In an audio recording made by Tony Conrad on March 5, 1963, filmmaker Jack Smith can be heard gasping with delight at the spectacle produced by a lensless film projector running at reduced speed, sans film, with performer Mario Montez illuminated in its unsteady beam. Smith exclaims: “Oh, Tony, can you see that? Have your actual eyes, in reality, ever seen anything as exaggerated and raging as this? I mean, aside from theatrical experience (gasp) […] Oh, *Madre!*” The recording documents the first of Conrad’s experiments with cinematic flicker, the first seed of an idea for a future film.

The dazzling, dizzying, and fitful visual experience to which Smith is responding—the rapid, mechanical flashing up and dying away of projected light—epitomizes the most common sense of the word “flicker” in contemporary parlance. However, before the last few decades of the nineteenth century, the word might just as well have been employed in reference to a flirtatious glance, a pilferer, or the fluttering movements of a winged creature: a bird, a moth, or, as in the following description of an exchange between lovers (Chaucer’s *Troilus and Cressida*), a spirit that has evacuated its body to flit around outside of it:

And at that she began more deeply to sigh, and he began to comfort her as best he might:

took her in his two arms, and kissed her oft, and to comfort her set his best intent: at which her ghost, that flickered aloft, into her woeful heart again it went.3

Given this lexical heritage, it seems fitting that in 1878, Etienne Jules-Marey immediately associated the photographic study of motion with “the questions connected with the flight of birds” in an enthusiastic letter to *La Nature*. Responding to the journal’s publication of Eadweard Muybridge’s newly published photographic motion studies, Marey writes: “I was dreaming of a kind of photographic gun, seizing and portraying the bird in an attitude, or, better still, a series of attitudes, displaying the successive different motions of the wings…” The technique Marey has in mind, of course, is the “proto-cinematic” technique he would come to call chronophotography: the depiction of movement in successive instantaneous photographs. What he was dreaming of amounts to the ability to shoot a bird, not to kill it but to capture its living, vision-confounding motion and convert it into legible, fixed image sequences. The passing into obsolescence of older meanings of “flicker” thus marks a contemporaneous shift in the way movement and time could be viewed. Since the bird’s incomprehensible flying movements have become reducible to a number of arrested instants, its body *ceases to move*. Once it had been seized over and over, cinema proved it could bring the bird back to life, so to speak, by spinning the image sequence back into motion. The dazzling and continuous flicker of flight becomes a dazzling but discontinuous flicker of light on the screen. As such, the flicker presents itself as a model for modern temporality, in which the present proceeds by successive instants, bursts of barely perceptible light intersected by “empty” intervals, all passing at
TRAVELS IN FLICKER-TIME (MADRE!)  

a blinding pace.

This model of time met with some criticism in the early days of cinema. I have written elsewhere on one such criticism: Henri Bergson's challenging of “quantitative” time, which he characterized in 1907 as “cinematographic.” For Bergson, one of the problems with building time like a cinematographic image, instant by instant, is the accompanying assumption that time is either completely objective and thus independent of any perceiving, remembering subject, or completely subjective and thus incompatible with the pre-existence of any outside world. Bergson sought to demonstrate that if either of these extreme views is true, time cannot exist, because there can be no passage from one instant to the next. He argues instead that duration requires a bridge: a fusion of realism and idealism, inside and outside. Bergson used the cinematic apparatus, passing as it does from one instantaneous photograph to the next to project its illusionary image of movement, as a model of the incorrect time of everyday intellectual construction.

What follows is a sketch, tracing the outlines of a larger argument composed of three main claims: first, that the flicker stands as a visual manifestation of a certain understanding of time as essentially discontinuous—flicker-time—which despite initial appearances is not strictly opposed to Bergsonian duration; second, that this particular temporality has played an important part, since the 1890s, in cultural productions that play at imagining time; and third, that the device of the flicker makes visible, albeit dazzlingly so, a certain practical potential for radicalized uses of flicker-time: implicitly critical and even destructive of certain conventional temporal constructs—but always alluring as well.

The present article primarily attends to the second claim, brought into focus through the lens of the popular trope of time travel. In order to illustrate this time’s transformative talents, and at the same time to suggest that it is not necessarily an entirely new kind of time, I will take the liberty of first digressing into a very old fable.

The Wolf’s Trick

In his book History of the Aesopic Fable, published in 1889, Joseph Jacobs includes an English translation from the original Hebrew of the tale, “The Fable of the Wolf and the Animals” by twelfth century fabulist Berachyah Hanakdan. Like some better-known parallel fables, the tale employs the figure of the hungry Wolf to impart a lesson about unchecked voracity and the slippery power of language.

