

# WHAT IS DIGITAL CINEMA?

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Cinema, the Art of the Index<sup>[1]</sup>

Thus far, most discussions of cinema in the digital age have focused on the possibilities of interactive narrative. It is not hard to understand why: since the majority of viewers and critics equate cinema with storytelling, digital media is understood as something which will let cinema tell its stories in a new way. Yet as exciting as the ideas of a viewer participating in a story, choosing different paths through the narrative space and interacting with characters may be, they only address one aspect of cinema which is neither unique nor, as many will argue, essential to it: narrative.

The challenge which digital media poses to cinema extends far beyond the issue of narrative. Digital media redefines the very identity of cinema. In a symposium which took place in Hollywood in the Spring of 1996, one of the participants provocatively referred to movies as "flatties" and to human actors as "organics" and "soft fuzzies."<sup>[2]</sup> As these terms accurately suggest, what used to be cinema's defining characteristics have become just the default options, with many others available. When one can "enter" a virtual three-dimensional space, to view flat images projected on the screen is hardly the only option. When, given enough time and money, almost everything can be simulated in a computer, to film physical reality is just one possibility.

This "crisis" of cinema's identity also affects the terms and the categories used to theorize cinema's past. French film theorist Christian Metz wrote in the 1970s that "Most films shot today, good or bad, original or not, 'commercial' or not, have as a common characteristic that they tell a story; in this measure they all belong to one and the same genre, which is, rather, a sort of 'super-genre' ['sur-genre']."<sup>[3]</sup> In identifying fictional

films as a "super-genre" of twentieth century cinema, Metz did not bother to mention another characteristic of this genre because at that time it was too obvious: fictional films are live action films, i.e. they largely consist of unmodified photographic recordings of real events which took place in real physical space. Today, in the age of computer simulation and digital compositing, invoking this characteristic becomes crucial in defining the specificity of twentieth century cinema. From the perspective of a future historian of visual culture, the differences between classical Hollywood films, European art films and avant-garde films (apart from abstract ones) may appear less significant than this common feature: that they relied on lens-based recordings of reality. This essay is concerned with the effect of the so-called digital revolution on cinema as defined by its "super genre" as fictional live action film.<sup>[4]</sup>

During cinema's history, a whole repertoire of techniques (lighting, art direction, the use of different film stocks and lens, etc.) was developed to modify the basic record obtained by a film apparatus. And yet behind even the most stylized cinematic images we can discern the bluntness, the sterility, the banality of early nineteenth century photographs. No matter how complex its stylistic innovations, the cinema has found its base in these deposits of reality, these samples obtained by a methodical and prosaic process. Cinema emerged out of the same impulse which engendered naturalism, court stenography and wax museums. Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint.

Even for Andrey Tarkovsky, film-painter par excellence, cinema's identity lay in its ability to record reality. Once, during a public discussion in Moscow sometime in the 1970s he was asked the question as to whether he was interested in making abstract films. He replied that there can be no such thing. Cinema's most basic gesture is to open the shutter and to start the film rolling, recording whatever happens to be in front of the lens. For Tarkovsky, an abstract cinema is thus impossible.

But what happens to cinema's indexical identity if it is now possible to generate photorealistic scenes entirely in a computer using 3-D computer animation; to modify individual frames or whole scenes with the help of a digital paint program; to cut, bend,

stretch and stitch digitized film images into something which has perfect photographic credibility, although it was never actually filmed?

This essay will address the meaning of these changes in the filmmaking process from the point of view of the larger cultural history of the moving image. Seen in this context, the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to nineteenth century pre-cinematic practices, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated. At the turn of the twentieth century, cinema was to delegate these manual techniques to animation and define itself as a recording medium. As cinema enters the digital age, these techniques are again becoming the commonplace in the filmmaking process. Consequently, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a sub-genre of painting.

This argument will be developed in three stages. I will first follow a historical trajectory from nineteenth century techniques for creating moving images to twentieth-century cinema and animation. Next I will arrive at a definition of digital cinema by abstracting the common features and interface metaphors of a variety of computer software and hardware which are currently replacing traditional film technology. Seen together, these features and metaphors suggest a distinct logic of a digital moving image. This logic subordinates the photographic and the cinematic to the painterly and the graphic, destroying cinema's identity as a media art. Finally, I will examine different production contexts which already use digital moving images -- Hollywood films, music videos, CD-ROM games and artworks -- in order to see if and how this logic has begun to manifest itself.

### A Brief Archeology of Moving Pictures

As testified by its original names (kinetoscope, cinematograph, moving pictures), cinema was understood, from its birth, as the art of motion, the art which finally succeeded in creating a convincing illusion of dynamic reality. If we approach cinema in this way (rather than the art of audio-visual narrative, or the art of a projected image, or

the art of collective spectatorship, etc.), we can see it superseding previous techniques for creating and displaying moving images.

These earlier techniques shared a number of common characteristics. First, they all relied on hand-painted or hand-drawn images. The magic lantern slides were painted at least until the 1850s; so were the images used in the Phenakistiscope, the Thaumatrope, the Zootrope, the Praxinoscope, the Choreutoscope and numerous other nineteenth century pro-cinematic devices. Even Muybridge's celebrated Zoopraxiscope lectures of the 1880s featured not actual photographs but colored drawings painted after the photographs.<sup>[5]</sup>

Not only were the images created manually, they were also manually animated. In Robertson's Phantasmagoria, which premiered in 1799, magic lantern operators moved behind the screen in order to make projected images appear to advance and withdraw.<sup>[6]</sup> More often, an exhibitor used only his hands, rather than his whole body, to put the images into motion. One animation technique involved using mechanical slides consisting of a number of layers. An exhibitor would slide the layers to animate the image.<sup>[7]</sup> Another technique was to slowly move a long slide containing separate images in front of a magic lantern lens. Nineteenth century optical toys enjoyed in private homes also required manual action to create movement -- twirling the strings of the Thaumatrope, rotating the Zootrope's cylinder, turning the Viviscope's handle.

