



Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema

Kristen Whissel

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By developing the concept of the "digital effects emblem," Kristen Whissel contributes a new analytic rubric to cinema studies. An "effects emblem" is a spectacular, computer-generated visual effect that gives stunning expression to a film's key themes. Although they elicit feelings of astonishment and wonder, effects emblems do not interrupt narrative, but are continuous with story and characterization and highlight the narrative stakes of a film. Focusing on spectacular digital visual effects in live-action films made between 1989 and 2011, Whissel identifies and examines four effects emblems: the illusion of gravity-defying vertical movement, massive digital multitudes or "swarms," photorealistic digital creatures, and morphing "plasmatic" figures. Across films such as *Avatar*, *The Matrix*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, these effects emblems heighten the narrative drama by contrasting power with powerlessness, life with death, freedom with constraint, and the individual with the collective.

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