

ARTSIMAGE

Visual culture matters

6

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The trails of light which they seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals did not really exist, but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye, appearing to see a certain afterglow in the place from which the creature, shining for only the fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone. It was such unreal phenomena, the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape spread out before us, or in the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.

W.G. SEBALD, *Austerlitz*

Technophobia and Technophilia in the Media, Art and Visual Culture

edited by

Luca Malavasi

Sara Tongiani

Essays by

Federica Cavaletti, Mattia Cinquegrani, Lorenzo Donghi

Ruggero Eugeni, Riccardo Fassone, Barbara Grespi

Giancarlo Grossi, Stefano Locati, Luca Malavasi

Giuseppe Previtali, Sara Tongiani, Federica Villa





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Table of Contents

- 9 Introduction
Luca Malavasi, Sara Tongiani
- 15 Out of Joint: Audiovisual Media as Technologies
of the Time
Ruggero Eugeni
- 29 Filtered Self. Few Notes Around Recent Self–Technologies
Federica Villa
- 41 The New Life of Images. The Case of Postmodern Cinema
Luca Malavasi
- 59 Notes on Technological Imagery, Between Love and Fear
Sara Tongiani
- 71 Digital Fear. Contemporary Horror and Visual Technologies
Giuseppe Previtali
- 85 Inside Sadako’s Digital Panopticon: The Transition
from Analog to Digital Media in the *Ringu* Franchise
Stefano Locati
- 103 Take a DEEP Breath: Virtual Reality and Real Anxiety
Federica Cavaletti, Giancarlo Grossi
- 119 The Promise of a Binary Immortality.
Death and New Social Media
Mattia Cinquegrani

- 133 Video Games, Digital Authority, and the Aesthetic
of Bureaucracy
Riccardo Fassone
- 145 Giving Data a Face. Genetic Surveillance
and DNA Phenotyping
Lorenzo Donghi
- 161 The Power of the Mechanism. Cinema and the Machinery
of Desire
Barbara Grespi
- 179 Authors' Bio–Bibliographies

Introduction

LUCA MALAVASI, SARA TONGIANI

The present volume collects most of the speeches presented at the conference “Technophobia and Technophilia in the Media, Art and Visual Culture” held at the University of Genoa in May 2018; to those are here added some essays written by scholars who participated in that conference, not as speakers but as discussants, organizers or members of the scientific committee.

The two days of the conference represented the first opportunity to give shape to a series of “lateral” thoughts developed within the Doctoral School in Digital Humanities by some young scholars interested in investigating the political, cultural and “sentimental” impact of technology. In the following years there would be other occasions, both conferences and seminars, thanks to which this perspective would be further deepened, opening up other, specific aspects — for example, the nature, the role and the functions of images in our digital society, or the algorithmic automatization of communication processes. But if in 2018 we (the editors of this volume, along with our colleague and friend Giacomo Calorio) decided to start with a reflection that placed at the center the issues of the “philia” and the “phobia” toward technology — that is, forces and dynamics of attraction and rejection, pleasure and fear —, it was also to underline some “humanistic” aspects of technology (and of our existence as technological subjects), aspects too often underestimated when not completely, and guiltily, removed. Within a PhD in Digital Humanities aimed mostly at imagining and, sometimes, at designing “new technologies” and new forms of interaction and communication mediated by technology, it seemed fundamental to us to start a project for “questioning the

technology”, to summarize the title of a book that is still fundamental in this debate today.

The decision to orient the conference and, therefore, the volume towards the value interpretation and the psychological impact of technology (as an abstract concept and ideology) and of the devices and tools in which it is embodied, derives from a very simple consideration, half factual, half intuitive: compared to the story of strong opposition drawn by Andrew Feenberg in his book (which, it must be remembered, dates back to 1999¹), the emotional “temperature” of today’s debate on “technological society” (to quote the title of another crucial book, that of Jacques Ellul²) seems to have stabilized at a neutral point; a point from which not even events such as the financial crisis of 2008, an emblem of the contemporary digital technocracy (that is, a social order in which politics has become a branch of technology), appear capable of moving it. Even the global debate triggered by the pandemic spread of Covid-19 during 2020 has not substantially changed the situation: technology and our technological existence, to which, in the end, we owe the “invention” and the spread of the virus, have stayed away from any serious problematization, and, in fact, the control of the situation has been given to the most classic technocratic rationality — efficiency, calculability and technological tools. Think, for example, of the global use of a very different kinds of thermometers: it is quite obvious that these “toys” — I’m thinking of the basic “gun” used to check your temperature when you want to enter a restaurant or a shop — doesn’t really work; despite this, upon the numerical, technological, and “scientific” results of these devices, our Covid society has regulated the access to private and public spaces. It’s quite evident — in this case and, on a different scale, in the scientific research of a vaccine — that technology (still intended, as in the enlightening tradition, as the operational “space” in which human progress and social development take place), is not an issue anymore, or, in any

¹ A. FEENBERG, *Questioning Technology*, Routledge, New York 1999.

