

## Introduction: Contexts and Concepts of Time in the Mass Media

A man steps into an ornate machine and is spirited away to adventure in the far future. In another world, an alarm clock rings and yesterday begins again. In a library, a man meets his future wife for the first time, but she has been visited by older versions of him since childhood. Time travel has been a popular trope in the mass media since its early days and in recent years these stories have become increasingly prominent in films (*About Time* [2013], *X-Men: Days of Future Past* [2014], *Edge of Tomorrow* [2014]), television series (*Doctor Who* [1963-1989, 1996 and 2005-present], *Lost* [2004-2010]), comics and graphic novels (*The Return of Bruce Wayne* [2010], *Watchmen* [1986]) and video games (*Mortal Kombat* [2011], *Pac-Man: Adventures in Time* [2000], *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* [2000]). For, the fact is, we are obsessed with the idea of time travel and the possibilities it offers us to venture into the past, to meet iconic figures and amend mistakes, or to travel to the future to discover our place in history.

However, definitions of time travel as it appears in media texts are difficult to pin down. It has been thought of as a genre, a subgenre, a motif and a narrative device (and indeed the authors represented in this volume take contrasting approaches). It shifts between fantasy

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and science fiction, magic and technology. Iconography and tropes are disparate and even the presence of a time machine is not always necessary. Some of the various means of transportation through time have been compiled in fig. 1 and they impact upon our perception of the genre for time travel can be facilitated by the supernatural, technology or through unexplained phenomena. However, even when a machine is used in time travel, it may still not be classed as science fiction. For instance, the use of the television remote control in

*Pleasantville* (1998) lacks a scientific rationale and leans instead on something akin to magic, which predisposes the film towards the fantasy mode. Furthermore, time travel frequently makes appearances within other generic traditions as disparate as romance (*Somewhere in Time* [1980], *Portrait of Jennie* [1948]), the western (*Back to the Future Part III* [1990]), comedy (*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* [1989], *Les Visiteurs* [1993]) and the musical (two versions of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* [1927 and 1949], *DuBarry Was a Lady* [1943]).

Of course, these problems are not specific to time travel as genre is a notoriously fluid concept. Many media products blend genres and, in some cases, texts may be marketed through a particular genre for reasons that have little to do with their content (Altman 1999). Many early films, such as *Metropolis* (1927), were reclassified in both industrial discourses and the public imagination as science fiction when the genre became better established. As David Blanke's essay on the films of Cecil B. De Mille in this volume highlights, this process is ongoing and there remain many time travel texts in the annals of media history that may yet be reclaimed for the genre. As such, while time travel is not unique in its ability to slip between and merge with different genre classifications, it is perhaps best for us not to attempt to solidify it through a totalising definition. Instead, this collection leaves the question open to further investigation and offers multiple perspectives on the issue through its various chapters. Each of the authors whose work appears here handles the question of time travel's generic status in a manner that suits their own line of enquiry. Sometimes this is done explicitly, sometimes implicitly. We invite readers to sample the range of approaches that are on offer in the hope that they shed light on the various means of addressing time travel that are available to media scholars.

Of course, the questions raised by time travel go beyond narrative and genre. The plasticity of time and its relationship with storytelling has proven to be fruitful territory for

media producers, but media forms themselves can also be thought of in relation to time travel. We could, for example, ask how the act of turning a page, clicking a mouse, fast forwarding and scrolling back engages a media user with the flow of time. These various means of manipulating texts highlight the specificity of the relationship between various media forms and issues of temporality. So, for instance, Doane (2002) shows how time in early cinema emerged as a symptom of modernity and Stewart (2002) deconstructs changes in the ways temporality is represented in analogue and digital cinematic time. Comics, developed in parallel with cinema, used similar editing devices to articulate time, including montage, flashbacks and cuts (Eisner 2008; McCloud 1994). Both, however, express time differently; cinema relies on the illusions of movement and duration produced through the display of 24 frames per second (although even this seemingly rigid rule of the cinematic apparatus' temporality has been malleable), whereas in comics, time is expressed in the juxtaposition of panels and through the braiding of themes through the page and meta panel (Groensteen 2007, McCloud 1994; Eisner 2008). The arrival of recording and digital technology transformed the television into a time machine, as noted by Sky in their promotion of the Skybox S12. Video games, too, manipulate time, enabling their audiences to relive and replay a narrative until they achieve perfection, much like the protagonist in *Groundhog Day* (1993). In this sense, both the gamer and the game develop different but equally complex relationships to time - a phenomenon noted in several of the chapters in this volume. Media forms are thus interlaced with issues of the representation and experience of time, but each format gives voice to these concerns in different ways.

