Je pense à quelque chose. Quand je pense à quelque chose, en fait, je pense à autre chose toujours... Par exemple, je vois un paysage nouveau pour moi. Mais il est nouveau pour moi parce que je le compare en pensée à un autre paysage. Ancien celui-là, que je connaissais.

—Jean-Luc Godard, Eloge de l'amour
13. An Elegy for Film

Film is facing an uncertain future. The cinephiles of the new millennium now occupy a curious temporal state, not unlike the protagonist of Jean-Luc Godard’s 2003 *Eloge de l’amour*. "In Praise of Love" is the English translation of the title of Godard’s film, but the sense of the French word *éloge* is more ambiguous. Combining the senses of “elegy” and “eulogy,” this cinematic song of future-seeking, backward and forward looking, as befits contemplation of an art form undergoing a stark historical mutation. This temporal ambiguity is also expressed by the two-part structure of the work: an elliptical narrative present shot in fine-grained 35mm black-and-white, followed by a more linear video is used to evoke memory and the past and black-and-white film the present. This logic is as complex as it is subtle. As in so many of his films, Godard is encouraging us to look again, to reconsider how and what we see through film or through video. And in so doing, the projected work encourages a deep phenomenological examination concerning film in our time that is lost or sharply reduced when watching *Eloge de l’amour* on DVD. Curiously, the conceptual force of Godard’s aesthetic choices is not completely lost when presented digitally; nonetheless, the perceptual density of the evidence of our senses is sharply attenuated. In even this well-mastered DVD, not only is resolution lost in the black-and-white sections, but the video images appear less color saturated and somehow more “natural.” In the DVD version, the edges of two extremes are reduced to a happy medium: video color finds its home on the television monitor, while film is uprooted to a land where it rest an uneasy immigrant. Perhaps Godard’s last exercise in medium specificity, *Eloge de l’amour* is a praise song for the 35mm matrix. Video may be the future of cinema, but, ironically, the color palette achieved in the second part of the movie is best accomplished when video is printed on film. And so, while the black-and-white scenes suggest a present that may be passing out of existence—the disappearance of film as a medium—the color sequences may never again achieve their impressionistic vibrancy and luminosity when and if these video images are no longer presentable through 35mm projection.

The narrative of *Eloge de l’amour* allegorizes the present virtual life of film. The protagonist, Edgar, seeks to create a work from the life of Simone Weill, though it is unclear what form this work will take: a cantata? an opera? a novel? a play? a film? Edgar’s project is less a work than a potentiality searching for a form and a medium; it has a purely virtual existence. This virtual project is doubled by the search for the woman to voice the work—found but unrecognized as such in the video past to come, ineffable in the filmed present. The video section presents something like the search for a form or forms for memory, wherein “Spielberg Associates” seek to purchase the past of the woman’s grandparents, who were resistance leaders during the Occupation. But just as this strand of the story runs parallel to Edgar’s search without intersecting it, the woman’s possible presence in the project rests unrecognized as much as the future form of the work itself. Seen but unrecognized in the past, she is present but evanescent in the black-and-white “present” of the film. Here she is portrayed either in shadow or in the background, or as indexes of an off-screen presence. Sometimes an unseen voice—out of focus, off-screen or out-of-frame—she ends as a story recounted by others. After her death, nothing remains but the ambiguous contents of the small valise she has left behind. Our hero is offered one of her personal effects, a book, *Le voyage d’Edgar*, and herein lies the unsettled temporal space presented by the film. We will never see Edgar’s project or know the form it may ultimately take, if any. We are in the middle of a voyage whose endpoint is uncertain and whose beginning is already forgotten. In the passage from filmic to videographic time, the (video) future is already in the past, the present strives to preserve an aesthetic memory of what film was, and the viewers struggle to envision the work to come, which is always just beyond our reach.

In this way, *Eloge de l’amour* marks the current fate of film as an indiscernible point of passage—the present realization of an already unattainable past. This transition is expressed as a continually changing landscape. Near the end of the color sequences, Edgar is on a train from Brittany to Paris. We watch a deeply saturated seascape with a setting sun as Edgar voices off-frame: “I think of something. When I think of something, in fact, I think of something else...” For example, I see a landscape new to me. But it is new to me because I compare it in thought with another landscape. Very old that one, that I used to know.”

