

'There's Something Very Familiar About All This': Time Machines, Cultural Tangents, and Mastering Time in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy

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Abstract Time travel cinema criticism frequently cites H.G. Wells's *fin-de-siècle* novella *The Time Machine* (1895) as a master template for popular time travel narratives. Following the thirtieth anniversary of *Back to the Future*, a film still regarded in popular culture today as a landmark in time travel cinema and 1980s culture, this article positions the *Back to the Future* trilogy alongside Wells's novella and its most successful film adaptation, *The Time Machine* (Pal, 1960), in order to explore the varied and cultural preoccupations that each of these time travel narratives articulate, alongside *Back to the Future's* adaptation and intertextual references to Wells's time travel tale. In particular, the article explores the depiction of time machines in both *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy, its specific cultural anxieties regarding evolution and paradoxical erasure, and how these texts explore, both visually and narratively, the concept of mastering time. This article therefore contends that the *Back to the Future* trilogy is an adaptation and reimagining of Wells's novella and Pal's film for the 1980s generation.

Keywords *Time Travel, Popular Cinema, Adaptation, H.G. Wells, Back to the Future trilogy.*

Notions of time travel and the differing interpretations of this adventurous possibility have been part of the popular imagination from the Victorian era with the publication of H.G. Wells's 1895 novella *The Time Machine*. Throughout fiction and film, time travel offers a useful device through which we may imaginatively recreate the distant past or fantasise about the future, or indeed alter wrongs in our present time. This article presents a reading of two popular and thematically inter-related texts that have dominated popular conceptions of time travel: H.G. Wells's Victorian novella, which effectively invented the notion of the mechanisation of time travel and of time machines; and the 1980s film trilogy *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990) in which teenager Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) travels back thirty years in time by way of his quasi-Victorian mad-scientist mentor's converted DeLorean motor car. Both texts treat time travel, time machines, and the fear of being stuck in an alternate time, or a possible erasure from existence, in similar fashions; indeed, *Back to the Future* has been read by scholars as an update of Wells's scientific romance for the 1980s generation.¹ Comparisons will be made between the three films of the *Back to the Future* trilogy, Wells's

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novella *The Time Machine*, and George Pal's 1960 screen adaptation of the same name, in order to consider how Victorian ideas on science and time can help in understanding modern depictions of time travel. Furthermore, this article identifies specific echoes, citations and references to Wells's novella and Pal's film in the *Back to the Future* films, indicating the series' writers' familiarity with time travel narratives more generally, but also emphasising Wells's tale as a master template for the genre.

The first notable instance of time travel via a 'time machine' appeared in H.G Wells's 1895 novella. His fictional invention, a sled-like yet static machine capable of gliding through the fourth dimension of time, to the future or the past, has been noted by scholars (Nahin 22) as being the first popular instance of fictional time travel based on scientific method and theory rather than wishing or dreaming methods associated with time travel in earlier narratives. Prior to Wells's novella, time travel was often achieved through dreaming—awakening from a slumber (much like Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle [1820]) to discover the world has changed. Similarly, Mark Twain's 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, provides no explanation of the means by which time travel is accomplished beyond the description of a blow to Hank Morgan's head. In contrast, Wells's Time Traveller is steadfast in his conviction that we may travel along the fourth dimension of time, but that we cannot travel in space and time simultaneously—that is, we may 'travel' to a London of the future but we will remain in precisely the same geographical position. As the Time Traveller describes his first experience of time travel, time subjectively speeds up and appears as though it were 'fast forwarding' in a linear fashion, that is described in visual terms, like celluloid running through a projector:

The laboratory got hazy and went dark. Mrs Watchett came in and walked, apparently without seeing me, towards the garden door. I suppose it took her a minute to traverse the place but to me she seemed to shoot across the room like a rocket. I pressed the lever over to its extreme position. The night came like the turning out of a lamp, and in another moment came tomorrow. The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and ever fainter. Tomorrow night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still. [...] As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing. The dim suggestion of the laboratory seemed presently to fall away from me, and I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. I supposed the laboratory had been destroyed and I had come into the open air... I was still on the hillside upon which this house now stands. (Wells 18–19)

The scientific and mechanical basis for Wells's version of time travel has greatly influenced and informed modern day time travel narratives in both fiction and film. Indeed, filmmaker Robert Zemeckis names both *The Time Machine* and Charles Dickens's 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol*, both Victorian imaginings of the possibilities of the future, as the best time travel stories ever written (Zemeckis). This influence is clearly evident in the 1980s, a decade steeped in revisionism and nostalgia, particularly in Richard Donner's revisionist version of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in *Scrooged* (1988). *Scrooged*, a postmodern update of Dickens's novella, also references *Back to the Future* in its time travelling sequence where the protagonist visits 1955 in a taxicab with The Ghost of Christmas Past. However, the past in *Scrooged* can only be viewed (like a 're-run') and

is closed off to influence (contrary to *Back to the Future's* active changing of past events). Interestingly, Zemeckis also directed an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* in 2009, and has frequently cited Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra) as a time travel narrative which directly influenced the second act of *Back to the Future Part II* (Zemeckis); in this alternate present (1985A) sequence, Marty, like George Bailey (James Stewart) in Capra's Pottersville sequence, experiences a nightmare vision of his home town under the grotesque grip of the (now wealthy) town bully. *It's a Wonderful Life*, like *Back to the Future Part II*, conjures up an alternate timeline in which our protagonists were never born, or are wholly absent from the horrific 'present'. Zemeckis is also indebted to Pal's 1960 film adaptation of *The Time Machine*, from which *Back to the Future*, Zemeckis's most memorable and successful film to date, occasionally borrows imagery and references. However, the *Back to the Future* trilogy, despite its release and success 90 years after Wells's novella *The Time Machine*, also illustrates a keen awareness of other Victorian time travel stories more broadly: like Twain's Hank Morgan, Marty is knocked unconscious in each instalment of the trilogy and comes to in his new world disorientated and confused, momentarily convinced his current adventure has been a 'horrible nightmare'. This is a reoccurring visual joke in the trilogy but also explicitly cites earlier time travel tales where dreaming or unconscious states results in time travel.² Yet, it is without question the mechanisation of traversing time that Zemeckis references in *Back to the Future* via the DeLorean time machine, foregrounding Wells's novella and Pal's film adaptation as the trilogy's touchstone on the subject of time travel and alternate histories. It is therefore necessary to begin by examining the time machine itself, and the ways in which Wells's vision has been adapted and updated by Zemeckis in the *Back to the Future* trilogy.

EXPLORING THE TIME MACHINES

In earlier Wells-based time travel films such as Pal's *The Time Machine* and *Time After Time* (Meyer), the time machine is, as in Wells's tale, an immobile contraption; it does not move as a vehicle in space during its travels through time; it remains static if left unmoved by others.³ Unlike the DeLorean, a motorcar which must move at the significant speed of 88 mph to breakthrough the time barrier by travelling through both space and time simultaneously, Wells's time machine is not only stationary, but, in comparison, slow to journey through time. Just as Dickens's ghosts of Christmas came to visit Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, Victorian time travel, which offers awe-inducing glimpses of the past and the future, requires patience. Wells's time machine gains speed as it travels, eventually reaching a pace of roughly 'over a year per minute' (Wells 20) to the year 802,701 AD. For Zemeckis's DeLorean, time travel is instantaneous, as it enters and exits the space-time continuum too quickly for viewers to register at all. Unlike Wells's time machine, which functions via a relatively slow and steady linear projection of the passing nature of time, time travel in the *Back to the Future* trilogy is often done in haste, by accident, or to escape an immediate threat, meaning that there is no grand observation of the journey during the brief seconds of time travel because of its rapid, violent, and disjointed nature. The visual pleasure of *Back to the Future's* time travel narrative unfolds as the time travellers navigate the uncanny spaces of Hill Valley through historically important and visually arresting periods—the future of 2015, the Western past of 1885, the multiple versions of 1985, and the 'idyllic' 1955 all unfold through the

films' detailed *mise en scène*. Time travel itself as an experience has collapsed, to the point where it is barely registered, but its effect on the diegetic space is profoundly felt and visually reinforced, as Marty and Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) traverse key dates in time attempting to repair rifts and correct tangents in the history of Hill Valley.