With this dual focus on media texts and forms in mind, our aim in producing this collection is to prompt wide-ranging debate on a topic that, despite its popularity, has garnered little sustained research and academic comment. There have been edited collections devoted to individual single franchises, such as *Doctor Who* (Lewis and Smithka 2010;

Butler 2007; Hansen, 2010; Layton 2012; Decker 2013; Newman 2005), *Back to the Future* (Cooke 1999; Ní Fhlainn 2010; Shail & Stoate, 2010), *La Jetée* (Harbord 2009) and *The Terminator* (French 1996). There have also been occasional chapters or sections devoted to time travel in edited collections (Redmond 2004; Rickman 2004; Kuhn 1990; Lewis 1976) and chapters in monographs (Schneider 2009; Penley 1991; Sobchack 1987) which make excellent contributions to the debate on time travel. Much of the existing literature revolves around a relatively narrow range of concerns, such as the narrative paradoxes of time travel (Rickman 2004; Rascaroli 2001; Penley 2004; Lewis 1976), feminism (Grosz 2005) connections between the time traveller's present crisis and the resolution of the journey (Gordon 2004; Penley 2004), the traveller as tourist (Bignell 2004) and the carnivalesque (Dimitrakaki 2002). However, the only work to address the full breadth of time travel as a cross-media phenomenon in a sustained manner is Wittenberg's excellent, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (2013). Wittenberg argues that time travel stories enable not only an exploration of narrative experimentation but also an interrogation of social, philosophical and political issues. These are recurring themes in this collection too, which also aims to take up Wittenberg's broad view across the range of media formats in which time travel appears. For this collection this includes film, television, comic books and graphic novels, and video games.

However, in this introduction we have a slightly different approach to Wittenberg as we explore the ways time travel was constructed through temporal discourses. The following sections thus offer a brief history of time travel, identifying its precursors in antiquity and describing the ways it emerged through changing cultural practices of spectatorship, time, and technology. In doing so, we seek to explore how time travel narratives appeared in different national and regional cultures and their relationship to these contexts. This introduction concludes by tracing the themes and tropes identified within this discursive

analysis of time and time travel in the chapters of this collection, where they are developed further.

### **Precursors of Time Travel: Re-creation, Re-enactment, Dislodgement and Projection**

Many authors writing about the cultural and religious aspects of time draw a distinction between cyclical time in ancient and rural cultures and linear time. Cyclical notions of time, as described by Eliade (1971), are expressed through the rituals of religion and their relationship to myth. For Eliade, rituals serve not only as a means of recreating, invoking or performing religious or mythic time, but also of transporting participants back to the sacred time. For example, in Catholic doctrine, the bread and wine used in the sacrament of the Eucharist are not simply representations of the body and blood of Jesus, but become, through transubstantiation, his actual body and blood. Such rituals allow time to be imagined as circuitous and looping, bringing people back to sacred times through the rituals of the present.

Of course, there are other ways in which time can be understood and Rayment-Pickard (2002), for example, has identified four different types of time in biblical discourse: catastrophic (C time), apocalyptic (A time), kairic (K time) and prophetic (P time). C time is the ways time affects the body through age, decay and the destructive end of time (42). A time is a time of waiting for the moment of revelation (65). K time is the concept, 'of history as a series of moments each potentially complete in itself' (87). Kairic time enables us to make sense of history through iconic moments - the death of a particular figure, a battle, an epoch - and is significant in drama from the Renaissance onwards, as noted below. Prophetic time is spent 'questing for higher goals, greater achievements, new discoveries' (110) and is consequently aspirational, often seeing a hero attempting to mould time to create, rather than wait for, the future. Rayment-Pickard's ideas, while rooted in a Christian tradition of

temporality, mark a starting point for our own analysis of the development of time travel in oral storytelling, rural cultures and modern mass media. They sit alongside notions of ritual and cyclical time as indicators of complex notions of temporality at play prior to the formal emergence of time travel literature, which is often dated to the publication of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in 1895. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that time travel texts tend to slip between fantasy and science fiction, since elements of these mythic and religious understandings of time underpinned the development of this narrative tradition and recur in many modern stories.