I once thought that one of the most rewarding tasks of a film teacher was to restore for students the historical and phenomenological experience of watching silent films. But I have recently come to realize, with some personal alarm, that during the past twenty years we have all lost in some degree the capacity to involve ourselves deeply and sensually in the 35mm image, well projected in
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a movie theater. Film is no longer a modern medium; it is completely historical. And indeed, the task now is to ask students to imagine an era, not so long past, when the default perceptual norms were not videographic, when there were no expectations of interactivity with the image, and when screens were found principally in movie theaters. Theatrical cinema is, no doubt, the ancient land to which Godard refers, no less than the *nouvelle vague*’s presentation of modernity in remaking the black-and-white 35mm image of Hollywood cinema of the 1940s. And so Godard asks us once again to compare the two landscapes, film and video, the passing present and the emerging future, not only to recover a perceptual past that is quickly being lost to us, but also to realize that the aesthetic future of the electronic image may be tied to film, though in ways we have not yet anticipated or fully understood.

Film, I have argued, is a historical medium par excellence. But it is also now becoming "history"; that is, it is quite likely that film is no longer modern or constitutive of our modernity. For the time being, theatrical cinema is our passing present, our disappearing ontology. But this also means that it is not yet completely past, and that the emergent future may remain, for some time to come, cinematic. To imagine a conclusion, then, I want to explore two overarching themes: first, to present some criteria for evaluating the transformation from film to digital in the moving image and for indicating what aesthetic roles film might still play in contemporary image practice; and second, to argue that a certain conception of film theory still provides the core concepts with which this transition may be understood and evaluated.

14. The New "Media"

Part II of this book began with the observation that a certain idea of cinema is already dead, its phenomenology transformed by television and video. Under pressure from video and computational processes, contemporary cinema is currently in a state of self-transformation, and its future is difficult to foresee. A new territory has unfolded on electronic and digital screens, and this is a landscape "without image" for two reasons. The first reason is historical. The future of the electronic and digital arts is only thinly drawn and barely recognizable in the present. The problem here is not the novelty or "newness" of the digital and the electronic. Rather, we do not possess a historical image of these forms because we do not yet completely understand what concepts condition their possible genealogies. Nor do we have a sense of how they inform our
present understanding of what history means for us, or in what sense they constitute our modernity as lived today.

The second reason is ontological. These forms are also without image in the sense that what appears on electronic and digital screens does not fully conform to the criteria by which in the past we have come to recognize something as a created, aesthetic image. Here we confront a new kind of ontological perplexity—how to place or situate ourselves, in space and in time, in relation to an image that does not seem to be “one.” On electronic screens, we are uncertain that what appears before is an “image,” and in its powers of mutability and velocity of transmission, we are equally uncertain that this perception has a singular or stable existence either in the present or in relation to the past. But more on this later.

For these reasons, it is difficult to comprehend in what the “medium” of computational processes consists and, in fact, what makes them “new.” The designation “new media” is misleading for a number of reasons. First, it encompasses too wide a variety of computationally processed artifacts: CD-ROMs; HTML authoring; interactive game design and programming; image and sound capture or synthesis, manipulation, and editing; text-processing and desktop publishing; human-computer interface design; computer-aided design; and all the varieties of computer-mediated communication.

The term “digital cinema” poses similar problems. Many commentators confuse the very different creative processes of digital capture or acquisition, computer synthesis, digital postproduction, and digital distribution, not to mention the many interesting questions raised by the transition to digital sound production. A theatrical movie today may combine one or more of these processes with more-traditional photographic capture, though it is increasingly rare to find a moving image entirely unaffected by digital practices. At what point does something become “digital cinema”? Must the raw material be captured on high-definition video? Would the presence of digital sound and the transfer of all picture elements to a digital intermediate count? Or would the mastering and release of an analogical print and visual artifacts into digital forms. From this perspective, there are no “new media”; there are only simulation and information processing used in reformatting old media as digital information.

So-called new media may not be so new for another reason. Lev Manovich’s book The Language of New Media takes a salutary perspective in noting that contemporary computational practices appear as the convergence of two parallel histories, both beginning in the 1830s: on one hand, daguerreotypy as the beginnings of photography and other time-based spatial media; on the other, Charles Babbage and Lady Ada Lovelace’s early experiments in analytical computing. For Manovich, new media are nothing less or more than the synthesis of these two histories in the translation of all existing media into numerical data manipulable by computers and accessed via electronic screens. Manovich calls this “transcoding,” a process wherein all previous cultural forms become subject to the computer’s ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics. Cinema and its prehistory are as much the progenitors of new media as computers and their prehistory; one cannot be understood without the other.

