

“Photography is a system of saving memories. It is a Time Machine, in a way, to preserve the memory, to preserve time” - Hiroshi Sugimoto (Atlas Gallery 2021).

To what extent, and with what conscious intent, does the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto fulfil such a function by explicitly exploring the related themes of time and memory?

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Abstract

Using Hiroshi Sugimoto’s contention that “Photography is a system of saving memories.... a Time Machine, in a way, to preserve the memory, to preserve time” as an initial stimulus, this essay will comparatively evaluate how far, and with what conscious intent, his own body of work has overtly and distinctively set out to explore the relationship between the concepts of time and memory. His key works considered in this context are *Dioramas*, *Theaters* and *Seascapes*. The wider theoretical and analytical framework for this evaluation – and the broader relationship of photography to the central themes of memory and time - is provided by the perspectives of commentators such as Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Alison Landsberg, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s. The other photographers whose works - and approaches - will be critically evaluated as a comparative to those of Sugimoto’s in this context include those of Colin Gray, David Szustader and Thomas Schafers. Evaluation and conclusions will comparatively assess the extent of Sugimoto’s deliberate and distinctive intent in connecting and exploring these two, related themes in the context of approaches and artistic outcomes taken and produced by others. In doing so, it will contend that his concept of photography as a ‘time machine’ is unique

in that it provides a unifying and defying philosophical framework for his work that is not found to the same extent in other practitioners.

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“Photography is a system of saving memories. It is a Time Machine, in a way, to preserve the memory, to preserve time” - Hiroshi Sugimoto (Atlas Gallery 2021).

To what extent, and with what conscious intent, does the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto fulfil such a function by explicitly exploring the related themes of time and memory?

Using Hiroshi Sugimoto’s contention that “Photography is a system of saving memories.... a Time Machine, in a way, to preserve the memory, to preserve time” as an initial stimulus, this essay will seek to comparatively evaluate how far, and with what conscious intent, his own body of work has overtly and distinctively set out to explore the relationship between the concepts of time and memory (Atlas Gallery, 2021). It aims to do so in three related phases. Firstly, an exploration of the wider theoretical and analytical framework for the concepts and time and memory – and the relationship of photography to them - provided by the perspectives of commentators such as Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Alison Landsberg, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and which will provide a counterpoint to subsequent reflection. Secondly, a critical evaluation of Sugimoto’s body of work both in the context of this framework and also his own notion of photography as a “time machine”; a means of moving the viewer between, and enabling them to experience, different temporal contexts as a form of creative “time travel”, drawing on a phrase first used by H.G. Wells in his iconic science fiction novel *The Time Machine* (1895). The major works that will be critically evaluated in this context are *Dioramas* (1976– 2012), *Theaters* (1978– Present), and *Seascapes* (1980–

Present). Finally, the distinctiveness of Sugimoto's intent and body of work in this respect will be compared with those of other photographers whose works - and approaches - also seek to explore themes of time and memory. The photographers identified to provide this comparative perspective include Colin Gray, David Szuader and Thomas Schafer. Summative evaluation and conclusions will comparatively assess the relative extent of Sugimoto's deliberate and distinctive intent in connecting and exploring these two, related themes in the context of approaches and artistic outcomes taken and produced by others.

Sugimoto's contention that photography is a "Time Machine", which enables the observer to both move between - and indirectly experience - different temporal contexts, reflects a wider discourse about the relationship of art to the concepts of time and memory in a range of research literature and other creative applications in film, music and the novel.

Firstly, and specifically in relation to photography, this is perhaps most apparent in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, in which, after the death of his mother, the author looks to the medium as a means of finding or recapturing her "essence" after a significant period of time has passed (Barthes, 1993 p.66).

This idea of "essence" falls within Barthes' wider concept of the "Punctum", highlighting how a specific detail of a photographic image can "strike" or "pierce" it's viewer - and draw them into it. For Barthes, this manifested itself in the "Winter Garden" image which features his mother as a child; this being the only image of her that he could find that truly reflects the "essence" of her soul (1993 p.73). The

passage of time and memory therefore coalesce in a single reflection. In a separate work, *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977) Barthes' succinctly captured his thinking about the relationship to time and memory as follows:

The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing... but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then (Barthes, 1977 p.44).

