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Cinema and the Code (partial)
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What are the implications of digital imaging for the evolution of cinematic language? Since 1986, Peter Weibel, Steina and Woody Vasulka and I have been meeting to discuss that question [1]. We thought our talks might become a book, whose subject Weibel conceived as “the evolution of the image through the digital image.” What follows is an outline of our conversations, assembled for this publication from 200 pages of transcript. It is in every sense a first draft, a working paper. We are quite aware of the problematic nature of our discourse, especially in the cursory form presented here. Every conclusion is vulnerable to criticism, which we welcome. We are certain of only one thing: that these questions are important and need to be explored.

The subject of ‘digital imaging’, we agree, exists in the context of both video and the computer (different only in the source of the image and the possibility of real time operation) and covers the generic areas of image processing, image synthesis, and writing or organizing digital code in a procedural or linguistic fashion [2]. But in every case when we refer to the phenomenology of the moving image, we call it cinema. For us it is important to separate cinema from its medium, just as we separate music from particular instruments. Cinema is the art of organizing a stream of audiovisual events in time. It is an event-stream, like music [3]. There are at least four media through which we can practice cinema—film, video, holography and structured digital code—just as there are many instruments through which we can practice music. Of course each medium has distinct properties and contributes differently to the theory of cinema, each expands our knowledge of what cinema can be and do. Each new medium modifies and extends the linguistic possibilities of the moving image, subsuming the syntaxes of previous media without negating them.

Thus, the basic phenomenology of the moving image what Vasulka calls “the performance of the image on the surface of the screen”—remains historically continuous across all media. Digital code, for example, has radically altered the epistemology and ontology of the moving image but has not fundamentally changed its phenomenology. There are no digital images that have not been prefigured in painting, film and video. With the code we can only summarize them, elaborate and unfold them or exercise modalities. Vasulka calls the code a variation machine. There are no new classes of images, there are only new variations and new epistemological and ontological conditions for generating and witnessing those variations. Each new medium of the future, says Vasulka, can only “play host to the phenomenology of the moving image,” which will evolve through that medium to the next, accumulating the language of each.

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