Video as Ambience:
The Emergent Aesthetics of Flat-Screen Video Display

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Abstract

The wide spread dissemination of high-resolution flat-screen display devices will remediate the presentation of video, and therefore the aesthetics of video production. This technology will become the basis for a new video medium, which will relate to the current television in the way that television now relates to film. Many techniques and poetic devices will be shared between the old video and the new video. At the same time, producers will discover styles and techniques better suited to the presentation potential of the new device. Out of these discoveries will evolve a unique body of practice and critical theory.

Critical Stance

This paper is an exercise in speculative poetics. I am making predictions about the aesthetics of a medium (or at least a sub-medium) that is not yet mature. Underlying the paper's argument is a key assumption about the domestic marketplace. I am assuming that large size, high-definition video display devices will become more and more common in our homes and offices. My current concern is not with the timing or the details of that development - nor is it about any particular technology or product. However, I do feel that it is the larger high-definition 'flatscreen' displays (whether liquid crysal, plasma or other technologies) that will yield the most telling results within the stylistic parameters that I outline.

Reception and Production

New forms of mediated experience carry within themselves new aesthetic opportunities and imperatives. As artists and creators work within a new medium, its effective poetics are revealed through practice and experimentation. In a technologically-based art, these poetics are refined through inter-connected dialectics of art, commerce and critical discourse.[1]

The visual poetics of video are derived from those of film. However, the two were never identical - there were critical differences that led to the variance in production practice and visual poetics between the two media. This paper is concerned with two of these differences. One is the difference in visual quality - in particular scale and resolution. The large, rich, finely textured visuals of theatrical film (or even well-crafted 16 mm film

[1] Henry Jenkins draws on the history of critical film discourse in the twenties, and sees a similar dynamic in the current development of the art and poetics of game design. <http://web.mit.edu/cms/games/opening.html>

footage) are far superior to the truly marginal quality of standard North American NTSC images. The second difference lies in the conditions of reception. Theatrical film is seen in a magic black box, a glowing shrine to the suspension of disbelief. Television and video are typically seen in the home, where the entertainment appliance vies for our attention along with the telephone, the refrigerator, the washroom, and the daily distractions and companions of our everyday lives.

One of these differing conditions of reception will shift dramatically, the other is harder to predict. The condition that will change is the visual quality of the experience. Video capture and display technology is rapidly improving. More difficult to anticipate and summarize are the environmental parameters of the home video experience, to which we will return later in this paper.[2]

The Evolution of the Video Image

The changes in the visual quality of video are relatively predictable.[3] The family of television appliances is undergoing a significant visual upgrade. The size of the picture is getting bigger and bigger. The quality of the picture is getting better and better. The size trend has been a steady growth. The quality trend has been punctuated by advances in video playback and distribution technology such as cable-casting, laser discs, satellite distribution, DVD, advanced consumer video-recording capability, and digital multicasting. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, the current quality of these formats is bound by the overall limitations of consumer television. The engineer's lament - "NTSC stands for 'Never Twice the Same Color'" - has the ring of sad truth for those that love a reliable and crisp image. PAL and SECAM are certainly improvements on NTSC, but they will never rival cinema for visual quality or impact.

The quality and the impact of the home video experience is on the verge of making a double quantum jump. The first is the gradual introduction of high-definition television standards. The second is the increasing size and the decreasing price of plasma display screens. The obtrusive box in the corner with the marginal picture is about to become an elegant (and large) frame on the wall, coupled with imagery that is closer to 35mm motion picture film than anything in our current television experience.

The commercial momentum of this change is considerable, as is evidenced by attention to newspaper advertisements of home video equipment. Picture sizes continue to grow, and regular picture tube display is being steadily augmented by flatter picture tubes, projection television, and true flat panel video displays. The upper end receiver-monitors in all configurations include "HDTV" or "HD-compatible" as part of their marketing pitch. The wide-screen high-definition experience is being sold hard, with a reliance on

[2] Although the details differ, many of the arguments about the reception experience of domestic video also apply to the use of video in small and medium size business, and in larger public spaces.

[3] This analysis currently bypasses the role of sound, which has already undergone its own quantum evolution. Home and office playback is already comparable to most theatrical cinematic sound experiences. A more detailed analysis of the role and the future of sound in the large scale video form is one the next priorities of the author.

movies, sports and lifestyle as the marketing drivers. The top of the status heap is clearly the flat panel video display. For now, high comparative costs confine this item to the early adopter end of the technology acquisition spectrum. However, there is a logic to the adoption curve for the flat panel video units. HDTV distribution will continue to grow, consumers will be ready to move up from projection boxes and traditional picture tubes, flat panel technology development costs will be amortized over longer and larger production runs, and prices for the wall units will inevitably begin to come down.[4]

Implications for Video Content

What do these changes in video quality imply for video production? There are obvious areas for aesthetic development. The first is a return to a more film-like aesthetic. The starting point is the recovery of a robust spatial representation. Television imposed severe limits on the treatment of scale and perspective. The loss of image size and resolution was a double whammy for the visual sensibilities of the newly televised picture. The long shot lost much of its impact, and the close-up became privileged to the point of imperative.