² J. ELLUL, *The Technological Society* (1954), Vintage Books, New York 1964.

case, a word that can really be called into question. Technocracy also means the same thing.

The feeling — as we said: half factual, half intuitive — is that our current society (to be precise: from the “digital turn” onwards) has developed, or taken to the extreme, a form of technological dependence which no creativity or intelligence or political resistance can really dent. Of course, people have always depended on technologies: they are indeed, by definition, extensions or externalizations of people’s imagination, will and actions, and the basic idea of dependency is, after all, unavoidable — at the very moment technologies enhance imagination, will and action, they enrich (reshape) the interaction between subjects and between subjects and the world; to all this, modern rationality has added a philosophical (positive) coefficient: technology is not just, or simply, objects and inventions; it is the maximum expression of a society built upon faith in science and rationality (technology needs a proper association with science to fulfill its promise and, of course, the reverse). The real problem seems to us to be precisely the restoration of this straight philosophical perspective: the return of the most classic, positivistic idea that technology is an unproblematically beneficial force for human progress. So, “questioning technology” is not just a “fashionable” intellectual attitude anymore, but possibly also a guilty one. Just one final image: the same laboratory (as a visual space, cultural concept and modern icon) from which Covid has “escaped”, has become, in the end, the only refuge for salvation from the virus. It is an emblematic short circuit, and it is worth noting that the “scientific laboratory” represents the most classic modern “black-box”: we — “normal” citizens — can look at it only with a mixture of blind faith and reverence — that is, a mixture of love and fear.

The conference, therefore, intended not only to draw attention to two interpretations of technology — the “philic” and the “phobic” — which, particularly from the 1960s onwards, have been essential in the analysis of the subject/technology/modernity relationship, both from a sociological and philosophical point of view and within the cultural and artistic production. The con-

ference also intended, as anticipated, to test the “emotional gradient” that surrounds the modern experience of technology and therefore, upstream, the cultural and ideological interpretation of that experience. In fact, technophilia and technophobia ultimately represent not only two “symptoms” thanks to which we can account for the presence of technology in our lives, but also its work in reconfiguring essential aspects of our daily experience, such as those of space, time, identity.

The book opens with an essay devoted to the analysis of modern temporality which, for Ruggero Eugeni, «is marked by temporal alienation, following the two models of accelerationism and extensionism; but it is also the site of a struggle for the re-appropriation of individual and qualitative times, following the model of multiplicationism (or simultaneism)». In particular, Eugeni questions the role of a specific technique, that of cinema (intended as «as a device for re-enacting the spatialized, quantified, linearised time of modernity»), in the socialisation of subjective temporal experience. The complex relationship between technology, time and subject experience is a strong concept throughout the book: with a particular attention to the problem of digital identity, it is also at the center of Federica Villa and Mattia Cinquegrani’s essays, which, respectively, inquire as to «self-configuration in the contemporary media and in the everyday life experience of any of us, specifically in our habitual relationship with technologies» and the use of the internet and social media as «a “sepulchral space”». In both cases, technology appears as an attractive, desirable means from which «the need to defamiliarize one’s image is delegated, in an increasingly clear desire to move away from oneself», or thanks to which a “sophisticated “entity” that aspires to replace men and women after their death” is created.

