

# Wavelength

(1967)

A film by Michael Snow

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

Northwest Film Forum

Co-presented by Third Eye Cinema and The Sprocket Society

Seattle, WA

# This Evening's Program

## *Wavelength* (1967)

45 min. / 16mm / color / sound (sync, originally on tape)

New print, restored version

### *Credits*

Act: Amy Taubin, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Lynn Crossman, Naoto Nakagawa, Roswell Rudd.

Aid: Ken Jacobs. Snd: Ted Wolff.

### *Awards*

1967: Grand Prize, EXPRMNTL 4 (Knokke International Experimental Film Festival, *Knokke-le-Zoute* Belgium)

2000: 100 Best Films of the 20th Century, *Village Voice* Critics Poll

2006: Masterwork, Audio-Visual Preservation Trust, Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television

*Wavelength* was shot in one week Dec. '66 preceded by a year of notes, mutterings. It was edited and first print seen in May '67. I wanted to make a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings and aesthetic ideas. I was thinking of planning for a time monument in which beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure Film space and time, a balancing of 'Unison' and 'Fact', all about seeing. The space starts at the camera's (spectator's) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind).

The film is a continuous zoom which takes 45 minutes to go from its widest field to its smallest and final field. It was shot with a fixed camera from end of an 80 foot loft, shooting the other end, a row of windows and the street. This, the setting, and the action which takes place are cosmically equivalent. The room (and the zoom) are interrupted by 4 human events including a death. The sound on these occasions is sync sound, music and speech, occurring simultaneously with an electronic sound, a sine wave which goes from its lowest (50 cycles per second) note to its highest (12000 c.p.s.) in 40 minutes. It is a total glissando while the film is a crescendo and a dispersed spectrum which attempts to utilize the gifts of both prophecy and memory which only film and music have to offer.

– Personal statement on *Wavelength* for EXPRMNTL 4, *Knokke-le-Zoute*, Belgium, 1967.

## *Breakfast (Table-Top Dolly)* (1976)

15 min. / 16mm / color / sound

Shot in 1972 and shelved until 1976, when sound and editing problems were solved. All the varied and unusual motions visible on the screen are the result of a single camera movement. – MS

“*Wavelength* before breakfast. A continuous zoom traverses the space of a breakfast table, serving as a grand metaphor for indigestion.”

– Deke Dusinberre

“In *Breakfast*, the camera (behind an invisible plexiglass shield) dollies toward an untidy still life of breakfast items and slowly pushes the objects along the table until they tip over, tumble off, or are smashed against the wall at the far end of the table.”

– William C. Wees. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Univ. of California Press, 1992).

“I want to make physical things so that the experience is a real experience and not just conceptual. Of course, there are ideas in the works, but they are also body affects, like the panning in *Back and Forth*, for example. Some of my films have caused riots, fights, all kinds of things. People have fainted viewing *La Région Centrale*. So I must be doing something right.”

– Michael Snow

## A Conversation with Michael Snow

By Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney

Excerpt. First published in *Film Culture* 46 (Autumn 1967, published October 1968). Reprinted in *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), pp. 40-46.

(Late in the night on August 15, 1968 Michael Snow showed us the rough cut of a film in progress, approximately one hour long, in which a camera fixed to a tripod in a schoolroom pans continuously left-right-left-right, sometimes with actions and sometimes with only the empty room. Following the screenings we asked him to describe his film career.)

*Snow:* I made my first film in 1956 or '57. I was painting before that. I did not make another one until '63. It was in Toronto and we (Joyce Wieland, his wife, and himself) actually met while working at a film company, which was the first company to make TV commercials in Canada. It was also headed by George Dunning; Dick Williams was there also, whom you may have heard of, he's done long animated films. These were the guys who had worked at the National Film Board of Canada and they started a little company. I don't know how our paths crossed, but anyway I started working there. They did mostly animation. I was there about a year and a half until the company folded.

All of us who were working there made films on our own. The first one that I made was animated. I worked in some others. We all made them. Joyce made some and was in others. Some of them were nice, too.

*Sitney:* When did you first come to New York?

