

Revisiting Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, after Deleuze's Time-Image

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Abstract. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is one of the most written about avant-garde films. It has served as "a blue screen in front of which a range of ideological and intellectual dramas have been played out," as Elizabeth Legge put it in a book-length study of the film, whose recent publication testifies to the continuing relevance of the film (Legge 2009). This paper takes Annette Michelson's article, *Toward Snow*, one of the first and most often cited encounters with Snow's cinema, as its point of departure (Michelson 1978). Michelson sees the film as a reflection which reveals the cinema as a temporal *narrative* medium. Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology of time-consciousness, she argues that this reflection on the medium is at the same time a reflection on the structures of consciousness. However, the paper also draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose two-volume study of the cinema has opened up new possibilities for thinking about time and the cinema (Deleuze 1983, 1985). The paper is not an interpretation of Deleuze. It appropriates and puts to work his idea that the cinema is not essentially a narrative medium; but a medium that disrupts linear time, making visible a non-chronological dimension of time, which fragments the subject and exposes it to liminal situations. *Wavelength*, I argue, reverses the flow of time, to make visible an abyss at the heart of time, which shatters the unity of the subject.

Keywords: Deleuze's time-image, Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, avant-garde, non-chronological dimension of time, narrative versus non-narrative

"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 one 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 there 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 note to its highest 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"

(Snow 1994, 40–41).

It is not easy to approach a film that thematizes the impossibility of attaining what is aimed at; a film, a 45 minute zoom, whose object seems to withdraw as the camera approaches it. "A track towards the true nature of film," as Bruce Elder (1977, 320) called it; *Wavelength* questions itself, reflects on its own possibility and ontological status, yet seems to withhold the answer, deferring the end of its movement. However, as in philosophy, a question well-posed may provide an answer despite or *by* remaining open. Moreover, a path "toward Snow" has already been breached. The film has been written about extensively. Perhaps the most often cited, and the most relevant, is the work of Annette Michelson. Rather than seeing the film as a documentary or a reflection on what it means to "dwell" in a space, Michelson understands that the film is about time (Michelson 1978). Citing Valery's *Introduction to the method of Leonardo da Vinci*: "The working of his thought is thus concerned with that slow transformation of the notion of space which, beginning as a vacuum chamber, as an isotropic volume, gradually became a system inseparable from the matter it contains and from time;" she suggests that we see a similar kind of transformation take place in the film (Michelson 1978, 172). What at first appears as the image of an ordinary apartment, framed in the static geometry of perspective, is turned into a meditation on – but also an experience of – time, time and the cinema. Michelson points out that the film is punctuated by sudden changes from positive to negative, intense flashes of color, superimpositions of fixed images over the progressive zoom itself, and a series of human events, all of which create a series of still (photograph-like) moments within the forward movement. These interruptions serve to remind us that the movement of the cinematographic image "bears in its wake" discrete events, out of which the flow of time emerges (1978, 174). In other words, for Michelson the film is about the formation of time, of temporal continuity, out of fixed frames, isolated events, and spatial objects. It is a film about film, or about its essentially temporal dimension.

It is this creation of time, which *Wavelength* both performs and reflects on, that makes it such an interesting and important film for thinking about the cinema. In this regard, Michelson puts us on the right track. However, for

Michelson, time is synonymous with narrative; and in making visible the formation of time, *Wavelength* functions as a reflection on narrative. It functions as a kind of a meta-narrative. Moreover, Michelson understands narrative time through Husserl's phenomenological concept of time-consciousness. For Husserl, consciousness is intentional, in the sense that it is directed at objects in the world; and, as intentional, the temporality of consciousness is teleological (in layman's terms, goal-oriented) (Husserl 1960). Michelson equates the teleological time of intentional consciousness with the time of narrative (Michelson 1978, 173). Narrative, she argues, establishes a relation between the subject (viewer or artist) behind the camera and the world given before the camera, which exhibits intentional activity; insofar as it compels the viewer to organize the flow of images in reference to a meaningful end, the end of the story; and to experience the perpetual modification and development of that end across time. The experience of film time, in this sense, mirrors the experience of a subject intentionally positing a goal and acting to realise it in the world. *Wavelength*, for Michelson, is a perfect example, because it strips the narrative down to this essential temporal aspect: the experience of moving towards a resolution (Michelson 1978, 173–177).