Berachyah’s fable begins as the Wolf stands trial, dragged by all the “birds and beasts, wild and tame,” before the sovereign Lion to be punished for his greedy, murderous eating habits, “as a monster worthy of detestation.” The Lion sentences the Wolf to two years without meat and forbids him from killing ever again. Although the Wolf accepts this punishment, it is not long before his voracious nature returns. He finds himself hunting, comes upon “a fat sheep,” and hesitates: “Then to himself he said, ‘Who can keep every law?’ and his thoughts were bewildered with what he saw.” Having begun his transgression against the law by hunting down this sheep, the Wolf is faced with a puzzle: he feels hungry and has food within sight, but is forbidden to perceive it as food because of the Lion’s sentence. To resolve this contrary vision, he conjures a trick:

He said to himself, “It overcomes me the longing to eat, for two years day by day I must fast from meat. This is my oath to the king that I swore but I’ve thought how to fulfill it as never before. Three sixty-five are the days in a year. Night is when you close your eyes, open them, and then the day is near.”

With this play of words—a clever redefinition of “day” and “night”—the Wolf opens up the possibility of accelerating the passage of time. He does so by reducing the situation, for the time being, to a picture. The sheep is an object that the Wolf wants to kill and eat, a matter of utmost physical intimacy, but the passage of time becomes a matter of optics, harmless and distant. Having induced this distance, this space, the Wolf performs the trick: “His eyes he closed and opens straightaway. It was evening and morning, one day. Thus he winked till he had numbered two years and his greed returned and his sin disappears.” His sentence now complete, he grants himself the authority to devour the helpless animal before him.
The Wolf’s trick, his invention, is a device for moving things along by blinking, producing for himself a proto-cinematic, flickering picture. Camera, projector, and spectator all in one, he induces a spectacle that passes time. As each of his momentary “days” pass, he closes his eyes and the sheep disappears; when he opens his eyes to the next “day,” there stands the object of his desire, an object of vision, virtual food (the future), immobile, visible, and within reach, prone to become actual food (the present). A mysterious substitution occurs at this point in Berachyah’s tale, marking the prey’s transition from virtual to actual, there to here, future to present. The sheep turns into a goat:

His eyes fix the goat they had seen and he said, “See beforehand I have atoned for my sin,” and he seized the neck of the goat, broke it to pieces, and filled up his throat as he was wont to do before.

Having transformed back into food, the animal standing before the wolf also has undergone a taxonomic metamorphosis. Jacobs, our translator, acknowledges the lexical switch in a footnote, but does not attempt to explain it: “There is a curious vacillation between sheep and goat in Berachyah’s version.” Perhaps the transformation’s significance is simply symbolic: as the sacrificial animal onto whose head the sinner places his sins, the goat appears as the disappearance of the wolf’s sins. His optical trick functions on the condition that the animal intermittently disappear each “night” and reappear each “day” for the proper number of days, after which the sheep vanishes and “his sin disappears.” The uncanny transformation of the animal certainly bolsters the scene’s resemblance to a cinematic encounter. As in a simple substitution splice, sheep becomes goat in the blink of an eye (perhaps the switch itself occurs during an interval, at “night,” while the Wolf’s eyes are closed). Rather than simply manifesting a goat, the trick subsists in removing the sheep to make way for the goat. Just like that, the situation ceases to be a matter of optics. No longer an image, the animal transforms back into meat.

The Wolf’s game, his object, is to momentarily reverse the power of the sovereign Lion, the law, to displace his sins onto the animal and then to devour it. Before he can fill up his throat, however, he must empty it by making an utterance; that is, in order to justify assimilating the weak animal—using force against the word of the sovereign, the strong, ultimately to capture the weak—he must regurgitate the language and logic by which the law makes itself known (passes its sentence). In his essay, “The Fabulous Animal,” Louis Marin makes a striking claim to this effect: “It could very well be that the fable, the story of the weak and marginal, generally constitutes a particular kind of apparatus within discourse itself,” Marin says. “The function of this apparatus is to allow the weak to displace and reverse the power contained in the discourse of the strong.” In a complementary essay on Marie de France’s “Fable of the Wolf and the Lamb,” Marin maintains that the clever and insatiable figure of the Wolf uses the power of speech to straddle the border between nature and culture, and does this precisely by establishing a temporal deferral between the desire to eat and the act of devouring. As in Berachyah’s fable, the temporal interval between the hungry present and a wished-for future is bridged by a hesitation, a gap. Time becomes space, a “stage” on which the fable can play out: “language and discourse establish a new boundary between the need that drives the animal and the act of devouring. They bring about a distance, a temporal difference that defers the immediate satisfaction of desire.”

