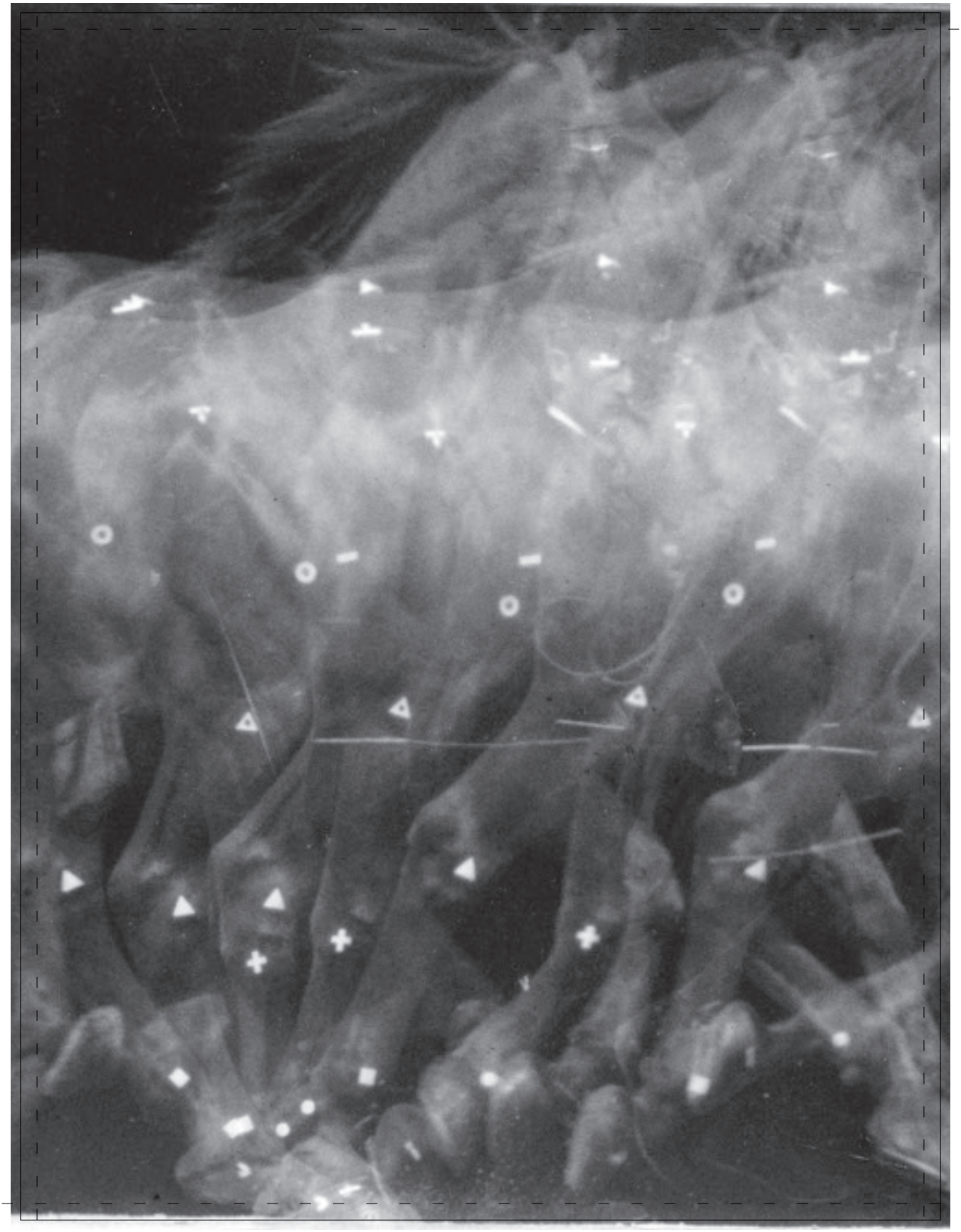

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time machine

cinematic temporalities

SKIRA

ANTONIO SOMAINI

WITH ÉLINE GRIGNARD
& MARIE REBECCHI

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Capitale Italiana della Cultura 2020

Parma 2020, Italian Capital of Culture
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Supported and implemented with the contribution of
Ministry for cultural heritage and tourism
Emilia Romagna Region
Municipality of Parma
Cariparma Foundation
Committee for Parma 2020
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Parma
12 January–3 May 2020

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First published in Italy in 2019
by Skira editore S.p.A.
Palazzo Casati Stampa
via Torino 61
20123 Milano
Italy
www.skira.net

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Fondazione delle Arti
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Printed and bound
in Italy. First edition

ISBN: 978-88-572-4329-0

Distributed in USA, Canada,
Central & South America
by ARTBOOK | D.A.P. 75,
Broad Street Suite 630,
New York, NY 10004, USA.
Distributed elsewhere in the
world by Thames and Hudson
Ltd., 181A High Holborn, London
WC1V 7QX, United Kingdom