However, not every narrative has a teleological structure, not every story resolves itself in a single revelation. There are many open-ended and pluralistic narratives in modern literature and film. In contrast to Michelson, I argue that *Wavelength* only seems to have a linear trajectory, but at a deeper level reveals a more twisted structure, projecting an end-less future, at both the beginning and end of the film. More importantly, however, it strikes me that the film should not be considered a narrative at all (even an open-ended one). *Wavelength* is composed as a movement. From the beginning to the end of the film, the zoom sketches a figure in time; a figure, a back and forth movement, which creates a certain sense of time. The time of the film is the effect of a certain ordering of the flow of time in the image and between images; of a certain montage that takes place within the zoom. In other words, it is by purely cinematographic means, and not by way of the story, that Snow is able to create that sense of temporal continuity, the stretch of time, which Michelson was not far from conceptualizing.

In order to better understand the experience of time that lies at the heart of *Wavelength*, Gilles Deleuze's work on the cinema is a valuable resource. Deleuze emphasizes the irreducibility of the movement and time of the cinematographic image to narrative. In classical cinema, he argues, time was bound up with narrative development more closely. It thus took a more teleological form (Deleuze 1986). However, according to Deleuze, modern cinema is preoccupied with time more directly, often foregoing the rational

development of events, in order to explore empty or disjointed time; in order to explore the unfolding of time for itself (Deleuze 1989). This is the case with *Wavelength*, the “focus” of which is not the end of the story, but the experience of being on the way. It is this experience of being on the way, that is, of moving towards a future, a future which will not arrive, that I will try to conceptualize, in its metaphysical and cinematographic aspects, through an approach that is informed by the work of Deleuze.

Back to the Future: the Zoom

Michelson is right to point out that *Wavelength* begins by installing a threshold of expectation through the searching, narrowing movement of the zoom. The film appears as having “relentless directionality,” or “that regard for the future that forms a horizon of expectation” (Michelson 1978, 174). The sense of a “towards which” becomes visible as the photograph comes progressively into view on the horizon, and is, as it were, thematized. It is made visible as that in relation to which the present of the image, and, correlatively, the consciousness that is situated in the present, is constituted, as a present in time, on its way “towards” the future.

At the same time, Michelson points out, the film makes visible a “horizon of the past,” through superimpositions (of the image just seen) and events “passing into the field from behind the camera and back again” (Michelson 1978, 174). “And back again,” that is to say, there is a recursive movement whereby the past is re-projected (superimposed) onto the future; as a memory is re-activated in the present. What is initially projected ahead becomes past (falling behind the camera) and serves as the basis for a new horizon. For Michelson, this recourse to the past does not disturb the film’s “relentless directionality.” It gives it shape, in the way that a memory serves to fix the end point of a new action.

The film (or its time) seems to move like an arrow towards its target, suggesting a linear schema, and the promise of a resolution. However, this progressive movement is foiled, or serves as a foil for a different type of temporality that soon becomes apparent in the course of the film. We are “moving from uncertainty to certainty,” as Michelson puts it; but what happens at the moment of “revelation,” when the camera discovers the object of its search? It turns out to be a photograph of ocean waves, and the zoom continues. The image regains the depth that it started with and that it only seemed to have exhausted. Michelson writes: “The photograph is re-projected in superimposition upon itself. The eye is projected through a photograph out beyond the wall and screen into a limitless space” (Michelson 1978, 175). What takes place is a sort of

return to the beginning; a return, that is, to the condition of being on the way towards or being suspended before an uncertain future.¹

The future, that is, the photograph *towards which* the zoom moves, ceases to appear simply as what is ahead on the horizon. It “turns out” as having already been given, as what the zoom aims at *retrieving*. It is as though it were (a future) past. In his description of the film, Snow spoke of “the gifts of both prophecy and memory that only film and music have to offer” (Snow 1994, 40). Considering the loop-like structure of the zoom, the conjunction “and” could be taken as suggesting an imbrication of prophecy and memory, past and future, which makes each the function of the other. The gift of time would then be this imbrication: the givenness – in memory – of the future; or the “yet to be” character of what is given (as past).