What makes Berachyah’s Wolf remarkable is the way he doubles the fable’s time-distancing effect with his blinking trick. The hunter’s eye blinks to capture his prey, holding the passing scene in place by alternating successive looks with dark, unseen intervals. In order to hold the object of his desire in place as an image, the Wolf must let the sheep out of his sight each time he blinks. A captivating image emerges, and arrests both hunter and hunted, like spectator and film. The object of desire is captured in the flicker, but so is he; although the trick affords the Wolf a satisfying meal, in the end he has fooled only himself, as his transgression puts him back at the mercy of the Lion, back inside the law, the rule: regular time.

Travel by Time Machine: “the palpitation of night and day”

From 1888 to 1895, contemporaneously with the
much like the Wolf’s blinking technique, Well’s device would speed up the succession of night and day to flickering velocity. His novella, aptly titled *The Time Machine*, was published in the late Spring of 1895, two months after the Lumière brothers first demonstrated their *cinematographe* for a private audience, and six months before they unveiled it to the public. In Well’s story, an inventor known only as “the Time Traveller” builds a machine to prove the principle that time is space (the fourth dimension). He uses his contrivance to “travel” into the distant future; the machine is clearly conceived as a vehicle, undoubtedly inspired by the modern locomotive technologies that had already accelerated the experience of moving from place to place. As such, the time machine moves its operator: “I took the starting lever in one hand and the stopping one in the other, pressed the first, and almost immediately the second. I seemed to reel…”

Given the vehicular character of the time machine, it becomes clear that it is designed with the built-in presumption that time can be treated practically as space.

Importantly, this machine, as it propels the driver through time as if through space, also provides a corresponding visual experience. Wells’ rich description is worth quoting at length:

I pressed the lever over to its extreme position. The night came like the turning out of a lamp, and in another moment came to-morrow. The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and ever fainter. To-morrow night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still. An eddying murmur filled my ears, and a strange, dumb confusedness descended on my mind.

I am afraid I cannot convey the peculiar sensations of time traveling. They are excessively unpleasant... As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing... The slowest snail that ever crawled dashed by too fast for me. The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye. Then, in the intermittent darknesses, I
saw the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters, and had a faint glimpse of the circling stars. Presently, as I went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous color like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space; the moon a fainter fluctuating band; and I could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.¹⁹

“Flickering.” For this mid-1890s vision of time travel, the experience is not only visual, but also remarkably cinematic: diurnal time reaches the pace of flicker-time. The mechanical acceleration of night and day into a "continuous greyness" supplies the same intermittent action of light and dark, accelerated just beyond the limits of perception, produced by the film image: at a certain speed, the flicker disappears. Neuroscientists call such a fusion of darkness and light "critical flicker frequency" (CFF): the point at which an increasingly fast intermittent light source ceases to visibly fluctuate and begins to appear continuous. Understood as such, the passage from flicker-speed to CFF names a visual phenomenon that teases vision with its own limits, making visible the transition from seeing what is happening—the flicker—to seeing an illusory continuity. For Wells’ Time Traveller, this passage is "excessively unpleasant" and "painful to the eye," but once he reaches the proper velocity (faster than a year per minute), the displeasure gives way to thrill: “The unpleasant sensations of the start were less poignant now. They merged last into a kind of hysterical exhilaration.”²⁰

The flickering, fast-motion quality witnessed by the time machine's driver presents this scene as ripe for adaptation to film. In 1960, special effects technician George Pal directed the first full-blown film version of the novel for MGM. Pal received an Oscar for speeding up time with his stop-motion animation techniques. At least for the scene in question, his adaptation adheres to Wells’ description with some fidelity. As the inventor, here called George Wells (played by Rod Taylor), drives into the future, stop-motion animation visualizes the ride: a snail crawls speedily across the ground, flowers bloom and close rapidly, and, as Anne Friedberg has observed, a dress shop mannequin across the street literally "wears" the passing of time by displaying the ever-changing look of ladies’ fashion within a frame that remains constant—the shop window functions as George’s "marker of temporality."²¹ In order to arrive at this animated experience with its masterful envisioning of accelerated time, however, it must be noted that the scene passes through several sustained moments of flicker. As the machine's speed increases, days and nights grow shorter and shorter, and everything becomes illuminated by flickering light, including George (see Figs. 1-8). A relatively slow alternation becomes a "palpitation," accompanied by accelerating non-diegetic sound effects that punctuate the accelerating flicker of the image. The sequence unfolds as a shot/reverse-shot sequence showing George holding his lever while delighting in the flicker, glancing around the room, out his window, and also up through the paned skylight that reveals the changing pace of diurnal time. (Figs. 9-11) In voiceover, George makes quite clear the cinematic quality of the experience: “Thus I was able to see the changing world in a series of glimpses.”