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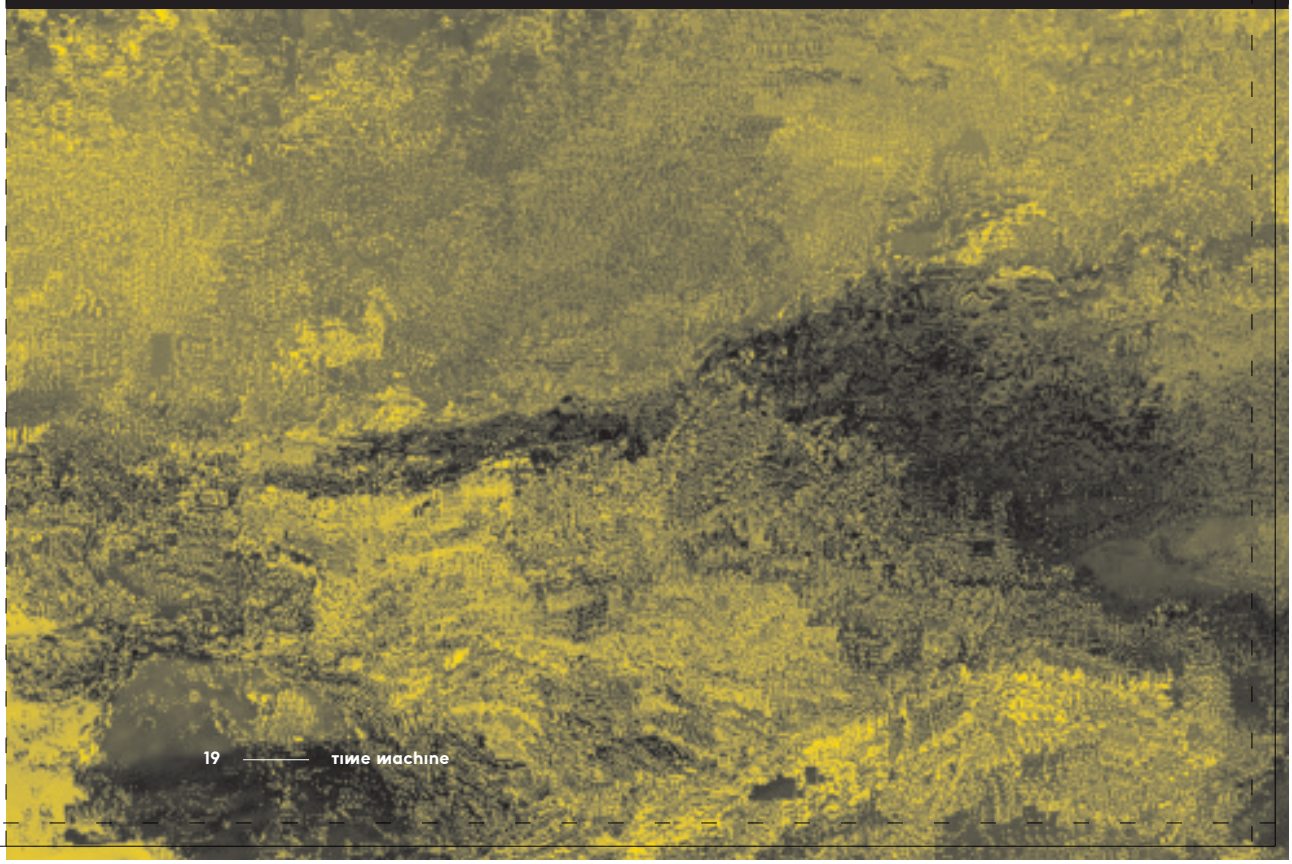
FROM TIME MACHINES TO MACHINE VISIONS

Antonio Somaini



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"Acceleration, Slow Motion, and Time" [*Zeitraffer*, *Zeitlupe und der Raum*] (1928), Ernst Bloch highlighted the "distancing effect" of both techniques,**69** while Walter Benjamin, in *Little History of Photography* (1931) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1935-36, five versions) saw in them an example of the techniques through which cinema and photography could reveal an "optical unconscious."**70** Presenting cinema as a "machine for contemplating time," Jean Epstein writes in *L'Intelligence d'une machine* (1946) that cinema is a "machine that stretches or condenses duration, that demontrates the variable nature of time, that preaches the relativity of all measurements."**71**

During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s we again find the technique of time-lapse in films that highlight once more the acceleration of life in the modern metropolis, be it in order to focus on its "organic" dimension, as in Hilary Harris's *Organism* (1975), or on the alienating effects of ubiquitous technology that imposes its rhythms on all areas of human life, as in Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In recent years, this technique continues to proliferate, with its uses ranging from the celebration of efficiency in time-lapse images of construction sites, to the anguishing denounciation of the devastating effects of global warming in images of glaciers receding **Fig. 15 ↦ Time-lapse photography of glaciers receding**, to poetic reconstructions of the biological processes in films such as Terence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) or *Voyage in Time* (2016).