It was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that the automatic generation of images and their automatic projection were finally combined. A mechanical eye became coupled with a mechanical heart; photography met the motor. As a result, cinema -- a very particular regime of the visible -- was born. Irregularity, non-uniformity, the accident and other traces of the human body, which previously inevitably accompanied moving image exhibitions, were replaced by the uniformity of machine vision.<sup>[8]</sup> A machine, which like a conveyer belt, was now spitting out images, all sharing the same appearance, all the same size, all moving at the same speed, like a line of marching soldiers.

Cinema also eliminated the discrete character of both space and movement in moving images. Before cinema, the moving element was visually separated from the static background as with a mechanical slide show or Reynaud's Praxinoscope Theater (1892).<sup>[9]</sup> The movement itself was limited in range and affected only a clearly defined figure rather than the whole image. Thus, typical actions would include a bouncing ball, a raised hand or eyes, a butterfly moving back and forth over the heads of fascinated children -- simple vectors charted across still fields.

Cinema's most immediate predecessors share something else. As the nineteenth-century obsession with movement intensified, devices which could animate more than just a few images became increasingly popular. All of them -- the Zootrope, the Phonoscope, the Tachyscope, the Kinetoscope -- were based on loops, sequences of images featuring complete actions which can be played repeatedly. The Thaumatrope (1825), in which a disk with two different images painted on each face was rapidly rotated by twirling a strings attached to it, was in its essence a loop in its most minimal form: two elements replacing one another in succession. In the Zootrope (1867) and its numerous variations, approximately a dozen images were arranged around the perimeter of a circle.<sup>[10]</sup> The Mutoscope, popular in America throughout the 1890s, increased the duration of the loop by placing a larger number of images radially on an axle.<sup>[11]</sup> Even Edison's Kinetoscope (1892-1896), the first modern cinematic machine to employ film, continued to arrange images in a loop.<sup>[12]</sup> 50 feet of film translated to an approximately 20 second long presentation -- a genre whose potential development was cut short when cinema adopted a much longer narrative form.

### From Animation to Cinema

Once the cinema was stabilized as a technology, it cut all references to its origins in artifice. Everything which characterized moving pictures before the twentieth century -- the manual construction of images, loop actions, the discrete nature of space and movement -- all of this was delegated to cinema's bastard relative, its supplement, its shadow -- animation. Twentieth century animation became a depository for nineteenth century moving image techniques left behind by cinema.

The opposition between the styles of animation and cinema defined the culture of the moving image in the twentieth century. Animation foregrounds its artificial character, openly admitting that its images are mere representations. Its visual language is more aligned to the graphic than to the photographic. It is discrete and self-consciously discontinuous: crudely rendered characters moving against a stationary and detailed background; sparsely and irregularly sampled motion (in contrast to the uniform sampling of motion by a film camera -- recall Jean-Luc Godard's definition of cinema as "truth 24 frames per second"), and finally space constructed from separate image layers.

In contrast, cinema works hard to erase any traces of its own production process, including any indication that the images which we see could have been constructed rather than recorded. It denies that the reality it shows often does not exist outside of the film image, the image which was arrived at by photographing an already impossible space, itself put together with the use of models, mirrors, and matte paintings, and which was then combined with other images through optical printing. It pretends to be a simple recording of an already existing reality -- both to a viewer and to itself.<sup>[13]</sup> Cinema's public image stressed the aura of reality "captured" on film, thus implying that cinema was about photographing what existed before the camera, rather than "creating the 'never-was'" of special effects.<sup>[14]</sup> Rear projection and blue screen photography, matte paintings and glass shots, mirrors and miniatures, push development, optical effects and other techniques which allowed filmmakers to construct and alter the moving images, and thus could reveal that cinema was not really different from animation, were pushed to cinema's periphery by its practitioners, historians and critics.<sup>[15]</sup>

Today, with the shift to digital media, these marginalized techniques move to the center.

### What is Digital Cinema?

A visible sign of this shift is the new role which computer generated special effects have come to play in Hollywood industry in the last few years. Many recent blockbusters have been driven by special effects; feeding on their popularity. Hollywood has even created

a new-mini genre of "The Making of..." videos and books which reveal how special effects are created.

I will use special effects from few recent Hollywood films for illustrations of some of the possibilities of digital filmmaking. Until recently, Hollywood studios were the only ones who had the money to pay for digital tools and for the labor involved in producing digital effects. However, the shift to digital media affects not just Hollywood, but filmmaking as a whole. As traditional film technology is universally being replaced by digital technology, the logic of the filmmaking process is being redefined. What I describe below are the new principles of digital filmmaking which are equally valid for individual or collective film productions, regardless of whether they are using the most expensive professional hardware and software or its amateur equivalents.

Consider, then, the following principles of digital filmmaking:

1. Rather than filming physical reality it is now possible to generate film-like scenes directly in a computer with the help of 3-D computer animation. Therefore, live action footage is displaced from its role as the only possible material from which the finished film is constructed.