In both book and film, then, one effect of time travel is the production of a moving image that flickers to life. The machine reaches full speed by merging multiple “glimpses” which are polar opposites—night and day, light and dark—into one enthralling image. The time traveller’s privileged view comes from his position inside the machine—this is what allows him to witness the acceleration of time’s passage from normal speed to flicker velocity and up beyond it. A spectator, he is immobile in space but mobile in time: spatially still, contained, inside the machine, but temporally in motion, uncontained and unsituated, outside of space. This is a temporal “outside,” as the machine’s trick is precisely to evacuate the now.

To conceive of the fictional technology of the time machine in this way is to imagine a vehicle, but also a kind of fantastic cinematic device. “It is first necessary to ‘read’ time before writing a time-travel story,”²² writes Veronica Hollinger. The time travel trope “is a sign without a referent, a linguistic construction originating in
If time has classically been readable as a category of space, it becomes technologically writable with the emergence of the cluster of technologies that must have informed the original literary text (clocks and watches, trains and their timetables, photographic motion studies, chronophotography, the kinetoscope, etc.). The deep irony of this new technical claim is not lost on Wells: the inaugural time machine narrative is also a sharp critique of the “fourth dimension” concept itself. “The subversion of 19th-century scientific values which [the novel] undertakes on the level of narrative event,” Hollinger argues, “is complemented on the level of textual discourse by its deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.” Wells’ definition of time travel as a visual experience, then, suggests a commentary on technology’s metaphysical effects. The time traveler’s unwise folly, his meddling with the order of time (chronology), is aligned with the newly prevalent treatment of time and movement by cinematographic flicker.

Such a reading has been taken to indicate a turn of the century telos. Paul Coates posits the invention of cinema as a product of the colonial crisis as imperial powers ran out of undiscovered space: “Time travel is in a sense travel between the unevenly developed countries of this world projected onto the universe...the Zeitgeist generated cinema to effect this time travel.” While there is little doubt that the emergence of cinema participates in a dispersed concern over the finitude of uncolonized territory, I would contend that cinema is not simply “generated” by it. Even if the film image speaks to the disappearance of space (in both the cartographic and the metaphysical senses), it does not simply treat time as “the new space,” so to speak. The time machine’s movement into the future is described as a literal disappearance from both the time and space of the present day. As Jonathan Bignell has noted, while traveling, the Time Traveller “seems to master and control what is seen on the screen, while being excluded from the action.” Much like an ideal cinema spectator, he watches a scene from which he is absent. More practically, each spectator really disappears, over and over again, as the darkened space of exhibition is bathed in the flicker of projected light.

The Flicker Film

Especially when I was younger, as a teenager, my experience with movies was extraordinarily rich in the way that they transported me to some other place and time. I remember coming blinking out of the theatre into the sun and awakening from the trance of the film, a kind of narrativity trance, which can be very strong. —Tony Conrad

The same year that Pal’s *The Time Machine* was released, another cinematic flicker appeared. In Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), unlike in Pal’s...
The Instant

The Instant

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film, the flicker does not interrupt or accelerate a filmed scene; instead, this film’s content amounts to the flicker itself. An experiment composed of entirely black and entirely white frames which alternate in modulated intervals (with a soundtrack that alternates similarly, abruptly between silence and noise), Kubelka’s film prefigures a veritable sub-genre of experimental and avant-garde cinema known as the “flicker film.” It is a category that has since come to emblematize the “structural” film movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, comprised of films whose _modus operandi_ is, at least in part, to make visible or take advantage of the cinematic apparatus’ inherent propensity to create unstable visual effects. An incomplete list of examples: Tony Conrad’s materialization of his projector experiments, titled _The Flicker_ (1966); Paul Sharits’ series of flicker films, including _Piece Mandala/End War_ (1966), _Razor Blades, Ray Gun Virus, N.O.T.H.I.N.G._, and _T,Q,U,C,H,I,N,G_ (all 1968); a trio of chromatic flicker works by Victor Grauer titled _Angel Eyes_ (1965), _Archangel_ (1966), and _Seraph_ (1966); _Around Perception_ (Pierre Hébert, 1968); _Raindance_ (Standish Lawder, 1972); and Taka Iimura’s _Shutter_ (1967) and _Twenty-four Frames Per Second_ (1975).

