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Sculpting Time: An Interview with Michael Snow

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SCULPTING TIME
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL SNOW

JUSTIN REMES

"Movies are supposed to move, stupid. Nobody can do a movie with still images."

Thirty years after hearing his childhood friend utter these words, Chris Marker made *La jetée* (1962), a seminal science fiction film constructed almost entirely from still photographs. After its release, avant-garde directors became increasingly interested in challenging the hegemony of movement in cinema. Two filmmakers in particular would become the chief exponents of the cinema of stasis. One is Andy Warhol. His film *Sleep* (1963) features an immobile nude man sleeping for five and a half hours, while *Empire* (1964) consists only of a static shot of the Empire State Building that is held for over eight hours. The other is Michael Snow.

The first artwork that comes to everyone's lips when Snow's name is mentioned is *Wavelength* (1967), an undisputed classic of experimental cinema which pairs an escalating sine wave with a very slow 45-minute zoom from one end of a room to the other. While *Wavelength*'s canonical status is well deserved, the film's fame has unfortunately tended to overshadow many of the other remarkable entries in Snow's oeuvre (which consists not only of films but also of paintings, photographs, sculptures, and jazz music). In particular, one of the most under-theorized elements in Snow's aesthetic is his fascination with stasis. In some of his films, movement is kept to a bare minimum (e.g. *Dripping Water* [1969], co-directed with his wife, Joyce Wieland, in which the only movement portrayed is water dripping into a dish). In other Snow films, however, there is no on-screen movement whatsoever. *One Second in Montreal* (1969) consists only of photographs; *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film* (1970) offers only paintings; and *A Casing Shelved* (1970) is simply a color slide of a bookshelf accompanied by Snow's voice describing the items on it. (Some critics have even questioned whether or not *A Casing Shelved* should be considered a film, since it offers no potential for movement. Of course, if one adopts a more Wittgensteinian approach to defining cinema, one can certainly see the 'family resemblances' between this work and more conventional films.) And one of Snow's most idiosyncratic static films is *So Is This* (1982), in which individual words appear on screen, one at a time, forming jocular self-referential sentences. Since I was interested in learning more about Snow's static films (especially *So Is This*) and the aesthetic that gave rise to them, I conducted an interview with Snow via e-mail. Our correspondence took place between October 2011 and March 2012.

Justin Remes: While many film theorists have seen motion as a necessary condition of cinema, many of your films challenge this view. What underlies your interest in cinematic stasis?

Michael Snow: The basis of cinema as a technology is stasis; the fundamental unit is the still photograph. Motion is made from the perception of fast stills.

Remes: Noël Carroll has argued that *A Casing Shelved* should not be considered a film, since it offers no possibility of movement. In his view, calling this static work a film would "turn family albums into cineplexes." (Along similar lines, at the moment, *A Casing Shelved* is noticeably absent from your filmography on Wikipedia.) Do you agree with Carroll on this point? Or do you find his conception of what "counts" as cinema to be too narrow?

Snow: Yes, *A Casing Shelved* is categorically problematic. However, it *is* a projection on a screen from a 35mm transparent source. There is no movement on the screen, but the movements of the eyes

Michael Snow, *"Rameau's Nephew" by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974). Frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.

of the spectator are directed by the sound – my voice. That there is sound, which *is* a movement in time, is important in considering the work's cinema status. The 'movie' is made by the recorded voice guiding the spectator's eyes over the projected image.

Also, the experience of duration is unenforceable in gallery moving-image installations, so this work has to be shown in a cinema theatre. *A Casing Shelved*, *One Second in Montreal*, and *So Is This* are experienced within the social contract that a spectator makes in going to a cinema theatre. This, of course, comes from the theatre (plays, live performances) but the "contract" is: "Events which will have determined durations usually take place on the screen (stage), and I will sit here and experience these durations."

A curator in Paris once told me that he would like to show *One Second in Montreal* as a looped gallery work. I had to remind him that this would destroy the particular perceptions that the work engendered: that of experiencing durations comparatively. To get anything out of it you have to experience it from its beginning to its end.

