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Cinema and a 'time-varying universe': An interview with curator Antonio

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On 12 January 2020 the exhibition *Time Machine: Cinematic Temporalities* opened in the Palazzo del Governatore in Parma. Commissioned by the city's Department of Culture led by the film studies scholar Michele Guerra and conceived as part of the cultural program for Parma 2020 Italian Capital of Culture, this exhibition offers a transmedial and media-archaeological answer to the general theme of the cultural program: *'La cultura batte il tempo'* ('culture beats time'). Unfortunately, the troubled times we are experiencing this year forced the Palazzo to close its door on 8 March. However, thanks to the remediations to social distancing that the internet provides, Antonio Somainsi – the main curator of the exhibition and a film and media studies professor at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 – could grant us this interview about *Time Machine* and its substantial catalogue.



Fig. 1: Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, 1970, aerial view.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The name ‘time machine’ given to the exhibition may be read in two ways. For the science-fiction amateur, it will be the title of H.G. Wells’ novel and will foretell the risk of numerous temporal paradoxes. In the prism of film studies, such an expression inevitably evokes the Deleuzian reading of cinematic time. However, you do not adopt either of these two approaches in favour of a journey that proceeds from the archaeology of media devices. What place would this exhibition assume in the field of film studies? On the contrary, would it seek to take distance from the classical approach of cinema through films to cinema through its technical apparatuses?

Antonio Somaini: As you remind in the introduction to this interview, the general theme of the 2020 cultural program in Parma was ‘La cultura batte il tempo’, to be interpreted in the double sense of the verb ‘beating’: both in the sense of ‘culture defeating time’, that is, countering the inevitable passing of time through the production of artefacts that resist time, that last in time, and in the sense of ‘culture giving rhythm to the passage of time’, through artefacts and events that mark specific moments in time.

Having this general theme in mind, Michele Guerra approached me in the summer of 2017 and asked me if I was willing to organise an exhibition, I quote him, ‘on the way in which cinema, throughout its history, has changed our perception of time’. The proposal was extremely interesting and I accepted it immediately, knowing that there could be many different ways to tackle such a broad question. One possibility could have been, for example, to explore the ways in which cinema, throughout its history and in different cultural contexts, has *represented* different time periods, different epochs. Another possibility could have been that of examining the way in which cinema, again throughout its history and in different cultural contexts, has *imagined* the future, through different kinds of utopian and dystopian projections.

After evaluating various possibilities, I decided to take another route, and I started working on it with the two associate curators that I invited to join me in this project, Éline Grignard and Marie Rebecchi (our team included also Antoine Prévost-Balga for a specific section of the exhibition, and Adèle Yon for various related research). The perspective I chose in order to develop the exhibition project was that of studying the ways in which cinema, throughout its history, has invented a series of *techniques of time manipulation* that have made time *malleable, plastic, relative*: techniques such as slow motion and acceleration, high speed cinematography and time-lapse, freeze frame and sequence shots, multiple exposures and stop-motion animation, loops

and time reversals, plus the endless variations of that crucial operation of time manipulation that is montage in all its forms.

I found the title of the exhibition very early in the process, and the title – *Time Machine* – pointed immediately towards H.G. Wells' 'scientific romance' *The Time Machine: An Invention*, published for the first time in book format in 1895. The coincidence, in 1895, of the first publication of a novel which described the possibility of traveling through time thanks to a mechanical device, and the first public presentation of another machine, the Lumière Brothers's Cinématographe, which allowed not only the recording and replaying of the unfolding of optical phenomena, but also their projection in reverse motion (as it happened since 1896 for films such as *Démolition d'un mur* and *Bains de Diane*) became immediately a leading thread for the elaboration of the rest of the project.

Having found this starting point, together with Éline Grignard and Marie Rebecchi, we began developing the idea of an exhibition capable of presenting different cinematic techniques of time manipulation through a vast and heterogeneous corpus that included early, classical, modern and contemporary, experimental and scientific cinema, kinetic sculptures involving film reels and video installations, generative videos and videos produced by systems of machine learning, as well as occasional incursions into the history of photography.