If time travel as a narrative device is often seen as an invention of the late 19th century, but is prefigured by a long history of temporal play in storytelling, it is perhaps useful at this stage to offer a suggestion of the different ways in which people represented their experience of time from antiquity to the end of the Classical period through folklore, myth and performance. This can be broken down into four categories: re-creation, re-enactment, dislodgement and projection. The first two, re-creation and re-enactment can be considered as forms of repetitive time, based as they are on the notion of resurrecting past moments in the present. However, the former is predicated upon myth and the latter on secular representations and contexts. Re-creation, which we have encountered above in cyclical time, brings the present into the past through ritual, while re-enactment returns the past to the present through dramatisation. Projection, on the other hand, offers a line of sight through time, for example where a prophecy, an auger or an oracle foretells the future or elucidates a problem of the past. Prophecy offered one means of discussing the future in biblical and Medieval times, but it has also been accused of preventing the development of other ways of reflecting on the future that were to emerge in the late seventeenth century (Alkon 1987). These three concepts are often constructed through religious and spiritual discourses, but perhaps much more familiar in modern storytelling is dislodgement, where an individual

steps outside of time, where two different time zones coexist, or where an individual moves into a different time state from the rest of the narrative world. This is certainly evident in contemporary popular culture, for example in films where virtual reality allows the user to experience one time zone through technology that simultaneously signals their presence in another. However, dislodgement is not exclusively a modern phenomenon and also has a long history that can be traced via the depiction of limbo and Heaven as places where time runs differently than it does on Earth.

Re-enactment has been particularly significant in the development of time travel stories due to its reliance on narrative, which bring tales of and from the past into the present through its two key traditions, oral storytelling/folktales and drama. While both narrative forms thus often represent a journey into the past for their audiences, many fairy tales and legends of the oral storytelling tradition also present time as a fluid concept. This is commonly seen through an encounter with the supernatural that results in characters becoming dislodged in time. Thus Sleeping Beauty experiences 100 years of slumber, while the monk listening to the song of a magical bird and the traveller foolish enough to accompany the fairies under the hill might be there for one hour and emerge 100 years later. This fluid construction of time in folklore is not confined to the West. In Japanese folklore of the eighth century, a fisherman travels to the palace of the Dragon God beneath the sea and returns to find centuries have elapsed. Such disparities of time also appear in religious texts in the Hindu, and Islamic traditions. In these tales the dream or altered state is a significant element in the ability of a character's ability to manipulate time. For instance, in the *Mahabharata* King Revaita meets the creator in Heaven and, upon his return, discovers many ages have passed. Muhammad ascends into Heaven and Jerusalem on his *Buraq*<sup>2</sup>

and returns on the same night. The development of theatre from the Church enabled a different type of experience of earlier times in which re-creation of the sacred gave way to re-

enactment of K time, in which the concept of individual historic moments became significant. The Renaissance saw performances of certain events in Classical or recent history, such as Julius Caesar's assassination or, in Britain, The Wars of the Roses. These re-enactments, which represented a form of drama and often propaganda, enabled audiences to connect the political and cultural concerns of the present with the past.

This replicates the ideological functions of time travel in contemporary narratives for, as suggested above, sedimented traces of precursive practices in culture and storytelling influence contemporary time travel narratives. Indeed, all four types of antique time can be seen in time travel media texts. Re-creation has been discussed at length in relation to films such as *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), *La Jetee* (1962) and *Groundhog Day*. In these films the time loop, which sees a specific period of time repeating over and over again, functions to re-create cyclical time and the mythic moment of creation and devastation. Time travel stories have also shown a clear tendency towards re-enactment through the (often deliberately inaccurate) reconstruction of historical moments on film. For example, *Doctor Who* has seen the Doctor visiting the siege of Troy ('The Myth Makers' [1965]) and the destruction of Pompeii ('The Fires of Pompeii' [2008]), while *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* sees the titular time travelers meeting Billy the Kid, Socrates and Sigmund Freud, amongst others. These productions serve to make historical moments available to the time travelers, but also to re-create them for their audiences. While projection is evident in its traditional form through prophecy in many recent media texts, such as *Minority Report* (2002), it is also perhaps one way of understanding flashbacks, which have been used in cinema since at least D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* in 1916. As noted above, dislodgement is particularly common in modern time travel texts, since transporting characters between different eras is itself essentially an act of dislodgement, but it is also evident in time loop films such as *Source Code*, *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Groundhog Day*. As such, time travel is a narrative trope that



can trace its roots much further back than Wells' *The Time Machine* and which draws on storytelling traditions from antiquity, biblical discourse, rituals and myth.

