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Motion[less] Pictures

THE CINEMA OF STASIS
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, since the reader has more control over the rate of a work’s durational unfolding.¹⁹ Nevertheless, text is temporal in a way that traditional visual art is not. Unlike a painting or a sculpture, text (along with film, drama, and music) 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.²⁰ This raises the obvious question: “Why?”—a query that 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 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.”²¹

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). 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.” Because of this careful structuring of cinematic temporality, readers are 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 (see figure 4.2). 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. Conversely, 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.24

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 hope that the spectators can savour the many duration forms that happen in *So Is This*. There are spicy ones, salty ones, sweet ones, etc.”)²⁵

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 a reader to set his own pace, books allow the reader to return to previous passages in order to “catch” words or ideas that might
have been missed the first time—or perhaps to review passages that were particularly compelling or confusing. 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. Since 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, since 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 are 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 what direction a sentence will move in and what 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.”

*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, while 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 Netflix,
DVDs, and the Internet) 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.”27

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 / neighbour / read / together? / This / is / Communal / reading! / it’s [sic] / Group / Lit!”28