To highlight the overlaps between Wells's Victorian text and the *Back to the Future* trilogy, we must therefore begin by examining the time machines themselves. The Time Traveller of Wells's tale uses a model of his time machine to provide a demonstration to a small party of friends who treat it as a Victorian parlour trick—'it might be real but more likely a trick, a simulation, a scientific demonstration or an optical illusion' (Bignell 138). The initial concern here is that the gathered audience (and reader) has been deceived or fooled, but they are subsequently convinced by the Time Traveller's unfolding tale. A similar experiment is conducted in *Back to the Future* when Doc Brown first tests the time machine, sending Einstein, his beloved dog, one minute into the future. At first, Doc is also met with disbelief as Marty exclaims, 'Doc, you disintegrated Einstein!', yet, when we catch up with the DeLorean one minute later, Marty, and the viewer, are left in no doubt of its capability. The fear aroused by Doc's experiment is not that it might be dismissed as an illusion but that, as the time machine requires plutonium to function, it could be extremely hazardous. That the experiment is also captured on video camera adds veracity to the demonstration—something that Wells's own traveller does not have the luxury of thoroughly documenting beyond the testimony of the witnesses he has gathered for his first experiment with the miniature model. The DeLorean's interior bears some resemblance to the machine in Pal's film adaptation—its digital LED interface is colour-coded to resemble the colours found on Pal's time machine; however, Zemeckis's contraption, built in the digital age of the 1980s, retains an analogue aesthetic with its many levers, dials, and cables, which, when combined with the digital time circuits, produces a home-built fusion of superfluous parts and dangerous materials. Pal's time machine uses the colours red, green, and yellow on its panels to indicate the specific day, month, and year of destination. In the DeLorean, the colours red, green, and yellow indicate the 'Destination Time', 'Present Time', and 'Last Time Departed', respectively. Moreover, both time machines become damaged on their perilous journeys—the expensive materials of ivory and plutonium alone gesture towards both machines' specific national and cultural contexts (colonial Britain and the Cold-War armament, respectively) but also imply that their delicate and intricate parts seem unlikely to withstand time travel at all, despite the Time Traveller's optimism: 'There it is now, a little travel-worn truly, and one of the ivory bars is cracked, and a brass rail bent; but the rest of it's sound enough' (Wells 18). In comparison with Wells's machine's scuffs and bent rail, the DeLorean fares even worse. It is tested and damaged on nearly all of its journeys. In *Back to the Future* it must be adapted to channel the alternate power source of lightning to enable Marty to return back to 1985. In *Back to the Future II* it is adapted again to fly with a hover conversion which, coupled with a malfunction of the time circuits, accidentally sends Doc Brown back to 1885. In *Back to the Future III*, the DeLorean's fuel tank is ruptured and fails to move under its own power—it must be thrust forward literally by a locomotive (a symbol of Victorian progress that emits coloured smoke in green, yellow, and red in homage to Pal's *The Time Machine*) to enable time travel back to the 1980s, and to restore Marty to his 'correct' present time. Upon arriving back to 1985 for the final time, it is crushed by a freight train, thus stranding

Marty in the correct(ed) version of 1985,⁴ and foreclosing the possibility of any further adventures through time for him. As all of this indicates, time travel in the *Back to the Future* trilogy is always a perilous endeavour.

Alongside the colour-coding of the time display in the DeLorean, with its levers and dials reminiscent of Pal's 1960 time machine, Zemeckis's film also knowingly gives a nostalgic filmic nod to Pal's film in *Back to the Future's* opening scene and the climactic lightning storm. Both films open with shots of multiple ticking clocks—presented in perfect unison in *Back to the Future* and abstractly floating and chiming in *The Time Machine*. *The Time Machine's* opening credit sequence concludes with a shot of Big Ben (London's master clock), a great rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning. This opening sequence becomes a revisited image and leitmotif throughout the *Back to the Future* series, moving from a foreshadowing of disruption and threat in Pal's film to Zemeckis's positive reuse of the same idea, which inverts the foreboding symbolic fracturing of weather and harmony into a triumph over nature and time as Marty travels back to 1985 when lightning strikes Hill Valley's Clock Tower. The lightning bolt that concludes the opening credits of Pal's film signals the disruption of nature and order which is about to occur—the unnatural and disruptive action of traversing the fourth dimension. Ironically, the lightning bolt, which here functions as a natural warning that humanity should avoid such movements across time, actually *enables* Marty's return to the future in Zemeckis's film. Further references to Pal's film can be noted in pivotal nondiegetic musical cues in Zemeckis's film, which underscore the magical and uncanny nature of time travel and can be traced back to Russell Garcia's soundtrack for *The Time Machine*. Most notably, a cluster of sparkling musical notes feature as homage to Garcia in Alan Silvestri's score for *Back to the Future* in scenes where the ripple effect of time travel is evident (e.g., when Doc blinks his eyes open after surviving the Libyan attack in *Back to the Future's* denouement). As Christine Lee Gengaro notes,

The first of Alan Silvestri's musical themes we hear is an effervescent, sparkling motif consisting of two arpeggiated triads a half step apart. It appears when the temporal magic of time travel is either realized or revealed [...] Silvestri used musical cues for events or characters in a very fluid way. The music for the cue 'the DeLorean Revealed,' for example, refers specifically to the DeLorean in some instances, but in other situations, the initial thematic idea of 'The DeLorean Revealed' refers to some magical effect of time travel. (Gengaro 114–15)

The musical cue of sparkling notes is musically contrasted with the recorded chime of Big Ben in *The Time Machine*—a striking sombre tone reminding the viewer of the grave nature of crossing the threshold of time. In *Back to the Future*, Silvestri specifically rerecorded Big Ben's chime from *The Time Machine* to be used as the chime for Hill Valley's Clock Tower. These aesthetic and aural echoes confirm *Back to the Future* as a film which was heavily influenced by Pal's film *The Time Machine*, and which sources significant aural, scored and visual motifs from Pal's vision, thus conferring legitimacy onto itself not only by recalling Pal's film, but also, by proxy, Wells's novella.

