"The demise of the relative and analogical character of photographic shots and sound samples in favour of the absolute, digital character of the computer, following the synthesizer, is thus also the loss of the poetics of the ephemeral."
-- Paul Virilio, in *Art and Fear* [1]
"When the world, or reality, finds its artificial equivalent in the virtual, it becomes useless."

-- Jean Baudrillard, in *Impossible Exchange* [2]
"Don't you think the world's greatest game artist ought to be punished for the most effective deforming of reality?"

-- eXistenZ, dir. David Cronenberg [3]
"To have a regard for reality does not mean that what one does in fact is to pile up appearances. On the contrary, it means that one strips the appearances of all that is not essential, in order to get at the totality in its simplicity."

-- André Bazin, from "In Defense of Rossellini" [4]

Today, the real has become the new avant-garde.
Can we lay responsibility for the resurrection of reality at the doorstep of digital cinema? In what might be the supreme irony, it turns out that the re-emergence of realism in the cinema can be traced directly to a technological form that seems to represent a final break with the real. For doesn't the digital -- in its very process of capturing reality -- break with the old photographic process upon which classical cinema was built? Doesn't the digital remove us even deeper from the real world?

It would seem so. And yet, despite the fact that digital technologies are used in the service of ever greater special effects and fantasies that twist reality into impossible escapades, there is an alternative tendency to use digital video cameras not to transform the raw material of reality into some elaborate special effect, but rather to depict it more humbly. In a sense, the new aesthetics -- evident in recent movies shot with digital cameras, such as *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002), *Russian Ark* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002), *Tape* (Richard Linklater, 2001) and *Time Code* (Mike Figgis, 2000) -- rely on a species of strict formalism (the long take, the divided frame, etc.) to remind us that reality is the most experimental form of all.

To claim that digital video cinema returns us to the real we must acknowledge the paradox that the technologies of digital cinema -- as opposed to analogue -- are often discussed in terms of how they in fact remove us further from reality, and even from human-ness. John Bailey, a cinematographer who has worked on both celluloid and DV films (including *The Anniversary Party* [Alan Cumming and Jennifer Jason Leigh, 2001]) has talked about the "hyper-realistic, artificial look"[5] of digital video as opposed to celluloid. DV cameras, unlike analogue cameras, convert the captured image to zeros and ones, compress it, and save it as a digital file. "A digital system," notes Peter Edwards, "is one in which data is
represented as a series of periodic pulses. The initial data source . . . is regularly sampled and converted into numerical values."[6] If anything, digital cinema seems to offer the specter of the unreal. Jean-Pierre Geuens has written that digital cinema is characterized by a "deep distrust of the everyday world, the sense that the 'real stuff' is no longer good enough to do the job that is now envisioned for the cinema."[7]

And yet: Russian Ark constitutes an elaborate 96-minute long take through the Hermitage Museum. Time Code is a series of four separate 97 minute long takes simultaneously shown in four quadrants. Ten is entirely shot (without the director present) from digital cameras mounted on the dashboard of a car as it is driven through the streets of Tehran. Tape takes place entirely in one hotel room. In a sense, the special effect that that links these digital films together is reality itself; they are considered experimental or avant-garde simply because they lack the jump-cut, speed ramp, freeze frame, CGI aesthetics that now inform mass cultural media forms ranging from television commercials, to music videos, to video games, to television shows, to mainstream movies.

In Don DeLillo's novel The Body Artist, the main character Lauren is transfixed by a real-time rendering of a country road in Finland that she watches on the computer: "It was interesting to her because it was happening now. . . . It was compelling to her, real enough to withstand the circumstance of nothing going on."[8] In a sense, this long take on reality -- a real-time streaming of reality that could conceivably last indefinitely -- is an extension of the Lumière brothers' films. Where the unedited one-takes of the Lumière lasted just over one minute, today's long takes can last hours. "Four cameras. One take. No edits. Real time." Such are the claims of Time Code. As Lev Manovich has noted, "[I]n addition to a more intimate filmic approach, a [DV] filmmaker can keep shooting for a whole duration of a 60 or 120 minute DV tape as opposed to
the standard ten-minute film role."[9] If traditionally movies splintered time into a series of narrative units, then it is only just that digital video should resurrect "real time" in films that are, paradoxically, considered avant-garde.

