

Chapter 13

Ambient Video: The Transformation of the Domestic Cinematic Experience

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If you are standing five feet away from a four-foot-wide, high-definition video screen, is it television or is it IMAX? Or is it something else entirely.

The yule log burns cheerfully in the fireplace. Or does it? In 1996 I created a visual conversation piece for our annual Christmas party. I installed a small charcoal-grey TV set in the fireplace, and ran prerecorded footage of a burning log, which I had shot in the very same fireplace. The illusion was interesting enough to enthrall our guests in those moments when they had run out of immediate conversation. This video installation was a form of ambient media in the tradition of Brian Eno's ambient music, which "must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting" (Eno).

My burning log video certainly fit both of Eno's criteria: it had the capacity to be both interesting and ignorable. I got a fair bit of pleasure from it, and I was proud of my little piece of domestic video art. However, my pride was taken down a notch when I discussed the matter with a senior colleague, who informed me that the burning log was a video cliché. He had done one himself a long time ago, and many other versions have appeared since. Tapes of a burning log (sometimes called a "Yule log") have been available commercially for years, and you can now find a variety of DVD versions on the Internet. My cable company's community access channel has been broadcasting their burning Yule log video every Christmas for years. In addition, there are now three *other* channels on my cable service that feature their own holiday log. What may be the oldest broadcast version first aired on New York's WPIX in 1966. The WPIX log has won its local time sweeps for the past three years, is now available on the station's digital channel, and

reaches sixty-five million American homes through WPIX's corporate stablemate, superstation WGN. The Yule log phenomenon is a global one; Reuters reports that a German woman saw her local version of the Yule log and called the fire department!

The various electronic avatars of the Yule log—VHS, DVD, cablecast, broadcast, homemade—have burned away in millions and millions of homes for decades.¹ Unlike our normal conception of the televisual, this version of video imagery is a truly ambient experience. In my house, as in countless others, the various versions of the log play in and around the background of our lives. From time to time, the dancing electronic flames will capture, and even hold, the attention of one or two people in the household. Inevitably, the moment of concentrated gaze passes, and attention is shifted to another activity or to more immediately engaging video material. Despite our inconsistent attention, the log itself, as with millennia of campfires and fireplaces, maintains its role in our visual environment. The question for us is whether the Yule log is merely an interesting but strictly limited holiday phenomenon or whether it is a harbinger of a more widespread cultural trend toward a new type of ambient video form.

Reception, Experience, and Production Practice

In order to answer this question, consider some of the implications of the forms of digital video production and presentation tools that have recently emerged. Emergent forms of mediated experience carry within themselves fresh aesthetic opportunities. This McLuhanesque call for media specificity is not an argument for a simplistic form of technological determinism as derided by Raymond Williams. The reality is more complicated than that. As artists and creators work within a new medium, its effective poetics are revealed through practice and experimentation. In technologically based art, these poetics are refined through interconnected dialectics of art, commerce, and critical discourse. This dialogue between the creative and the

critical is equally important for the development of new forms of contemporary video expression.

The initial visual poetics of video were derived from those of film. However, the two were never identical—there were critical differences that led to variance in the production practices and the effective poetics of the two media. This chapter 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 footage) are far superior to the truly marginal quality of standard television 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 two differing conditions 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 technologies are 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 chapter.

The Evolution of the Video Image

The changes in the visual quality of video are relatively predictable. The family of television appliances has undergone a significant visual upgrade. Picture size gets bigger and bigger and picture quality gets 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 cablecasting, 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 that 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 the North American NTSC standard, but they will never rival cinema for visual quality or impact.²

The quality and impact of the home video experience is now making a double quantum jump. The first is the introduction of high-definition television standards for broadcasters and producers of consumer electronics. The second is the increasing size and the decreasing price of flat-panel display screens. The obtrusive box in the corner with the marginal picture is becoming an elegant (and large) frame on the wall, presenting imagery that is closer to cinematic standards than anything in our previous television experience.