Barthes' thinking can be related to a wider conceptual and theoretical framework provided by analysts such as Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Freud's seminal theory of a "Psychoanalytic Framework" explores the notion of "identity" and its potential relationship to "memory" and "time" through three factors (Psychology, 2022). Firstly, the "ID" which is driven by instinct and desire. Secondly, the "superego" which drives morals and values and finally the "ego" which modulates the two. Barthes' concept of the "Punctum" relates, in particular, to the superego as the concept is driven by the "value" that he associates with the time-bonded memory of the mother he knew, in relation to the past version of her captured in the image.

The nature of memory elicited by the "Winter Garden" photo additionally resonates with Bergson's theoretical perspective, articulated in *Matter and Memory*, that rather than being part of the nervous system, memory - or "Pure Memory" - is in fact intensely spiritual in its nature (Cultural Studies Now, 2021).

In this context it is particularly interesting to note that one recent commentator, Mary Bergstein, has specifically reflected on the relationship between Freud's psychoanalytic framework and photography, describing the mind's eye which captures the multifarious memory and experiences which shape identity as the equivalent of a camera's lens (Harvard Book Store, 2022).

A further concept which flows both from Sugimoto's observation - and indeed Barthes' exploration of the relationship between photography, time and memory - is that of "Prosthetic Memory", as developed by Alison Landsberg (2004). This explores how a photograph or film coverage of an event can, even if it was not directly experienced by the viewer at the time, create a "prosthetic" and emotionally connective experience for them (Landsberg, 2004). The concept of "Prosthetic Memory" can be identified in a number of other creative art forms beyond photography including film, music and the novel. For example, this is particularly significant in the 1982 movie *Blade Runner*, in turn based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. *Blade Runner* is based around the "Blade Runner" Rick Deckard who pursues "Replicants", artificially created androids who have memories created for and implanted within them (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). For the replicant characters in the movie, photographs are a central sense of proof that their memories (and by extension they themselves) are real and not artificially "engineered", echoing Landsberg's concept that the photograph can allow the viewer to create a prosthetic experience set in a moment of time (Ferguson, 2018).

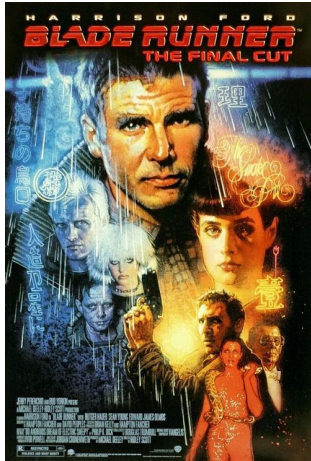


Fig 1. *Blade Runner 1982 The Final Cut* Poster, Bros, W, 1982.



Fig 2. *Rachael with Mother Photograph* from *Blade Runner 1982*, Bros, W., 1982.

Another motion picture which shows photography as a powerful tool in both capturing one's memory while also using it to create a timeline for those memories is *Memento* (2000) by Christopher Nolan. In the film, the main character Leonard Shelby, who suffers from Anterograde Amnesia, uses images created from his polaroid camera as a timeline for the memories he cannot recall (Goldberg, 2023). Like *Blade Runner*, *Memento* alludes to Landsberg's concept of how the viewer of a photographic image can simulate a memory.



Fig 3. *Memento* film Poster, 2000



Fig 4. *Teddy's Polaroid Memento* Film Still, 2000

These concepts have also been explored in other forms. For example in music, the Beatles' *In My Life* (1964) reflects on John Lennon's memories of "lovers and friends", experienced in Liverpool and stimulated when taking a bus ride around the city. (Beatles Bible, 2011). From literature, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) is often cited as the principal example of later memory being stimulated by an external sensation or experience. Here the central character Charles Swann, who it later transpires is Proust, tastes a piece of Madeline which triggers wider childhood memories associated with tasting the cake (Encyclopaedia Britannica, no date). These perspectives on memory from other artistic disciplines offer an interesting complement to – and potential comparator with – the concept's exploration in the field of photography.

