

## Time in Film

Besides being groundbreaking in that it was the first major film to depict an alternate universe entirely created with puppets, the 1982 Jim Henson and Frank Oz production *The Dark Crystal* touched on some active philosophical issues. The main character Jen describes writing as "words that stay" (Henson & Odell, 1982). While oral traditions permeate human history, as early as 3200 BC (Archaeological Institute of America, 2016) and possibly as early as 10,000 BC (Neuendorf, 2015) the written word has influenced communication. Estimates vary wildly depending on the source, however, most of these early communications were pictograms - cuneiform and hieroglyphs - pictures used to express meaning. Even earlier are simple cave drawings - perhaps as early as 40,000 years ago - simple still frames of animals (Clottes, 2019). Therefore, from this point of view one could argue that the roots of film predate even the written word.

But regardless of the medium, the initial purpose of any sort of record, be it art, literature, film or a shopping list is to record an idea or a moment for later use or reflection. As the song goes, "time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin' Into the future " (Miller, 1977) and while our perceptions of time may change ("time flies when you're having fun") actual time itself marches relentlessly forward at a predictable pace. We can't stop it or reverse it; we can't slow it down or speed it up. But what we can do is preserve it and vicariously relive it. A historical record, even a written one, is essentially a sort of a time machine. We can get an idea of how life was when Jane Austen wrote about her village communities or the hardships of Thomas Hardy's Industrial Revolution and in film, with modern advancements and techniques (particularly computer technology) we can recreate this time in the past. Furthermore, film itself transcends time and we can see how things were presented at a time in the past with clarity that is more precise than literature and more accurate than memory. For the purpose of this essay I have chosen four temporal concepts that I would like to examine in terms of film.

Before Peter Sellers found fame as Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther (Blake Edwards - Director, 1963) or solved the code for the CRM-114 discriminator in *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick - Director, 1964) he was working with British compatriots Harry Secombe and Spike Milligan on the successful satirical radio show called *The Goon Show* (1951-1960). One particular episode, *The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler (Of Bexhill-On-Sea)* (Milligan, 1954), depicts a madman roaming the English countryside throwing batter puddings randomly at people during World War II. Obviously, no such thing ever happened. Nor was the "land" part of "Hollywoodland" shot down during a dogfight as suggested in Steven Spielberg's humorous retrospective *1941* (1979)<sup>1</sup>. These things are set in our world, in our time but never actually happened. It is as though there was an

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<sup>1</sup> The current Hollywood sign actually read "Hollywoodland" originally and was a promotion for a housing development; the current subdivision just south of the Hollywood Hills is called Hollywoodland. But it didn't lose the "land" because it was shot down by an enraged John Belushi; it was removed as part of a compromise to restore the sign in 1949 (Hollywood Sign Trust, 2018).

alternate universe in which the Japanese did attack Los Angeles or there was some lunatic running around hurtling English cuisine at unsuspecting moor-wanderers.

Any fictional film in a contemporary setting can be viewed as an alternate dimension of the time in which it was made. Robert K. Weiss and Tracy Tormé (son of famous lounge singer Mel Tormé), explored this concept in more details with their TV show *Sliders* (1995-2000) in which the characters would pass through a portal to an alternate universe where "it's the same year, and you're the same person but everything else is different" (Season 3 Intro, 1997). Before Weiss and Tormé, Gene Roddenberry showed a mirror world in the original *Star Trek* episode *Mirror, Mirror* (Marc Daniels - Director, 1967) where the Federation was an oppressive empire. The entire reboot of the franchise (J.J. Abrams - Director, 2009) starts with a time traveler (Eric Bana - fellow Australian and "a remarkably troubled Romulan" - Orci & Kurtzman, 2007) changing the past and creating an alternate dimension; a handy technique to allow the writers to explore different plots without being in danger of contradicting original storylines. Even earlier, Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) toyed with the alternate universe motif in the episode *The Parallel* (Alan Crosland Jr - Director, 1964) where an astronaut returns from a mission after a mishap to discover the world slightly different from the one he came from.

I enjoyed *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey & Rodney Rothman - Directors, 2018) more than I thought I would. It contained visually stimulating animation and a gripping plotline which included, you guessed it, a parallel universe and featured the obscure *Spider-Ham* (satirized as *Spider-Pig* in *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-)) - a bizarre comic book creation; a spider that was bitten by a radio-active pig (Riesman, 2019) - that could never exist in our real world. This is the first temporal concept: the alternate universe and, as you can see, it keeps coming up, almost as its own genre. Time is the same, but it is as though it moved along a different track somewhere in our past. It is obvious in *Sliders* or *Star Trek* or *The Twilight Zone* and it's entertaining to think of any narrative film as an alternate history.

The second concept that I would like to look at is the idea of predicting the future. Along with machinery, the Industrial Revolution and its subsequent inventions influenced science fiction and fueled the imaginations of storytellers and industrialists alike (Franklin, n.d.). H.G. Wells sent his "Time Traveller" (seriously, in the book he has no actual name and is referred to only as such) barreling eight hundred, thousand or so years into the future (Wells, 1898). In the book we see the Time Traveller deduce that the horrible, underworld Morlocks are the descendants of the downstairs servants; a prediction consistent with British society at the time in which H.G. Wells lived and wrote. In the 1960 film adaptation (George Pal - Director), with Rod Taylor (another fellow Australian) as the Time Traveller<sup>2</sup>, the Morlocks are underworld creatures evolved from humans who went underground to escape radiation caused by war; a prediction consistent with the Cold War at the time when the film was made.

