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PART ONE

BODIES, LANDSCAPES, REPRESENTATIONS



DAN BROWNE

OBJECTS OF VISION: THE POLYMORPHIC CINEMA OF MICHAEL SNOW

Abstract

This paper explores how the sensory spaces within the works of Michael Snow represent kinesthetic and audile-tactile modes of vision, proposing an integrated form of visuality that functions in tandem with the other senses, relating to the *sensus communis* proposed by Aristotle. While Snow's cinema is often characterized as more objective, technological, and immaterial than the subjective and poetic aesthetic of Brakhage, Snow's films present a similar yet distinctly idiosyncratic paradigm of multisensory perception through their sculptural, deconstructive nature. While Snow's camera lens remains focused on the exterior world, his films present spaces that journey far from the illusory and disembodied nature of the scopic regime that Martin Jay (1988) terms "Cartesian dualism," instead seeking out a unified field of energetic vision through relationships between movement, duration, sight, sound, and the embodied limits of vision itself, and are deeply informed by a sustained multidisciplinary approach.

Key words

Michael Snow; avant-garde cinema; sensus communis; technology; perspective; vision; embodiment; Marshall McLuhan

To assert that Michael Snow is one of the most significant artists in the world today is a statement relatively lacking in controversy. One of only two twentieth century practitioners to be awarded an honorary doctorate from the Sorbonne,¹ Snow's works have left a substantial impact upon all of the various mediums he has utilized over a career spanning six decades, including music, painting, sculpture, photography, sound recording, holography, cinema and video installation. Works by such artists hold significance not only for their aesthetic innovation, but also for their

capacity to shed light upon transformations in paradigms of knowledge, providing insights into relationships of a fundamental nature to the era of their production. The Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan often stated that while most individuals are limited by a “rearview mirror” perspective – where the present is comprehended in terms of past modes of understanding – artists tend to possess greater sensitivity to cultural transformations, resulting in their works appearing uncannily prescient and forward thinking. Just as Erwin Panofsky (1997[1937]) analyzed perspective as an act where “spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign” (Panofsky 1997: 41), there is meaning to be found in reflecting upon the perspectives employed by Snow’s artworks, and how they simultaneously employ and challenge aspects of what Martin Jay (1988) terms a “scopic regime of modernity”: namely, the mode of linear visual representation which Jay terms as “Cartesian perspectivalism,” developed in the Renaissance and largely internalized since that era on a broad level within Western culture, most notably within the cinema and other camera-based arts. As Robert D. Romanyshyn observes, artistic expression provides a mirror “through which we can read the image which an age has of itself and the world [...] not only the ideas which a particular age has about the space of the world and its place within that space, but also the space itself of that world” (Romanyshyn 1989: 32). As a painter, Snow’s works bear correlations with Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, which sought to undo a linear conception of spatiality based on the principles of a fixed perspective and the illusionistic grid of Cartesian space. A similar aesthetic is also apparent in Snow’s sculpture, which appeals to the viewer as an embodied and ambulatory presence, as well as his photography, which deals primarily with the compression of three-dimensional objects to flat surfaces, often utilizing a multiplicity of frames – a technique Anne Friedberg (2006) associates with the contemporary collapse of perspective as a static window into a homogeneous spatial realm. Snow’s films enact similar transformations; yet, as compositions that employ elements of the cinematic apparatus (arguably the preeminent visual technology of modernity) as structural and temporal devices, their aesthetic agendas are not as easily summarized. In this essay I will examine how Snow’s artwork, and most paradigmatically his cinema, presents an interpretation of technology closely connected to McLuhan’s analysis of media as exteriorizations of the sensory faculties of the body. Through the ways in which they suggest perceptual experience to be of an inherently embodied, interrelated and multisensory character, Snow’s works develop an aesthetic that is profoundly rooted within an experience of corporeality, despite their conceptual character. Through the model of the *sensus communis*, a faculty proposed in the writings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas that was later adopted by McLuhan in his analysis of technology, I will demonstrate how Snow’s use of technological forms supports a discourse of embodied experience, through the ways in which his works challenge traditional modes of representation, and the affective modes they generate upon the bodies of spectators.

A recent retrospective of Snow’s sculpture entitled “Objects of Vision” at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2012 offered several substantial insights into themes

