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> —James Broughton[1]

> The film of tomorrow will be *lettrist* and composed of *subtitles*. If at its conception cinema was by virtue of its images an attack on *reading*, the day will come when the cinema will be a mere *form of reading*.
> —Isidore Isou[2]

Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* (1926) is one of the most unusual films ever made, even by the standards of the early European avant-garde. It partly comprises a series of filmed roto-reliefs, vertiginous rotating spirals moving at a variety of speeds. If this were *Anémic cinéma*'s sole content, it would be a compelling abstract film in the tradition of Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921), Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921), and Viking Eggeling's *Symphonie diagonale* (1924). However, the shots of the roto-reliefs are interspersed with shots of ostensibly nonsensical written text: spinning phrases replete with alliteration, puns,

1 Quoted in *Follow Your Own Weird: The World of James Broughton* (Chicago: Facets Cine-Notes, 2006), 31.

2 Quoted in Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 441–442 (italics in original). The passage is taken from Isou's obscure 1954 film *Apology of a Unique Personality* (*Apologie d'un personnage unique*).

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and sexually suggestive double entendres (Figure 1). Here is a sampling of Duchamp's Dadaist wordplay:

> The child who nurses is a sucker of hot flesh and does not like the cauliflower of the hot glass-house.

> If I give you a penny, will you give me a pair of scissors [i.e. a fuck]?

> Incest or family passion, in blows too drawn out.

> Have you ever put the marrow of the sword into the stove of the loved one?[3]

Figure 1. Cryptic language appears on a revolving disk in Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma* (1926; Kino International, 2005).

The centrality of language in *Anémic cinéma* challenged the widespread assumption that imagery—whether abstract or representational—was to be film's sole currency. Duchamp's cinematic vision was far more inclusive. He clearly sided with surrealist poet Robert Desnos, who asserted, "Everything that can be projected on the screen belongs in the cinema, letters as well as faces."[4]

Written text in a film was nothing new, of course. Text had frequently been used in cinematic introductions, credit sequences, and intertitles. Indeed, intertitles were so ubiquitous in the era of silent cinema that the handful of films that disavowed them—such as F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), Dimitri Kirsanoff's *Ménilmontant* (1926), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)—were the exceptions that proved the rule.[5] Still, *Anémic cinéma*'s use of text departed dramatically from its predecessors. Unlike conventional cinematic text, Duchamp's language served no narrative (or even paratextual) purpose. Instead, the function of the words was primarily poetic (or, in the spirit of Dadaism, anti-poetic). Text no longer needed to be relegated to a subservient role. In the post-Duchampian world, the

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3 Translations from the French text are taken from Katrina Martin, "Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*," *Studio international* 189, no. 973 (1975): 53–60. The original French sentences appear as follows: "L'enfant qui tête est un souffleur de chair chaude et n'aime pas le chou-fleur de serre chaude." "Si je te donne un sou, me donneras tu une paire de ciseaux?" "Inceste ou passion de famille, à coups trop tirés." "Avez vous déja mis la moëlle de l'épée dans le poêle de l'aimée?" Given the complexity and polysemy of the original French text, Martin correctly points out that a faithful English translation of *Anémic cinéma* is "impossible."

4 Quoted in P. Adams Sitney, "Image and Title in Avant-Garde Cinema," *October* 11 (1979): 102.

5 Silent films without intertitles did not necessarily forgo written text altogether. For example, as Scott MacDonald points out, Murnau still managed to smuggle written language into *The Last Laugh* "within the imagery." See Scott MacDonald, ed., *Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2.

written word could be just as central to a film as imagery.[6] The door had been opened for a new kind of cinema: *the textual film*. Rather than being composed of photographic or animated imagery, these works would foreground letters, words, numbers, punctuation marks, and other forms of handwritten or typographical text—challenging what Hollis Frampton has called the "logophobia" endemic to cinema and other visual arts.[7]

The prominence of text in avant-garde film has received a fair amount of scholarly attention.[8] However, the implications of these intermedia experiments have not yet been adequately theorized. I want to argue that text-based cinema challenges widespread preconceptions of what a film can do (and be) while also highlighting cinema's unique ability to modulate duration. Nowhere are the theoretical implications of textual cinema made clearer than in Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), a self-referential film in which individual words appear on-screen, one at a time, gradually forming a series of statements that are alternately philosophical, facetious, and false. I claim that textual films like *So Is This* help demonstrate the folly of ontologies of cinema that prescribe necessary conditions. I also argue for a more Wittgensteinian approach to conceptualizing film, one that recognizes the boundless elasticity of concepts like film and language. However, before analyzing *So Is This*, it will be useful to situate the work within the broader context of Snow's cinematic oeuvre.

One of the most undertheorized elements in Snow's aesthetic is his fascination with stasis. In some of his films, movement is minimal, as is the case in *Dripping Water* (codirected with his wife, Joyce Wieland, 1969), in which the only movement portrayed is water dripping into a dish.[9] In other Snow films, the movement is extremely slow, giving the viewer an impression of stasis. (Snow's protracted films include his widely revered *Wavelength* [1967], a forty-five-minute zoom from one end of a room to another, and *See You Later / Au Revoir* [1990], in which an ordinary thirty-second farewell is expanded to eighteen minutes.) And Snow is not afraid to push his interest in stasis to its logical conclusion: in several of his films, there is no on-screen movement at all. *One Second in Montreal* (1969) consists only of photographs, *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound*

6 Although P. Adams Sitney has called *Anémic cinéma* "the first film within the tradition of the avant-garde to claim equality of title and image" (see Sitney, "Image and Title," 102), there is arguably a precursor to Duchamp's experiment in Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhattan* (1921), which combines documentary footage of Manhattan with poetic intertitles. One might reasonably contend, however, that the text of *Manhattan* serves as a commentary on the film's images and is thus more closely allied with traditional narrative intertitles—ones that are subservient to cinematic imagery—than Duchamp's more autonomous text. Interestingly, Man Ray, who assisted Duchamp in the filming of *Anémic cinéma*, would go on to make several films of his own that used written text for poetic (rather than diegetic) effect, such as *L'étoile de mer* (*The Starfish*, 1928) and *Les mystères du château de dé* (*The Mysteries of the Chateau of Dice*, 1929).

