LANGUAGE AGAINST ONTOLOGY: THE FALLACIES OF MEDIA ESSENCE

By

CHAD SIMS

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For my grandmother, Caroline Sitek

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Chad Sims

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Chair: Terry Harpold
Member: Robert Ray
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This study addresses the influence of digital media on film through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic language theory. In an attempt to better understand how one media can influence another, this study also includes a look at some of the more developed scholarship surrounding the influence of television on cinema. These contemporary mediums interact with one another in ways that are not immediately apparent, and we vitally need new paths of inquiry in order to make progress towards understanding these interactions. One such path suggested in this study is tracing the ways in which various media have been represented through film ultimately leading to the adoption of the logics of that media in film. Examples of this method are given for still photography and digital media. The study culminates in a study of the film *Run Lola Run* which is a prime example of the influence of digital language on film. This project is intended as a beginning of a new approach to, not a conclusion to, a vast and complicated issue.

CHAPTER 1
MEDIA AS *LANGAGE*

This project began as an investigation into how one medium (digital computer technologies) affects another (film). I was not so much interested in technical aspectsof their relation, but in what I consider the specific "logics" of digital and cinematic representation—and how they influence one another. For instance, how is the increasing use of hyperlink logic, a trait that has come to mainstream awareness from digital media, affecting practices of film-making and viewing? It is hard to watch many films made since the advent of digital editing and CGI (Computer Generated Images), and not notice differences in post-CGI films from those that preceded these technologies. These differences can be obvious like the inclusion of computer generated monsters or subtle like an increased frequency of edits facilitated by digital editing.[1] My hypothesis was not only were new technologies directly influencing films, but exposure to digital media was changing what we desired to see and how filmmakers perceived of presentation. Crucial aspects of films such as *Tron* (Steven Lisberger 1982) *Run Lola Run*[2] (Tom Tykwer 1998) *The Matrix* (The Wachochski Brothers 1999), *eXistenZ* (David Chronenberg 1999), *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen 2001), and *Running Scared* (Wayne Kramer 2006) all seem to be shaped by something like a digital ethos, as distinct from (but not unrelated to) digital filmmaking techniques including CGI, digital photography, and digital editing. Both *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ* directly deal with the integration of digital technologies into the analog world, while the others seem to make use of characteristically digital logics (hyperlink, simulation,

[1] Quick and frequent edits are possible using analog editing techniques, but the labor required to edit in this manner almost always limits their usage.

[2] The English title for the German *Lola rennt*, lit. Lola Runs.

graphic user interface, aggregation) to elucidate events occurring in the analog world in which the film's events take place.

We are surrounded by the digital. Our work, play, organization, communication, and countless other daily activities are now facilitated and engaged with operations of computers, so why would these technologies not also influence film? We know that digital computing is used in a number of ways in the contemporary moment of film production, but how does the logic of digital computing effect the production and reception of cinema indirectly. In other words, how has our interaction with computers (and their inherent logic) changed how film is conceived, produced, and received? Of course other popular media such as television are not immune to these influences. Digital logic has become prominent on news, sports, and informational programming; whether it is computerized graphics on the news, a computer generated analysis of a basketball player's ability to dunk a basketball, or a wireframe rendering of the musculature of a great white shark. In all of these examples we see evidence of hyperlink logic. Having access to most any information we desire on the World Wide Web, we now have begun to expect more from our information sources; there must always be more content lurking just below the surface. The ability to click on a link and gain access to more information is something we now take for granted. A better understanding of this interplay of digital technologies and media works is vital. There had to be a better way to think about this convergence than simply they influence one-another.

While initially researching this topic, I frequently encountered the term "language" where I had been anticipating the word, which I had been using, "logic." At first, it

seemed a case of slightly different idioms for the same concept, but my response changed when I started thinking about the specific manner in which Jacques Lacan employs the term “language.” Could media be an extension of language? As the astute reader may have noticed, the title of this section utilizes the French langage in place of language. French has two words for the English term language: langage and langue. In Lacan’s work, these terms serve distinctive purposes. According to Dylan Evans, in Lacan’s thought “langue usually refers to a specific language, such as French or English, whereas langage refers to the system of language in general, abstracting from all particular languages” (96). Lacan’s use of *langage* in this regard is reflected perhaps his most famous of psychoanalytic dictum, “the unconscious is structured like a language” (S 11, 20). This dual conception of “language”-- as specific national tongue, with associated histories and idioms, and as a *system* of representation, with its own histories and idioms -- is intriguing, and the idea that all language is characterized by a founding structure is more so.

What if we thought of individual media as languages (*langues*), while thinking of all media, in all varieties, as an extension of language (*langage*), in Lacan’s sense of this term? At first, this formulation may seem like a misappropriation of Lacanian theory; however, why would we not structure our forms of cultural communication in some ways homologous to structures of innate communication? This is not to say that all media are equivalent in all respects; it is clear that they and their effects differ, as established traditions of film and media studies have already shown. But what I propose is that many commonly-held differences may be illusory and not in fact essential to media as *systems* or representation. This brings us to another area of Lacan’s thought that will

be helpful and perhaps necessary to my analysis; his three orders of human experience the *real*, the *symbolic*, and the *imaginary*.

We will begin with the *real*. For Lacan, the *real* is the order of the human condition that is not addressable by language: "the *real*, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it." (Ec 25) The "upheaval" is the mutability to which language is subject. Words are used and received in various ways. The *real* is something that is unchanging; whereas words can have a variety of significances as we see in tropes like metaphor and metonymy. Dylan Evans explains, "the *real* also has connotations of matter, implying a material substrate underlying the imaginary and the symbolic" (160). While working with these orders we begin to run into a problem of ontology. In this model, the *real* seems like the only possible site of essence, because the other orders are orders of language as we will see.

Lacan's *real* presents a problem for investigations of media ontologies, because it would seem to limit us to physical properties of media or the conditions of their reception. In the order of the *real,* the physical basis of the various media would certainly be linked to its ontology. The physical attributes and material substance of the media are unchanging and set limits on what is possible to represent with them. Therefore the ontology of film is bound to attributes of celluloid, tele-visual is bound to the attributes of electronic video, and new media is bound to the attributes of digital computing (which of consists of a number of apparatuses working in tandem: hard drive, processor, RAM, display, network technologies, etc). As I will demonstrate throughout the rest of this project, all of the aspects that define the foundational logic of a particular

media are actually quite fluid and change over time. This view may seem like a reduction that limits possibilities in media scholarship, but I would say the contrary is true; that this conception will open new avenues of scholarship that hopefully will become palpable as we examine the other Lacanian orders.

The *imaginary* and the *symbolic* are very closely intertwined, and this is where my formulation gains strength, for these are the orders of human language. For Lacan, the *imaginary* is associated with alienation from our animal state. He writes, "In man, the imaginary relation has deviated, in so far as that is where the gap is produced whereby death makes itself" (S2 210). In other words, the imaginary -- the order of resemblance -- is what separates us from animals, because we can conceive of our own death, the very limit of resemblance. The *imaginary* order is somewhat difficult to understand without the *symbolic*, with which it is inextricably bound. Lacan formulates the *symbolic* as the order of difference, founded on the difference of signifiers. "The death instinct is only the mask of the *symbolic* order" (S2 326)—that is, the fatal necessity figured in Freud's concept of the death instinct is in fact the necessity of the system of signifiers. If I am reading Lacan correctly, a signifying system is essential for the articulation of abstract thought. Therefore, signifiers (the *symbolic*) shape -- in their differences -- what we can conceive (the *imaginary*)—in its resemblances. We are able to communicate what we imagine through the field of speech, into which we were born, the rules of which we must accept as the cost of entering into the social relations of linguistic subjectivity.

How then do these orders help us with new conceptions of media study, and specifically the analysis of digital media's influence on the structure of cinema? Just as,

for Lacan we are necessarily speaking subjects, born into speech and subjected to its structure, we are also born into medial conditions, which have associated with them systems of thought. The vital facet of film, and later media language, is that we know implicitly, the history of the development of that language, or at least we have a competence in its use that determined its history. We can only guess about the origins of verbal language. As Lacan points out:

> We imagine that there must have been a time when people on this earth began to speak. So we admit of an emergence. But from the moment that the specific structure of this emergence is grasped, we find it absolutely impossible to speculate on what preceded it other than by symbols which were always applicable. (S2, 5)

Of course, film emerged out of media practices particular of the late 19th century, so I am not trying to argue that cinema could have had a pure beginning. What media studies using this particular conception of *language* could gain are new ways to perceive of both media and ourselves. Furthermore, the proliferation of media *languages* offers multiple opportunities for new forms of media specific inquiry. The goal of this project will be to look at how media language affects the production and reception of individual media, by attempting to unravel the symbolic and the imaginary components of the specific *language* (*langue*) of each—with the aim of establishing some of the traits of an underlying *language* of media (*language*). This project is hardly finished, but describes a useful starting point from which to examine film, television, and digital media in new relations to one another.

Before we proceed further I must, of course, mention other psychoanalytically-informed theories of media. Since Laura Mulvey's infamous essay, film studies have

been scarred by psychoanalysis. [3] The problem is that Mulvey's essay was an overly simplistic, and many would argue, plain misreading of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I am hardly the first person to take issue with this essay, as we see from the opening of Craig Saper's essay "A Nervous Theory: The Troubling Gaze of Psychoanalysis in Media Studies":

> The gaze is in trouble. After enjoying many years as one of the most influential concepts in film theory, it now seems to suffer repeated efforts to extend, reverse, or simply debunk its scope of explanation. Its common formulaic presentation as "men gaze at women" has provoked one theorist (Norman Bryson) to extend the notion to include "men gaze at men." Its equation with sadistic activity has opened the way for another theorist (Gaylyn Studiar) to propose a "masochistic aesthetic." Its close associations with écriture feminine have left it open to charges of biological essentialism by cultural contextualists (for example, David Rodowick, Teresa de Lauretis). Yet, in all this hacking and bandaging, one might forget to ponder the obvious: why did theorists import (Lacanian) psychoanalytic concepts (suture, gaze, jouissance, and so forth) to discuss media? They wanted to explain how Hollywood films hid the sociopolitical context of production (33).

