



*Michael Snow at Montreux. (Photo: Babette Mangolte.)*

## Notes for *Rameau's Nephew*\*

### MICHAEL SNOW

To me it's a true "talking picture". It delves into the implications of that description and derives structures that can generate contents that are proper to the mode. It derives its form and the nature of its possible effects from its being built from the inside, as it were, with the actual units of such a film, *i.e.*, the frame and the recorded syllable. Thus its dramatic development derives not only from a representation of what may involve us generally in life but from considerations of the nature of recorded speech in relation to moving light-images of people. Thus it can become an event in life, not just a report of it.

Echoes reverberate to "language", to "representation" in general, to representation in the sound cinema, to "culture", to "civilization". Via the eyes and ears it is a composition aimed at exciting the two halves of the brain into recognition.

\* The full title of the film is given as *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen*. The selection of notes offered here is followed by the shooting script of one sequence of the film. We are indebted to Anthology Film Archive for assistance in this publication.

A clear use of ambiguity.

Can you extrapolate from “*not being able to understand*” (in terms of intelligibility of parts of the separate segments) to “not being able to understand” the whole?

“Understand”—Two shades of meaning.

**LAUGHTER AND ORGASM:** relation?

Style is a way of saying. Styles of different sections. Ways of saying several things at once.

**DIFFERENT MEANINGS AT DIFFERENT READINGS** connecting different “strata”.

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INTERNAL	EXTERNAL	SOUND
Appearance/disappearance	Focus	Appearance/disappearance
Substitution	Color	Substitution
Metamorphosis	Light intensity (F stop)	other voice,
Auto-motion	fade in/out	other sound, etc.
Changes of light	exposure—	Pitch change
intensity	over/under	Timbre change
color	Opticals	room-tone,
position	wipes	echo, fuzz
Repetition	fold-overs	Volume (loud to 0)
Normal movement	Superimpositions	spatial position
	Repetition (printed)	Repetition
	Camera position	“distortion”
	Camera movement	
	Camera speed	
	Screen shape	
	<i>The other external is the actual film strip. Editing.</i>	

### CROSS CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Cause: action “in” picture. Effect: “external” change (image color, focus, etc.)

Cause: action “in” picture. Effect:

“Entering the image”: **TOUCH:** caress, feel, eat, fuck, smash.

Verbal description, “journalism”. Dialogue sexual.

*Eventually, the camera enters the image by fast changes of position, hand held stuff, wild cuts, dollies, etc.*

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List all possible manipulables.

Computer/cross-index all the permutations, combinations.

Use this as a script.

5	6	1	2	3	4	action	
6	5	2	1	4	3	reaction	Superimpose
5	6	2	1	4	3	action	several locations
2	1	5	6	4	3	reaction	or sets or backdrops
4	3	2	1	5	6		
1	2	4	5	6	3		Trees by a river NO
3	2	1	4	5	6		New Orleans Street
5	2	1	4	6	3		Babylonian (ancient) scene

Do film in four or five tempi.

medium (long) 40 minutes

slow (medium) 15 minutes

fast (medium) 20 minutes

slow (short) 5 minutes

Control of WAVES OF "COHERENCE" necessary.

Rhythm continues but certain elements become more sequential then become more varied again.

e.g. dialogue  
becomes more sequential  
"normal"  
then starts  
fragmenting again.

**COMEDY** *Commedia dell'Arte* Comedy of Art

Same characters exchange positions but original voices are still heard.

Characters are replaced but original voices are still heard.

Characters are replaced but new voices are heard.

Characters change spatial position but sound continues.

**FRAMES:** The *Fact*: Everything can be changed between frames.

Film absolutely not videotape.

**CUTTING**—Disjunctive.

**ABSOLUTELY** non-sequential patterns.

No proportionate modulations, glissandos, fades.

Must be  
staccato,  
not  
legato

But: 6 2 1 9 3 8 4

All this applies to sound, too: it can be changed “between frames”.  
Needn’t be sequential, needn’t be sentences, needn’t be a story.  
*Words* interchangeable.