The new display technologies reverse that trend. The scope of the reverse will depend on questions of screen size and resolution, but the trend will be to make video much more film-like in its presentation characteristics, and therefore in its production aesthetics. In fact, the combination of size, resolution and viewing distance may eventually bring the reception conditions of home video closer to Cinerama than to conventional movie formats. The research question will be: "If you are standing five feet away from a ten-foot wide high-definition video screen, is it Television or is it Imax?"

Even before this extreme evolution, the new video form will differ from the old video in many of its fundamental poetics. As visual field, image size, and resolution approach cinematic standards, the wide shot will be re-privileged, and the close-up far less critical. In some situations the use of tight closeups will become counter-productive.

This change in treatment of subject scale should have an effect on editing pace. Television's devaluation of the wide shot lent an impetus to faster cutting for visual storytelling. Classic cinematic composition in depth was a form of spatial montage. Narrative detail could be arranged within a long single shot, and successively privileged through sound, lighting and blocking of action. Television's reliance on medium and close shots necessitated the sequencing of narrative visual elements. Story tended to be supported through a succession of tighter images rather than through the visual dynamics of a single rich image. The height of this effect was exhibited in several sub-genres

[4] Of course, the saturation of the initial HD consumer market will be followed by further improvements in picture quality. Scott M. Stevens points out that frame rate adds considerably to perceived resolution and visual impact. In "Time Traveller, Cinematic Theory, Perception, and Scientific Visualization" [Pixel, The Magazine of Visualization, 3, March/April 1992]. Stevens cites Douglas Trumbull's ShowScan as the breakthrough work in this regard. Proposed future generations of HDTV will undoubtedly include higher frame rates that will take advantage of this phenomena.

unique to television: the commercial, the series opening signature sequence, and the rock video. These forms faced a unique set of constraints. Not only did they have to contend with the visual limitations of standard television, they had to face the double test of working well upon first viewing, yet standing up to repeated examination. One of their defining tactics was to push the limits on temporal montage, increasing the cutting pace enormously. Their joint effect on the poetics of the moving image was far-reaching indeed. The video "short form" triumphed in its own right, and in turn affected the poetics of longer television shows and of mainstream cinema.

Mitchell Stephens[5] points out that as a result of our exposure to the "new video" short forms, our ability to take in visual information has increased tremendously. Stephens sees this quick-cutting style as a continuing imperative within the new video. However, temporal acceleration is not the only path to a rich visual information environment. One has to consider the effect of high-resolution large-scale video display on the fundamental poetics of the medium. Lev Manovich is much more attuned the implications of the evolutionary nature of the screen. He recognizes that monitors are getting bigger, and will eventually become wall-size.[6] Having established this context, he points out that "spatial montage represents an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage".[7] He extends Eisenstein's conceptions of montage as an ongoing dialectic within a full range of audio-visual-spatial-temporal possibilities. Manovich sees the effect of the computer screen on the aesthetics of the moving image. He relies on the role that digital technology has played in empowering creators. Digital art lends itself to fragmentation into parts and recombination into new and layered dynamic constellations. This potential gives video artists powerful tools to wield on their improved electronic palettes.

Two of these tools will be the split screen and the layered transition. At the risk of a bad pun, the split screen has a checkered cinematic history. Its full capabilities have never been consistently exploited. Any one of us can name a few feature films which have used this technique: *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *The Boston Strangler*, *Woodstock*, Gance's *Napoleon*… Few of us could name as many as twenty examples in film's long history. In a similar vein, shot and scene transitions have been dominated (in rough order) by the hard cut, the lap dissolve, the fade, and a very small percentage of pattern wipes. More complicated transitions were possible, but the cost of optical effects in the film world, and the lack of visual quality in the video world have limited their utilization. Even given the mainstream cultural dominance of a relatively linear and unambiguous narrative tradition, the use of these multi-formed visual devices has been low. However, the next several years may well test their aesthetic capabilities. The new video display units provide an appropriate platform, and related digital technologies provide the conceptual models. The windowed universe of the desktop and the web is already being reflected in a rebirth of the fragmented-frame video environment. We already see this effect in the news networks and in dramatic series such as *24*. The morphing and collaging capabilities of software such as Photoshop, Premiere and Final Cut Pro support

[5] Mitchell Stevens, "the rise of the image the fall of the word", pg. 154
[6] Lev Manovich, "The Language of New Media", pgs. 114-5
[7] Lev Manovich, "The Language of New Media", pg. 322.

a layered video experience that seamlessly blends varied backgrounds and subjects in a smooth temporal flow.[8]

The renaissance of the scenic wide shot, the split screen, and layered transitions are instances within a broader direction. The new screen technologies support and mandate a strong shift to the pictorial. Larger surface and higher resolution carry their own visual logic. Creators will inevitably exploit it, and viewers will come to expect it. Other pictorial directions will include an increased emphasis on lighting and composition, the hypnotic attraction of slow motion imagery, and the continued exploration of the moving camera. Long-form visual poems such as *Koyannisqatsi* or *Baraka* are examples of a pictorial cinema that will help to define the aesthetic boundaries enabled through the new video formats.

