The gallery looks as if it were in the process of installing an exhibition. Unused video monitors lay stacked in a corner, while elsewhere wires hang exposed and a clip of a “No Trespassing” sign familiar from an old Hollywood film impedes the viewer from obtaining a clear view of a video screening behind a metal fence. A small train shuttles between two spaces, making its way through a hole that seems to have been haphazardly punched through the gallery wall. Is it a return to the playfulness of childhood, to the innocence of lost origins, to the 1895 screening of the Lumières? Three rooms have been transformed into a sort of necropolis of cinema, with a proliferation of small, LCD screens showing Bresson, Ray, and Rossellini like so many gravestones. Stripped of its monumentality and place in the public sphere, the big screen now appears small scale, in an “exploded apartment,” complete with an unmade bed. We are inside Jean-Luc Godard’s Voyage(s) in Utopia, JLG, 1946-2006: à la recherche d’un théorème perdu (Voyage(s) in Utopia, JLG, 1946-2006: In Search of a Lost Theorem), installed between May 11 and August 14, 2006, at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition functions simultaneously as a career retrospective and a commentary on the so-called death of cinema, a preoccupation central to Godard’s career from Weekend’s proclamation “Fin d’histoire, fin du cinéma,” to Histoire(s) du cinéma’s great metahistorical undertaking.

Perhaps most telling is the room entitled Aujourd’hui, into which the toy locomotive tellingly does not travel. It is a space that entertains Ridley Scott’s Black Hawk Down as a metonymic stand-in for the entire media-industrial complex of Hollywood alongside pornography, simulcast television, and clippings from interior design magazines. Described by James Quandt as a “domestic hell,” it is this space that most fiercely indicts the contemporary intersection of consumerism and the media. Here, the glittering surface of the commodity emits a blinding glare that transforms one’s perception of all objects it encounters, including that one best loved by Godard, the cinema.

Voyage(s) en utopie includes many movies, but no films—that is to say, no celluloid. The proliferation of digital media that one might align with the Aujourd’hui section of the exhibition has altered the cinema forever, but has also allowed it to be understood in a way quite different than was able during its cultural dominance. To understand the trajectory of Godard’s filmmaking from the late 1950s to the present is, in many ways, to understand the development of cinema itself and of its shadow discourse, film theory. Just as a film like Vent d’est encapsulated film theory’s hopes for a radical counter-cinema, Voyage(s) en utopie raises many of the crucial questions facing film theory today: the transition from analogue to digital, large to small scale, public to domestic reception, cinema to gallery, and the revival of a nostalgia-infused cinephilia. We are here today to discuss the “death of cinema,” a shibboleth that
is often used to encompass these questions and others. It is necessary, though, to interrogate the discourses surrounding this supposed death at a metatheoretical level. It seems important to parse certain oft-repeated arguments to interrogate what sort of assumptions they are making and what might be at stake in the revalorization of cinema as a loved object in danger of disappearance. Referentiality—that is, film's relation to the profilmic real, now often conceptualized in terms of Peircian indexicality—and cinephilia figure as the founding repressions of 1970s film theory, in which we see cinema transformed into a so-called “bad object” of ideological mystification. But what is repressed is not forgotten and never stays buried forever. Now, referentiality and cinephilia have returned to occupy central positions in film theoretical discourse. Moreover, a close link exists between them as they may both be read as symptomatic of the increasing obsolescence of celluloid and infused with nostalgia for this “lost object.”

In his book, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Christian Metz begins by outlining the changed relation between theorist and film that would be spurred by the use of psychoanalytic semiotics as a critical methodology. Previous criticism, based on notions of aesthetic taste, constituted cinema as a love object and are described as beset by a sort of “siege psychosis”: the task was to “to surround and protect [the film], according to the cocoon principle.” In such a scenario, cinema and its theoretical discourse remain firmly on the side of the imaginary, caught in the thrill of cinephilia which, for Metz, designates a fascination with the apparatus rather than with particular films. Metz figures the advent of psychoanalytic semiotics as the intrusion of the symbolic that breaks the mother-child dyad of critic and film, after which the critic should “not have forgotten what the cinephile he once used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections, in the three dimensions of his living being, and yet to no longer be invaded by him.” The critic is thus characterized by a sort of splitting, homologous to the subject’s entry into language. Henceforth, (s)he is forced into an act of juggling belief (a mystified love of the cinema) and knowledge (a profound awareness of its ideological mechanisms) that has distinct parallels with the structure of classical fetishism. The pleasure of analysis comes to replace the pleasure of spectatorship, or, as Metz terms it, “voyeuristic sadism” becomes “sublimated into epistemophilia.”

This sentiment is echoed by Thomas Elsaesser in his retrospective evaluation of this film theoretical moment in “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment.” Elsaesser writes:

This theological proof that heaven, or cinephilia, does not exist, is now what I tend to think screen theory was partly about. Its radicalism can be most plausibly understood, I suggest, as an
insistent circling around one single question, namely how this make-belief, this effect of the real, created by the false which is the American cinema, can be deconstructed, can be shown to be not only an act of ideological manipulation but an ontology whose groundlessness has to be unmasked...  