After reviewing the theory's history, Saper goes on to elucidate what he terms "nervous theory." This theory yet again extends gaze theory. For Saper, this concept of the gaze is too consistent. He argues that given other elements of Lacan's work we must account for "inconsistencies" that are fundamental to Lacan's concept of the gaze. In his conclusion he states, "old notions of predictability and statistical analysis no longer adequately deal with anomalies. Instead, to understand what might happen when we look at films—a question of predictability—we need a different way of looking" (Saper 51). While accounting for "anomalies" seems to be a step forward, the basis of much contemporary media theory (and in particular, film theory) in gaze theory is still problematic. In the formulation of media as language, inconsistencies are accounted for

[3] "Visual Pleasure and The Narrative Cinema" 1975

by the fluidity of language. We see in Lacan's own work (chiefly in his early discussions of metaphor and metonymy) an understanding that signifiers have value in relation only to other signifiers.

The other chief advantage of my proposed approach is that it synthesizes object and theory based modes of criticism. Where gaze theory, "wanted to explain how Hollywood films hid the sociopolitical context of production," I would argue that sociopolitical context already figures in both the imaginary and symbolic orders of medial language, though it may at times be necessary to derive that context by acts of analysis. The difference lies in *looking* for, versus *accounting* for, orders of the sociopolitical. As an example, Mulvey's version of the gaze argues that Hollywood film, in its portrayal of women, men, and their relations, figures and perpetuates patriarchy. In the language--based view, patriarchy is an aspect of the imaginary order supported by and in concert with other conditions of the imaginary order: political, social, financial. All of these elements look like solid ideologies, but in fact are made up of multiple, interconnected, essentially symbolic, influences. Were and are there Hollywood films that support an unapologetic patriarchy and the subjection of women to a specifically male, heteronormative mode of invasive vision? Yes, however, this is not necessarily an essential ideological component of Hollywood, as Mulvey asserts. This distinction will hopefully become evident in the following chapters of this essay.

Chapter 2, "Film or Television?" will deal primarily with some of the critical literature regarding differences between and similarities of film and television. This is a good place to start. These media resemble each other in certain; obvious respects, many authors have already commented on this resemblance. These authors have

already started my project for me. At times, they mistakenly assume certain imaginary qualities of film and television are in some way essential to their operations; such an approach is more productive when framed through the lens of language (*langage*). This chapter begins with some thoughts on David Thomson's recent book *The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder*. Thomson observes that Hitchcock's celebrated film may not have been possible without television. The chapter continues with a discussion of David Bordwell's theory of *intensification,* as described in his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. The chapter concludes with a look at some of the essays collected in Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffman's *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel, or Cable The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*. The essays in this book are especially useful for articulating media language theory in relation to film and television.

Chapter 3, "Digital Logic Celluloid Film" is devoted to material and formal interactions of digital media and film (the original impetus for this project). This chapter begins with the stuff of cinema itself; film, and proceeds to follow its representation in cinema starting in *Call Northside 777* (Henry Hathaway 1948), progressing to *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni 1966), and ending in the imagined (not to be confused with the Lacanian imaginary) future of digital photography in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982). Next, I will discuss Lev Manovich's theory of *cultural interface* (from his book *The Language of New Media*) and how it can be employed to understand how media apparatuses shape our perception. *Cultural interface* will not be placed in opposition to the language formulation; instead my formulation offers a mechanism by which Manovich's theory could function within the language model. This section resumes the

discussion of some films mentioned earlier; *Tron*, *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and *Running Scarred*. In light of media language theory and Manovich's cultural interface theory, how do these films represent digital media and digital logics? While most of these films are hardly works of great cinema and are lacking in notable aesthetic innovation; they do include vital examples of the model I present here. Clearly, these films are not the only films displaying the mark of the digital, but they are a representative cross-sampling of average expression of this mark.

Chapter 4, "Lola is Media Language," is a case study of *Run Lola Run*. This film is a perfect example of the convergence of what we normally think of as cinematic, televisual, and digital languages. In this chapter, scholarship on the film will be examined, and the implications for media language theory will be discussed regarding these preexisting analyses.

Media language theory does not reduce discrete media to a continuous, undifferentiated mass. There are decisive differences between media, but they are all predicated upon the underlying logic of language-as-system. Differences in media occur within the imaginary realm which cuts across our real, which has an effect on how we see and experience the human world. What I aim to criticize the notion of a metaphysical ontology of film, television and/or digital media, and in this regard to open new ways of imagining possibilities of media and media scholarship.

CHAPTER 2
FILM OR TELEVISION?

In his 2009 book *The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder*, David Thomson describes Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* as a turning point in American cinema, after which the depiction and reception of sex and violence became far more acceptable to audiences:

> Anyone with a sense of film knew not just that Psycho changed "cinema" but that now the subversive secret was out—truly this medium was prepared for an outrage in which sex and violence were no longer games but were in fact everything. …But the deeper lesson was that the audience in its self-inflicted experiment with danger might be crazy, too (2-3).

Thomson observes that Hitchcock had already been toying with these themes:

> …in films like Strangers on a Train, Rear Window, and Vertigo, he had been pursuing the issue of moral responsibility in voyeurism and the larger question of why "decent" people were so interested in visions of crime and violence and sex that they would watch in apparent safety or immunity (7).

Throughout the book, Thomson's close reading of *Psycho* is interspersed with commentary on cultural factors, outside film, that may have played a part in the reception and transformation of cinema, for which *Psycho*, he argues, is the most prominent example. These cultural forces are what I would define as aspects of the imaginary order of film; seeing them in this light will help support my theory of media language.

Another recurring argument of *Moment of Psycho* is television as agent of *cinematic* change. We should remember, by the time Hitchcock made *Psycho* television had become an ingrained part of American culture, as the numbers make clear:

> In 1958 American box office dropped below $1 billion a year, a figure it had held since the early 1940s. In the same year, the average weekly attendance at the movies fell to 35 million; it had been 82 million in 1946.

> Another statistic helped explain that decline. In the '50s, the number of American households with television went from about 4 million to about 48 million. There wasn't any question about America's, or the world's, delight in moving picture stories. But staying at home with them felt easier, cheaper, and more natural. No matter how big or spectacular Hollywood made the movies, the audience took the smaller version (4-5).

In the '60s things only got worse for the movies, "…Attendance in American theaters dropped from 30 million in 1960 to 18 million in 1969. In the same year the percentage of American households with television increased from 87 to 95" (147). These numbers clearly demonstrate that America had embraced television, and with his show *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-62), Hitchcock had as well.

While producing *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, Hitchcock had learned much about making "moving picture stories" more economically. This new frugality proved useful when he began to shoot *Psycho*. The film had such a controversial script that the studios wanted nothing to do with it. In-order to get Paramount to finance the film, "Hitch offered to do it like one of his TV shows — cut-price, very fast, without color or big stars. In return, Hitch would own 60 percent of the picture himself" (18). These cheaper working methods had a direct influence on the look of one of the most iconic films in cinema history; they not only got the film made, they also made Hitchcock a very rich man.

Notably, the trailer of the film was also influenced by practices Hitchcock had developed for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

> Hitchcock was by then widely known for the poker-faced intros to his television show. So he employed the same method on a rather grander scale for his new movie. Now he was a kind of realtor showing off the Bates Motel for prospective buyers. So he was dry and dusty, and then struck by how much it had been tidied up since—since the blood, and then for an instant you were into the shower mayhem and that crude but effective dare that still gets people to the movies: "Can you stand to see this?" (95).

Hitchcock was playing off a character with which his American audience had become familiar. That character—the televisual Hitchcock—was beamed into their homes on a weekly basis and had become, paradoxically, a familiar voice of the uncanny. The film's effect on audiences was thus shaped by these two paratexts; the trailer and Hitchcock's *Presents* persona. Here we see a direct connection of constructs within the imaginary order.

The opening to chapter 7, "Noir Society" is the final element of Thomson's book that is immediately helpful for the purposes of the project at hand. He writes brilliantly of the changes television wrought on cultural perception:

> Television was a medium that could cut instantaneously and without sentiment or irony from the lavishly engraved stylization of commercials to the rawest of documentary footage of an automobile disaster, the scene of a murder, or the trail of warfare. In the '60s, television "taste" yielded to increasingly graphic violence from Vietnam, Biafra, and so many other places and put them in its own dramas. The world became a montage, or a collage, easily perceived as madness even though a piece of ordinary furniture kept it in place. There was no way that television could pretend to be in control, or protecting us. The old Hollywood had been dead long enough for its code of security and happiness to be not just ruined but mocked (138).

Thomson draws our attention to interrelations of film and television; television had installed a new mode of visual discourse which embraced rapid juxtaposition of seemingly incongruent images, and this new mode would be taken up by cinematic discourse in a number of ways that would change elements of cinema's system.

If we use the language model to investigate Thomson's claim a number of parallels become evident. What has been traditionally studied as forms of television and film are largely, if not entirely, of the imaginary order. The aspects that form what we think of as cinematic and televisual are determined by factors outside themselves and are in no way essential. The vocabulary of film became more complicated over

time and evolved into a form that seemed very controlled. The model that shaped television was derived from radio which is its own imaginary system, but the content could have been presented in the same fashion as film had this order not existed. Symbolically, the exact same things can be depicted in both cinema and television, but the presentation was shaped largely by external stimuli. Both the imaginary and symbolic are however shaping the real of television and film. Had television been invented before film the old "code" of Hollywood may never have existed, and film may have always been more like television.

A good place to turn now would be to someone whose work focuses on effects of technical innovation on film aesthetics, David Bordwell. In his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, he argues a theory of "intensified continuity" which he breaks further into what he calls "four dimensions." The first dimension is "Picking Up the Pace" (121-4). Bordwell explains that the average shot length (ASL) has changed over time. "In the 1920s, Hollywood films were cut quite fast, four to six seconds per shot, but the arrival of sound put on the brakes" (Bordwell 121). Assumedly, character dialog allowed the camera to linger on a single shot for a longer period of time. The pace of films stayed at a more leisurely pace until the 1960s when ASL began to speed up, however some films continued to use longer shots until the 1980s when "[d]ouble-digit ASLs , still found during the 1970s, virtually vanished from mass-entertainment cinema" (122).