7 Hollis Frampton, "Film in the House of the Word," *October* 17 (1981): 61.

8 The most notable scholar in the field of text-based cinema is undoubtedly Scott MacDonald. In addition to the aforementioned *Screen Writings*, see his "Text as Image in Some Recent North American Avant-Garde Films," *Afterimage* 13, no. 8 (1986): 9–20.

9 *Dripping Water* appears to be a cinematic interpretation of George Brecht's event score *Drip Music* (*Drip Event*) (1959), the instructions for which simply read, "A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel." See Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, and Lauren Sawchyn, eds., *The Fluxus Performance Workbook* (A Performance Research e-Publication, 2002), 22, http://www.deluxxe.com/beat/fluxusworkbook.pdf. Snow's film represents a distinctive "performance" of Brecht's score, however, since the water falling into the vessel and the dripping heard on the sound track are deliberately asynchronous.

Film (1970) offers only paintings, and *A Casing Shelved* (1970) is simply a color slide of a bookshelf accompanied by Snow's voice describing the items on it. Clearly, Snow is intent on challenging conceptions of cinema that see movement as its essence. As he puts it, "the basis of cinema as a technology is stasis; the fundamental unit is the still photograph. Motion is made from the perception of fast stills."[10]

Snow's fascination with cinematic stasis is particularly salient in *So Is This*. This "motion picture" is motionless and pictureless—it consists only of immobile typographical text.[11] In other words, what is preeminent in *So Is This* is not movement or imagery, but duration. In fact, Snow has claimed that "controlling durations" is the starting point of his cinematic practice, and that *So Is This* and *One Second in Montreal* represent his "purest uses of duration."[12] As the text itself indicates, "the / decision / has / been / made / to / concentrate / on / the / distinctive / capacity / of / film / to / structure / time."[13] While Snow is correct to assert that film has a unique ability "to / structure / time," film's status as "a time form" (to borrow Maya Deren's memorable phrase) has been challenged by some theorists.[14] Thus, before making an argument about the temporality of textual films (and of *cinema* writ large), it will be necessary to address these criticisms.

The most prominent argument against film's status as a temporal art form runs like this: Everything takes place in time. Therefore, film is temporal only in the trivial sense that *everything* is temporal. After all, even paintings and sculptures must be looked at for a certain duration (even if it is a very brief one) to be apprehended. One of the most prominent proponents of this view is Anthony McCall (most famous for his seminal 1973 work of expanded cinema *Line Describing a Cone*). In McCall's view, "Everything that occurs, including the process of looking and thinking, occurs in time and . . . therefore, the distinction [between temporal and atemporal art] is absurd."[15] McCall further argues that "a piece of paper on the wall is as much a duration as the projection of a film. Its only difference is in its immediate relationship to our perception."[16]

This is a seductive claim, one that is worthy of careful attention. McCall is certainly correct to point out that everything that happens, happens in time. He is also correct to suggest that a piece of paper on a wall may be more like a film than common sense would suggest, insofar as they are both likely to offer visual changes over a period of time—even if the piece of paper undergoes change at a rate that is beyond the realm

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10 Justin Remes, "Sculpting Time: An Interview with Michael Snow," *Millennium Film Journal* 56 (2012): 16.

11 It is worth noting that not all textual films are static. For example, the text of Richard Serra and Carlotta Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* (1973) continuously scrolls upward from the bottom of the screen, in the style of closing credits.

12 Annette Michelson and Michael Snow, "The Sound of Music: A Conversation with Michael Snow," *October* 114 (2005): 56.

13 Slashes do not appear in *So Is This*. However, the fact that words only appear one at a time is destabilizing for the reader and viewer. I use slashes when quoting from the film to elicit a comparable reading experience, one that is stilted and desultory.

14 Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (1960): 160.

15 Anthony McCall, "*Line Describing a Cone* and Related Films," *October* 103 (2003): 56.

16 Anthony McCall, "Two Statements," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 252–253.

of immediate human perception. (This is precisely the insight underlying Tony Conrad's *Yellow Movies* [1972–1973], in which paper covered in cheap paint is presented as a quasi–cinema screen, so that the viewer can imagine the white paint slowly turning yellow over the course of several decades.)[17] In spite of these insights, I think McCall is ultimately mistaken to claim that paper on a wall is "as much a duration as the projection of a film." They may both endure for a period of time (as all things do), but there is a crucial difference: films offer a predetermined and structured duration, whereas paper does not. A filmmaker can modulate duration, deciding how long a spectator will see a given object or event, but this is not an option for an experimental artist who places pieces of paper on a wall. Obviously, there is no guarantee that a spectator *will* watch a film in its entirety, from beginning to end. Still, regardless of what a viewer may choose to do, a film has a fixed temporal structure, a predetermined durational unfolding that distinguishes it from traditional visual art.

Of course, *So Is This* is a remediation of written text, not visual art, and reading a book is temporally distinct from viewing a film, because the reader has more control over the rate of a work's durational unfolding.[18] Nevertheless, text remains temporal in a way that traditional visual art is not. Unlike a painting or a sculpture, text (along with film, drama, music, and so on) generally has an inherent trajectory that must be followed for a work to be apprehended. Unlike, say, *One Second in Montreal*, which temporalizes photography, or *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film*, which temporalizes painting, *So Is This* uses the temporal medium of film to remediate *another* temporal medium: the book.[19] This raises the obvious question: why? This is a query Snow anticipates: "One / question / which / the / author / expects / is: / 'Why / would / anyone / want / to / do / such / a / thing / as / this?' / followed / by / 'wouldn't / a / book / be / better?'" This question implicitly hints at its own answer: by cinematizing written text itself (rather than the *content* of a particular text), Snow impels us to consider the distinctions between the two media. And the viewer gradually comes to the realization that the most salient distinction between the textual film and the written word resides in their varying temporal structures. As Mary Ann Doane notes, "*So Is This* asserts its difference from a book through its rigorous control of the *time* of reading. The slowness or the rapidity of the appearance of new words on the screen is a play with filmic temporality and audience anticipation."[20]

17   In the theorizations of Jonathan Walley, works like Conrad's *Yellow Movies* would be considered "paracinema," because they "recognize cinematic properties outside the standard film apparatus," and thus find "cinematic qualities or effects in nonfilmic materials." See Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October* 103 (2003): 15–30. See also Walley's "The Paracinema of Anthony McCall and Tony Conrad," in *Avant-Garde Film*, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 355–382.

