

Michael Snow's So Is This

So Is This, Michael Snow's latest film in the self-reflexive mode, is a logical extension of his previous film work. As usual, it deals with the process of film itself, and how that process is manifested in objectification. But he has found a fresh and, he confesses, not original method of representation: using the written word as icon. The word becomes more than a signifier, it becomes the thing it represents - in this case, the film.

The film is intended to be read literally, word for iconic word. It consists solely of single, basic-vocabulary words, presented one after the other to construct sentences and paragraphs. By continuously drawing attention to itself as object, the film makes one conscious of reading/seeing as projected celluloid pictures of words, and therein lies a fresh resolution to the concept-object dichotomy which has characterized much of modern art. A word seldom bears some direct relationship with what it signifies, whereas images do. Pointedly, the most prominent, immediate and oft-repeated word/image of the film is: *this*. *This* is both the signifier and the signified because *this* is the film. And *this*, as Snow repeatedly announces, is the title of this film.

As the film's author, the first message Snow conveys is that *this*, the film, represents itself. Consequently, each word stands alone to exist in and of itself. Yet when read/watched in succession, meaning is formulated in the viewer's mind. A film cannot exist without an audience, for its very essence is interactionary. The participatory nature of the film is emphasized throughout, almost as if this is Snow's apologia, his personal letter to his audience, and he anticipates, guides and extracts a very calculated audience response. Significantly, the only sounds heard throughout the duration of the film come from the audience's chuckles, laughter, groans and shufflings: they too belong to the film, in an experiential if not tangible sense.

The film cajoles the audience to become aware of its (and film in general's) very procedure. At the beginning, the viewer reads that "the rest of the film will look just like this" and that it will be approximately two hours in duration. This elicits audience laughter because the film schedule states clearly that the film is 43 minutes in duration. But one is also aware that it would not be far-fetched to expect a two-hour long "orgy of light-reading" from Michael Snow. Consequently, audience laughter is always an echo of Snow's own self-ironic laughter, and thus an echo of the film laughing at itself.

Everything about this film falls back upon itself and calls attention to its own object-hood. The film asks viewers/readers to relax and enjoy themselves, to consider it entertainment. As if to appease philistine appetites for diversionary mainline film, it demonstrates the variety of possibilities a film may use to convey specific meaning: colour could be introduced, different typefaces could be used, the words can fade in and out, they can slide off the frame, they can be of different sizes. Images or sound could be introduced (this is only a titillating suggestion). Each word or sentence could

be held on the screen for different lengths of time or there could be variations in the patterns and rhythms of words to create certain emphases. Film is reduced to its basic formalistic elements as Snow gives the ABC's of filmmaking. Contentwise, the film can also draw upon a number of possibilities. It can discuss itself; it can be a film of verbal and sexual violence; it can laugh or cry, become confessional, playful, personal and dead serious. The film becomes a lesson, an experience, and a representation of its own process as it demonstrates each of these characteristics.

Snow often uses biographical material in a recondite fashion in his films. Recently his *Presents* and *Rameau's Nephew* were banned by the Ontario Board of Censors, which now requires independent 16mm filmmakers to submit their works for inspection. In *This*, he takes solace in directly and familiarly addressing the Censor Board's high priestess, Mary Brown. In an exhibitionistic urge to expose itself, the words "tits" and "ass" flash excitedly across the screen.

Judging from audience reaction, this is perhaps Snow's most accessible film to date. He deliberately tries not to talk over anyone's head (he says he "wants to reach everyone who can speak English"). But the film's self-contained simplicity is deceptive, as its meanings spiral out and redouble upon themselves. Like the loop of infinity, a film like this never really ends, it only seems to stop.

Lyn Martin ●

SO IS THIS d./sc./ed./p. Michael Snow
cam./stills Anna Pasanow running time 43 min.
dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre,
New York Film Co-op.

Marv Newland's Sing Beast Sing

Do you remember a film called *Bambi Meets Godzilla*? This short visual joke became an instant sensation akin to the popularity of the pet rock. But how could an animator desecrate the memory of a beloved Walt Disney character? Well, Marv Newland is the culprit.

Sing Beast Sing, Marv Newland's most recent film, has his signature. He amuses us with credits like "Special Effects by Accident" but don't let these light touches fool you. *Sing Beast Sing*, like good black comedy, will make you laugh derisively and at the same time raise your awareness about ecological travesties perpetrated by man.