Manovich’s book and recent articles are comforting to film theorists, since he places so much emphasis on the importance of cinema as a “cultural interface.” As a result of its century-long success as an immersive and broadly accessible cultural form, cinema dominates our cultural understanding of what moving screened images consist. Further, this idea of cinema serves as a template for the design of a great variety of digital interactive media.

Manovich is correct, I think, to insist that in their sibling rivalry with cinema the forms and operations of interactive media have emerged through a process of creating a new digital “language” and cultural interface as the remediation of an older, analogical and photographic one. Nevertheless, a number of historical cautions should be raised around this story. First, despite his fascination with cinema, Manovich’s understanding of its history and theory lacks depth and complexity. In this respect, he sets in place a retroactive teleology from which all time-based image practices are evaluated from the point of view of film. Alternatively, it is worthwhile to confront the hubris of film history with the broader context of media archaeology. The recent work of William Uricchio, among others, has uncovered a third trajectory, wherein the prehistory of television and electronic or scanned images—with their powers of temporal simultaneity, point-to-point communication, and real-time interaction—predates that of film and runs parallel to it. Two con-
elusions might be drawn from this acknowledgment. One would be that Manovich brings the histories of cinema and computational processes too closely together; his fascination with cinema obscures important differences as well as similarities between the photographic and electronic arts. And, ironically, while he develops many useful concepts for specifying the forms and operations of digital interactivity, despite the centrality of cinema to his argument it is unclear what cinema and photography will become in the aftermath of their computational transcoding. A second conclusion might be more disturbing for the cinefilles and cinefis of contemporary film study. (Hommage à Serge Daney.) The long view and the larger historical context of media archaeology suggest that the history of cinema has been only a long digression in the more culturally significant merging of the history of electronic screens with the history of computational processes.

In any case, a more complex and nuanced historical context is needed for us to begin to comprehend how a photographic ontology, in Cavell’s sense of the term, is being displaced by a digital ontology. For it is not yet given that we have the tools for understanding what a computational “medium” might be or what would make it new, modern, or actual in relation to the photographic and the cinematographic. Especially in popular criticism, there is considerable historiographical confusion concerning what makes new media new. In the last ten years, the emergence and popularization of digital technologies have provoked four historical attitudes, all of which obfuscate the complexity of our current relationships with analogical and digital media. Perhaps the most common is what Thomas Elsaesser characterizes as “business as usual.” This perspective acknowledges no historical change at all: film disappears, but cinema continues because the dominance of the digital image and digital postproduction processes has had little to no impact on the narrational norms characteristic of theatrical fiction films. Or, in a similar vein, one eliminates all distinctiveness by forgetting the question of medium and collapsing all time-based spatial expression under the supergenre of the moving image.

Philip Rosen makes the larger claim that popular discourses wanting to account for the novelty of new media tend to displace or deny historical self-consciousness about their origins or genealogies through a variety of rhetorical strategies. Thus, the creation of the idea of “new media,” whatever such a vague designation might imply, models the history of digital inventiveness as the temporal displacement or replacement of analogical media. These strategies involve the metaphor of conquest (the analogical is supplanted by the digital); the presumption of a radical break on the technological time-line, which posits a linear chronology disavowing a relationship to the (analogical) past; and, finally, the casting of digital technologies in the form of the forecast. Here the newness of new media is presented as a form of rational extrapolation whereby technologies or products still in the lab or on the drawing boards become exemplary of an inevitable shift that lies just ahead of us.

Our historical distance from the Wired 1990s, short as it is in 2007, already provides an ironic perspective from which to comprehend these historical excesses. However, we are still searching for historical tools for understanding and evaluating the novel situations that confront us on screens reflective or electronic. Nor have we yet overcome a radical division in which one either mourns the passing of film as an art argente que or celebrates the emergence of the digital as technological destiny. Clearly, though, the possible disappearance of photography and film into computationally based practices informs new attitudes to time and to history that require careful attention. As I related in Part II, not only has film become history, but through the work of Rosen and others film studies has raised new and interesting questions that examine the indexical arts in relation to historical knowing by evaluating their expressive powers of causation, duration, and past-relatedness. Moreover, film studies’ confrontation with the digital and the electronic, combined with the displacement of the theatrical model of spectatorship, has made us more attentive to the history of cinema studies itself, of its methods and questions in relation to an ever-changing object. (I will address this last point more expansively in An Elegy for Theory:)

Nevertheless, today most so-called new media are inevitably imagined from a cinematic metaphor. Undoubtedly, the art of cinema is renewing and refashioning itself through the incorporation of digital processes, while a certain idea of cinema informs and insinuates itself into the development of interactive entertainments. Here, the arts of analogy are not displaced by digital technologies; rather, an idea of cinema persists or subsists within the new media as their predominant cultural and aesthetic model for engaging the vision and imagination of viewers. But this also means that it is difficult to envision what kinds of aesthetic experiences computational processes will innovate once


they have unleashed themselves from the cinematic metaphor and begin to explore their autonomous creative powers, if indeed they eventually do so.