The commercial momentum of this change is considerable. Evidence is provided by a review of newspaper advertisements of home video equipment and confirmed through sales statistics and projections (Joseph and Fasold; Kitadata and Takahashi). As picture size grows, standard television sets are being steadily supplanted by quasi-flat projection television, and true flat-panel (plasma and LCD) video display. The new receiver-monitors in all configurations include "HDTV" (high definition television) or "HD-compatible" as part of their marketing pitch. The wide-screen, high-definition experience is being sold hard with a reliance on movies, sports, and lifestyle as the marketing drivers. The HD marketing pitch is being reinforced in several new directions. Sports are a big sell for the men in American households. "Action so real you will want to wear a helmet," reads the sports-oriented ad for one big-screen, HD, flat-panel television ("Action So Real ..."). This may be hyperbole, but the big, high-resolution screen has the capability to solve a critical problem in televising team sports: how to reconcile the need to

show the flow of the entire play and at the same time maintain narrative identification with the individual stars. The new screen technologies can offer both in one large, high-resolution wide shot. For some sports, like hockey, tennis, and golf, these HD screens offer the further opportunity to actually see the ball or the puck during play!

The marketplace has a different television hook for youth and adolescents. Two of the current generation video game platforms (Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3) features high-definition video output. The big screens in millions of living rooms and family rooms will amplify the performative aspect of the electronic game experience. Completing the domestic loop, women (who are the key to the purchasing of home electronics) are increasingly drawn to the style and design beauty of the flat-panel devices (Pearce). A review of the photo spreads in home sections of newspapers reveals the increasing inclusion of a visual "triple-play" in the depictions of the perfect living room: fireplace, picture window, and large, flat-panel television hanging on the wall. All three are devices that bring ambient visual pleasure into our day-to-day lives. In any case, the stereotypical nuclear family is being tempted on all fronts—husband, wife, and children—by the lure of HD technology. Until now, high comparative costs have confined this item to the early adopter end of the technology acquisition spectrum, with the projection TV playing a role as a less expensive "starter" big set. However, there is a logic to the adoption curve for the flat-panel video units. As HDTV distribution continues to grow and more consumers are ready to move up from projection boxes and traditional picture tubes, flat-panel technology development costs are amortized over longer and larger production runs, and prices for the wall units are inevitably coming down.³ At the same time, we will see continued development of the next generation of flat-panel technologies, such as OLED (organic light-emitting diode) and HDR (High Dynamic Range) displays.

The introduction of high-definition, flat-panel displays creates unprecedented conditions of televisual reception experience. For the first time, cinematic-quality visuals are situated in our homes. The effects of this development will be amplified by a variety of other digital production and postproduction tools. Inexpensive, high-quality digital video cameras provide widespread opportunities for experimentation with new forms of video expression. The latest version of prosumer cameras offer HD-quality visuals for approximately \$3,000. These high-resolution images can be edited, processed, and transformed with an array of sophisticated post-production software. Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premier, After Effects, and related tools offer thousands of digital filmmakers opportunities for layering, segmentation, combination, metamorphosis, and transformation that were formerly confined to the most costly studio operations or the most obsessed of film artists.

Implications for Video Content

These changes in video quality and capability carry implications for video production and the televisual experience. 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 cinematic image size and resolution was a double whammy for the visual impact of the original televised picture. The long shot lost its expressive and its communicative powers, and the close-up became privileged to the point of imperative.

The new display technologies reverse that trend. The scope of the reversal 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 relevant

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 form in many of its fundamental poetics. As visual field, image size, and resolution approach cinematic standards, the wide shot will be reprivilaged, and the close-up will become far less critical. In some situations, the use of tight close-ups will become counterproductive.

This change in treatment of subject scale will support a new freedom for the choice of 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. For filmmakers such as Orson Welles or John Ford, narrative detail could be arranged within a long single shot and successively privileged through sound, lighting, and blocking of action. Television was perfectly capable of using the long (and wide) take to support dialogue, but it needed a different strategy for visual storytelling. Its reliance on medium and close shots necessitated the sequencing of any critical visual narrative 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 subgenres unique to television: the commercial, the series opening signature sequence, and the music video. These forms faced a unique set of constraints. Not only did they have to contend with the visual limitations of standard television, they also 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 of 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.