Lacurie & Sauvage: How did media archaeology literature influence your curating?

Somaini: The field of media archaeology was definitely a major reference point for our approach to the exhibition. We decided to situate moving images within a wider network of optical and sound media dedicated to the recording, storing, replaying, and manipulating of visual and sound phenomena, and we decided to adopt a double perspective that should always inform, in my view, any way of practicing media archaeology: on the one hand, a perspective that invites us to look back at history *from the point of view of the present*, exploring all the 'retroactive causalities' that such a *nachträglich* approach produces, and considering anachronisms as a hermeneutical tool rather than a danger to avoid; on the other, a perspective that invites us to look at the present and the immediate future *from the point of view of the past*, trying to understand the multiple, intertwined genealogies of which new media and new forms of cinematic time manipulation are part of. I would like to quote here a phrase from an essay by the deeply missed Thomas Elsaesser, the idea that a media-archaeological approach to film history should investigate 'the

archaeology of possible futures, and the perpetual presence of several pasts' [1]. This phrase has often guided my research on the film and media theories of figures such as Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein, László Moholy-Nagy, and Dziga Vertov, and was definitely one of the perspectives I had in mind in organising this exhibition.

I would like it to be an exhibition that invites us to locate the history of cinema within a series of wider fields: the history of moving images, the history of the cinematic techniques that have been invented in order to manipulate the flow of time, and, even more broadly, the history of all the optical and sound media that have transformed, in different ways, our perception of time. In his latest theoretical project, the project for a 'general history of cinema' (1946-48), Sergei Eisenstein tried to locate cinema within the *longue durée* of the history of all the media that had responded, in a way or another, to a deeply-rooted anthropological 'urge' or '*Trieb*' 'to secure phenomena', that is, to 'fixate phenomena', contrasting the passing of time. I like to think of this exhibition as an attempt to document some of the ways in which moving images have responded to a similar, deeply-rooted anthropological need to appropriate and manipulate the flow of time. Cinema as one of the ways in which 'culture beats time'.



Fig. 2: Bullet time from The Matrix, Lana and Lily Wachowsky, 1999.

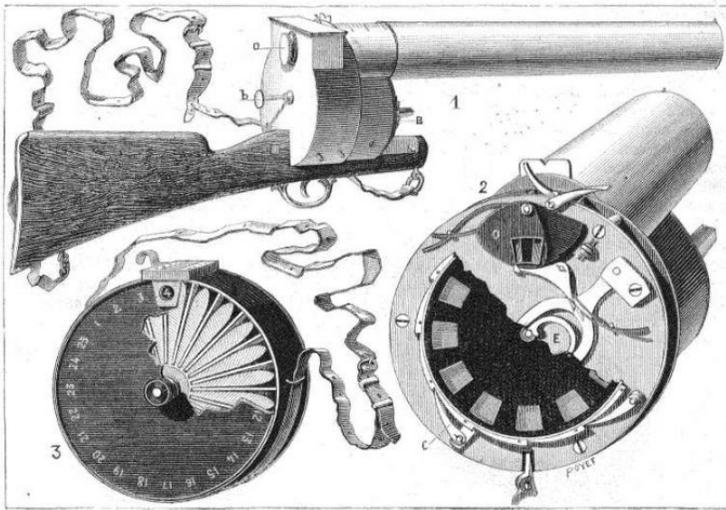


Fig. 2. Mécanisme du fusil photographique.

1 Vue d'ensemble de l'appareil. — 2. Vue de l'obturateur et du disque à feuïtre. — 3. Boîte contenant vingt-cinq plaques sensibles.