Bordwell's second dimension is entitled "Going to Extremes" (124-9). He describes changes in lens size throughout cinema history. Early films commonly used lenses with "a focal length of 50mm" (124). While close-ups were typically shot with

“[l]onger lenses, from 100mm to 500mm” (124). As time has gone by filmmakers have turned to even wider angle lenses. These lenses force a perspective and direct the viewer’s attention towards the most important point of the frame. This forced perspective also discourages the viewer’s eye from wandering about the frame.

The third dimension is “Closer and Closer” (129-34), which describes Hollywood’s increasing use of close-ups throughout its history. This is especially true for dialog driven scenes. Bordwell observes most modern directors’ feelings about framing dialog scenes, “[a]ny style that treats conversations in a sustained, fixed shot must be a perverse, boring minimalism” (129).

The final dimension is “The Prowling Camera” (134-38). As the title would suggest this dimension entails increased and increasingly-noticeable camera movement:

> When we do find longer takes and fuller framings, the camera is usually in motion. Camera movement became standard in most films during the last years of silent cinema. With the coming of sound, filmmakers began to rely on the flamboyant tracking or crane shots, especially in opening scenes, and on those slight reframing that keep the compositions balanced. Today’s camera movements are ostentatious extensions of the camera mobility that came to prominence during the 1930’s. (134)

Through all the “dimensions,” Bordwell argues that “the choices available to filmmakers have narrowed since the studio era” (121). While I do not entirely agree with this sentiment, one of the avenues that Bordwell suggests as a cause does offer this project an opportunity for closer scrutiny.

Bordwell is known for his view that technology drives many aesthetic changes in film. He writes, “[a] demand on one front produces a change on another, and this affects yet another” (147). An example can be derived from the *second dimension* “Going to Extremes.” If we agree with Bordwell we might say something like “the use of

wider angle lenses caused set design to be less focused on fine details and instead on major details like color or large shapes." This would be because theoretically the audience would not be looking at small details and would instead be focused, for instance, on the actors delivering dialog. We could go a step further and say perhaps new lighting gels were developed for a larger palette of possible colors with which to paint the scene. This is a purely hypothetical scenario, and it is only being used to demonstrate a typical Bordwellian argument. While it is hard to argue with the basic elements of his logic, he does seem to ignore that audiences may be capricious; they embrace certain practices and styles but reject others. In other words, technology certainly has an effect on film aesthetics, but Bordwell often overstates the direct technological drive of film aesthetics.

Bordwell does, however, suggest television as a possible source for many of film's aesthetic changes. He argues that a variety of beliefs about television and what will properly screen on television have shaped filmmaking practices. Change seems inevitable for certain aspects of film, when anticipating their potential rebroadcast on television. For example, a film shot in a wide-screen format was likely to be cropped for television, due to "broadcasters… reluct[ance] to letterbox films because the image degraded when fewer scan lines were devoted to it" (148). Filmmakers would now have to consider framing more carefully if their films would screen well on television. Of course this example becomes less relevant as widescreen televisions become more common.

Another stylistic change that Bordwell attributes to television is the decreasing duration of ASLs. "Television, people argued, is usually watched in a distracted

environment, so it needs to hold attention by a constantly changing visual display" (149-50). To me this claim seems doubtful after all even older Hollywood films rarely linger on a completely static shot for very long. Bordwell does not appear to consider that the distracted manner in which many viewers watch television may not be attributable to the viewing environment (during dinner, in a living room, etc.) alone, but may be a function of other factors, such as the need (in American television) to break the broadcast on a regular basis for commercials. In other words, daily exposure to rapidly-changing visual media may have increased viewers' ability to quickly comprehend rapidly-changing images. Bordwell continues his argument in a way that supports this reading. "Before the 1960s many filmed TV programs had ASLs of 10 seconds or more, but in the decades since then I can find no ASLs averaging more than 7.5 seconds" (150). He goes on to add, "[p]erhaps cutting rates accelerated independently in the two media, or perhaps a feedback loop developed" (150). This statement still does not account for the possibility that successive generations of television viewers may have become more comfortable with, and more desiring of, quicker-paced visual media. In earlier film eras, most film patrons could not view films as often as could the emerging television audience. It is possible that viewers internalized the rhythms of film and television and became bored with slower visual narratives, gravitating to these intensified productions.

To propose that technology is not capable of driving innovation and change in film and other media would be absurd, but to say that technology is the primary cause of change in contemporary visual media seems overly simplistic. While offering an exhaustive history of technical development, Bordwell does seem to want to rely almost

exclusively on his theories of technology. His propositions regarding television appear especially tenuous. A counterargument could be made because of the proliferation of large, wide-screen HD televisions. With the adoption of wide-screen television, films no longer have to be cut to fit a square screen (or at least cut a negligible amount). Increased resolution shows detail comparable to film, and larger size televisions no longer make extreme close-ups as necessary or perhaps even desirable. As these trends continue I would guess that film will not return to the studio era style. If Bordwell were correct, then the technological attributes of modern televisions would create a demand for content more akin to classic Hollywood with a somewhat slower pace allowing the viewers eye to wander the frame. This scenario seems unlikely, because viewers have adapted to these *intensified* production techniques and accept them as the norm. Of course, Bordwell does offer other technological explanations for why film has changed, but most of them fall outside the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that most of his explanations occur along the lines of his views on television's influence.

The value of Bordwell's work, for my purposes, is that he attempts to posit his model of media change on a material basis. His work makes us think about the influence of technologies, including television, on other media, notably film. Other authors, however, have attempted to write about the connections between television and film but have missed the mark. Instead of looking for similarities they look for difference. If we look at this method through the prism of media language (*langage*), we begin to see problems of these formulations more clearly. Elements of the medial imaginary begin to be taken as concrete facts. Some may argue that what I am proposing is merely theoretical and not grounded in any specific practice of film. This

statement may be true depending on your aims. If the goal is simply to describe a phenomenon then current practices are acceptable. If we want to more fully understand media and our relationship to it we must begin to think of media in other terms such as those of psychoanalytic language.

An example of the older mode of critical thought, to which I have been alluding, is something like the recent collection *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable?: The Screen Arts in the Digital Age,* edited by Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffman. (The title of the collection refers to the Jean Luc Goddard film *Sauve Qui Peut (La Vie)* (1980) in which a character writes on a chalkboard, "vidéo et cinéma = Cain et Abel"). [4] The essays in this collection explore the mutual interactions and influences of cinema and television. Two important facts about this collection will become important as I continue. First, the book was published in Amsterdam with a principally European audience in mind. Second, the year of publication was 1998, so the full effect of certain digital technologies were not yet realized (I suppose they still are not).[5]

The first article from *Cinema Futures* I wish to examine is Conrad Schoeffer's "Scanning the Horizon: A Film is a Film is a Film." Schoeffer makes a case for subtle but characteristic differences of film versus television. After citing several examples in support of his claims, the piece culminates in Table 2-1. I am not going to repeat Schoeffer's examples here. Instead I would like to consider the conclusions laid out in this table, insofar as they specify characteristics or tendencies of cinema and television. These categories of cinematic and televisual are aspects of the imaginary order. They

[4] Video and Cinema = Cain and Abel

[5] I originally approached this book because of its reference to the digital, but the articles on television and cinema proved more useful for my purposes.

give us a model by which to establish resemblances of objects. The terms within the categories are signifiers which are part of the symbolic order. Here we see how these two orders are intrinsically bound to each other. The signifiers only have meaning for us as far as they engage the imaginary order, but now they are being placed in new contexts which generate new significances.

Table 2-1. Television/Cinema comparison

Television	Cinema
Daily Habit	Event
Low budget	High production values
Local	Escape
Fact based	Fictional
Dialogue-oriented	Visual
Viewed	Experience
Modular	Dramatic arc

My purpose here is not to quibble over terms or turn my argument into a structuralist discourse on media, but to envision media in new ways already accepted by audiences. Let me give the example of the popular television show *Lost*. This show hardly appears to possess many of the characteristics of television as Schoeffer has outlined them; it seems to fall in-line with characteristics of cinematic. In comparison to film *Lost* may not have as large a budget but the production aesthetic of the show has a very cinematic quality. While the episodes are *modular*, overall the show does have a *dramatic arc*. The show was often promoted as an *event*, which the audience had to *experience* for fear of being left out of loop. It was filmed on a tropical island; the very definition of escape for many people. This show is hardly the exception, there are many HBO, Cinemax, and other network shows that have been trending this way in recent years.

As mentioned previously, Schoeffer's essay appears in a book published in 1998. Based on the movies mentioned in the essay it couldn't have been written too long beforehand. Looking back, television and cinema still seemed far more rigidly differentiated in the 1990s than in the second decade of the 21st century. Why do the norms of television and cinema seem less rigid today? Is it just a case of one medium influencing – remediating - the other or is there another, more complex relationship at work here?[6] One possible explanation is the rise of the World Wide Web. While we were already using the Web in the late 90s, it had not yet become as ingrained in the general public's daily life. This was where I first noticed the fissure in media that became this project. With the advancement of digital technologies the rigid boundaries of media become less apparent. We can now stream television, cinema, and specifically digital content all within the same apparatuses. In some of this digital content (specifically cut-up style art) we can even encounter combinations of all three media. The digitization of media has made it all the more difficult to see where one begins and the next ends. For example, I can stream an episode of Lost (television) or the Seventh Seal (film) from my laptop. Not only can I watch earlier media which has been converted to a digital format, I can also view media that was intended for viewing on a computer like a video game, interactive digital fiction, or digital art. Bertolt Brecht had signaled a similar problem with radio as far back as 1932. Brecht writes, "there was a moment when technology was advanced enough to produce the radio and society was not yet advanced enough to accept it" (51). He goes onto suggest that radio should be two-way communication and perhaps this would remedy problems associated

[6] Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

with it. The Internet is a two medium, so if Brecht was correct maybe this will help us with some of these problems.

The next article from the collection that may be helpful is Pierre Sorlin's "Television and the Close-up: Interference of Correspondence." As may be gleaned from the title, this essay is about the use of the close-up in television. In the same vein as Bordwell, Sorlin attributes the use of close-ups in television to the distracted manner in which television is viewed in contemporary households. "Television is a domestic appliance. People come in, switch on their television and then go somewhere else. Television creates a permanent presence in their home" (121). This notion of "presence" I find intriguing and it may link forward into characteristics of digital media that have had some influence on the operations of modern cinema.