2. Once live action footage is digitized (or directly recorded in a digital format), it loses its privileged indexical relationship to pro-filmic reality. The computer does not distinguish between an image obtained through the photographic lens, an image created in a paint program or an image synthesized in a 3-D graphics package, since they are made from the same material -- pixels. And pixels, regardless of their origin, can be easily altered, substituted one for another, and so on. Live action footage is reduced to be just another graphic, no different than images which were created manually.[\[16\]](#)

3. If live action footage was left intact in traditional filmmaking, now it functions as raw material for further compositing, animating and morphing. As a result, while retaining visual realism unique to the photographic process, film obtains the plasticity which was previously only possible in painting or animation. To use the suggestive title of a popular

morphing software, digital filmmakers work with "elastic reality." For example, the opening shot of Forest Gump (Robert Zemeckis, Paramount Pictures, 1994; special effects by Industrial Light and Magic) tracks an unusually long and extremely intricate flight of a feather. To create the shot, the real feather was filmed against a blue background in different positions; this material was then animated and composited against shots of a landscape.<sup>[17]</sup> The result: a new kind of realism, which can be described as "something which looks is intended to look exactly as if it could have happened, although it really could not."

4. Previously, editing and special effects were strictly separate activities. An editor worked on ordering sequences of images together; any intervention within an image was handled by special effects specialists. The computer collapses this distinction. The manipulation of individual images via a paint program or algorithmic image processing becomes as easy as arranging sequences of images in time. Both simply involve "cut and paste." As this basic computer command exemplifies, modification of digital images (or other digitized data) is not sensitive to distinctions of time and space or of differences of scale. So, re-ordering sequences of images in time, compositing them together in space, modifying parts of an individual image, and changing individual pixels become the same operation, conceptually and practically.

5. Given the preceding principles, we can define digital film in this way:

digital film = live action material + painting + image processing +  
compositing + 2-D computer animation + 3-D computer animation

Live action material can either be recorded on film or video or directly in a digital format.<sup>[18]</sup> Painting, image processing and computer animation refer to the processes of modifying already existent images as well as creating new ones. In fact, the very distinction between creation and modification, so clear in film-based media (shooting versus darkroom processes in photography, production versus post-production in cinema) no longer applies to digital cinema, since each image, regardless of its origin, goes through a number of programs before making it to the final film.<sup>[19]</sup>



Let us summarize the principles discussed thus far. Live action footage is now only raw material to be manipulated by hand: animated, combined with 3-D computer generated scenes and painted over. The final images are constructed manually from different elements; and all the elements are either created entirely from scratch or modified by hand.

We can finally answer the question "what is digital cinema?" Digital cinema is a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements.

This can be re-read in view of the history of the moving image sketched earlier. Manual construction and animation of images gave birth to cinema and slipped into the margins...only to re-appear as the foundation of digital cinema. The history of the moving image thus makes a full circle. Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its boundary, only to become one particular case of animation in the end.

The relationship between "normal" filmmaking and special effects is similarly reversed. Special effects, which involved human intervention into machine recorded footage and which were therefore delegated to cinema's periphery throughout its history, become the norm of digital filmmaking.

The same applies for the relationship between production and post-production. Cinema traditionally involved arranging physical reality to be filmed through the use of sets, models, art direction, cinematography, etc. Occasional manipulation of recorded film (for instance, through optical printing) was negligible compared to the extensive manipulation of reality in front of a camera. In digital filmmaking, shot footage is no longer the final point but just raw material to be manipulated in a computer where the real construction of a scene will take place. In short, the production becomes just the first stage of post-production.

The following examples illustrate this shift from re-arranging reality to re-arranging its images. From the analog era: for a scene in Zabriskie Point (1970), Michaelangelo Antonioni, trying to achieve a particularly saturated color, ordered a field of grass to be painted. From the digital era: to create the launch sequence in Apollo 13 (Universal

Studios, 1995; special effects by Digital Domain), the crew shot footage at the original location of the launch at Cape Canaveral. The artists at Digital Domain scanned the film and altered it on computer workstations, removing recent building construction, adding grass to the launch pad and painting the skies to make them more dramatic. This altered film was then mapped onto 3D planes to create a virtual set which was animated to match a 180-degree dolly movement of a camera following a rising rocket.<sup>[20]</sup>

The last example brings us to yet another conceptualization of digital cinema -- as painting. In his book-length study of digital photography, William J. Mitchell focuses our attention on what he calls the inherent mutability of a digital image: "The essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer. It is simply a matter of substituting new digits for old... Computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments to a painter."<sup>[21]</sup> As Mitchell points out, this inherent mutability erases the difference between a photograph and a painting. Since a film is a series of photographs, it is appropriate to extend Mitchell's argument to digital film. With an artist being able to easily manipulate digitized footage either as a whole or frame by frame, a film in a general sense becomes a series of paintings.<sup>[22]</sup>

Hand-painting digitized film frames, made possible by a computer, is probably the most dramatic example of the new status of cinema. No longer strictly locked in the photographic, it opens itself towards the painterly. It is also the most obvious example of the return of cinema to its nineteenth century origins -- in this case, to hand-crafted images of magic lantern slides, the Phenakistiscope, the Zootrope.