The effect of this imbrication, or of the folding of the future onto the past, is a kind of *mise-en-abyme*: there appears a horizon behind the horizon, a veil behind the veil. The recommencement of the zoom into a horizon which lay behind the horizon, in other words, implies the possibility of an infinite regress. The future *mise-en-abyme* appears as *infinitely deferred*. As the zoom approaches it, at the very moment, the future opens anew as already still to come; and so on, ad infinitum, as though the movement had no end. It is in this sense that the zoom returns to its “origin.” It repeats and recommences the unending movement towards the future.

The time of the film is not therefore linear, but it is not simply circular either. It does not simply return to what was already there, since what was already there, and what comes to have the status of the past in the course of the film, was itself simply a possibility, a vague future on the horizon. In other words, what was given beforehand was a movement that still had to be made, a horizon that had not yet been given or had only been given in the form of the not yet. The zoom returns only to the future, to that which continually escapes it, to that which it can never be done with. Its trajectory is therefore more paradoxical than that which is implied by a simple circle. Spinning away from and towards itself at the same time, it traces something like a broken or decentered circle.

The “human events” that punctuate the zoom do not constitute a narrative, so much as they serve to mark the time of the film. A woman walks into the apartment accompanied by two men carrying a book-shelf; later she returns

1 The climactic moment of the film, when the photograph moves clearly into view, is marked by a rapid series of superimpositions of the photograph as it *was* just projected, as well as by the sine wave (the soundtrack of the film), which begins to slide up and down its range of cycles as though it were turning back and doubling upon itself after having steadily progressed, until then, to its highest pitch. Both of these devices serve to emphasize the loop-like or repetitive structure of the zoom.

with a friend, and they listen to *Strawberry Fields Forever*; a long while later, a sound of breaking glass is heard, and a man (played by Hollis Frampton) stumbles in and dies on the floor; the woman returns and calls someone to tell him about the dead man in her apartment, whom she has never seen before. This absurd little “narrative” constitutes a before and an after, with a death in-between. What is essential here is the fact that it is *at the moment of death* that the camera turns into the photograph (passing just above the dead body). Death coincides with the transition, with the moment when the film turns back (to the future). From this standpoint the photograph of ocean waves appears as a sort of visualization of death, or of the point of rupture, the moment, the time of death. But if in this sense the film unveils the great mystery of life, it is only, alas, to unveil another veil. For if it is death that is projected, it is projected as infinitely deferred, that is, it is made present as what cannot be made present. It is given as unattainable, or “imprevisible;” – and what, conceivably, is more “imprevisible” than death?

This reading of the film is confirmed in a certain way by Snow’s *Wavelength for Those Who Don’t Have the Time* (2003). The film, which is *Wavelength* cut into three parts and superimposed upon one another, does more than economize on time. It reveals what is most essential about *Wavelength*. The film folds *Wavelength* upon itself such that the end is co-present with the beginning: the photograph of waves is already there while the zoom is just beginning to move towards it. We see the photograph up close, occupying the whole screen, and *at the same time* we see it superimposed upon itself, as a small image, far on the horizon. [Fig. 1.] The zoom moves toward a future that has already past and is still to come... From the point of view of Snow’s sequel, what is essential about *Wavelength* is neither narrative nor linear perspective, but that doubling up of time that is best understood in terms of the anachronism: *back to the future*.²

2 The fact that the central and final image of *Wavelength* is a photograph sheds further light on the temporality of the film. If a photograph fixes a moment of time, a photograph projected in a film is itself fixed in time. Snow explored this paradox (of photographs cinematographically projected in time) in his film *One Second in Montreal*. The film projects a series of photographs of parks in Montreal. Each still is held progressively longer, which reveals, ineluctably, the irreducible inscription of time on the cinematographic image. As Michelson puts it, in *One Second in Montreal* “the flow of time is superimposed, inscribed upon the photograph’s fixity – as the discrete images of the loft had been superimposed upon its traversal by the zoom [in *Wavelength*]” (1978, 177). However, in the final moments of *Wavelength* the projection of the photograph serves to reveal the infinite dimension of time itself.