However, perhaps most interestingly – and relevantly – in the specific context of this essay research question is the reflection on the nature of time, and time travel, in H.G. Wells' groundbreaking, early science fiction novel, *The Time Machine*, written in 1895 (Figure 5). The novel is in part allegorical. The Time Traveller's journey back and forward through time over 800,000 years expresses Wells' views on social change and progress – or the lack of it – in late-Victorian Britain (Nicholson, 2023). Transported almost a million years into a future London by his elaborate ivory, crystal, and brass "time machine" contraption, the nameless Time Traveller encounters a world populated by two races: the decadent Eloi, dependent for food, clothing, and shelter on the caveman-like Morlocks, who live underground and prey on them (Sparknotes, 2023). The two races can therefore be seen to symbolise Wells's vision of time, change and the impact of capitalism on society, with a lazy and weak upper class eventually being overthrown by a down-trodden

working-class proletariat (Nicholson, 2023). As such it also raises contemporary, time-related themes of evolution and natural selection related to Darwinism.

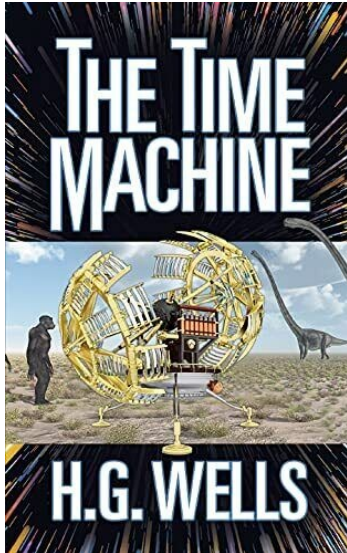


Fig 5. H.G Wells *The Time Machine* (2021 Edition) Front



Fig 6. Rod Taylor in *The Time Machine* (1960), Leibovit, 1960.

In all cases these works can be considered in the context of Deluze and Guatari's concept of the multiplicity of time, which is non-chronological and involves different temporal processes interacting with each other (Smith, 2018). In addition to this, Deluze in particular, feels that memory of the "past" is not an important factor in works of art; and that the "present and the future" is and therefore should be the priority (Pearson, No Date).

A final and particularly innovative and applied perspective on the specific relationship between photography time and memory is provided by Lawrence Aëgerter's project, *Photographic Treatment* (2016). In this she aimed to improve the lives of those effected by Dementia through a collection of "photographic diptychs", these

containing various collections of paired images, in doing so she aimed to test the cognitive functions of those who suffered from memory loss (Aegerter, 2016).

Aegerter's approach has been very significant in relation to the development and practical application of my own work, which has been increasingly themed in this area. Inspired by it, I developed a series of "Photo Reminiscence" workshops which have been delivered in a number of dementia care settings over last year (see Appendix 1).

Within this theoretical framework, Hiroshi Sugimoto's contention that photography is a "time machine", referencing the title of H.G Wells' aforementioned novel which first coined the phrase, is perhaps one of the most explicit statements by a practitioner about its role in expressing a relationship between time and memory.

Born in Tokyo in 1948, Sugimoto lives and works in New York and Tokyo. His interest in art and cultural heritage began in childhood: reflecting on childhood memories, and with echoes of Freud's Psychoanalytic Framework, Sugimoto feels he gathered "images and sensations that he would later explore through art." (The Art Story, 2023). As he himself describes it:

In my dreams as a child, I often floated in midair. Sometimes I'd leave my body and watch my sleeping self from on high near the ceiling. Like an out-of-body projection perhaps, a waking of self coexisting simultaneously with a sleeping self. Even as an adult, I habitually imagine myself airborne. Might this be at the root of my artistic spirit? (The Art Story, 2023)

This also alludes to Barthes' idea of having "an awareness of its having-been-there.", as Sugimoto, when describing himself dreaming as an "out of body projection", implies that this "root" of "artistic spirit" came from his own "awareness" of his own conscious self "coexisting" with that of his physical sleeping self (Barthes 1993; The Art Story, 2023). Additionally, this reflects Bergson's idea of memory being "spiritual" in its purest form as Sugimoto reminisce of his childhood dreams are what he considers to be the origins of his artistic "spirit", and therefore memory (Cultural Studies Now, 2021).