within Snow's oeuvre through the ways in which works within the show served as directors of attention – guiding the visual attention of the spectator over, across, through, and sometimes underneath the works. Such a mode of vision differs dramatically from a linear perspective dominated by the logic of a “single and immobile eye” (Panofsky 1997: 29), whereby the visual sense is fragmented into an abstraction that exists independently from the body of the spectator. By contrast, Snow's sculptures consistently evoke a mobile spectator, whose kinesthetic visual interaction provides a ground of meaning for each work, challenging the bias of visibility by eliciting dynamic modes of sight informed in tandem with the other senses. In an interview accompanying the exhibition, Snow observes, “sculpture is something that may be static, but the spectator moves” (AGO, 2012). *Transformer* (1982), a large tree suspended horizontally and sharpened to a point at one end, is an examination of shape that asks to be seen by a movement along its surface, a linear action that ultimately sends the gaze beyond the limits of the piece, rather than towards its centre. *Core* (1982–84), by contrast, is a cylindrical shape that requires the viewer to enact a circling movement around its space to be seen. In *Seated Sculpture* (1982) and *Blind* (1968), the limitations of visual experience are foregrounded through tactile, material obstructions that redirect sight to an interiorized state – generated via direct physical contact by sitting in *Seated Sculpture*, or by the mingling of bodies within the spatial grid provided by *Blind*. In both instances, the work achieves its completed through the inclusion of the spectator's body – a contestation of the detached, objective conception of the optical observer. Several other works within the exhibition deal directly with the constrictions of monocular vision and the experience of blindness, a subject of significant interest to Snow due to his personal experience at a young age with the gradual loss of his father's vision. *Zone* (1982) is a pyramid-like shape representing the externalized visual field as a transparent container, an object of limited scope that is lacking in substance and trained only at a blank wall. *Monocular Abyss* (1982) contains a complete darkness within a small aperture, and while it extends to the floor and therefore can be seen as externally limited in scope, its interior is a space that cannot be visually judged. In this sense, the piece functions as an inversion of the notion of the *camera obscura*, challenging the fundamental assumption of presence that underlies the act of sight. The window, a characteristic metaphor for Renaissance images, is evoked by *Sight, NYC* (1968), which replaces the clarity of glass with a darkened surface offering only a small, diagonal transparent section. The view through this cutout does not lead elsewhere, but instead remains within the space of the exhibition – a reconfiguration that transforms embodied space into a visual field, foregrounding the inevitable abstraction from the real that extends from the process of representation itself. In an interview with R. Bruce Elder, Snow remarks on the piece:

The view through *Sight* becomes part of the work, by its becoming an image in a determinate setting. I don't think that what's seen through the aperture has the characteristics of an object. The scene [...] becomes less 'solid' and

actual and more of an image under the influence of its context. The circumscribing boundaries are definite, an object, but what is seen is not a 'thing'. (1994: 229)

It may be appropriate to interpret Snow's use of the term "object" as shorthand for "objection", given that he contrasts this term against "thing", a word whose etymology originally connoted a trial or judiciary. Indeed, it is appropriate to note a sense of protest in Snow's works against an oversimplified reading of the subject-object relations such forms traditionally manifest. Snow foregrounds the perceptual relationship between art object and spectator, denoting the 'subject' of the work as a process transformed by an evolving dialogue with the viewer, as opposed to something formed out of discrete units established in advance and operating in isolation. Such connections also form a common theme in his photography, which often deals with the potentials of kinesthetic movement for transforming visual spatial experience (i.e. *Crouch Leap Land*, 1970; *Venetian Blind*, 1970; *Plus Tard*, 1977), and the multisensory responses evoked by a plurality of media contained within a single format (i.e. *Sink*, 1970; *Midnight Blue*, 1973–74; *Cover To Cover*, 1975; *Door*, 1979). Within both approaches, a range of sensory data is necessitated in order to come to an understanding of the reality employed by a particular representational system. Snow dealt with the capacities for a particular medium to shape and express meaning within a work most notably through his *Walking Woman* series (1961–67), in which he recast a single form, consistent in size and shape, within many different materials and contexts. The *Walking Woman* series can in many regards be interpreted as an extension of Duchamp's descending nude in its dynamic and fluid polymorphism, furthering the depiction of the body as subject to temporal flux by placing it beyond the limits of a bounded frame, as the stencil figure used by Snow was recast in a multiplicity of shifting environments over many years. While the legacy of Renaissance-based perspective served to produce a visual field wherein objects were related and judged by a form of vision contained within a fixed arena and thus abstracted from the body, Snow's sculptures and photographs invariably emphasize their size, dimensions and material in relation to the physicality of the spectator, suggesting that the body forms a fundamental component of exchange within the process of art. Among his non-temporal works that evoke this relationship most strongly is *The Squerr (Ch'art)* (1978), a painting originally derived from a photograph, depicting a seemingly innocuous grid that on closer inspection is found to not be square but slightly warped, possessing the distortions that would result from the vantage point of a camera lens or eye. The embodied perspective of *The Squerr (Ch'art)* goes so far as to even include subtly painted green afterimages that reproduce the residual optical effects experienced by a spectator from looking at its red lines – the work thus not only draw attention to the inevitable distortions that are generated through processes of mediation, but further contends that the body must be understood as a primary mediation for all perceptual activity, an inescapable condition of the world.

