Research File

Animation Production Unit 3

The Infinite Canvas: Subverting Linear Narrative and Directed Attention through VR Cinematography

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Introduction: Escaping the Invisible Cut

As outlined in the accompanying Process Document, my Master's project, Vessel: A Loophole in Space, challenges the dominant visual language of the last century: Classical Hollywood Cinema. Defined by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, this style aims to make the mechanics of filmmaking invisible. Through continuity editing, the cut acts as a "guided gaze," ensuring the viewer sees only what the director intends, strictly controlling the narrative flow [1]. This cinematic language relies on a contract of passivity where the audience surrenders their agency in exchange for narrative clarity. The director says "look here," and the cut enforces that command.

However, Virtual Reality (VR) necessitates a rejection of this system. In VR, the "frame" is the viewer's entire field of vision. The open-plan architecture of my spaceship, which removes the walls between the Control Room, Kitchen, and Garden, exacerbates this loss of directorial control. Without the ability to cut, I cannot edit out "boring" moments or force the viewer to look at a protagonist. This Research File argues that this loss of control is not a deficit, but an evolution. By removing the frame, Vessel transfers the responsibility of editing to the audience. It transforms the physical act of looking, such as turning one's head, leaning in, or rotating the body, into the primary mechanic of the experience. The viewer is no longer a passive recipient of a story, but an active inhabitant of a "Microworld," editing their own version of the narrative in real-time.

Subverting the Hierarchy of Motion

In the Process Document, I detailed the specific frame rates used in Quill. This decision carries theoretical weight when contrasted with modern trends, such as Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse [2]. While celebrated for animating on "twos" (12fps) to create a hand-crafted texture, the film strategically switches to "ones" (24fps) during critical moments. In this context, frame rate becomes a semiotic marker where smoothness equals importance. The sudden fluidity grabs the eye, acting as a spotlight that separates the "hero" from the "background." In Vessel, I subverted this hierarchy to achieve what I term "democratic smoothness." By animating the background environment, including swaying plants and rotating turbines, on similar frame rates to the characters, I denied the viewer the subconscious cue of where to look. The ethereal motion of the Pilot is not prioritised over the chaotic motion of the Alien.

This aligns with Laura U. Marks' concept of "Haptic Visuality," where the image invites the viewer to "graze" the surface rather than focus on a single point [3]. In standard CGI, high-fidelity textures often push the viewer away, creating an uncanny distance. By rendering every element in Vessel with the same "messy" Quill brushstrokes, I create a tactile unity. The Chef's third arm shares the same visual DNA as the walls of the kitchen. This forces the viewer to scan the entire 360-degree sphere rather than locking onto a protagonist. The result is a world that feels uniformly alive, avoiding the hierarchy that typically separates "hero assets" from a dead backdrop.

The Loop, Ma, and Narrative Stasis

Lev Manovich argues that the loop is the fundamental structure of digital media, distinct from the linear trajectory of cinema [4]. To make the cyclical nature of Vessel engaging without a plot, I looked to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey [5]. Kubrick subverted the "quick cut" pace of cinema by forcing viewers to stare at slow-moving ships, using boredom as a gateway to observing texture and scale.

I leveraged this hypnotic quality to create atmosphere rather than story. This approach draws heavily on the Japanese concept of Ma (negative space) which is often utilized in the films of Studio Ghibli. Ma is the "gap" or "pause" that gives shape to the whole. In Vessel, the moments where characters are simply walking between rooms or waiting for a task to begin are not "dead air" to be cut; they are the substance of the piece.

The Cleaner's action of sanitising the Alien's residue is not narrative progression; it is a system reset, functioning as a literal Ouroboros. By refusing to cut to a climax, I force the viewer to sit with the texture of the world. The viewer co-exists with the characters in their routine, shifting the project from entertainment to a "digital terrarium." The tragedy and beauty lie in this redundancy where the Pilot flies nowhere and the Cleaner cleans a mess that will immediately return.

The Democratic Gaze and Audio-Vision

The most significant theoretical intervention of the project is its rejection of "directed attention" in favour of a "Democratic Gaze." Vessel achieves this through visual clutter and spatial audio.

A. Visual Clutter: The Tati Approach
André Bazin, in his defence of Deep Focus photography, argued that editing manipulates the viewer, whereas deep focus respects the viewer's freedom to choose what they look at [6]. To achieve this in VR, I adopted the staging philosophy of Jacques Tati, specifically from Playtime [7]. Tati rejected the close-up, filling wide shots with simultaneous actions so dense that viewers often missed jokes if they looked in the wrong direction [8]. Tati often used glass walls and open-plan sets to layer action, creating a sense of urban density and chaos.
As described in the Process Document, I applied this to the spaceship's Panopticon layout. By removing the opaque walls, I replicated Tati's glass architecture. The clumsy movements of the Chef happen simultaneously with the Pilot's flight. This "Polyphonic Attention" rewards repeated viewing as the audience cannot consume the whole scene at once but must return to catch missed details. This mimics the complexity of a real ecosystem, where events happen regardless of whether they are observed.

B. Audio-Vision: The Invisible Guide
To prevent total confusion without camera cuts, I relied on Michel Chion's theory of "Audio-Vision" and "Synchresis," defined as the immediate psychological bond between sound and image [9]. I utilised 3D spatial audio to create misdirection. For example, the loud "splat" of the Alien triggers the McGurk Effect, where sound overrides visual focus. If the viewer is watching the Pilot, the sound from behind forces a physical rotation. This allows me to "edit" the experience via sound, guiding the viewer's attention while leaving the final choice to turn around in their hands. The viewer is not just watching a world; they are acoustically inhabiting it.

Conclusion: Inhabiting the Loop

Vessel: A Loophole in Space serves as the theoretical counterpart to the practical work outlined in the Process Document. By rejecting the invisible continuity of Classical Hollywood Cinema, the project avoids the sterility of standard CGI. By subverting modern techniques, such as rejecting the guided frame rates of Spider-Man, embracing the meditative slowness of 2001 and the concept of Ma, and utilising the chaotic staging of Jacques Tati, the project enforces a "Democratic Gaze." The viewer must navigate the "visual noise" of the spaceship using their ears as much as their eyes. The decision to construct a Microworld of simultaneous loops challenges the desire for resolution; the characters are not moving toward an ending, but simply surviving. This suggests that the future of immersive animation lies not in guiding the viewer to a climax, but in granting them the agency to inhabit the loop.

Bibliography

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[9] Chion, M. (1994) Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 63.