8. "ENTERING INTO THE FUTURE BY SLIPPING INTO THE CRACKS BETWEEN SECONDS"

During the 1920s and 1930s, time-lapse acceleration was often cited as an example of how a technically enhanced vision was capable of redrawing the limits between the visible and the invisible, allowing human eyes to see phenomena unfolding in time at a speed that lay beyond the thresholds of sensory perception. At the same time, seeing through the objective of the camera was also considered to be a way of perceiving the world from an unsettling, decentered, non-human point of view: a "non-human eye, without memory, without thought" (Jean Epstein),**72** an "impartial vision" disconnected from the biases of the human brain (László Moholy-Nagy),**73** a "kino-eye [...] more perfect than the human eye" (Dziga Vertov) **Fig. 16 ↦ Dziga Vertov, *Man with the Movie Camera*, (1929)**,**74** an "unfeeling camera" (Siegfried Kracauer).**75**

In recent years, this idea of a "machine vision" enhancing human vision beyond its limits—to the point of producing "invisible images" that human eyes cannot see, machine-

69 Ernst Bloch, "Zeitraffer, Zeitlupe und der Raum" (1928), in *Verfremdungen II. Geographica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).

70 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (second version, 1936), in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Essays on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), respectively 274-98 and 19-55.

71 Jean Epstein, *L'Intelligence d'une machine* (Paris: Melot, 1946), 17. Our translation. On Epstein's *L'Intelligence d'une machine* and the film *Le Tempestaire*, see the essay by Noam M. Elcott in this volume: "The Master of Time: Jean Epstein's nonhuman time axis manipulation"

72 Jean Epstein, "L'Objectif lui-même" [1926], in Jean Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma 1921-1953. Tome I: 1921-1947*, preface by Henri Langlois, introduction by Pierre Leprohon (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 128.

73 László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* (1925, 1927) (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1969), 7.

74 Vertov, "Kinoks. Revolution" (1923), in *Kino-Eye*, 15.

75 Siegfried Kracauer, "Tentative Outline for a Book on Film Aesthetics" (1949), in *Siegfried Kracauer—Erwin Panofsky, Briefwechsel 1941-1966*, ed. by Volker Breidecker (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 83.

76 On this, see Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking At You)," *The New Inquiry*, December 8, 2016, available online at https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/.

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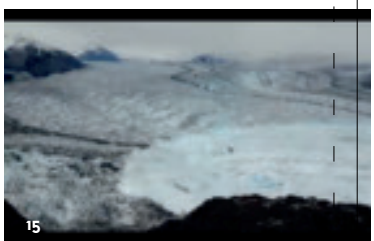
readable images that circulate across machine-to-machine networks with humans out of the loop**76**—has been at the center of a series of works by artists such as Jacques Perconte, Hito Steyerl, Pierre Huyghe and Grégory Chatonsky that reinterpret in new ways, through the possibilities of computer programming and artificial intelligence, the old connection between moving images, time manipulation and time travel.

Through a sophisticated use of programming that aims to unsettle and deconstruct standard compression formats in order to liberate all sorts of digital artifacts, Jacques Perconte has been developing for several years an attempt to reinterpret through digital means a textural perception of the layers of natural elements and atmospheres that can be found in British romantic paintings (Turner in particular) and in French impressionism.**77** His *Le Tempestaire* (2020) further develops this line of work through a direct dialogue with the homonymous film by Jean Epstein (1947). In the famous sequence in which the "storm tamer" calms the storm through the occult powers of a crystal sphere, Epstein manipulates the temproal flow of the waves and the clouds through a series of techniques of time manipulation which include slow motion, freeze-frame, acceleration and reverse motion, while in the soundtrack we hear the eerie sound of the Ondes Martenot, en early instrument of electronic music that produces Theremin-like sounds **Fig. 17 ↦ Maurice Martenot playing the *Ondes Martenot*.** During the early 1920s, Theremin music was called in German *Ätherwellenmusik*, "music of the ether waves," that is, music produced by a technical medium capable of capturing and modulating waves circulating across the atmosphere. What we see in Epstein's *Le Tempestaire* is a similar, *environmental-atmospheric* use of the cinematic medium, which is here staged in its capacity to act upon the environment, modulating the energies carried by wind, water and vapor. Taking as a starting point a series of video images shot in the middle of a storm, Perconte produces a *generative video* in which a specially prepared software incessantly manipulates the initial video images producing different kinds of destructured, pixelated textures **Fig. 18 ↦ Jacques Perconte, *Tempestaire* (2020).** As he explains the work, "at each new edit the change of shot, instead of interrupting the image flow to usher in a new image, further develops the existing image through the arrival of a new one. In this way, the new shot carries within it the image that was already there: the colors melt into each other, and the materials mix to become what the technical possibilities allow as a function of the lumino-spatio-temporal complexity of the old and the new image. The image does not pre-exist *per se*, in the form in which it will be shown. Its visibility, its display, is an actualization."**78**

77 For an overview of Jacques Perconte's work, see http://www.jacquesperconte.com.

78 Unpublished conversation with Jacques Perconte, 2019.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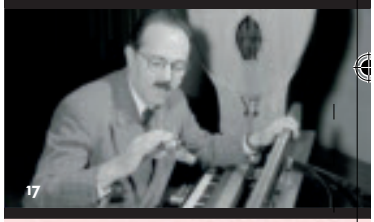
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