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Score for *Wavelength* . An Homage to Michael Snow

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Letter to Turkey, return to sender.

Take a year off? What does he say?

I think he would say:

“Ok. Time’s up.”

Thank you that’s the end.

Guitar and dramaturgy by Bart de Kroon

This project was developed in dialogue with and inspired by Fred Dewey, in particular his work with/ on Arendt and council democracy. See his publication The School of Public Life, (Los Angeles / Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2014) for details on his writings and practice of council democracy, Hannah Arendt, and his establishment of the Neighborhood Council structure of self-government into the Los Angeles city charter. Special thanks to Dewey and, in Istanbul, Can Altay.

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The American-born Berlin-based artist **JEREMIAH DAY** has established a practice of elegiac descriptions of public life—from considering the farmers who formed the first Black Panther Party in Alabama to Hannah Arendt’s work on the French Resistance—and these affirmative reflections are staged in a novel form: small scale performance works that are often accompanied by free discussion and guest speakers, with live art as a basis to assemble a public. Day studied Fine Art at the University of California, Los Angeles, and subsequently the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, then completed a PhD at VU University Amsterdam as part of a pilot project in establishing third-cycle education in the arts. Day is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of the Arts Helsinki’s Center for Educational Research and Academic Development in the Arts, researching the teaching methods that emerged from the intersection of the visual arts and dance in the 1960s and ’70s.

SCORE FOR WAVELENGTH. AN HOMAGE TO MICHAEL SNOW.

ALEXANDRA KARL

PREAMBLE

The following score outlines the sequence of a performance of Michael Snow’s 1967 film *Wavelength*, available on YouTube.

The following are listed:

Stopwatch Minute denotes the real-time unfolding of the spoken word performance.

Wavelength + time stamp denotes the time of Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*.

Spoken Word to be read aloud in a deliberate and steady voice.

Stopwatch Minute 2–*Wavelength* 6m, 0s.

Spoken Word: *Wavelength* is a forty-two-minute continuous camera zoom from one end of a New York City loft to another. It was shot by Canadian artist Michael Snow in 1967. For years, the artist requested that the original film be screened in a darkened theater, but it is now available on YouTube.

In film, a zoom is created when the lens of a camera changes smoothly from a long



Figure 1.

Michael Snow, still from Wavelength (1967). Image courtesy of the filmmaker.

shot to a close-up, or vice versa, by varying the focal length. I say this because today's digital cameras achieve this electronically instead of mechanically.

So technically speaking, Snow's camera took forty-two minutes to move the lens a few inches away from the celluloid film inside the camera obscura. In other words, it took forty-two minutes to go from the camera's widest possible field to the smallest final field.

The film was shot during one week in 1966. It took Snow one year to plan for this forty-two-minute sequence.

Stopwatch Minute 3—Wavelength 7m, 30s.

Spoken Word: When the film opens, the lens is at its smallest, the audience looks onto an eighty-foot expanse of a New York City loft. The room is sparsely furnished with three large windows on the adjacent wall. Over the forty-two minutes, the camera frame slowly approaches and eventually subsumes a black-and-white photograph located on a wall between two of the windows. This photo depicts an expanse of waves on a body of water.

As the camera frame narrows over forty-two minutes, we witness the gradual

elimination of cinematic space as our gaze converges on the flat black-and-white photograph. So from three dimensions to two dimensions.

Stopwatch Minute 4—Wavelength 8m, 10s.

Spoken Word: While the zoom progresses, millimeter by excruciating millimeter, it is pierced by what Snow calls “modulations.” Theatrical events take place: a bookcase is delivered into the room by two women. Some glass is shattered. A man collapses and dies on the floor, and a woman places a call to have the body removed.

Cinematic devices also intercede. The zoom is shot at different times of day and night,

which impacts the lighting of the room. Different film stocks are used, affecting a range of colors and textures.

Stopwatch Minute 5—Wavelength 9m, 3s.

Spoken Word: It should be noted that my description of the film is not true to the experience of the film. In short: I have given away the final scene and the punchline.

Typically, the audience reaction begins with disinterest and apathy. Because the zoom is so slow, it is nearly imperceptible. Hence, the audience typically finds themselves sitting in a darkened theater, staring at another room, wondering when something is going to happen. Besides the few



Figure 2.
Michael Snow, still from Wavelength (1967). Image courtesy of the filmmaker.

modulations mentioned earlier, nothing else really happens.

Stopwatch Minute 6—*Wavelength* 10m, 47s.

Spoken word: (none).

Stopwatch Minute 7—*Wavelength* 12m, 30s.

Spoken Word: That is, until an awakening occurs. At some point during the forty-two-minute screening, the audience acclimates. Perhaps they abandon their reliance on conventional narratives and realize that the camera is headed “somewhere.” Aggravated by the increasingly irritating soundtrack, their apathy is suddenly replaced not just with anticipation, but with that most modern of preoccupations: anxiety.

Stopwatch Minute 8—*Wavelength* 15m, 13s.

Spoken Word: When the work was first screened in 1967, it invited many readings. At the onset, it embodied the conceptualist’s love of wordplay. The title at once refers to the distance or length required to reach the waves, hence, the length to the waves.

Wavelength also refers to the physics of the light required for both celluloid film and photographic media. Snow’s stated interest was “the essential nature of the medium and especially in *Wavelength* I was trying to concentrate on the fact that the material is

light and that what one shapes when one makes a film is light and time, although obviously time itself cannot truly be shaped, that in an illusory thing, although one does work with durations.”¹

Stopwatch Minute 9—*Wavelength* 16m, 49s.

Spoken word: (none).