CINEMATIC TIME AND CULTURAL TANGENTS: TECHNOLOGY, EVOLUTION, AND SELF-ERASURE

The publication of Wells's novel in 1895 coincided with the invention of the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe, which, according to Keith Williams, can be considered as

a veritable time machine (Williams 1). With their ability to capture a moment in time that is now lost, to resurrect or reanimate the dead or undo catastrophe, to speed time up or to make a moment stand still, experiments in film magic and illusion had been steadily progressing since Thomas Edison's unveiled his Kinetograph in 1893. By 1896, George Méliès, a conjuror who had experimented with 'stop motion effects', manipulated images that effectively demonstrated that cinema has its own internal narrative reality by combining edits, dissolves, substitutions, and exposures to achieve illusions and spectacles on film that would be impossible in 'real life'. As Bignell notes:

What both time travel and cinema can do is make the familiar appear unfamiliar by changing the manner of its perception. What is rapid can be slowed down, what moves slowly can be speeded up, and forward motion can be reversed. Time travel and cinema seem to show the spectator the workings of the laws of nature, granting him or her special perception, which makes the ordinary marvellous and strange. (Bignell 140)

The imagined and the impossible could be rendered visually through editing and optical manipulation, thus cinema was 'mechanising magic' (Williams 4). Wells's novella, by mechanising the exploration of time and 'domesticat[ing] the impossible [through his] meticulously constructed impression of everyday material reality' (Williams 4), combines visual illusion and scientific materialism, and consequently 'makes time itself resemble a movie reel, speeded forwards and backwards, or stopped at will' (Williams 2). The paradoxical onscreen representation of the fantastic-as-reality by pioneers such as Méliès bestowed 'credence within the narrative context while knowing it for deception' (Williams 5), as special effects and optics developed to further realise imaginary worlds and other visual wonders, as seen in *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le Voyage dans la lune*) (Méliès, 1902). The continuing breakthroughs in cinematic special effects artistry enabled Pal to visually capture the passing of time in an extraordinary sequence in his film. By combining time-lapse photography and stop-motion animation, Pal's time travel sequence is an exciting spectacle of cinematic wizardry which recalls the pioneering work of Wells's contemporary Méliès in its combination of trickery, 'model shots, early "blue screen" double-printing and matte painting' (Williams 131); the film's special effects artists Gene Warren and Tim Baar won an Academy Award for Best Special Effects (awarded in April 1961). Keith Williams notes, 'As George speeds up, the sun blurs across the sky and the alteration of light and darkness picks up Wells's suggestion of the crude flickering of early projectors and effects such as double exposure' (Williams 132). Just as Wells's novella coincided with the birth of cinema and its optical manipulations, *Back to the Future Part II* was also developed in tandem with significant technological advancements in the film industry towards the end of the twentieth century. This is especially evident in Zemeckis's own fondness for combining digital trickery and Chroma keying,⁵ and in the further-increased ability to produce the impossible onscreen. Zemeckis's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), for example, combined cel animation and live-action performances which were composited with a rostrum camera and synthesised in postproduction at ILM (Industrial Light and Magic). The final draft of the script for *Back to the Future Part II* was designed around significant digital compositing, which meant that the same actor could play different roles in the same frame.⁶ Doing so permitted the series to realise its complex vision—in essence, these

digital advancements allowed for *Back to the Future Part II* not only to create spectacles playfully, in which a single actor appears to be in two or more places at once but also, crucially, to subjectively re-enter key scenes from *Back to the Future* in the sequel. In order to present three characters, Marty Snr, Marty Jr, and Marlene McFly, all played by Michael J. Fox, interacting onscreen at the same time, Zemeckis commissioned ILM to custom-build the VistaGlide camera, which could map, dolly and separate the image so it could be composited into the same frame in postproduction, resulting in a scene where the various characters played by Fox seamlessly interact with each other and the camera appears to move fluidly throughout the scene.⁷ Due to ILM's significant developments in digital compositing, morphing, and design during the late 1980s and early 1990s, most visible in the Oscar-winning visual effects in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991)—another time travel film, featuring the pioneering work of Stan Winston, Dennis Muren, Robert Skotak, and Gene Warren Jr, son of *The Time Machine's* visual effects artist Gene Warren—Hollywood productions have since been completely transformed due to digital technology's limitless ability to produce and mesh mechanical and digital 'magic' onscreen.

Beyond the emphasis on mechanisation and optical trickery, *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy also share a tendency to dramatize cultural anxieties and social critiques that were prevalent during their respective decades. The time travel narrative effectively offers a condensed representation of epochs, offering warnings about the progress of mankind in evolutionary and social terms. At the same time, in framing political anxieties, such narratives also function as conservative fantasies in which protagonists are empowered to act in order to prevent terrible events from occurring. Thus, time travel narratives establish a specific coding of spaces and timelines in disarray, which can be mastered or put right with the aid of the time machine and the knowledge that time travellers wield about future events.⁸ While *Back to the Future* offers some problematic, yet optimistic, views on the future of Ronald Reagan's America, Wells's novella gives a reformist and occasionally bleak outlook on humanity's future progression—his imagined future underscored by competing scientific arguments on evolution, devolution, and degeneration as witnessed through the biology of the Eloi and Morlocks.

Wells's Time Traveller journeys to the future to witness the progress of mankind; he shares this motivation with *Back to the Future's* inventor counterpart, Doc Brown.⁹ While the geographic location of Wells's London remains unchanged, the future landscape of London appears at first to be a utopian Eden. *Back to the Future* references this motif; the mall parking lot in which the initial time travel experiments occur is called Twin Pines Mall, metaphorically recalling the Garden of Eden's twin trees: the tree of life and the tree of good and evil.¹⁰ The Time Traveller observes upon his arrival in the future that 'the whole Earth had become a garden' (Wells 30). The initial impression is that the Earth has returned to a natural pastoral ideal in contrast to the *fin-de-siècle* London of the Time Traveller; however, the horrors of the future lie beneath the idyllic surface of this seemingly utopian world. Whether it is the Victorian future of class divide turned evolutionary nightmare or the Reaganite creation of an idyllic 1950s realised through 1980s hyper-economic individualism, central to these visions of time travel is the fear that time travel, for all of its promises and wonder, permits a terrifying glimpse at humanity's erasure from existence. Wells's vision of the future, beyond 802,701 AD, is

that of the dying sun, beneath which the Earth is devoid of all life; humanity devolved to primordial ooze on the Earth's scorched and charred soil. This is, for Wells, the end of time—the entropic end point at which everything ceases to be. These dire warnings are repeatedly evoked in the *Back to the Future* trilogy, as Marty is cautioned that he could endanger his own existence; or, when events threaten to spiral outward to cause a paradox in *Back to the Future II*, that his and Doc's actions 'could unravel the fabric of the space-time continuum and destroy the entire universe'. In Wells's novella, humanity is on a continuous and fatal path which Wells highlights in order to provoke the reader into questioning the profound effects that the Victorian political and social present might have in determining which possible future awaits us.

Wells was heavily influenced by T.H. Huxley, whose writings and influential Romanes Lecture 'Evolution and Ethics' (1893) called for improved conditions and social reforms for the Victorian working class, and emphasised 'that this benevolence must be eventually upheld by the sponsorship of the State' (McLean 23). The biological segregation realised in 802,701 AD indicates that such necessary reforms have been ignored, and that the processes of retrogression and degeneration (Eloi/Morlocks) spring from class, geographical (pastoral/city) and eugenic divisions realised over hundreds of thousands of years, subdividing the human race into two inferior mutations.¹¹ McLean observes that Huxley 'stresses that "it is an error to imagine that evolution signifies a constant tendency to increased perfection"' (McLean 24). Similarly, Wells's makes use of Ray Lankester's concept of the evolutionary development of an organism, in which successful evolution depends upon the organism's ease in sourcing food, upon the competition it faces, and upon the conditions of its environment (McLean 25–26). Should an organism's or animal's needs be met with considerable ease over a substantial period of time, Lankester argued, the process of degeneration will follow [this is reflected in the Eloi's reduced height and 'intellectual degradation' (Wells 62)]. Conversely, if there is both a need to adapt to a new environment and consistent competition for resources, new biological features may develop to aid survival (the Morlocks' eyes have adapted to their dark underground dwellings). McLean reads the evident degeneration in the novella as Huxley's profound influence on Wells, and his opposition to the social Darwinism championed by Victorian intellectual Herbert Spencer. Spencer 'advocated the independent actions of individuals as opposed to state interference' (McLean 30), which was used as a means to justify the ends of industrial capitalism, with the gilded classes embodying the very worst aspects of Spencer's 'survival of the fittest'. Reinforcing and attempting to justify such class divisions as 'natural selection', Wells warns, will result in future species such as the Eloi and Morlocks. Wells, inspired by Huxley and his criticisms of social Darwinism, actively responds to the unjust division of wealth at the *fin-de-siècle* by positioning evolutionary descent and degeneration, along with the Earth's entropic conclusion, as a direct consequence of such divisions. His novel therefore implicitly questions such unethical poverty and class discord, and demonstrates the futility of avarice and materialism while 'time's winged chariot might well be driving mankind and its habitat to a stop' (Mackenzie 122).

