My intention in this chapter is to appropriate aspects of a still-evolving theoretical framework that revisits the concept of realism in moving image media, and to use some of these ideas to inform a more narrowly aesthetic analysis and appreciation of certain technologically hybrid forms of animation that exist today. Implicit here is an observation that the entire field of animation is in the midst of technical and aesthetic transition, driven most obviously by the increasingly high profile commercial success of a succession of feature length animated films (from Toy Story [1995] and Shrek [2001] to Finding Nemo [2003] and Cars [2006]) created entirely with computer hardware and software. The success of CGI blockbusters, as well as the popularity of computer games, has moved more than one critic to argue that there has been a paradigm shift in the conventional wisdom of commercial animation production; as Jesse Hassenger put it in a review of the 2D feature Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas (2003), “audiences are no longer interested in looking at traditional animation, no matter the quality.” (Hassenger) This blanket assertion may not be entirely accurate (it certainly isn’t true of Japanese audiences), but the trend it points to is real enough. However, this statement ignores the fact that most mainstream cel animated features and television series these days also incorporate at least some CGI, and that it has become increasingly common to digitize cel-based sequences within the production process to blend them with computer generated material. That is, an increasingly large proportion of commercial animations are ‘hybrid’ in the way that I am using this term. In any case, the supposition is that traditional forms of 2D animation are all but obsolete, at least in a commercial setting.

Whether or not this total transformation comes to pass, the increasing prominence of CGI has implications for both the creators and viewers of animated works. A key conceptual area here is the growing body of interesting and significant critical writing about animation’s stake
in concepts of realism within moving image media. These arguments have been especially illuminating and provocative in discussions of the widespread use in contemporary live action filmmaking of computer-generated (i.e., animated) special effects, as well as the institutionalizing of CGI as an increasingly prevalent form of animation. A good deal of this analysis begins with or references Baudrillard’s ideas concerning simulation and the contemporary fascination with the spectacle of the image itself rather than the meanings produced through images—a ‘loss’ by artists and audiences alike of a sense of the ‘real’. Andrew Darley, for example, argues that:

A technical problem—the concrete possibility of achieving ‘photography’ by digital means—begins to take over, and to determine the aesthetics of certain modes of contemporary visual culture. Attempts . . . to imitate and simulate . . . displace and demote questions of reference and meaning (or signification), substituting instead a preoccupation with means and the image (the signifier itself) as a site or object of fascination: a kind of collapsing of aesthetic concerns into the solution to a technical problem. (Darley, 2000, p. 88)

The trajectory of recent critical discussions of realism have been quite usefully summarized and critiqued in New Media: A Critical Introduction by Martin Lister et al., who point out that the connotations and focus of such analysis has shifted significantly in relation to digital media creations. Whereas the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s conceived of realism primarily as a social and cultural phenomenon, more recent criticism has regarded it mainly as a technological and perceptual matter. As Lister et al. argue, though, any consideration (much less definition) of realism is itself culturally bound, and the Baudrillardian version seems to have a blind spot, a largely unacknowledged nostalgia for the dominant realist codes (‘traditional depth cues’) once the object of film theory’s critique. If any given ‘realism’ assumes and articulates its own particular model of the ‘real world,’ then it is not surprising that in postmodernist theories the ‘hyperrealism’ of computer graphics has been interpreted as not presenting a more analogous image of the real world, but rather heralding its disappearance. (Lister et al., 2003, p. 148)

Perhaps, then, a more nuanced approach to the concept of realism in the age of digital reproduction would not discount the impact of technological transformations in visual media that have dramatically increased the stakes of verisimilitude for its own sake. At the same time, it seems implausible that imagery which seems to fit Debord’s (or anybody else’s) definition of spectacle has somehow been emptied of all meaning, much