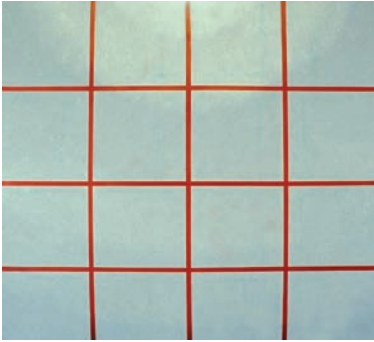


Figure 1. *The Squerr (Ch'art)* (1978), oil on canvas, 194.7 × 209.2 × 5.5 cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada



Figure 2. *Crouch, Leap, Land* (1970), 3 black and white photographs, perspex, metal, suspended, 140 × 36 cm each, total dimensions 161 × 36 cm.
Collection: Art Gallery of Toronto



Figure 3. Pages excerpted from the book *Cover to Cover* (1975), book, 23 × 18 cm, published by the Press of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design and New York University Press

Despite the character of Snow's sculpture and photography, the contention that his films prioritize embodied sensory experience is hardly a standard claim in many critical assessments, for his cinematic works are most often considered in terms relating to its structural, conceptual and technical qualities – notions connected to intellectual rather than sensual experiences.² Borrowing Deleuze's analysis of the

North American avant-garde as seeking to develop a sort of “gaseous perception” (Deleuze 1986: 84) through their adherence to the aesthetics of Dziga Vertov, Laura U. Marks suggests the works of Snow and other structuralist filmmakers seek to “free perception from subjectivity” (2000: 61). In many regards, Snow’s filmmaking can be distinctly contrasted with the works of another figure of immense importance within the North American avant-garde, who sought to prioritize embodied experience above all else: the highly Romantic, poetic filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Given their predilection towards foregrounding elements of the technologies involved in their construction, Snow’s films do not necessarily suggest embodied experience to be their primary focus, yet the notion Snow and Brakhage’s aesthetics are irreconcilable is an overly reductive characterization,³ and it is my contention that such an analysis neglects their most profound and substantial features. To resolve this discrepancy, which obscures the significance of phenomenological modes of inquiry within Snow’s cinema, further clarification is required on the distinctions between Brakhage’s and Snow’s conceptions of the body. Brakhage’s works celebrate proprioceptive and internal forms of subjective vision; their compositional arrangements seek to recreate the spontaneity encountered through creative, generative visionary experience – an aesthetic strongly influenced by the poet Charles Olson, who proposed unification of form and content through the embodied energies of the poet: “a poem is energy transferred [...] a high energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge”⁴ (Olson 1967: 52). Brakhage’s cinema is therefore firmly embedded within a present tense, first-person sensation of embodiment that aspires to prefigure the impositions and limitations of language, as he makes clear in his artistic manifesto, *Metaphors on Vision*:

Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. (2001: 12)

Brakhage’s cinema holds the relationship between physical sensation and the realm of objects that exist “before the ‘beginning was the word’” (12) as its primary subject – an intersection of his deep commitment to both Romantic and Modernist modes of artistic practice. By contrast, Snow’s cinema is primarily organized around formal structures relating to the capacities of the technologies utilized within their creation: camera and lens movement in *Standard Time* (1967), *Wavelength* (1967) and *Back and Forth* (1969), synchronization and de-synchronization of image and sound in *Rameau’s Nephew...* (1974), distortions and interventions within the plasticity of representation, as seen in *Presents* (1980–81) and **Corpus Callosum* (2002), and the capacities of montage, invoked not in service of expressing an inner realm of imagination, but as a system for the categorization of material worldly objects, as evinced by the second section of *Presents*, *To Lavoisier, Who Died in the Reign of Terror* (1991), and *Triage* (2004). As such, Snow’s work engages and simultaneously challenges traditions

of both modernism and postmodernism (Elder 1989: 399).⁵ However, to better contextualize the significance of Snow's cinema aesthetic, it is necessary to again consider his multidisciplinary practices, the importance of which he noted in a 1967 artistic statement (the same year *Wavelength* was released):

My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a painter, music by a filmmaker, paintings by a sculptor, sculpture by a filmmaker, films by a musician, music by a sculptor... sometimes they all work together. Also, many of my paintings have been done by a painter, sculpture by a sculptor, films by a filmmaker, music by a musician. There is a tendency towards purity in all of these media as separate endeavours. (1994: 26)

A career as a jazz pianist and trumpet player being among his earliest artistic ventures, Snow has performed as both a solo artist and with the ensemble CCMC since the mid-1970s, and his body of work as a musician has extended improvised free jazz to dizzying heights by dealing exclusively with the type of spontaneous compositional forms that appear from a superficial reading as antithetical to his cinema. CCMC's music lacks impositions of conceptual structures, harmonic, rhythmic, or temporal restrictions beyond an intuitive, exploratory approach shared by the musicians (of whom Snow is the only remaining original member) through years of fluid, self-regulating performances. In CCMC's music, any possible element may be added or combined, and Snow has commented on how this unique form emerged from the constraints of a more standard jazz format out of a desire to transcend the limits imposed by the framework of a single tempo (Shedden and Shaw 1994). Such departures reveal an innate trust in embodied gesture and a highly sensitized ability to react to the interplay of spontaneous flows of energy. While Snow is sometimes hesitant to ascribe a strong degree of interrelatedness between the aesthetics of his sonic and visual oeuvres, he has explicitly used this style of free jazz twice in his films: *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964), an adaptation of the Walking Woman series, and *Reverberlin* (2007), a CCMC concert 'documentary' that contrasts an audio recording of the group in Berlin with images composed from a pastiche of other performances from a variety of locations and time periods.⁶ Yet the shifting colour palettes in *Wavelength*, the crescendos of movement in *Back and Forth* and *La Region Centrale*, and the montage sequence of mobile glimpses in *Presents* are nothing if not musical in nature. Furthermore, the thematic concern of multiple tempos and asynchronous performance is a core attribute within relations of sound and image in nearly all of Snow's films – an investigation conducted most exhaustively in *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974), Snow's first "talking" picture, in which an episodic structure evokes different subversions of traditional relations of synchronization. Both *New York Eye and Ear Control* and *Reverberlin* employ their use of music without relying on clichés of synch sound, presenting instead two simultaneous unfoldings – hence the term "Eye and Ear Control," which denotes a distinction between image and sound that is only united in the final act of