As John Lawton argues Wells's vision of the future can easily be mapped on to this Victorian present. He states, 'The society that is [Wells's] audience is about to be destroyed. Wells depicts no other between the Victorian present, and the year of the

Eloi and Morlocks. It is, in effect, the Victorian future. The society we see at ease among the chenille and velvet of a Richmond villa is the logical, the direct, ancestor, of the one we find in 802,701' (Lawton xxxv). It is, then unsurprising that some of Wells's fantasy and science fiction focuses on humanity's end times, as a result of cosmic disasters or Martian invasions, often concluding in partial or total annihilation of all life on the planet. For Wells, the erasure and destruction of humanity is scientifically inevitable, and is a frequent and reiterated danger not only in scientific and cosmic romances of the era, but also in subsequent time travel narratives. Spencer's social Darwinism was also evident in the rhetoric of Reaganism and its revulsion for the poor. Reagan's repeated call for the dismantling of 'big government' echoes Spencer's individualists, who were quick to criticise or quash the advantages of collectivism and social responsibility with tales of welfare queens, fraud, and of generalised fecklessness. For Reagan, federal programmes designed to aid those in poverty 'had destroyed the work ethic of the poor and turned them into a generation of welfare cheats. The Reaganites' view of the lower classes would have made the most inveterate social Darwinists proud' (Kleinknecht 27–28). It is undeniable that the emphasis on yuppie and consumer culture in the 1980s had a profound social effect, with idealised Hollywood representations of wholly amoral capitalists such as Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) in *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987) who espouses the notion that 'The new law in the evolution in corporate America seems to be survival of the *unfittest*, well, in my book you either do it right, or you get eliminated. [...] Greed [...] is good. Greed is Right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.' Gekko is the prime example of 1980s neo-liberal yuppiedom onscreen, his most famous speech is so deeply embedded in Reaganite social Darwinism that it has come to epitomise the worst aspects of the decade, alongside the desired upward social mobility upon which yuppie culture and rampant consumerism thrived. And *Back to the Future* is somewhat guilty of this outlook too—Marty's reward for his time travel meddling is his family's upwardly mobile class status at the film's conclusion; he also is given a new Toyota 4 × 4 as a symbol of his indomitable spirit and maturation into manhood.

While Wells's novella sees human evolutionary degeneration as caused by rifts in the class structure of the 1890s, and marks the *fin-de-siècle* as a crucial nexus point in human history, the *Back to the Future* trilogy marks the critical dangers of time travel as a localised ripple effect (confined to Hill Valley) that occurs onscreen with immediate consequences. Hints of damage to America at large *are* evident via newspaper archives in *Back to the Future II*, where President Nixon seeks a fifth term in office in 1985 and Hill Valley becomes a toxic wasteland, but these ripple effects are not explored onscreen.¹² In *Back to the Future*, Marty is struggling to repair the rift he has caused by interrupting his parents' encounter, and thus must overcome numerous obstacles to ensure they fall in love, thereby reinstating and ensuring his own future birth. By interrupting the timeline and initially failing to understand the implications of his actions, Marty jeopardises his family's existence through the causal looping of time—every action he performs in 1955 will have 'major repercussions on future events' for better or worse. This culminates in Marty becoming temporarily incapacitated and unable to play guitar at the 'Enchantment under the Sea' dance; his presence in a family photograph (along with his own hand) begins to fade away in a visual cue that suggests his erasure as all but certain.

However, as his previous actions to reunite his parents prove to be ultimately successful at that same moment at the dance, his new fate in Hill Valley's restored timeline is quickly and permanently assured. In *Back to the Future II*, this stability is endangered again by complex time travel journeys undertaken by Marty and Doc to the future (2015), the horrifically altered present (1985A), the events of the first film in 1955, and, at the film's conclusion, Hill Valley's mythic Western past in 1885. Throughout these adventures, Marty is frequently warned by Doc Brown about the dangers of self-erasure in time travel,¹³ the disastrous consequences of creating major paradoxes in the timeline, and the possibility of running into their other selves as he and Doc Brown revisit the pivotal events of the first film in a parallel narrative that lurks at the margins of the first film. The series' chronology is diegetically complex and unfolds largely in reverse (1985-2015-1985A-1955-leading to 1885 in *Back to the Future II* alone) and via revised/revisited periods of time and space visited in *Back to the Future* (1985 and 1955). The trilogy's theoretical fragmentation and alteration of Hill Valley's timeline neatly isolates and expands upon the precarious nature of travelling outside one's allotted place in time. Much like Wells's own Time Traveller who ventures far into the future, only to witness the dying sun and the end of time, Marty's own escapades into the past immediately place him in a liminal space in which his very existence is threatened from the outset *because* of his journey through time. For Marty, his extinction is localised to himself (and his siblings), as a result of his having disrupted timeline causality; for Wells, human erasure is forewarned as our biological and cosmological destiny.¹⁴

The Victorian questioning of evolution, progress, and invention naturally lends itself to the Time Traveller's desire to witness the grand progress of mankind; notions of class systems and their potential futures (which, indeed, inform us of how the Eloi and Morlocks come to be in 802,701AD) are acutely paralleled but also reversed in *Back to the Future's* preoccupation with upward mobility. The later film suggests that the past can be corrected to render attainable such class migration—a notable cultural preoccupation of President Reagan during the 1980s. As Carolyn Anderson rhetorically asks: 'During a decade when [...] Americans were urged to "be all you can be" despite the failed promise of a trickle-down prosperity, what sort of class discourse was enacted in popular movies?' (Anderson 141) 1980s cinema is largely populated with characters grappling with class—ideologically, financially, and socially straining to belong to or overcome the constraints of class constructs. Specifically, these boundaries are construed (particularly in the cinema of John Hughes) as destructive barriers during the decade. Indeed, the 1890s and the 1980s share a considerable fascination with upward mobility, self-help and social betterment—an emphasis which frames not only these time travel narratives, but also decades in which genuine concern for the future dominated cultural, political, and economic thought.