The image (or lack thereof) produced in the flicker film exceeds the space of the screen and the frame that usually contains the image, producing what Sharits calls an “internal time-shape.” What one sees, William C. Wees writes, is “impossible to fix in space. In fact, it is not ‘in space’ at all. It is ‘in the temporally organized firing of brain cells.’” Although the normative film image is built of still photographs, fixity itself is not properly involved in seeing a film, as the moving image can only appear in flux, operating faster than the eye. The flicker’s primary effect, one might say, is to make visible the transitional stages between a static, fixed view of things and a moving, cinematic one. The moving image is always disintegrated, built on brief instants. The flicker film is no different, but it approximates the effect of a slowed-down projection, like Conrad’s earlier experiments. It is still constituted of instants, but instants that linger slightly longer. Are these “instants” instantaneous at all, or are they bits of duration? Is the dichotomy duration/ instantaneousity anything more than an illusion?

The fact that flicker films, despite being “slowed down,” are able to push vision beyond its own capacity points to their attraction for experimental filmmakers, but also to the anxieties they stir up. The effect can have unpleasant physical consequences: photogenic migraines and, in rare cases, epileptic seizures. Conrad’s _The Flicker_ highlights the threat of photogenic epilepsy by including a warning at the beginning of the film. In researching the risks, Conrad found that “children who are epileptic, because the seizures can be fun, they sometimes will go outdoors and look up at the sun and then just wave their hand in front of their eyes and this will take them into a trance.” The risks and pleasures associated with the flicker film, then, have something to do with the “trance,” as if it is the way that _The Flicker_ arrests the spectator’s physical functions, overriding self-control, that makes it successful. Writing about flicker films, Philippe-Alain Michaud corroborates:

> The discomfort or illness that the spectator may feel upon seeing these flickers has a transcendental function: the paradoxical demands on the perceptual apparatus generated by the flicker allow this very apparatus to map itself out. Bedazzlement is a visual oxymoron; at the extreme limits of vision, where, according to Aristotle, the sensible destroys sensation, absolute brightness turns itself into a dark image: what remains is a pure flutter between light and dark, which appears as the unsurpassable limit of cinematic experience.

Even without the benefit of a seizure, one is given the pleasure of _seeing_ one’s own perception fail. The design of Conrad’s film allows the viewer to observe—or fail to observe—this breakdown quite clearly. The rate of alternation between black and white moves from twenty-four flashes per second (fps) down to four and then back again, over the course of a thirty-minute runtime. Writing in 1966, Conrad explains, “in the range from 6 to 18 fps, strange things occur.” Primarily an experimental musician, Conrad was curious about the possibility of inducing a “harmonic content” that is visual rather than aural, by producing poly-
rhythms with alternating light. Describing his expectations for the viewing experience of The Flicker, he observes that “it is not coincidental that one of the principal brain-wave frequencies, the so-called alpha-rhythm, lies in the 8 to 16 cycles per second range.” This hypothesis suggests that the power of his film, its disturbing quality, derives from the rough synchronization of the inside and the outside, the hijacking of an internal timing by an external stimulus.

The Flicker’s opening disclaimer is a sincere one, but also has the effect of highlighting the film’s general function, which is to whisk the spectator off on an out-of-control journey. “I did think of The Flicker as a kind of science fiction movie at its best in which one experienced the full impact of narrative transport,” Conrad explains in a recent interview. Complaining that science fiction films tend to “back off from the most extreme phenomenological problems,” he places his own flicker film at the outer edges of the genre, but still within it, and suggests that the transportive potential of film is technically inherent; that is, it does not have to be expressed according to narrative conventions. The vehicle is hypnotic, pulsating light itself.

Considering this equation of film spectatorship with transportation, then, one can begin to understand The Flicker as a vehicle that moves by palpitation, feeling around for the right rhythm or timing to take advantage most effectively of the internal rhythms that make perception possible. Gilles Deleuze’s evaluation of the flicker film—“when the black or white screen stands for the outside of all the images, when the flickerings multiply the interstices like irrational cuts”—would seem to agree: “The film does not record the filmic process in this way without projecting a cerebral process. A flickering brain, which relinks or creates loops—this is cinema.” What I would suggest, one step further, is that the flickering image, by its capacity to approximate internal rhythms, can also shed light on time consciousness.

