

SNO SIN SOU

If you love literature and somebody hands you a cookbook, you're not going to complain about the plot – right? Well, the same holds true for “experimental” films (everyone making them hates that word). There ought to be another word to describe cinema which is not necessarily made to entertain by telling a good story, because the word “experimental” is not only a poor definition causing all kinds of bad reactions in people – it doesn't fit. After all, some people love reading cookbooks.

What is all this nonsense leading up to? Patience, it isn't easy for a writer to relate two totally non-linear experiences – the first being Michael Snow's four and a half hour film *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot* (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen and the second being three and a half hours (excluding lunch and red wine) called *An Interview with Three Laughing People* (one of whom was) Michael Snow.

If you feel slightly adventurous, this may be your chance to find the answer to the question: What do people SEE in Michael Snow's work and why should you care? (Wouldn't you love to know?)

Basically, Michael Snow is working on the frontiers of cinema starting from the point of zero preconceptions, and he is creating new languages in celluloid. “I just work with the medium as facts in itself. This is very presumptuous – but I have been thinking that people haven't really been looking at the sound/image relationship. In most films, you have to accept that people are talking and there's no content in knowing how that's done. But I think there are contents in those things. I get into a lot of the possibilities and these possibilities are like a microcosm of the possibilities of the world.

“There are some things you can't do because when you say you're going to make a movie, the first limitation you have is that you're going to make a movie. Which means that you're not going to make a pie. . . .” Which brings us back to cookbooks.

Recipe for One Sound Film:

“The film started out as a sentence. Scripts were written and each section of the film has a different sound/image relationship.”

Ingredients: Sound and Film

Step One – Close-up shot of Michael Snow whistling. Shot from the front, the back, and both profiles.



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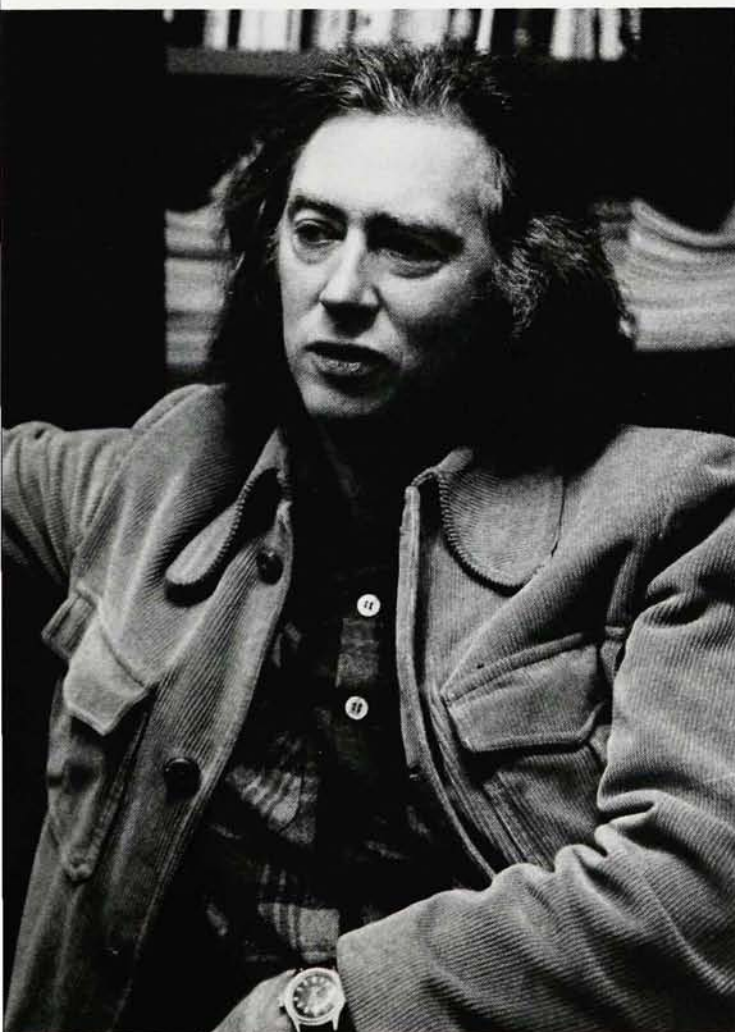
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OW'S EMA) FILE



Step Two – Medium shot of a kitchen sink. Hands turn on the tap, water fills the sink, while hands tap the music of bongos. Then, plug is pulled out, water drains, while hands tap the music of bongo drums on sink.

Step Three – Three people in an office are trying to locate the bodiless voice which started this scene by saying, “Hi folks!”