Following initial degree level studies in politics and sociology, his shift to the photographic medium and artistic focus around recurring themes of memory, the passing of time and the ephemeral nature of life began to emerge in the 1970's. As he puts it, "my goal was to visualise the ancient layer of human memory with the means of photography." (The Art Story, 2023). Sugimoto was also increasingly influenced by Surrealism and Dada, and the work and philosophy of Marcel Duchamp with his emphasis on "readymade" everyday objects (The Art Story, 2023). The central pillar of his philosophy that photography is a "time machine" that pauses or alters the passage of time and preserves the relationship between them, is reflected in a series of his major works: *Dioramas* (1976– 2012), *Theaters* (1978– Present), and *Seascapes* (1980– Present). Significantly and distinctively in this respect, the history of photography itself also helps to shape Sugimoto's practice, utilising 19th and early 20th century camera techniques and a large format camera when creating images. Both further emphasise this sense of heritage and lineage in which photography forms part of a dialogue between past and present. In this way it can be argued that "He serves as a bridge between photography's craft tradition and

digital future, connecting analogue techniques with concepts of dematerialization that hint at the vastness of humanity's past and future" (The Art Story, 2023).

The first of Sugimoto's major works to express the "time machine" theme is *Dioramas* (1974- 2012) (Figure 7). In this series Sugimoto captures the "utterly fake" stuffed animals with their painted backdrops from the American Museum of Natural History with the intention of presenting them in a very "real" light through the photographic image. This repurposing of various stuffed animals of historical significance through the medium of the photographic image is the first attempt by Sugimoto to convey that through the image we are seeing a "fossilisation of time" (Art21, 2005). These ideas are most evident in the first of his *Diorama* series, *Polar Bear* (1976), in which Sugimoto captures a stuffed Polar Bear figure looming over the body of a stuffed dead seal. In this image Sugimoto plays with our notion of what the "time machine" of photography is due to the "fake" nature of the subject matter behind the images. He does this through capturing the fur of the bear in relation to the reflectors which helps turn a "fake" or "staged" image into an illusion which appears more lifelike and real (The Art Story, 2023). The significance of this particular photograph in relation to Sugimoto's wider philosophy and notion of photography as a "time machine" is perhaps best reflected in the observation that:

This image, like Sugimoto's work more broadly, is closely involved with the history of photography and notions of time in relation to and apart from human history. The diorama, as a means of presenting the world, became popular in the late-19th century, in the same period in which photography began to be lauded for its scientific accuracy, and both technologies derived power from their ability to capture and

preserve specific moments. Sugimoto's major contribution to visual art lies in the craft with which he uses the camera's relationship to time and its capacity for illusion to focus our attention on ways in which humans makes sense of the natural world (The Art Story, 2023).

This idea that Sugimoto's work ties the relationship between photography and "time and it's capacity for illusion" directly builds upon Barthes' idea that the photographic image is a "an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then" (The Art Story, 2023; Barthes, 1993). This is due to the way in which Sugimoto has created an image which tries to convey the "there then" through the image's "fake" nature, reflecting the sense of their being "illogical conjunction" within it (The Art Story, 2023; Barthes, 1977 p.44). This in turn helps to trick the viewer into thinking it looks real, creating the new "space time category" Barthes describes (Barthes 1993).



Fig 7. Polar Bear, Sugimoto, 1976

Secondly, in his *Seascapes* series (1980) (Figure 8) Sugimoto manages to incorporate this theme through the sea itself, viewing it as the origin of human (and

own his) “consciousness” (Fraenkel Gallery, 2022). He considers the sea in this way because, as he emphasises, that the same seascape would have been looked upon by our ancestors, making them the one “constant” throughout “time”, binding their past and our present. As he himself has expressed it:

I became interested in seascapes because they relate to memories from my infancy; the very earliest thing I can picture is the sea (Art Story, 2023). Perhaps more broadly in relation to the passage of time and its very nature, ‘The sea reminds me that in my blood remain traces of human evolution over hundreds of thousands of years.... Whenever I stand on a cliff looking at the sea, I envision an infinite beyond. The horizon lies within bounds and the imagination stretches to infinity (Fraenkel Gallery, 2022).