### **Time, Space and Knowledge from the Sixteenth Century to the Modern Age**

While contemporary time travel media texts clearly draw on historical conceptualisations of temporality, they also make use of narrative tropes and discourses of modernity that first emerged in earlier eras. Alkon (1987) documents a wide range of literatures from the late seventeenth century, beginning with Jacques Guttin's, *Epigone: histoire du siècle futur* (1659), that tell stories of times yet to come. Félix Bodin's *Le Roman de l'avenir* (1834), Samuel Maddon's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733), Louis Sébastien Mercier's *The Year 2440* (1770) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) all projected ideas about what the future might hold. While this in itself does not necessarily constitute time travel, Mercier's novel does see people and diplomatic papers transported between time zones, though this is not the key concern of the book. In some senses these texts belong to a prehistory of time travel literature, toying with the same ideas but not yet realising them fully.

Alkon suggests that these proto-science fiction texts are the product a time when the technologies and philosophies that would lead to science fiction, and hence time travel as it most commonly appears today, had not yet emerged. This was to come in the late nineteenth century, when technology, travel and shifting ideas about the nature of work encouraged people in industrialised societies to conceive of time as a segmented, measured phenomenon. Jameson (2002) has suggested that notions of cyclical time based on ritual and myth diminished to some extent after the Enlightenment, when they were undermined by the more mundane rigors of timetables, schedules and factory shifts. As such, time was instead imagined as being compartmentalised, or divided into a series of discrete segments (seconds, minutes, hours and so forth) that are experience in a linear manner. Clocks and accurate time

devices were developed, as was the notion of a fixed spatial point (Greenwich) in the late eighteenth century as the basis for measuring time. Railway timetables demanded that disparate communities conformed to a national timetable, doing away with the slight variations that had previously existed in local records of the time of day. Urbanisation and the requisite decline of seasonal, agricultural employment necessitated a demarcation between work time from private time. These shifts produced an image of time as a segmented, fixed and linear phenomenon.

In turn, this change produced new modes of spectatorship which would prove crucial to the development of time travel texts in later years. In tandem with the rise of the concept of work time, leisure or free time emerged in the late eighteenth century as a space in which one was free to follow one's interests, improve oneself and, in some cases, travel or go on holiday. From the mid eighteenth century, rich folk traveled on the Grand Tour to become more educated, while the democratisation of travel developed during the nineteenth century, when middle and working class people visited spas or foreign destinations (Inglis 2000). This was facilitated by better transport systems and the founding of companies like Thomas Cook in 1871, which organised trips to foreign and exotic destinations. Historical sites such as Pompeii and Knossos were excavated and tourists were able to step back into the past lives of cultures thought long dead. Meanwhile, when back at home in the cities and urban environments of Western Europe, some people were able to use leisure time to watch the world go by. In Paris, this led to the development of the concept of the *flâneur*, an individual, usually male, who could observe the life of the city's inhabitant but who was, himself, simply as one of the crowd and was consequently all but invisible.

With these notions of passive spectatorship, tourism and rapid development in place, the conditions were ripe for the emergence of time travel literature, which often posed the traveler as one who used new technologies to take trips to and witness other societies in the

far future or the past. As tourists in places of historical significance (be they sites of our own history or of imagined societies that are yet to come), time travelers are sites of confluence in these emerging discourses. In this sense, it is possible to think of H. G. Wells' nameless wanderer as the arch *flâneur*. While the historical precursors of modern time travel narratives can be found among ancient rituals, myths and modes of storytelling, these discourses of temporality were shaped into the modern concept of time travel amidst the changing perceptions of time produced through the processes of industrialisation that characterised the nineteenth century. The next section shows how the themes discussed above, along with scientific philosophy and technological advances were brought together to produce the narrative fascinations of time travel in twentieth and twenty-first century media texts.

### **Modernity, Spectatorship, Science**

As these new perspectives on temporality, spectatorship and modernity took hold and conceptualisations of time based on myth and ritual declined, time travel stories began to emerge that marked a shift away from magic and towards technology as the means of temporal transportation. At the end of the nineteenth century Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in the Court of King Arthur* (1889) both relied on the supernatural to facilitate their journeys through time, but there were also contemporary texts, such as Edward Page Mitchell's "The Clock that went Backward" (1881), that preferred to locate time travel within a technological sphere. While this short story is one of the earliest examples of time travel's move towards science fiction and away from fantasy, it was virtually ignored. As noted above, time travel narratives are now most widely thought to have come of age with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, which was published fourteen years after Mitchell's story.

