

Focusing on a Blurred Boundary

Josephine (Josie) Harrison

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Professor Young

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Special visual effects or rather VFX have become an integral part of modern day film appearing in a vast majority of the films we consume. Going into this class I thought I already understood what a visual effect was, however, it has now become apparent that there is actually a lot more complexity within the defining of VFX. Through beginning to question what actually defines VFX I have looked back at my previous understanding and interpretations of VFX, and have come to realize they are very superficial and notably subjective without a consistent application and much more diverse than I originally understood. In order to look into what makes a VFX, context and understanding as to the origins and development of film will need to be utilized.

The beginnings of film can be seen to be interchangeable with the beginnings of VFX, with the whole point of some of the earliest films being to create illusions through the form of 'trick films'. Films were considered trick films when the sole purpose of the film was to create some kind of illusion and trick the audience. It is worth noting that for some of the earliest creators of trick films such as Melies, the prioritization of the film's contents was different. Melies' main goal when creating his trick films was that of the trick, with the narrative being a second hand thought that simply carried the trick (Gaudreault 113). On top of this the length of these films were very short ranging within the single digit minutes. The effects that Melies seemed to prioritize were those related to exposure and even double exposure, where he would film a situation and block out areas of the camera, or utilize dark areas of the set to then re-expose the illusion or 'trick' of the film. Due to Melies' prioritization of the 'trick' and his desire to create magic with film, his films can be seen as the origins of what people most commonly understand VFX i.e. there is a very clear distortion of reality occurring within each film(Gaudreault 113). It is the idea of 'distorting reality' that needs to be focused on when delving deeper into the defining of VFX.

Melies' films distorted reality using a variety of special effect techniques, most notably relying on the combination of practical and technical effects to create his overall visual effect. Within Melies' film *L'Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (Georges Méliès, France, 1901) he utilizes the naturally dark space within the set to deliberately underexpose the sight of the 'trick'. After filming the first runthrough of the scene i.e. the man 'pumping' up the head, Melies then films the trick by reexposing the same film, all while utilizing the practical effect of forced perspective to make it seem like the head is being 'pumped up'. Through combining these techniques he is able to create his illusion, however, the illusions that Melies sought to portray never really 'fooled' the audience as they were the sole aspect of the film. Films like Melies' came under the umbrella term of 'trickality' in that people went to see them not to follow a complex story, but to be tricked and appreciate the illusion being presented (Gaudreault 112). People would attend trick films expecting to be 'tricked' and thus never truly were. Furthermore, the notable exhibitionist nature of the films fuelled this as audiences were almost invited into the trick and the pursuit of understanding it.

As films developed and so did their audiences the balance between narrative and 'trick' slowly changed. In a desire to increase the appeal of films as an art form towards the middle class the emphasis on narrative began to take over that of 'trickality', leading to films of longer runtime and more concrete narratives (King 3). As the run time and narrative increased it led to the need for better integration of VFX into the films in order to sustain people's attention and suspend reality while watching the film, and not disrupt the viewing experience or immersion of the story. It is at this point where the emphasis of film changes, where the boundary that defines VFX as VFX becomes blurry because the viewer's attention is drawn away from the VFX. One definition brought forward by Dan North suggests that VFX are there to be used as a tool to the

filmmaker, they are used when the film is trying to portray something impossible, whether that be lightsabers from Star Wars or a sandy desert for a film being filmed in Canada (North 46). Dan North's definition can provide a very clear boundary as to not just what a VFX is but also when it is most likely to be used. Though North's definition takes on a predictive strategy it can then draw parallels back to the trickality films noted before because it suggests that the audience will again be aware of the use of effects and thus draw more attention to them (North 46). However, what North's 'definition' doesn't do is highlight the diversity of VFX, notably the more 'invisible' forms of effects.

Invisible effects are those effects which seem natural and are designed to not be seen e.g. the snow scene in *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, USA, 1990). The impact of invisible effects can often go under-appreciated due to the nature of them being 'invisible', however, they are the smaller aspects of a film which build the authenticity of the story and the believability of it, truly allowing people to immerse themselves into the world of the film. Invisible effects thus don't seemingly 'distort reality' for the viewer, however, with the added context of knowing that fog or sunlight wasn't there it does provide a distortion of reality that only the creators see. Another form of seemingly underappreciated effect is that of makeup, notably makeup that distinctively changes the look of a person's face. Makeup effects can heighten or diminish a character's emotions, or even transform a human into an alien, all of which distorts reality to a certain extent.

Furthermore, North's interpretation of VFX seems to imply that it is only done when needed and seems to take away the artistic decision making surrounding their use, an ironic notion when film has fought so hard to gain recognition of an art form. VFX and their artistic use – rather than their 'realistic' use – helped gain films artistic recognition, alongside the framing

and editing of film (King 4). A special mention should be given to how certain kinds of editing – in relation to the films timeline – may also be considered a kind of effect under the umbrella of VFX. Editing can distort reality, especially in the examples of parallel editing made popular by D. W. Griffith or in how the editing of *Safety Last!* (Fred C. Newmeyer & Sam Taylor, US 1923, 75 min) made it appear that Harold's actor was in fact climbing up a multi story building (Gunning 18). The argument for parallel editing being a kind of VFX is due to how it impacts the way an audience views the narrative and the implications of the specific order of editing.

Throughout this paper there has been a significant reference to the idea of 'distorting reality' combined with the notion that anything that results in a distortion of reality being some kind of effect. However, if that was the only criteria then film as a whole could be regarded as a special visual effect – and when it did first emerge it was – thus, more criteria and context must be added.

Firstly it is important to keep the criteria of 'distortion of reality' as that is the basis for what can define a VFX. However, the second criteria – or rather boundary – that allows for more clarity in setting a definition relates to how it affects each individual shot or scene within the context of a scene. Through providing context to what is shown in a scene it can highlight a specific choice as not something just random, but instead a specifically chosen effect with a desired impact. However, even then it leaves a significant amount of the definition up to interpretation of the individual viewer and creator as to how they perceive certain aspects of the film. An effect for one person might be considered just a basic piece of film for another, or even be completely unintentional by the people who made it.

It seems that VFX and what defines them is inherently, and always will be a somewhat subjectively defined thing. However, the main piece of criteria of distorting – the visual – reality

does provide the beginning of a definition, and combined with the ‘almost rules’ presented by North does begin to provide a framework for people to create their interpretations. Overall the concept of VFX seems to be a kind of umbrella category for most effects. The determining factors of being classified a VFX are whether the effect distorts the reality of the viewer and the reality of the film, creating something that either doesn’t exist or otherwise could actually be presented in real day to day life depending on the context exposed to the consumer. A VFX can be both visible and invisible, with often the best kinds of VFX being those that the average viewer does not notice, thus it does not distort the reality of the film, but the reality of filming e.g. *Safety Last!* with the forced perspectives utilized while climbing the building.