

WINNING TIME AND LOSING FRAMES: CLASHING FORMATS IN THE POST-
ARCHIVE

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KEYWORDS

Winning Time, digital cinema, analog film, KODAK, visual studies, HBO

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 18, May 31, 2025

HOW TO CITE

Mansi Tiwari. “*Winning Time* and Losing Frames: Clashing Formats in the Post-Archive.” *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 18 (2025).
<<https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2025.1480>>.

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2025.1480>>



Winning Time and Losing Frames: Clashing Formats in the Post-Archive

Abstract

Marked by warring aspect ratios, resolutions, and frame rates, HBO's *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty* (2022–2023) chronicles the L.A. Lakers basketball team in the 1980s. Max Borenstein and Jim Hecht's series proves from the outset that much more than nostalgia is at stake in their television series, interrupting the opening by dissolving it into digital and analog static. Framed by technologic white noise, the opening sequence proposes it is not the Lakers, but the underlying clashes of film formats that lie at the show's core. Grappling with the multitrack possibilities in film, it is in fluctuating image frames that the seam between visual technologies is articulated. While the inconstancy of the frame highlights the image's ability to masquerade as historical footage, it also pulls focus away from the narrative and towards the material level of the show. The waning significance of the frame in the digital age, as discussed by Vivian Sobchack, thus enacts the flexibility and interactivity common in screens today, while also highlighting that the very material gap between the image and its border that refuses to align with digital cinema practices.

Flitting through strips of analog film, camera burns, and out-of-sync audio, HBO's foray into NBA basketball is a nostalgic love letter to the 1980s from the digital age. *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty* (2022–2023) both chronicles the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team in the 'Showtime' era,¹ from 1979 to 1991, and grapples with the multitrack possibilities in film production today. With players and coaches addressing the camera as frequently as one another, the series refuses to commit to any particular film stock or camera technology. Instead, at any given moment, the narrative thread snaps and slips into various analog cameras, showcasing different degrees of grain, film stock, and other markers of materiality. These shifting gears of *Winning Time* do not serve as mere reminders of film history. Instead, the show concerns itself with the paralyzing possibilities afforded in filmmaking as the medium fluctuates between fictional, fictionalized, and archival footage. We might read the rise of the mixed-media aesthetic as Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*: an object consisting of two inseparable halves. As with a panorama viewed from a window, the material windowpane and the landscape are two sides of the same coin.² In *Winning Time*, this duality consists of the storyscape of the Lakers as inextricably melded with the screen of the medium. Revealed in the shifting aspect ratios and perforation stripes onscreen is the series' playful investment in a 21st-century visual logic. *Winning Time's*

continual confrontation with the edge of the image negotiates the boundary between digital and analog practices of film, renewing the function of the image frame for the digital age.

Winning Time draws from Jeff Pearlman's book, *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s* (2014), following key figures of the era, including Magic Johnson (Quincy Isaiah), Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Solomon Hughes), and team owner Jerry Buss (John C. Reilly). Initially pitched to the author by Jim Hecht in 2014,³ the series took off only when Adam McKay (dir. *Don't Look Up*, *Succession*) joined as a producer and brought the project to HBO.⁴ Emerging at the cusp of the 2020s, *Winning Time* premiered just as the streaming boom flattened, narrowly missing what has been considered television's second heyday in the first decades of the 2000s, or what FX chair John Landgraf in 2015 called "Peak TV."⁵ Ten years later, following SAG-AFTRA and WGA labor strikes in response to increasing precarity in the screenwriting profession, and the Covid-19 pandemic's disruption and production delays, the "imminent saturation point" that Landgraf warned of on the streaming-business horizon appears to have been reached. Numbers of new shows have been shrinking since the record year of 2022, new streaming services are in decline, and algorithmic mass-fare and IP extensions are proliferating: trends which Sam Adams, in an article for *Slate*, groups under the label 'Trough TV.'⁶ With streamers like HBO Max reducing offerings⁷ and saving on the cost of residuals,⁸ the remarkable cash flow into streaming is coming to an end. While streaming's all-encompassing availability was once hailed as 'burying' cable, it is now the cause of large-scale reshuffles in the television industry. Already grappling with Covid-era production delays, *Winning Time*'s emergence at the crosshairs of this downturn—and the industry's associated cost-cutting—culminated in the show's premature cancellation, and the limited on-air presence enjoyed by *Winning Time* marks a shift towards curated offerings and familiar spin-offs in an austere series landscape.

Nostalgic for an age of economic and media prosperity, it is worth noting that a crucial part of the show's conception lies in the evocative choice of camera technologies. Series creators Max Borenstein and Jim Hecht's pitch to HBO hinged on the use of camera technologies and film stock that was prevalent in news footage, documentaries, and the advertising landscape in the 1980s. Employing analog film, the show was shot on 35mm, 16mm, and Super8mm with color and black-and-white film

stock, creating a collage-like aesthetic of the time period.⁹ In an interview, director of photography Todd Banhazi describes the visual identity of the show as an “immersive collage of our collective American cultural memory,”¹⁰ which charts both the basketball team’s arc and the era’s media landscape. Banhazi discusses the choice to employ 35mm cameras, Ikegami tube cameras (popular for newscasts and sports footage), and Super8 home video cameras for the first season, set in 1979, to invoke formats familiar to the cultural imaginary of that time.¹¹ The second season, set in the 1980s, moves to VHS cameras and 16mm film, mirroring the shift in technology.¹² Employing different image formats, the show chronicles transitions in both history and media in its choice of footage.