In *Back to the Future*, this sense of class anxiety brings about a distinct fracture within the McFly family, in that Marty, the only member of his family to travel through time, remains wholly unchanged by his adventure, while his family have evidently been remoulded in terms of their class status and taste. Marty already seems to belong to the right class and conform to the right ideals, and therefore is not subject to revisionism. As promulgated by President Reagan's own cultural and economic policies at the time, the 1980s was a period steeped in narratives of *historical erasure* of the troublesome 1960s

and 1970s. The period's cultural politics promoted a desire to return to the moral codes and family values of the 1950s that were largely recalled via nostalgia, in an effort to re-invoke traditional values and ideologies that had since, the narrative insisted, become eroded and outdated in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Second Wave Feminism and the numerous political scandals of the 1970s. Upper-middle class status, particularly in the 1980s, was perceived to be a position to which one simply ascended with hard work and financial reward. Conforming to the Horatio Alger myth,¹⁵ much like the yuppie cinema which also came to the fore during the decade, taste, consumption, and acquisition directly followed such upward mobility in the 1980s cultural mindset. According to Tom Shone, *Back to the Future*, alongside another highly successful time travel film *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), locates the shared thread of chasing one's future—to ensure a successful outcome—in an age wracked with uncertainty. As Shone notes:

All around them, in movies like *Working Girl*, *Flashdance*, and *Top Gun*, characters are chasing their dreams, making it count, chasing their tomorrows, starting up small ghost-busting agencies and other such eighties activities; but *The Terminator* and *Back to the Future* were the only movies whose protagonists chased their tomorrows to quite so literal a degree—time travel movie as self-improvement manual. This is probably not what H.G. Wells had in mind when he wrote *The Time Machine*. (Shone 157)

The fear of predestined failure, whether inherited or caused by technological advancements (which both *The Terminator* and *The Time Machine* narrate as an anxiety about the future progress of science and mankind's impending doom, be it at the mercy of devolution or genocide at the hands of sentient machines), must be rigidly contained and overwritten in an age that actively rewrote its own present and expunged its unpalatable past from the cultural record. *Back to the Future* allows for the cinematic fantasy of rewriting and reediting our own present, through altering the historical record, simply by rewriting our own personal history for our future economic and social betterment. Elizabeth McCarthy locates the threat of feared inherited failure which informs the central relationship between Marty and his parents, Lorraine Baines (Lea Thompson) and George McFly (Crispin Glover), which, if left unchecked would also have eventually engulfed Marty's prospects.¹⁶ She writes:

Yet again, we see here the dramatic impetus underlying *Back to the Future* is the nightmare of biological determinism and, more specifically, the fear that failure is hereditary. But Marty's will to succeed proves greater than the weight of this fear. So much so that Marty will not only make a success of his own life but will (with the aid of Doc and a time traveling machine) guide his troubled teen parents towards a far better future than the one they had made for themselves without his wise and sobering influence. (McCarthy 142)

The continued emphasis on social change throughout the trilogy is a firm feature in most popular time travel narratives, further enshrining the lasting legacy of Wells's novella as a master template for the genre, just as the "self-help" myth was also a powerful literary convention in nineteenth-century fiction. Not only do Dickens's heroes rise from a marginal condition to one of respectability and economic stability but some of his villains (like Boundarby [sic] in *Hard Times*) even function as a parody of the

Victorian “gospel of success” (Chialant 98). Furthermore, in the 1890s, alongside optical and photomechanical developments, ‘Victorian scientists were developing the technologies that would shape the modern world [including] electromagnetism, radio waves, X-Rays, new gases (neon, argon, krypton, xenon), submarine cables were connecting the world, cities were illuminated, moving pictures started, followed on by the telephone,[all of which] [...] created a climate of exciting possibility’ (Warner xx). Similar dreams of scientific discovery were revived during Reagan’s tenure, which emphasised American dreams and endless technological possibilities, invigorated with a renewed drive towards promoting and harnessing nuclear power, in an age that had grown fearful of its destructive potential (such as the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979 and the Chernobyl disaster in 1986).¹⁷ Reagan’s own invocation of the possibilities of the future (technological, social, and economic) often extended to the fanciful, a tactic that not only captured the spirit of self-belief in the nation, but also rooted itself explicitly in the heightened Cold-War climate of the mid-decade. His address to Congress in the 1986 State of the Union speech was laden with references to the future and dreams of futuristic possibility, coupled with a time traveller’s ability to claim witness to the past and reasserting the potential technological and social advancements to be achieved in the near future. He stated:

As they said in the film *Back to the Future*, ‘Where we are going, we don’t need roads.’ Well, today physicists peering into the infinitely small realms of subatomic particles find reaffirmations of religious faith. Astronomers build a space telescope that can see to the edge of the universe and possibly back to the moment of creation. So, yes, this nation remains fully committed to America’s space program. We’re going forward with our shuttle flights. We’re going forward to build our space station [...] [defending the Strategic Defense Initiative]. A security shield can one day render nuclear weapons obsolete and free mankind from the prison of nuclear terror. America met one historic challenge and went to the Moon. Now America must meet another: to make our strategic defense real for all the citizens of planet Earth. (Reagan 1986)

By invoking dreams, symbolism, and hopeful language in order to position ‘the future’ as a positive place for humanity and scientific progress, and indeed for the citizens of Planet Earth (citing the filmic language of science fiction), Reagan’s State of the Nation, similar to most time travel narratives, is steeped with growing fears and concerns about the political present. Future technology and dreams are evoked not only to inspire what may be possible, but also clandestinely to emphasise technological superiority as an antidote against future wars, while addressing current Cold-War tensions. What is undoubtedly clear is that both the novel and 1960 film version of *The Time Machine*, and the *Back to the Future* trilogy all reference the current thinking and anxieties of their own specific cultural decades (the 1890s, 1960s, and 1980s, respectively). Pal’s adaptation of Wells’s novella is acutely anxious about the historical course of the twentieth century, beginning the narrative on New Year’s Eve 1899, on the cusp of a new age of progress. The inventor’s journey begins with his arrival at specific historical moments in the twentieth century, briefly accounting for both World War I and World War II. He also lands in the later 1960s, where he charts changes in consumerism and consumer behaviour, while continuing to express evident trepidation, fearing that another global war on the horizon:

In Pal's film, the inventor stops to look around in 1917, 1940 and 1966 [...]. In 1966, the projected future from the perspective of 1960 is like a sunny American suburb. The inventor's house (destroyed by a wartime bomb) has been replaced by a park. The local shop, which had become a department store by 1917, is now a glass and concrete shopping mall, and shiny American cars are on the street. The film's thematic emphasis on the effects of war continues as extras rush past and an air-raid siren sounds [...] this virtual future environment is alien but familiar, all too obviously determined by a 1960 anxiety (but also shared by Wells in the 1895 novel) that the future will be the same as the present, only more so. (Bignell 142)

Indeed, as Bignell notes, the future is envisioned as the present thrust forward. The future is only what we can conceive of it—that is, as an extension of present circumstances and people, in both linear and causal terms, as we cannot imagine a space that is left untouched by our own existence and time. Similarly, Victorian progress in Wells's novella gives birth to invention and exploration and the celebration of scientific progress, but it carries with it ideals and cultural/sociological preoccupations of its Victorian time.

However, *Back to the Future* navigates this terrain of American optimism by capturing the magical elements of scientific discovery. The trilogy's master of time, Doc Brown, is an amalgam of Ronald Reagan, Albert Einstein, and Wernher von Braun, a fantastical characterisation that perfectly binds together conservative politics, scientific discovery and a desired mastery of history and time. As Susan Jeffords keenly observes on the trilogy's benign patriarch of time, Doc Brown not only is the keeper of modern technology and wizardry, but also opens up the grand slipstream of time to prevent disasters, in the guise of Reagan himself:

For who is Doc Brown other than Ronald Reagan himself? [...] Ranging over history, apparently in control of time, Ronald Reagan and Doc Brown come to stand as surrogate fathers, supplying symbolic leadership to a generation of youth whose futures seemed to have been opened up by their visions of technological wizardry and moral instruction. Both, by the end of the decade, seem to have gone beyond time itself, to have left the limitations of history and entered into the realm of fantasy, glory and dreams. (Jeffords 78)

While this destiny of glory and dreams is where the *Back to the Future* trilogy concluded, it is also made clear that the magic of time travel can be harnessed for good *or* evil, and the means by which it is effected (nuclear energy) were also culturally represented as an ongoing anxiety which could become potentially apocalyptic in the wrong hands. After all, the fears of nuclear annihilation or postfallout scenarios intensified in the popular imagination in numerous films and publications in the United Kingdom and United States, including *The China Syndrome* (Bridges, 1979); the UK government's *Protect and Survive* series of pamphlets, radio broadcasts, and information films (1980); Raymond Briggs' graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* (1982) and its animated adaptation (Murakami, 1986); the American TV film *The Day After* (1983), directed by *Time After Time*'s director Nicholas Meyer; *The Terminator*; Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986–1987); and the countdown of the Doomsday Clock from seven to three minutes to midnight between 1980–1984 to reflect Cold War tensions and the increasing threat of nuclear armament (including Reagan's futuristic Strategic Defence Initiative, monikered 'Star Wars' in 1983).