We usually think of computerization as automation, but here the result is the reverse: what was previously automatically recorded by a camera now has to be painted one frame at a time. But not just a dozen images, as in the nineteenth century, but thousands and thousands. We can draw another parallel with the practice, common in the early days of silent cinema, of manually tinting film frames in different colors according to a scene's mood.<sup>[23]</sup> Today, some of the most visually sophisticated digital effects are often achieved using the same simple method: painstakingly altering by

hand thousands of frames. The frames are painted over either to create mattes ("hand drawn matte extraction") or to directly change the images, as, for instance, in Forest Gump, where President Kennedy was made to speak new sentences by altering the shape of his lips, one frame at a time.<sup>[24]</sup> In principle, given enough time and money, one can create what will be the ultimate digital film: 90 minutes, i.e., 129600 frames completely painted by hand from scratch, but indistinguishable in appearance from live photography.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Multimedia as "Primitive" Digital Cinema

3-D animation, compositing, mapping, paint retouching: in commercial cinema, these radical new techniques are mostly used to solve technical problems while traditional cinematic language is preserved unchanged. Frames are hand-painted to remove wires which supported an actor during shooting; a flock of birds is added to a landscape; a city street is filled with crowds of simulated extras. Although most Hollywood releases now involve digitally manipulated scenes, the use of computers is always carefully hidden.<sup>[26]</sup>

Commercial narrative cinema still continues to hold on to the classical realist style where images function as unretouched photographic records of some events which took place in front of the camera.<sup>[27]</sup> Cinema refuses to give up its unique cinema-effect, an effect which, according to Christian Metz's penetrating analysis made in the 1970s, depends upon narrative form, the reality effect and cinema's architectural arrangement all working together.<sup>[28]</sup>

Towards the end of his essay, Metz wonders whether in the future non-narrative films may become more numerous; if this happens, he suggests that cinema will no longer need to manufacture its reality effect. Electronic and digital media have already brought about this transformation. Beginning in the 1980s, new cinematic forms have emerged which are not linear narratives, which are exhibited on a television or a computer screen, rather than in a movie theater -- and which simultaneously give up cinematic realism.

What are these forms? First of all, there is the music video. Probably not by accident, the genre of music video came into existence exactly at the time when electronic video effects devices were entering editing studios. Importantly, just as music videos often incorporate narratives within them, but are not linear narratives from start to finish, they rely on film (or video) images, but change them beyond the norms of traditional cinematic realism. The manipulation of images through hand-painting and image processing, hidden in Hollywood cinema, is brought into the open on a television screen. Similarly, the construction of an image from heterogeneous sources is not subordinated to the goal of photorealism but functions as a aesthetic strategy. The genre of music video has been a laboratory for exploring numerous new possibilities of manipulating photographic images made possible by computers -- the numerous points which exist in the space between the 2-D and the 3-D, cinematography and painting, photographic realism and collage. In short, it is a living and constantly expanding textbook for digital cinema.

A detailed analysis of the evolution of music video imagery (or, more generally, broadcast graphics in the electronic age) deserves a separate treatment and I will not try to take it up here. Instead, I will discuss another new cinematic non-narrative form, CD-ROM games, which, in contrast to music video, relied on the computer for storage and distribution from the very beginning. And, unlike music video designers who were consciously pushing traditional film or video images into something new, the designers of CD-ROMs arrived at a new visual language unintentionally while attempting to emulate traditional cinema.

In the late 1980s, Apple began to promote the concept of computer multimedia; and in 1991 it released QuickTime software to enable an ordinary personal computer to play movies. However, for the next few years the computer did not perform its new role very well. First, CD-ROMs could not hold anything close to the length of a standard theatrical film. Secondly, the computer would not smoothly play a movie larger than the size of a stamp. Finally, the movies had to be compressed, degrading their visual appearance. Only in the case of still images was the computer able to display photographic-like detail at full screen size.

Because of these particular hardware limitations, the designers of CD-ROMs had to invent a different kind of cinematic language in which a range of strategies, such as discrete motion, loops, and superimposition, previously used in nineteenth century moving image presentations, in twentieth century animation, and in the avant-garde tradition of graphic cinema, were applied to photographic or synthetic images. This language synthesized cinematic illusionism and the aesthetics of graphic collage, with its characteristic heterogeneity and discontinuity. The photographic and the graphic, divorced when cinema and animation went their separate ways, met again on a computer screen.

The graphic also met the cinematic. The designers of CD-ROMs were aware of the techniques of twentieth century cinematography and film editing, but they had to adopt these techniques both to an interactive format and to hardware limitations. As a result, the techniques of modern cinema and of nineteenth century moving image have merged in a new hybrid language.

We can trace the development of this language by analyzing a few well-known CD-ROM titles. The best selling game Myst (Broderbund, 1993) unfolds its narrative strictly through still images, a practice which takes us back to magic lantern shows (and to Chris Marker's La Jetée).<sup>[29]</sup> But in other ways Myst relies on the techniques of twentieth century cinema. For instance, the CD-ROM uses simulated camera turns to switch from one image to the next. It also employs the basic technique of film editing to subjectively speed up or slow down time. In the course of the game, the user moves around a fictional island by clicking on a mouse. Each click advances a virtual camera forward, revealing a new view of a 3-D environment. When the user begins to descend into the underground chambers, the spatial distance between the points of view of each two consecutive views sharply decreases. If before the user was able to cross a whole island with just a few clicks, now it takes a dozen clicks to get to the bottom of the stairs! In other words, just as in traditional cinema, Myst slows down time to create suspense and tension.

In Myst, miniature animations are sometimes embedded within the still images. In the next best-selling CD-ROM 7th Guest (Virgin Games, 1993), the user is presented with video clips of live actors superimposed over static backgrounds created with 3-D computer graphics. The clips are looped, and the moving human figures clearly stand out against the backgrounds. Both of these features connect the visual language of 7th Guest to nineteenth century pro-cinematic devices and twentieth century cartoons rather than to cinematic verisimilitude. But like Myst, 7th Guest also evokes distinctly modern cinematic codes. The environment where all action takes place (an interior of a house) is rendered using a wide angle lens; to move from one view to the next a camera follows a complex curve, as though mounted on a virtual dolly.