The medley of cameras used on the show signal their specificity in their collision with the screen’s canvas. The edge of the image circumscribes the particular aspect ratio and image quality unique to each device used. In the fraying edges of the film stock, the quality of the image’s seam also points to the materiality of technology and filmstock, which only become legible in relation to the screen’s dimensions. Rather than leaning into a mimetic recreation of the period, the series chooses to highlight the tactile presence of celluloid while opting for a discontinuous and experimental montage style. The focus on the shifting edge of the image plots a second narrative of technological variation, and as a result, the contrast between visual material and its technological use draws the eye towards the image’s artistry. A type of bifocality emerges, pulling the viewer between narrative thread and technological flourish. The show’s stance mirrors this duality, producing a viewing position that locates the viewer within the diegesis of the 1980s while it pulls back the curtains on the mechanics that create its illusion.

Winning Time’s distinctive visual identity is introduced early in the show’s pilot, when soon-to-be team owner Jerry Buss speaks about his love for basketball. With a television set playing in the background, he is shot in close-up, with the camera moving in on his face as he addresses someone offscreen.¹³ Cutting to a reverse shot, one sees a television playing a sports reel, while the camera continues to move in on Buss. Fragments of sports footage from a newscast and Super8mm interrupt the images on the TV set onscreen, appearing just for a sliver of a second before returning to Buss’ face. Buss continues to speak, as the basketball footage appears alternately framed by the television set or directly inserted into the timeline. At this point, it is unclear

whether these images appear to Buss, in his point of view, or whether they interrupt the diegetic plane of the narrative. This sequence also sets the tone of the show: ironic, self-aware, and pastiche-like, as Buss addresses the camera directly, revealing his plans to buy a basketball team.¹⁴ These fractured sequences that open the show emerge as a contradictory and frenzied amalgamation of visual footage. In the scene that follows, the meta-reflexive aspect of the character speaking about future events and breaking the fourth wall seem to imply a wry twist on advertising footage of the time, with the character growing past the generic and narrative frame of the series. Mired in postmodern playfulness, this opening scene introduces viewers to the central plot and specific cameras that will shape the series to come.

Next to the exhilaration of the 1980s, the technological dimension speaks to the show's preoccupation with post-cinematic filmmaking. *Winning Time* turns its attention beyond the L.A. Lakers to the format of the streaming series: the technological clash is centerstage, while the context of basketball sets the arena. Taken to the extreme in the opening credits, the show manages to accelerate a disjunctive, discontinuous media logic that culminates in the title card's dissolution into video static. Each cut in the opening sequence moves with increasing frequency into a different gear of film technology, superimposing clips and other images until finally concluding with a title card disrupted by waves of rainbow-colored static in an erratic image that moves from a 35mm to an early digital camera shot. Two points become clear in this opening: First, the final disrupted still's ending on a digital glitch confirms that it is not the image but the technology that will have the last word.¹⁵ Second, the temporal and spatial discontinuities that structure the flow of narrative in the montage are emblematic of digital rather than analog logic. Despite the use of typically analog materials, the speed of the montage departs from the twentieth-century mixed-media aesthetic; rather, moving into the microscopic and minute, *Winning Time's* montage aligns with the digital logic Steven Shaviro introduced as a post-continuity style that undermines coherence.¹⁶ In that sense, the digital realm of the edit, usually intended to increase the precision of a montage, here actively counters the illusion of continuity. The flows and spaces of narrative become jumbled, mirroring the networked, non-linear technology of editing suites in use today. *Winning Time's* post-continuity style accords the temporal logic to the post-digital, while the camera images remain firmly anchored in the analog age.

In the midst of what Ellen Rутten and Ruby De Vos have termed the most recent “imperfect turn,” this aesthetic shift speaks to a deliberate interest, between the 2010s and 2020s, in decay, destruction, and the imperfect.¹⁷ Responding to the increasing faultlessness of image technologies, it appears that the human fingerprint on the materiality of the film has evaporated. In this age of the virtual and digital, what do we make of media that bring back traces of human imperfections that are otherwise so meticulously scrubbed away? The rise of the digital, while having usurped the ubiquity of analog filmmaking, certainly has not rendered it obsolete; it instead appears that we live in the age of the anachronistic multimedia archive, which is free to bring into dialogue all strands of material history. While a fictitious reimagining, *Winning Time* certainly makes the most of the image archive, infusing the genome of the show with an accelerated and breathless speed that is haunted by the self-reflexive nature of mediatization. Beyond the hold of accelerationist aesthetics in twenty-first century media,¹⁸ the series contends with an underlying anxiety about the conventions of narrativity that inform contemporary cinema practices. Focusing on the oscillating frame size and film stock, the show pressurizes the already strained boundaries between fiction and the archive, the coherence of space and time, and ultimately puts forth a logic of heterogeneity and discontinuity as the logical conclusion of the twentieth century’s visual logic. The collapse of these boundaries inaugurates a visual grammar that is pulled between digital perfection and the precarity of the digital image’s continued existence.

1_Archive

As the show is preoccupied with earlier film technologies, it is worth considering the drama’s relationship to archival film. Though the inclusion of stock footage from the 1980s expresses nostalgia for an older economic and media era, this seems to be complicated in the logic of the montage. The series’ director of photography, Todd Banhazl, suggests that while the choice of celluloid in itself certainly evokes the time period,¹⁹ the key interest was in “blur[ring] the line between what was actual archival and what we shot.”²⁰ Thus, the crux of the show is not primarily the invocation of a shared nostalgia for the 1980s, but the slippage between the fictional and the historical, negotiated over the choice of film stock. In the juxtaposition of historical and fictional footage, this confusion arises primarily in the realm of the edit. Part of this illegibility

lies not only in the choice of film stock, but in aging the film print to imitate the look of forgotten film footage.

While many directors opt to shoot on film—such as, recently, Alice Rohrwacher with *La Chimera*, or Martin Scorsese with *Killers of the Flower Moon*—the aesthetic effects are geared at evoking period-appropriate verisimilitude. Rohrwacher comes closest to *Winning Time* by employing a collage-like mix of footage in her film on tomb raiders in the 1980s, but she employs film stock to differentiate between imagined, remembered, and current events. The diegetic differences between the interpolated narrative levels emerge in the difference of camera device. In Scorsese's film, on the other hand, the real and imagined histories are strictly divided in their diegetic placement, with the historical only appearing as a paratextual comment before the credits acknowledging the divide between history and its fictionalization. In comparison, the logic of *Winning Time* craves and exposes the mantle of historicity that cloaks the fictional reimagining. Through the imitation of period film codes and the insertion of actors into historical footage, the historic and fictive spaces melt together via the screen, making historical reference tenuous. While a media-archeological perspective offers some insight in the type of technologies and film stock that were current, their warring visual aesthetics fracture images, temporality, and indexicality into a conflicting, collage-like whole.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's cultural theory, Catherine Russell's work on "archiveology" defines the practice as "the reuse, recycling, appropriation, and borrowing of archival material that filmmakers have been doing for decades."²¹ In itself, archival film usage is a practice that is far from specific to the current age, thus Russell no longer reads the film archive as a space of preservation but an "image bank"²² that interrogates memory's constructed nature. *Winning Time* focuses on the artifice of camera images that undergird the formation of the archive, recording what Russell calls "technologies of film stocks, video grain, and other signs of media history."²³ In the twenty-first century, Russell acknowledges how the current move to restore and digitize "challeng[es] norms of authenticity, media specificity, and origins that have traditionally been attached to the archive."²⁴ In playing with the aesthetic and technologic markers that attest to the former, the series interrogates the equation of the material image with historic deixis. The unstable position of the digital image demands a diffractive gaze that oscillates between aesthetic mantle and historic deixis. The

instability of the image's semiosis is only exacerbated by the digital plane's capacity to erase historic and medial differences. Next to the equalizing montage across technologies, the interruptions that switch out cameras within the same frame draw attention to the imperfect constancy that mirrors the digital glitch.

In his work on the post-digital, Jakko Kemper turns towards precisely such moments of glitch to discuss digital infrastructure.²⁵ As he reads the glitch as a faulty interference in the flow of information, the disturbance disrupts the audience's immersion in the image.²⁶ In instances in which a single shot flickers between different camera technologies, the interruption and reformulation of the image does not restabilize it. Rather than returning to the same image, *Winning Time* uses the glitch as a gear switch between technologies, making the interstitial space a key signifier in the series' visual vocabulary. Caught between flickering camera shots, the glitch speaks to what Kemper reads as the "fragility of technology [...] at risk of breakdown."²⁷ The frequent disruptions of the image frame push what might be accounted for as material errors to the digital precarity of the stream. While the visuals carry the traces of dust and scratches on celluloid, the montage's interruptions seem to be more closely aligned to the faulty flow of information. Despite the analog set up of the show, these momentary breakdowns speak to the underlying digital logic of the image's unstable and continually reconstituting operation. As such, the glitch serves to recenter the varying image technologies that underlie the show's production and the fragility of the data stream. Moreover, in the context of streaming, the instability of the image also refers to the precarity of shows in the digital age. As the 2020s mark a downturn in the industry's growth, the continual investment in original series has declined over the investments in reboots and spin-offs. Even availability in the all-encompassing online archive is no longer guaranteed. With the lack of material records, and with streaming giants curating the exclusive rights to stream (or lock away) a series, the precarious nature of the digital stream is dependent both on a stable internet connection and the continuing stability of the streamers. The series, once interrupted, continually grapples with its looming non-existence in the momentary visual glitches.

Between analog degradation and the digital glitch, it appears that *Winning Time* provides an interesting case in light of the imperfect turn. The disruptive aesthetics of glitch finds an interesting counterpart Hito Steyerl's discussion of digital debris in the form of "poor images."²⁸ Steyerl's concept of the poor image is one that emerges with

the ability to digitally circulate images of continually decreasing quality via screenshots. While the poor image represents “a copy in motion,” Steyerl describes its visual character as bridging deteriorating quality with increasing circulation.²⁹ While the quality of the digital poor image is read as a mark of its liberation from fixed formats and platforms,³⁰ *Winning Time*’s ambulant imagery seems to mirror this freedom. However, a key shift lies in the format, exchanging digital for analog footage. The mixed media aesthetic of the late twentieth century marks an early moment when cross-media collages entered mainstream cinema. With the ability to scan film stock into digital code in the 2000s, the paradoxical alignment between the digital glitch and material degradation highlights differing logics of precarity, which *Winning Time* seems to conflate. Just as the series shifts between historic and fictional material, it balances the specificity of analog film with the originless degradation of the digital. While Steyerl reads poor images as the “Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production,” *Winning Time* seems to weld together the markers of historicity with the liberty afforded to the digitized image. In equating the two, it appears that both material imperfection and the digital glitch have achieved a nostalgic air in the increasing perfect translatability of the image. The post-archive’s capacious encapsulation of these previous media logics also highlights how these digital and material traces are remnants of media logics that no longer operate in the post-digital age.

The array of camera angles and devices that interrupt one another in *Winning Time* also speak to the overabundance of footage in the imagined archive upon which the series draws. The archive, once all-encompassing, seems to be coming apart at the seams, which Russel prophesies will “soon succumb to entropy and chaos.”³¹ Thus, the collage-like, contradictory, and frequently overlaid montage of the show points towards what I might call the post-archive, in which historicity, medium specificity, and data volume shift the selective, curated mode of the archive. In the glitchy interstices of the show, Kemper’s reading of the post-digital is key in understanding what the shift to the post-archive constitutes. His use of the term implies “a condition of saturation” in which the digital has come to infuse all forms of technology.³² In the post-archive, previously material artifacts are replaced by immaculate digital copies that are endlessly copiable and reproducible without significant material constraints. The digital image, unmarred by material imperfections, has rendered the status of the

singular image unimportant. Instead, with its sheer volume of material, the post-archive differentiates itself as a database in which analog and early digital material is subsumed by the endless proliferation of the digital landscape. Moreover, in the clash of materials and point of views around historic figures and events, the very conception of the existence of a stable collective memory becomes elusive. In that manner, *Winning Time*'s glitches point towards the imbrication of analog material with the logic of digital precarity that renders visuality unstable.

2_Frame

Returning to the divergence between history and artifice, Nicholas Rombes reads digital cinema as operating in a “double logic: striving for ever greater realism via a technology and interface that continually calls attention to the artifice of the medium.”³³ In this double move, digital cinema's reliance on and departure from the conventions of analog film adopts the post-cinematic logic proposed by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda. Rather than marking a rupture, they posit that this period of transformation grapples with the impacts of new media and their response, not replacement, of classic cinematic logics.³⁴ As the post-archive suggests, these dual revisionary tendencies are already present in the series' filmic material. In tracing the wandering image format as a means of tracking shifting devices, the fluctuating aspect ratios, collages, and overlays continually draw attention to the image's construction. The gap between the surface of the screen and the image's format draws attention to the former's function in the digital age. Rather than reading the malleability of screen size as an indicator of the digital, I follow Rombes in reading the image's frame as the dominant interface of the time.³⁵ The frame's malleability vis-à-vis the screen becomes an indicator of the post-cinematic landscape—equally available and adaptive to all formats of visual media that are screened today. Arguing that the technological plane now simply exists as a stage for the frame, Rombes points to the edge of the image as more “available, more tenuous, more fragile,”³⁶ subject both to user control and screen type. In reviewing the boundaries of the image in *Winning Time*, Rombes' reading seems to strike fertile ground: the tenuous borderlands of the digital frame make up the post-cinematic arena for allowing images of the previous age to circulate freely and flexibly.

While the flexibility of format is key to the digital frame, the jarring frame shifts ensure that the viewer is unable to disregard the artifice undergirding the mimetic

capacity of film. The material intervenes in the medium's immersive capacity, interrupting the alignment between spectator and screen that Vivian Sobchak first proposed in *The Address of the Eye*.³⁷ Through the flexible edge of the image, *Winning Time* operates from a disjunctive instance of narration, characterized by interruptions on the level of montage, image quality, and temporality. This instability in viewing position is deeply integrated in the visual toolbox of the show, with the first episode establishing the vocabulary for this type of clash. Introducing the celebrated basketball player Jerry West in the first episode, a conversation held between Buss and West on the golf course serves as a fitting illustration for the clash of image formats.³⁸ As Buss' team approaches the former player about coaching the Lakers, the camera introduces the four men in a wide shot on 35mm film. Quickly, the scene introduces split screen as their conversation heats up, before cutting to an Ikegami tube camera, that records the scene from afar and zooms in on West. Buss then narrates the course of West's career to the audience, which is intercut with black and white Super8mm footage of West as a basketball player that mixes archival footage with fictionalized reshoots.

Throughout this sequence, the aspect ratio shifts between 1.78:1, used for widescreen and HD television, and 1.33:1, the dominant aspect ratio for television until the 1990s. Peppered in throughout are shots from Super8mm and 16mm stock, in which sprocket holes and letterboxed images shift the images' edges in relationship to the screen. The image borders signal an underlying generic code, asking viewers to read individual sequences as public and private aspects of the personages that appear. The specificity of the aspect ratios also implies different temporal standpoints that are interwoven in the same sequence. However, the mutability of these frames also undercuts the alignment Sobchack suggests above. Rather than aligning the camera eye with the viewing subject, the multiple camera eyes create a kaleidoscopic array of viewing positions that are assembled in the implied viewer. Mirroring the fragmented narrative and imagery, the viewing position is subject to a similar disruption in coherence, marked by the shifting frames of the footage. The shifting frame sizes and film stock not only operate as a marker of the post-archival but also imply generic frames of reference that are tied to material and device. In their undulant shifts, these frames, too, exacerbate the spatial and temporal incoherence behind the spectatorial code.

Next to the construction of the viewing position, this visual logic is at work in the introduction of the series' cast. Rather than passively recording the argument that takes place in this scene, the shifting cameras are actively involved in creating and framing these characters for the audience. The frame, both in terms of literal image borders as well as narratological conventions, offers a fragmented, shifting, and protean quality to these characters who seem to emerge in a synecdoche of footage that cannot quite encapsulate the historic personas. In *Cinematic Bodies*, Steven Shaviro reads this type of discontinuity in film as a means to "dislodge the spectator."³⁹ Beyond the unstable frame, the montage practice of aligning cuts to technological shifts supports the instability of the characters as well as the implied viewers' positioning. In the clash of these film stocks, the viewing position comes to mirror the constructed quality of the frame. Through the variance in technology and footage, the viewer is simultaneously positioned in unresolvable clashes between the public and the private, distance and closeness to the characters, as well as professional and home film material. Thus, the implied position of the viewer is always shifting gears, whether as the audience of a newscast, a home film shot on Super8mm, or, in fact, also implied in historical footage of the time period. While Shaviro writes against the psychoanalytic thrust in film theory of the 1980s, his reading of editing as undermining "any notion of a fixed center of perception [...] and at which experience would obey the laws of spatial contiguity and linear causal succession" anticipates the logic of *Winning Time's* fragmentary aesthetics.⁴⁰ *Winning Time* exacerbates this disintegration, extending it to the frame of narrative itself. Unable to securely locate the spectator at a particular diegetic distance, the playfulness of the visual vocabulary strains the traditional narratological framework of story.

This splitting of character into puzzle-like pieces is at work in the introduction of the basketball player, Earvin "Magic" Johnson. In the pilot, Jerry Buss discusses his newly acquired team's draft with his daughter Jeanie, quizzing her on picks for his team. The scene cuts to a college football newsreel, in which Earvin Johnson emerges in a mosaic-like collage, pulled together from various strands of footage. He is juxtaposed with his rival on the Celtics team, Larry Bird, and both are introduced via a newscaster's ironic metacommentary over scenes from their sports games. The ironic title cards directly undercut the racializing stereotyping of both characters, punctuating the audio track's introduction of Bird as the "hardworking, disciplined, all-American

Boy,” with the accompanying caption of “white” ultimately covering the entire image. The same is true for Johnson’s dehumanizing introduction as a “show-stopping, naturally gifted physical specimen,” punctuated by the continual appearance of a subtitle of “black.”⁴¹ The newscaster’s voice is visually undercut until the image recedes behind the text captions, leaving no space to view the individuals behind it. Buss’ character finally rounds off the show’s critique of the discourse around the players, who is keen on drafting anyone of character, regardless of being “black, white, or polka dot.”⁴² The fragmentation of the visual and narrative instance is what gives rise to the heteroglossic nature of the series that resists adopting a stable ideological or even narrative point of view. Its polyvocality emerges in the juxtaposition of visual, auditory, narrative, and generic codes that interweave warring perspectives into a whole that denies clear categorization and stable semantic ground.

Following the newscast, the camera returns to Buss, who begins to explain his interest in Earvin, saying “That’s why they call him...” Before he can finish his sentence, he is visually interrupted by a cut to Johnson’s family home, his mother asking somebody offscreen not to call Earvin by what is implied to be his moniker “Magic.”⁴³ This interruption of the scene by Johnson’s mother can almost be read as the camera intervening in the narrative of the show itself, interrupting not only the show, but character speech through the swift cut to the Johnson household. The footage shifts from 1.33:1 and 1.78:1 in aspect ratio. This move implies a change from newsreel to a handheld, documentary style camera that is intercut with Super8mm footage of details in the Johnson home. Following Earvin through a camera associated with home videos, the genre framing shifts from professional reporting to a homey and private access to the character. The player Johnson is composited through newsreel footage and home videos, attempting to marry the private and public personas for the viewer, with the visual interruptions and ironic undercutting as stylistic means to highlight the contradictory nature of this process. Reflecting on the construction of collective cultural memory and historic personas in this montage, it is clear that the lack of stable characterization, both in camera choice and content, interrogate the stability of common monuments and the flattening process of documentary-style storytelling in itself. In donning the logic of the post-archive, the content of the shows serves as the critical impulse that often accompanies historical documentaries. The show, however, pushes this critique further, addressing the very genre and material as fictitious and polyvalent

in its construction of the past. To go further, its various instances of disruption and instability provoke an interrogation of all organizing parameters of narrative, ranging from footage to material and narratological frameworks that become semiotically ambiguous.

The fragmented portraits of the show's characters are also indicative of the illusory opposition between reality and artifice that Shaviro posits in *Cinematic Bodies*. In showcasing the seams of the image, the show exposes the "incessant violations of continuity and coherence, [and] numerous ruptures of point of view" that even the most naturalistic film genres contend with.⁴⁴ In the scene above—or in a later sequence that intercuts between a coin toss at the NBA league offices in Manhattan, the offices of the Lakers, the Chicago Bulls, and the Johnson household—the overt showcasing of the montage and material reveal the sutures of storytelling.⁴⁵ And in this reveal, the show operates according to Benjamin's dictum: "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."⁴⁶ The illusion of image-making technologies as capturing reality masks the underlying technological assets that undergird and enable the illusion's existence in the first place. The show seemingly lifts the curtain on Benjamin's statement, revealing the very permeation for the viewer, and it remains unwilling to let the curtain of artifice descend.⁴⁷ The act of composing film is not about aspiring to a veracity that masks the illusion of reality, but a process of creating the real itself. In availing itself of fictive and historical footage, *Winning Time* thinks through this assertion in a fully digitized mediascape. No longer are the seams about the constructivity of representation, but the inability to move outside image making technologies and the archive at all. Trapped by the infinite archive at our disposal, the show leads its viewers' eyes towards the very seam of the post-archival mode in which the stability of the visual sign has come undone.

3_Screen

If the shifting frame signals visual storytelling's unmooring from narrative conventions, Vivian Sobchack's article in *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship* assesses how such shifts inaugurate new media's establishment of a new plane of storytelling. Digital media are not simply about representing reality but speak to the slippery imbrication in co-creating our existence. Sobchack positions this shift as a

move from the media regime of “screen-scape” to “screen-sphere,” describing a system that creates a virtual dimension that is only accessible via device.⁴⁸ Interestingly, *Winning Time* seems to follow the logic of the screen-sphere, working within a diegesis that manifests the networked connections between various camera formats. Similar to the visual identity of the show, Sobchack reads the screen-sphere as giving rise to “a single, dynamic, self-referential, and complex system” that synthesizes screens without homogenizing them.⁴⁹ In the speed of shifts between film stock, it appears as though the cameras gain the capacity to intervene on the act of montage itself. Yet, in relying on the image technologies of the analog age—those not yet interconnected in the virtual realm, the series continues its paradoxical alliance between analog and digital film. This amalgamation of medium, format, and platform becomes “an in-between manifestation of all three [...] that materializes what we come to see and describe as the differences and connections among television, film, computers, electronic signage, and digital spaces.”⁵⁰ Moreover, the access to this post-archive becomes dependent and exclusive to those entering via device. Its continual gesture towards the seams of filmmaking points towards the decidedly digital logic of the code. Rather than functioning as a spatiotemporal index, digital code, as Pollock and Bryant argue, relies solely on “a consistent process of becoming (and unbecoming).”⁵¹ Moving that static nature of analog film into digital, the continual gesturing at interruption points towards binary code’s interplay of absence and presence. Each sequence highlights the processual nature of the image’s continual becoming, highlighting the creative act that underlies the historic events depicted.

To return to the screen’s capacity to “frame and open up to our world a virtual spacetime,” the key word here, frame, is doubled in the logic of *Winning Time*.⁵² Providing access not just to a virtual lifeworld of interconnected images, the show insists on the framed access to all media logics of ages past and present. In the post-archive, this realm becomes one of a free-floating spectral eye, wandering through realms of footage that no longer differentiate between the registers of real or imagined, public or private, wandering through the debris of footage at our fingertips. As the show demonstrates, the screen-sphere’s logic of interconnectivity enables the post-archive, its linkage becoming the condition for the clash of image technologies. At the same time, in expanding the range of what is archivable, volume and speed simultaneously accelerate the move into the chaos Russell describes above. In the logic of *Winning*

Time, the speed and clashes that are expressive of a post-continuity aesthetic also come to express the disintegration of the markers of historicity and narrative itself. Moreover, digital images “problematize trust” in the waning of the indexical link to history.⁵³ Instead, their continual movement offers what Bryant and Pollock read as a virtual realm of promise through creative interruptions.⁵⁴ Ironically, this potentiality of promise suffered an early end in the case of the Lakers’ fictionalized retelling. Fielding criticisms from the historic personas depicted, the failure to trust in the images of the show created a real-world throughline that accompanied its two-season run. Canceled before reaching its narrative peak in the Lakers’ Showtime era, the virtual realm of promise remained out of the viewer’s reach and instead posited a show for the post-authenticity era.

Tracing the volume or even the speed at which *Winning Time* hurtles through its hourlong episodes—something is afoot in the streaming world. With the downturn of business rendering online archives precarious, this fictional retelling of a nostalgic era of prosperity marks the end of the great era of streaming. Demanding a dual viewing position, in which the eye focuses both on material and plot, the wealth of material variation is evocative of a previous media landscape. And yet, in the fragmentary aesthetics, the diegetic breaks, and continual oscillation between camera technologies, the montage logic of the show is firmly planted within a post-continuous style that demands the dissolution of the tenets of classical filmmaking. Leaning into the glitch, the turn to the imperfect becomes the leading sign under which the move into post-digital visuality leaves behind material and digital imperfections. While this type of encounter is far from unique to the current age, the digital archive’s ability to juxtapose this variety of technologies seems to close the loop of the complete dematerialization, and thus, ahistoricization that Frederic Jameson foresaw.⁵⁵ In reading this loop as a symbol for the digital logic of film production, Rombes argues that the digital loop is “an indicator for the way information is stored, reproduced, and recirculated with no generation loss.”⁵⁶ In its publication format, *Winning Time* closes off this loop in the replayable format of the show’s existence on the streaming platform HBO Max. While perfect reproduction is now possible in digital media, the freeing from platforms and devices also implies its potential disruption, with the loss of quality becoming both a nostalgic marker of a previous optic regime and the mark of the digital stream’s precarity.

Working within the archival mode, the twentieth century mixed media style is remixed to highlight the shifting nature of the digital archive. In moving away from the medium specificity and selectivity of the analog archive, the move into digital images marks what I read as the post-archival—the free-play of older technologies in the virtual, discontinuous, and overwhelming logic of the digital. With the weakening of historic deixis, the image becomes an unstable sign, pointing towards its status as an originless and unfixed visual migrant, free to roam the virtual landscape. Similarly, the show moves between the historic and fictional in its juxtaposition of stock footage and fictionalized reenactments that threaten to fall together in the speed of the editing that ties the sequences together. Subsuming all previous image formats in the post-archive, the tenets that were pinned down in the photographic image have come undone in the processual code of the digital. Where reference, origin, and historicity wane, the unencumbered circulation of images flourishes, as their semantic stability becomes increasingly tenuous. In rendering semiotic signs into aesthetic husks, visual signs are in freefall, reconstituting new parameters that will stabilize their legibility.

As visuality finds itself in a transitional phase, the series' experimentation with older image technologies attempts to locate the current instability in the past, negotiating a new visual grammar in the ongoing inclusion of newer camera devices. Where both the Lakers' rise and the mediascape's changes are nostalgic in their gesture, the stylistic disruptions place the creative direction and camera department in the current arena of visual studies. Just as the post-postmodern novel grapples with the disruption of temporality and spatiality in an age of the instantaneous and the virtual, *Winning Time* leverages older formats that are manipulated to such a degree that time is paused, accelerated, slowed, and even rewritten as part of the very noeme of its media logic. The diverse frames of the genres and the images become partial elements seen through a visual narrative instance that is a fragmented and unstable viewing position. The frame thus becomes a mark for the limits of narrativity, a testament to the post-cinematic style that dislocates the spectator through the ambulant camera eye. Post-perceptual in its dislocation of a stable viewer, the jarring viewing logic fragments the thread of the show, threatening the stability of narratological parameters. The very diegetic plane and narratorial eye come under pressure, producing visuality that is heteroglossic in the very construction of its image. Highlighting the act of construction and the warring technologies, the processual nature of digital visuality makes up the

logical frame of a series that cloaks itself in nostalgia. Moving into the post-archival and discontinuous, *Winning Time* performs the very unfixity of the semiotics of vision that make up the twenty-first century.

Following the rapidity of the montage, the series' untimely cancellation in its second season provides the only logical conclusion to its increasingly breathless speed. Just as the series' accelerated syntax drives towards chaos, Russell's dictum of the archive's move towards chaos seems to come into fruition. Cut off before the series covers the promised success of the Lakers' Showtime era in the 1980s, television critic Ross Douhat pronounces *Winning Time*'s premature cancellation as heralding the end of the "silver period" of television.⁵⁷ A portent of the limits of small screen abundance, the hectic, disjunctive logic of *Winning Time* seems to look back on a media age and cultural history marked by giants, recording a slow but steady deceleration in the current mediascape. In its audacious and bold grammar, *Winning Time* documents the peak of streaming service dominance, the lavish offerings of prestige television, as well as the simmering labor disputes on the horizon of the creative industries. Threaded in between the clash of the analog and the digital, the series explores the seams of the screen-sphere's expansion that ultimately envelopes all image making technologies of the twentieth century. In the virtual frame of the digital image, time, space, and medium become loosened from the absolute tethers that operated in classical cinema. Just like the untimely dissolution of the title card, the series' narrative drive prematurely crashes on the cusp of reaching the heights of its narrative offerings, mirroring a media landscape marred by decreasing margins and economic instability.