If we accept Sorlin's assumption that television's function in the contemporary cultural imaginary is partly to provide a "presence" in our homes, then similar assumptions may be made about subsequent broadcast/representational technologies. New media and digital technologies seem to provide "presence" in a far more comprehensive manner than television can. A larger and larger portion of the population carries cell phones and PDAs that keep them in constant contact with others through the digital world. Social networking sites have become places of constant contact, where you can read a friend's thoughts that hang in stasis for hours or seconds. Much like the fears that television would rot our minds, there are now fears that we are becoming less effective at tasks that require sustained attention because of digital technologies and the multitasking they encourage. The imaginary of television

has reshaped who and what we are, like the cinema before that, and now digital technologies will as well.

The final selection from *Cinema Future* which I wish to discuss is John Ellis' "Cinema and Television: Laios and Oedipus." It seems almost requisite that I mention this text, because of its address of Freudian psychoanalysis. Out of all the essays in this collection this one seems the closest to my project; however, Ellis is far more interested than I in keeping film and television distinct from one another. Rather than work from the Cain and Abel of the collections title, Ellis decides to use Laios and Oedipus as a metaphor for film. He does not descend into a particularly detailed psychoanalytic reading of film and television, founded on the myth's characters; instead, the basic premise of conflict between father and son is at the heart of this reading. This works very well as far as a reading of media as psychoanalytic language is concerned; after all the Name-of-the-Father is the originary signifier.[7] Ellis gives examples of the give and take between television and film to further flesh out the metaphor. Then he decides to abandon the metaphor. Here things become interesting.

For Ellis, television has increased the visual sophistication of viewing audiences. He observes of modern viewers:

> The general level of audiovisual literacy in Western culture is much higher than it was even twenty years ago. Ordinary people know how images are created; they have some idea of how images are selected, and how they can (in the common view) distort things. They are well used to sophisticated media 'in-jokes'. They can deal with elliptical narratives, ambiguous characters, leaps and discontinuities that would have puzzled the cinema audience of years ago. And it is cinema that profits from this audiovisual literacy… (130-1)

[7] For Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father is the fundamental signifier from which all signification stems.

A problem that I see with this statement is that films engaged in all the media operations he mentions many years before the dominance of television. These operations were adopted by the cultural language of media, if not by the general public, certainly by educated people who are now producing television.

The difference, for Ellis, seems to be the aims of television and film. Here he returns to the myth claiming that "Laios [is] the decisive; Oedipus [is] the obsessive repeater" (132). Again, we see a problem of historical context in this article. While film sequels were certainly not uncommon at the time this essay was written and television shows had even been made into movies (and vice versa, e.g., *MASH*), Ellis was not privy to the onslaught of these kinds of crossing of film and television – or film and other media such as comic books and video games - which have since become a norm of big budget films. It seems as if Hollywood has become the "obsessive repeater" with countless sequels, remakes, and licensed properties that have proliferated in the last 10 to 15 years.[8] The best guess for this situation is the stratospheric investment in production and promotion of current films; failing is far too costly, so directors and producers repeat prior success that are familiar to audiences. Ellis characterizes the television aesthetic as, "[that] of ordinary, mundane human existence, rather than of special moments, of epiphanies, of separated realm of the senses" (133). Here I would reiterate my objection to Schoeffer's essay: the depth possible on contemporary television has turned these "ordinary, mundane human existence[s]" into something approaching an "epiphany." Films are having a harder time creating strong character connections that television appears better able to establish over years of viewing. In an

[8] Meaning licensed from another media not rights bought from a screen writer.

hour and half to three hours run time, it is difficult to generate sympathy for characters when audiences are now accustomed to spending an hour a week (sometimes more) with a character over multiple seasons spread across a number of years.

The goal of this section was to look at a sample of the existing criticism of the televisual/filmic media. These two fields of media are obvious choices for comparison because of their dependence on visualization. One thing I want to make clear is that I am not saying that there is no difference between the two. Going back to the earlier explanation of my theory, the different media are like different spoken languages. Just as we would say that German and French are not the same language; film and television are not the same media language. We do, however, recognize that both German and French operate in fairly similar manners despite being from different language families. In the next chapter, I will examine the connections between film and digital media.

CHAPTER 3
DIGITAL LOGIC CELLULOID FILM

In the classic noir drama *Call Northside 777*, reporter P. J. McNeal (James Stewart) attempts to free Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte); a man, McNeal believes was wrong convicted of murder. One of the film's central plot points revolves around a photograph of Wiecek and eye-witness Wanda Skutnick (Betty Garde) walking into a police station. Skutnick claims that the only time she had ever seen Wiecek, before she identified him to the police, was while he was in the act of committing the crime. McNeal does not believe Skutnick, and other evidence suggests that Wiecek is innocent.

If McNeal can discredit Skutnick, he can save Wiecek. After seeing a news story about police blowing-up a signature to reveal a forgery, a thought occurs to McNeal. He quickly glances at the photo of both Wiecek and Skutnick entering the police station. It had been assumed that the photo was taken on the 23rd of December the same day that Skutnick identified Wiecek. If this photo was taken before that day it would prove that Skutnick had seen Wiecek at a time before the line-up, and her identification would be severely compromised. McNeal quickly goes to see the police worker who had done the photo work on the forgery case; luckily the man is sympathetic. McNeal asks him to blow-up a section of the photo containing a newsboy standing in the background holding the daily paper.

McNeal hurries to the Wiecek hearing without time to see the final blown-up photo; he relies on the A.P. wire to get it to him in time. He shows the judge and other members of the hearing committee the original photo (Figure 3-1 A), one blown up 100X (Figure 3-1 B), and one blown-up 140X (Figure 3-1 C). Finally, he takes the lawyers

and hearing committee to a nearby news office to see the final enlargement (Figure 3-1 D). They all see that the date the two were seen together was December 22nd, Skutnick is discredited, and Wiecek goes free.

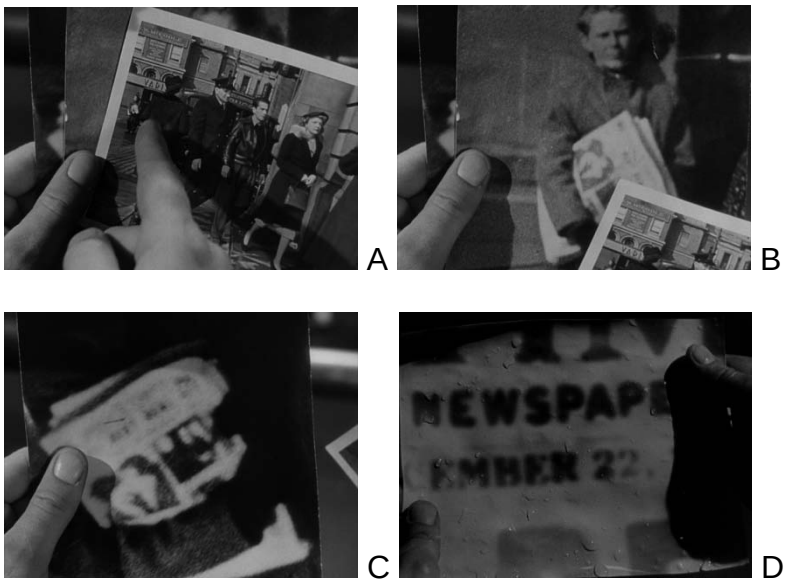


Figure 3-1. Enlarging the photo in *Call Northside 777*

What is fascinating about this film is that it based on a true story. Joseph M. Majczek was convicted of a murder based partially on the testimony of one Vera Walush. As in the film Majczek's mother placed an ad in the newspaper asking for help and a reporter did fight to get the conviction overturned. The key addition to the plot of the film is the photograph that discredits the witness. Instead, lawyer Walker Butler successfully sought a pardon for Majczek from Illinois Governor Dwight H. Green a close personal friend of Butler.[9]

Luckily for Majczek, the lawyer hired to defend him did not rely on the method depicted in *Northside*. As anyone with even a little knowledge of photography will quickly grasp when watching the film, the process as it is performed is nearly

[9] Northwestern Law Bluhm Legal Clinic

impossible. Yes, we can blow-up pictures, but an improbably high resolution lens and camera would have been required in order to capture the detail evident in the final enlargement. Worse still, the photo in Figure 3-1 C is already distorted; there would be no way to increase the resolution.

One of the oft discussed aspects of this film is that, to increase its realism, it was shot primarily on location. During the studio era this was not a normal practice. It is odd then that in a film, where visual realism was such a concern, there would be such a glaring technical inaccuracy regarding photography. Also, why would they change the story's end in this way? Yes, it is hardly heroic for a lawyer to use his connections to get a man out of jail, but there could have been another way to end the tale. Perhaps one reason was that by 1948 (*Northside's* release year) photography had become an increasing important part of our culture. Photography had been around for over 100 years and cinema only a short time less. The culture had embraced photography, and I would argue that people were becoming more personally interested in pictures. It doesn't seem like a coincidence that this was also the year in which Kodak introduced their first instant camera. Suddenly, cameras were more available, more affordable, and easier to use than ever before. With a minimal investment anyone could now be a photographer. Also, photographic development was no longer a dark art practiced somewhere in secret; it was now something that happened in front of every person with access to an instant camera. Despite consumer interest in photography, it is doubtful that the average person had considered the resolution limit of celluloid. As far as *Northside* is concerned, it seems that the filmmakers used the growing familiarity with the development of the photographic image – made tangible and everyday by the

instant camera – as way to justify the film's *deus ex machina*. The important point is that language (*langue*) of photographic development was becoming part of the larger cultural language (*langage*). *Northside* would not be the last film to use photographic enlargement as a central plot point, while extending and refining the *langue* of photography in the cultural imaginary.

