



drawing by Marcela Toro

# Video Mediation of Theatrical Film

The problems of *Plenty*

## by Mark Medicoff

During the 1980s a dramatic increase in the accessibility of video cassette recording devices has made these instruments a common household appliance. Films recently made for the large screen now appear regularly on the reduced dimensions of a television monitor. The result is a transformation of the film image – and the way viewers respond to largescreen films on television.

According to statistics published in February 1986 by the A.C. Nielsen Co. of Canada, VCRs averaged 31 percent penetration into Canadian homes. By contrast, in September 1983, there were VCRs in only 5 percent of the

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households. Canada's national average climbed from 24 percent to 31 percent between March and November 1985.

Last July, *The Globe and Mail* reported that videocassette penetration had already reached the 44 percent level. The Nielsen research indicated that VCRs will be in 85 percent of U.S. homes by 1995 – and Canada is not far removed from the experience of the American consumer market.

To what degree the viewing audience recognizes the large number of visual distortions caused by the mediation process between large and small screen could be the subject of an empirical analysis. Nevertheless, observable distortions in film introduced by VCRs have important implications in the way theatrical films are being received by viewers. Many films gain a larger viewing audience on video than on the silver screen, so recognizing these distortions should become important for filmmakers.

## New problems

The advent of the VCR has introduced a unique problem for filmmakers. A critique of the Meryl Streep movie *Plenty* by Molly Haskell (*Video Review*, May 1986) reveals the concern over video mediated film:

"Let me say it right off: the framing of *Plenty* for its video release is a near disaster. As one brought up on the glories of CinemaScope, I'm delighted that movie directors are rediscovering the opulent possibilities of widescreen forms. But there is no way, if the ratio is used as expressively as it was in the '85 theatrical version of *Plenty*, that such movies can be squeezed into present video proportions without losing much of their reason for being.

"One possible exception, of course, is the use of so-called letterboxing, running a black or grey panel across the top and bottom of the screen to assure the full original width (as Woody Allen in-

sisted upon for the video release of *Manhattan*). That's not so bad with large TV screens, less satisfactory with average-size sets. But *Plenty* has been cropped in a way that is egregiously at war with both the writer's and director's strengths. Hence the two-star rating for a movie that should have merited three or four."

## Transformation of image

When television is employed as a delivery system for the singular art form of film, a transformation of the film image takes place. Television technology imposes its own unique aesthetic forces. As a consequence, the artistic and emotional message created by the filmmaker is often betrayed by the interloping television technology.

What is the emotional impact on viewer perception when the large-screen film is mediated on television? Do

theatrical films elicit a different emotional response from viewers on the television monitor than on a large screen?

Why is there a different reaction to a panorama scene when viewed on a large screen than on the small television screen? Why do viewers have different reactions when presented with images of people seen head to toe, than when presented with closeups of television's head and shoulders.

Does the muted, less brilliant colour of the "film look" elicit a different emotional impact on the viewer than the bright, high-contrast colours of the "television look?" Does the element of sound elicit a different response from the viewer in a television setting than in a theatrical setting?

How does McLuhan's message of the television medium compete with the message of the video-transformed film-medium? Are we apt to become more personally involved with the pictorial images portrayed on television than on film?

Montreal's biennial Convergence Conference represents an international attempt to bridge the gap between film and video practitioners. Scheduled for December 8-11, the conference is a veritable Toyville of electronic gadgetry, but perhaps the conference will also serve as an educational forum for visual literacy in television and video. Perhaps some of these questions will make the rounds of delegate discourse.

### Distinctive art form

Television and theatrical film are unique and distinctive art forms. In film, the image promotes the broad landscape view, and has different compositional and visualization features. Television demands different staging arrangements, and different ways of articulating visual construction.

In short, television is a singular art form which exerts its own regulations. When television is used as a simple delivery system for films designed for the large screen, image and message distortions arise.

### Depth Perception

The eye/brain react and interpret a film in a theatre differently than when the same film is presented through video technology. In television, elements along the Z-axis create the illusion of depth. The Z-axis, according to television guru Herbert Zettl, is especially important in television, since the height and width of the frame are far more reduced than in the wide screen motion picture frame.