Next, consider the CD-ROM Johnny Mnemonic (Sony Imagesoft, 1995). Produced to complement the fiction film of the same title, marketed not as a "game" but as an "interactive movie," and featuring full screen video throughout, it comes closer to cinematic realism than the previous CD-ROMs -- yet it is still quite distinct from it. With all action shot against a green screen and then composited with graphic backgrounds, its visual style exists within a space between cinema and collage.

It would be not entirely inappropriate to read this short history of the digital moving image as a teleological development which replays the emergence of cinema a hundred years earlier. Indeed, as computers' speed keeps increasing, the CD-ROM designers have been able to go from a slide show format to the superimposition of small moving elements over static backgrounds and finally to full-frame moving images. This evolution repeats the nineteenth century progression: from sequences of still images (magic lantern slides presentations) to moving characters over static backgrounds (for instance, in Reynaud's Praxinoscope Theater) to full motion (the Lumieres' cinematograph). Moreover, the introduction of QuickTime in 1991 can be compared to the introduction of the Kinetoscope in 1892: both were used to present short loops, both featured the images approximately two by three inches in size, both called for private viewing rather than collective exhibition. Finally, the Lumieres' first film screenings of 1895 which shocked their audiences with huge moving images found their parallel in 1995 CD-ROM titles where the moving image finally fills the entire computer screen. Thus, exactly a

hundred years after cinema was officially "born," it was reinvented on a computer screen.

But this is only one reading. We no longer think of the history of cinema as a linear march towards only one possible language, or as a progression towards more and more accurate verisimilitude. Rather, we have come to see its history as a succession of distinct and equally expressive languages, each with its own aesthetic variables, each new language closing off some of the possibilities of the previous one -- a cultural logic not dissimilar to Kuhn's analysis of scientific paradigms.<sup>[30]</sup> Similarly, instead of dismissing visual strategies of early multimedia titles as a result of technological limitations, we may want to think of them as an alternative to traditional cinematic illusionism, as a beginning of digital cinema's new language.

For the computer / entertainment industry, these strategies represent only a temporary limitation, an annoying drawback that needs to be overcome. This is one important difference between the situation at the end of the nineteenth and the end of the twentieth centuries: if cinema was developing towards the still open horizon of many possibilities, the development of commercial multimedia, and of corresponding computer hardware (compression boards, storage formats such as Digital Video Disk), is driven by a clearly defined goal: the exact duplication of cinematic realism. So if a computer screen, more and more, emulates cinema's screen, this is not an accident but a result of conscious planning.

### The Loop and Spatial Montage

A number of artists, however, have approached these strategies not as limitations but as a source of new cinematic possibilities. As an example, I will discuss the use of the loop and of montage in Jean-Louis Boissier's Flora petrinsularis (1993) and in my own Little-Movies (1994 -).<sup>[31]</sup>

As already mentioned, all nineteenth century pro-cinematic devices, up to Edison's Kinetoscope, were based on short loops. As "the seventh art" began to mature, it banished the loop to the low-art realms of the instructional film, the pornographic peep-

show and the animated cartoon. In contrast, narrative cinema has avoided repetitions; as modern Western fictional forms in general, it put forward a notion of human existence as a linear progression through numerous unique events.

Cinema's birth from a loop form was reenacted at least once during its history. In one of the sequences of the revolutionary Soviet montage film, A Man with a Movie Camera (1929), DzigaVertov shows us a cameraman standing in the back of a moving automobile. As he is being carried forward by an automobile, he cranks the handle of his camera. A loop, a repetition, created by the circular movement of the handle, gives birth to a progression of events -- a very basic narrative which is also quintessentially modern: a camera moving through space recording whatever is in its way. In what seems to be a reference to cinema's primal scene, these shots are intercut with the shots of a moving train. Vertov even re-stages the terror which Lumieres's film supposedly provoked in its audience; he positions his camera right along the train track so the train runs over our point of view a number of times, crushing us again and again.

Early digital movies share the same limitations of storage as nineteenth century pro-cinematic devices. This is probably why the loop playback function was built into QuickTime interface, thus giving it the same weight as the VCR-style "play forward" function. So, in contrast to films and videotapes, QuickTime movies are supposed to be played forward, backward or looped.

Can the loop be a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age? It is relevant to recall that the loop gave birth not only to cinema but also to computer programming. Programming involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as "if/then" and "repeat/while"; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures. If we strip the computer from its usual interface and follow the execution of a typical computer program, the computer will reveal itself to be another version of Ford's factory, with a loop as its conveyer belt.

Flora petrinsularis realizes some of the possibilities contained in the loop form, suggesting a new temporal aesthetics for digital cinema. The CD-ROM, which is based



on Rousseau's Confessions, opens with a white screen, containing a numbered list. Clicking on each item leads us to a screen containing two frames, positioned side by side. Both frames show the same video loop but are slightly offset from each other in time. Thus, the images appearing in the left frame reappear in a moment on the right and vice versa, as though an invisible wave is running through the screen. This wave soon becomes materialized: when we click on one of the frames we are taken to a new screen showing a loop of a rhythmically vibrating water surface. As each mouse click reveals another loop, the viewer becomes an editor, but not in a traditional sense. Rather than constructing a singular narrative sequence and discarding material which is not used, here the viewer brings to the forefront, one by one, numerous layers of looped actions which seem to be taking place all at once, a multitude of separate but co-existing temporalities. The viewer is not cutting but re-shuffling. In a reversal of Vertov's sequence where a loop generated a narrative, viewer's attempt to create a story in Flora petrinsularis leads to a loop.