Back to the Future's nuclear power and terrorist anxieties are rendered explicit when viewed with Reagan's rhetoric in mind; not only is the DeLorean fuelled with plutonium to enable time travel but this material is sourced through a Libyan terrorist group, representing the heightened tensions between Libya and the United States during the mid-1980s. In earlier scripts and storyboards, the climax of the first film was to have Marty drive onto a nuclear test site in Nevada to enable him to travel back to 1985, but this sequence was abandoned due to budgetary constraints and a desire to keep the climax contained in Hill Valley.¹⁸ Furthermore, the DeLorean's means of time travel can be read alongside specific energy narratives relating to the years in which each instalment of the trilogy was made; while *Back to the Future* looks to nuclear energy and the channelling of natural power via lightning (while also citing Pal's film), 1989's *Back to the Future II* overcomes the nuclear issue via fusion technology—ecological activists and reformers hoped in the late 1980s that, by 2015, the year in which *Back to the Future II* is partially set, energy fusion (and the dream of cold fusion) would provide a limitless energy source. By 1990's *Back to the Future III*, Marty and Doc are firmly placed in the past in terms of modern science, technology and progress—the 'back to basics' approach that George H. Bush promoted during his presidential tenure fused with the cinematic Western persona of his presidential predecessor. Stuck in the Old West of 1885, aesthetically attuned to the rise of the 'steampunk' subgenre,¹⁹ which tangentially cites both Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, they must look to nineteenth-century Victorian progress, steam-powered locomotives, adapted machinery, and careful use of future knowledge to ensure their safe return to the 1980s.

MASTER CLOCKS AND MASTERING TIME

Both Zemeckis's trilogy and Pal's film adaptation pay significant attention to images, chimes, and representations of clocks, precision, and time. Yet time works remarkably differently in both narratives. Time in the *Back to the Future* trilogy is fleeting and dangerous, something to be chased and manipulated, while in *The Time Machine*, time is abstract, and can ultimately be mastered through its narrative linearity. It is evident that Zemeckis's film is more informed by Wells's *The Time Machine* than by any other time travel narrative in popular literature—although Wells's French counterpart Jules Verne is explicitly referenced in *Back to the Future Part III* (specifically Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* [1864]). Both *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy structure the adventures they narrate both chronologically—each lasting almost a week (explicitly in *Back to the Future III*)—and their protagonists encounter alien versions of both their hometowns and community once they arrive. Both time machines are stolen by treacherous 'others'; the Morlocks take it inside the Sphinx, depriving the Time Traveller of his means to leave the distant future, while Biff (Thomas F. Wilson), the reoccurring villain of the *Back to the Future* trilogy, steals the time machine in *Back to the Future II* in order to alter history for his own personal gain. Significant parts of the time machines, once their destination has been reached, must be removed and/or replaced, in order to restore the machine to working order (including an assortment of levers, hooks to conduct lightning, fuel supplies and microchips). The influence of the earlier text on the films is therefore undeniable.

Curiously, throughout these time travel narratives, women are largely relegated to specific and marginalised roles and, when compared to the time travellers' adventures, have a minor but necessary impact on the story. As McLean states, 'Thus in the scientific romance, the technological creation replaces the woman as the object of emotional gratification' (McLean 21). Wells's Time Traveller meets an innocent Eloi named Weena whom he rescues from drowning in a nearby pool soon after his arrival in the future, altering future history by intervening and saving her life. However, her adoration for him ultimately leads to her death in the forest—the cause of which is rather ambiguously recounted in the Time Traveller's account (she is presumed to have died in a forest fire). *Back to the Future III* echoes this scenario when Doc Brown saves a local school-teacher, Clara Clayton (Mary Steenburgen), from certain death when her carriage plummets into a ravine—a ravine that, in future history, was to be named after her. *Back to the Future III* is primarily concerned with how both Marty and Doc will return to the future via the use of Victorian steam-powered technology, and with whether Clara, Doc's one true love, can accept that he is a time traveller from the next century. While Wells's Time Traveller does seem genuinely perturbed by Weena's disappearance (as he had intended to bring her back with him to Victorian England), he does not mourn her loss per se, but rather his own dislocation in time—'I felt the intensest wretchedness for the horrible death of little Weena [...] it is more like the sorrow of a dream than an actual loss' (Wells 77) and the loss of the human race as it approaches its ultimate demise.

We are not even sure that he personally gains any form of reward from his invention or his experiences; we can only conjecture that, because he has not returned to Victorian London since he last embarked upon a journey through time, he may have found another time in which to exist. Here, the texts diverge, in that, while *The Time Machine* is more focused on what the science and discovery of time travel has to offer the inquisitive mind of the inventor, time travel in the *Back to the Future* trilogy initially offers the same opportunities to the inquisitive but is soon undertaken to right past wrongs, to fulfil seemingly distant desires and dreams, and to attain 'the good family' life for both the McFlies and the Browns. The conclusion to *Back to the Future III* (where both Doc and Clara travel to 1985 to meet with Marty once more, in a new time machine constructed within a steam-powered locomotive), intertextually connects this moment with the conclusion of Meyer's *Time After Time*, where H.G. Wells (Malcolm McDowell) not only prevents Jack the Ripper (David Warner) from continuing his murder spree in San Francisco in 1979, but also brings Amy Robbins (also played by Mary Steenburgen) back to Victorian England with him. Thus, both women are positioned as a reward for the time traveller's dedication and emotional connection to the machine. Both Clara and Amy are permanently relocated by their respective masters of time, just as Wells's Time Traveller had intended with Weena.

Back to the Future III attests to the influence of Victorian progress and regulated time, with its specific inclusion of the Pacific railroad and locomotives. Moreover, it intertextually combines the images of the DeLorean and the hijacked locomotive on the railroad tracks at the climax of *Back to the Future III*, when Marty returns to 1985 for the final time. That Doc Brown later returns to bid him farewell in a steam-powered locomotive time machine, after we witness the DeLorean being crushed by a freight

train upon its final return to 1985, only cements Doc's positioning as belonging to an era of the past, a place of Victorian fantasy and filmic dreams—for he is explicitly costumed as an echo of Professor Marvel/The Wizard (Frank Morgan) from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Here, however, we are assured that, like Dorothy's (Judy Garland) magical trip to Oz, his use of the time machine has bestowed a better life for all concerned.