Remes: Do you feel there is any affinity between your films and those of Andy Warhol? I ask because he also seems interested in challenging the dominance of movement in cinema with films like *Sleep* and *Empire*. Additionally, he talked about creating a film called *Warhol Bible* (which was never realized) that would have filmed each page of the Bible from beginning to end, essentially blurring the lines between written texts and cinema (in much the way you do in *So Is This*).

Snow: I don't think that there is much affinity. Though some of Warhol's films show something 'theatrical', they are basically documentaries, whereas my films are constructs. Incidentally (though there was definitely no influence), I shot every page of the Toronto Phone book (a total of 2,036 pages, one frame each) in *Triage*, a 2-screen collaboration with Toronto filmmaker Carl Brown in 2004.

The psychology of being filmed is an important part of Warhol's best work, like *Henry Geldzahler* (1964). Even the 'acted' ones draw on casts of eager-to-be-filmed people selected from the inmates of The Factory. Two of Warhol's films (which were actually directed by Ronald Tavel) are memorable: *Screen Test* (1965) and *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1965). They're theatrical documentaries. Most of Warhol's films are fixed camera 'stares'; none of mine are. They're related to his silkscreen 'paintings', which put repeats of the same frame beside each other, whereas in the film, the repeats are shown sequentially.

Michael Snow, LEFT ***A Casing Shelved*** (1970).
ABOVE ***One Second in Montreal*** (1969).
OPPOSITE ***So Is This*** (1982). Frame enlargements.

He and I share some things: most importantly, we were painters. Working on a painting usually involves lots of time spent being static: you do something on the canvas, then you sit and look at what you've done. When the painting seems to be finished, then you look at it for a long time to decide whether it really is finished.

Remes: At one point in *So Is This*, the words on the screen read, "The decision has been made to concentrate on the distinctive capacity of film to structure time." This seems to be central to your cinematic vision. In *So Is This*, some words appear only fleetingly, for a split-second, while other words appear for lengthy periods of time (the word *length* remains on the screen for almost a full minute, for example). One also can't help but think of *One Second in Montreal* here, where the length that individual photographs remain on screen gradually increases, then decreases again. Can you talk about the role of temporality and duration in your films?

Snow: Yes, it'll take time, your time, as much time as you choose to give it. The film medium and its artifacts – camera, filmstrip, and projector – are mechanical clocks, 'ticking' 24 times a second. The base time unit is 1/24th of a second. Specifying durations is a fundamental 'shaping' in making films. Events can happen fast or slowly or in between, and the total length of the film is an important part of the aesthetic of a film. *La Région Centrale* (1971) is three hours, a 24-hour day compressed, but while working on that film, I thought that duration is like weight in sculpture.

"Rameau's Nephew" by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen (1974) is 4½ hours long. It's a monologue/dialogue of talk that, by its temporal monumentality, can find its place in the continuous non-stop global talk. Talk, talk, which is constant everywhere, even here.

I hope that the spectators can savour the many duration forms that happen in *So Is This*. There are spicy ones, salty ones, sweet ones, etc. Durations were specified in the script, and *So Is This* was shot on an animation stand. The number of frames per word and spaces between was precisely indicated. It's composed.

Remes: Given your interest in cinematic duration, I wonder if you have any thoughts on the rise of the digital. Babette Mangolte has argued that digital film "is unable to establish and construct an experiential sense of time passing." Do you agree?

Snow: Depending on the speed and complexity of image movement in cinema, one can more or less see the pulse of 24 frames a second (and this is even clearer with 16 fps). So I think there is a 'clock' quality to cinema (which I hoped would help 'time' the experience of the holds in *One Second In Montreal*). HD video projection, by contrast, is 'timeless', so I agree with an aspect of Babette Mangolte's characterization.

However, about a year ago I saw *Ruhr* (2009) by James Benning. I was very impressed. I've known and liked Benning's work for a long time, and I thought that the 'timeless stasis' of the digital image made his characteristic holds-with-eventual-surprise-movement even more powerful.