18   I borrow the term *remediation* from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who use it to describe the McLuhanesque appropriation of one medium by another. See their *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

19   Throughout this article, I use the term *book* as a convenient shorthand for referring to all traditionally typographical mediums, including magazines, journals, newspapers, text-based websites, and e-books.

20   Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 137 (italics added).

Indeed, if one sees the film version of *So Is This* in addition to reading the script, it is striking just how different the experiences are (even though they both involve reading the same text).[21] For example, readers of the script can set their own pace: they may choose to skim certain passages while reading others more carefully and deliberately. But this is not an option in *So Is This*. As Snow points out, "The number of frames per word and spaces between was precisely indicated. It's composed."[22] Because of this careful structuring of cinematic temporality, a reader is forced to accept Snow's pacing. At times, this means spending an inordinately long time staring at a single word. For example, at one point in the film, the text reads, "one / of / the / interests / of / this / system / is / that / each / word / can / be / held / on / the / screen / for / a / specific / length / of / time." While most of the words in the film remain on the screen for just a second or two, the word *length* in this passage remains in place for almost an entire minute (Figure 2). The eye becomes so tired of viewing the word that it begins to lose its semantic content and simply become an abstract series of shapes and squiggles. By the time the sentence finally completes itself, only alert viewers will remember how it began. In contrast, certain words appear on only a single frame of the filmstrip, and as a result, inattentive spectators may miss them entirely. This is most evident in the film's assault on the Ontario Board of Censors, which had previously banned Snow's four-and-a-half-hour *"Rameau's Nephew" by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974) for its graphic sexual imagery:

> This / is / the / start / of / a / new / paragraph / from / which / any / children / present / should / shield / their / eyes. / Since / this / film / was / tits / originally / composed / ass / The / Ontario / Board / of / Censors / has / started / to / inspect / so-called / Experimental / Films. / e.g. / This. / Its [*sic*] / difficult / to / cock / understand / why / but / it / seems / as / if / their / purpose / is / to / protect / you / from / this. / To / protect / you / from / people / like / cunt / the / author / discussing / their / sexual / lives / or / fantasies / on / this / screen.[23]

The taboo words here appear on the screen for only a split second, making it easy to miss them altogether. Unlike the word *length*, which feels weighty and laborious as a result of being on the screen for such an extended period of time, words like *cock* and *cunt*, because of their brief duration, seem sharp, caustic, and affectively jarring—even more so than usual. Through his control of the film's temporal structure, then, Snow is able to modulate the preexisting connotations of words, slightly altering the "flavor" of each one. (The flavor metaphor, incidentally, is borrowed directly from Snow: "I

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21   The text of *So Is This* can be found in MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 140–155.

22   Remes, "Sculpting Time," 18.

23   In fact, *So Is This* goes so far as to address by name Mary Brown, the censor who banned *"Rameau's Nephew"*: "Hello / Censors, / Hi / Mary. / This / Film / is / as / clean / as / a / whistle. / Ha / Ha / Ha / Ha / (Hollow / laughter). / This / film / wouldn't / say / shit / if / its / mouth / were / full / of / it. / Gulp." The "Gulp" in this passage simultaneously expresses Snow's fear of censorship (the nervous gulp) and his utter defiance of censorial strictures (the evocation of coprophagia).

hope that the spectators can savor the many duration forms that happen in *So Is This*. There are spicy ones, salty ones, sweet ones, etc."[24])

When struggling to read Snow's taboo words, which appear for only a split second, one is immediately reminded of another temporal distinction between books and films. In addition to permitting readers to set their own pace, books allow readers to return to previous passages in order to "catch" words or ideas that they might have missed the first time—or perhaps to review passages that were particularly compelling or confusing.

Figure 2. The word *length* is displayed for a lengthy period of time in Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982). Image courtesy of Michael Snow.

But the durational unfolding of a film does not permit this. It proceeds at its own pace, indifferent to the demands of the audience. (Of course, the modern media environment complicates such distinctions: films like *So Is This* are increasingly viewed online, which does permit one to scroll back and catch passages that were initially missed.) Snow's strict durational control is what makes a screening of *So Is This* such a compelling experience. Because sentences become subdivided into the individual words that make them up, each word takes on a renewed importance, including words that are normally skimmed over, such as articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. In fact, because each word is formatted to take up approximately the same amount of space on the screen, small words appear in large typeface, and are thus more visually dominant than the sesquipedalian words that Snow uses (e.g., *semiological*, *psychoanalytical*, *incommunicado*). Additionally, the experience becomes more participatory than more conventional modes of reading. In part, this is because the deliberateness (and relative slowness) with which each word appears encourages the audience to play a guessing game, hypothesizing about which direction a sentence will move in and which words will appear next. Scott MacDonald describes this dimension of the film perceptively:

> In *So Is This*, Snow controls time—as all filmmakers do—and we are at his mercy. We cannot know what a sentence means until it's over; as a result, Snow's one-word-at-a-time structure forces viewers to construct a meaning, then reconstruct it, as individual words are revealed. Indeed, since the meaning of words is determined by their contexts within sentences, we cannot even be sure how a particular word is to be understood until subsequent words have been revealed.[25]

24 Remes, "Sculpting Time," 18.

25 MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 137. In addition to this implicit form of audience participation, there are points in the film when participation is explicitly encouraged—for example, when audience members are invited to sing together

So Is This calls attention to still another key distinction between reading a text and viewing a textual film: reading a book is almost always a solitary activity, whereas watching a film tends to be communal. Again, this situation has changed a great deal in the past several years, and I must confess that I watch more films alone (via the Internet, on DVD, and the like) than I do in group settings. Still, one can experience a film *with* other people in a way that is simply not possible with a book. One can certainly read along with someone else, but the experience is not the same. I have read parts of a book with a friend reading over my shoulder, for example, but invariably, the experience is temporally asynchronous, if only slightly: one of us will laugh before the other has reached the humorous passage, for example. But given the fixed duration of film, responses become concomitant. As Snow puts it, "Usually the tempo of reading depends on the reader, so it seemed interesting to use film to control the duration of reading because control of duration is a capacity of film, not of a book."[26] And the fact that communality is a concern of Snow's is hinted at in several passages in *So Is This*: "Warning: / This / film / may / be / especially / unsatisfying / for / those / who / dislike / having / others / read / over / their / shoulders." And later on in the film: "When / was / the / last / time / you / and / your / neighbor / read / together? / This / is / Communal / reading! / it's / Group / Lit!"[27]