“My bottom of the origin of the concept of time”

In his essay, “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad,” Freud confesses a secret hunch about time consciousness. The essay introduces a technical analogy for explaining the working relationship between perception, consciousness, and the unconscious: a device known as the Mystic Writing Pad, or Wunderblock. A children’s toy, the Mystic Pad is a tablet upon which one can write, erase what is written, and write again. It works by a three-layered arrangement of parts: on top is a celluloid sheet, beneath that a sheet of wax paper, and beneath that a wax substrate pliable enough to receive impressions. With a pointed stylus, the user writes on the top layer, and then lifts the sheets away from the bottom layer to erase the inscription. What makes this device attractive for Freud is the fact that the writing is erased only from the top two layers, which come to analogize perception and consciousness, while the wax substrate underneath, which comes to represent the less conscious domain of memory, permanently retains all of its past impressions. Freud admits that his comparison only goes so far, since the Mystic Pad cannot perform anything analogous to the creative act of remembering—it cannot recall its impressions back up to the “conscious” level. As Akira Mizuta Lippit writes, traces of past contact “cannot be reactivated from the inside but are rather dependent on another intervention. Only in the dynamic flow of psychic action does the unconscious counter the influx of external stimuli with its own response, a form of desire.” In remembering, the unconscious works over the past in ways that the Wunderblock simply cannot. “None the less,” writes Freud,

I do not think it is too far-fetched to compare the celluloid and waxed paper cover with the system Pcpt.-Cs. and its protective shield, the wax slab with the unconscious behind them, and the appearance and disappearance of the writing with the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception.

In other words, the movement of consciousness functions by the flickering on and off of perception. Having come upon this precise analogy for the psychic mechanism, Freud finds the courage to make some bold speculations about the way a perceiving subject understands time. To get there,
he enters a confessional mode:

But I must admit that I am inclined to press the comparison still further. On the Mystic Pad the writing vanishes every time the close contact is broken between the paper which receives the stimulus and the wax slab which preserves the impression. This agrees with a notion I have long had about the method in which the perceptual apparatus of our mind functions, but which I have hitherto kept to myself. My theory was that cathetic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely pervious system Pept.-Cs. So long as that system is cathected in this manner, it receives perceptions (which are accompanied by consciousness) and passes the excitation on to the unconscious mnemic systems; but as soon as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill.43 [my italics]

The secret thus far amounts to the speculation that consciousness, or more accurately, the contact between the unconscious and the outside, proceeds only intermittently, not continuously. Perceptions are received in “rapid periodic impulses” with intervals in-between them, during which “consciousness is extinguished.” The system closes itself off intermittently—blinks—in order to protect itself by tucking away each influx of perceptions and making space for the next burst. Freud does not acknowledge the resemblance of this mechanism to that of a film camera, but the resemblance seems clear: the film camera’s method, in the simplest of terms, entails opening the shutter to expose one frame, and then instantaneously closing it while the film advances to stow away the exposed frame and bring the next segment of unexposed film into place, ready for another exposure. The spool of photosensitive film, theoretically endless, stands in for the endlessly impressionable wax slab.

Admittedly this facile comparison to cinema is a debatable conjecture from Freud’s analogy and requires a speculative leap, but not nearly as bold a leap as the next step Freud himself takes: “I further had a suspicion that this discontinuous method of functioning of the system Pept.-Cs. lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time.”44 This last proposition, which is not elaborated any further, is what makes the Mystic Pad analogy a valuable revelation to the present essay. What are the implications of a cryptic confession like this, daring to claim that time originates—first becomes perceptible, conceivable—by way of a discontinuous, or continually distracted, engagement with the outside world? Why had Freud been keeping this hunch a secret? Perhaps the obvious resemblance to cinema embarrassed him (it is well known that he disliked the movies). Or perhaps the reason is that this turn is more boldly speculative than even his psychoanalytic technique could support. Perhaps Freud’s method, built on the use of keen observation to glimpse processes that take place beyond the realm of observation, cannot quite account for the dazzling flicker effect.

I would suggest that there is another reason for Freud’s furtiveness: if time consciousness is built on a flickering between perception and memory, inside and outside, then the order of things is called into question. Even underneath the everyday notion of “quantitative” time Bergson criticized as “cinematographic,” there remains a presumption of a linear flow, a continuity of time that persists entirely outside of consciousness, independent of it, with the present ahead of the past and behind the future. However, if Freud is persuasive in suggesting that the flickering action of perception/consciousness truly invents time, then chronology itself is called into question. Presence, or the progressive movement of time (into the future), is dictated by the blinking of the unconscious as it perpetually renews the regressive movement of memory (into the past). Past, present, and future become cotemporaneous components of an interminable kind of game—excessively unpleasant and hysterically exhilarating, like the Time Traveller’s first ride, and like Jack Smith’s Oedipal flicker film viewing: “Madre!” In psychoanalytic theory, time cannot be understood otherwise: “past, present, and future are strung together on the thread of a wish that runs through them.”45 And given the Wunderblock analogy, this “thread” looks less like a string than a series of
glances, a strip of discontinuous snapshots. The continuity that is generally presumed to govern time begins to look broken, less (chrono)logical, and without rule.