I am closer now to explaining why new is under erasure and "media" is in scare quotes. Phil Rosen has wisely warned us to be attentive to the "hybrid historicity" of the digital arts, both with respect to the past processes from which they emerge and which they in fact prolong, and with respect to the senses of time and history to which they may give rise. Our contemporary sense of the moving image has evolved from three interwoven strands of the virtual arts that engage with one another in uneven historical rhythms—photography and film, electronic imaging and transmission, and computational processes—and we need concepts that can bring these strands together while recognizing the complexity of their relationships and differences. This book is not and cannot be a study of "new media," although I will have occasion to make some remarks on digital media in general. I am more concerned here with problems of imagining "digital cinema," and the paradoxes to be confronted in that particular combination of words. This is a matter of evaluating what the moving image is becoming, and indeed, has (un)become in the era of digital capture and synthesis. By focusing resolutely on the current destiny of photography and film in their transformation by computational processes, the future emerging from this passing present may yet be better understood.

There is debate or discussion today because we are confronted with something new in the image, something that disturbs the perceptual default of the chemically based analogical image. We confront something that looks like photography, and continues to serve many of its cultural functions. Yet a felt change is occurring, or perhaps has occurred, in our phenomenological relationship with these images. A subtle shifting of gears is taking place in our current ontology, in our relation to the world and to others, as mediated through technologically produced images. What we find to be uncanny and unsettling, I would suggest, is the spatial similarity of digital images to the now antecedent practices of photography and film. The ontological strangeness provoked by digital imaging is not the same as that of photography, yet many continuities bridge the two kinds of practice and our cultural relationship to them. As a result, photography and film remain the baseline for evaluating a certain kind of perceptual experience, although (and this is the temporality of all ontological questioning) we find ourselves pushed to examine something new in this experience that has already happened to us. The examination of the new, the actual, and the contemporary is the recovery of a transition already past, and so we must revisit some familiar questions of classical film theory in a new context.

In the sections that follow, I will map out the conceptual difficulty of imagining what cinema becomes in the digital era by examining arguments concerning "perceptual realism," the function of analogism and indexicality in digital capture and synthesis, and the relative distinctiveness of analogical transcription with respect to digital conversion as causal processes. In addition, the current conjunction of electronic displays with computational processes will present two historical difficulties for envisioning the place of contemporary cinema studies in the study of digital imaging. On one hand, this conjunction indicates yet another dislocation of "film" and the continuity of its ontological expressiveness. (And this is less a disappearance than a displacement into new and surprising contexts.) On the other, computational processes put conceptual pressure on our ordinary senses of the nature and qualities of a medium or media, or indeed, of the "image" itself. The process of transcoding is now advanced enough that any notion of aesthetic specificity—of image, sound, music, or text—has completely dissolved into computers and computational processes. Where before there may have been photography, cinema, or video, there are now only computers and the kinds of capture, synthesis, and processing they allow or encourage.

The presumed newness of digital practices refers less, then, to the creation of a new medium than to a large-scale historical process wherein existing textual and spatial media are transcoded into digital form so as to be manipulable by computational processes and communicable through information networks. Just as the nature and extent of the historical novelty of "new media" must be reexamined, so also must we ask: Can information processing be considered a creative medium? Can the computer as a simulation machine or information processor give rise to creative automatisms?

15. Paradoxes of Perceptual Realism

In Part II, I presented some of the fundamental elements or automatisms that distinguish film as a photographic medium, while accepting the complex set of family resemblances through which the photographic is connected to, yet distinct from, videographic expression within the larger category of moving-image practices. Conditioned by the logic of automatic analogical causation, these automatisms of photographic transcription, succession, and projection are also automatic or automated as mechanically occurring processes. More so even than photography and film, the digital arts, if there are any, are characterized by automated procedures. Select, cut, copy, paste, sort, rip, sample, fil-