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*Internal* reactions to *external* causes.

During fade-out people say “what’s happening to the light?”  
Over-exposure; people cover their eyes.  
Flood of color—they watch it rise.  
They comment on changes that happen to the sound,  
e.g., a bit of music is substituted for a phrase of dialogue.  
Another person says “That’s by J.S. Bach, isn’t it?”  
A superimposition of a group of people is imitated by the people  
in the scene.  
A person reacts *within* the scene to  
other people’s reactions to  
an external cause.

A SERIES OF JOKES:                      crude enough that some  
will survive dismemberment.

A man got on the elevator in his apartment building. There  
was a woman in the car and she was completely nude. He was  
a little taken aback but he said, “My wife has an outfit  
just like that.” (Aunt Rhoda’s joke.)

MOVE CAMERA SLIGHTLY (on tripod) ON EACH  
FRAME OF S.F. REAL-TIME SHOOTING-JITTER.  
DON’T FORGET: This thing is *absolutely*      SOUND ↔ IMAGE  
RELATIONSHIPS

OK plan to studio re-record some things with changes.  
Have sound man change *something* on every image,  
change treble, bass, or volume.

A bit where sound disappears  
when something is held in front of the camera.  
Something opaque?

The entire film an “example” of the difficulty (impossibility) of the essentializing-symbolizing reduction involved in the (Platonic) nature of words in relation to experience (object) etc. discussed. The *difference* between the reduction absolutely necessary to discuss or even describe the experience and the experience. Each is “real” but each is different.

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INTERNAL REACTION: People in the shot notice, see, pay attention to a manipulation: e.g., a bottle appears, reappears (8 frames, 4 frames, 2 frames).  
They watch this, continuing to talk about something else. They screen their eyes during over-exposure.

Change camera position in mid-conversation  
(continue in the middle of a word).  
Should especially concern itself with the people.  
Lots of medium shots, close-ups. (2 or 4 heads, etc.)

All-woman cast?

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PSALMANAZAR: Georges Psalmanazar (1679-1763), assumed name of a Frenchman who represented himself as a pagan from Formosa and invented a language, “Formosan” and a religious system; he later repented of the imposture, which is described in his memoir, and became a serious scholar, a friend of Dr. Johnson.

Each sequence made like a spoken word—like an actual word?—  
so each has a distinct character.  
No, it's the language of film.

Introduce “relativity” into the use of speech:  
contextual nature of nuances of meaning.  
Words common but everybody having nuances. My uses to make *this* work of art.  
Words as *material* (recorded).

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” The picture is the words.  
 Some way of making visual sentences.  
 Someone opens mouth and things change.  
 “The unexpected happens when you least expect it.”

LOGOMANIA: a pathological state of volubility,  
 or incoherent wordiness.

LOGOPATHY: a speech disorder of any kind.

LOGORRHEA: pathological form of volubility.

REBUS: The rebus introduces the subject of the accuracy of  
 recording, verisimilitude, absolute realism in a context where  
 the nuances (means) of the medium are the elements of the reality  
 of the experience of the representation.

Philosophical Comedy

“Gags”

“Routines” exemplify philosophical statements  
 problems  
 proposals

Use books, e.g. Wittgenstein  
 to write joke-dialogue.

To end a scene: e.g. four people talking.

Take out voices, one by one, until the scene is silent,  
 then remove the people one by one, then remove the set to white screen.

SOURCE OF SOUND

Sequence with playing of record, turning on T.V.  
 and (perhaps off screen) tape playing plus talking.

Someone points to loudspeaker and facing audience  
 says (or off-screen tape says) without moving mouth,  
 “This is where it came from.”

T.V. sound is turned on, then turned off,  
 and tape of *just previously recorded* conversation is  
 played with T.V. picture. People comment.

Someone points to an object as a voice speaks about to play a  
 record. While putting it on sound *starts* via off-screen tape;  
 they then play simultaneously for a while.

ANARTHRIA: loss of power of articulate speech.