As the expression "Group / Lit" implies, *So Is This* represents a remediation of literary text (broadly defined). One is immediately reminded of Marshall McLuhan's famous claim that the contents of one medium are "always another medium. The content of the press is literary statement, the content of the book is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel."[28] McLuhan seems to be making the (somewhat myopic) assertion that films remediate novels insofar as they offer extended narratives (ones that occasionally directly adapt novelistic content). This claim clearly has little relevance to avant-garde cinema, which often has closer ties to poetry—or even music or painting—than the novel. Still, what is interesting about textual films is the way they adapt "literary" content in radically new ways. Rather than attempting to translate written text *into* visual imagery, the films provide written text *as* visual imagery.

To better appreciate this distinction, consider traditional remediations of the Bible, Western culture's most influential text (or, more accurately, collection of texts). Biblical narratives have been one of the primary sources of cinematic content, from early films about the life of Jesus by Thomas Edison and Louis Lumière to Hollywood block-busters like Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments*

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in their minds: "Let's / all / raise / our / mental / voices / mutely, / mutually / in / song / (please / don't / move / your / lips). / Ready? / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4: / 'Some / where / o / ver / the / rain / bow / skies / are / blue . . .'"

26 Remes, "Sculpting Time," 20.

27 A rather different form of cinematic "Communal / reading" arises when an audience watches a foreign film with subtitles. Since entire phrases or sentences are usually displayed (as opposed to the word-by-word approach favored by Snow), reading rates can vary slightly, resulting in two kinds of temporal asynchrony: (1) individual spectators may read at different speeds, leading some to apprehend textual content before others, and (2) spectators may experience a "delay," reading the textual translation of a piece of dialogue before or after it is spoken. (For example, when watching foreign films, I often find myself quickly reading the subtitles with enough time remaining to anticipate how the actor or actress will deliver the lines I have just read.)

28 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 305.

(1956). But contrast these films to Andy Warhol's proposed cinematic remediation of the Bible. I am speaking here not of his eight-hour *Imitation of Christ* (1967) (a work that has only a tenuous connection to the biblical narrative), but of the unrealized project *Warhol Bible*. Warhol planned on filming each individual page of the Bible, long enough to be read, before displaying the next page. (The film's running length would have been a full thirty days!) It is not clear whether Warhol ever seriously planned to bring this project to fruition; it is quite possible that the idea itself fascinated him more than its actualization. In any case, *Warhol Bible* draws attention to the variety of ways that one medium can be appropriated by another. One need not "translate" the language of text into the language of cinema—one can simply film text directly. The most frequently repeated cliché about filmic adaptation is the claim "the book was better than the movie." Would it even make sense to compare the two in the case of *Warhol Bible*?[29]

Warhol's proposition does differ slightly from a film like *So Is This*. While Snow's words are naked, displayed in isolation from any kind of cinematic imagery, *Warhol Bible* would still have foregrounded photographic indexicality, in its "capturing" of actual pages from a Bible. In this sense, *Warhol Bible* has closer affinities to a textual film like Hollis Frampton's *Poetic Justice* (1972), in which the pages of a film script are displayed on a table, one at a time, so that, as Allen S. Weiss describes it, "paratext serves as text."[30] This explains why Snow does not mention Frampton in *So Is This* during the list of filmmakers who "concentrate / on / texts": "Richard / Serra, / Tom / Sherman, / Su / Friedrich, / John / Knight / and / Paul / Haines"—Snow alludes exclusively to "films (and videotapes) that featured only text, that had no pictorial element."[31] It is the very fact that *So Is This* has no explicit pictorial element that allows the text *itself* to become pictorialized. The letters and words of Snow's films are not merely the carriers of semantic information but also visual experiences in their own right, typographic formations with a host of aesthetic and affective valences.

In some films, the idea of words as an aesthetic (rather than semantic) cinematic element is taken to extreme levels, resulting in text that cannot even be read. One of the earliest examples of this is Joseph Cornell's *By Night with Torch and Spear*, a collage

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29 *Warhol Bible* appears to be a kind of practical joke, although this should not diminish its status as a serious meditation on the distinction between text and cinema. Since most viewers would hear the title and expect some kind of Warholian interpretation of Biblical stories (using actors, sets, dialogue, and so on), the absurdly literal content of the film would subvert these expectations. In fact, the idea for *Warhol Bible* is strongly reminiscent of the Fluxus film *12! Big Names!* (1975), in which spectators were lured into the theater by flyers that promised they would see "big names"—like Warhol and Snow—only to be disappointed when they realized that the event was simply a textual film that displayed the stars' names in typographical text, one at a time.

30 Allen S. Weiss, "'Poetic Justice': Formations of Subjectivity and Sexual Identity," *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 1 (1988): 50. Textual films like *Poetic Justice* are often characterized as "new talkies," experimental films from the 1970s and beyond that foreground language. (See, for example, J. Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984], 66.) However, I do not find this designation particularly helpful, since what was novel about the original talkies was not language per se, but *spoken* language and aural synchronicity—elements that are altogether absent from silent textual films like *Poetic Justice* and *So Is This*. To his credit, Noël Carroll (who appears to be the originator of the term *new talkie*) categorizes *Poetic Justice* as a structural film. See Noël Carroll, "*Interview with a Woman Who . . .*," *Millennium Film Journal* 7–9 (Fall 1980–1981): 37.