perception.⁶ In moments where the images and sounds align in synchronistic fashion in these works, the effect produced is one of heightened interest, rather than the dismissal of one form as merely supporting the mimetic nature of the other, as is too often the case with sound and music in cinema. Snow's use of sound in his films is deeply related to his conception of how cinema interprets and represents embodied experience – in the description for **Corpus Callosum* (2002), he describes the low-pitched electronic drones which fill the bulk of the soundtrack as representing “the nervous system” of the work.



Figure 4. Still image from *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young)* by Wilma Schoen (1974), 4.5 hours, 16 mm



Figure 5. Still images from *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964), 34 minutes, 16 mm

New York Eye and Ear Control was completed the same year McLuhan published his seminal text *Understanding Media* (1964), and several congruencies can be noted between Snow and McLuhan's aesthetics that help illuminate the relationship of Snow's cinema to issues of embodiment and sensory experience. McLuhan's primary contention was that the linear technologies of print and the phonetic alphabet had been responsible for a fragmentation of the human senses, by privileging an abstract continuous visual space over the acoustic, oral and polyphonic forms that previously existed within tribal societies; the development of electric media for McLuhan represented a return to these earlier acoustic, resonant forms. Yet McLuhan's approach to the senses was not based in a fragmented analysis of shifts within the physiology of sense perception (as many critics often mistakenly interpret), but rather sought to consider how the balanced interplay of sense activity was governed, and how such sensory ratios could be altered over time. To examine this, McLuhan invoked the notion of the *sensus communis*, a term originating with Aristotle (384–322 BCE) that is also found in accounts of sensory experience by the Islamic scholar Avicenna (c. 980–1037) and medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Immanuel Kant would later conceive of the *sensus communis* through its Roman conception, as a transcendental source of aesthetic judgment; yet for Giambattista Vico, it was a faculty governing the basis of living and practical judgment, relating to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (Hance 1997: 136), a notion shared by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who similarly defined it as the sense that founds community (2004: 20). In Book III of *De Anima*, Aristotle proposes the *sensus communis* as a means for developing a holistic ontology of human experience; its function is to render the information of the other senses explicate to consciousness. In contemporary terms, the *sensus communis* seeks to address what is known in cognitive science as the "binding problem": how our minds are able to associate distinct qualities obtained through different sensory faculties as segregated or combined in nature, given that various stimuli such as colour, shape and motion are thought to be processed via distinct neural pathways (Revonsuo and Newman 1999). Aristotle writes that each sense "is relative to its particular group of sensible qualities: it is found in a sense-organ as such and discriminates the differences which exist within that group" (1991: 284). He suggests the means by which we form a total awareness of sense data, such as the ability to distinguish different sensations that cannot be compared directly (ie. "white" and "sweet"), is through an additional meta-sense, which he terms "*koine aisthesis*" – translated into Latin as *sensus communis*, meaning literally "common sense." For Aquinas, this faculty "is a certain power at which all sensory alterations terminate. [...] It perceives the sensory alterations themselves and distinguishes between sense objects of different senses" (1990: 206). Thus, for Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as for McLuhan, the *sensus communis* forms an integral component of consciousness, serving as the connective bridge through which "all sensible qualities are related" (McLuhan and Nevitt 1972: 96). Aristotle compares the *logos* of the senses to a lyre, in analogy to their adjustment and pitch, and observes that if its strings are struck too hard the result is a loss in tun-

ing. Thus, if a sense becomes over-stimulated, its proportion (or ratio) is lost, and its mode of experiencing is altered. McLuhan intuited that the *sensus communis* is not only trained, acquiring habits based upon context, but also that such conditions are directly related to the re-orderings of communication environments generated by new technologies (1968: 136). McLuhan suggested that humans lack a necessary capacity due to their development as a species reliant on interpreting their surroundings through technological mediation – forms that extend the senses, but lack the responsive feedback of internal bodily functions (2009: 207). Based on its capacity to act as a completion mechanism for sensory activity, McLuhan proposed that technology ought to be considered an intrinsic aspect of the human *sensorium*, interpreting the world at a remove from direct embodiment but nonetheless extending it within a unified field. Technology, for McLuhan, is therefore an extension of the *sensus communis*, forming an integral part of human perception and consciousness.⁷ In a letter written to his friend and associate Walter J. Ong, he relates his entire project of media literacy towards establishing this one essential truth, comparing a technologized *sensus communis* to a common sense that has been literally placed outside the grasp of the individual, and which can be reclaimed only by developing an awareness of media effects – “A *sensus communis* for external senses is what I’m trying to build” (McLuhan 1987: 281).