A. Language as a “tautology”. We already know what can be said.

**B.** Not only are there many words you have never heard, but there are many combinations of them and the ones and combinations that you already know which have never been made which you've never heard.

Originality then with words is?

Language is Thought's body.

Speech is thought; they are not generally two separate activities.

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*Wrong or invented sounds for things that happen on screen.*

Man drops a cup, it shatters, sound is thunder and rain. Rain sound continues till woman covers her eyes. Man cleans up broken cup, sound is hammering. Hammering cuts simultaneously with cutting to "now", same cup in place of fragments. Woman lights cigarette, sound is a ball or chime. She blows out smoke and as she blows, cup (is pulled) slides along table over to edge. Either it cuts at edge and a second later, sound of breaking glass, or it falls off and sound is of car screeching around a corner. She knocks ash off cigarette, sound is splashing water, puffs on cigarette, sound is the spoken word "money." Simultaneously, man pulls letter from his pocket, sound is a bird sound till he unfolds letter. As he unfolds letter, sound is a siren and also she starts to speak: "Harvey, I just don't know what to say." He reads letter and sound is footsteps. She speaks again: "So much time has passed since we first met that it seems like it was only yesterday. The first time I saw you was in winter. I saw you walking down the street, you were wearing a very long black overcoat. You looked very strange and very interesting and I hoped that I could meet you. Isn't it strange? Some two weeks later I did." During "the first time" she gets up from chair and walks out of room. Her voice continues with absolutely no change in volume, etc. It ought to be in perfect lip sync before that. Next, man turns off a lamp which is on table. Sound is of breaking glass and image over-exposed. Man leaves everything on table on its side. At first leaving, sound of rain again. At the last, sound cuts and camera swivels till scene is sideways with objects right side up, short hold and cut.

The last part as a separate scene in itself or part of another.  
Someone leaves everything on their sides, then the camera swivels.

A section shot right but shown backwards including sound.  
A sequence: camera swivels as above but scene *continues*, talking, etc. Cut to scene upside down with sound somehow effected by that. SOUND UPSIDE DOWN? Cut to backwards scene.

Backwards scene could be shot with some action *done backwards* so they'd be "correct" though screened wrong.

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## THE ART OF MODULATING TIME RECORDING

The "concretion" of music, its materiality "increases" with radio, records.

Music is now in the situation of literature after the invention of printing. Recording is mapping of time into space. Like drawing or painting.

Consonants equivalent to attack or percussion.

*(Staccati, pizzicati)*

P.K.D.T.B.

Lenses: shoot something changing lenses. Per word, perhaps.  
Various focal lengths. Wide screen lens, anamorphic, multiple image. Diopter, split field lens. Super wide angle, 5.7 mm., etc.

VISUAL	SOUND
One sequence of lenses	volume and
zoom	distortion
pan	changes
camera position	Use
focus changes	electronic
	filter?

What is it like not to be able to read or write?





*Michael Snow, Rameau's Nephew, 1974.*

## Hotel

*Scene 11. Same as 10A, 10B. Camera tripod. Fixed. If possible shoot through a door showing a bit of door frame at each side. Table in foreground. Optical flip. Memorize.*

J: What's hard to believe?

S: Does anybody want something to drink?

J, *Dracula accent (throughout scene), facing camera*: How about some OXO?

*Cut to J lying on floor parrallel to frame facing camera.*

J: OXO

*Cut to J standing on head. Others can hold his legs up. Facing camera.*

J: OXO

*Cut to J lying on side facing right.*

J: OXO

*Cut.*

R, *to camera*: Have you noticed how the unexpected happens when you least expect it.

S, *to everybody*: Do you want to smoke some dope?

J: I'm afraid to smoke dope on the screen. It's like smoking in bed, the screen might catch fire.

L: Or the screen might get arrested.

S: The picture's trying to get away right now! *She looks "at picture"*.

J: Hey wait for me!

A: It can't go anywhere without us. (*Another accent*)

S: Anyway do you want some firewater?

J: Oh yes, please, I'm feeling a bit dizzy.