From a Phenomenological towards a Deleuzian Concept of Time and the Cinema

Is *Wavelength* a metaphor of the subject's experience of being in time? Michelson is not the only significant film critic to make this argument. What it implies is that the film *refers* to a reality given in the world, by *mirroring* the "intentional" structure of subjective experience. Understood phenomenologically, consciousness is "intentional" in the sense that it is always directed at objects in the world. Insofar as intentionality is an activity (of the subject in the world) it is fundamentally temporal. This is what, according to Michelson, the film dramatizes: with the camera in the role of consciousness, and the photograph in that of the world. Like phenomenology, the film does not describe this relation as static, or the movement from the one to the other as "deterministic" (that is, uni-directional, like a cause and effect relation). For phenomenology, subject and object, intention and goal, past and future are never given once and for all. In *Wavelength* we are to see the perpetual transformation of subject and object in relation to one another, through the perpetual reversal of horizons, whereby what was projected ahead becomes the starting point for new initiatives. We are to see, that is to say, the perpetual transformation of the world by the camera's subjective eye, and of the eye by the world. The phenomenological reading of film is not strictly "realist" (Michelson herself always identified as a modernist) since from this standpoint reality is not simply reproduced. Nonetheless, the reading refers the camera's eye to the horizon of the world and to its subjective correlate, as to an original structure, of which it becomes "a metaphor."³

However, if *Wavelength* reverses the direction of time in the way that I have described it above, then it ruins intentionality. Even if, following Michelson, we begin by considering the camera in the role of consciousness and the

3 The question of what kind of image of the subject is constituted by *Wavelength* was much discussed in the seventies and eighties, during the heyday of Film-Theory. Stephen Heath argued with Michelson, suggesting that the film's implied narrative and linear perspective prevents it from questioning how the apparatus of cinema constitutes the subject in the first place; and makes it complicit with a certain ideology of the (all-powerful) subject. Snow, for his part, claimed that neither narrative nor perspective were the true subjects of the film. Guided by Deleuze, I have focused on the time that is articulated by the movement of the image in the film, which implies a different way of looking at the question of the cinema and its relation to the subject.

For a summary of these more classical debates about *Wavelength*, see Elizabeth Legge's *Michael Snow, Wavelength* (Legge 2009).

photograph in that of its object, and if we understand the relation between the two, as “dramatized” by the film, in terms of time, we cannot fail to see the ruin of intentionality. The photographic object appears in the guise of a future that withdraws from the grasp of consciousness as it approaches it. It does not function as a goal that the subject can recognize or represent. It does not refer back to the original intention of the subject, as its actual or potential realization. It appears to the subject as the unknown, the unforeseeable, the limitless. Exposed to such a future, plunging, that is, zooming into it, the subject is undone. That is to say, the coherence of the subject, its identity across time is broken; broken by the fact that a part of it, the future into which it is projected, remains inaccessible and unrecognizable. If there is a unity between consciousness and its object, the camera eye and the photograph, it lies in the continuity that the zoom establishes; and this continuity links the one to the other, the past (self) to the future, as to a radical otherness. In other words, the point of connection, of the self with its object and through this object with itself, is a point of divergence.

In the film the projection of the future and the ruin of the subject are marked by death. Similarly, in the history of philosophy, it is the meditation on death, in the work of Heidegger, that introduces a rupture with the modern theory of the subject. Having defined the subject as situated in time (*Dasein*) and having defined time by the possibilities that the subject aims to realize in the world, Heidegger identifies death as the limit of all these possibilities (Heidegger 1996). Death is not only the possibility that cannot be realized; it also marks the limit of all possibilities, of all possible realizations. However, the possibility of not realizing a possibility, or of not being able to, is a feature of all possibility and serves to define the very character of possibility, that is, its essentially contingent “not yet” quality. Moreover, this “not yet” essence of possibility, which is marked by the possibility of death, is also what enables the realization of possibilities, since it implies that the course of action is not fixed in advance. This reasoning leads Heidegger to conclude that death is the ultimate human possibility, the horizon that sustains every horizon, enabling the realization and the negation of all possibilities. If the subject is defined by a possibility that it cannot master, if its “ownmost” (as Heidegger calls it) possibility escapes it, then it is divided within (Heidegger 1996, 232). Being towards death, the subject cannot know itself or what will become of it. It is defined, rather, by a movement away from itself; that is to say, the movement towards itself, towards its own possibilities, pushes it outside itself. The subject is outside of itself (as Heidegger would say, it is *ec-static*), or, which amounts to the same thing, it is an other to itself. This reflection on death and the ruin of the subject is radicalized in the work of Blanchot, Levinas, Derrida, and Deleuze. It takes

place in *Wavelength* (both as reflection and experience) through the movement of the zoom towards an infinitely deferred horizon.