Fig. 3: Sketch of the 'Chronophotographical Gun' invented by Etienne-Jules Marey in 1882.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The museography of the *Time Machine* exhibition is built around two central rooms: the lower room retraces the archaeology of media devices, enriching the often too univocal understanding of the medium 'cinema'; the upper room inventories the different technical processes invented by fiction cinema (especially Hollywood) to represent the relativity of time. The ensemble communicates to form a large hall open on two floors, allowing a sort of 'geological montage' within the architectural structure itself, revealing the technical bases that articulate the devices of modern attraction to contemporary entertainment cinema. As Éline Grignard suggests in her catalogue's article 'Time Crystals (Film, Deep Time and Geological Strata)', quoting Robert Smithson 'transforming trucks into dinosaurs' through the power of montage, the Palazzo itself turns the chronophotographic gun of the first floor into a screen displaying the bullet-time technique on the second. How does the *Time Machine* exhibition aim to function from a museographic and historiographical point of view?

Somaini: As any other exhibition, *Time Machine: Cinematic Temporalities* had to adapt to the specificities of the exhibition space, which in this case was a historical but heavily renovated palace in the center of Parma with two floors and 25 rooms. Two of these rooms, the ones you mention, are indeed much larger than the other ones, and are superimposed onto one another,

forming one single central space. We decided to treat the lower level of this central space as a sort of *incipit* that was supposed to set the tone for the rest of the exhibition itinerary. In it, we presented two strictly-connected displays: a) within a series of plexiglass vitrines, a copy of the original 1895 edition of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and next to it a series of objects stemming from the *Collection des appareils* of the Cinémathèque française. These objects date from the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, and include a Kinetoscope-kinetophone fabricated by Thomas Edison, one of the first Cinématographe cameras by the Lumière Brothers, one of the two *fusils photographiques* by Étienne-Jules Marey, a magic lantern with double projection (producing the first forms of fade-in fade-out, which are already a form of time manipulation), one of the first phonographs, again by Thomas Edison, one of the first gramophons by Emil Berliner, two editing tables from the 1920s-1930s, and finally a sewing machine from the end of the nineteenth century: a small, 'Vertovian' gesture (if we think of one of the central sequences of *Man with a Movie Camera*) aimed at highlighting the proximity between the cinematic techniques of montage, with cut-and-paste, and the techniques of cutting and sewing of textile manufacture; b) on the wall behind the vitrines, a large projection with a montage (made by Margaux Serre) of a series of sequences stemming from films that have visualised in different ways, and often through the invention of new techniques of time manipulation, the experience of *time travel*: from the two adaptations of Wells' *Time Machine* (by George Pal in 1960, and by Simon Wells in 2002), to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Andrei Tarkovski's *Solaris* (1971), Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time* (1979), and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014).

The goal of this first, central room, was to suggest that the invention – during the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s – of sound and visual media such as the phonograph and the gramophone, the Kinetoscope and the Cinématographe, together with the birth of the genre of science fiction with a novel such as Wells' *The Time Machine*, has opened the way for the development of a whole imaginary of time travel that has then unfolded throughout the twentieth century, and continue to do so nowadays, interacting in every historical period with the different visions, fears, and expectations that societies and cultures have had towards the future. When Wells wrote *The Time Machine*, among the great questions he wanted to tackle were: what will be the fate of humanity, if the Darwinian laws of evolution continue to produce their effects through centuries and millennia?; and, will humanity undergo a gradual

but constant process of perfection, or will it reach a peak and then start to decay, and what will happen of the Earth, of the sun, if the second law of thermodynamics, through the process of entropy, will gradually lead the sun to lose part of its heat, and eventually go out altogether? Wells answers these questions by reaching out to a very distant future (first 802,701 years, and then 30 million years from the present) in which a decayed humankind has split into two races (the Eloi and the Morlocks), and a dying sun, 'red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat'. Today, our visions of the future and our imaginary of time travel are inevitably linked with the anxieties related to global warming and to the risk of human extinction. And since the beginning of the current health crisis caused by the coronavirus, even the immediate future looks like uncharted territory. Were our exhibition to reopen in June 2020 after the lockdown, as we hope, the spectators would probably see it in a different way than it was seen in January and February before the lockdown.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The recent upheavals we experienced in the way we perceive time and its passage indeed proved how it is now necessary to think temporality in a definitely subjective – and even affective – way. And it precisely seems to be, at the very incipient moment of every invention of a time axis manipulation technique, this strange idea that time is an illusion, or rather, a constructed illusion.