*Snow:* We've been here for six and one half years. When I first came here I ran into a guy named Ben Park. I had been working on the idea for a film which involved using the Walking Woman figure which I use in all my work, sculpture, printed, and everything. He became very interested in financing the film; so we started to work on it. We shot about three hours of film. Then he took over the thing. He owns it.

Both this film and *New York Eye and Ear Control* were part of the variation that I made on the theme, the one-image theme of the Walking Woman.

In 1964, maybe earlier too, I made Walking Woman t-shirts and ties and all that kind of stuff, which is all in the film with Ben Park. I made a composition in the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Bookshop once. It was all done with rubber stamp images of the Walking Woman. I put them in books and various places that had some significance to me.

*New York Eye and Ear Control* was made in 1964. It was a year after the film with Ben Park and I used some of the things that were happening in the earlier film. I just decided to go ahead and do it myself. It's different. If the first one were ever made it would be quite a different film. We may finish it. I haven't seen him for a while, but he may be interested in finishing it.

I gradually stopped using the Walking Woman exclusively after I did a big sculpture exposition at Expo 67, which I worked on in '66 and showed in the summer of '67. That was something that was

finished before it was done in the sense that it was a designed thing and a summation of certain ideas of *objectness* that I'd been thinking out. It was a big sculptural composition in stainless steel. It had a lot to do with reflections: so it really had an image aspect.

I was thinking over *Wavelength* for a long time. It was really quite important to me.

*Sitney:* Which part of the concept of *Wavelength* came first?

*Snow:* The zoom. I was searching for the place for a long time and I didn't know where it started or where it went. It was just the idea of a long zoom. There really was an awful lot of thinking about it – that was strange to say because it doesn't really mean anything. It just so happens that I made an awful lot of notes and thought about it for about a year. I meant it as a summation of everything that I've thought about, everything.

*Sitney:* How did it come about that the zoom was interrupted? Had you ever thought of making one technically slick zoom?

*Snow:* It is attempting to balance out in a way all the so-called realities that are involved in the issue of making a film. I thought that maybe the issues hadn't really been stated clearly about film in the same sort of way – now this is presumptuous, but to say in the way Cézanne, say, made a balance between the colored goo that he used, which is what you see if you look at it in that way, and the forms that you see in their illusory space. That whole issue in film has been touched on by lots of people, that it's light, and it's on a flat surface, and it's also images. A kind of space that seems natural to it is maybe conical, but flattened. I can't explain how that seems proper. But it's something to do with that and that (Snow indicates first the flat of a screen with his palm and then the conical projection beam with both hands: the beam and the flat surface).

I was trying to do something very pure and about the kinds of realities that are involved. The film opens with the kind of thing in which you have a certain belief of you give up that you see a zoom, you see people walk in, and you believe in that. The room is shot as realism. It is shot the way you would see a room as much as there is a consensus about how one sees a room. It also has realistic representational sound: the noise from outside. But then there are intimations of other ways of seeing the thing, until the first real break is when the image is totally negative. It is all red and that pure sound, that drone at about 50 cycles per second, starts as opposed to the other representational sounds. That is something in which you do not have the same kind of belief. It is the other side of that, and yet it's colored light. It is all very obvious. I was concerned with making a balancing of all these things.

*Sitney:* The film is so pure that I am curious about the accumulation of its various parts. There is one zoom across a long room towards a photograph of waves on the opposite wall. Four actions take place: a bookcase is moved in, two girls listen to the radio, a man staggers in and falls on the floor, and a girl enters and telephones someone to say a man is dead in the room. Did the photograph just happen to be on the wall?

*Snow:* Oh my God no! The wall was set up that way; that's where the zoom was going. I took the photograph myself for the film, but I also made a piece of sculpture using photographs of waves.

All those orders of events were classified by me at that time as kinds of events and the kind of effect that they can have. There is the implication of a story in the sense of human affairs. You can make connections between, say, the two girls listening to the radio and the delivery of the bookcase, maybe it's like a coffee break or something, but that is not the story.

There is only one place with a connection to a prior event: her making the phone call refers back in time and space too, because the zoom has gone past that point, to where the body is. It also makes a connection and gives the implication that this thing will continue, so that more will follow, which it does.

The photograph of the waves is an implication of a kind of total continuity for everything, not just that simple incident.