31 Remes, "Sculpting Time," 21.

film in which text plays a prominent role. (The film appears to have been made in the 1940s, although the exact date is uncertain.) Cornell displays footage of camels, caterpillars, and workers in a steel factory, but the images are occasionally broken up by upside-down intertitles that appear and disappear very quickly. Cornell's rigid temporal structure prevents one from reading much of the text, and as a result, it simply becomes a part of the film's atmosphere. Similarly, Paul Sharits's *Word Movie* (1966), a film composed entirely of seemingly random words accompanied by flickering light, moves at such a frenetic pace (one word per frame) that it is simply impossible to read the vast majority of the words that appear. One can make out individual words from time to time, but for the most part, the information overload results only in a fleeting visual impression of shapes and flashes.[32]

Clearly, *By Night with Torch and Spear* and *Word Movie* offer textual experiences that are quite distinct from *So Is This*, since in Snow's film, every word can be read and comprehended, so long as the viewer pays close attention. Still, Snow seeks to excavate more from his words than simply their semantic content. As was mentioned before, words that appear for prolonged durations lose their meaning and begin to become abstract shapes. (One is reminded of Warhol's maxim: "The more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away."[33]) And since small words like *of* and *is* are in very large typeface, the pictorial qualities of each individual letter become foregrounded. This was one of Snow's goals: "The hope was that the changes in scale from word to word will help the spectator to see each word as an individual shape, a pictograph, a picture—but also as a shot. Reading, as we learn it, is not 'seeing,' not 'regarding,' so I wanted to introduce pictorial/design perception as well as 'reading.'"[34]

But one of the most important questions raised by textual films in general—and *So Is This* in particular—is, what is a film? Since Snow breezily jettisons many of the components that have traditionally been thought to be necessary conditions of film (both movement and imagery), what is left, exactly? What are the implications of *So Is This* (and other textual films) for the ontology of cinema?

At the very least, such films should make us wary of any attempt to define cinema through recourse to necessary conditions (i.e., "*x* is a film if, and only if, it has the following properties"). Many film theorists have found themselves caught in the trap of drawing strict boundary lines around their object of study, only to have those boundaries challenged by some forward-thinking filmmaker or new technology. The result is a series of (more or less) pointless debates about whether *x* is a *true* film. Noël Carroll is one of the chief offenders here. In his essay "Defining the Moving Image," he argues that there are five necessary conditions that must be met for something to be accurately categorized as a film. In the interest of time, I give consideration to only

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32   Another film that is worth mentioning here is Takahiko Iimura's *White Calligraphy* (1967), in which characters from the *Kojiki*, an eighth-century Japanese text, are scratched directly into the film stock and displayed in rapid succession. As Iimura points out, it is not possible to read the film's text, even if one is fluent in Japanese: "Certain characters can be read, but not all of them; it's too fast." See Scott MacDonald, "An Interview with Taka Iimura," *Journal of the University Film Association* 33, no. 4 (1981): 26.

33   Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (San Diego, CA: Harvest/HBJ, 1990), 64.

34   Remes, "Sculpting Time," 20.

two of them, as this should be sufficient to make my point. According to Carroll, x is a film "only if x belongs to the class of things from which the impression of movement is technically possible."[35] However, movement is *not* possible in *So Is This*—it is a static film. Although it is true that the film changes as one word replaces another, at no point does the text ever move within the frame. Carroll might respond that *So Is This* is still projected by an apparatus with the capacity for movement. But what if, after attending a screening of *So Is This*, I discovered that the particular version I saw was displayed not via a movie projector but rather via a precisely timed slide projector (or some comparable technology that offered no technical capacity for movement)? Would it then be necessary to revoke the work's cinematic credentials? And Carroll offers another problematic necessary condition of cinema, one that strikes me as exceedingly strange: "x is a moving image only if it is two-dimensional."[36] In Carroll's view, then, is Francis Ford Coppola's *Captain EO* (1986) a film only if I watch it without my 3-D glasses on? And if 3-D movies do not "count" as a counterexample to this claim, what does? What about Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*, in which the three-dimensional projected light *itself* becomes the film? And what if future technologies enable the creation of "hologram" films, which would literally exist in three dimensions? It is hard to know how Carroll would be able to respond to these questions without falling prey to the no-true-Scotsman fallacy.[37]

This kind of thinking is so widespread that even someone like McCall, who consistently challenges rigid definitions of film with his innovative works of expanded cinema, falls into the trap of prescribing necessary conditions. For example, in 1975, McCall claimed, "*Line Describing a Cone* deals with one of the irreducible, necessary conditions of film: projected light."[38] This claim has not aged well. Given the ubiquity of films watched on televisions, computer screens, and iPods in today's postmedium convergence culture, few would continue to argue that light must be *projected* in order for a film to exist.[39] (And this is not to mention a film like Walter Ruttmann's *Weekend* [*Wochenende*; 1930], which features no light at all, but merely an audio track of "found" sounds accompanied by a blank screen.) Of course, it would be anachronistic to expect McCall to foresee future technological developments. But this is precisely the problem with demarcating boundaries around what a film is or can be: since any conception of cinema is necessarily limited by the technological and aesthetic practices that happen to be current at any given time, one can often mistake the contingent for the necessary. Does anyone doubt that fifty years from now new technologies and innovative filmmakers will

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35 Noël Carroll, "Defining the Moving Image," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 130.

36 Ibid.

37 Here is a succinct summation of the fallacy by Antony Flew, who originally conceptualized it: "No Scotsman would do such a thing. But one did. Well, no *true* Scotsman would." See Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 251 (italics in original). In the context of Carroll's argument, the fallacy might look something like this: "No film is three-dimensional. But *Line Describing a Cone* is three-dimensional. Well, no *true* film is three-dimensional."

38 McCall, "Two Statements," 250.

39 I borrow the term *postmedium* from Rosalind Krauss's book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

have pushed the boundaries of cinema in new directions, ones that are simply unthinkable today? And this should be seen as a welcome development, not some bothersome challenge to ontological or theoretical dogmas. Concepts are not immutable, discrete entities created by a deity with strict predetermined functions; they evolve over time and continually adapt to varying intellectual and cultural environments. The concept *film* is no exception. There is simply no need to speculate about every future development in cinematic praxis before offering a tentative conception of film, so long as one does not paint oneself into a corner by insisting on inflexible boundaries.

