The possibilities for recombination offered today by digital media tend to blur the boundaries between the stasis of photography and the movement of film. This redefinition suggests that photography no longer focuses exclusively on concepts such as instantaneity and stillness.

The cinemagraph is a particular type of animated GIF that is almost entirely static, apart from some small details within the image that move subtly in an infinite loop. Its contemporary emergence seems closely connected with the present reconfiguration of the traditional categories of stillness and movement from the standpoint of interconnectedness and simultaneity. With the loop as its structural principle, based on repetition and brevity, the cinemagraph’s iterative operation generates an analytical experience that suggests that it is impossible to look at the image’s movement without simultaneously seeing its static ‘counterpart’, thus confusing notions such as instant and duration. The cinemagraph’s loop also implies an ‘archaeological’ concept of animation that affords the viewer an exquisitely ‘monstrative’ pleasure that transcends any narrative quality of the image, recalling the attractive compulsion to repetition of pre-cinematic optical toys.

Keywords
Animated GIF; cinemagraph; loop; still/moving images; attraction.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE RETURN OF ANIMATED GIFS

Since the 1990s, the growing hegemony of digital technologies in the field of visual culture, art and communication has made us question the traditional taxonomy which, throughout the 20th century, saw a rather clear-cut separation between the typology of the static image (mainly attributable to photography) and the typology of the moving image (represented by cinema). In today’s online culture, the renewed success of animated Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) – one of the earliest image formats native to the web, created as far back as 1987 and employed today both as an everyday communication tool by anonymous users, and as an artistic medium1 – offers a meaningful example of the current reconfiguration of the relationship between static and moving. Made up of individual stills repeated to generate a short cyclical animation, often intermittent and potentially inexhaustible, GIF images tend to reveal, via a series of small shocks,
the paradoxical nature of the moving image which turns out to be connected on many levels to stillness\(^2\). The ‘eternal return’ to which GIFs seem ‘condemned’ also has an important consequence on the viewer’s perception, an effect which, by confounding the usual boundaries between moving image and still image, allows for the (once again paradoxical) possibility of introducing the cyclical and repetitive form of the loop within a still image\(^3\).

Definable as a ‘living photograph’, the cinemagraph is an almost completely still GIF image in which, nonetheless, one or more animated details are present, repeating themselves indefinitely in a ‘subtle’, sometimes almost imperceptible, circular movement. The term was coined in 2011 by photographer Jamie Beck and graphic designer Kevin Burg, who “named the process ‘Cinemagraphs’ for their cinematic quality while maintaining at its soul the principles of traditional photography”\(^4\). This article will attempt to take an in-depth look at the functioning of the loop and the multiple temporality connected with it in the case of the peculiar genre of photographic GIF known as cinemagraph. The choice to focus on the cinemagraph is connected to the unique ‘hybrid’ photographic nature of this type of image compared to other GIFs. If, on the one hand, cinemagraphs still keep the specificity of photographic experience through their static quality, on the other hand they reshape the temporal boundaries of photography towards a process of looping ‘cinematization’.

2. THE ‘CINEMATIZATION’ OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Referring to the well-known three-fold division of signs into *index, icon* and *symbol* theorised by Charles Sanders Peirce\(^5\), in the late 1980s Jean-Marie Schaeffer speculated about the problem of time connected with the ‘indexical’ stillness of the photographic image, and compared this with the idea of temporality stemming from the ‘iconic’ movement of film. In this regard, the French academic declared:

Dans l’image immobile qu’est la photographie, l’écart temporel naît du savoir de l’*arché*, c’est-à-dire du fait que nous savons que l’*icône* est la rétention visuelle d’un instant spatio-temporel ‘réel’: le temps photographique est d’abord le temps physique (le moment et la durée) de la formation de l’empreinte. […] Dans le cinéma, au contraire, l’*icône* mobile elle-même est investie par le temps: ainsi, un dessin animé produit le même effet de flux perceptif actuel qu’un film ‘réel’, sans fonctionner comme indice du temps physique ou humain. Alors que dans l’image mobile la dimension temporelle est une fonction de l’*icône*, dans l’image photographique elle est un fonction de l’indice\(^6\).