Mastery of time in these texts is indeed informed by the Victorian pretext of knowledge, invention, and discovery, but only in *Back to the Future* do we find a version where one symbolically masters a localised sense of time travel, in that, time travel and its effects is explicitly limited to Hill Valley. This mastery of time is found in perhaps *Back to the Future*'s most lasting and famous image—the Clock Tower being struck by lightning—where time travel is made possible by using both science and nature as conduits, and literally freezing the clock in the town square as a permanent reminder of the event. The Clock Tower thus becomes a symbol of halting and altering time; while running, the clock represents a countdown to the closing of the gap/tear in the space-time continuum where Marty can alter history and return to 1985. Once the clock has been struck by lightning (at 10:04 p.m. on November 12, 1955), the fabric of time is resealed into a fixed path or direction. Whether Marty succeeds in his mission to get back to 1985 or not, this gap is an absolute limit; Marty cannot return home any other way, and the clock, once struck by lightning, remains frozen thereafter, effectively closing off this opportunity to return to the future. Both Marty and Doc also face the ultimate peril presented by both travelling through and altering time, in that they endanger their own existence—Marty by almost erasing his own future conception when his mother (temporarily) romantically falls for him instead of his father, and Doc by nearly plummeting to his death and grasping electrified cables to conduct the lightning bolt. The Clock Tower remains a consistent symbol thereafter in the trilogy; its continued symbolic presence reminding us not only of the original adventure but also that the fate of the entire town is interconnected with the Clock Tower's environs—the paths in the 1955 town square are precisely Y shaped like the flux capacitor—and its master clock.²⁰

Doc, in particular, crosses, clings to, and ultimately harnesses the power of time itself (the clock face of the symbolic 'master clock' in the Clock Tower) and thus illustrates the mortal dangers which surround such mastery of time travel. It is also interesting to note that entering and intruding upon another period in time is referred to as 'breaking the time barrier'. During the lightning storm in 1955, the symbolic master timepiece is actively running and keeping time, rather than in its familiar broken state; if we conceive of the clock's stasis in 1985 and 1955 (after the storm) as fixed states, it is then possible to assert that it is only when the clock is running does Marty and others affected by his actions, have the opportunity to steer/alter the course of history and time before the clock (re)freezes (again). This fundamentally connects with why the DeLorean needs to travel at 88 mph in its physical fusion of analogue and digital time. By breaking through the time barrier at this speed, time becomes undone by the machine—reset to a default display like a blinking unset digital clock interface which reads as a series of 8s—and is reset again to reach the destination time. This resetting of time at 88 mph in the DeLorean again emphasises the time machine's wizardry by combining analogue mechanisms and digital interfaces.

Wells's Time Traveller possesses a wholly different type of mastery, firmly rooted in his biological position as a human time traveller, able to navigate the complexities of Victorian London *and* the distant future of the Eloi and Morlocks. Because his own time stands at the threshold of dramatic divisions for the human race, the novella insists that, if *fin-de-siècle* sociocultural divisions remain unchecked, all will not be well for Wells's Time Traveller. He knows that his mastery is connected to his status at the 'apex of human evolution' (McLean 33), which, in the distant future, will have 'been swept out of existence' (Wells 61). As McLean notes, '[The Time Traveller] alone is able to fully understand, and indeed master, both the worlds represented in the novel. The protagonist not only has the knowledge of Time Travel which places him in an exclusive position among his contemporaries, but also [...] [he is] able to adapt to the diametrically opposed environments in which the Eloi and Morlocks exist' (McLean 33). In *Back to the Future*, time travel and its advantages/trappings are severely localised to Hill Valley (it is always recognisable as the same town) and thus is generational, nostalgic, and limited in scope. Biological history is confined here to direct descendants of particular families (mostly the McFlys/Tannens) and is traced through local history, documents, and newspapers; all time travel is conducted within or near living memory (mostly 30 year cycles), and as such, it emphasises direct generational continuance rather than the grand evolutionary scale depicted in Wells's novella. However, what Doc and the Time Traveller share is the fact that neither can resist the glimpses of the future and the potential offered by their machines—both forge on as master explorers, never to return to their original timeline.

CONCLUSION: ACHIEVING BETTER TOMORROWS TODAY

Time travel films and fiction explore the possibility of altering a perceived fate or destiny, in the form of a magical journey that permits a fantastic glimpse into the past, or of a potential future. Tied into the birth of cinema itself, the popular time travel narrative permits fantastic alternative timelines where the time traveller(s) can actively alter potentially destructive or failed futures, or achieve unfulfilled desires and destinies. The romance of such possibilities has dominated science fiction cinema for decades, providing a means of wish-fulfilment or catharsis, articulating social ills, exploring prophetic warnings, and visually creating alien-yet-familiar worlds. Films including *La Jetée* (1962); *The Terminator* franchise (1984–2015); *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989); *12 Monkeys* (1995); *Donnie Darko* (2001); and *Project Almanac* (2015) all grapple with global or personal catastrophes that require urgent intervention. Science fiction allows us as viewers to contemplate such interventions as critical junctures that have affected the course of our own lives. The cult television show *Quantum Leap* (1989–1993) explored everyday lives that required adjustment though time travel, with Dr Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) leaping into a different subject's body each week (fusing the mechanical and biological) in order to correct the course of history. What *Back to the Future* achieves is a salient nostalgia for a version of a past that never really existed, wholly subscribing to its contemporary Reaganite mantra that 'if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything'. The film literally revises the 1980s present via a futurism and teenage idealism that openly modifies the flaws of the previous generation. Wells's outlook is grander in scale and locates its *fin-de-siècle* present as a crucial nexus, a point at which it is possible

to alter the horrific future that the Time Traveller experiences—Wells’s readers must confront their own contribution to their shared future and alter it themselves.

As I have argued, both *The Time Machine* and *Back to the Future* are enduring popular texts exploring the mechanised filmic dream of time travel. Wells’s own mechanisation of time travel, bound up in the technological advancements of the 1890s, has directly influenced the entire genre of science fiction in the twentieth century, and Zemeckis’s trilogy is astutely aware of Wells’s legacy. Zemeckis’s trilogy is an adapted update of Wells’s time travel tale for the 1980s generation, where a predestined future can be avoided, and the present can be reclaimed by overwriting the failures of the past. While Wells warns against a terrible destiny, and *Back to the Future* is concerned with achieving better todays and limitless tomorrows, their affirmation is fundamentally the same: ‘the future is whatever you make it!’

NOTES

¹ For more on this, see Andrew Shail and Robin Stoate. *Back to the Future: BFI Film Classics*. London: Palgrave, 2010. Print. p. 98

² Another instance of time-travel via dreaming occurs in Edward Bellamy’s 1888 novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. In the novel, a young American, Julian West, falls into a deep hypnotic sleep. Upon awakening, West discovers that he has ‘travelled’ to the year 2000 and that the United States has been transformed into a socialist utopia.

³ While the events of *Time After Time* (1979) are set in San Francisco in 1979, this is due to a touring exhibition on Wells’s life (one of the artefacts on display is his time machine). The film, therefore, does not violate the ‘space’ aspect of time travel as outlined in Wells’s *The Time Machine*.

⁴ This version of 1985 at the end of *Back to the Future Part III* is also the idealised version of 1985 which concludes *Back to the Future*. This is deemed the ‘correct’ 1985 by the celebration of Marty’s successful alteration of history at the end of the first film. It is where George McFly is a well-known author and Doc Brown has survived the Libyan attack. Marty summons the courage to submit his demo tape to the record company, gets the Toyota 4×4, and has the perfect 1980s suburban family. However, due to the events of *Back to the Future Part III*, it is also the version of 1985 where Clayton Ravine has been named Eastwood Ravine due to Marty’s 1885 Western moniker of Clint Eastwood.

⁵ The process of Chroma keying is to use a blue or green screen background and to digitally alter the background image in postproduction.

⁶ *Back to the Future II* is not the first film to feature ‘doubling’ of the same actor in a single frame. Earlier famous examples of doubles or multiples of the same actor in the same frame include Buster Keaton’s minstrel show in *The Playhouse* (Keaton and Cline, 1921); Bette Davis in *A Stolen Life* (Bernhardt, 1946); and Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers* (Cronenberg, 1988).