*S walks off towards camera*

E, *looking out*: Gee, I wonder if I'm in the audience tonight?

A: Impossible.

E: Well, if I am . . . "Hello me!" Gosh, what's wrong with my eyes, I can't see straight.

J: Where the hell's that table gone? It was here a minute ago.

*Cut. End of optical flip.*

*Scene 12. Just tape record. No image.*

*S walks a little. Clinking ice in glass.*

*Drop glass. It breaks.*

S: Here's your drink.

J, *still Dracula*: Whoops, I'm sorry it went out like a light.

E: It did not.

J: There's another side to every story.  
*J or Ray, preferably Ray starts to casually in background play violin.*

S: I'll get you another drink. *Walks a bit.*

A: Looking back is depressing.

L: I suppose you think there's a bed there.

J: Who?

E: Of course there's a bed there. Watch this. *Walks noisily for a few seconds. Stops. Says: What the hell? Walks some more, stops, says: Well, anyway I found the table. Here it is. Taps on table.*

L: Keep your eye on it.

J: Pull up a chair, Ray.  
*S walks in, clink, clink, ice in glass.*

S: Here's another drink for you, Jacques.

J: Don't put it on that table.

S: What table?

R: This is kind of relaxing.

L: When are we supposed to be back on?

*Scene 13. Optical flip. Picture comes around other side (left). People regrouped as they might be after the last scene. No glass though. Same camera position. Memorize. R plays violin in background like practicing.*

J: Aphasia, have you seen this entire film?

A: How could I, Jacques, it isn't over yet . . . I'm just looking at the part I'm in.

E: These are pretty bad seats.

L: Yeah, this is really hard on the eyes.

S: Ouch! These corners are sharp!

J: Make sure that table gets around. *Push it a bit back and forth but end up leaving it in same place.*

A: It doesn't need any help to get around.

L: I'd miss the bed more than that table.

A: Have you been in any good movies lately, Ray?

J: Have you been in any good movies lately, Ray? *Turns aside to say this.*

R, *stops playing:* One question at a time.

E, *glancing to her left:* Just another few feet to go.

S, *looking same way:* There.  
*Everybody looks that way.*

*Cut. R, facing camera still holding violin: Wow!*

*Cut. R, back to camera: Wow!*

*Close door if shot is through door. Could be slammed.*

*Cut.*

*Scene 14. Camera same. Everybody grouped same except for J and R, who are seated at the table. Underexpose. This shot will be supered. Fade in. Memorize.*

A: Back in the picture. *Said like a title.*

J, to R: Well, did you like the lovemaking scene in Nadia Jerkoffski's new film "Fuck and Suck"?

R: Oh, it was beautiful.

J: Wasn't "Sally," the little Danish girl with the long blonde hair, exquisite?

R: Mmm, yes, she was so beautiful, so voluptuous . . . what a lovely ass!

J: When she rolled over into the bed and opened her legs by first sliding one against the other . . . wasn't that beautiful? . . . Her lips were pink and moist as her luscious thighs revealed them . . . in that great close-up her curly blonde cunt hairs were all dewy too.

R: Her big brown eyes were lovely too; she really seemed to be feeling it when the German guy, Carl, slid his long cock into her . . . you could read in her eyes how good it felt moving in.

J: She moved her breasts in a way that . . . just seemed to tell a story. And what breasts and shoulders and arms! . . . When she turned over, her big breasts and the pink nipples on top just slid to the side with such . . . what's the word? . . . comfort.

R: Oh yeah, I wanted to touch them and in the movie lucky Gunja, the Pakistani guy, did caress them, kissed them, sucked them, licked them.

J: And she made such a beautiful sound of pleasure too.

E: What was her role in the film?

R: She was a mathematician who discovered the Rondo effect which revolutionized space travel. She had written several books, spoke ten languages, taught at York University and was the Director of the Mathematical Research Center which employed 10,000 people.

E: Quite a well-rounded woman.

J, *said like a title to camera:* A figure of speech.