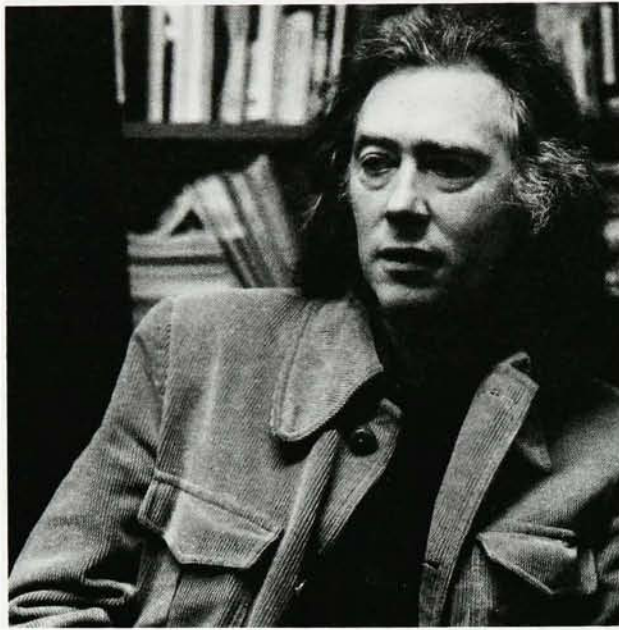
“On one hand, there’s the belief that you really do see people on the screen talking, with a voice coming out of their mouths. That can be very powerful, but it isn’t really happening. It’s coming out of that little box which is where the sound comes from. It’s marvelous! And it’s really funny – it all has to do with the reality of what you’re experiencing.”

What reality are you experiencing? “The subtitle says it’s for English-speaking audiences, because if English is the language you use with some familiarity, the way your mind will be paying attention gets strained. In listening to speech you tend to listen to the Sense and the Sound simultaneously, but the Sense has priority. When the speech becomes changed by running it backwards or distorting it electronically, or if you can’t hear it properly, then you’re listening to pure Sound. You’re straining for Sense but part of your brain is starting to listen as to Music, and it so happens that those parts of the brain are separate. Sometimes, you have to think several thoughts at once.

“The experience has to do with the difference between hearing and listening and looking and seeing. Each section is a different compound of those sensory systems. There are a lot of demands on your attention and there’s a struggle going on.”

Step Four – Take one simple scene of a fart interrupting a highly civilised afternoon tea-party being filmed by a silent cameraman. Run action forward with sound backward. Then action backward and sound forward. Wait for mind to spin in forward and reverse (à la Steenbeck-goneberserk) desperately trying to get both sound and image running forward. When mind starts rising, open oven door carefully to check reality taking shape.

That particular exercise closely approximates an advanced meditation practice described by Carlos Castaneda in his fourth book on Yaqui sorcery, *Tales of Power*, where his two mentors whisper into each ear simultaneously to allow Carlos to break his mind’s conditioned



patterns and “experience reality”. Or, as Michael Snow explains, “It’s not hard to understand, but it’s hard to verbalise.”

How was that again? “You just have to speak English. That’s all. Because I’m basically dealing with recorded speech set against your memory of what happened before. The film itself may be difficult in some ways, but the difficulty is part of the pleasure, so it demands a certain kind of person in a certain state of mind. I’m just working with certain possibilities of movies, you just have to hear it and see it.”

What kind of people go to hear and see Michael Snow’s films? “It’s a small group but it’s always growing. I’ve found that my other films made audiences and are still making audiences. I don’t see any reason why my films couldn’t be seen by many people and even be popular!”

The “small group” is an understatement. Michael Snow is a living legend. His films have been seen all around the world and his influence on Cinema cannot yet be measured. Retrospectives of his work have been held in places like Italy’s Pesaro Film Festival (see Issue No.6), Vancouver’s Pacific Cinematheque, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Montreal’s Cinéma-thèque québécois, Ottawa’s National Gallery, the Ontario Art Gallery, to name a few. *Rameau’s Nephew* is currently being booked by both film and post-graduate philosophy courses. Michael Snow’s films have been massaging brain cells for nearly a decade.

Nonetheless, with the exception of *La Région Centrale* (see Issue No.4), most of his films were made on mini-money. “Fortunately, so far I have been able to do what I think is right without having to hassle with investors wanting their money back. I just can’t go through with what’s necessary to get involved in commercial distribution in theatres. I just can’t face it, I’m not good at it, and I avoid it.”

Yet, one of his closest friends and co-artists, Joyce Wieland, is now shooting a 35mm dramatic feature film after a parallel and successful career in both art and “experimental” filmmaking.

“It’s not what I do, but it’s going to be incredible! *The Far Shore* is going to be like *Gone With the Wind* was for the U.S. Joyce has a social basis to what she does which I don’t have. She wants *The Far Shore* to be a kind of Canadian Myth which really states things for this country that haven’t been stated before. She’s making a feature

that’s going to be better than any ever made in this country! She can *see* — she’s not just putting together a long shot and a medium shot — she knows what the medium is! I respect what she’s doing very much, but it’s not what I do.”

