

Television Form: Past, Present, Future

“Televisual Spectacle and the Digital Transition”

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I’m currently working on a project related to special effects and digital visual effects (VFX), and I’ve been thinking through issues related to the specificity of televisual spectacle and how TV has deployed special and visual effects both historically and in the contemporary moment. In my research, I’ve encountered an interesting quirk in disciplinary terminology. While there is a relatively robust body of scholarship within cinema and new media studies addressing issues of labor organization, globalization, economics, production, technology, and style of VFX, television scholarship tends not to place focus on the term “visual effects.” Instead, television scholarship employs the language of “televisuality,” “spectacle,” or “excess.”

I find this use of terminology telling, as it links to broader historical discourses that position cinema as a technologically sophisticated, big budget, artisanal/craft-oriented, masculine form and television as domestic, low budget, feminine, and oriented toward quick, slapdash production. Whereas cinematic FX are technological marvels of sublime spectacle, televisual FX are strange appendages attached to a form better suited to more intimate narrative and aesthetics. In other words, television FX are always less-than their cinematic counterparts, “good enough” for TV but never reaching the quality of cinema’s displays of spectacle.

The transition to digital workflows has, however, reworked this relationship. Historically, television has tended to follow cinema’s lead in adopting special and visual effects, from the introduction of color to the adoption of widescreen aspect ratios to the integration of CGI. What I’d like this roundtable to discuss is the specificity of the television image, its unique approach to the image without hierarchical comparisons to the cinematic image. Discussions of “quality television” tend to focus primarily on the quality of writing, acting, narrative complexity, and aesthetic style. What is often ignored in these discussions is an attention to the quality of the image itself. Ranging from live broadcasts, to kinescope recordings, to transmissions of content filmed in 35mm, to videotape transmissions, the quality of television transmission and the quality and size of the television screen have historically been viewed as poor substitutes for their 35mm cinematic counterparts. While creators exploited the unique qualities of videotape in the 1980s, the video aesthetic remained mostly confined to the televisual domain and, for the most part, wasn’t deemed suitable for cinematic exhibition. (Independent films of the late-1990s and early-2000s—e.g., the Dogme 95 films—are a notable exception. The exhibition of these films in theaters was controversial at the time, though, and many critics deemed the use of digital video as inappropriate for theatrical exhibition.)

However, with the transition to high-definition digital transmission, the consumer adoption of HDTVs in the early 2000s, and the introduction of Blu-Ray (and the now defunct HD-DVD) into the home video market, TV developed a unique approach to image quality. While cinema struggled with the digital transition, television came to embrace this shift, and the television industry and TV manufacturers used HDTV as a way to market a form of quality specific to the home viewing experience. In fact, TV jumped on board the digital movement a decade before cinema. This is partly due to FCC policy changes, as well as the notable *increase* in televisual image quality versus the perceived *decrease* in cinematic image quality with the shift to digital

production and exhibition. Nevertheless, television exploited the digital transition to produce images unique to the televisual landscape. Live sports, long the purview of TV, got a significant upgrade with HDTV, and sports were used to move HDTV sets and HD cable subscriptions. Nature documentaries, another stalwart of TV programming, also benefited from the introduction of HDTV, as evidenced by the breathless marketing surrounding the production, broadcast, and Blu-Ray release of the *Planet Earth* (2006) nature documentary series. HDTV thus serves as a contemporary example of television adopting its own norms of image quality, taking the lead over cinema during the digital transition.

An ancillary point of discussion relates to video games and video game consoles. A major selling point of the PS3 (2006) was its ability to play Blu-Ray discs, and both the PS3 and Xbox 360 (2005) consoles took advantage of HDTV displays. Video games, along with TV programming, also received a significant image upgrade in the form of digital HD. As with cinema, however, there is a certain longing for TV's analog past, and we can see this in the nostalgia for the standard definition CRT image of 1980s home console gaming. An example of this is the "CRT mode" available in Nintendo's upcoming [NES Classic Edition](#). While players can play in HD through an HDMI connection, the system can also simulate the look of CRT TVs.