It is here that we find significant overlap between McLuhan and Snow, for what Snow accomplishes in his works – and perhaps most methodically within his cinema – is no less than an experimental taxonomy of the sensory effects of media, and the relation of their forms to the embodied experience of the spectator. Arthur Kroker has observed that the legacy of Canadian communications theorists such as McLuhan, Harold Innis and George Grant, offers us “a highly original, comprehensive and eloquent discourse on technology,” (1984: 7) and Snow’s work is productively situated within this context. Snow’s cinema and photography is preoccupied with the ontological consequences of the camera upon the embodied act of vision; like Vertov, who sought to uncover what truths were possible through the mechanical interventions of the “kino-eye”, Snow observes the ways in which cameras simultaneously “intensify and diminish aspects of normal vision and they ‘set apart’ those aspects for possible examination” (Snow 1994: 221). Walter Benjamin similarly described how such functions expose and open up new territories for perceptual exploration in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended [...] Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man [...] The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (1969: 236–237)

Unlike the conventions of mainstream cinema, which invoke such transformations in the service of a temporal and spatial continuity to convey a narrative

structure, Snow's cinema prioritizes such qualities of the apparatus as perceptual ends in and of themselves, investigating their effects on the body by foregrounding their movements, stillnesses and durations. Laura U. Marks (2000) contends that cinematic representations of haptic experiences form a strategy through which filmmakers addressing notions of diaspora are able to accurately craft representations of their subjects; similarly, in considering Snow's cinema, it is beneficial to keep in mind McLuhan's contention that a sense of diaspora can be felt by all inhabitants of the modern world within the context of ceaselessly changing mediated environments – on account of modern communications technologies, “all of us today are displaced persons.” (McLuhan 2003: 2) Just as McLuhan suggested the sensation of touch operates not as a discrete sense but rather as “the very interplay of the senses” (1962: 83), the invocation of haptic and kinesthetic experiences within the cinema can be understood as a means for crafting the reconstitution of a spectator who is otherwise perceptually trapped within a mechanized field of fragmented image and sound – a pair of eyes and ears, without a body. *Wavelength* (1967), *Standard Time* (1967), *Back and Forth* (1969), and *La Region Centrale* (1971) all present systematic classifications of movements made possible by the mechanized cinematic vision of the camera eye, and while these works are on one level easily described by the structural forms they utilize, their effects serve to render concept into percept (in McLuhan's terms) – a movement from intellect to body, as Snow has stated:

I really want to make physical things so that the experience is a real experience and not just conceptual [...] there are ideas in the works, but there are also body affects, like the panning, for example in *Back and Forth*. I've seen someone get sick and people have fainted with *La Region Centrale*, so I must be doing something right. (In Totaro and Habib 2002)

Within each of these works, embodied gestures generate sublime and profound moments of insight. In *Wavelength*, subtle rifts are produced by the hand-manipulated quality of the zoom, which is not smooth and continuous (as often believed by film scholars, who read about the film more often than actually viewing it), but filled with subtle tremors, starts, and stops. These are further echoed by the tactile pleasures of changes in colour filtration and light flares that taint the film stock. In *Back and Forth*, the slapping sound generated by the camera generated as it impacts physically upon the limits of the panning space provides a physical resonance to the visual activity, a feature that is similarly expressed by the scanning radio dial in the soundtrack of *Standard Time*. Even *La Region Centrale*, in which the movements are entirely controlled by a machine operates independent of a human body that is unable to photograph itself, the images produced by the shadow of the camera serve to ground the movements of the film from the highly disorienting physical effects of its extreme velocities and trajectories, and the white “X” inter-title – the only element not in a state of constant dynamic motion – sometimes appears to float and rise across the screen in an optical illusion