Freud’s confession about time could be construed as dangerous, with profoundly transgressive implications. By positing flicker-time as a normative and even originary temporal structure—the time on top of which all other times are constructed—he implies a questioning of a larger system. Who would stand behind the illegitimate temporal claim made by the trick of the outlaw Wolf, blinking as he does to pass the time, to pass his sentence and satisfy his hunger, to reverse the sovereign law by disrupting the regular (regulated) and legible (legislated) flow of conventionally conceived time? In fabulous discourse, where the animal can speak, the Wolf reverses the law with a uniquely human invention: an act of stupidity, in the sense that Jacques Derrida treats the French word bêtise. An idiomatic term meaning beastlike stupidity, bêtise describes something that is reserved for the speaking subject (it does not apply to actual animals). Derrida reveals the political stakes of Freud’s confession, more or less directly, by proposing bêtise as a fabulous vehicle for traveling beyond the boundaries of psychoanalytic language:

It is enough, a minimal condition, that we take into account the divisibility, multiplicity, or difference of forces in a living being, whatever it may be. It is enough to admit that there is no finite living being, human or nonhuman, that wouldn’t be structured by this differential of forces between which a tension, if not a contradiction, cannot not locate or be located in different instances, apparatuses, if you will, one resisting others, one repressing or suppressing others, or trying to put forward or make prevail what La Fontaine, in his “The Wolf and the Sheep,” called “la raison du plus forts,” the reason/right of the strongest. In these antagonisms made possible in every finite living being, made possible by differences of forces and intensities, stupidity is always necessarily on both sides, on the side of the who—man, ego—and the side of the what… Considering that the emergence and mass popularization of cinema was going on during the same years that Freud was keeping his secret about flicker-time, Derrida’s line of thinking might be productively continued by looking into the flickering visuality of moving pictures. Cinema is, after all, an apparatus that proceeds by differences of forces and intensities, dark and light, dim and bright, stupid (bête) and illuminated.

The flicker acts as a time machine in two related ways. First, it manipulates “cinematic time” by effectively slowing down the apparatus, reducing the frame rate in order to reduce the speed at which time passes. This is how the flicker makes visible a normally-invisible mechanism of the apparatus. In the same gesture, however, flickering sequences have the capacity to make perception perceptible. Recalling Michaud, such films induce one’s perceptual apparatus to “map itself out”; similarly for Deleuze, they function by “projecting a cerebral process.” I would only add the point that this mapping or projection is not properly topographic, not strictly spatial, but fundamentally temporal; and not chronographic or chronophotographic but, more precisely, tempographic or tempophotographic: time or timing, inscribed in light. Only in time can one glimpse such an image of perception, of the time of perception. It is tardy—always lagging behind, arriving after the fact—and vulnerable to being duped. The result of this appearance of vision’s faulty technique, its flickering course, is not only an image of perception, or of the time that perceiving takes, but of the time that it produces. This time achieves affect through perception (nausea, headaches, seizures, exhilaration), but is never reliably visible; if it is inscribed, it is also erased before anyone can read it. It appears in flashes, brief exposures, like sudden excursions or stops on a voyage, branches on a timeline. In flicker-time, the past amounts to a discontinuous register of brief, explosive encounters, and the now is bedazzling, too much to handle, a shock always in the act of passing into obscurity so that it can be registered and, in the same stroke, clear the way for futurity: the next instant.

On the suggestion of prominent psychoanalytist
Sándor Rádó, Tony Conrad tried turning around to look at the audience during a screening of The Flicker, and found that everyone in the space was “projected into a trance-like situation. People were frozen, looked frozen, and looked uncanny all in one sweep.” The film screen is not the only surface captured in the flicker. The bodies in the audience pulsate too, in that distinctly modern mode of passing time in the reflected light of a repeatedly broken beam. Not only present in absence, like the ideal spectator of apparatus theory, these bodies are projected into a flickering presence. The sickening and exhilarating trance of flicker-time travel, seen in this light (darkness and light), is not only internal but also external, both private and public, personal and political: discontinuous, disturbing, disruptive.