Conditions of Reception

These opportunities are complicated by the situation of this rich visual field in a domestic consumer device. The question still stands - "Is the new video display Television or is it Imax? Or is it something else?" The key here is the question of foreground and background. Film is very much a foreground medium. We sit in a dark room, transfigured by the glowing image that dominates our visual world.[9] This is an environment completely adapted to the "willing suspension of disbelief". Television, on the other hand, is a chameleon. It is capable of assuming either foreground or background status depending on several variables: the quality of the video experience, the exigencies of domestic life, and the shifting user preference in the moment.

The new screen format will approach the presentation quality of film, but retain the figure-ground malleability of video. In combination, this describes a medium where there will be some demand for foreground programming, and some demand for background programming. We will still use the new screens to watch "movies". The latest DVD (or its High Definition technical equivalent) will remain a domestic "destination event" that dominates our attention. At the same time, we will continue to use the device for standard television programming such as news, dramatic series, game shows, music, sports, and even the latest "sur-reality TV" concoction. Our attention to these shows will vary tremendously, as it has for decades of television viewing.

Ambient Video

These viewing conditions imply an entirely new content direction that will be supported by the video frame on the wall. That is the program that is designed to run in the background, but will sustain a certain amount of close attention at any time. The

[8] In *Remediation*, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin point out that the various media ceaselessly adapt and repurpose each others components, forms and conventions. This historical tendency is accentuated and accelerated in the plastic reality of digital media.

[9] Our immersion is, of course, aided by a theatrical sound experience as rich and as full as the visual.

common parlance for this new form is "video wallpaper". The immediate digital antecedent is the screen saver, but its deeper aesthetic roots will be found in certain kinds of video installation art. The prime characteristic for this type of programming is that it be pleasant, visually interesting, and capable of supporting occasional close viewing. It should change, but not too quickly, and the details of any particular change shouldn't be critical over a limited time frame.

This is ambient video - the "slow-form" reversal of forty years of intense development of the fast-paced "short-form" moving image. Some work in this genre will be directly based in the screen saver form. This will include purely graphic abstract designs and geometrics, naturalistic motion graphics such as water and fire, and quasi-narrative artificial life environments. It will certainly include visual creations that are driven by music (such as the light shows built into Macintosh's iTunes and Microsoft's Media Player).

Other work in this stream will be more cinematic. This variation will concentrate on rich compelling visuals, making full use of the screen's size and resolution. Like the purely graphic screen-saver form, the aesthetic imperative for the cinematic version is visual ambience. The size and beauty of the visuals will capture a casual glance at any moment. The resolution and detail of the image will enable the subtle details that can sustain a more concentrated gaze. The incorporation of slow change and metamorphosis will support still longer and closer examination.[10] This form will privilege the use of nature sequences (fire, water, cloud, foliage, geology), slow motion, gradual transitions, visual effects, layered and convoluted imagery, and subtly embedded secondary visual artifacts.

The nuance of this direction will be the seduction of visual sensibility. The archetypal situation is a background visual during a cocktail party. People will converse, and then glance at the screen during a pause in the talk. The glance will be compelling, for a moment, or a minute, or several minutes. Then the conversation resumes, and the viewers withdraw their attention - until the next pause in their personal flow. When the viewer is again ready, the screen will be there, revealing rich and living imagery at any given moment of choice.

It is worth noting that we are echoing the reception requirements of the video short form. Commercials, series openers, and rock videos are designed to work on first viewing, and to work on multiple viewings after that. Ambient video shares those difficult goals. It too must work immediately, and sustain multiple viewings. However, there is a significant difference. The short forms are designed to compete for foreground attention in the contested reception environment of the home. The ambient video slow form does not contest. It waits. It is content to play in the background, but always ready to assume foreground attention at the choice of the reader. Its capacity for repeated viewing can't depend on temporal montage and fast pacing - these devices both require and command

[10] Lev Manovich is pursuing a similar set of goals in his "Soft Cinema" project. This groundbreaking work is designed to elicit a range of viewer responses that includes such modes as: glance, focus, observe, examine, and study. He includes a description of settings and architectures that complement the large screen and support the entire range of response intensities. See "Soft Cinema" at <www.manovich.net/>

viewer attention. Instead, ambient video will be a more purely visual medium - relying on pictorial impact and the subtle manipulation of image, layer, flow, and transition. It will play on the walls of our homes, a window of infinite possibility capable of supporting any level of attention we care to bestow.