As a result of our exposure to the fast-paced video short form, our ability to take in visual information has increased tremendously (Stephens 154). However, temporal acceleration is not the only path to a rich visual information environment. One has to consider the effect of the new display standards on the fundamental poetics of the medium. Lev Manovich is attuned to the implications of the evolutionary nature of the screen. He recognizes that monitors are getting bigger and will eventually become wall-size (114–15). Having established this context, he points out that “spatial montage represents an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage” (Manovich 322). Manovich feels he is extending Eisenstein’s conceptions of montage as an ongoing dialectic within a full range of audio-visual and spatial-temporal possibilities. At the same time, Manovich 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 the ability to wield the powerful tools of their improved electronic palettes.

Two of these tools are 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 that have used this technique: *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *The Boston Strangler*, *Woodstock*, and Abel Gance’s *Napoléon*. 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 by the hard cut, with minor attention to 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 multiformed 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 contemporary digital forms provide the conceptual models. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin point out that different media ceaselessly adapt and repurpose each other's forms and conventions. The windowed universe of the desktop and the Web is reflected in a rebirth of the fragmented-frame moving image environment. We see this effect in the news networks, in dramatic television series such as *24* and *Trial and Retribution* and in a number of contemporary films such as *Run, Lola, Run*, *Timecode*, and *The Rules of Attraction*. At the same time, the morphing and collaging capabilities of digital post-production software supports a layered video experience that seamlessly blends varied backgrounds and subjects in a smooth temporal flow. The cinematic wipe flourished in the thirties and subsequently fell out of favor, but it and similar devices are undergoing a rebirth (Thompson and Bordwell). The beginnings of a revitalized aesthetic of layered transitions can be seen in television series such as *Home Improvement* and *Las Vegas* and hypermediated action-comic cinema such as *Hulk* and *Spider-Man*.

The renaissance of the scenic wide shot, the split screen, and layered transitions are specific trends 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 *Koyaanisqatsi* 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 (supported by a sound experience as rich and as full as the visual). This is an environment completely adapted to the “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge). 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 shifting user preference in any given moment.

Surprisingly few television critics address this aspect of the home television experience. Williams correctly identified “flow” as a powerful concept for the analysis and understanding of television, but Lynn Spiegel’s introduction to the 1992 edition of Williams’s seminal work *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* points out that the flow of programming is often interrupted or overridden by the flow of domestic life: “[Williams’s methodology] didn’t at all account for more everyday viewing procedures. It didn’t account for someone preparing a sandwich, answering a phone, putting a child to bed—in short the flow of human activities that interact with the flow of television programs” (Spiegel xxvi). Television experience may be pleasurable precisely because it can be a casual activity. Jib Fowles sees selective attention as a basic characteristic of home television viewing that adds to the enjoyment of the experience. He cites a study of actual television usage which showed that 20 percent of the time when the television was on, there was no one in the room, and another 20 percent of the time, potential viewers were in the room but not paying attention to the screen. The rate of inattention grew to

50 percent during commercials (C. L. Allen, qtd. in Fowles). A robust understanding of the range
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of possible options for video production should take into account the variable attention actually paid to domestic television.

The new screen display formats approach the presentation quality of film but retain the figure-ground malleability of video. In combination, this describes a medium where there will be ongoing demand for foreground programming and, at the same time, some level of demand for background programming. We will still use the new screens to watch movies. The latest DVD (or its HD 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, and sports. Our attention to these shows will vary tremendously, as it has for decades of television viewing.