Wells' novel not only established the technological time machine as the defining element of time travel science fiction, but it also borrowed from and critiqued the

technological, entertainment and spectatorship discourses of the late nineteenth century discussed above. *The Time Machine* bore the influences of early cinematic discourse through cinemacity, the Victorian tendency 'to conceptualize and represent the world in terms of moving photographic images that culminated in the [Lumiere Brothers'] *cinématographe* apparatus in 1893' (Williams 2009: 347). From the mid-nineteenth century, technology enabled the development of different types of entertainment, such as projector shows, travelling fairs, early forms of cinema and dioramas. The diorama, amongst other proto-cinematic devices, was of great significance to the development of time travel narratives, for it set in place a new type of spectatorship, which in turn drew on those popularised through emergent forms of tourism, based on the mediation of perception in what Friedberg (1993) describes as a 'mobilized virtual gaze' (2). For Friedberg, 'The virtual gaze is not a direct perception but a received perception mediated through representation...a gaze that travels in an imaginary *flânerie* through an image elsewhere and an image elsewhere.' (Friedberg 1993, 2-3). The virtual mobilized gaze was shared by both cinema and the time machine, which emerged within two years of each other.

Cinema's manipulation of time and the gaze through techniques such as flashbacks and jump cuts signals to some writers its similarity to a time machine (Coates 1987; Rascaroli 2001). While this connection is tantalising in relation to George Pal's adaptation of the book to film in 1960, the novel itself displays a fascination with the same Victorian concepts of spectatorship that connect cinema, travel and the *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, as noted above, looks but does not act. The cosmopolitan visits places as a tourist, but does not ultimately have any emotional engagement with the indigenes they meet. Similarly, the time traveler frequently does not engage with the indigenes, not from disinterest, but out of necessity. The grandfather paradox, proposed in *Le Voyageur Imprudent* (Barjavel 1943) and discussed in a number of the chapters in this collection, notably Effington's, is a popular means of justifying and

sometimes critiquing a protagonist's disengagement with the societies visited in time travel texts. It asks what would happen if a traveler to the past were to accidentally kill their own grandfather, causing the protagonist never to have been born and, therefore, for the grandfather to still be alive, which in turn would result in the birth of the protagonist who would go on to slay his relative once again in a never-ending and nonsensical loop. As such, issues of regulation enter into time travel discourse and are present in franchises such as *Back to the Future*, leading to a situation where the travellers are often forced into a situation akin to that of the *flâneur* or the cosmopolitan tourist, who are unwilling to engage with the environments they pass through. As such, Wells' protagonist hero observes, ponders and theorises the division of the human race into the brutish Morlocks and the dispassionate Eloi, but does little to challenge the exploitative social structure of this future world, embedded as he is within a time travel story that displays the hallmarks of the Victorian understanding of spectatorship, travel, visuality, technology and time.

## **Conclusions**

The brief explanation of the development of time travel fiction presented above is, of course, only one way in which one might understand such texts, and the essays of this collection trace their own approaches to such texts through a range of theoretical and empirical traditions. As such, we intend that this volume serves not as a definitive guide to the genre (or sub-genre, motif, trope) but as a starting point for the development and exploration of debates about the issues it raises. We have only been able to sketch some general outlines of the key areas of discussion, but the papers in this collection expand upon much of this material in more detail. The chapters have consequently been grouped thematically. The first focuses on philosophical and theoretical approaches to time travel, the second on the genre's place in different national and historical contexts, the third on its relationship to media formats and narrative, and the fourth on its key tropes and their

relationship to the generic cycles in which time travel has played a significant role. These sections are followed by a number of detailed case studies of significant ways that various television series and films treat time travel. Finally, the appendices include a range of material that, we hope, will prove useful to readers who are interested in following up the ideas encountered here through further research. I think here we should briefly note the sections are by no means definitive and there are themes interwoven throughout the collection such as play and ludic time, media as time travel models, tropes such as the flaneur, HG Wells, museums and fashion (consumerism)

Normal practise dictates that an introduction such as this should conclude by sketching out the contents of the individual essays that follow. However, in the spirit of the book's theme we hope readers will fast forward to our brief introductory comments presented before each section, where this material can be located.

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<sup>1</sup> Our notion of the fantastic is informed by Todorov's definition, 'In a world which is indeed our world...a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses...and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us...The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. For once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.' (1973, 25)

<sup>2</sup> A horse.