*Fade out to black.*

*Scene 15. Same length shot of room (shoot maybe a foot more). Underexposed. To super.*

*Scene 16. New tripod shot centered on bed. Fade in.*

L, *said like a title to camera:* Seeing is believing.

E: That's what they say.  
*Fade out to black.*

*Scene 17. Same shot but bed only. Against black. To be supered. Shoot 2 minutes.*

*Scene 18. Same camera and position marked. Bed off. To be supered on scene 17. Memorize. Fade in.*

J: Seeing is necessarily a belief, an act of faith, but to me the phrase should really be "Touching is believing." I'll demonstrate what I mean.

L, *butts in, feeling hands*: Gee, my hands are dry. I've been washing clothes all day. Sara, have you got any of that cream hand stuff?

S: Yes, I've got some right here. *Takes it out of purse and squirts in his hand.* Try this.

*L rubs hands together. Everybody watches.*

J, *a bit peeved*: OK, you demonstrated what I meant but I'd like to show you my way . . . I suppose we all believe that there's a bed there (*points*) and that it actually exists.

E: Of course, I slept there last night and had wonderful dreams.

J: Alright then, watch this, all of you. *J walks to where the bed is supposed to be and lies down on floor as if bed were there (so his feet will stick out but when bed is put back).*

*The others gape. Everybody try to hold same position. Except E, who goes off but near a mike.*

*Cut. Scene 19. Put bed back in same place over J.*

*Fade in.*

E, *speaks off screen*: Well, that proved that this was a dream and that that's a comfortable bed.

A, *looks startled, looks around*: Who said that?!

J, *comes out from under bed, looking disgruntled and says*: Well, we usually use a table to demonstrate reality.

E: That's because a table is more real than a bed at dinner time.

J: What time is it?

S: Time for bed. *Said like a title to camera.*

*Fade out.*

*Scene 20/21. Shot twice. Tripod. New camera position. Note where it is, tape-mark, etc., framing, etc. It must be returned to for last shot (scene 20).*

*Mark position of table. Shoot just it against black. Fade in. Shoot one minute. Hold.*

*Scene 22. Table off. People grouped around where table should be, looking at it. Chalk or tape mark where everybody is placed so that we can return to those positions for final (table smashing) scene. Plates, cup, saucer should be handy to J. He should note what the height of table is.*

*Fade in.*

R, *squints angrily at "table"*: But doesn't THIS table look familiar?!

S: What table?

E: Where's the hammer?

J: Maybe it's a multiplication table.

A: If it's a vege-table, we can prove that "eating is believing" which is what I believe.

J: I'll set the table. *Takes plate, cup, saucer, knife, fork, spoon and "sets" where he thinks table is. Drop cup first, then plate, saucer, cutlery so they break.*

*Cut.*

*Scene 23. Table back on. People in same places but clean up debris. Camera same. Fade in.*

J: I give up. I don't believe in anything.

A: I'm hungry.

L: I'm hungry.

*Cut.*

*Scene 24. New scene. Camera tripod. Everybody off. S in bed with clothes on. E standing at side of frame like on stage.*

E, *to camera with hand gesture to S in bed*: And now . . . "Lying In Bed" *She walks off.*

S, *when she's off, to camera*: I AM NOT IN BED. *Emphatic.*

*Cut.*

*Scene 25. Different camera position. Tripod. S in bed clothed same as last scene. Everybody else back on sitting all around edges. J has beard on. L standing. Memorize.*

L, *to Sara*: Sara, hearing you lie in bed like that makes me even hornier. *Pause. Then speaking to others*: I suppose all of you don't think there's a bed there.

A: Of course, I slept there last night and had wonderful dreams. Which reminds me: I woke last night thinking that my watch was gone.

J: Was it?

A: No, but it was going.  
L, flatly: Ha ha. Alright now watch this all of you.  
*Goes to bed and starts to make love to S. Takes off her top and bra and feels her breasts. Says to others: Gee, my hands feel soft now.*  
*They fall to the bed kissing.*  
Cut.

*Michael Snow and Babette Mangolte during filming of Rameau's Nephew. (Photo: Annette Michelson.)*