Moving forward, Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 masterpiece *Blow-Up* uses the imaginary of photographic enlargement in a related form. As we shall see, since the time of *Northside* the *langue* of photography has more fully integrated into *langage* and can now be used in a more sophisticated manner. The overall story of the film is fairly simple. A self-absorbed photographer (David Hemmings) known only as Thomas is taking random pictures in Maryon Park (London), when a woman (Vanessa Redgrave) whom he had photographed demands that he give her the film. Thomas refuses, only to be confronted by the woman again at his loft. He pretends to give in to her demands, but substitutes a different roll of film. After developing the images from the park he notices something does not seem right. On the photograph, he traces the woman's lines of sight (Figure 3-2 A). After blowing-up the photo there appears what could be a face of someone standing in the bushes (Figure 3-2 B). Further enlarging the same area reveals what could be a gun in the hand of the hidden person (Figure 3-2 C). Finally, he zooms in on the woman while she appears to be looking at something on the ground (Figure 3-2 D). Thomas decides that he has captured the image of a murder and calls his editor to tell him about it. Later he goes back to the park and sees a corpse lying in the position from the photo. There is a little more to the story, but this is enough for my purposes.

This film is clearly asking us to question the reliability of photography. Unlike in *Northside*, here film is not infallible. The shape in Figure 3-2 B could be anything, yet in Figure 3-2 C there seems to be a gun. In Figure 3-2 D, there appears to be a corpse and later in the park we see a corpse. If we compare B and C the gun appears from nowhere. When Thomas returns to the park, we see the corpse as it appeared in the enlargement. Like in *Northside*, is this a case of film suddenly being able to reproduce detail that cannot be justified to appear in the image? I would say not. Throughout the film we are confronted with images of things which are not what they seem (most notably, near the film's end, the game of mimes playing tennis with an imaginary ball). Thomas decides that he has seen a murder (we know from the phone call), and now that is all he can see. The film is, more or less, told from his point of view so we see what he sees. Of course, others have already exhaustively made these observations, so let's move on.

What is of interest to me is the increased level of sophistication with the regard for photographic enlargement that is signaled in the passage from *Northside* to *Blow-Up*. It must be true that the viewing audience was familiar with photography than at the time of *Northside* (the previously mentioned instant camera had been allowing everyone to take quick and easy photos for 18 years). Yes, this was an "art film," by a director known for his challenging method and technical experimentation, so it may be expected to be more sophisticated in its approach to the photographic image than a mainstream Hollywood film. Had Antonioni (or anyone else) attempted to make *Blow-Up* in 1948 even most of the target audience may have been unprepared for these ideas. *Blow-Up*

is concerned with the limitation of both photography and perception. We see that the fluency of media language has increased in the interim years.

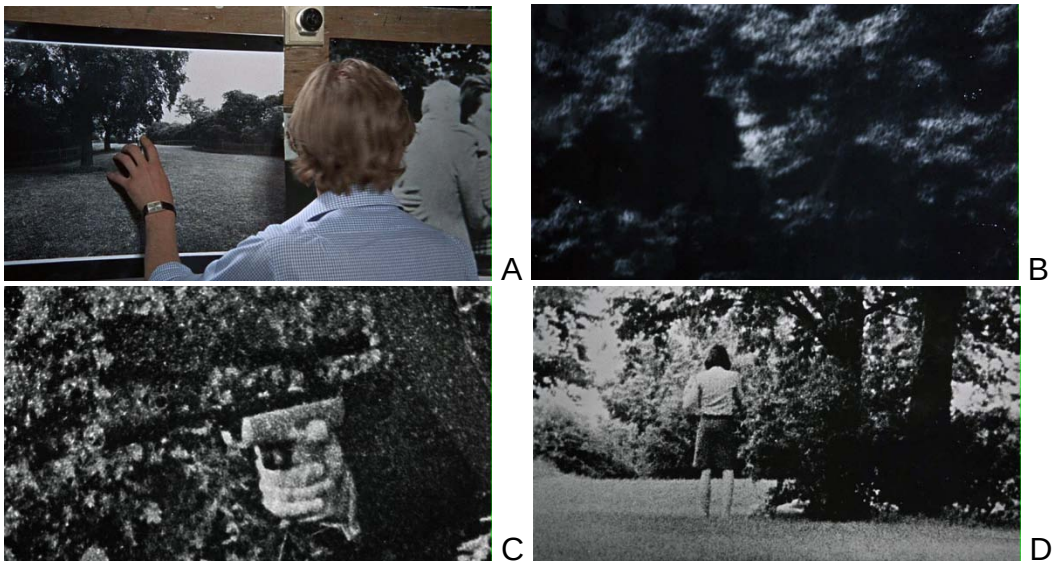


Figure 3-2. Enlarging the photo in *Blow Up*

The final film in which I would like to trace the representation of photographic enlargement is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). The plot of this film is film is relatively simple. Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) hunts rogue human clones called replicants; while doing so, he begins to suspect that he too may be a replicants.[10] Of course much more happens along the way, but unlike the last two films, a detailed plot synopsis is not as important because the scene we will be looking at is not as intrinsically linked to the meaning or outcome of the film.

While on the trail of the escaped replicants, Deckard searches for clues in a photograph (Figure 3-3 A). He places this photo into some sort of scanner and begins manipulating the image. At first this manipulation is confined to practices like zooming and enhancing. Then he begins to zoom into the reflection of a mirror (Figure 3-3 B). Next there is an extreme zoom into one of the mirror's details (Figure 3-3 C). Finally,

[10] Sorry if that was a spoiler but this film premiered in 1982.

there is a fantastic movement in which the computer seems to look *around* an object that was obscuring what he is trying to look at (Figure 3-3 D).

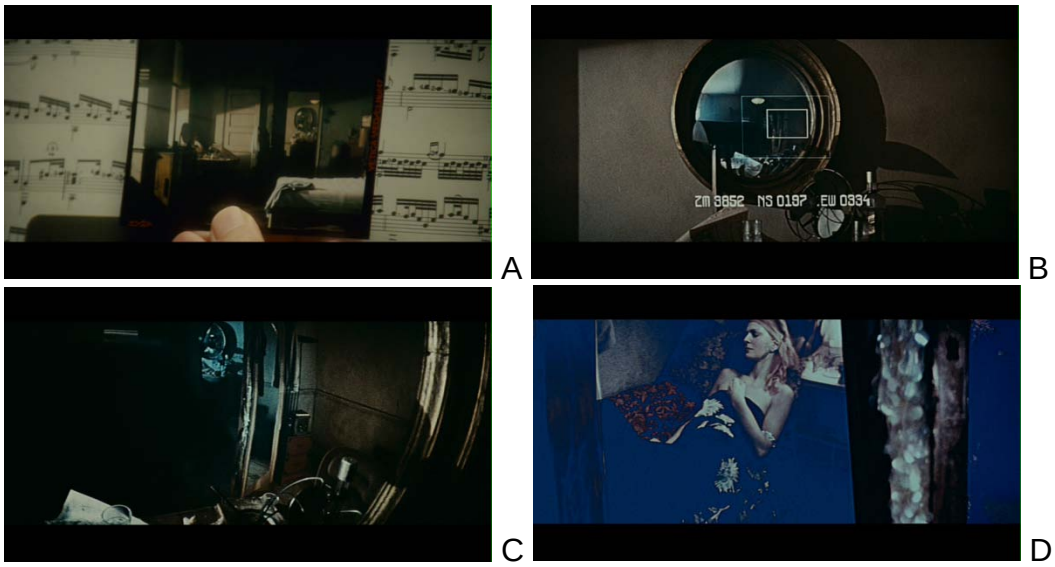


Figure 3-3. Photographic manipulation in *Blade Runner*

It seems as if we are back to where we were with *Northside*. A new technology of which the audience is currently enamored is used, in an improbable manner, as a device to capture the viewer's attention by showing more than can possibly be seen. This time it is not solely photography, but also digital computing that is being employed to effect this new perspective on this image.

Now, digital technologies capably use algorithms to enhance photos, but they cannot break the laws of physics related to matter and light. In *Northside*, an impossibly precise image seems probable, given the lack of knowledge concerning photographic resolution and the limits of enlargement. In *Blade Runner*, a similar sort of magic was is effected, perhaps on the basis of the audience's misunderstanding of a computer's capabilities, even in the (then) distant future of 2019. Of course, more realistic example of digital enhancement technologies are encountered on any number of current police and courtroom television programs. And like *Blow-Up*, these dramas are more openly

confronting the issue of verisimilitude of what we see. An algorithm is nothing but a computer's educated guess as to what the image might be, similar to Thomas's conjectures in *Blow-Up* (well perhaps without the human bias).

The interesting thing in these three films is that the *langue* of still photography is depicted within the *langue* of moving pictures. Of course, movies are a form of photography taken at 24 images per second, so the *langue* of still photography is always at work in film, whether the audience realizes it or not. For this reason, we never notice the merging of these two *langues*, because one was built on the other from the beginning. This is perhaps why visual media as language (*langage*) has been so difficult to conceptualize, because thus far the dominant visual media have been more closely related to each other. For instance, in the discussion of television and cinema we saw that these two media are rather similar. Both mediums capture individual images and replay them sequentially to give the illusion of motion. The two media are associated with cultural discourses which have shaped them and generated certain convention of production and reception, which we often view as essential to them. As marks of digital culture have evolved in film, the differences in the two *langues* have been easier to detect, because the *langues* are so noticeably distinct from one another. I will give filmic examples of this distinction, but first I must mention Manovich's theory of the cultural interface which has provided much of the inspiration for this project.

As I mentioned earlier, the term "language" is often used in discussions of media. A prime example of this use would be Lev Manovich's seminal 2001 study *The Language of New Media*. From the very title we know that Manovich will be employing the term. "Language" is used in various manners throughout the book, but one instance

that proved important for this project was in his discussion of "The Language of Cultural Interface." In this section, Manovich claims that:

> During the 1990s, the identity of the computer changed. In the beginning of the decade, the computer was still largely thought of as a simulation of a typewriter, paintbrush or drafting ruler—in other words, as a tool used to produce cultural content that, once created, would be stored and distributed in the appropriate media—printed page, film, photographic print, electronic recording. By the end of the decade, as the Internet use became commonplace, the computer's public image was no longer solely that of a tool but also a universal media machine, which could be used not only to author, but also to store, distribute, and access all media (69).

He goes on to say, "We are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form" (69-70). Basically, Manovich is arguing that the digital computer is now the general condition in which most of society experiences cultural production.