resulting from the perceptual contrast between its stasis and the camera motion preceding it. While each of these films are comprised of spatial forms that can be easily mapped within a system of Cartesian coordinates, the experiences produced by their movements generate results that transcend such formulations. In *Wavelength*, the progression of the zoom moves not towards the windows of the loft wall, but instead collides with a two-dimensional image of waves – a shift from spatial depth to surface, yet a surface that is simultaneously in a state of suspended, rapturous flux. In *Back and Forth*, the speed reached by the camera panning turns the objects of the room into a combined field of blurs, described by Snow as a desire “to make it become all one energy field” (in Totaro and Habib 2002) and thus transcend visual fragmentation through movement. Such an effect is comparable to the methods invoked by Sufi dervishes, who employ a constant whirling body motion to enter into a trance-like state, wherein newfound sensitivities of embodiment hold forth a transformative potential. This is similarly at the root of the experience of *La Region Centrale*, which R. Bruce Elder observes evokes a process whereby “consciousness merges with the totality of matter” (1989: 398), and whose movements effect a shift from an earthbound perspective to one that Snow describes as “cosmic”, echoing the technical concerns and advancements of the era in which it was made, its motion invoking the orbital movements of a satellite-mediated environment – “It starts out *here*, respecting the gravity of our situation but it more and more sees as a planet does” (Snow 1971: 61). Bill Simon writes that *La Region Centrale* is a “masterwork not simply of landscape, but also of the complex problems of representing landscape in the modern era” (1979: 93), its de-centering transcending a perspectival system based in exteriority: “The classical tradition of the fixed viewpoint of observation towards space [...] is very strongly contested” (97). Such techniques correspond to the capacity of artworks to function as what McLuhan terms an *anti-environment*: foregrounding the ways in which media transform perception as a means for counteracting the numbing of the senses that result from such environments. McLuhan saw artists as uniquely able to fulfill such a capacity through their abilities to generate perceptual insights that engender greater awareness of the environmental conditions of media:

One of the functions of the artist that is understood in recent decades is that it is, above all, to prevent us from becoming adjusted to our environment. [...] The job of the artist is dislocation of sensibility to prevent us from becoming adjusted to total environments, and to becoming the servant and robots of those environments. That may sound paradoxical. The phrase is from Rimbaud: “*un...dérèglement de tous les sens.*” The job of the artist is to upset all the senses, and thus to provide new vision and new powers of adjusting to and relating to new situations. (2003: 223)

Snow’s films often invoke anti-environmental conditions through their lengths, a quality reflecting his concerns as a sculptor.⁹ While *Wavelength* and *Back and*

Forth both run less than one hour – nonetheless an extended length for the minimal actions and events they contain – *La Region Centrale* is three hours, and *Rameau's Nephew* stretches four and a half hours. Snow also addresses duration not only by the length of his films, but through their structured approaches towards time. In *One Second in Montreal* (1969), a series of twenty-four still photographs of a snowstorm are presented in successions that grow increasingly and then decreasingly in length, foregrounding their temporality in the absence of any movement. The result contrasts the experience of embodied spectatorship with the effect generated by cinematic duration – we are reminded of our bodies sitting inert within the darkened theatre,¹⁰ something normally avoided in the realm of 'motion' pictures, given that reminding viewers of their corporeality risks inspiring them to get up and leave. A similar use of duration is utilized to invoke perceptual movement in *A Casing Shelved* (1970), through the interplay of a single 35mm slide presenting a set of shelves in the artist's studio with an accompanying audio track that guides the viewer through the image, activating it into a 'motion' picture through the reading generated via the interplay of sound and image, as each object is subjected to a process of rigorous categorization and analysis that also serves to critique the limits of a merely visual explanation. *A Casing Shelved* challenges the fundamental constitution of what a film can be, proposing that in the same way that cinematic movement exists in the experience of the spectator blending a discrete series of still images into a continuous, dynamically moving image through a perceptual leap of faith, it is similarly possible to experience cinema with only one sustained image, as long as a combination of experiences between image, sound, and their tactile interplay is possible. *So Is This* (1982) subvert notions of cinematic movement in a similar but entirely different manner, through a form consisting entirely of words presented on screen one at a time that necessitates dynamic interactivity by compelling viewers to actively read each word in quick (or sometimes slow) succession. The film's focus lies not only in the dynamically shifting meanings of the words but also their formal qualities of size and shape, as well as small incongruities in the letters themselves and the colour balance of the film stock – drawing forth a tension between content and form, concept and percept, language and embodiment. *So Is This* is also one of Snow's most musical works – the entire composition is scored by rhythmic notation, akin to sheet music, that dictates how long each word appears and how many frames of black divide them. Multisensory experiences are further evoked by simultaneous suggestions and negations of representation with the work: in one passage, words spell out the beginning of the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," followed by "clap clap clap," and it is difficult not to hear Judy Garland's voice play out inside one's head, despite the fact that the film is entirely silent.

Another significant aspect within Snow's films that consistently addresses issues of embodiment is his use of space as a site of signification and meaning governed not merely by a distanced and objective visual sense, but that maintains the ability to intrude upon and impact the subjects of its gaze through the act of seeing itself. Shifting from his earlier works dealing strictly with effects of camera movement