*Sitney:* Did you rehearse the telephone call? Did you tell her what to say?

*Snow:* No, that's just one shot. I did tell her what to say and I had to redo the sound. It took me a week to shoot the film. Then it took a little while to put it together, figure out the sound and everything. I had to start shooting in the middle too, which made it a little difficult. Hollis Frampton is the guy who dies, and he could only do it on such and such a day so I had to start the zoom in the middle and make sure that got back to where it was supposed to be.

Ken Jacobs lent me the camera and the Angenieux lens and naturally he did not want me to leave it in my studio. I had to take it apart every time after I finished shooting. I fixed the tripod but I still had to take the camera off. I shot some nights and some days. I'm delighted the whole thing came out the way I wanted it, including the different kinds of stock.

*Sitney:* What do you call the new film?

*Snow:* No name. But I was thinking of using that  $\leftrightarrow$ . [The spoken title is *Back and Forth*.] In the new film I am thinking about some sort of different orientation or emphasis that the spectator has, some kind of different participation. The new one is more objective, I think, than *Wavelength* and it involves you in some way which I don't know how to describe – exactly what your eyes and mind are doing when you're watching that.

## **Michael Snow on *Breakfast***

Excepted from: Mike Hoolboom, "Michael Snow: Machines of Cinema (an interview)" (1993), <http://www.mikehoolboom.com/r2/artist.php?artist=42> Originally published in: *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*, ed. Mike Hoolboom (Coach House Press, 2001; 2nd edition).

*Mike Hoolboom:* Tell me about *Breakfast (Table Top Dolly)* (15 min 1972-76).

*Michael Snow:* This is another thing I shot three times. I wasn't totally satisfied with the first two takes and did it again. There's a lot that's accidental in it.

*MH:* Did they all feature a table with breakfast on it?

*MS:* Yes, though the things on the tabletop changed a bit in each shooting. I made this track with a heavy Plexiglas sheet on it about half-an-inch thick. We pushed this sheet along the top of the table, at right angles to the table, knocking over various things until it all gets smashed against the wall.

*MH:* So it's a take on what happens when the camera zooms — it's about optical compression.

*MS:* Yeah, it came up in a conversation with Hollis Frampton. I was just joking about making *Wavelength* as a tracking or trucking shot, and I immediately thought about a snowplow, which is how the camera functions in *Breakfast* — it plows its subject against the wall. In the same conversation we came up with this title *Table Top Dolly* — the expectations are some kind of table top dancer, dolly in the girly usage. I tried to arrange the objects so they would all fall into each other. I had milk which I wanted to spill, but in the first two they just didn't do interesting things. I used the three takes shown consecutively to make a videotape called *Three Breakfasts* — it's a series of variations. But the concept comes from literalizing the idea that photographing or filming makes the three-dimensional become two-dimensional.

**Michael Snow**, born in 1929, is considered one of Canada's most important living artists, and one of the world's leading experimental filmmakers. His wide-ranging and multidisciplinary oeuvre explores the possibilities inherent in different mediums and genres, and encompasses film and video, painting, sculpture, photography, writing, and music. Snow's practice comprises a thorough investigation into the nature of perception. Regardless of artistic genre, Snow consistently engages in an analytical discourse on the nature of consciousness and experience, language and temporality.

While Snow early established himself as a successful painter and musician in his native Toronto, it was his 1962 move to New York City that marked the beginning of his rise to international prominence. He entered into a long-lasting and fruitful dialogue with downtown Manhattan's artistic avant garde, exchanging ideas with figures such as Yvonne Rainer, Philip Glass, Sol LeWitt, and Richard Foreman, and developing of some of his most ambitious and influential works to date. His 1964 film *New York Eye and Ear Control* documents his growing involvement with the burgeoning free jazz movement, and the soundtrack boasts a lineup that includes Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, and Sonny Murray. Snow would continue to pursue improvised music, both on his own and in ensembles such as Toronto's CCMC. The generation and reception of sound in the broader sense emerged as one of his main concerns, reflected in performance and tape works that share qualities with contemporaneous experiments by composers like Steve Reich.