This feature operates differently in film, where there is less of an emphasis on depth perception. According to Concordia University Communications Professor Nikos Metallinos, "The staging of a crowd scene for film is diametrically opposed to that of television. With

a few people on the Z-axis, you can create the illusion of hundreds of people in television. This cannot be done in film because the screen is bigger and needs more people to fill it."

When the theatrical film is mediated on the video screen an 'unnatural' visual

more muted, complex, and less vibrant. Communicators call it the "film look".

The small screen imposes distortions which limit the exchange of film information. Video mediated film often displays closeups where the dialogue receiver is absent or partially amputated

### Specific forces

In his seminal publication, *Sight Sound Motion*, Zettl outlines the impact of compositional elements on television and film – elements which exert specific forces on the large screen or on the



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• Unlike film...

field often appears. The result is that large-screen film depth perception is distorted on the video screen. "The television picture, being two-dimensional and considerably smaller than the objects or events it depicts," adds Metallinos, "compresses the size of the objects."

### Close-ups

Unlike film, television relies on closeup proportions for information, viewer attention, and creative values. The film medium relies on the wide screen to impart information. Television stresses a vertical orientation when compared to film's horizontal band. This, in part, explains why video mediated film often has a compressed, narrow look. In addition, the true television aesthetic is brought to life with vivid, saturated, high-contrast colour. Film colour is

from the audience's view. Or a close-up will reveal an uncomfortable appearance of only mouth and eye. In television, facial close-ups provide essential information. The television viewer is almost like a hearing-impaired person who requires lip and eye movement to increase understanding and to sustain emotional contact.

Panoramic scenes, which are vital for informational exchange in film, appear lifeless, stilted on the television screen. Viewers are left squinting to see tiny dots of information, or will simply refrain from such concentration.

Metallinos refers to these distortions as "noise" He points out that noise in television is often produced by film editing. Fast-paced editing on television blurs detail, and the viewer is left with the unpleasant task of applying his own logic to the visual message.

television monitor. According to Zettl, the frame of the medium or large objects within the frame exert a pulling force on other objects near them.

Referring to the phenomena as magnetism of frame and attraction of mass, Zettl describes how they visually attract objects to frame corners or magnetically pull objects to frame lines. These elements can have discernable repercussions when film is mediated through a technology which exerts a different set of electronic forces.

Magnetism is particularly noticeable because the aspect ratios of a film is proportionally more awkward than the 1:00 to 1.33 of the television screen. As a result, the video mediated film scene seems unnatural and distracting. Images are sometimes pulled to unnatural contortions. Important details become inconspicuous.

A film scene suggests something uniquely different when these aesthetic forces exert their properties on television.

**Psychological closure**

Psychological closure represents one of

the small screen doesn't. Television has conditioned the viewer to reconstruct, so that the image presented is not cluttered with detail. Too much detail results in information overload. As a cumulative process, the image distortions of video mediated film detract

tends that sound sometimes contributes to television noise. Sound is background in film, but in television it conveys basic information. When video mediated film sound turns to noise a viewer's involvement with the image is further reduced.

**Eye movement**

The different aesthetic demands for eye movement exacted by television also has direct implication for video mediated film. The requirements for eye movement reactions for film and television are very different. Large screen film invites a greater number of scans and, consequently, more movement than television. Because of the small screen and the predominance of close-ups, television does not compel eye calisthenics.

Critics have long commented on the sleepy, hypnotic sensation of watching a theatrical movie on television. A video mediated film demands concentration and involvement, so the tired viewer on the comfortable sofa simply tunes out.

**Vectors**

Eye movement orientation is a function of the placement of vectors within a frame. Vectors are directed lines which move eye contact from one point to another. According to Zettl they "can help in the task of clarifying and intensifying a particular event on the screen." This element is as important in the creative process for television art as for the theatrical film.

A consequence of the video mediated film, however, is that the directed focus may steer the eye right off the television screen into empty space because the artificial frame of television reduces the size of the film image. As a consequence, the information and emotional impact of the image is reduced and the viewer grows even more annoyed.

**Essence of television**

It is the sense of immediacy, spontaneity – of portraying action as it happens with sound and sight – that sets television completely and utterly apart from any other medium. It is the one element that gives television its distinctive aesthetic appeal, an appeal that translates into a message. What are the messages delivered by television and film, and what happens to the film message when conveyed through the message of television?