More interested in the visual and narrative representations are the essays of Luca Malavasi, Giuseppe Previtali and Stefano Locati, which all look at cinema as a crucial space for reflecting

on technology. More precisely, movies are analyzed, in the first place, as imaginative spaces in which technology is scrutinized, tested, and remediated; Malavasi insists particularly on the role of the cinema of the 1980s as a “theoretic” test bench for a series of technological innovation, while Previtali and Locati’s essays, centered on contemporary horror movies, and especially on the Japanese ones, stress the ambivalent representation and narrative use of technology, «technology paves the way to the resurfacing of the removal of the tradition that modernity has caused, eliciting a state of anxiety» (Locati). Anxiety is also the main feeling that surrounds technology when it is used to control and surveil people: that is the main theme addressed in Lorenzo Donghi’s essay, and explored through the artistic work of Heather Dewey–Hagborg, while Riccardo Fassone starts from the commonsensical «polarization between a technophobic attitude and a technophilic élan» in discourses around video games to stress another kind of control, that exerted by digital games over their players. Sara Tongiani explores the multiple facets of technophobia and technophilia in contemporary imagery, focusing especially on the representation of AI and machines in cinema and tv series.

Finally, two essays are more directly devoted to the analysis of “machinery” and to the relationship between the human body and technology: Cavaletti and Grossi explore the mixed feelings associated with virtual reality, which could be, at the same time, a dystopian device (it separates the user from “real reality”, absorbing her/him inside the representation) and, as the psychiatric practice shows, an effective tool in the treatment of those pathologies that lead patients to experience difficulty with interacting with their environment; Barbara Grespi’s essays open up an intriguing perspective in exploring the emotions triggered by technology as the result of a humanizing process led by gesture: the essay focuses particularly on the affinity between cinema and slot machines, where the gestures that each apparatus requires are comparable.

The editors would like to thank Barbara Grespi and Alessandra Violi for accepting this volume in the Afterimages series. Thanks to Gloria Della Gatta for helping with the editorial process.

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Out of Joint: Audiovisual Media as Technologies of the Time

RUGGERO EUGENI

The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5

«Something is wrong», Ragle said.
«I don't mean with you or with me or with any one person.
I mean in general».
«The time», Ragle said, «is out of joint».
Philip K. Dick, *Time out of Joint*

1. Introduction

In this paper I raise the question of whether audio–visual media, notably cinema, can be considered as technologies of time and if so, by what means and dynamics they operate on, in and with time¹. The first two sections adopt a top–down approach. In section 2 I examine what forms time takes on in modernity, while I dedicate section 3 to the role played by cinema in this context. The second part, in turn, takes a bottom–up approach: in section 4 I take into consideration the processes of constitution of subjective temporal experience as they emerge from contemporary cognitive neuroscience; section 5, in turn, focuses on a couple of theories on the transition from the subjective to social experience of time. Finally, in the last section, I propose a hypothesis about the specific role of cinema in the transition from the subjective to the social dimension of temporality.

¹ The research presented in this paper took place within a PRIN entitled *Perception, Performativity and Cognitive Sciences* funded by the Italian Government (P.I. Antonino Pennisi, University of Messina, years 2015–2019, Grant number: 2015TM24JS – SH4).

2. Time and Modernity

Giorgio Agamben argues that

The modern concept of time is a secularisation of rectilinear, irreversible Christian time, albeit sundered from any notion of end and emptied of any other meaning but that of a structured process in terms of before and after. This representation of time as homogeneous, rectilinear and empty derives from the experience of manufacturing work and is sanctioned by modern mechanics, which establishes the primacy of uniform rectilinear motion over circular motion².

This conception of *chronos*, however, marginalises a radically different conception of time: the *cairós*, “in which man, by his initiative, grasps favourable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment”³.

Agamben’s argument sums up two cornerstones of contemporary reflection on time in modernity. First, technology (linked to scientific thought as it was defined at the end of the Seventeenth century) determined a conception of time as an objective, quantitative, linear, progressive, empty and utilitarian substance. The mechanical clock⁴ is the most visible emblem of such a conception of time, which was able to synchronise the different social activities as well as the rhythms and trends of nature, an issue that is treated in different tones and with different emphases (in the wake of Émile Durkheim and especially of Lewis Mumford) in authors such as E.P. Thompson, Norbert Elias, Alfred Gell, Eviatar Zerubavel, and Peter Galison⁵. Second, this technologi-

² G. AGAMBEN, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, Verso, London 1993, p. 96. To frame Agamben’s position see J. DOUSSAN, *Time, Language, and Visuality in Agamben’s Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills–New York 2013.

³ G. AGAMBEN, *Infancy and History*, cit.

⁴ D.S. LANDES, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*, 2nd ed., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000. For a broader perspective see J. MAZUR, *The Clock Mirage. Our Myth of Measured Time*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 2020.