The loop which structures Flora petrinsularis on a number of levels becomes a metaphor for human desire which can never achieve resolution. It can be also read as a comment on cinematic realism. What are the minimal conditions necessary to create the impression of reality? As Boissier demonstrates, in the case of a field of grass, a close-up of a plant or a stream, just a few looped frames become sufficient to produce the illusion of life and of linear time.

Steven Neale describes how early film demonstrated its authenticity by representing moving nature: "What was lacking [in photographs] was the wind, the very index of real, natural movement. Hence the obsessive contemporary fascination, not just with movement, not just with scale, but also with waves and sea spray, with smoke and spray."<sup>[32]</sup> What for early cinema was its biggest pride and achievement -- a faithful documentation of nature's movement -- becomes for Boissier a subject of ironic and melancholic simulation. As the few frames are looped over and over, we see blades of grass shifting slightly back and forth, rhythmically responding to the blow of non-existent wind which is almost approximated by the noise of a computer reading data from a CD-ROM.

Something else is being simulated here as well, perhaps unintentionally. As you watch the CD-ROM, the computer periodically staggers, unable to maintain consistent data rate. As a result, the images on the screen move in uneven bursts, slowing and speeding up with human-like irregularity. It is as though they are brought to life not by a digital machine but by a human operator, cranking the handle of the Zootrope a century and a half ago...

Little Movies is my own project about the aesthetics of digital cinema, and an eulogy to its earliest form -- QuickTime. Beginning with the well-known supposition that every new medium relies on the content of previous media, Little Movies features key moments in the history of cinema as its logical subject.

As the time passes, the medium becomes the message, that is, the "look," more than the content of any media technology of the past is what lingers on. Little Movies reads digital media of the 1990s from a hypothetical future, foregrounding its basic properties: the pixel, the computer screen, the scanlines. As described earlier, in the early 1890s the public patronized Kinetoscope parlors where peep-hole machines presented them with the latest marvel -- tiny moving photographs arranged in short loops. And exactly a hundred years later, we are equally fascinated with tiny QuickTime Movies -- the precursor of digital cinema still to come. Drawing a parallel between these two historical moments, Little Movies are explicitly modeled after Kinetoscope films: they are also short loops.

As Boissier, I am also interested in exploring alternatives to cinematic montage, in my case replacing its traditional sequential mode with a spatial one. Ford's assembly line relied on the separation of the production process into a set of repetitive, sequential, and simple activities. The same principle made computer programming possible: a computer program breaks a tasks into a series of elemental operations to be executed one at a time. Cinema followed this principle as well: it replaced all other modes of narration with a sequential narrative, an assembly line of shots which appear on the screen one at a time. A sequential narrative turned out to be particularly incompatible with a spatialized narrative which played a prominent role in European visual culture for

centuries. From Giotto's fresco cycle at Capella degli Scrovegni in Padua to Courbet's A Burial at Ornans, artists presented a multitude of separate events (which sometimes were even separated by time) within a single composition. In contrast to cinema's narrative, here all the "shots" were accessible to a viewer at one.

Cinema has elaborated complex techniques of montage between different images replacing each other in time; but the possibility of what can be called "spatial montage" between simultaneously co-existing images was not explored. In Little Movies I begin to explore this direction in order to open up again the tradition of spatialized narrative suppressed by cinema. In one of the movies I develop the narrative through a number of short video clips, all much smaller in size than the computer screen. This allows me to place a number of clips on the screen at once. Sometimes all the clips are paused, and only one clip is playing; at other times two or three different clips play at once. As the narrative activates different parts of the screen, montage in time gives way to montage in space. Or rather, we can say that montage acquires a new spatial dimension. In addition to montage dimensions already explored by cinema (differences in images' content, composition, movement) we now have a new dimension: the position of the images in space in relation to each other. In addition, as images do not replace each other (as in cinema) but remain on the screen throughout the movie, each new image is juxtaposed not just with one image which preceded it, but with all the other images present on the screen.

The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and co-existence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen. Nothing is forgotten, nothing is erased. Just as we use computers to accumulate endless texts, messages, notes and data (and just as a person, going through life, accumulates more and more memories, with the past slowly acquiring more weight than the future), "Spatial Montage" accumulates events and images as it progresses through its narrative. In contrast to cinema's screen, which primarily functioned as a record of perception, here computer screen functions as a record of memory.

By making images different in size and by having them appear and disappear in different parts of the screen without any obvious order, I want to present the computer screen as a space of endless possibilities. Rather than being a surface which passively accepts projected images of reality recorded by a camera, computer screen becomes an active generator of moving image events. It already contains numerous images and numerous narrative paths; all that remains is to reveal some of them.

### Conclusion: From Kino-Eye to Kino-Brush

In the twentieth century, cinema has played two roles at once. As a media technology, cinema's role was to capture and to store visible reality. The difficulty of modifying images once they were recorded was exactly what gave cinema its value as a document, assuring its authenticity. The same rigidity of the film image has defined the limits of cinema as I defined it earlier, i.e. the super-genre of live action narrative. Although it includes within itself a variety of styles -- the result of the efforts of many directors, designers and cinematographers -- these styles share a strong family resemblance. They are all children of the recording process which uses lens, regular sampling of time and photographic media. They are all children of a machine vision.

The mutability of digital data impairs the value of cinema recordings as a documents of reality. In retrospect, we can see that twentieth century cinema's regime of visual realism, the result of automatically recording visual reality, was only an exception, an isolated accident in the history of visual representation which has always involved, and now again involves the manual construction of images. Cinema becomes a particular branch of painting -- painting in time. No longer a kino-eye, but a kino-brush. [\[33\]](#)

The privileged role played by the manual construction of images in digital cinema is one example of a larger trend: the return of pre-cinematic moving images techniques. Marginalized by the twentieth century institution of live action narrative cinema which relegated them to the realms of animation and special effects, these techniques reemerge as the foundation of digital filmmaking. What was supplemental to cinema

becomes its norm; what was at its boundaries comes into the center. Digital media returns to us the repressed of the cinema.