Remes: How important is the photochemical medium to your cinematic practice? It strikes me that the images in a film like *One Second in Montreal*, for example, would be perceptually identical to photographs if it were not for the imperfections of the film stock – the aleatory scratches and splotches that occasionally intrude on the image. One might even argue that the stasis you frequently employ draws attention to these 'imperfections', and consequently foreground film's materiality. Is this a part of your aesthetic?

Snow: Ideally, I'd prefer that a screening of *One Second in Montreal* be a new unscratched print, but the little things that intrude usually refer to the passage of the film through the projector. So I think that up to a point these imperfections can participate positively with the spectator's sense of his/her time passing and with filmic time passing.

The photochemical medium has been important to all my 'theatrical' films. But video (DVD, D-Beta, Blu-ray, and HD) has been important in the very different situation of projecting non-stop in an art gallery, where the potential audience is ambulatory.

Remes: I was somewhat surprised to see the prominence of computer-generated imagery in your film **Corpus Callosum* (2002). What prompted this?

Snow: My introduction to film came about from my having the incredible good luck (in 1956) of getting a job where I was learning how to animate. In 1980 I created a section (the first five minutes) of my film

Michael Snow, *SSHTOORRTY* (2005), frame enlargement.

Presents, wherein the entire image was slowly squeezed to become a vertical line, then un-squeezed back to a normal frame proportion. This was done electronically and it made me interested in perhaps making a film that would be composed of stretching and squeezing.

Over a few years, I kept thinking about and making notes for such a film. During that time I was also noting what was happening with electronic imaging. Eventually I saw that the ability to move individual pixels in the image meant that any realistic image could be modified in ways that weren't possible with film. A few more years of musing changed the original intention to the 'stretch and squeeze' of shapes within the image, not just the entire frame. After a few more years, **Corpus Callosum* got made. Its final shot is a little passage of drawn animation that I had done in 1956 which shows the 'impossible' stretching and twisting of a drawn character's leg. In **Corpus Callosum* that kind of shape changing is done to 'real' images, not drawn ones. But the drawn passage was a forerunner.

Remes: Another important element in many of your films is written text, which is often employed in challenging ways. For example, in *So Is This* the constant changes in duration and word size create a destabilizing and desultory reading experience. Further, in your more recent film *SSHTOORRTY* (2005) (or *SHORT STORY*), the superimpositions occasionally result in one subtitle being placed directly over another, making the translation of either expression impossible to make out. (And of course, the title *SSHTOORRTY* itself can present enunciative and semantic challenges.) Can you speak a bit more about the role of written texts in your films?

Snow: Usually the tempo of reading depends on the reader, so it seemed interesting to use film to control the duration of reading because control of duration is a capacity of film, not of a book. Each word in *So Is This* is framed within the same frame so that a short word like *as* is much bigger than a long word like *psychoanalytical*. Though there are lists, most of the text consists of 'normal' sentences with a subject, verb, and object. The hope was that the changes in scale from word to word will help the spectator to see each word as an individual shape, a pictograph, a picture – but also as a shot. Reading, as we learn it, is not 'seeing', not 'regarding', so I wanted to introduce pictorial/design perception as well as 'reading'. The superimposed words in *SSHTOORRTY* are also pictorial – 'shapes' made from words. One level of perception of it and, I guess of all my films, is the understanding that this is a 'construct', that this is a 'picture'.

Remes: You have mentioned your interest in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein in several interviews, and his influence seems especially prominent in the "language games" that you play throughout *So Is This*. What is the relationship of Wittgenstein to your films?

Snow: I can't say that there is any relationship to my films in general. I was particularly interested in his writing during the years I was working on *Rameau's Nephew*. His book *On Certainty* is often hilarious, and his portrayals of little play-events to illustrate the relationships between speech, meaning, and action were influential – as was the aphoristic style of *Zettel*, for example (but I like that in Nietzsche, too). (Your question had me looking at my bookshelf. I haven't examined the several books by Wittgenstein that I have for many years.)