⁵ É. DURKHEIM, *The Elementary Forms of the religious life* (1912), George Allen & Unwin, London 1912; L. MUMFORD, *Technics and Civilization*, Routledge, London 1934; E.P. THOMPSON, *Time, Work–Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, «Past & Present», no. 38, 1967, pp. 56–97; N. ELIAS, *Time: an essay* (1984), Blackwell, Oxford 1992; A. GELL,

cal conception of time produced a tension between collective and individual temporalities, which in literature often assumed the form of an opposition between a quantitative, alienated time, and a qualitative, regained one. On the basis of this opposition, three major models of modern time have emerged in contemporary theoretical reflection.

Following the first model, modern time is characterised by *acceleration*. The process of time compression began at the very origins of modernity, thanks to new communication and transport technologies⁶. It particularly emerges, however, in the last phase of modernity: late capitalism accelerates time in order to obtain the maximum economic advantage⁷, and takes a final leap that corresponds to the transition from the modern to the postmodern condition⁸. Even in this phase communication technologies, in their alliance with the military industry, play a decisive role, as scholars such as Friedrich Kittler and Paul Virilio underline⁹. This collective, accelerated, and alienated time gives rise to forms of political “chronopower,” as Hartmund Rosa¹⁰ emphasizes.

The Anthropology of Time. Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images, Berg Publishers, Oxford 1992; E. ZERUBAVEL, *Time Maps. Collective Memory and Social Shape of the Past*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2003; P. GALISON, *Einstein’s Clock, Poincaré’s maps. Empires of Time*, Norton, New York–London 2004. For a synthesis see B. ADAM, *Time: Key Concepts*, Polity Press, Cambridge–Malden 2004.

⁶ S. KERN, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1983.

⁷ J. RIFKIN, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History*, Henry Holt, New York 1987.

⁸ D. HARVEY, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, London 1990, pp. 284 e ss.

⁹ P. VIRILIO, *Speed and Politics* (1977), Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2006; F. KITTLER, *Optical Media*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015.

¹⁰ H. ROSA, *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, NSU Press, Malmö–Aarhus 2010; ID., *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity* (2005), Columbia University Press, New York 2013. The accelerationist paradigm is taken up by numerous scholars: H. ROSA, W.E. SCHEUERMAN (eds.), *High-Speed Society*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 2009; J. TOMLINSON, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*, Sage, London–Thousand Oaks 2007; R. HASSAN, *Empires of Speed. Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2009; H. NOWOTNY, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience* (1989), Polity Press, Cambridge–Malden 1996; A. MACKENZIE, *Transductions. Bodies and Machines at Speed*, Continuum, London–New York 2006; J. WAJCMAN, *Pressed for Time. The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2015.

The alienation of individual time can also take place in an opposite way, not through the *contraction* but rather through the indefinite *extension* of spatialized time. Accordingly, the second model of modern time identifies the affirmation of an enlarged present and the dissolution of a historical perspective. Fredric Jameson saw the primacy of synchrony over diachrony as one of the marks of postmodernism¹¹, and the idea of modern time as extended present returns in various authors, such as Hans Gumbrecht and, even earlier, Reinhart Koselleck¹². Recently, Jonathan Crary highlighted how the extension of waking time, resulting from a series of media technologies and expressions of neocapitalist globalisation, crystallises the empty time of modernity into an eternal present¹³.

Finally, the alienation of social time (implemented through either its contraction or its extension) finds at least partial compensation in a third model, which highlights the *multiplication* of modern temporalities. Historians from *Les Annales* had already pointed out the possibility of studying not “time” in the singular, but rather the multiple, qualitative and subjective temporalities that emerge through history¹⁴; more recently, social research has emphasized how the time of modernity and even more so, that of postmoder-

¹¹ F. JAMESON, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), Duke University Press, Durham 1991, pp. 25–32. This conception was influenced, among other things, by the success of the video as an artistic medium at the end of the seventies, since «in contrast to film as a medium, defined by the delay between the inscription of the past event and the time of viewing, video [was seen as] inherently marked by its engagement with the “present tense» (J. KIM, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital. Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age*, New York–London, Bloomsbury 2016, p. 29). See also, from an “workerist” point of view, M. Lazzarato, *Videophilosophy. The Perception of Time in Post-Fordism* (1997), Columbia University Press, New York 2019.

¹² H.U. GUMBRECHT, *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014; R. KOSELLECK, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979), Columbia University Press, New York 2004.

¹³ J. CRARY, *24/7. Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, Verso, London–New York 2013. See also R. HASSAN, R.E. PURSER (eds.), *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007.