As the examples discussed in this essay suggest, the directions which were closed off at the turn of the century when cinema came to dominate the modern moving image culture are now again beginning to be explored. Moving image culture is being redefined once again; the cinematic realism is being displaced from being its dominant mode to become only one option among many.

## NOTES

[1] This is the third in a series of essays on digital cinema. See "Cinema and Digital Media," in Perspektiven der Medienkunst/Perspectives of Media Art, edited by Jeffrey Shaw and Hans Peter Schwarz (Cantz Verlag Ostfildern, 1996); "To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence," in Mythos Information -- Welcome to the Wired World. Ars Electronica 95, edited by Karl Gebel and Peter Weibel (Vienna and New York: Springer-Verlag, 1995), pp. 343-348. This essay has greatly benefited from the suggestions and criticisms of Natalie Bookchin, Peter Lunenfeld, Norman Klein and Vivian Sobchack. I also would like to acknowledge the pioneering work of Erkki Huhtamo on the connections between early cinema and digital media which stimulated my own interest in this topic. See, for instance, his "Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Emersion," in Critical Issues in Electronic Media, edited by Simon Penny (SYNU Press, 1995).

[2] Scott Billups, presentation during "Casting from Forest Lawn (Future of Performers) panel at "The Artists Rights Digital Technology Symposium '96," Los Angeles, Directors Guild of America,

February 16 1996. Billups was a major figure in bringing Hollywood and Silicon Valley together by way of the American Film Institute's Apple Laboratory and Advanced Technologies Programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Paula Perisi, "The New Hollywood Silicon Stars," Wired 3.12 (December, 1995) pp. 142-145; pp. 202-210.

[3] Christian Metz, "The Fiction Film and its Spectator: A Metaphychological Study," in Apparatus, edited by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), p. 402.

[4] Cinema as defined by its "super-genre" of fictional live action film belongs to media arts which, in contrast to traditional arts, rely on recordings of reality as their basis. Another term which is not as popular as "media arts" but perhaps is more precise is "recording arts." For the use of this term, see James Monaco, How to Read a Film, revised edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 7.

[5] Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 49-50.

[6] Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, p. 25.

[7] C.W. Ceram, Archeology of the Cinema (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), pp. 44-45.

[8] The birth of cinema in the 1890s is accompanied by an interesting transformation: while the body as the generator of moving pictures disappears, it simultaneously becomes their new subject. Indeed, one of the key themes of early films produced by Edison is a human body in motion: a man sneezing, a famous bodybuilder Sandow flexing his muscles, an athlete performing somersault, a woman dancing. Films of boxing matches play a key role in the commercial development of Kinetoscope. See Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, pp. 72-79; David Robinson, From Peep Show to Palace: the Birth of American Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 44-48.

[9] Robinson, From Peep Show to Palace, 12.

[10] This arrangement was previously used in magic lantern projections; it is described in the second edition of Athanasius Kircher's Ars magna (1671). See Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, pp. 21-22.

[11] Ceram, Archeology of the Cinema, p. 140.

[12] Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, p. 78.

[13] The extent of this lie is made clear by the films of Andy Warhol from the first part of the 1960s -- perhaps the only real attempt to create cinema without a language.

[14] I have borrowed this definition of special effects from David Samuelson, Motion Picture Camera Techniques (London: Focal Press, 1978).

[15] The following examples illustrate this disavowal of special effects; other examples can be easily found. The first example is from popular discourse on cinema. A section entitled "Making the Movies" in Kenneth W. Leish Cinema (New York: Newsweek Books, 1974) contains short stories from the history of the movie industry. The heroes of these stories are actors, directors and producers; special effects artists are mentioned only once. The second example is from an academic source: the authors of the authoritative Aesthetics of Film (1983) state that "the goal of our book is to summarize from a synthetic and didactic perspective the diverse theoretical attempts at examining these empirical notions [terms from the lexicon of film technicians], including ideas like frame vs. shot, terms from production crews' vocabularies, the notion of identification produced by critical vocabulary, etc." The fact that the text never mentions special effects techniques reflects the general lack of any historical or theoretical interest in the topic by film scholars. Bordwell and Thompson's Film Art: An Introduction which is used as a standard textbook in undergraduate film classes is a little better as it devotes three pages out of its five hundred pages to special effects. Finally, a relevant piece of statistics: a library of University of California, San Diego contains 4273 titles catalogued under the subject "motion pictures" and only 16 titles under "special effects cinematography." For the few important works addressing the larger cultural significance of special effects by film theoreticians see Vivian Sobchack and Scott Bukatman. Norman Klein is currently working on a history of special effects environments.

Kenneth W. Leish Cinema (New York: Newsweek Books, 1974); Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, Aesthetics of Film, trans. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 7; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Film Art: an Introduction, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993); Vivian Sobchack Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film, 2nd ed. (New York: Ungar, 1987); Scott Bukatman, "The

Artificial Infinite," in Visual Display, eds. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

[16] For a discussion of the subsumption of the photographic to the graphic, see Peter Lunenfeld, "Art Post-History: Digital Photography and Electronic Semiotics," which has been translated as "Die Kunst der Posthistorie: Digitale Fotografie und elektronische Semiotik," in the catalogue, Fotographie nacht der Fotografie (Munich: Verlag der Kunst, 1996), pp. 93-99.