Previous to this condition, of cultural interface, we experienced culture largely through cinema and the printed word. For Manovich:

> "Cinema" thus includes the mobile camera, representations of space, editing techniques, narrative conventions, spectator activity—in short, different elements of cinematic perception, language, and reception. Their presence is not limited to the twentieth-century institution of fiction film; they can be found already in panoramas, magic lantern slides, theater, and other nineteenth-century cultural forms; similarly, since the middle of the twentieth-century, they have been present not only in films but also in television and video programs (71).

This conception of "cinema" is in accord with my own. Mainly, the differences between these various visual media, Manovich mentions, are (as I mentioned in the *Film or Television?* chapter) incidental. As far as "printed word" is concerned, Manovich is "referring to a set of conventions that have developed over many centuries (some even before the invention of print) and that today are shared by numerous forms of printed matter, from magazines to instruction manuals" (71). Of course, there is "a general

trend in modern society toward presenting more and more information in the form of time-based audiovisual moving image sequences, rather than as text" (78).

Manovich's description of the "cultural interface" seems apt enough, yet he offers little in the way of a description of the mechanism by which it functions. This problem of mechanism is where media language theory, as I am outlining it, becomes a useful explanatory device. As we begin to become accustomed to an emerging medium, we grow more accustomed to its idioms and system – its language – and begin to have expectations of finding that medium within other media. As Manovich mentions, the "trend…toward…time-based audiovisual moving image sequences" seems driven by what we now consider limitations of text. Furthermore, as we have become more habituated to the possibilities of the digital cultural interface, the cinematic has come to seem somewhat limited in comparison. As an example of the cinematic shift towards the digital, I will now demonstrate how film has progressed from representations of digital technologies (like the photographic examples from the beginning of this section) to using the very logics of digital technologies. This implementation of digital logics is quite different from the examples of photographic enlargement I have citied because film has always had an underlying photographic logic. The analyses will not be readings of the entire film, instead they are meant to demonstrate the evolution of the digital in film from representation to logic.

The first film I will be looking at is Disney's *Tron* (1982). The film tells the story of a computer programmer named Flynn (Jeff Bridges) who is pulled into his computer and must fight malfunctioning computer programs. The interior of the computer is envisioned mostly as multicolored, glowing lines on a black background. Most of the

effects are achieved not through digital means but instead by existing film practices (optical printing and the like). The conception of how this computer works is purely fantastic. My reading of this film is analogous to my reading of *Call Northside 777*. In *Northside* viewers were drawn in by a technology (photography) with which they were rapidly becoming more personally involved with, and the same can be said of *Tron* albeit with a different technology (digital computing). *Tron's* release in 1982 was at a time when home personal computers were rapidly becoming for many less a matter of science fiction and more a commodity of everyday life. Despite the newfound access to personal computers that was now possible for the average person, the vast majority of the film going populace was unaware of the capabilities or possibilities of digital computers. *Tron,* like *Northside,* depicts a fantastic version of a technology that, at the time of release, was captivating the culture. (Both technologies, however, had already entered the popular consciousness before the respective films' releases).

The appropriations of technology characteristic of the next two films (*The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*, 1999, 1999) I will cite as examples of the cinematic digital evolution are in some respects analogous to those of *Blow-Up*. Before I discuss these two films a brief excerpt from N. Katherine Hayles may clarify what I am attempting to accomplish. In the final chapter of Hayles's book Electronic *Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, she writes, "So essential is digitality to contemporary processes of composition, storage, and production that print should properly be considered a particular form of output for digital files rather than a medium separate from digital instantiation" (159). I would assert that the same could be said of a great many modern theatrically released films. As a matter of fact, if we agree with Hayles, then most of these films exhibit multiple

levels of digitality. First, most of them were probably conceived using digital technologies. This conception could be anything from writing and revising the script, to preproduction renderings, to any number of preproduction organizational tasks. Second, many current films are shot on digital cameras. Third, almost all mainstream films, whether shot digitally or on traditional film, are now edited using non-linear digital editing systems. Fourth, post-production effects ranging from simple color correction to complicated computer generated images are produced using digital computing. Clearly, modern films are touched by the digital. Both *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ* demonstrate these digital touches, but they also represent digital technologies as foundational elements of the story-worlds they depict.

I felt compelled to include *The Matrix* (even though I do not think very highly of it as a film), because of its commercial significance, both financially and aesthetically. My chief complaint with *The Matrix* is that, it is a rather mindless Hollywood action blockbuster coated with a thin veneer of pseudo-philosophical dialog, leading many viewers to believe to imagine that it is saying digital culture, perception, or the relation of digital culture to the real. Yet, despite my opinion of the film, it marks something of a turning point for the role of digital logics in popular film.

The plot of *The Matrix* is simple. A group of freedom fighters attempt to free humankind from enslavement by nefarious robots. The robots use humans as living batteries and keep them pacified through a digitally-constructed, illusory world known as the Matrix. The freedom fighters rescue from the Matrix a man named Tom Anderson (Keanu Reeves), aka Neo (his hacker name), whom they believe to be some sort of messiah (the “One”). According to prophesy, Neo alone is capable of defeating the

machines for good and freeing humankind from the illusions of the Matrix. (Of course, we don't see Neo defeating the machines in the first film of the trilogy; that would make it more difficult to produce sequels. I will only be discussing the first film of the franchise.)

As *Call Northside 777* and *Blow-Up* involve representations of photographic enlargement, *The Matrix's* plot involves representations of digital technologies. While the digital technologies of *The Matrix* are as equally fantastic as those of *Tron*, the latter film demonstrates a fuller understanding of how digital computers actually function. For instance, after Neo is freed from the Matrix he becomes capable of seeing the Matrix's source code (Figure 3-4). When plugged into the Matrix a person sees a visual representation of this code; just as most of us don't see the programming code of a computer in our everyday use. Like a computer screen the Matrix creates sense data that possesses value for the human user.

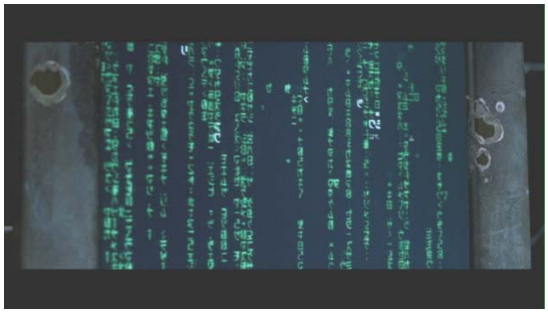
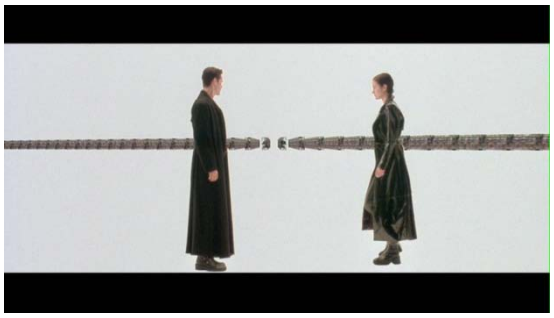


Figure 3-4. The matrix code

Next, we should look at the scene introducing "the construct." In the film, "the construct" is described as a loading program that allows the freedom fighters to access anything they may need in order to fight the machines in the matrix (guns, clothes, phones, etc) (Figure 3-5 A and B). The name is not common to computer discourse, but the concept is similar to a plug-in. A plug-in is a program that interacts with another

preexisting program and gives the preexisting program new capabilities. In this instance it gives the user (the freedom fighters) access to objects they would not otherwise have in the matrix. In Figure 3-5 A and B, we see guns being loaded in “the construct” prior to the final showdown of the film.


A

B

Figure 3-5. The loading program

The final example from *The Matrix* I wish to cite is what has become – unfortunately – its most prolific contribution to contemporary film aesthetics, *bullet-time*. *Bullet-time* is the term commonly given to slow motion shots in which the camera moves about a character or object to highlight complex action which would be otherwise indiscernible. In *The Matrix*, these shots are primarily of characters dodging bullets, which leave distinctive trails of, presumably, disturbed air behind as they pass (Figure 3-6). Perhaps *The Matrix* was not the first film to use this or similar techniques, but it was most certainly the film that popularized its use in the mainstream. Countless films and video games have since used this technique to the point that even parodies of the technique have become cliché. This technique does, however, link to a digital logic of its own, 3-D digital graphics. Digital 3-D graphics computer programs allow the user to model an object and then inspect it from any angle or distance they choose. These capabilities were a major step forward in digital computing with profound influence on contemporary filmmaking. As we remember from the 1990s, a major promise of the

Internet was the capability to travel places anywhere in the world from the safety and comfort of your own home, and it would be just like being there. *The Matrix* took this capability and put a dystopic spin on it. Now instead of traveling to far off art museums from our home computers, we would be fooled into thinking that a computer generated world is reality.

Figure 3-6. Bullet time

A film that I find far more interesting yet was completely overshadowed by the enormous commercial success of *The Matrix* was David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*. Both films were released in 1999, but *eXistenZ* was released just about a month later. Owing to its low advertising budget (in fact I don't recall seeing any advertisements for it) and the unfortunate timing; *eXistenZ* was lost in the shuffle. Despite its relative box office failure, it is a fascinating film which deals with philosophical issues of perception distinctive of life in the digital age.

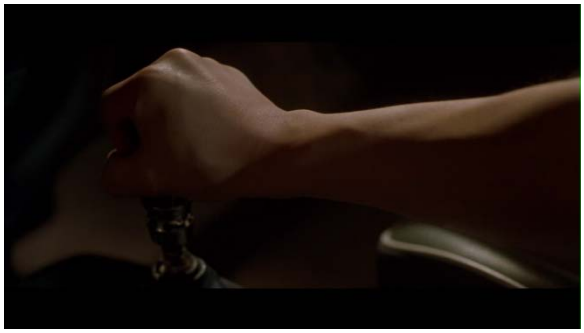
eXistenZ tells the story of Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a computer game designer, and Ted Pikul (Jude Law), a PR person for a computer game manufacturer, as they run from anti-game radicals who attempt to assassinate Geller at a testing of her new game. The film does not attempt to deal with any sort of technical issues of digital representation; instead, it focuses on issues of perception in a post-digital world. As the two main characters evade the anti-game radicals, they play

Geller's game. The game is so realistic that eventually they realize that they cannot be certain if they are in the game world or not. The blurring of game and "reality" is sufficient that there is nowhere in the film to which we can point and say this event or object is conclusively in or out of the gameworld. Obviously, this is a very literal presentation of these issues of perception, but this is very similar to the point that Hayles made. Until we stop and think about it (as Hayles points out using literature as an example), where does the digital world end and ours begin?