In fact, it is these very constraints on the deformation of reality that constitute today's cinematic avant-garde. It is ironic that the Dogme 95 movement -- the Danish film movement inaugurated by directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg that aimed in part to purge cinema of its excesses -- precisely because it aimed to strip away special effects and liberate film from illusion by creating severe rules. (I will leave it to well-meaning film theorists to insist that, of course, all films construct reality insofar as reality itself is a construct.) Although the Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity" is well-known and disseminated, a few of its ten rules bear repeating:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images, or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)[10]

While some theorists of film studies have been quick to point out the irony and hypocrisies of this vow, or to dismiss it as a mere publicity stunt (as if sincerity or modesty were preconditions of art!) the general tendency of the Dogme 95 movement and the DV cinema in general has been to return cinematic representation to the realm of the real. While many recent discussions by film scholars about digital cinema focus on the "special effects" capabilities of digitalization, what they fail to see is the way in which digital cinema has rendered
reality itself a special effect. For in the stripping away of elaborate post-production techniques, Dogme 95 and similar movements have refocused attention on the anarchy of reality. The new ascendance of André Bazin -- the French film theorist who provided sometimes poetic defenses of neorealism and whose work at Cahiers du Cinéma helped lay the groundwork for the French New Wave -- thus does not signal a conservative backlash against deconstruction so much as renewed appreciation of his acknowledgement of reality's radical possibilities.[11]

But is it possible to talk about the real today without being accused of a sort of retrograde orthodoxy, a naive or unreflective reversion to Bazin? It is possible, because Bazin has been "corrected" by decades of post-humanist theory that has told us what was always already obvious: that reality itself is an apparatus further deconstructed by cinema. In today's landscape of self-theorizing media, where popular films like Not Another Teen Movie (Joel Gallen, 2001) nicely do the job of deconstructing what was once the province of academics, it is once again safe to speak of representations of the real without putting that word in quotation marks. And there are figures like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, who are making it safe to talk about human-ness again, often espousing ideas that, coming from others, would be considered dangerously conservative. Consider Virilio's recent book Art and Fear, which takes a hard look at the role of modern art in the willful destruction of the idea of the human: "Avant-garde artists," he writes, "like many political agitators, propagandists and demagogues, have long understood what TERRORISM would soon popularize: if you want a place in 'revolutionary history' there is nothing easier than provoking a riot, an assault on propriety, in the guise of art."[12] It is only against this legacy of deformation that it becomes clear why the return to realism in digital cinema is called experimental or avant-garde. While watching Hero (Zhang Yimou, 2002), my son leaned over to me during a shot of an
immense crowd of thousands of people and asked me a question that I myself wanted to ask: Are those people real? Perhaps ten or twenty years ago, we would have been amazed to learn that the crowd was a special effect. Today we are amazed to learn that the crowd was, in fact, real. It is reality that astounds us. Paradoxically, in an age when Sergei Eisenstein's dialectic montage has become the dominant mode of advertising and a tool of media industry, Bazin seems more radical than ever. And it is the very critics who rejected Bazin's theories as unreflective and complicit -- including Jean-Louis Comolli, Stephen Heath, and Colin McCabe -- who now risk being mocked, in part because of the reproducibility of their theoretical approaches. As Robert Ray has noted, "[C]inema journals and conferences brim over with papers rounding up the usual suspects for hermeneutical interrogation."[13] And anyway, haven't films for quite some time (perhaps since the beginnings) acknowledged their own basis in the hierarchies of genre? Have the dominant films ever been anything other than "business"? Has this ever been a secret? It would be going perhaps too far to say that the post-1968 turn was, in fact, a theoretical turn that had been made by audiences as early as 1908. Peter Matthews has suggested that, "Bazin valued those film artists who respected the mystery embedded in creation."[14] What was dismissed as unreflective orthodoxy and bourgeois humanism in the post-1968 world has returned with a vengeance in the Dogme 95 manifesto, a manifesto read as ironic by those for whom reality was a quaint myth. For what the Dogme 95 manifesto promises is liberation not through freedom, but through restraint -- a restraint that allows the ashes of the real to settle, to be explored. Bazin himself recognized that the realism in cinema that he so valued was, in fact, the product of artifice: But realism in art can only be achieved in one way -- through artifice.
Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered. But when this aesthetic aims in essence at creating the illusion of reality, as does cinema, this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when such a choice is made. Without it, supposing total cinema was here and now technically possible, we would go back purely to reality.[15]

What Bazin describes here -- virtual reality before there was such a phrase -- constitutes the terminal aesthetics of digital cinema, whose end point is nothing short of total cinema, of complete representation. Recent films that call into question the boundaries between perception, memory, and reality -- such as eXistenZ (David Cronenberg, 1999), Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999), Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002), and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004) -- are not so much postmodern parlor tricks as stopgap measures against total cinema, reminders of the processes by which reality is constructed.

For while it would seem that digital cinema and non-linear editing software is an apparatus that favors a rapid cutting, montage aesthetics (as in Run Lola Run), digital cinema -- with its long takes and experiments with simply letting reality edit itself -- is haunted by a sort of Bazinian neo-realism. That the choreographed unfolding of reality in digital long-take films such as Time Code, Russian Ark, and Ten is considered a stunt or an experiment only serves to show how deeply montage and rapid editing have become the dominant visual grammar of our lives. Part of the critical backlash against Stanley Kubrick at the end of his career had less to do with the supposedly old-fashioned humanist moralism of Eyes Wide Shut (1999) than its slow, languid, long-take aesthetics, an aesthetics that seemed quaint if not reactionary in light of Pi
(Darren Aronofsky, 1998) *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) and others. Indeed, it was even reported at the time that Janet Maslin lost her job as film critic at the *New York Times* in part for her praiseworthy review of *Eyes Wide Shut*[^16] ("This is a dead-serious film about sexual yearnings," she had written). Maslin's apparent mistake in not faulting the film for its lack of irony was compounded by a more subtle problem: the film -- with its Kubreckian long takes and languid pacing -- did not conform to the rapid-cutting, montage aesthetics of the time. The primary sin of *Eyes Wide Shut* lay in its style.

Is it not ironic then that the re-emergence of the long take is so closely tied to digital cinema, a form that is usually associated with fast-paced cutting and MTV pacing? As Manovich and others have noted, the deep storage capabilities of digital allow for a shot duration (i.e., an entire movie, like *Russian Ark*, can last one take) that was simply not possible previously. Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) -- shot in nine takes lasting eight to nine minutes each, the amount of film in the camera's magazine -- illustrates the limits of the long take in the classical era. But it also reminds us that a digital desire has been present in cinema all along, and that it is only against the context of a historical cinematic style (montage) rooted in technical constraints (camera magazines could only hold so much film) that today's digital long takes seem avant-garde.

For perhaps human perception itself is a long take, a lifespan unfolding in real time, punctuated by cuts and fade-outs that take the form of blinking and sleeping and forgetting. Far from taking us further away from the real, today's long take digital cinema takes us ever deeper into natural time. The fact that we persist in calling this cinema "experimental" reminds us of the near-total triumph of montage, and the dream of fractured time from which we are now beckoned to awake.

Those nostalgic for the golden age of celluloid must recognize in digital cinema the revenge of the real upon classical cinematic practices that mutilated reality. If yesterday's avant-
garde constituted a murderous gesture against the real, today's avant-garde resurrects the anarchy of the real and the triumph of total cinema.

Notes----------------


[10] For the entire "Vow of Chastity," and more on the Dogme 95 movement, see the official Dogme 95 website at http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/index.htm. For an excellent and wide-ranging discussion of Dogme 95, see *POV*, issue
#10, which is devoted to the topic:  
http://imv.au.dk/publikationer/pov/Issue_10/POV_10cnt.html


[16] See, for example, "Janet Maslin Leaves the Times. Why?" by Judith Shulevitz in Slate at http://slate.msn.com/id/1003660

Nicholas Rombes is an associate Professor of English at the University of Detroit Mercy, where he co-founded the Electronic Critique Program. He is editor of the forthcoming book New Punk Cinema (Edinburgh University Press, 2005) and is at work on a book Cinema in the Digital Era.