The respect is mutual: Joyce Wieland narrated the *Ultimate Canadian Scene* in Snow’s last film:

Step Five — One magnificently cluttered desk in medium shot. Two hands start moving all the film/writing/drawing/painting instruments and objects while the voice-over describes each movement in *Hockey Night*-style. Objects are arranged by color, by form, by media and the action sometimes precedes the narration, sometimes follows it, sometimes is simultaneous. *The Eternal Documentary!*

Would a big budget change Michael Snow’s films? “It would mean that I could use equipment and sets. If I did have money, I would be able to afford to build a set that I could change in various ways. That’s one of the things I would like to do. As usual, when I finished this film, I thought I would never make another film. I’m not going to do one for a while. I want to look at this one still, but I have some other ideas. . . .”

Variations on Standard Soufflé:

If recipe sounds interesting and you feel ready for a four and a half hour experience in metaphysics, try to see *Rameau’s Nephew* by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen. Or you could see any other film by Michael Snow (available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre). Or you could try to stop using the word “experimental” and (maybe) start enjoying such films.

P.S., Apology and Note

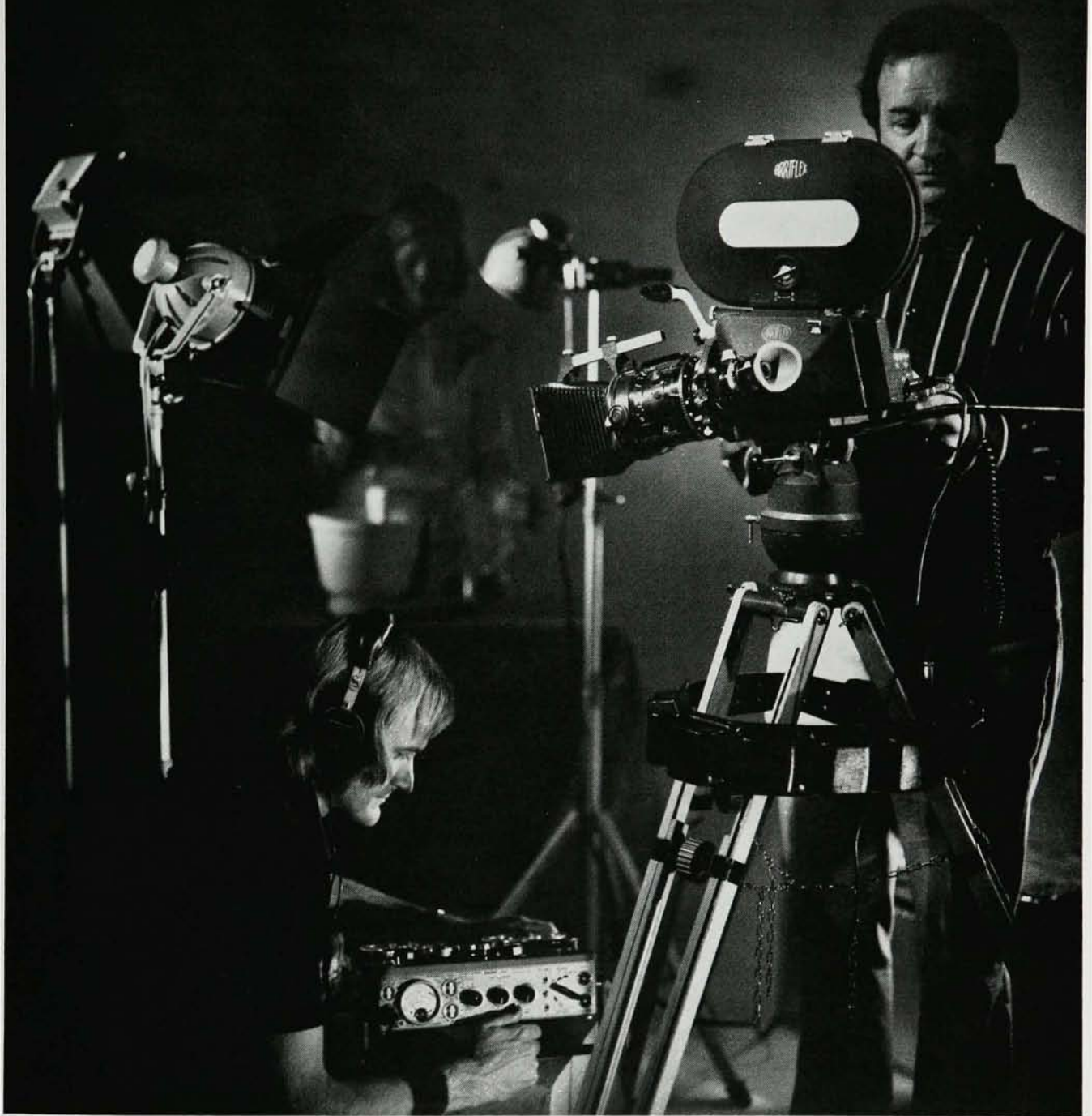
P.S. Rave Review from an Admitted Fan —”i/#! ”. (which just proves that you shouldn’t believe anything you read, you should experience for yourself.)

Apology: We cannot print the credits because they form one of the funniest and most beautiful chapters of the cookbook.

Note: Soufflé is done when bubble breaks.

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