[17] For a complete list of people at ILM who worked on this film, see SIGGRAPH '94 Visual Proceedings (New York: ACM SIGGRAPH, 1994), p. 19.

[18] In this respect 1995 can be called the last year of digital media. At 1995 National Association of Broadcasters convention Avid showed a working model of a digital video camera which records not on a video cassette but directly onto a hard drive. Once digital cameras become widely used, we will no longer have any reason to talk about digital media since the process of digitization will be eliminated.

[19] Here is another, even more radical definition: digital film =  $f(x, y, t)$ . This definition would be greeted with joy by the proponents of abstract animation. Since computer breaks down every frame into pixels, a complete film can be defined as a function which, given horizontal, vertical and time location of each pixel, returns its color. This is actually how a computer represents a film, a representation which has a surprising affinity with a certain well-known the avant-garde vision of cinema! For a computer, a film is an abstract arrangement of colors changing in time, rather than something structured by "shots," "narrative," "actors" and so on.

[20] See Barbara Robertson, "Digital Magic: Appolo 13," Computer Graphics World (August 1995), p. 20.

[21] William J. Mitchell, The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 7.

[22] The full advantage of mapping time into 2-D space, already present in Edison's first cinema apparatus, is now realized: one can modify events in time by literally painting on a sequence of frames, treating them as a single image.

[23] See Robinson, From Peep Show to Palace, p. 165.



[24] See "Industrial Light & Magic alters history with MATADOR," promotion material by Parralax Software, SIGGRAPH 95 Conference, Los Angeles, August 1995.

[25] The reader who followed my analysis of the new possibilities of digital cinema may wonder why I have stressed the parallels between digital cinema and the pre-cinematic techniques of the nineteenth century but did not mention twentieth century avant-garde filmmaking. Did not the avant-garde filmmakers already explore many of these new possibilities? To take the notion of cinema as painting, Len Lye, one of the pioneers of abstract animation, was painting directly on film as early as 1935; he was followed by Norman McLaren and Stan Brackage, the later extensively covering shot footage with dots, scratches, splattered paint, smears and lines in an attempt to turn his films into equivalents of Abstract Expressionist painting. More generally, one of the major impulses in all of avant-garde filmmaking, from Leger to Godard, was to combine the cinematic, the painterly and the graphic -- by using live action footage and animation within one film or even a single frame, by altering this footage in a variety of ways, or by juxtaposing printed texts and filmed images.

I explore the notion that the avant-garde anticipated digital aesthetics in my Engineering Vision: from Constructivism to the Computer (The University of Texas Press, forthcoming); here I would like to bring up one point particularly relevant for this essay. When the avant-garde filmmakers collaged multiple images within a single frame, or painted and scratched film, or revolted against the indexical identity of cinema in other ways, they were working against "normal" filmmaking procedures and the intended uses of film technology. (Film stock was not be designed to be painted on). Thus they operated on the periphery of commercial cinema not only aesthetically but also technically.

One general effect of the digital revolution is that avant-garde aesthetic strategies became embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software. In short, the avant-garde became materialized in a computer. Digital cinema technology is a case in point. The avant-garde strategy of collage reemerged as a "cut and paste" command, the most basic operation one can perform on digital data. The idea of painting on film became embedded in paint functions of film editing software. The avant-garde move to combine animation, printed texts and live action footage is repeated in the convergence of animation, title generation, paint, compositing and editing systems into single all-in-one packages. Finally, another move to combine a number of film images together within one frame (for instance, in Leger's 1924 Ballet Mechanique or in Vertov's 1929 A Man with a Movie Camera) also become legitimized by

technology, since all editing software, including Photoshop, Premiere, After Effects, Flame, and Cineon, by default assumes that a digital image consists of a number of separate image layers. All in all, what used to be exceptions for traditional cinema became the normal, intended techniques of digital filmmaking, embedded in technology design itself.

For the experiments in painting on film by Lye, McLaren and Brackage, see Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, Experimental Animation (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), pp. 65-71, 117-128; P. Adams Smith, Visionary Film, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 230, 136-227.

[26] Reporting in December 1995 issue of Wired, Paula Parise writes: "A decade ago, only an intrepid few, led by George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic, were doing high-quality digital work. Now computer imaging is considered an indispensable production tool for all films, from the smallest drama to the largest visual extravaganza." (Perisi, "The New Hollywood Silicon Stars," p. 144.)

[27] Therefore, one way in which the fantastic is justified in contemporary Hollywood cinema is through the introduction of various non-human characters such as aliens, mutants and robots. We never notice the pure arbitrariness of their colorful and mutating bodies, the beams of energy emulating from their eyes, the whirlpools of particles emulating from their wings, because they are made perceptually consistent with the set, i.e. they look like something which could have existed in a three-dimensional space and therefore could have been photographed.

[28] Metz, "The Fiction Film and its Spectator: A Metaphychological Study."

[29] This 28 minute film, made in 1962, is composed of still frames narrativized in time, and concludes with a very short live action sequence. For documentation, see Chris Marker, La Jetée: Ciné-roman (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

[30] Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[31] Flora petrinularis is included in the compilation CD-ROM, Artintact 1 (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM/Center for Art and Media, 1994). Little Movies are available online at <http://jupiter.ucsd.edu/~manovich/little-movies>.

[32] Steven Neale, Cinema and Technology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 52.

[33] It was Dziga Vertov who coined the term "kino-eye" in the 1920s to describe the cinematic apparatus's ability "to record and organize the individual characteristics of life's phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion." For Vertov, it was the presentation of film "facts," based as they were on materialist evidence, that defined the very nature of the cinema. See Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The quotation above is from "Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye," originally published in 1924, pp.47-49, p. 47.