upon visual representation, *Breakfast (Table Top Dolly)* (1972–76) examines the camera's physical impact in crafting an image in literal terms, as it collides with a still life arranged on a table. This kinetic relationship is furthered in *Presents* (1980–81), a film composed of two main sections exploring modes of physical image transformation, the first of which features two actors traversing a highly constructed set that shifts and sways in wobbling fashion as the characters move through its space – what would normally be achieved via camera tracking is accomplished here by the entire set being moved, in accordance with directions shouted from off screen. This process foregrounds the physicality of camera motion on space by reversing the traditional relation between subject and lens – the tactic has acoustic consequences as well, as the moving set causes a record player providing a Bach cello suite as soundtrack to skip uncontrollably – and this reaches its culmination as the camera assumes centre stage and proceeds to “act” in the film by intervening, smashing into the various objects in a fashion similar to *Breakfast (Table Top Dolly)*. *Presents* thus offers a metaphor of vision as an intrusive, tactile process, akin to the theory of *extramission* posited by the ancient Greeks, in which light rays are emitted from the eyes and strike objects in order to be able to see them. The disembodied cinematic spectator that has previously remained inert is suddenly implicated in full physical presence, and is ultimately revealed to be the filmmaker himself, the driving force behind the camera who is glimpsed in the reflection of the plexiglass barrier that impacts and destroys the objects one after another. This ontological relationship is developed further in **Corpus Callosum* (2002), a digitally-created work which expands on the themes of stretching and squeezing addressed by the opening sequence of *Presents*, in which an image of a traditional reclining nude is slowly distorted in height and width through video manipulation. These transformations make it clear how arbitrary the nature of normal representational spatial relations are, as possible only through precise technical calibrations that remain static and objective only due to the symbolic conventions of a particular form of perspective, yet, when activated, become dynamically changing forces that reshape representation in the same manner as the camera-eye distorts vision. **Corpus Callosum* uses a highly structured, set-like environment in a manner similar to *Presents*, populated by models whose theatrically plastic movements implicate the constructed fashion of the *mise-en-scène* and are similarly directed by Snow's off screen directorial voice. As a statement on the technologized *sensus communis* in the era of digital media, it presents a series of metaphors suggesting bridges between brain activity (the corpus callosum is the region in the brain that connects the two hemispheres, acting as a “mediator”), computers, and processes of transmutation and transference between bodies in which the malleability of space-time posed by cinematic language effects a form of alchemy on the physical world where opposites merge and combine. Significantly, all the computer animated interventions within the film – including the stretching and squeezing of bodies and appendages, magnetic forces and electric shocks – are not experienced by the performers onscreen as visual stimuli, but instead relate directly to their bodies on a predominantly tactile level.