McLuhan contended that the medium's message shapes the way we think and feel about the world around us. He described film as a hot medium. In Zettl's terms, hot is described as high definition – conveying substantial amounts of information. McLuhan considered television a cool medium, conveying low definition, or small quantities of information.

In film, the audience is a "passive consumer of action." The VCR acts as a mediator, conveying high-definition information through a technology which elicits low-definition information. Viewer participation is inhibited. The viewer has trouble becoming involved in the process. The consequence, once again, is audience tune-out.



• ...television relies on close-up proportions for information

the most significant differences between film and television, and has direct implications on video mediated film. Zettl defines psychological closure as "the act of taking a minimum amount of clues and mentally filling in non-existing information in order to arrive at an easily manageable pattern." McLuhan also addresses this subject and contends that television is like "a cartoon image" because viewers fill in the details.

Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim asserts that seeing is a selective process, a biological device which seeks out data in the environment as a means for survival. He points out that selecting information is an important aspect of visual perception. He describes this condition as restructuring.

Viewers restructure television images. This feature differs significantly in film, where the images are complete. The large screen has room for detail,

from the filmmakers' original creative intent.

Closure is also a function of the inherent logic in the editing of television images. The structural logic of small screen television is inductive because it is foremost a close-up medium. "We can move from several details to the overview or simply present a series of details that the viewer can combine in his head into the overall scene," writes Zettl. By contrast, film moves deductively from the large view to the detail.

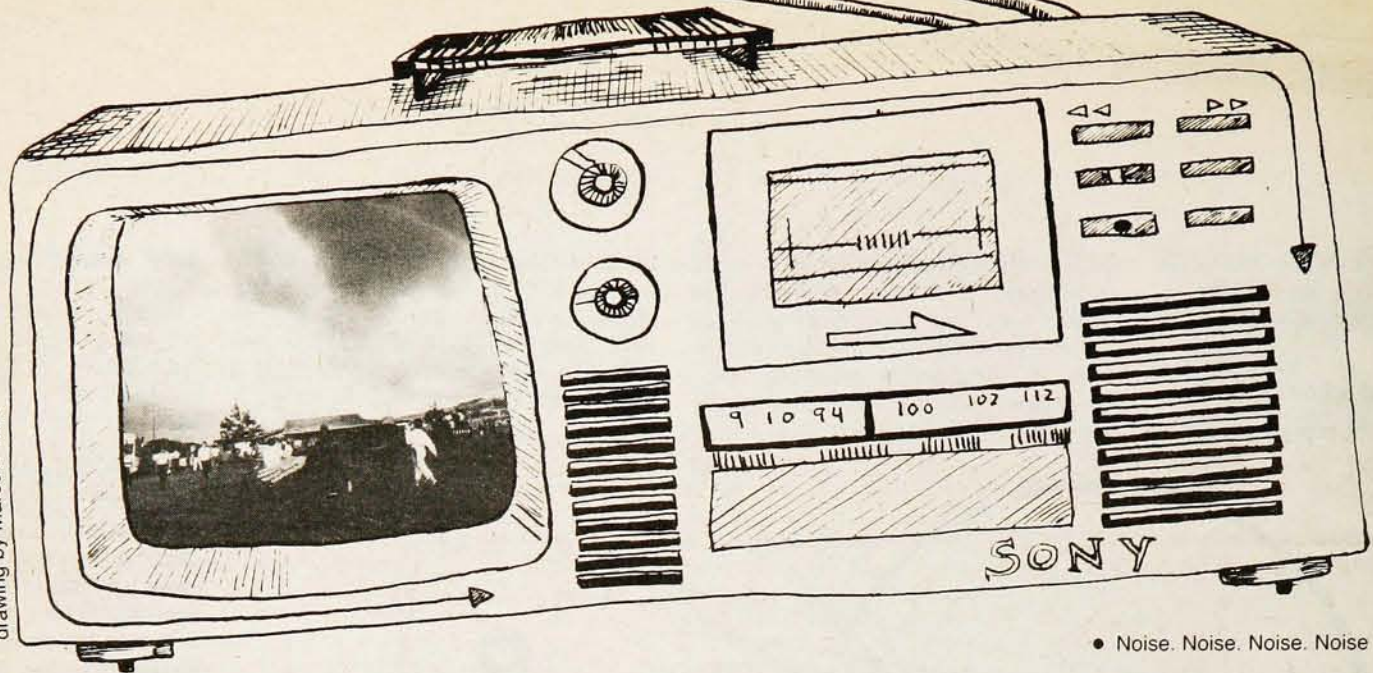
Does this difference in logic affect viewer impact? What repercussions emerge when the deductive logic of film is conveyed through a technology whose presentation of image logic is inductive? What kind of psychological dissonance is established by this incongruity of visual reasoning?