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In Schaeffer’s opinion, the photographic image, precisely because of its ‘indexical’ stillness, registers time only in the form of spatial distribution; photography, from this point of view, rather than presenting itself as an image capable of offering an interpretation of temporality, constitutes a form of “spatial framing” by ultimately establishing a privileged relationship with the dimension of space rather than with that of time. What happened at the moment in which the advent of digital media produced an inevitable shake-up of the relationship between still image and moving image? What were the effects of that which Philippe Dubois defined as the “elasticization” of the temporal orders of the image as a consequence of the spread of digital technologies?

In recent years George Baker theorised the opening of an “expanded field” of photography capable of leading the photographic image towards a process of “cinematization” definable “not in the closure of photography tout court, but in an expansion of its terms into a more fully cultural arena”. The coexistence of stillness and movement which can be obtained today through the use of digital technologies can produce a model of conceptual and aesthetic interstitiality which can complicate once again the semiological debate on the image in film and photography; in this regard, cinemagraphs challenge the observer to conceive new ways of thinking about the identity of the contemporary image.

3. THE CINEMAGRAPH

Usable only by means of a digital device and produced by artists, designers, or ordinary users, the cinemagraph is a GIF image specifically distinguished by the coexistence of stillness and animation: indeed, although, like other animated GIFs composed of a series of individual stills, the cinemagraph is definable as a motionless photograph in which certain details are moving nevertheless. The name itself, cinemagraph, seems intended to constitute a type of ‘new’ medium capable of specifically introjecting the interstitial space which exists between photography and cinema; the animation that characterises the cinemagraph is repeated indefinitely in a loop entailing a form of circularity which, as well as casting doubt on the concepts of referentiality and verisimilitude usually associated with photography, also subjects the viewer to a peculiar “experience of stillness”. In this respect, the cinemagraph represents a hybrid, a paradoxically animated photographic image, obtained via the use of techniques originating in photography, cinema, video and collage; the moving elements which make up a GIF are, in this case,

11 Exactly as other animated GIFs, cinemagraphs are created for artistic, advertising or entertainment purposes.
isolated within the image in order to create an estranging suspension between the immobility of the still as a whole and the animation of the individual detail.

Although the first appearance of the cinemagraph can be traced back to the animations posted from 2010 onwards on the blog “If we don’t, remember me” (iwdrm) created by Gustaf Mantel, this kind of GIF owes its popularity mainly to the aforementioned duo of Jamie Beck and Kevin Burg. However, while Beck and Burg use the cinemagraph mainly in the sphere of fashion photography, Mantel uses this type of image in order to explore what lies behind the motionlessness of the individual frame and the running of the film, thus creating ‘animated movie stills’ from existing cinematic fragments. Some of the most interesting images available on the blog iwdrm at first seem completely still; only after quite a long wait do these cinemagraphs reveal an unexpected and surprising movement to the patient viewer. One particularly important still in this respect shows a close up of Ivana Karbanová in the film Sedmikrásky (Vera Chytilova, Czech Rep., 1966). At first, the cinemagraph portrays the actress’s face with her eyes looking motionlessly upwards; the viewer, intent on staring at the image, has to wait about ten seconds to see the moment when the character unexpectedly shifts her gaze forwards. Freeing the still from the demands of narrative and representation and repeating it ad infinitum in a loop, the cinemagraph shows its analytical potential, leading us to rethink the relationship between static image and moving image, and also that between instant and duration.

4. LOOPS AND TEMPORAL MULTIPLICITY

As Gustaf Mantel’s images suggest, the coexistence of stillness and movement characteristic of the cinemagraph does not simply create a brief and fleeting visual experience, one which is particularly in tune with the “contemporary culture of distraction” and “video-shorthand”. It recalls an ‘archaeological’ notion of animation which identifies its own underlying principle in the repetitiveness and intermittence of the loop – or, according to Lev Manovich, in the most elementary structure at the base of the moving image functioning.

