

However, 'cinema' as a distinct medium comes into question not because of its dominance and ubiquity – i.e. as the result of an avant-garde challenge to its paradigm – but because it seems poorly suited to a critical engagement with the *changed conditions* emergent in the developments of digital technology that enable it. The "material manifestation of history" originates with a particular type of audience engagement that produces specific and limited options – formal, interpretative, aesthetic, political – for the works accepted as significant enough for critical and theoretical consideration.[32] The expanded scope that postcinema attempts to contain is *not* a repudiation of historically cinematic forms which seem more common and omnipresent than ever before, instead being produced by the ungrounding of their accepted foundations; at the same time, it is a transition to an entirely different apparatus and aesthetic that undermines the ontology and dispositive of historical cinema.

Acknowledging the role of Modernist ideology and aesthetics as a definitional part of the historical conception of 'cinema' makes the contemporary challenges posed by digital technology more than just a change in productive methodology or distributive apparatus, but as a fundamental challenge to the aesthetic definition of 'art cinema' itself; making the emergence of 'postcinema' and its challenges to the Modernist order inevitable. The shifting technological basis of motion pictures from a photographic technology to the digitally encoded/sampled information rendered for human audiences by computer technology – the commonly known 'convergence'

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[31] Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 56.

[32] Hagener et al., A. *The State of Post-Cinema* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 4.

of the digital – produces an inherent instability for aesthetics dependent on a 'pure' media. The period of transition that has been underway since the shift from analogue video to digital video in the 1990s has accelerated with the technological shift to digital production and distribution for commercial feature films primarily manifests at the margins first: in the changes apparent in avant-garde media, motion graphics, music videos and animation that were historically ignored by Modernist 'cinema' during its time of dominance, making the analysis and consideration of this dispositive apparent in the *writing* a means to identify the ongoing impacts of this heritage.

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