Elsaesser’s attention to the “groundlessness” of cinema’s impression of reality leads the way to perhaps the governing principle of 1970s film theory: the application of a linguistic model based on Saussurian semiotics that completely disregarded film’s referentiality. Any consideration of the referent was bracketed as being part and parcel of those rejected conceptions of the medium that naively viewed it as a “window on the world,” as cinema was instead studied as a closed system that created meaning not by any reference to the external world but instead through a series of internal differences amongst signifiers. The “effect of the real” ceases to be located in the medium-specific properties of celluloid and is instead displaced onto the spectator-screen relation. Thus, referentiality and cinephilia stand together as two founding repressions of 1970s film theory.

As such, cinema emerges as a lost object for 1970s film semiotics in a very different way than it does for contemporary discussions of indexicality and cinephilia, which are imbued with a distinct anxiety regarding the increasing obsolescence of the material substrate of celluloid. As academic fashion and the cultural status of the medium have changed, so has film theory’s conceptualization of its bad objects. As Naomi Schor has noted, “Aren’t bad objects secretly good objects anyhow? What I mean is simply this: at a given time, within the carefully policed precincts of the academy, some critical objects are promoted to the status of good objects (say, not so long ago, dead authors), while others are tabooed (say, in the old days, experience).” Schor was writing from the perspective of literary studies, but one might easily change such a statement to fit the film studies context by inserting cinephilia and referentiality in the place of the formerly tabooed objects of study. However, it must be remembered that 1970s film theory configured cinema as bad object precisely, as Schor asserts, because “all bad objects are secretly good objects”: it was because of an intense love of the medium that the political imperative was to engage in a certain disavowal that would permit the aspired pseudo-scientific inquiry. Contrastingly, film theory today is witness to a re-entry of the critic’s desire into discourse, and indeed, as a subject of discourse, as is evident in Christian Keathley’s _Cinephilia and History_, or _The Wind in the Trees_, Laura Mulvey’s _Death 24x a Second_, Paolo Cherchi Usai’s _The Death of Cinema_ and in the edited volume by Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, _Cinephilia: Movies, Love, and Memory_, among others.

In a way, the entire history of film theory may be read as an attempt to grapple with the inescapable question of the real in cinema and the ways in which it is inextricably bound to desire. The 1970s chose to see the problem of the real as a kind of structuring absence, preferring to shift any questions of film’s presentation of the real to an interrogation of the representation governed by convention. Here, the allure of the real was held to be nothing but a lure, a kind of ideological mystification. Now, though, the contemporary problematic situates it at the centre of the analogue-digital debate, most often through the question of indexicality. With the much maligned waning of experience often taken as characteristic of the new media universe, the cinema is retrospectively figured as a privileged access to an unquestioned real that is uncontaminated by the ontological uncertainty and groundlessness of the digital. However, contemporary discourses on film’s referentiality run the risk of setting the trustworthiness of analogue film against the simulation of the digital in an unproblematized relation. The return of the repressed of 1970s film theory is rearing its head: this love at last sight for the cinema often brings with it a faith in the image that would have been anathema to _Screen_ theory.

The notion of the index was introduced to film studies by Peter Wollen in his 1968 book, _Signs and Meaning in the Cinema_, published in the heyday of the structuralist importation of Saussurian semiotics from the domain of linguistics into broader areas of culture. Wollen turns to C.S. Peirce’s typology of signs as a necessary corrective to theorists such as the early Metz who, in privileging a binary conception of signification, had failed to account
for certain problems arising from the application of a linguistic model to an image-based medium. Wollen insists that the film image is a combination of all three aspects of the Peircian sign: it is at once index, icon, and symbol. However, somewhat curiously, Wollen aligns indexicality with realist aesthetics: “Realist aesthetics are a projection of the indexical, pictorialist aesthetics are a projection of the iconic, and what we might call ‘discursive’ aesthetics, with the stress on conceptual meaning, are projections of the symbolic.” This notion of the index as guarantee of a faithfulness to the real, of a kind of transparency of representation, betrays a misappropriation of Peirce’s concept of the index. The index undeniably invokes a relation to the real, but aligning it with realist aesthetics makes it responsible for the creation of a film image that would look “just like” the real thing. The indexical sign is a gesture towards an object, a pointing figure that directs attention towards its referent, exclaiming “There!” but its work stops after such gesturing. Conceiving of cinema as indexical sign provides a way of naming a certain relation to the past but in no way asserts a resemblance between sign and referent, which would belong to the category of the icon. Peirce writes that indices “have no significant resemblance to their objects,” yet that “they direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion.”

Is it possible to think indexicality as this “empty gesture,” without lapsing into aligning it with either realist aesthetics, as Wollen does, or with the real itself, as Laura Mulvey does in her book, *Death 24 Times a Second*, which tellingly, does not cite Peirce, but merely Wollen’s reading of him? Often, the indexical is aligned with the registration of the contingent detail and as such serves as a locus of cathexis in the image, a sort of filmic re-writing of Barthes’ punctum that is perhaps best known to film studies in Paul Willemen’s conception of cinephilia. As such, it becomes inextricably bound up in discourses of cinephilia that locate a love for the filmic image as residing in its privileged relation to the real. Thomas Elsaesser has called indexicality a “semiotic conundrum,” a succinct testimony to the complexity surrounding discussions of this concept. Is indexicality really the category that designates a medium-specific capability of analogue film as it differs from digital media’s basis in binary code? Is it the prerequisite for cinephilia, or could this investment in the detail function similarly with a digital image? Certainly,
any simple opposition of film as indexical and digital as non-indexical dissolves very quickly when one considers the realities of media production today. It seems that there is a marked tendency to decry the digital as an age of unchecked simulation lacking any grounding in the real and to champion film’s indexicality as a guarantor of unadulterated reality. Such a position is dangerous, though, since the digital image is sometimes founded in an external event in the world and the film image’s claims to representing reality must always be taken with a grain of salt, never forgetting the many conventions of representation that transform the raw reality between its capture and its presentation onscreen. Why, then, despite the resulting “conundrum,” have critics recently fastened so sturdily onto the concept of indexicality?

Now, when the “death of cinema” is being proclaimed once again, it seems necessary to interrogate and reflexively examine the multiple desires that inform the writing of film’s theories. It would be easy to mythologize cinema in the face of its loss of cultural dominance, to lament the disappearance of the object in such a manner so as to put it beyond critique. This is not to suggest that the concept of indexicality has no place in film studies; indeed, its central relation to the dialectic of contingency and rationality that characterizes modernity has been thoroughly demonstrated by Mary Ann Doane. However, Doane emphasizes the necessity of untangling indexicality from “its sole connection to the concept of realism, the reflection of a coherent, familiar, and recognizable world,” emphasizing instead that it must be thought as a function “essentially without content.”

Despite the fact that indexicality refers only to a deictic pointing figure and not to any relation of similitude, its constant deployment as a buttress to film’s fidelity to the real belies nostalgia and anxiety, not to mention a profound ideological operation that should not be overlooked. The contemporary return to referentiality seems to be a way of grappling with the loss of the loved object, as an attempt to cling onto a constitutive difference between analogue and digital, holding the new media under great suspicion, much as cinema was when it too provoked the anxiety of novelty in its earliest years.

Such anxiety and nostalgia mustn’t overwhelm theoretical rigour. If film studies wishes to do justice to what the cinema has been, it is necessary to understand it in all of its historical permutations, one of which may very well be digitally based. As such, the return to ontology is substantiated only insofar as it historicizes the changing incarnations of the cinema, as it changes over time and as our perspectives on it change according to our own investments and our own desires. Tom Gunning, for example, has shown the importance of trickery and magic to an ontology of the early film image, thus emphasizing its iconic properties and questioning the possibility of truly disentangling indexicality from realism. Now, the desire to attribute cinema a privileged relation to the real by virtue of indexicality must be read alongside anxieties surrounding digital media. This is to suggest broadening rather than narrowing the scope of inquiry into this fascinating moment of medium change, as technology is only one, but far from the sole, site of inquiry.

While it might have seemed like a somewhat arbitrary choice, introducing this essay through a discussion of Godard’s Voyage(s) en utopie was motivated by more than my great affection for his recent work. While I will follow my own advice and acknowledge the desires informing the investments and choices of this essay, I will also emphasize that Godard’s work points to the necessity of conceiving of the death of cinema with a broad, intermedial perspective. The question of cinematic scale is, for example, a crucial aspect of contemporary debates around medium change that is often neglected in the analogue-digital debate. Although it has been a pressing issue since the introduction of television, the proliferation of small screens in Voyage(s) en utopie and the marketing of films for video iPods testify to the ongoing relevance of this overlooked area of inquiry. Critiquing those who lament the airing of films on television, Serge Daney suggests that what they miss more than anything about the film itself is the giganticism of the cinema’s screen. For him, “Cinephilia, whether we like it or not, passes through television. It might only last for a moment, but it is our moment.” Such a position rejects cinephilia as having much to do with the material substrate of film and instead presses for...
FROM BAD OBJECT TO LOST OBJECT

a further investigation of the consequences of the alteration of scale. It would seem that a further interrogation of the relation between cinephilia and cinematic scale is of utmost importance if the phenomenon is to be understood in its multiple valences. Considerations of film’s referentiality and indexicality are surely important correctives to certain crucial lacunae of 1970s theory, but an understanding of the contemporary moment must not stop with the persistent question of the real, but instead probe further to historicize cinematic specificity in its many facets.

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Notes

4. Ibid., 15.
5. Ibid., 16.
13. “The essential aspect of modern photography, its truly modern and destabilizing role, may work at cross-purpose to its identity as an index which can be traced back to a unique original. Photography as mechanical reproduction may undermine identity through its iconic power to create doubles of an unaltering similarity (identity?).” See: Tom Gunning, “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography’s Uncanny,” in Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 66–67.