In the words of Huhtamo, according to whom 'the aim of media archeology is to explain the sense of déjà vu that Tom Gunning has registered when looking back from the present reactions into the ways in which people have experienced technology in earlier periods', the exhibition aims not only to describe the technical devices of time-axis manipulation (Kittler) but also to describe the role that this *Kulturtechnik* plays in the viewer's experience. What relationship does the exhibition reveal between technique and affect? What historical link does it draw between the past reception, in the era of the first technical machines, and the one of the contemporary experience?

Somaini: I am glad that you mention the concept of *Kulturtechnik* in relation to our exhibition project. *Kulturtechniken*, or 'cultural techniques', are culture-informing, culture-structuring techniques and operations that can be detected in various historical and cultural contexts, and that cut across traditional distinctions between media. In opening the exhibition with a display that presented the Kinetoscope and the Cinématographe next to a phonograph and a gramophone, we wanted to emphasise, following Kittler, that the

Kulturtechnik of ‘time axis manipulation’ that cinema has explored throughout its history could not be understood without locating cinema within a wider network of visual and sound media. By selecting works from a very heterogeneous corpus, and by establishing a whole series of montage-like junctures between moving images stemming from different spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts, we wanted to highlight the values and the connotations that have often been associated with specific techniques of cinematic time manipulation. The technique of *time-lapse*, for example, has been widely used since the 1910s in order to visualise, bringing it back to a temporal scale that is perceptible by a human subject, slowly unfolding phenomena such as the growth of plants and the blossoming of flowers, the formation of crystals, the cosmic phases of the sun and the moon. Exhibiting examples of time-lapse stemming from the 1910s and 1920s next to contemporary ones immediately raised the question of how our perception of these images has changed in time. And one of the things that fascinated me in working on this exhibition was to discover that the imaginary of time-lapse seems to reappear with the new images generated by systems of machine learning that artists such as Hito Steyerl and Grégory Chatonsky have recently used in their works. In the main video of Hito Steyerl’s installation at the Venice Biennale of 2019, titled *This is the Future*, we find images of plants growing and flowers blossoming that are generated by neural networks and that bear a fascinating resemblance with older images of time-lapse. The history of cinematic techniques of time manipulation is not over, and artificial intelligence is introducing new forms of image production that still need to be fully explored and understood.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The first aisle of the Palazzo immediately establishes the Epsteinian thought of cinema – from the *Tempestaire* of the twentieth century to the twenty-first century one by Jacques Perconte – as the Ariadne’s thread of the fluid conception of time from which the rest of the exhibition is derived. To what extent have Epstein’s writings and films guided the composition of the exhibition? Or, on the contrary, was it as the works were collected around the idea of the ‘time machine’ that the Epsteinian echoes that existed between them emerged?

Somaini: After the initial, central room the exhibition is then organised in four sections. The first, ‘Flows’, tackles the ways in which cinema and other media based on moving images have used different techniques of time manipulation in order to capture and visualise the flow of time as it manifests itself in the flow of the natural elements (wind, clouds, waves, rain, flowing

water, changing atmospheres, etc.). The second section, titled 'Instants', tackles the different techniques of time manipulation that have been employed in order to isolate different instants or different fragments of time, in order to then re-arrange them in different ways. The third section, 'Re-montage', deals with the vast world of found footage practices, in which techniques of time manipulation operate onto pre-existing film materials, with their own specific temporalities. The fourth and last section, 'Oscillations', presents different techniques such as time reversals, loops, multiple views of the same instant, as well as a series of works that deal with the relationship between, on the one hand, the specific temporality of the medium of celluloid film, with its photo-sensitive materiality, and, on the other, the *longue durée* of the geological processes of sedimentation and cristallisation.