There is thus a universal or metaphysical aspect to the film, which brings it into relation with philosophy. Although Snow was not thinking about Heidegger or Deleuze, he did have metaphysical "aims," calling the film a summation of his religious inklings (Snow 1994, 40). It is hard not to see the photograph of the ocean, projected at the moment of death, as invoking some sort of transcendence. However, it would be presumptuous to see it as invoking the beyond of death as the place of everlasting bliss. The ocean is too vague and indeterminate for that. It appears, rather, as a limit towards which the subject moves but can never cross. Death is this limit: at once full of promise and infinite possibility and, at the same time, a hopeless black hole in which everything comes to nothing. The sublime quality of the film or of its climactic moment can also be explained by this Janus-faced character of death: at once a source of great wonder and novelty, and the most harrowing, destructive experience.

In the cinema books Deleuze turns to Heidegger when discussing the cinema's relation to thought. It is Heidegger's later reflections on the nature of thinking that interest Deleuze the most. In the text *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger exploits the double sense of the German phrase *Was Heisst Denken?* (meaning both what is called thinking and what calls for thinking) to transform the question "what is called thinking" into the question "what calls for thinking;" that is to say, what enables us to think in the first place (Heidegger 1976). His answer, at once simple and profound, is that what calls for thinking, what is most thought provoking is the fact that we are not yet thinking. It is the lack of knowledge, rather than the stock of accumulated knowledge, that makes us think in the first place; just as it is the possibility of not being able to act that gives us the possibility of action, of realizing something new and undetermined, in the first place. Deleuze writes that when the cinema discovers time, not the time that unfolds as a determined sequence, but the empty time that opens a limitless horizon, it discovers this fundamental "inpower" (*impouvoir*) of thought. In other words, with the time-image the cinema forces us to think thought itself, which is the "not yet" that lies at the origin of all thought, at the origin of all possibility.⁴ The cinema has innumerable ways of making us probe

4 "What forces us to think is 'the inpower (*impouvoir*) of thought,' the figure of nothingness, the inexistence of a whole which could be thought. [...] The cinematographic image, as soon as it takes on its aberration of movement, carries out a *suspension of the world* or affects the visible with a *disturbance*, which, far from making thought visible, as Eisenstein wanted, are on the contrary directed to what does not let itself be thought in thought, and equally to what does not let itself be seen in vision" (Deleuze 1989, 168).

the very depths of thought; *Wavelength* does it by making visible the “imprevisible” (invisible) future.

However, the universal aspect of the “not yet” should not blind us to the specificity of the medium (the time) of the cinema and the singular way that it is realized in this monumental film. Deleuze’s approach, moreover, instructs us to consider this specificity as well as the singular way it is realized by each film. *Wavelength* does not give us a representation of death or simply reproduce the concept. The zoom does not function as a representation or a reproduction of a real subject moving towards a photograph of the future. Rather, it is a movement that opens the future for itself. In other words, the event that the film constitutes does not function as a mirror of experience; it effectuates a rupture with the world as it is experienced by a subject.

The effectuation of the rupture, moreover, is accomplished through purely cinematographic means. It is the “stuff of time” (as Zsuzsa Baross puts it) out of which cinematographic images are made, that constitutes the means through which *Wavelength* creates its sense of time (Baross 2011, 32). The time it takes the zoom to traverse the apartment, and the mechanical articulation of this time by the projector, are manipulated and organized in a way that allows the future to become visible as a withdrawing horizon. To put it differently, it is in the space of the 45 minutes that it takes for the projector to repeat the movement of the zoom; and in between the images mechanically articulated into a continuum; that the abyss of time (the infinite deferral of the future) surges up and becomes visible. This is why the 45 minutes feels like an eternity.⁵

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5 While the sense of an infinite stretching of time has little to do with the real-time length of the film, one does have to sit through *Wavelength*, one does have to give it time. It is the slow building up of duration that disposes us to eventually experience its limitlessness. This is why, while *Wavelength for Those Who Don’t Have the Time* reveals the anachronism that lies at the heart of the film, it is not the same experience.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. *Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time* (2003).