There's no doubt that *Zettel* was an influence on *Rameau's Nephew*. The book is made of fragments of "propositions," which are similar to the series of "propositions" in my film. In *Zettel* each paragraph is an investigatory statement into the nature of language and memory. His discussions often take the form of little 'plays' of quotidian incidents and common speech, much like *Rameau's Nephew*.

One of the aphorisms in *Zettel* which is really pertinent to *Rameau's Nephew* is: "The question: 'What do I mean by that?' is one of the most misleading expressions. In most cases one might answer: 'Nothing at all…I say!'"

Remes: Another passage in *So Is This* states that "there have been several films or videotapes that concentrate on texts, for example Richard Serra, Tom Sherman, Su Friedrich, John Knight and Paul Haines have made excellent use of texts." I find it curious that you do not mention Hollis Frampton here, since his *Poetic Justice* (1972) seems to be one of the most salient examples of text-based cinema. Was *So Is This* inspired at all by *Poetic Justice*? Or are your concerns in *So Is This* qualitatively different from Frampton's?

Snow: The list in *So Is This* was intended to be of films (and videotapes) that featured only text, that had no pictorial element. I'm not conscious of *Poetic Justice* being influential –perhaps because at the time I thought that it worked better as a book ("wouldn't a book be better?")

Hollis and I were close friends. For two or three years, Hollis, me, and my wife, Joyce Wieland, met frequently. He liked her films a lot. Undoubtedly our ideas affected each other's, but this had more to do with direction than specifics. I will say, though, that his starting to use sound (all his films are silent up to 1973 – as were most after 1973) is partly due to my blabbing about sound/image during the four years I was obsessed with *Rameau's Nephew*. Hollis' *(nostalgia)* (1971), a film for which he asked me to record my reading of his text, uses a very *Rameau's Nephew* sound/image idea.

Remes: As far as I know, your last film was released in 2005. Are you still in the business of filmmaking? Are there are any artistic projects (cinematic or otherwise) that you are currently working on?

Snow: Yes, after *SSHTOORTY* (2005), I made *Puccini Conservato* (2008). Although it's a DVD, it is a cinema film. Otherwise, what I've been making are not cinema films, but video installations: *In the Way* (2011), *Piano Sculpture* (2010), *Serve/Deserve* (2010), *The Corner of Braque and Picasso Streets* (2010) and *Condensation: A Cove Story* (2009). Also, from 2002 there's *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)*, which is a video installation, too – and I hope you know about *That/Cela/Dat* (2000) because it's a tri-lingual video installation, son-of-*So-Is-Thisa* . There's also a public commission, *The Windows Suite*, which consists of large plasma screens in several windows of a new building here in Toronto. It's a two-hour loop of many varied scenes that has been shown every night from sunset to 2am since it was installed in 2006.

Amongst the things I'm working on at present: a 60-storey high permanent light installation that will be part of a new skyscraper here in Toronto – The Trump Tower. And in other recent news, I prepared some new (as well as old) work (mostly video installations) for a show at the Jack Shainman gallery in New York, which opened on January 7th, 2012. That show featured a new seven-projection video work, *The Viewing of Six New Works*. Then, from February to April 2012, I had a one-man show at Secession in Vienna consisting of video installations and photographic works (one of which is 8ft. x 32 ft.). I also played a solo piano concert and did four evenings of film screenings at the wonderful Filmmuseum there.

In a year the marvelous Philadelphia Museum will present a retrospective of my photo-works. As of this writing we're working on the selection. In July 2012 the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto will show a retrospective of my sculpture. And the New York MoMA recently acquired two 1970 carousel slide works of mine.

Justin Remes is a Special Lecturer in Film and Literature at Oakland University. An article of his on avant-garde film--entitled "Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis"--was recently published by the British Journal of Aesthetics. He has also published essays in Film-Philosophy and the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture.