

Panasonic PT-AE300

Smooth operator By Tony Davey

Panasonic PT-AE300 video projector. \$5999

It was only a little over a year ago that there was a buzz going around home theatre enthusiasts here and abroad about a product that revolutionised the way consumers looked at video projection. That product was the Panasonic PT-AE100, reviewed in April 2002.

Panasonic have built on the early success of the PT-AE100 by enhancing what was already a sound machine into the PT-AE300. The PT AE300 remains targeted squarely at the Home Theatre market with a native 16:9 panel. Resolution is increased to 960 x 540.

Connections are plentiful, including a scart input (perfect for connecting a Sky box), component (accepts both interlaced and progressive scan input), s-video composite video, 15Pin VGA and (shudder) an audio input. In addition to these inputs is a DVI input that bypasses the internal analogue to digital conversions, reportedly offering the best picture quality by keeping the picture entirely in the digital realm (requires a DVI output from either a suitably equipped DVD player or HTPC).

Set up

Setting up the AE300 was blissfully simple. Set up the machine at an appropriate distance from your screen, plug in the video connections, plug in the juice and turn it on.

The AE300 is equipped with a short throw lens, meaning that you can have the projector fairly close to the screen and still produce a substantial sized picture. I had the projector about 3 metres away to produce a 125inch diagonal 16:9 picture. Zoom and focus are both manual on the front lens allowing for fine tuning of size and clarity of the picture.

A quick scan through my recently acquired (NTSC) set up disc showed the factory settings to be a little on the bright side (resulting in grayer blacks) but only marginally so, and with the appropriate calibration done, it was down to some serious, but ultimately pleasurable viewing.

Viewing Pleasures

The AE300 attacks without mercy the historical "weaknesses" of digital projection.

One significant development Panasonic made over the AE100 was the introduction of "smooth screen technology", to reduce the size of the lines between pixels, thereby greatly reducing "screen door". It's an interesting feature but does it work? Hell yeah!

The effect of the smooth screen technology is immediately obvious, with the picture portrayed solid and full of detail. There was no sign of pixelation in scenes usually prone to it such as large expanses of single colour (such as the sky in *Castaway*) colour bursts/explosions (such as the opening scenes of *Armageddon*) and even animation (*A Bugs Life*).

Another improvement made with



the AE300 is in picture contrast. The AE300 is capable of displaying a very nearly black and the high contrast ratio also assists with shadow detail and image depth. This was all well displayed in *Armageddon* and the scenes on the asteroid. There is plenty of details in the rocks on the asteroid which were all displayed well, and the images of the actors are obviously separated from the background scenery, portraying a 3-D image with astounding perception of depth, totally avoiding the "flat" look of many other projectors.

Colour reproduction was on the whole sound, with skin tones soft and natural and skies had a realistic feel to them. One scene that impressed me was in *Castaway* as Tom Hanks is exploring the Island, the features of the Island just looked right, from the green of the palms of the coconut trees to the clarity of the water and the very light brown shade of the sand.

Potential projector purchasers in this area of the market have several great models to choose from. A bargain of a projector at around \$4k is the Infocus Screenplay 4800, but with that, you get potential problems (rainbows, eye strain and a noisy fan) with all the strengths of the 4800 (nice and contrasty, smooth and vibrant picture). The LCD Phillips Garbo is another potential competitor at \$4,500, but having owned one of these for quite some time, I can honestly (and depressingly) say that it is outclassed by the AE300.

Conclusion

Gone are the overly pixilated images of LCD projectors of old. "Black levels" have been improved to a point where unless you were being picky, you would hardly notice the absence of "true black". Fan noise is a remarkably low (published) 28db making it scarcely detectable in an average home theatre and bulb life is a high 5000 hours (using the low power setting), that's about 15-20 years worth of viewing if watching two movies a week!

If watching the latest block buster releases from Hollywood on your "big screen tv" is leaving you a little underwhelmed, check out the PT-AE300, it gives you the large cinema screen immersion into the film, with plenty of vibrancy and depth to the image without breaking the bank.