The films and the writings of Jean Epstein have been a major reference point throughout the elaboration of the exhibition project, and more specifically in relation to the section titled 'Flows'. Epstein's understanding of cinema, in *L'Intelligence d'une machine* (1946), as a '*machine à penser le temps*' has been one of the guiding ideas of the entire project, and films such as *Le Tempestaire* (1947) – as you notice – showed us clearly how cinematic techniques of time manipulation have often been conceived as techniques capable of intervening onto the very material fabric of the natural world. Jacques Perconte's own *Tempestaire* (2020), one of the two works specifically produced for our exhibition, has provided a wonderful way of prolonging Epstein's insights, through the new temporalities of generative videos: videos whose duration is potentially endless, since they keep on being reworked by a specifically conceived software. Were the exhibition to stay open for the next 200 years, Perconte's video would still be showing new images that never repeat themselves.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The exhibition leaves aside a science-fiction dimension of time travel: remembrance as the first 'time machine' of modernity, operating a direct link between memory and imagination (whether we think of Marker's or Resnais' time machines). However, concluding with Gregory Chatonsky's work in a form of 'artificial imagination', the exhibition's itinerary takes us back to the realm of an exploration of time through memory – albeit the artificial one of databases. How does the hallucination of the media device bring us back to the manipulation of time? How do you expect the link between 'time machine' and 'intelligent machine' to operate?

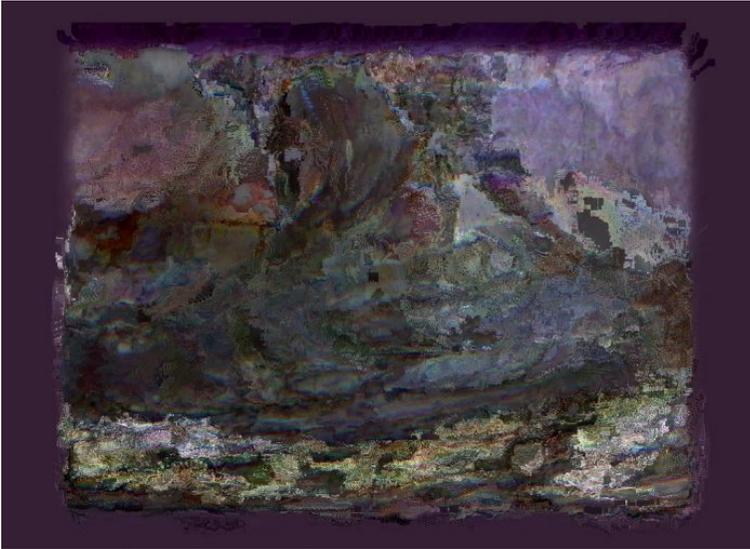


Fig. 4: Le Tempestaire, Jacques Perconte, 2020.

Somaini: I decided to invite Grégory Chatonsky to participate in our exhibition after seeing his installation *Terre Seconde* at the Palais de Tokyo in July 2019. I had been following his work for some time, and what I found in *Terre Seconde* was a work that resonated in very interesting ways with the overall concept of the exhibition. His use of images generated by neural networks called Generative Adversarial Networks showed very clearly, in my view, how new techniques of time manipulation of moving images could be used in order to visualise a future in which humankind has disappeared because of extinction, and machines re-elaborate, through a kind of ‘artificial imagination’, the visual memory that humans have stocked, over centuries, into digital databases. Grégory Chatonsky sets the products of this ‘artificial imagination’ against the background of a desolate, fully mineralised Earth, which reminds us somehow of the desolate landscape that Wells describes in ‘The Further Vision’, the last chapter of *The Time Machine*. Inviting Chatonsky to produce a new installation stemming from *Terre Seconde*, which he titled *Je ressemblerai à ce que vous avez été*, seemed to us to be the perfect way to conclude the exhibition.