Notes

2 Oxford English Dictionary, “flicker” (n. 3 and v.). The quotations traced by the OED suggest also that up until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the word referred less often to light effects than it did to fluttering or palpitating movements in general, including air, liquid, and fire. The word appears in reference to the action of lightning and candle flames, but it is not until the late nineteenth century that its sense begins to include the strobe-like qualities more readily associated with “flicker” today.
4 La Nature, December 28, 1878.
6 See Bergson, Matter and Memory, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1991), especially Chapter 1: “Of the Selection of Images for Conscious Presentation. What our Body Means and Does,” 17-76. In an introduction to the 1910 edition, Bergson writes, “The aim of our first chapter is to show that realism and idealism both go too far, that it is a mistake to reduce matter to the subject matter of the reader. What is the effect of the body to make us a able to produce in our perceptions, but in itself another nature than they. Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of ‘images’” (9).
7 Josef Jacobs, History of the Aesopic Fable (New York, Burt Franklin, 1970), 172-173. This citation applies to all references to this tale. The translation is Jacobs’ own, and this fable is one of only a few reprinted in full in the book.
9 It should be noted that the French word for “blink,” clignoter, also means “flicker.”
10 Jacobs, 174. The switch is indeed “curious” (perhaps a hallucinatory symptom of the hungry wolf’s blinking game), but certainly not a mere mistake on the author’s part: the fabulist’s very mode of discourse is to differentiate between animals. “Sheep” and “goat” are far from synonymous in the fabulous bestiary.
11 In Hebrew tradition, the goat would be set free into the wilderness once the sins have been transferred onto its head. Given the animal’s symbolic resonance, the wolf’s devouring of the goat multiplies his insolvency. The wolf displaces the law in order to atone for his sins, only to immediately take them back in (through the same passageway out of which his speech has rationalized the displacement in the first place). Instead of being properly sacrificed, the symbol becomes a meal.
12 For more on the substitution splice, see: Tom Gunning, “Primitive Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or, the Trick’s On Us,” Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), 99-103; and Scott Combs’ insightful discussion of The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in this volume.
15 Ibid., 74.
16 The Chronic Argonauts was a three part series printed in Wells’own Science Schools Journal in 1888; it was next published, though not in full, in early 1894 as a series titled The Time Traveller’s Story in The National Observer. The full story was then serialized as The Time Machine in five installments in the New Review, from January to May of 1895. It would be published as a single novella before the end of May.
18 This spatialization of time is a major component of the thinking against which Henri Bergson had been arguing at least since 1889, with Time and Free Will. His concept of “duration” explicitly opposes treating time as space.
19 Wells, 24-5.
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20 Ibid., 25.
23 Ibid., 201.
24 Ibid., 221.
26 In both the novel and the film, the time machine and its occupant vanish from view while traveling, as is evidenced by the disappearance of the small-scale model of the machine in the Time Travellers early demonstration. In the film, the disappearance of the model time machine is achieved with a substitution-dissolve.
31 Conrad, “Interview.”
36 Conrad was concerned about the possibility of photogenic epilepsy, but this turned out to be less founded than the flicker film’s reputation would suggest: “Maybe I would really blow people’s brains out right off the back of their head. I didn’t know…But to tell you the truth, I never did have people complain about epileptic seizures without cause, and in the whole life of the film to date, I’ve only heard of one case where someone did have a seizure.” Conrad, “Interview.”
37 Conrad, “Interview.”
38 Ibid.
41 Lippit interprets Freud’s turn to this technical, inscriptive analogy as a kind of last resort for figuring the working of memory—a working relationship between the inside and the outside—after having been dissatisfied with previous analogies. The very distinction inside/outside breaks down because the unconscious, like a machine, acts as an other. Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Cinemness: Martin Arnold’s Memory Machine,” *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, vol. 24 no. 6 (1997), 8-10.
43 Ibid., 231.
44 Ibid.
45 Freud provides this lucid illustration of psychoanalytic time in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” explaining that a phantasy (which is implied to be illustrative of the work of consciousness as such), “hovers, as it were, between three times.” Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York and London: Norton, 1989), 439.
46 A tangential but relevant digression here would be to consider Freud’s famous case of the “Wolf Man,” who in a dream finds himself in a visual encounter that strongly resembles that of the sheep/goat in Berachyah’s fable. He is faced by wolves—in this case, not a single wolf but rather a pack—sitting still, watching the dreamer. One of Freud’s speculations about the encounter is that the wolves’ stillness might be a reversal—“In that case instead of immobility (the wolves sat there motionless; they looked at him, but did not move) the meaning would have to be: the most violent motion”—raising another intriguing link to photography and cinema. Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” *Standard Edition*, vol. XVII, 35.
49 Conrad, “Interview.”