Further exacerbating this problem is the element of sound. Metallinos con-

Sound is vital to facilitate psychological closure in television, but is far less important to convey information in film. Even further, Zettl asserts that "television audio has a higher information density than television video." Since film is very much a visual medium, Zettl points out that film sound is an "accompaniment – the sound can be casual, the dialogue embedded in visual context.

"With no dialogue to help the communication, we become conspicuously and uncomfortably aware of the key pauses between the film speeches. The film dialogue, as natural as it may appear in conjunction with the wide-screen images, appears slow and spotty on television." Once again, the viewer is confronted with a situation where the film medium does not work in concert with the video technology.

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• Noise. Noise. Noise. Noise

### Internal technology

The very essence of the media's message is created by the internal make-up of the technology. Zettl describes television technology as "a continuous scanning process that exists - lives - as a process". Television defies the frame-by-frame construction of film because television is in constant motion. The basic frame of film displays the image at rest. For Zettl, television is "instantaneous" and "irrevocable". It is a testament to the present, to the now.

This expectation, this requirement, is the fundamental orientation of 'electronic' humankind to the television medium. Anything less than live television on television runs contrary to the very nature of the medium. The very essence of "real-life" television inhibits the evocation of fantasy, an essential ingredient of non-fiction film. Images which appear on television are, implicitly, an extension of "reality."

In a new television sitcom an extraterrestrial being called Alf lies unconscious in the protagonists' home. The family compares the being to the famous ET. The father, in all his wisdom,

shouts: "But that was only a movie, this is happening on our living room table."

### Light

The manipulation of light also plays a significant role in television aesthetics. Media author Mark Schubin believes the film look is mainly achieved through light. He states that contrast brightness is more intense in television which elicits a brighter, lifelike quality. Film, he writes, "is very nonlinear in the region of high incoming brightness."

Concordia Professor M. F. Malik points out that television brightness is three to seven times higher than other light reflecting sources. He states that television produces contrasts of 50:1 to 80:1 whereas the highest colour contrast of film is 20:1. As a result, video mediated film inherits this problem without compensating for it. The consequence is that video mediated film appears dull, less intense, less dramatic than the television aesthetic.

Zettl asserts that film is the control of external light, while television is the extension of the internal (electron beam) light. Television researcher David

Anton contends that the television viewer looks into the source of light so that the "source of light and the source of information are the same". Television reveals internal reality, it touches a fundamental base deep within the human psyche.

The viewer's eyes form a direct link with the beams of light emanating from the very core of the technology. The light affirms, and maintains an emotional contact. As a result, film is the best medium to portray action, but television is the best medium to sustain emotion.

A video mediated film cannot rise to the power of video light in the conversion process. It is unequalled to the light of television. Film light is low key, literal, intellectual.

### Environment

Clearly, the most obvious difference between television and theatrical film is the environment factor. Film is conveyed in a darkened surrounding where audience attention is held hostage by seating arrangement and convention until the completion of the "show." The

neighbour in the next chair may well be a stranger. The television home audience, by contrast, is subject to a multitude of attention distractions... in an illuminated, comfortable, and familiar surrounding.

### Made-for-television film

Filmmakers must inevitably come to grips with the consequences of video mediated film. They may well consider the process of shooting their theatrical film a two-step process. The first complies with the grandeur and logic of the big screen, but shot with additional footage to meet the demands of the small screen.

The second step consists of re-editing and incorporating the additional footage for video delivery. The re-editing process takes into consideration the inductively structured logic of television and its special compositional requirements. Only in this way can directors hope to reduce the most flagrant aesthetic distortions and loss of information of their video mediated theatrical films.

• Empire

• The making of a TV Empire with Denys Arcand, Jennifer Dale and Kenneth Welsh



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