Stopwatch Minute 10—*Wavelength* 20m, 17s.

Spoken Word: In addition to the wavelength of the film’s physics, the film’s soundtrack appears as a sine wave on a display monitor.

Stopwatch Minute 11—*Wavelength* 24m, 32s.

Spoken Word: To the extent that the zoom slowly condenses cinematic space to flat, photographic surface, it is an homage to film’s photographic origins. Snow described the work as “a definitive statement of pure Film space and time, a balancing of ‘illusion’ and ‘fact.’”²

But the gradual reduction of everything from the frame, of all that is urban and characteristic of downtown New York, to the arrival upon an image of the ocean symbolizes a return to nature, which itself reveals Snow’s “religious inklings and aesthetic ideas.”³

Stopwatch Minute 12–*Wavelength* 27m, 0s.

Spoken Word: (none).

Stopwatch Minute 13–*Wavelength* 28m, 15s.

Spoken Word: Responses to *Wavelength* were mixed. Some viewers have described the film as “maddening,” “essentially unwatchable,” “headache inducing,” “one of the greatest endurance tests cinema has to offer,” and something that “may compel you to scalp yourself.”⁴ Additionally, one contributor to Rotten Tomatoes gave the film “[f]ive stars even though it’s not my favorite Michael Snow film by a long shot.”⁵

Stopwatch Minute 14–*Wavelength* 30m, 23s.

Spoken Word: (none).

Stopwatch Minute 15–*Wavelength* 31m, 51s.

Spoken Word: In several screenings between 2014 and 2017, my students had impassioned reactions to the film. During the screenings, students would shift uneasily in their seats, or storm out of the classroom to pace in the hallway. Once finished, some slammed their hands on the desks, calling out “This is bullshit” and “Why is this art?” In one instance, a student

directed his anger at me, characterizing the film as “retarded,” questioning my authority as the instructor, questioning my taste in film and my choices for curriculum, and confronting me about what he perceived to be my salary. I felt extremely vulnerable, as I realized the film had triggered an emotional response beyond my control.

Stopwatch Minute 16–*Wavelength* 33m, 9s.

Spoken Word: In other circles, the work was immediately hailed as a masterpiece and showered with accolades. It was considered iconic and canonical, one of the major achievements of the structuralist film movement, and “one of avant-garde cinema’s most conceptually advanced investigations into its own medium.”⁶ The year after its opening, it won first prize at the Fourth International Experimental Film Festival in Belgium.

Stopwatch Minute 17–*Wavelength* 35m, 44s.

Spoken Word: *Wavelength* has also been called “one of Canada’s greatest contributions to art film.”⁷

I don’t know if this is a compliment or an insult.

Stopwatch Minute 18–*Wavelength* 36m, 18s.

Spoken Word: Perhaps the most intriguing of comments was the claim that *Wavelength* had achieved the most accurate representation of human consciousness to date. This effect was attributed to two features in the work.

First was the speed of the camera movement itself, which brought about an awareness of the flow of time. This in turn made the viewer aware of their own spectatorship, and aware that their gaze was synonymous with that of the camera's. With that in mind, we can perhaps hypothesize that the specific speed of covering eighty feet in forty-two minutes may in fact have been a

kind of marker in the psyche or consciousness of the spectator, located somewhere between the end of the Machine Age and the beginning of the Digital Age.

Stopwatch Minute 19–*Wavelength* 39m, 7s.

Spoken Word: To this was the film's zenith, where the camera frame came to overlap and rest upon the photograph for two highly portent minutes. This equalization of cinematic and photographic space was no arbitrary collision but a moment of pure gravitas, signaling the meeting of two colossal regimes of vision, two hegemonies of modernism.



Figure 3.
Michael Snow, still from Wavelength (1967). Image courtesy of the filmmaker.



Figure 4.

Michael Snow, still from *Wavelength* (1967). Image courtesy of the filmmaker.

/ **Notes** /

¹ “An Interview with Michael Snow,” by Simon Field, directed by Keith Griffiths, *Visions*, UK Channel 4, January 19, 1983.

² Michael Snow, “A Statement on *Wavelength* for the Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-Le-Zoute,” *Film Culture* 46 (1968): 40.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Andrew G., review of *Wavelength*, by Michael Snow, *Rotten Tomatoes*, October 7, 2007, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wavelength1967/reviews?type=user>.

⁵ Tio B., review of *Wavelength*, by Michael Snow, *Rotten Tomatoes*, December 14, 2007, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wavelength1967/reviews?type=user>.

⁶ “*Wavelength* Movie Info,” *Rotten Tomatoes*, last modified June 13, 2019, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wavelength1967>.

⁷ Michael D., review of *Wavelength*, by Michael Snow, *Rotten Tomatoes*, November 14, 2009, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wavelength1967/reviews?type=user>.

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ALEXANDRA KARL is a critic, curator, and educator. She was educated in Ottawa (BFA), Munich (MA), and Cambridge (PhD). Her dissertation (2008) addressed the impact of Darwinism on German-speaking artists from the nineteenth century. In 2001, she moved to Utah and began writing critically about the Utah art scene. She will present a paper on this subject at a roundtable dedicated to “Criticism between the Coasts” at the upcoming CAA 2020 conference. After adjuncting for what seemed like eternity, she received a two-year lectureship at Utah Valley University. Alexandra has designed a Holocaust memorial project called “Portrait Pebbles” and curated an exhibition called “Through the Looking Glass.” This looks at the role of distortion and reflective surfaces in the work of ten Utah artists. It is currently on view at Salt Lake City’s Leonardo Museum. Her publications and projects can be found on www.academia.com or www.alexandra-karl.com.