Endnotes

- ¹ A note on terminology: 'Showtime' refers to a basketball era, famous for its offensive style and key players that defined the Los Angeles Laker's team during the 1980s. It is unrelated to the cable network 'Showtime,' which launched in 1976 and, in 2024, was rebranded as 'Paramount+ with Showtime.'
- ² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 1980), 6–7.
- ³ Another creative decision included keeping distance from the Lakers' figures they were including in the show, relying solely on Pearlman's book. Upon the series' release, it appears athletes and the NBA were critical of the portrayal of events and have threatened legal action, as covered by Lacey Rose's article in *The Hollywood Reporter* (2022).

- 4 Lacey Rose, “How HBO’s Lakers Series Ticked Off the NBA, Ended a Friendship and Became the Most Anticipated Sports Show in Decades,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 23, 2022, para. 4, <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/winning-time-adam-mckay-john-c-reilly-hbo-laker-series-1235097468>>.
- 5 Sam Adams, “Peak TV Is Over. Welcome to Trough TV,” *Slate*, March 5, 2023, <<https://slate.com/culture/2023/03/peak-tv-over-golden-age-hbo-streaming.html>>.
- 6 Adams, para. 3. “Peak TV Is Over.”
- 7 Alex Sherman, “Here’s Why HBO Max Is Pulling Dozens of Films and TV Series from the Streaming Platform,” *CNBC*, August 19, 2022, para. 4, <<https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/19/heres-why-hbo-max-is-pulling-dozens-of-films-and-tv-series-from-its-streaming-platform.html>>.
- 8 Jennifer Maas, “Peak TV Has Peaked: From Exhausted Talent to Massive Losses, the Writers Strike Magnifies an Industry in Freefall,” *Variety*, July 11, 2023, <<https://variety.com/2023/tv/features/writers-strike-tv-industry-streaming-problem-1235666463>>.
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- 10 “Kodak Film Proves Slam-Dunk,” para. 6.
- 11 Joe Deckelmeier, “Winning Time Cinematographer Todd Banhazl on Vintage Cameras & Basketball Scenes In Season 2,” *ScreenRant*, August 7, 2023, <<https://screenrant.com/winning-time-cinematographer-todd-banhazl-interview>>.
- 12 Deckelmeier, para. 7.
- 13 “The Swan,” *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*, directed by Adam McKay (Home Box Office, March 28, 2022) (00:04:19).
- 14 “The Swan,” (00:05:03).
- 15 “The Swan.”
- 16 Steven Shaviro, “Post-Continuity: An Introduction,” in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Julia Leyda and Shane Denson, 2016, 57–64, here: 55.
- 17 Ellen Rutten and Ruby De Vos, “Trash, Dirt, Glitch: The Imperfect Turn,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2023): 3–13. Doi: [10.1177/13675494231152371](https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231152371).
- 18 Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, “#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics,” *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), May 14, 2013, <<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>>; Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 19 In an interview with Kodak, DP Todd Banhazl discusses his reliance on film stocks of the 1980s, including 35mm Kodachrome and Ektachrome for advertising footage, 16mm and 8mm archival newsreel footage, as well as electronic Ikegami tube cameras that were popular for sports coverage and news reporting (“Kodak Film Proves Slam-Dunk”). In terms of the show’s visual grammar, they had initially planned for 35mm cameras for establishing shots with additional footage from Super8mm or the Ikegami tube cameras for TV footage and character shots before turning to a more experimental use of the footage (“Kodak Film Proves Slam-Dunk,” para. 17).
- 20 “Kodak Film Proves Slam-Dunk,” para. 7.

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- 22 Russell, *Archiveology*, 1.
- 23 Russell, *Archiveology*, 12.
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- 27 Kemper, "Glitch," 50.
- 28 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-Flux Journal* 10 (2009): 1–9, <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image>>.
- 29 Steyerl, "In Defense," 1.
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- 31 Russell, *Archiveology*, 13.
- 32 Kemper, "Glitch," 52.
- 33 Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 113.
- 34 Julia Leyda and Shane Denson, "Perspectives on Post-Cinema: An Introduction," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, eds. Julia Leyda and Shane Denson (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), 1–19, here: 2.
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- 40 Shaviro, 38.
- 41 "The Swan," (00:10:29).
- 42 "The Swan," (00:11:02).
- 43 "The Swan," (00:11:14).
- 44 Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 39.
- 45 "The Swan" (00:15:00).
- 46 Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 39–40.
- 47 Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 40.
- 48 Vivian Sobchack, "From Screen-Scape to Screen-Sphere: A Meditation in Medias Res," in *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship – A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, ed. Dominique Chateau and José Moure (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 157–175, here: 158. Doi: [10.1515/9789048531691-015](https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048531691-015).
- 49 Sobchack, "Screen-Scape," 163.
- 50 Sobchack, "Screen-Scape," 162.

- ⁵¹ Griselda Pollock and Antony Bryant, "Editors' Introduction," in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, eds. Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, New Encounters (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 1–22, here: 8.
- ⁵² Sobchack, "Screen-Scape," 162.
- ⁵³ Pollock and Bryant, "Editors' Introduction," 10.
- ⁵⁴ Pollock and Bryant, "Editors' Introduction," 15.
- ⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53–92.
- ⁵⁶ Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, xx.
- ⁵⁷ Ross Douthat, "'Winning Time' and the Joys of Unnecessary Shows," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2023, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/06/opinion/winning-time-tv-hbo.html>>.