Sugimoto’s concept of the sea being a bridge that binds our present to our ancestors’ past is reminiscent of Landsberg’s idea, as according to Sugimoto, through the sea we are able to “prosthetically” experience the “consciousness” of both ourselves and our ancestors (Landsberg, 2004; Fraenkel Gallery, 2022). This is something Sugimoto aims to convey through his *Seascape* images as shown in Figure 8 below. This can also be a reflection of Deluze’s idea that art should prioritize “present and future”, as Sugimoto’s capturing of the sea and how it binds both past and future means that his work *Lake Superior, Jacobs Creek Falls* captures the nature of time and therefore human memory in its entirety through the ocean’s “horizon” of “infinite” length (Pearson, No Date; Fraenkel Gallery, 2022).



Fig 8. Lake Superior, Jacobs Creek Falls, Sugimoto, 2023

Thirdly, in his *Theaters* series (1977) (Figure 9) Sugimoto visited several theatres and took a long exposure shot at a wide-open aperture (Fraeknel, 2022). This resulted in the theatre screen becoming a pure illumination of light within the image, additionally illuminating the surrounding theatre (Fraeknel, 2022). These images convey Sugimoto's idea that photography is a "melting of time" itself as the films Sugimoto were watching from the theatre screen have "melted" into pure light, something the photograph has made a frozen piece of time (Cumming, 2023). There is therefore perhaps resonance here, quite literally, with Mary Bergstein's aforementioned observations on the relationship between Freud's psychoanalytic framework and photography, and the notion that the camera lens itself can act as a mind's eye to capture memory and experience. (Harvard Book Store, 2022). Additionally, this ties into H.G Wells' concept of time travel in *The Time Machine*, with it being described as "fast forwarded" in a "linear fashion" (Ní Fhlainn, 2015). And is also similar to how Sugimoto's long exposure resulted in the "melting" of the film into one bright "fast forwarded" light shining across the theatre (Ní Fhlainn, 2015). As a result, Sugimoto's work (as shown in Figure 9) can be seen as a

“fossilisation” of the concept of time that Wells own work describes as being a “linear” construct (Art21,2005; Ní Fhlainn, 2015).



Fig 9. U.A Fox, New York, Sugimoto, 1976

The continued contemporary relevance of these works and their thematic emphasis is reflected in his current exhibition running from October 2023 at the Hayward Gallery in London entitled “Time Machine” (Figure 10). In her review of it for *The Guardian* Laura Cumming emphasises how Sugimoto’s work encompasses the way in which the photographic image is itself a physical representation of the “time machine”:

For these are pictures of what photographs may also be – the half-caught memory, the ghost in the machine, the shadow in time’s eye. Philosophers speak of the metaphysical in Sugimoto’s art and that seems apt. Some of his images make truth out of fiction through the camera’s seal of authenticity; others unmoor our sense of place and time. Records made in and of time, these images nonetheless float free of their given moment, showing us what the world looked like before we existed, as it seems, and perhaps even what it will look like when we are no longer there (Cumming, 2023).



Fig 10. Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine Catalogue Front Cover, South Bank Centre, 2023

Whilst Sugimoto's view of photography as a "time machine" – and a body of work that reflects his intent of "preserving" time and memory - is therefore clearly and deeply defined, a number of other photographers have explored, in different ways, the relationship between memory and time, thereby providing a comparative context for any evaluation of it (Atlas Gallery, 2021).

Firstly, throughout his *In Sickness and in Health* project (Figure 11), Colin Gray documents the gradual decline of his parents' health in their old age, finally resulting in the death of his mother (2010). Gray's work, like Sugimoto's, explores the relationship between time and memory by way of the "time machine" through the capturing of the decline of his mother's health (Gray, 2010). This is reflected in the way Gray narratively structures the images in his final book, at times using objects of significance to him and his parents, creating a dynamic "timeline" of the events leading to her death.