But what is the alternative? How can we speak coherently about film without precisely defining our object of study? Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous discussion of games should provide solace to anyone who is troubled by such questions. In one of the most memorable passages of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein points out that while we have little trouble using and understanding a term like *game*, this does not imply that there are any necessary conditions for something to be classified as such:

> Consider, for example, the activities that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that. . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family—build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth—overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: "games" form a family.[40]

This is precisely the approach one should take in understanding what films are. Films can be incredibly diverse: black-and-white or color, silent or sound, moving or static, photographic or textual, two-dimensional or three-dimensional, and so on. But as diverse as films can be, they nevertheless have clear family resemblances that conceptually link them. And we come to understand these resemblances inductively, not deductively. As Wittgenstein puts it, "How would we explain to someone what a game is? I think that we'd describe *games* to him, and we might add to the description: 'This *and similar things* are called 'games.'"[41] And is this not also how we might explain to someone what a film is? There is no need to draw rigid (and arbitrary) boundaries; film, in Wittgensteinian parlance, is "a concept with blurred edges."[42]

I am not the first film theorist to invoke Wittgenstein in arguing for an amorphous and evolving conception of cinema. In his book *The Virtual Life of Film*, D. N.

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40 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 36 (italics in original).

41 Ibid., 37 (italics in original).

42 Ibid., 38. In 1956, the American aesthetician Morris Weitz made a similar argument regarding Wittgenstein's usefulness in conceptualizing art. See Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (1956): 27–35.

Rodowick also astutely asserts that "cinema studies can stake no permanent claims on its disciplinary territories; its borders are in fact continually shifting."[43] He elaborates: "Every medium consists of a variable combination of elements. In this respect, moving image media are related more by a logic of Wittgensteinian family resemblances than by clear and essential differences."[44] However, Rodowick does not seem to be fully convinced by his own argument. Consider, for instance, his comments on Stan Brakhage's film *Mothlight* (1963). To create this innovative work, Brakhage collected the wings of dead moths, blades of grass, dirt, and other miscellany, and taped them directly to the filmstrip. The result is a kind of cinematic alchemy—the ordinary objects become utterly transformed by their magnification, luminosity, and spatiotemporal arrangement, and the film's frenetic succession of images creates an experience of rare aesthetic force. *Mothlight* would seem to be a prime example of a filmmaker "shifting" the borders of cinema, a bold reimagining of what a film can do or be. Yet Rodowick challenges *Mothlight*'s status as a film, claiming that "films of unrecognizable or nearly unrecognizable images such as Peter Gidal's *Room Film* (1973) remain *films*, while Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) is rather a motion sculpture animated by the projection apparatus."[45] This is a puzzling distinction. Brakhage's original creation could certainly be conceptualized as a kind of sculpture, but why would running this work through a projector fail to produce a film? (Recall that Hollis Frampton once provisionally defined film as "whatever will pass through a projector."[46]) To be sure, *Mothlight* is radically different from a more traditional film, like, say, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), but is there not a clear family resemblance here? As a careful reader of Wittgenstein might point out, solitaire and basketball offer very different experiences, but they both remain *games*.

　　Wittgenstein has been an important influence on textual films in general and Snow's cinema in particular.[47] Like Wittgenstein, Snow dismantles facile conceptual taxonomies that resort to necessary conditions. By creating films without movement, films without imagery, films without filmstrips, and so on, Snow consistently challenges our preconceived notions of cinema. Consider the aforementioned *A Casing Shelved*, which presents a single stationary slide of a bookcase accompanied by Snow's recorded voice describing it. Noël Carroll has questioned the cinematic credentials of *A Casing Shelved*: "I would argue that this 'film' is not a film at all; to be a film, properly so called,

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43   D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 23.

44   Ibid., 86.

45   Ibid., 59 (italics in original).

46   Hollis Frampton, "For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 137.

47   Snow has mentioned his interest in Wittgenstein in numerous interviews. For example, see Andrée Hayum, "Information or Illusion: An Interview with Michael Snow," in *The Michael Snow Project: The Collected Writings of Michael Snow* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 85; "The Camera and the Spectator: Michael Snow in Discussion with John Du Cane," ibid., 88; and "Michael Snow," in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 75. For an extended analysis of Wittgenstein's influence on Snow's noncinematic visual art, see Elizabeth Legge, "Taking It as Red: Michael Snow and Wittgenstein," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 18, no. 2 (1997): 68–88.

requires the literal possibility of movement."[48] Snow's response to Carroll is impeccably Wittgensteinian. Rather than pedantically obsessing about necessary conditions, Snow has simply said, "*A Casing Shelved* is categorically problematic. However, it *is* a projection on a screen from a 35mm transparent source. There is no movement on the screen, but the movements of the eyes of the spectator are directed by the sound—my voice. That there is sound, which *is* a movement in time, is important in considering the work's cinema status."[49] In addition to drawing our attention to the family resemblances between *A Casing Shelved* and more traditional fare, Snow usefully reminds us of the deeply entrenched bias toward the visual that subtends most theories of cinema. It seems absurd to claim that a work with visual movement but no possibility of sound (e.g., Stan Brakhage's *The Riddle of Lumen* [1972]) is not a film. Yet somehow it seems more defensible to claim that a work with sound but no possibility of visual movement (like *A Casing Shelved*) is not a film. Ultimately, either claim rests on an unwarranted assumption that we must draw strict boundaries around the concept of film. It is hard to improve on Wittgenstein's formulation in *The Blue Book* (one of his studies for *Philosophical Investigations*): "If . . . you wish to give a definition of wishing, i.e., to draw a sharp boundary, then you are free to draw it as you like; and this boundary will never entirely coincide with the actual usage, as this usage has no sharp boundary."[50] The same is true of *film*. Theorists are free to draw prescriptive boundaries, and filmmakers are free to ignore them—in much the same way that traditional grammarians are free to insist that splitting an infinitive results in an ungrammatical sentence, whereas everyday speakers of English are free to completely disregard this rule. The concept of a film (like the concept of a grammatical sentence) is continually evolving. The word has no fixed definition, nor should we wish to place it in such a conceptual straitjacket. As Wittgenstein puts it, "[W]e are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don't know their real definition, but because there is no real 'definition' to them. To suppose that there *must* be would be like supposing that whenever children play with a ball they play a game according to strict rules."[51]

In addition to stretching our predetermined notions of what a *film* can do, *So Is This* is equally intent on stretching our notions of what *language* can do. On both accounts, Snow challenges the facile generalizations that we easily fall prey to (e.g., films tell stories, language communicates information). Wittgenstein's account of the malleability and infinite diversity of language in *Philosophical Investigations* is especially apposite here: "Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a

48 Noël Carroll, "Philosophizing through the Moving Image: The Case of 'Serene Velocity,'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (2006): 185.