At the same time, Snow made alliances within the underground film scene centered around Jonas Mekas' Filmmakers' Cinematheque, an experience that encouraged him to find ways to transfer his concerns with music and photography into the realm of the moving image. He assisted Hollis Frampton on films such as *Nostalgia* (1971), and it was legendary director Ken Jacobs whose loan of equipment helped Snow create his most famous and influential work, the groundbreaking 1967 film *Wavelength*. *Wavelength* remains one of the most studied and admired works of structuralist filmmaking. Other of Snow's films of this period, including *Back and Forth* (1969) and *La Région Centrale* (1971), similarly explored the mechanics of filmmaking to simultaneously investigate the functional processes of cinema and of thinking itself. In recent years, he has focused on the specific nature and potential of digital media, yielding works like the video-film *\*Corpus Callosum* (2002).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Snow, responding to a growing institutional commitment to his work, experimented more with large-scale installations, including public sculpture commissions such as *Flightstop* (1979) at Eaton Center and *The Audience* (1988-89) at the Toronto Skydome.

He remains an active painter and sculptor, though since 1962 much of his gallery work has been photo-based or holographic. Work in all these media is represented in private and public collections world-wide, including for example the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Museum Ludwig (Cologne and Vienna), Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), and both the Musée des Beaux-Arts and Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal.

He has done video, film and sound installations, and designed books, examples of the latter being *Michael Snow/A Survey* (1970), *Cover to Cover* (1975), *56 Tree Poems* (1999), and *BIOGRAPHIE of the Walking Woman 1961-1967* (2004). Retrospectives of his painting, sculpture, photoworks and holography have been presented at the Hara Museum (Tokyo), of his films at the Cinémathèque Française (Paris), Anthology Film Archives and L'Institut Lumière (Lyons), and of his work in all media simultaneously at the Power Plant and the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1994. Additional retrospective exhibitions have been mounted at the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Musée d'art contemporain (Montreal).

Snow has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (1972), the Order of Canada (1982), and the first Canadian Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts for cinema (2000). In 2004 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne.

(Adapted from an Electronic Arts Intermix bio at <http://www.eai.org/artistBio.htm?id=8368>, and the official artist bio.)

## Selected Other Film and Video Works by Michael Snow

*A to Z* (1956) 7 min. b/w silent  
*New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964) 34 min. b/w  
*Standard Time* (1967) 8 min.  
↔ [Back and Forth] (1969) 50 min.  
*One Second in Montreal* (1969) 26 min. b/w  
*Dripping Water* (1969) (with Joyce Wieland) 12 min. b/w  
*Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film* (1970) 20 min.  
*La Région Centrale* (1971) 180 min.  
*Rameau's Nephew By Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) By Wilma Schoen* (1974) 4.5 hours  
*Presents* (1981) 90 min.  
*So Is This* (1982) 43 min. silent  
*Seated Figures* (1988) 41 min.  
*See You Later/Au Revoir* (1990) 18 min.  
*To Lavoisier (Who Died in the Reign of Terror)* (1992) 53 min.  
*Prelude* (2000) 6 min.  
\**Corpus Callosum* (2002) 92 min. Yes, the asterisk is part of the title.  
*WVLNT – Wavelength For Those Who Don't Have the Time* (2003) 15 min.

## Some Suggested Reading

Various authors. The Michael Snow Dossier (*Offscreen* film journal). A selection of articles about Snow and his film works. Online at [http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new\\_offscreen/snow\\_dossier.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/snow_dossier.html)

Jim Shedden, ed. *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1965-1991* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

Michael Snow, ed. *Music/sound, 1948-1993* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). Covers the performed and recorded music/sound of Michael Snow, solo and with various ensembles, his sound-films and sound installations.

Michael Snow & Louise Dompierre, eds. *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994).

Martha Langford, Malcolm Le Grice, A.L. Rees, et al. *Michael Snow: Almost Cover to Cover* (Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

P. Adams Sitney. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2002, third edition).

*Program notes compiled by Spencer Sundell.*



# Wavelength

Michael Snow's landmark 1967 experimental feature

"A triumph of contemplative cinema." — Gene Youngblood, *LA Free Press*

original 16mm format, brand new print

plus his short film, *Breakfast* (1976)

**Wednesday, February 9, 2011**

8:00 PM only

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