Ambient Video

We are now drawing closer to the issues raised by the history of the burning Yule log video. Do the new digital display tools support the possibility for a new content direction—a true ambient video form? Will we see the development of a new class of domestic video art that will hang on our walls within these beautifully minimalist flat-panel video frames? The phrase “ambient video” would describe programming that is designed to run in the background but will sustain a certain amount of close attention at any time. A pejorative term for this type of programming is “video wallpaper.” A more accurate and respectful term would be “video painting.” The immediate digital antecedent is the computer screen saver; its aesthetic roots will be found in certain kinds of experimental cinema and video art. Its commercial beginnings can already be seen. The elemental companion to the fire of the burning log is the televisual liquid pleasure of the video aquarium. The DVD of *Finding Nemo* contains two different collections of video aquaria, one for standard video, the second for 16 × 9 format screens. A search of the Internet for

“ambient video” reveals a range of companies selling ambient video DVDs. The visuals on these videos include fireplaces and aquaria as well as a wide variety of nature imagery: beaches, mountains, forests, and waterfalls. The sound tracks include a complementary range of background audio consistent with the ambient functionality of the visuals: classical music, choral arrangements, natural sound effects, and light electronica. Some of the advertising is aimed at specialized markets (VJs, religious institutions and the wellness community), but much of it is clearly designed for more generalized domestic display. It is also clear that much of the appeal of this level of commercial product is to a kitsch instinct rather than substantive artistic appreciation.

Is the new ambient video doomed to this gimmicky level of creative endeavor—is it merely a new standard for electronic velvet paintings? Luckily we can find precedent for substantive explorations into a new ambient video form in the history of video art and experimental film. Eno himself explored this form in the late '70s and throughout the '80s, producing ambient video works such as *Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan* and *Thursday Afternoon*. Eno has plenty of company among artists working more directly with the moving image. Avant-garde filmmakers such as Andy Warhol (in his *Empire*, *Sleep*, and other works) explored the possibilities of the extremely long take. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* also explored the use of the slow shot and added his own sense of liminal narrative to Warhol's aggressively minimalist stance. Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* and *Apotheosis* (the latter with John Lennon) tied the long take to a pictorial sensibility and the play of landscape and skyscape. Bill Viola's works—from *The Reflecting Pool* to *Emergence*—combine a commitment to a luxurious screen time with an acute understanding of the painterly beauty of the carefully composed video image.

These and other works from the tradition of the innovative and experimental moving

image demonstrate the potential for a new type of domestic televisual 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 should not 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 television “short-form.” Some work in this genre will be closely linked to a screen-saver aesthetic. 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 Apple’s iTunes and Microsoft’s Windows Media Player).

Other work in this stream will be more cinematic. This variation will concentrate on rich and 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.⁴ This form will privilege the use of nature sequences (fire, water, clouds, 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 discussion. The glance will be compelling for a moment, a minute, or several minutes. Then the conversation resumes, and the viewers withdraw their

attention—until the next pause in their personal conversational 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 music 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 cannot depend on temporal montage and fast pacing—these devices both require and command 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.

Notes to Chapter 13

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¹ There are a series of Web citations on the history of the WPIX log, the Reuters log-scare woman, and various Web-based sales sites for a video Yule log or virtual fireplace.

² The various international video standards reflect complex struggles over technological quality, control of commerce, and cultural hegemony. NTSC (National Television Standards Committee) is the North American standard and is often used in those countries most closely aligned with the American and Japanese marketing domains. PAL (Phase Alternating Line) was developed in Germany and adopted widely throughout the British Commonwealth and within other Western European spheres of economic and cultural influence. SECAM (Système Électronique pour Couleur avec Mémoire) was developed in France and tends to be used in Francophone and former Soviet countries. (The cynical translation of SECAM is “Something Essentially Contrary to the American Method”.) More germane to the argument in this paper is the fact that PAL and SECAM have better resolution (at least in the vertical dimension) than NTSC but do not approach the resolution quality of high-definition television standards.

³ Of course, the saturation of the initial HD consumer market will be followed by further improvements in picture quality. For example, Scott Stevens points out that frame rate adds considerably to perceived resolution and visual impact, and proposed future generations of HDTV will undoubtedly include higher frame rates that will take advantage of this phenomenon. (Stevens)

⁴ 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.

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