A fellow named Bert is carrying a cactus in a little red wagon. He sets the cactus beside a piano. A creature that looks like it just crawled out of the swamp is sitting on the piano bench. His name is Toledo. Toledo proceeds to play and sing a blues song that repeats the phrase "I'm mad." As he sings the camera pans back and forth over a living-room scene. Furniture, paintings on the walls and a goose over a fire are some of the details observed. Are you still with me? No, I am not relating a bad dream. The pan comes to rest on a dog sitting at a bar drinking beer. The pan is repeated several times. When Toledo completes the song, a crashing sound is heard off-



● The beast, ready with an encore

screen. The next shot reveals the dog lying on the floor in a motionless state.

Bizarre things begin to happen. Remember Bert the foreman? He returns to the piano to take the cactus away. Upon touching the cactus and pulling out a needle, the cactus responds like all normal cacti by deflating like a balloon. There are plants on top of the piano and they meet the same fate. The plants take the form of objects in a Salvador Dali painting. They hang limply over the edge of the piano. By this point I am laughing uncontrollably and, just as I think my laughter is about to subside, the piano and bench transmute into a lifeless pool of matter on the floor. Toledo, the swamp-thing, walks out of the scene as if nothing had happened. That's all, folks.

Unfortunately that's not all, folks. This is not just a cute novelty film like *Bambi Meets Godzilla*. It cleverly and entertainingly makes a statement about the madness of a world that has allowed the environment to be raped by pollution.

Bert and Toledo symbolize a destructive love affair between industry and pollution.

Bert represents the industrial attitude towards the environment. In a clever use of off-screen action suggested by sound, Newland depicts how modern industrial society is stealing the new generation's birthright to a clean environment. The off-screen sound suggests that Bert takes a red wagon away from a child in order to cart the cactus, symbolizing the wrenching of the birthright from the new generation.

Bert's deflating of the cactus suggests that the industry is destroying life-giving plant life.

Toledo represents the ugliness of this modern menace. This is a creature of the swamp where destructive bacteria are given life. He drinks muddy water while he plays his blues lament.



Toledo is an apt name for this gruesome, sloppy, and destructive swamp-thing. The industrial city of Toledo, Ohio, stands as a monument to the ravages of pollution. Pollution has marred the beauty and the environment of the cities of North America.

The beer-drinking dog reflects the state of indifference some members of society display. The dog, supposedly man's best friend, throws the beer cans on the floor to add to the litter. The dog eventually collapses, probably dying from the polluted water used to make beer. Even the pink poodle playing the saxophone reminds us that animal life is affected by upsetting the genetic code and creating an aberration of nature.

As Marv Newland seems to suggest through the visual pun of the goose roasting another goose, that North America is cooking its own goose by accepting pollution as a way of life.

By tolerating pollution, Toledo will walk away from the situation still alive, while all life will disintegrate and die.

What monster will this talented animator create next? I'm looking forward to more Marv Newland films since his productions to date reflect a witty and innovative artist.

Robert Hooley ●

SING BEAST SING p./d. Marv Newland
anim. Mark Kausler, Dieter Mueller, Wayne Morris,
Jeff Howard voices Mark Robman, Max Becraft
cam. Tom Brydon, Richard Bruce, Svend-Erik Erik-
sen ed. Raymond J. Hall, Haida Paul, Christine
Hartman sd. Little Mountain controls Dick Abbott
backgrounds Brent Boates track reader Jean
Compton p. sup. Shelley McIntosh p. assts. Richard
Allen, Charlotte Crane, Cecilia Ohm-Eriksen, Lisa
Hart Freedman, Susan Kelso, Reginald W. Klassen,
Bernie Lyon, M.A.M., Alixe Matthews, George Metz-
ger, Andy Tougas mus. Willie Mabon lp. Vern,
Toledo Mung Beast, Black Ear the Dog, Pink Ear
assoc. p. Gayle Scott exec. p. Anne Garber p.c.
International Rocketship Ltd. Vancouver inspira-
tion Rick Staehling, Barry Hansen lab. Alpha-Cine,
Vancouver running time 9 min. 1 sec. colour
35mm