49 Remes, "Sculpting Time," 16–17 (italics in original). Snow's conception of sound as a kind of auditory "movement" echoes a remark made by Daniel, the protagonist of Isidore Isou's *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity* (*Traité de bave et d'éternité*, 1951): "Who ever said that the cinema, whose meaning is *movement*, must absolutely be *the movement of the photograph* and not the *movement of the word*?" Quoted in Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle," 345 (italics in original).

50 Ludwig Wittgenstein, "The Blue Book," in *Major Works*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 109.

51 Ibid., 116 (italics in original).

screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails, and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects."[52] A few pages later, Wittgenstein elaborates:

> But how many kinds of sentences are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds; countless different kinds of use of all the things we call "signs," "words," "sentences." And this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.[53]

So Is This introduces us to a host of new language games. While the standard uses of sentences all make an appearance—assertion ("This / is / communal / reading!"), question ("Is / there / anybody / reading / this / right / now?"), and command ("Just / think / of / this / as / entertainment.")—there are also playful uses of words that represent apparently novel language games. Consider an unusual passage near the end of the film, in which Snow announces that he will provide "ten / solo / words" (before going on to provide twenty-five): "And / Now; / ten / solo / words: / Coffee / Whisper / Psychoanalytical / Sunlight / Sodomy / Chalk / Blast / Mind / Duke / Mohammedan / Braille / Blink / Simulacrum / Hiss / Mask / Annihilation / Lips / Truth / Cuneiform / Choir / Flesh / Liturgy / Cave / Flower / Incommunicado."[54] Putting these words in sequence appears to produce nonsense, an ungrammatical word salad that offers no meaning. Of course, in the words of evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, "humans are pattern-seeking animals,"[55] so it is difficult to read this sequence of words without searching for some kind of organizing principle (e.g., Is the "Cave" Plato's cave, where there is no "Sunlight," and "Simulacra" replace "Truth"?). But such a hermeneutic framework risks playing one language game by the rules of another. What is important here is not meaning, but flavor: not only the "spicy," "salty," or "sweet" connotations of each word individually, but also (in the spirit of Eisensteinian montage) the novel connotations that arise as a result of Snow's unusual juxtapositions. As Wittgenstein has noted, nonsensical language can still have a measured and deliberate effect on hearers (or readers), depending on what kind of language game is being played: "When I say that the orders 'Bring me sugar!' and 'Bring me milk!' have a sense, but not the combination 'Milk me sugar,' this does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect."[56] Similarly, Snow's unusual combinations of words may be senseless, but there is clearly still effect on the audience. Of particular interest is how many of the words in this passage relate to various forms or methods of communication—"Whisper," "Chalk," "Braille," "Hiss," "Lips," "Cuneiform"—even though the passage itself communicates nothing (and ends with a word that evokes a lack of communication: *incommunicado*). Both in

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52 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 10.

53 Ibid., 15 (italics in original).

54 This is not the only occasion on which the text proves to be untrustworthy. Early in the film, we read, "this / film / will / be / about / two / hours / long," even though the actual running length of *So Is This* is less than fifty minutes.

55 Stephen Jay Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 60.

56 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 146.

content and form, this passage reminds the viewer of the multiplicity of linguistic modalities, the infinite diversity of language games that can be played.

In its recourse to nonsense, *So Is This* is reminiscent of Duchamp's enigmatic evocations of cauliflower, mosquitoes, incest, and Eskimos in *Anémic cinéma*. It also parallels another textual film released in the same year as *So Is This*: Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1982). Like *So Is This*, *Secondary Currents* visually offers nothing more than typographical text, although in this case, the text is accompanied by a soundtrack, one in which a voice is heard speaking a nonexistent language. The on-screen text undergoes a kind of linguistic entropy. The film's words are initially fairly straightforward ("I don't remember when the voice began"), but lucid language eventually gives way to incomprehensible jargon ("whose meandering lucubrations / foretold the essential entropy / of euphostolic processes and peregrinations / re-invitrafied by the subcholate stratifications / of an ecstatic generative demuneration"). Eventually, we are left with apparently aleatory combinations of words and punctuation marks: "frisson eldo bas erra ti gon / ship to antel k trio lo montre / pi l like s k soke sl abqu ek / dko tj s abi. tu n kto / rt l px ex: s at l / t-thel /: kethe ls o / ke lnc i ! u a je t s le / ee tri-sit pn vo tep." By the end of the film, the screen is littered with random letters and punctuation marks (Figure 3).[57] Of course, Duchamp's nonsense (grammatically correct yet cryptic wordplay) is distinct from Snow's nonsense (an agrammatical string of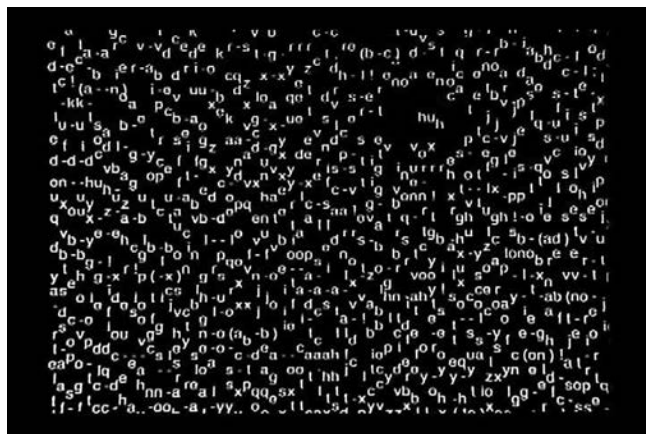 words), and both are distinct from Rose's nonsense (random letters and punctuation marks that do not even form recognizable words or morphemes). This diversity supports Wittgenstein's contention that there is no limit to the number of language games we can play—even nonsense is not a single game, but

Figure 3. Mysterious sounds accompany meaningless typographical text in Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1982). Image courtesy of Peter Rose.