⁷ *Back to the Future II* relied on the VistaGlide camera and ILM’s compositing techniques to present older and younger versions of characters, played by the same actors, to interact with each other onscreen. The most famous example is the ‘pizza scene’, with three characters all played by Michael J. Fox at the dinner table in 2015. Other examples in the film include two versions of Doc Brown speaking to each other in 1955, Old Biff giving Young Biff the Sports Almanac in 1955, and Marty seeing and narrowly avoiding his ‘other self’ at the ‘Enchantment Under the Sea’ dance in 1955 (the self from *Back to the Future*).

⁸ While *Back to the Future*’s narrative corrects an accidental disruption to the timeline, the basis for the entire *Terminator* franchise (1984–2015) is rife with causal loops that form a self-fulfilling prophecy complete with multiple timelines and alternate histories, which are continuously revised by time-travelling survivors from the future and Skynet’s own terminators. For an excellent analysis of these extremely convoluted timelines in the *Terminator* franchise, see Darren Franich ‘A serious attempt to follow the *Terminator* timeline: Everything is always happening all of the time’. Web. 2 July 2015. <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/06/30/terminator-genisys-franchise-timeline-explained>

⁹ It must be stated that Doc Brown does not undertake time travel until the end of the first film in the trilogy—Marty’s accidental trip to the past is more about an escape from Libyan terrorists than an actual

desire for or belief in the possibilities of time travel. Wells's Traveller not only believes that he can travel through time but, because he does not know that it is entirely possible beyond the disappearance of his model time machine, he experiments on himself. Doc Brown, in a parallel experiment, sends his dog Einstein one minute into the future to test the veracity of the DeLorean time machine. Doc intends to undertake time travel himself but is shot by the Libyans just before his first trip in the time machine.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Richardson notes that the symbolism of Twin Pines Mall links specifically with the Garden of Eden and its two symbolic trees. Reading *Back to the Future* from a Jungian perspective, Richardson postulates that the twin trees of Twin Pines Mall can thus be read as 'the process in which inner opposites unite', while Lone Pine Mall, with its one remaining symbolic tree (as Marty accidentally destroyed the other pine in 1955), 'might symbolize evolution, growth or psychological maturation' (132–34).

¹¹ For more on Francis Galton's theories of eugenics and *The Time Machine*, see Steven McLean. *The Early Fiction of H.G. Wells: Fantasies of Science*. 27–29.

¹² For more on this, see Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, 'Introduction: It's About Time'. *The Worlds of Back to the Future: Critical Essays on the Films*. 18–19.

¹³ In *Back to the Future Part II*, Biff Tannen returns to 2015 after stealing the time machine which results in his erasure from existence. Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis had included this scene in their initial final cut but, after audience testing, it was later removed because it deemed to be too confusing. According to Zemeckis and Gale, Biff erased himself from existence because he drastically altered his past (becoming a rich and corrupt mogul), which ultimately resulted in his death at the hands of his second wife, Lorraine (Marty's mother) sometime in the mid-1990s. As his death in the 1990s precedes his visible presence in 2015, once he returns to 2015 he has violated the rules of causal effect and is promptly erased from existence.

¹⁴ In *Back to the Future II*, Doc Brown does warn Marty that the consequences of time travel 'could create a time paradox, the results of which could cause a chain reaction that would unravel the very fabric of the space-time continuum and destroy the entire universe. Granted that is a worst case scenario and the destruction might in fact be very localised, to merely our own galaxy'. However, as this is conjecture, and one of only two possibilities that the Doc proposes, it is fundamentally different from Wells's cosmological dying sun. However, while the effect on the space-time continuum is stressed throughout, there is a repeated return to localisation, and Hill Valley in particular, felt throughout the diegetic universe of the *Back to the Future* trilogy.

¹⁵ The Horatio Alger myth is the classic American 'rags-to-riches' success story, made popular by author Horatio Alger Jr. following the American Civil War. Alger's protagonists work hard to better themselves and realise the modern American Dream by achieving financial security and upward mobility (most of Alger's characters ascend to middle class status rather than wealth). President Reagan was a recipient of the Horatio Alger Award from the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans in 1969.

¹⁶ Throughout the trilogy, it is often hinted at that Marty's future maybe tinged with failure. Despite overcoming the events of *Back to the Future* and significantly improving his and his family's life at its conclusion, *Back to the Future II* and *Back to the Future III* introduce the notion of Marty's temper (at being called a 'chicken') and insecurity as a young man—we are informed in *Back to the Future II* that he will be pressured into a drag race that results in a collision with a Rolls Royce and costs him his music career in the near future. It is only when the DeLorean is destroyed (and when he overcomes his temper and opts out of the drag race) that Marty has the ability to see the future as an open space of possibility—Doc tells him that 'the future is whatever you make it'—and, having matured from his time travelling, Marty is now enabled to make the right decisions (and avoid such failures).

¹⁷ The Three Mile Island accident was a partial nuclear meltdown in one of the two reactors in Dauphin County, Philadelphia on March 28, 1979. The accident occurred when the cooling system malfunctioned due to human and mechanical error, resulting in the release of radioactive vapour into the environment. It is considered the worst nuclear accident on American soil, with the clean-up concluding in 1993. Following the accident, there was significant pressure to address nuclear safety standards in the United States. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine is considered to be the single worst nuclear disaster in human history, with 31 deaths during the disaster and a permanent exclusion zone due to radioactive contamination.

¹⁸ In the storyboard for this abandoned sequence, Marty is referred to as a 'commie' when he is observed on the active nuclear test site, in keeping with 1950s Red Scare paranoia. 'Back to the Future Nuclear Test Site Ending Storyboard Sequence' (with commentary by writer producer Bob Gale). *Back to the Future* special featurette. Blu Ray release. 2010.

¹⁹ The coining of the term ‘Steampunk’ is attributed to author K. W. Jeter (author of *Morlock Night* [1979] and *Infernal Devices* [1987]), whose works explore reimagined Victorian-set fantasies, alongside authors Tim Powers (*The Anubis Gates* [1983]) and James Blaylock (*Homunculus* [1986]), which gave rise to the formal recognition of the subgenre and its aesthetics. This neologism is applied to fantasies of Victorian technology and retro-futuristic invention, alongside an explicit pastiche of Victorian culture, art and fashion. Jeter wrote to the science fiction magazine *Locus* (April 1987), describing himself, Powers and Blaylock as ‘steam-punks’—a variant on the 1980s science-fiction subgenre ‘Cyberpunk’. See Jeter’s archived letter to *Locus* magazine. Web. 18 Sep. 2015. <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2011/03/birth-of-steampunk.html>. Steampunk works tend to be set in the Victorian past or in the American Wild West, a postapocalyptic or fantasy landscape reliant on steam technology. It is interesting to note that in Jeter’s 1979 novel, the Morlocks use the time machine to travel back in time to ravage Victorian London.

²⁰ This is especially true in *Back to the Future II* and *Back to the Future III*, when moments of ‘historic’ importance (which are changed due to Marty and Doc’s intervention) are situated around the construction/rejuvenation/narrative space of the Clock Tower Courthouse. In *Back to the Future II*, Marty and Doc foil Griff’s plans of robbery—which we are informed will ‘set in place a chain reaction which will destroy the [McFly] family’—which concludes with a hoverboard chase and damage to the Clock Tower shopping mall in 2015 (with its historic and still frozen, preserved clock face). In *Back to the Future III*, Marty is hanged and almost killed by Buford Tannen outside the Courthouse upon his arrival to the Old West; he ventures back to 1885 to rescue Doc, who would have been shot by Tannen at the Courthouse Festival had Marty not intervened. At this festival, we see the starting and dedication of the clock to the people of Hill Valley, including Marty and Doc’s photograph being taken with it, affirming its significance not only as the time-piece of the trilogy, but also as ground zero for all of Hill Valley’s historic events.

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