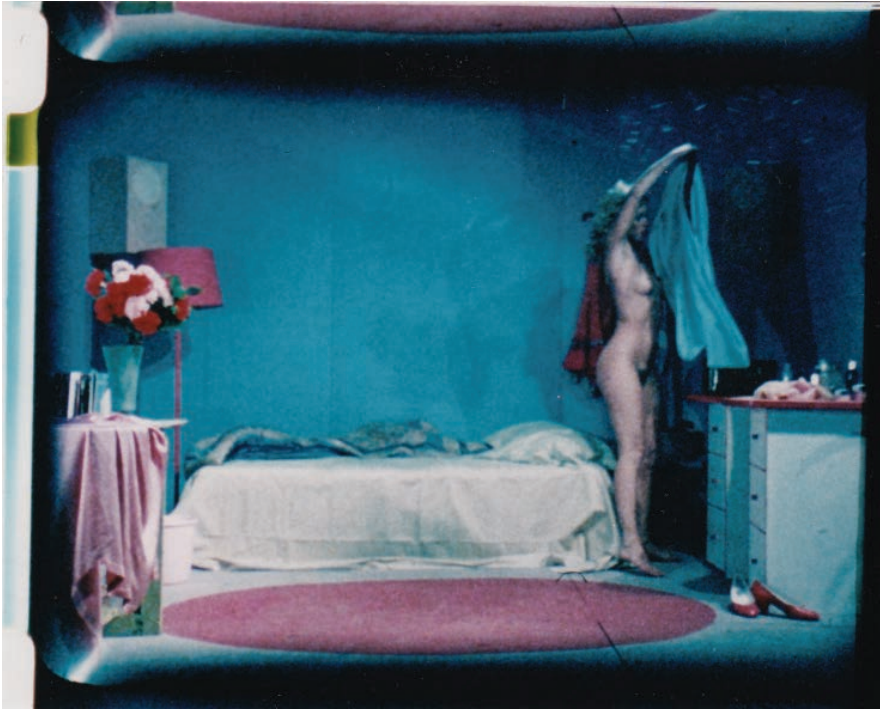


Figure 6. Still image from *Presents* (1980–81), 90 minutes, 16mm



Figure 7. Still image from **Corpus Callosum* (2002), 92 minutes, digital video

While it is tempting to view the multiplicity of spaces depicted in *Presents* and **Corpus Callosum* (as well as *WVLNT, Wavelength For Those Who Don't Have the Time*, 2003, and *SSHTOORRTY*, 2005) and their contrast with the representational austerity of Snow's earlier works as symptomatic of Rosalind Krauss's assessment that the era of video is "the end of medium-specificity," and that, in the age of television, "we inhabit a post-medium condition" (1999: 31), such a prognosis is confounded by Snow's last two cinematic works utilizing the format of 16mm film stock, both of which are collaborations with Carl Brown, a Canadian filmmaker whose work is dedicated to the intricate exploration of material transformations within the chemistry of film stocks. In *To Lavoisier, Who Died in the Reign of Terror* (1991), Snow presents a range of everyday activities photographed from angles that relate to the hours of a clock; these images are transformed through chemical intrusions and material abrasions on the surface of the filmstrip to create a series of representations dealing explicitly with the inherently embodied nature of representation. Dedicated to Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794), who provided the first accurate scientific account of fire, *To Lavoisier* addresses notions regarding the embodiment of the film medium as a whole in terms that are highly materialist; this address can be seen to form a response to the aesthetic contrast provided by the rise of video in the 1980s and 1990s, which bears a less directly tactile form of indexicality and a more immaterial relation to the subjects it represents. In *Triage* (2004), a unique dual-projection collaboration with Brown, Snow presents a complete taxonomy of the material world – through kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species – at an accelerated pace in which nearly every frame is a distinct image, generating a barrage of representation that resembles a flicker film in its physical impact. In both works, Snow continues to explore elements of a particular nature to the apparatus of the film medium – the chemistry of film stocks, the flicker of the projector – and how its effect as a tool of artistic representation can challenge and inform qualities of embodied perceptual activity.

Panofsky saw linear perspective as "a translation of psychophysiological space into a mathematical space [...] an objectification of the subjective" (1997: 66). While the nature of Cartesian perspectivalism supported a rational and unchanging epistemology, leading to a reduced view of the significance of the body in lieu of externalized instruments that could render more accurate measurements, its irreducibility persists despite its displacement through technological forms. As McLuhan made clear, technology is never more than an extension of ourselves, and to truly benefit from its use we must first (re-)discover our own corporeality as a primary mediation. In the search for a more conscious relationship to our tools, perspective can equally act as a beneficiary, as Panofsky observes:

Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine. (1997: 72)

Artworks are preeminently suited to enact such transformations, generating new forms of awareness through the lenses they present. It is towards the development of the inherent sensual, embodied nature of technology to which the cinema and artworks of Michael Snow contribute. In the words of his colleague Hollis Frampton, such an accomplishment is of a substantial nature indeed:

If the Lumières are Lascaux, then we are, now, in the Early Historical Period of film. It is a time of invention. One of little more than a dozen living inventors of film arts is Michael Snow. His work has already modified our perception of past film. Seen or unseen, it will affect the making and understanding of film in the future. This is an astonishing situation. It is like knowing the name and address of the man who carved the Sphinx. (2009: 190)

Notes

- 1 The other recipient is Pablo Picasso.
- 2 For an analysis of this critical reception, see Testa (1995: 44–45, fn. 75). However, it is important to note that I am far from the first to suggest such a reading – many of the most insightful interpretations of Snow’s cinema have taken such an approach, including Annette Michelson’s seminal essay “Towards Snow” (first published in *Artforum*, 1971), which argued for the importance of a phenomenological appreciation of Snow’s work, as well as Bill Simon (1979), R. Bruce Elder (1989, 1995), William C. Wees (1992) and Randolph Jordan (2002).
- 3 While the juxtaposition offers an insightful reading of Snow’s aesthetic break with the lyrical film (see Michelson 1971), it is my contention that the two are more productively viewed as complementary rather than opposite in nature. This latter, dualistic perspective was in fact promoted by Brakhage himself for some time, who was dismissive towards Snow’s use of premeditated compositional structures – a position held until the mid-1990s, at which time his perspective shifted and, in a lengthy personal letter to Snow, a reconciliation was reached.
- 4 For more on the connection between the embodied poetics of Olson and Brakhage, see Elder (1998: 348).
- 5 A similar contention can be made regarding the oeuvre of Marshall McLuhan.
- 6 This structural innovation was devised due to the fact that no visual recording of the concert existed, and, while it may be intuited that Snow’s motivation to create such a project had to do with the lack of sufficient documentation of CCMC’s improvised performances (which often disappear immediately after the moment of their creation, save for their traces as memories for the performers and audiences) the result is impressive. As a further anecdote: I recorded some of the footage used in *Reverberlin*, featuring John Oswald on saxophone during a performance at Hart House in Toronto, using the camera in an expressionistic, Brakhagean style, and employing a great deal of movement and blurs to convey the energy of the performance. I was surprised to find that the section utilized in the film included parts where I had accidentally applied in-camera filters (negative, solarization) that could not be removed from the footage – Snow’s appreciation and incorporation of these errors into the final product of *Reverberlin* further demonstrates his respect for spontaneous gesture.
- 7 Such fragmentation is akin to the manner in which John Cage and Merce Cunningham orchestrated performances of their music and choreography to coexist in space and time without necessitating a pre-calculated causal relationship, emphasizing the perceptual and sensual experience of the event over conceptual, intellectually dominated forms of comprehension.

- 8 Thus, while some would argue that the contemporary level of technological integration is
 resulting in the creation of “post-human” beings, McLuhan would counter by stating it is
 only through the act of technological intervention that we became “human” in the first place.
 9 As he observes in a recent interview with Justin Remes in *Millennium Film Journal*, “dur-
 ation is like weight in sculpture” (2013: 18).
 10 This is also foregrounded by the title of *Seated Figures* (1988).

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