We now consider the Symbol Tree cinemagraph, created by an anonymous user, which can be seen on the website photoclip.net. Recalling the interstitiality between photography and film of Belgian artist David Claerbout’s early works – especially the ‘living tree’ in Ruurlo, Bocurslescheweg, 1910 (1997) – this cinemagraph reiterates the tension between the movement and motionlessness of the image, operating primarily on the contrast evoked by the stillness of the human figures and the simultaneous animation of the tree’s foliage. The suspension between ‘photographic’ and ‘cinematic’ which distinguishes Symbol Tree produces a perceptual wavering or a type of deficit of

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18 Despite not being cinemagraphs, David Claerbout’s early works set up a similar tension in the image between stillness and movement. The choice of focusing on the cinemagraph Symbol Tree is justified by its suggestive resemblance to Claerbout’s Ruurlo, Bocurslescheweg 1910.
meaning which is nonetheless capable of generating a surplus of time and presence\textsuperscript{19}. This surplus, by removing all realistic or narrative coherence from the ‘moving still’, inevitably leads the cinemagraph to a pure monstrative concept of image-event. Dynamised in a loop, the animation in Symbol Tree becomes estranging and ambiguous, repetitive and circular, independent of any chronological requirement, with no possibility of identifying its beginning or its end. The digital substance of the cinemagraph reformulates the notion of time in numerous terms, questions the possibilities connected with the ‘confusion’ of motionlessness and movement, and goes so far as to re-explore the relationship between the photographic image and the film image in ‘archaeological’ terms; from this point of view, the return to a ‘monstrative’ condition of the image, stripped of its referential and narrative implications and concentrated mainly on its dialectical tensions, necessarily brings to mind the visual experience produced by the first cinematographic projections: “the effect of a still image which starts moving [..] and which, consequently, obliges the viewer to reconsider his first impressions at finding himself before a photograph”\textsuperscript{20}.

If the cinemagraph reminds us, then, to a certain extent, of that which Tom Gunning defined as “the astonishing moment of movement”\textsuperscript{21} – in other words the unexpected animation of a photographic still on the screen which started off the public showings of Lumière’s cinématographe in 1895 – the loop in this type of GIF takes us as far as the “rotation, repetition and brevity”\textsuperscript{22} that is characteristic of 19\textsuperscript{th} century optical toys. Devices such as the thaumatrope, the zoetrope and the mutoscope “displayed a dialectical relation between still and moving images”\textsuperscript{23}, insofar as they produced a type of repetitive and fragmentary movement able to create instant and fleeting visual pleasure; similarly, the cinemagraph produces an aesthetic and media experience, which can evoke the hypnotic suspension of movement and immobility created by the 19\textsuperscript{th} century optical devices.

Offering itself as an effective strategy able to direct the viewer towards the perception of a particular idea of time, the loop in the cinemagraph accentuates, on the one hand, the multiple and simultaneous temporalities already produced by the coexistence of movement and immobility in the image and, on the other hand, emphasises the possibility of coexistence between the technological past and the media present that the very functioning of the medium gives rise to. Conceived in this way, the loop within the cinemagraph becomes a potential conceptual instrument capable not only, as Christine Ross suggests, “[of] both shortening and extending the length of the work”\textsuperscript{24}, but also of offering an opportunity for anti-linear thought through which to consider the relationships between present and past media in terms of reciprocity and interpenetration. From this


\textsuperscript{20} S. Mah, “Rompere il ghiaccio: congelamento e malinconia”, in \textit{ibid.}, 74-87 (77), my translation.


\textsuperscript{24} C. Ross, “The Temporalities of Video: Extendedness Revisited”, \textit{Art Journal}, 65, 3 (2006): 82-99 (96).
perspective, cinemagraphs recall a possible “double birth”\(^ {25} \) of both photographic and cinematic mediums which testifies the resistance and reinventions of photography and cinema in contemporary digital culture. In this sense, the multiple temporalities and dialectics put into play by the cinemagraph confer on the image a paradoxical quality which suggests the impossibility of observing its digital ‘post-photographic’ and ‘post-cinematographic’ essence without simultaneously perceiving its ‘obsolete’ and even ‘pre-cinematographic’ workings.

\(^ {25} \) “The model of the double birth of cinema […] is characterised by a refusal to consider the medium a static, fixed entity, as having a finite, closed, and definitive essence”. A. Gaudreault, P. Marion, “The Neo-Institutionalisation of Cinema as a New Medium”, in Visual Delights Two: Exhibition and Reception, edited by V. Toulmin, S. Popple, Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2005, 87-95 (89).