I will now conclude this section with brief readings of one sequence drawn from *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and one from *Running Scared* (2006). Through the use of digital animations these sequences demonstrate how fully previously-distinctive digital *langue* has been integrated into our medial *langage*. They are not particularly important to the films as a whole; in fact, they could be replaced with more traditional shots or removed entirely and the films would be largely the same. The difference between these films and *The Matrix* is that they don't represent a digital world. This point is crucial because it demonstrates the integration of the digital *langue* into the representation of an ostensibly non-digital storyworld. In *The Matrix*, a plausible reason had to be given for effects like *bullet-time*. In other words, at the time of *The Matrix's* release, the use of such effects had to be justified by elements of the world in which they are used, in such a way that they should appear "natural" to that world. The examples I will cite from *The Fast and the Furious* and *Running Scared* occur, ostensibly, in a world which functions similarly to our own. The audience accepts these elements of digital *langue* because they have been fully integrated into a general *langage* of media representation and seem thus no more unusual than, for example,

photographic enlargement – even though they are capable of depicting things and events that are, literally, not able to be seen.

The Fast and the Furious is a predictable adventure film about an undercover detective named Brian O'Connor (Paul Walker) who infiltrates a gang of Southern California import street racers. This film is ultimately a disposable entry in youth racing films, but it does demonstrate in one notable way the integration of digital *langue*. During the race scenes, an initial close-up of the gear shift (Figure 3-7 A) quickly cuts to the internals of the transmission and engine (Figure 3-7 B), rendered in digital 3D. Unlike in the digitally generated fantasy world of *The Matrix*, this race is, presumably, happening in the audience's reality with all of the laws of physics characteristic of that world in place. Yet, with the aid of digital animation the audience is able to see the inter-workings of an enclosed transmission and engine. This would clearly not be possible without the use of animation, but the more important point is that audience is meant to accept these images as those of things that can, reasonably, take place. I assert that audiences, having become more comfortable with digital *langue* in contemporary cinema, now accept images such as these, because they function like hyperlinks. As a consequence of users' familiarity with navigation on the World Wide Web, we have become conditioned to expect more information than what can be immediately seen. When the camera focuses the audience's attention on the gear shift, the audience is conditioned to expect more than just the visible movement of the shifter. Also, unlike in *Blow-Up* or *Blade Runner* the audience is never meant to question the validity of these images; they are meant to accept them as accurate depictions of what is actually occurring.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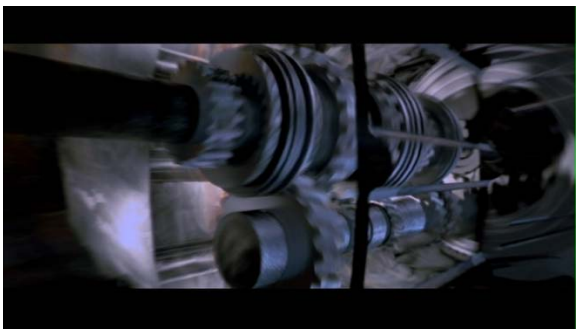
B

Figure 3-7. *The Fast and the Furious* gear shift

The final film I will discuss in this section is *Running Scared*.[11] The film is about a low level mobster named Joey Gazelle (Paul Walker) who is charged with getting rid of weapons that have been used in mob hits.[12] One of the weapons, used to kill a "dirty" police officer, goes missing before Joey is able to disposes of it, and he must race to find the gun before any of his superiors learn of his gaffe. The weapon is discovered missing after a stray bullet flies through Joey's dining room window while his family eats dinner. Joey immediately suspects his suspicious neighbor, Anzor (Karel Roden), and takes another gun to confront him. When Joey arrives next door he finds Anzor shot. Anzor claims it was his own son Oleg who had shot him. The camera immediately breaks into a crime recreation style similar to those used in many television

[11] I am discussing the 2006 Wayne Kramer film and should not be confused with the 1986 Peter Hyams film.

[12] It is purely coincidental that Paul Walker happens to star in both this film and *The Fast and the Furious*. The only connection that may seem pertinent to this discussion is that both films were intended for a somewhat younger audience. A younger audience may theoretically more quickly adopt emerging media trends. Something that is also odd about these two films is they are very similar in other ways which currently I cannot connect to this project. Joey's character is actually an undercover police officer like Walker's roll in *The Fast and the Furious*. Also, both films have a somewhat racist subtext. I do not wish to explore these subtexts in the main body of the text, because they are outside the parameters of this project. Interesting questions are, however, raised about if connects between target audiences (presumably affluent audiences who have already adopted and integrated digital technologies) and cultural beliefs. These are obviously massive questions which would be hard to prove and clearly beyond the scope of this project.

police and courtroom dramas. This sequence culminates with a shot from the bullets perspective as it travels through Joey's dining room (Figure 3-8 A and B).


A

B

Figure 3-8. Bullet goes through Joey's window

Again, this sequence owes much to television; but, I would argue, that the television *langue* has already adopted this shot from the digital *langue*. First, this shot has been made with heavy use of digital compositing. Second, the way the camera moves through and around things in a manner similar to the way we examine 3-D objects online (if you aren't sure what I mean think about the retail websites that allow you to examine objects in 3-D before purchase). This shot also seems to be something of a fulfillment of the *Blade Runner* scene which I had discussed previously. While you still cannot see around objects that obscure other objects in photographs, the fantasy of being able to do so is alive and well.

CHAPTER 4
LOLA IS MEDIA LANGUAGE

Thus far, I have lain out the fundamentals of this media language theory. I will conclude with a somewhat more in depth examination of the film *Run Lola Run* (*Lola Rennt*, 1998), and determine how it functions using many elements of digital *langue*. The film is structured in three main segments, each of which begins as a slight variation on the same sequence of events. The segments are separated by brief interludes, in which the two main protagonists Lola (Franka Potente) and her boyfriend Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) discuss the meaning of love and death. The primary action of the movie is set off by Manni, a small time criminal looking to move up in the eyes of his criminal friends, who loses a bag containing 100,000 German Marks during a job and fears the repercussions when his boss finds out. Desperate, Manni calls Lola begging her for help. Realizing Manni's peril, Lola promises to help him find a solution and bolts out of her house, with only 20 minutes before Manni will undertake a mostly likely doomed robbery in an effort to recoup the lost money. Each time the story repeats Lola hatches a slightly different plan which results in a dramatically different outcome.

Many critics have already commented on this film, and most of them seem to believe that it is a characteristically post-modern film. While I do not completely disagree that *Lola* demonstrates some aspects of what could be called post-modernism, I believe this film to truly be a product of the digital age. I am not the first to notice the influence of digital systems on this film, but often the digital is cited as being just a small aspect of this film's composition. For example, Robert Lauer writes:

> One also has a film imitating a new technology- the internet- that has compressed time and which continues to become more intricate and exciting in the new millennium; a new technology , where everything is

> possible upon returning to a previous icon that enables one to access others potentially available previously un-invoked routes [Paragraph 20].

Lauer touches here upon the concept of the computer icon which is what I originally noticed in *Lola*, and caused me to begin this project. I have two small problems with Lauer's reading. First, he claims that the film is "imitating . . . the Internet." I would argue that the film is using internet *langue* – specifically, the element of the hyperlink – and not imitating it. In *Lola*, The language of film and the Internet have formed a pidgin language. Second, Lauer makes this comparison in a single paragraph. This is clearly a small objection but it is as if Lauer added this comparison as an afterthought. Lauer is making an argument about Lola as a work of post-modernism, and as such he presents a pastiche of influences. For me, this undervalues the importance of the digital in the system of *Lola*.

A somewhat closer, yet still not entirely satisfactory, take would be Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey's reading of both *Lola* and *Bandits* (Katja von Garnier 1997):

> [Y]ouger audiences, practiced in video gaming, have different demands of realism than audience before video gaming. Such viewers do not ask cinema to provide realistic images as a match between sign and referent, but rather to understand visual culture as a bricolage of realities (127).

Like Lauer, this is not the focus of O'Sickey's argument, but she does capture the reception side of what I have been arguing here. Of course, I would argue this even further and say that the production side has been influenced by the digital, not just by video games, but by a whole range of technologies that support its distinctive language.

There are at least three particular digital logics which I believe are at work in *Run Lola Run*: icon, simulation, and aggregation. There are perhaps others, but these three should be sufficient to demonstrate *Lola's* digital idiom. The intentionality of the

filmmakers is inconsequential as far as if they thought about these concepts in relation to the film. What is important is that these logics are the *langue* of the digital.

As previously mentioned, what originally fascinated me about *Lola* is the way certain shots function almost as computer icons, in a fashion similar to the example from *The Fast and the Furious*. While running to meet Manni, Lola passes, and in some cases, bumps into various people along her path. In some of these encounters, the camera focuses in on the particular individual and a rapid succession of images follow. These images tell a flash-forward story of the characters' future after Lola has passed. The individual stories matter little to the main story, and appear to function chiefly as additional signifiers of the film's basic premise that every event in one's life entails a bifurcation that could lead to a different outcome. Sometimes the character's situation progresses positively or negatively. In the still shots shown below (Figure 4-1), we see the flash-forward story of one of the bank workers whom Lola encounters the first time she goes to her father's place of business in search of his help. Figure 4-1 A acts as the icon; we see the bank worker and the cinematic hyperlink opens to her story. Figure 4-1 B we see that she has an accident. Figure 4-1 C, presumably, comes from a surgery following the accident. Figure 4-1 D is the woman after her surgery. Finally, we assume that Figure 4-1 E is the woman committing suicide, perhaps in response to her paralyzing injuries. The second time Lola comes to the bank – that is, in the second iteration of the film's basic story – a very different outcome follows. The bank worker falls in love with a teller (who is instrumental in Lola's robbery of the bank), they marry, and live happily ever after in a mutually satisfying sadomasochistic relationship.