57   For the text of *Secondary Currents*, see MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 162–174. Rose, like Snow, was also influenced by Wittgenstein's philosophy. In fact, after *Secondary Currents*, Rose released another film about the progression from meaning to nonsense, titled *The Pressures of the Text* (1983), which ends with a quotation from Wittgenstein: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." I should also briefly note that Rose's early films have a clear precursor in the writings of Samuel Beckett, who was similarly interested in the breakdown of language and meaning. This debt to Beckett is explicitly indicated in *Secondary Currents* when one of the sentences reads, "given the existence as uttered forth by"—a direct quotation from the beginning of Lucky's rambling nonsensical soliloquy in *Waiting for Godot*. See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 45.

rather a collection of different games with different rules (or perhaps no rules at all). As Wittgenstein points out, "Even a nonsense poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babble of a baby."[58]

Although I am unable to catalog all the language games that Snow plays throughout *So Is This* (there are far too many), it will be instructive to give attention to one additional example. Contra Wittgenstein's claim that "the demonstrative 'this' can never be without a bearer," Snow refuses to identify the *this* of the film's title—or at least, if there is an identity, it seems to continually shift.[59] Consider some of the sentences that appear early in the film: "This / is / the / title / of / this / film." "The / rest / of / this / film / will / look / just / like / this." "This, / as / they / say, / is / the / signifier." There is an inescapable and unresolved ambiguity in these sentences. For example, when the film asserts that "this . . . is / the / signifier," we are left wondering: *what* is the signifier, exactly? The word *this*? The language Snow is using? The medium of film itself? Or perhaps all of the above? Snow exploits the same linguistic loophole that was foregrounded by René Magritte when he painted his landmark *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*, 1928–1929), in which a straightforward painting of a pipe is accompanied by text that reads, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). The confusion that the painting frequently engenders (if this is not a pipe, then what is it?) comes from the ambiguity of the word *this* (*ceci*)—a viewer might initially interpret *this* as the representational content of the painting (which clearly *is* a pipe), but *this* can also mean the painting *itself* (which, of course, is most emphatically *not* a pipe).[60] In the post-Wittgensteinian universe that Snow inhabits, neither words nor films have single fixed meanings, functions, or essences—rather, concepts are fluid and in a state of continual flux. Snow puts it this way: "Language lives—grows, bulges, shrinks, learns to talk, loses its hair. . . . There is a sense in which the cloudiness at the edges of the compendium of definitions of Art, which is especially noticeable, is also discernible on examination of *all* definitions."[61]

Noël Carroll's non-Wittgensteinian definition of *film*, which insists on the centrality of potential movement, would seem to exclude a textual film like *So Is This*. Revealingly, Carroll does categorize *So Is This* as a film, although his reasons for doing so are peculiar:

> We categorize *So Is This* as a film because we know the tradition in which Snow is working. It fits into an ongoing conversation about the nature of cinema. If Milton's *Paradise Lost* were recorded on film—a page being turned every thousand frames or so—and, if that was the only form in which it ex-

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58 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 103.

59 Ibid., 25.

60 Snow acknowledges his debt to Magritte in *So Is This,* in a passage written entirely in French: "Ça / fait / penser / l'auteur / au / tableau / bien / connu / de / Magritte: / Ceci / n'est / pas / une / pipe. / C'est / vrai / ici / aussi. / L'auteur / aime / beaucoup / le / mot / 'ceci.'" ("It / makes / the / author / think / of / the / well / known / painting / by / Magritte: / This / is / not / a / pipe. / It's / true / here / also. / The / author / likes / the / word / 'this' / a / lot.") My translation.

61 Michael Snow, "Trying to Figure It Out," in *Michael Snow Project*, 280 (italics in original).

isted, we would not call it a film, but a poem. The same would be true if Ezra Pound initially "published" his *Cantos* on film. Our classifications depend far more on history and what we know of the author's intentions than upon that through which medium the work is delivered.[62]

This contention seems to rest on a false dichotomy: that a textual film must be *either* a film *or* a poem. Why could it not be simultaneously both? In fact, some scholars have written about cine-poetry or the poetry-film as a way of conceptualizing works that that straddle the boundary between these two art forms.[63] The idea that something—literary or otherwise—might be "recorded on film" but not called a film is perplexing.

Presumably, Carroll is implying the following: if Ezra Pound had released *Cantos* on film, it would be called a poem, but if he instead decided to publish *Cantos* as a book, and Andy Warhol later created *Warhol Cantos*, this would fit "into an ongoing conversation about the nature of cinema" and would *now* be a film. If this seems like a defensible distinction, imagine the following scenario: I tell my wife that I am going upstairs to see what our son is doing. When I open the door to his bedroom, I find that his DVD player is running, and I see my son eating popcorn while gazing intently at his television screen. On the screen I see only the pages of an opened book with typographical text on it. I return downstairs, and my wife asks me, "What is he doing?" Acceptable answers to this question include "watching TV," "watching a film," or even "watching some really weird film that just shows the pages of a book." But imagine if I responded to my wife's query by saying, "I honestly do not know. I will need to do some research to learn more about the historical circumstances and authorial intent of the object of our son's inquiry before I am in any position to determine what kind of artwork he is engaging with." She would be absolutely justified in worrying about my mental health.

Textual films and other intermedia hybrids continue to proliferate in the modern era. (One particularly compelling example is the work of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, a Seoul-based Internet art group that temporalizes text using Flash animation technology in works like *Cunnilingus in North Korea* [2003] and *Lotus Blossom* [2000–2005].) Such works foreground the mutability of concepts like art, literature, and film while implicitly subverting essentialist ideologies. In fact, interrogating artworks that challenge conventional media boundaries is perhaps the preeminent method of coming to understand a given medium. As David Campany puts it, "We come to know what media are less by looking for their pure centers than their disputed boundaries."[64] Film has no "pure center," no essence, no rigid boundaries demarcating its territorial domain. But film is in good company here. As Wittgenstein

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62 Noël Carroll, "Engaging Critics," *Film Studies* 8 (2006): 162. The infelicitous syntax of this final sentence is quoted directly from Carroll's text.

63 See, for example, William C. Wees, "Words and Images in the Poetry-Film," in *Words and Moving Images*, ed. William C. Wees and Michael Dorland (Montreal: Mediatexte, 1984), 105–113. In this article, I favor the term *textual film* over *poetry-film*, since poetry is not the only text-based medium that cinema can appropriate.

64 David Campany, "Posing, Acting, Photography," in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, ed. David Green and Joanna Lowry (Manchester, UK: Photoforum/Photoworks, 2006), 98.

so perceptively notes, "*Many* words . . . don't have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary."[65]   ✽

65   Wittgenstein, "Blue Book," 119 (italics added).