Fig 11. Unknown, Gray, 2010

A second example is provided by Thomas Freidrich Schaefer's *Experimental Spaces* project (Figure 12), which depicts a variety of sets crafted based upon the artist's memories of his childhood home (Mistry, 2017). This also reflects Sugimoto's notion of photography being a "time machine" and a system of "saving memories", as Schaefer is creating photographs and sets from his own "system" of memories based upon his boyhood home (Atlas Gallery, 2021). By doing this it could be argued that he is creating a physical "time machine" in the form of those sets and capturing them through photography, reflecting Sugimoto's description of the medium as a way to "preserve time" (Atlas Gallery, 2021).



Fig 12. Experimental Spaces #5, Schafer, 2015

Third and lastly, it is informative to consider the *Failed Memories* series (Figure 13) by David Szauder, in which he investigates how “human and digital” memory is closely interlinked through the photographic image. In this series Szauder tries to convey the idea that humans can “store” their memories into hard drives similar to those of computers (Jablotschkin, 2020). This, and his use of the medium of photography, echoes Sugimoto’s idea that photography is a “system of saving memories” (Atlas Gallery, 2021). Indeed, arguably Szauder takes this concept even further by distorting his photographs to reflect the idea that as time passes our memories (like that of computers) “fade” (Jablotschkin, 2020).

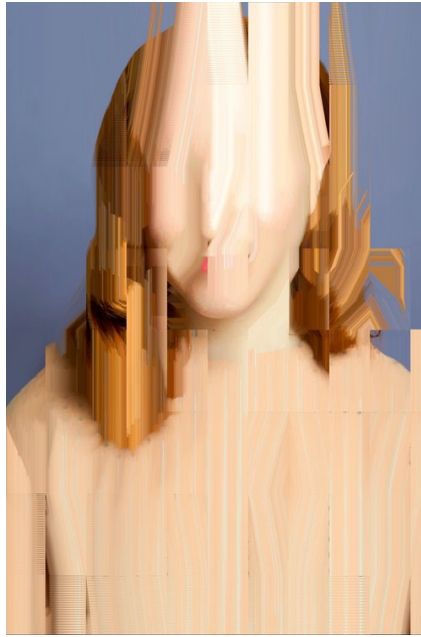


Fig 13. Szuander, Unknown, 2014

However, whilst all three artists identified for this comparative have produced individual pieces of work which explore themes of time and memory – and there are therefore elements of comparison with the work of Sugimoto that result – these do not form part of an overarching motif and creative driver in the way in which these themes consistently and deliberately do so for Sugimoto.

On the basis of a theoretical overview of the concepts of time and memory and a comparative evaluation of Sugimoto's body of work it would indeed be justified to argue that his concept of photography as a "time machine... to preserve memory, to preserve time" is both distinctive and unique in that it provides a *philosophical* framework for his practice which is not found to the same degree in that of his contemporaries (Atlas Gallery, 2023). The idea that "photography is a system of saving memories" is a defining and unifying theme throughout his major works and therefore its pervasive extent exceeds that of those who have also sought to explore similar concepts in individual pieces of work (Atlas Gallery, 2023). In this key

respect, If we are to accept Barthes' hypothesis that the "unprecedented" nature of photography as an art form is to provide "a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then", then Sugimoto's body of work does indeed also surely provide the genre's best vehicle for the viewer to most effectively experience that multi-dimensional journey (Barthes, 1977 p.44).

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Appendix 1 – Extract on “Photo Reminiscence Sessions” from my own website

It's a pleasure to put the learning I have gained from my second year “Traces Through Time” project into practice through designing and delivering my Photo Reminiscence sessions with people who have Dementia at both the Willows Edge Care Home and Fair Close Day Centre. The aim of the sessions being to see how the medium of photography can help stimulate memories within those who suffer from memory loss (People, 2022).



Fig 14. Photo Reminiscence Sheets, People, 2022