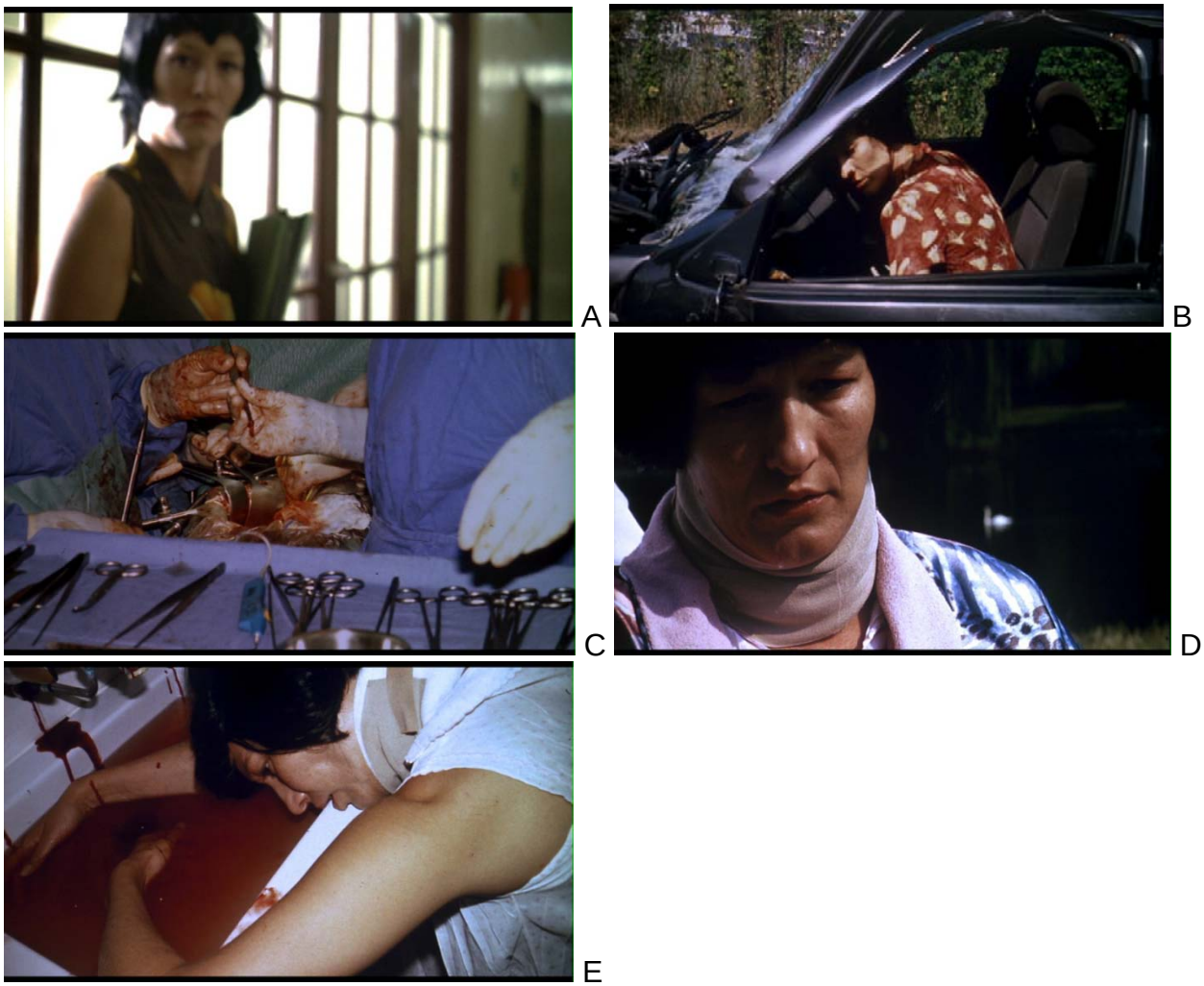

Figure 4-1. *Run Lola Run* flash forward

These icon based sequences are essential to fully comprehending *Lola* and its application of digital logic. The fact that these sequences have no influence on the greater narrative, ironically, keys the viewer to their exemplary character. Why else would the filmmaker go out of his way to include these sequences? They seem intended to induce the audience to compare these sequences with other elements of visual culture they have experienced – specifically, the icons and other elements of the graphic user interface (GUI). In his book *Ex-foliations: Reading Machines and the Upgrade Path*, Terry Harpold describes the implementation of icons thusly:

> [T]he screens of the GUI in the present cultural moment sustain an imaginary of unbroken reference and saturated connectivity, and have bound them in popular consciousness to seeming analog correlates, stripped of their mechanical and operational complexities (235).

Put simply, icons are intended to offer the user a familiar object to execute a task that is actually rather complicated within the technical system of the computer. In *Lola*, These flash-forwards, of potential futures of these minor characters, operate in a similar manner, and stand in this way for the overall pattern of the film and Lola and Manni's potential futures in each of the three variants of their story. At the moments of the flash-forward the film switches from full motion to a series of still shots. Each of these shots is accompanied by the sound of a shutter clicking or a flashbulb, reinforcing the idea that these are individual snapshots (that is, an analog correlate to the digitally discrete sequences).

If we accept that these sequences are based on discrete and compact points of departure akin—at least formally—to the icons of the GUI, then what are the "mechanical and operational complexities" which are hidden away? The answer is clearly *simulation*. In the flash-forward sequences, we are lead to believe that slight variations of Lola's actions lead to completely different outcomes for, not only herself and Manni, but also for the characters she encounters. Wendy Everett attributes this to chaos theory:

> [T]he difference of a fraction of a second, causing Lola either to bump into someone or narrowly to miss doing so, may have a significant impact not only on her own future but on that of the unknown individuals concerned who may, as a result, discover love and happiness or kill themselves in despair, may win the lottery or be diagnosed with cancer. Always, the outcomes seem out of proportion with the initial incident (butterfly/plane crash) (166).

The only problem that I see with Everett's reading is that she limits the possibilities to only what is on screen. If we are to accept the relevance of chaos theory to *Lola*, then we must also accept the unlimited and unforeseeable possibilities that could be generated by even the slightest change in initial conditions (a moment's hesitation or interruption when Lola sets off on her run).

The final example of digital logic I wish to investigate is aggregation. Aggregation is not a strictly digital logic, but it has become highly visible and influential on media practices because of its presence on the World Wide Web. Search engines and media aggregators sites are the two most common examples. Search engines allow us to somewhat more effectively sift through the massive amounts of information on the web by grouping relevant sites by similar text and keywords. This is clearly a gross oversimplification of how a search engine operates, but is at least provisionally acceptable for my current purposes.

In *Lola*, simulation logic works because of the aggregate logic we also see at work. We most clearly see the aggregate logic at work when Lola and Manni are robbing the grocery store in the first iteration of the main story. In this version, Lola wields the gun of the store's security guard she has just disarmed, but Manni must instruct her on how to release the safety catch. In the second occurrence of this story, Lola, before she has met up with Manni, takes the gun from the bank's security guard. This time she knows how to work the weapons safety. In the end, however, both of these simulations prove unsuccessful despite Lola's new-found knowledge of weapons, as each ends with the death of Lola or Manni.

The desired outcome is not achieved until the third simulation. Perhaps she has learned that her best option is using no weapon. I argue that part of what makes this an example of aggregate logic is the very fact that we don't know exactly how Lola learns these things. Our ignorance is similar to the popular ignorance of aggregate search engine operations. Again, like Harpold's description of the GUI, the "mechanical and operational complexities" are not visible but we see the outcome.

The observation by Wendy Everett I cited earlier is drawn from her essay "Fractal Films and the Architecture of Complexity." In this essay, Everett claims that Run Lola Run is a "Fractal Film" which she describes as a "new filmic trend that takes issue with theories of chance, chaos, and networks" (160). This sentiment is similar to those provided by many of the critics who have written on this film. Most insist that the film is about chaos, post-modernism, or randomness. While I most certainly agree that this context of the film was intended by the filmmakers, I do not agree that this was the final result, or that it is the best way in which to understand the film. In the last version of the main story, Lola is attempting to attain the money by gambling, a game of roulette (synonymous with chance). Yet, this game of chance is influenced by Lola's piercing scream at the moment the ball comes to rest. Lola's influence suggests simulation. A simulation can include any factors the programmer wishes. Also, a simulation can be run until the desired result is achieved. The final version of the main story seems to be the desired result of mainstream cinema – Manni finds the money, Lola wins even more money, neither is harmed; they live happily ever after. Not only is this ending correct by conventional standards, but the film is highly structured and hardly random. Here we

see the full unavoidability of language. Despite the filmmakers intent to make a film about chaos the *langue* of the digital had already influenced the greater *langage*.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

As mentioned near the beginning of this piece, this work is not intended as the end of a topic. The influence that digital and other media have on film and vice versa is not as simple as it may seem on first inspection. The way we interact with and experience media has multiple levels which are analogous to Lacan's orders of the *Symbolic* and *Imaginary*.

In this study, I have proposed that many of the systems that have previously been used in media criticism (including film) have been misled by mistaking media for something other than an extension of language. A more appropriate approach would be to conceive of media as Lacan conceived of language, which would mean language as having two different meaning *langage* and *langue*. *Langage* is the entirety, and *langue* are individual languages.

I have shown how individual media languages are represented and influence with examples from still photography, television, and digital media. Photography was demonstrated in the examples from *Blow-Up*, *Call Northside 777*, and *Blade Runner*. I traced representations of the digital from *Tron* through to newer film like *The Fast and the Furious* and *Running Scared* that adopt digital logics intrinsically. Finally, I examined *Run Lola Run* which I see as something of a turning point for the adoption of digital logics in film. All of these films are just examples, which I have selected because they seemed relevant to what I am trying to illustrate. There are other films that certainly containing aspects of the concepts I have discussed here, and perhaps there are examples that are better than those provided. Again, this work was meant as a beginning not an end and I hope to detail these concepts further in the future.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chad Sims was born in Plantation, Florida. He graduated from Pope John Paul II High School in 1999. After attending the University of Central Florida for a year, he decided to go into audio engineering. He received an Associate of Science in recording arts from Fullsail University in Orlando, Florida. In 2001, Chad moved to Gainesville to pursue a career as an audio engineer. Eventually, He decided to return to school, and earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Florida in 2008. This thesis is part of the work towards his English Master of Arts with a focus in film and media studies. Chad will be continuing his academic career at Temple University.