Introduction

In 1969, P. Adams Sitney, a precocious film critic of exceptional acuity, issued the most famous and frequently quoted essay ever written on avant-garde cinema. It starts out at high speed:

Suddenly, a cinema of structure has emerged. The dominant evolution of the American (and outland’s’) avant-garde cinema has been the pursuit of progressively complex forms; so this change of pace is unexpected and difficult to explain. Two points demand immediate clarity. First, what is the tendency towards complex forms? And, second, how is the structural cinema different? (1970: 327)

In answer to the first question, Sitney characterised the formal film that preceded the structural film as one of “conjunction” and “metaphor”. The goal of the makers of structural films was different from that of the earlier practitioners of avant-garde cinema, whose purpose had been to construct a compact cinematic architecture that would make disparate elements cohere – to reconcile diverse elements had been the ambition of Stan Brakhage, of Gregory Markopoulos, of Peter Kubelka, and of Kenneth Anger, to cite only those whom Sitney himself named. Between 1965 and 1969, a new tendency appeared, in the films of Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits. The films of these makers seem to belong to a tendency antithetical to the formal film (Sitney emphasised that the antithesis is only apparent) inasmuch as they constitute “a cinema of structure wherein the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film” (Sitney 1970: 327). To the characterisation of a structural film as a film that insists upon its
shape, Sitney appended a list of features any or all of which structural films often possess: fixed camera position (or, from the viewer’s perspective, a fixed frame); the flicker effect; loop printing (the reappearance of contents, exactly and without variation); and rephotography off a screen.

When he proposed that the films accord primacy to their shape, Sitney also suggested that films possess “minimal content”.

The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. This is the clearest in *The Flicker* (1965) of Tony Conrad and *Ray Gun Virus* (1966) of Paul Sharits, where the flickering of single-frame solids – in the former black and white, in the latter colors – is the total field. (1970: 327)

The assertion that structural films possess minimal content seems baffling at first, for it is difficult to see what more he might intend by that description than that the films are not, as Brakhage’s often were, replete with visual incidents (both represented and constructed). Sitney likely drew the term “minimal content” from a piece that the philosopher Richard Wollheim had written just four years before, a piece that was still a topic of discussion among people concerned with contemporary art.

If we survey the art situation of recent times, as it has come to take shape over, let us say, the last fifty years, we find that increasingly acceptance has been afforded to a class of objects which, though disparate in many ways – in looks, in intention, in moral impact – have also an identifiable feature or aspect in common. And this might be expressed by saying that they have a minimal art-content: in that either they are to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore possess a low content of any kind, or else that the differentiation that they do exhibit, which may in some cases be very considerable, comes not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory. Examples of the kind of thing I have in mind would be canvases by Reinhardt or (from the other end of the scale) certain combines by Rauschenberg or, better, the non-“assisted” ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. (Wollheim 1965: 26)

By “minimal content” Sitney likely meant much the same as what Richard Wollheim meant: that the films, since they do not strive to reconcile diversity, are “to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves” and that, since the films do not present themselves as an