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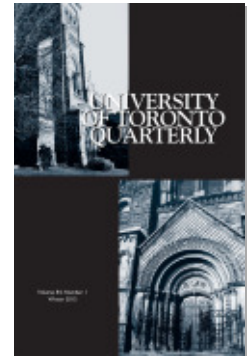
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## Michael Snow: Wavelength (review)

R. Bruce Elder

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B cowboys versions of male heroism – singing in the saddle, brightly decorated clothes, always leaving women to be with men.

The issues he raises, however, are somewhat more engaging than the analysis he presents. He interprets images from the perspectives of nostalgia, desire, queer space, and the market, and these perspectives are revealing, but they do not cohere into an analytic focus. He wants to stress the disjunctions in the B cowboy images, meaning the confusions of macho men who sing, wear sequins, and avoid women, but these disjunctions, as he points out, do not characterize the more standard (adult) cowboy/frontier image, so his argument rests on the specific significance of these juvenile B westerns. He brings his queer/psychoanalytic efforts to bear on their odd qualities – singing, a ventriloquist's dummy – but he neglects some apparent connections for boys of the time: for example, between the fancy clothes of B cowboys and the fancy costumes of superheroes in comic books, where superheroes were also seemingly indifferent to women (but presumably did not sing).

Because he needs these matinee films (with their macho strangeness) to be specifically influential today, his argument cannot rest on the significance of the cowboy image in general, and this is the point where it seems weakest. He claims these films still shape our cultural sense of male identity, but in fact they stopped being available as versions of children's literature in the early 1950s. The specific weirdness of the B cowboy (his focus) lasted for two decades perhaps and then vanished – nearly sixty years ago. In contrast, the standard image of the American frontier hero has been important for nearly three centuries and the cowboy version for over a century with clear resonances today. McGillis wants to stress the differences in these images and claim that the specific, juvenile qualities of the B western, with its distortions of the standard image, still have impact today. It is an interesting and stimulating claim, but it seems less convincing than he would hope. Even the standard adult version of the cowboy now seems to be fading as a male role model (with westerns and the Marlboro Man disappearing), as the frontier recedes in memory and racial and sexual Others achieve more equality. The matinee westerns he examines have fascinating, particular qualities, and he makes them even more fascinating through his interpretations. But they seem more relevant to historical juvenile contexts than revealing of current cultural roles. (WILL WRIGHT)

Elizabeth Legge. *Michael Snow: Wavelength*

Afterall Books 2009. 112. \$16.00

Writing on Michael Snow's artworks poses an interesting challenge that writers on contemporary art seldom encounter. Snow is erudite,

deliberate, and very bright, and his own commentary on his works is extensive, insightful, and expressed with a wit and novelty that almost unfailingly provokes insight. A commentator on Snow's work therefore confronts a choice: cleave closely to Snow's remarks and, while benefiting from Snow's remarkably level-headed understanding of his creative methods, risk being turned into someone who merely elaborates on and explains the artist's 'authoritative' comments (generally by translating them into a form that lacks the poetic irony so characteristic of Snow's own discourse); or blaze one's own path, by finding novel things to say about Snow's work – a tack that, given the extent and richness of Snow's own remarks on his work, risks turning the commentator's remarks into fanciful misprisions.

So how does Legge manage in navigating between this rock and this whirlpool? Essentially, she takes the second route – and that is commendable, since only that way might lead to fresh insight into a film that has generated a sizable literature, much of which has the character of commentary on Snow's commentary on the work. I say 'essentially' because Legge frequently quotes, or alludes to, Snow's own statements, but (perhaps in order to avoid turning the book into a commentary on the filmmaker's own commentary) she doesn't treat them as ironic and plurisemic constructs, but as straightforward statements about the artist's intent and methods.

The course Legge set for herself allows her to turn up some treasures. Her comments relating Snow's ideas on equivalence to those of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) seem to me a rich vein (that might have been exploited further). Her comments on the radio bringing sounds from the outside world into the loft and the phone call carrying sounds from the loft to the outside world are perspicacious.

It is wonderful, and revelatory of the context in which Snow made *Wavelength*, to read Legge's respectful acknowledgement of 'the very scope and density' of Susan Sontag's intellectual references as installing 'erudition as a unique identifier of contemporary approaches to art, film, and writing.' (Among Snow's friends and associates, think of Hollis Frampton's formidable erudition, or Paul Sharits's, or of Ernie Gehr's meticulous and probing analytic intelligence.) It is also wonderful to see Legge doing what is so rare, that is, to introduce the theory of the gaze without utterly misrepresenting Lacan (Legge correctly understands Lacan to have proposed that the gaze uncannily belongs to an inapprehensible point in the object [or picture] from which the viewing subject is gazed at). But then (acknowledging that this represents a turning away from Lacan), she does what I find unfathomable: she resorts to the politically motivated distortion of psychoanalysis Laura Mulvey offers, to ground what strikes me as a fatuous commentary on Snow's 'Walking Woman.' Her Barthesian inflected commentary on narrative

similarly relies on overly literal readings of signifiers that are far less determinate than that section of the book makes them out to be. Here, she might have benefitted from paying due heed to Snow's assertions that he is not a storyteller.

The book's major shortcoming is to propose that the film's devices resemble features of human vision. The avant-garde cinema that immediately preceded Snow's – Stan Brakhage's lyrical and mythopoeic films – is commonly thought (with some justification) to have been based on an analogy between human vision and cinematic constructions that are rooted in the medium's nature. Snow's cinema broke radically with that, in adopting a 'God-like above-it-all' vision. Legge's remarks that closely draw together forms from *Wavelength* and features of human vision reduces the radical challenge that Snow's film posed to the avant-garde cinema of 1968. Further, it flies in the face of Snow's own remarks that contrast art forms that accord great value to 'handwriting' and technological arts, of which the camera arts were the first example. In doing that, Legge fails to highlight features of Snow's work and thought that have attracted great loyalty from a new generation of artists and art students. (R. BRUCE ELDER)

David Davies, editor. *The Thin Red Line*

Routledge 2008. 116. US\$27.95

There is a certain reticence about the films of Terrence Malick that inspires critical assessment. For philosophers in particular, the invitation to engage with Malick's work is enhanced by his training in philosophy and by the enigmatic commentary that his films produce. Relatedly, there is the crucial task of reckoning with his films *as films*, or in other words, in terms of the specifically cinematic forms that Malick's philosophizing takes. Stepping up to these challenges is a new collection of essays focused upon *The Thin Red Line*, which seeks to 'locate the film in philosophical space.' But what characterizes this volume is a special self-consciousness about its project, foregrounding not only the philosophical issues that *The Thin Red Line* illuminates but also the need to think through such issues in medium-specific ways. Thus, from the outset, the success of the collection depends upon its ability to harmonize its commitments to both film and philosophy, appealing to readers in either discipline.

Simon Critchley's opening essay is a familiar text, having appeared online (*Film-Philosophy*, 2002) and in Critchley's study of Wallace Stevens (2005). Here it serves as an articulating framework for the materials that follow, enumerating the kinds of interpretive difficulties ('hermeneutic banana skins') that Malick's films engender. Among