¹⁴ J. LE GOFF, *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages* (1977), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1980. For a contextualization, see T. HIRSCH, *Le temps social: parcours d’une notion*, in J. ANDRÉ, S. DREYFUS–ASSÉO, F. HARTOG (dirs.), *Les récits du temps*, Puf, Paris 2010, pp. 70–86.

nity, is characterized by various forms of resistance to homogenization: temporalities linked to work, entertainment, and class and gender identities are multiplied through the everyday life of globalized subjects¹⁵. Once again, media technologies play a fundamental role, since they offer a diversified range of temporal affordances¹⁶.

In short, modern temporality is marked by temporal alienation, following the two models of *accelerationism* and *extensionism*; but it is also the site of a struggle for the re-appropriation of individual and qualitative times, following the model of *multiplicationism* (or *simultaneism*).

3. Cinema as a Technology of Time

Gilles Deleuze identifies a critical turning point in the history of cinema¹⁷: classical cinema reflected (on) time through movement, and more precisely through the activation of sensorimotor bonds (perception–action–emotion); modern cinema, on the contrary, starting from Neorealism, introduces pure optical and sound situations that suspend the link between perception and action, free time from movement, and allow a pure, direct, multiple experience of time:

¹⁵ See H. NOWOTNY, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience* (1989), Polity Press, Cambridge–Malden 1996; R. LEVINE, *A Geography of Time. The Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist, or How Every Culture Keeps Time Just a Little Bit Differently*, Basic Books, New York 1997, then Oneworld, Oxford 2006; G. CROW, S. HEATH (eds.), *Social Conceptions of Time. Structure and Process in Work and Everyday Life*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills–New York 2002; B. DAVIES, J. FUNKE (eds.), *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture*, Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills–New York 2011; J. BURGESS, A.J. ELIAS (eds.), *Time. A Vocabulary of the Present*, New York University Press, New York 2016.

¹⁶ E. KEIGHTLEY (ed.), *Time, Media and Modernity*, Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills–New York 2012; M. HARTMANN, E. PROMMER, K. DECKNER, S.O. GÖRLAND (eds.), *Mediated Time. Perspectives on Time in a Digital Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019.

¹⁷ G. DELEUZE, *Cinema 1: The Movement–Image* (1983), Athlone, London 1986; ID., *Cinema 2: The Time–Image* (1985), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989. On Deleuze’s theory and time perception see C. SHORES, *Cinematic Signs and the Phenomenology of Time: Deleuze and the Visual Experience of Temporal Depth*, in C. FERENCZ–FLATZ, J. HANICH (eds.), *Film And Phenomenology*, special issue of *Studia Phaenomenologica. Romanian Journal for Phenomenology*, vol. XVI, 2016, pp. 343–372.

In what is called modern cinema: [...] “time is out of joint”: it is off the hinges assigned to it by behaviour in the world, but also by movements of world. It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time. The relation, *sensory–motor situation* → indirect image of time is replaced by a non-localizable relation, *pure optical and sound situation* → direct image–time¹⁸.

As we previously did with Agamben, we can consider Deleuze’s approach as exemplary for a number of interventions by contemporary film theorists. In fact, several authors deal with the idea that cinema takes up and contributes to spreading the linear and consequential temporality of modernity; at the same time, however, it opens the door to different temporalities that alter the idea of a unique and linear time in a more or less radical way. This trend would also become increasingly accentuated in late or post modernity, marked by the end of analogue cinema and the advent of digital technologies.

For example, Mary Ann Doane¹⁹ emphasizes (with Stephen Kern: see above) that cinema is part of the new technologies that, around the turn of the twentieth century, redefine temporality as a homogeneous, directional, divisible, and administrable entity; however, at the same time, cinema pushes against such a conception, and enhances the sense of contingency, randomness, and unpredictability of events. Cinematographic temporality is therefore multiple, as the avant–gardes had well understood, and as the cinema of the end of the millennium rediscovered.

Along the same lines, Laura Mulvey proposes the idea of “delayed cinema”:

Delayed cinema [as expressed in works by Jean Luc Godard, Jeff Wall, Hollis Frampton, Douglas Gordon, and others] works on two levels: first of all, it refers to the actual act of slowing down the flow

¹⁸ G. DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, cit., p. 41.

¹⁹ M.A. DOANE, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002. See also H. POWELL, *Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema*, Tauris, London–New York 2012.