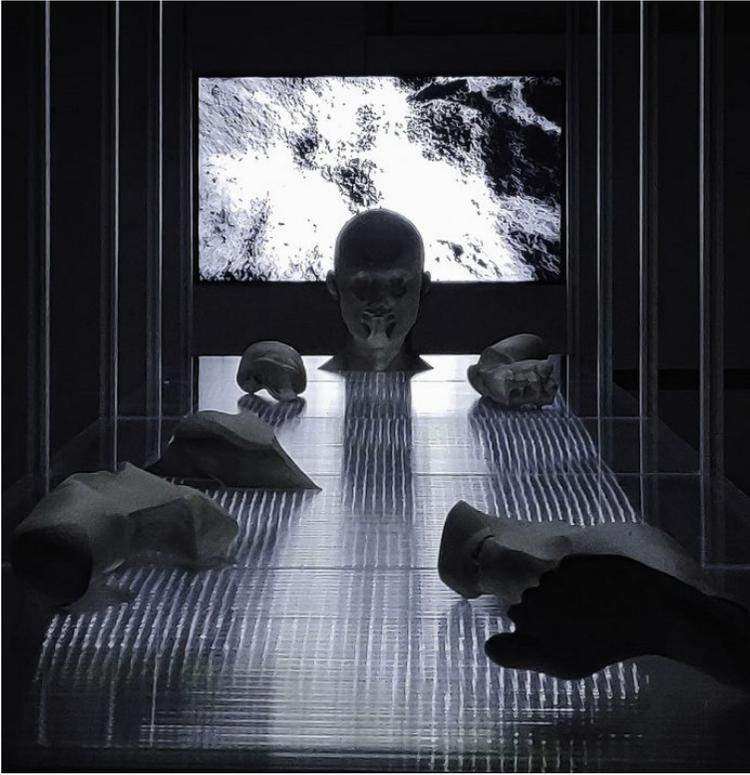


Fig. 5: Je ressemblerai à ce que vous avez été, Grégory Chatonsky, 2020.

Lacurie & Sauvage: The exhibition's rich catalogue brings together the texts of a constellation of authors mainly coming from the French context (Emmanuel Alloa, Jacques Aumont, Raymond Bellour, Christa Blümlinger, Georges Didi-Huberman, Philippe Dubois), and thus constitutes, in its own way, a cartography of a tradition of *French media archaeology*. In bringing these texts (all translated in English or in Italian for the two different versions of the catalogue) and French-speaking artists (from Epstein to Perconte and Chatonsky) together, have you tried to highlight the dialogue – and perhaps to close a gap – between them and a field of media archaeology that is known to be predominantly German and English-speaking?

Somaini: The publication that accompanies the exhibition was conceived since the beginning as a book, more than a catalogue, that could have a life of its own also after the exhibition was over. Working on the exhibition project from Paris, where I am based since 2012, and being a scholar who has always

been interested in promoting transnational and transcultural dialogues, I decided that it would be very interesting to invite a number of very well-known French film theorists and art historians who have been working since many years on the question of the temporality of fixed and moving images (I am thinking of Jacques Aumont, Raymond Bellour, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Philippe Dubois), alongside film and media theorists and art historians who work on the same issues but from different theoretical perspectives such as media archaeology, media theory, and media philosophy (and this is the case of Emmanuel Alloa, Christa Blümlinger, and Noam M. Elcott). The goal was to tackle, through these various perspectives, the question of the aesthetic, epistemological, and political implications of the various cinematic techniques of time manipulation, and these essays, together with the texts of the three curators and a machine-written text produced by Grégory Chantonsky, provide a series of very interesting approaches. I would also like to underline the very important role of our graphic designer, Roman Seban, who found a way to fit the 700 images (!) of our book into a very effective layout.



Fig. 6: Time Machine exhibition catalogue.

Lacurie & Sauvage: In effect, the catalogue is worth mentioning, with a thorough job of compilation and compositing that brings together works from the exhibition, photograms, and various machines that will continue the exhibition well beyond its unfortunately shortened setting at the Palazzo del Governatore.

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Barnabé Sauvage (Université de Paris)

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Notes

- [1] Elsaesser 2004, p. 99.