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<sup>2</sup> Cast as H. George Wells. H.G. Wells full name, of course, is Herbert George Wells.

Perhaps the hardest problem in any futuristic scenario is what I term the "predictability barrier." Similar to the meteorological concept, there is a point at which any guess at an accurate prediction of the future is simply impossible to make due to the same factors that Jeff Goldblum's character in *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg - Director, 1993) mentions: chaos theory - small fluctuations compound in unforeseeable ways. Perhaps H.G. Wells realized this when he set his *Time Machine* story 800,000 years in the future. With such a time deficit between the story's conception and his final future, it is unlikely that anyone is going to do any fact checking or that his memory will be held accountable. Likewise, the original *Star Trek*, set in the late 23rd Century, and its subsequent movies and series defy historical scrutiny from anyone involved in its creation and who should "know better."

But sometimes even the "far-flung future" can be closer than you think. When Stanley Kubrick made *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, 2000 was thirty-two years away and, had the space program progressed at the same rate instead of being cancelled, his vision may have been accurate. But the vision was within a human lifespan so now we can look at the film and, while much of it is timeless, we can notice that the stewardess is wearing a pillbox hat or that the space shuttle service is being run by Pan Am - a company that has been defunct since 1991; nine years before Kubrick's 2000 (Linares, 2016).

Films within a living memory set themselves up to scrutiny. In 2015 Marty McFly emerged from 1985 into a world in which cars flew and a dehydrated pizza could fit into a coin purse. The second *Back to the Future* film (Robert Zemeckis - Director, 1989) holds up quite well to some historical scrutiny - while we're not wearing two ties or have jackets that dry themselves automatically, flat-screen TVs are now the norm and can double as picture phones.

Whether it is someone travelling into the future or simply a futuristic setting, the idea of flying cars often comes up. Apart from Dr Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) outfitting his signature time machine DeLorean with hover apparatus, we see flying cars in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) which is set just this year. Which means that we're also missing out on genetically engineered slaves and the colonization of other planets. Perhaps Luc Besson was closer, and we have to wait until the mid-23rd century rolls around. *The Fifth Element* (1997) also depicts flying traffic and interstellar travel but takes the much safer far-flung future approach. Somewhere in between is *Lost in Space* (Steven Hopkins - Director, 1998) which sort of learnt the lesson by setting its futuristic date to 2058 instead of 1997, when the Jupiter II was launched in the original series (1965-1968) and when production for the film took place.

The idea of flying vehicles in futuristic films isn't new. *Just Imagine* (David Butler - Director, 1930) depicts the populace of New York travelling in flying vehicles which look like airplanes with propellers embedded in the wings. It starts by looking fifty years into the past (1880) and comparing "modern" developments and from there "extrapolating" what fifty years in the future, or 1930, might look like; a 1930 where a complete meal is the size of a gummy ("the roast beef was a little tough"), people have

numbers instead of names and babies can be purchased from vending machines. Again, fashions are tainted by their time - the Moon (which the filmmakers were too ignorant<sup>3</sup> to know does not have a breathable atmosphere) is inhabited by "Amazons" dressed in *Art Deco* fashions.

The subject of characters having numbers instead of names shifts us into a subsection of futuristic film called the dystopian future, and the third category of temporal film I will be looking at. Just like J-21 and LN-18 in *Just Imagine*, THX also had a simple designation, in George Lucas's film school project *THX 1138* (1971). But unlike David Butler's future, the world of *THX 1138* is oppressive and humans are treated as tools. George Orwell probably epitomized the dysfunctional, oppressive society in his classic book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; a scenario that was accurately recreated in the film adaptation by Michael Radford (1984), featuring master thespian Richard Burton in his last film role (a chilling swan song). Whether or not *1984* is a depiction of the future is open to debate: the very nature of the Ministry of Truth casts doubt on everything, including which year it is. Again, based on the atmosphere of England in 1948, following the Second World War and during the infancy of the Cold War, it was a plausible future. Now, in hindsight, it isn't (nor was it in 1984 when Radford made his film version, no doubt created solely because the year was, indeed 1984).

*The Hunger Games* films, also an adaptation from literature, while a presentation of a dystopian society set in the future, is heavily based on ancient Roman society. Even the key names are Roman and the very essence of the storyline - a fight to the death for the amusement of a heartless, hedonistic elite - is a direct parallel of Roman gladiator fights (although the *mise-en-scène* is either a more modern, lush decadent environment or cold, brutalist architecture more akin to *1984*). President Snow's dictatorship reflects Roman Imperial rule. From this point of view, *The Hunger Games* can be seen as a parallel universe; one where Rome never fell, similar to Season 2, Episode 25 of the original *Star Trek* series (Ralph Senensky - Director, 1968) which depicts a major television network broadcasting news of slave revolts and live sporting events of fights to the death.

Many films show societal regression and devolution - *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross - Director, 2012), *Avatar* (James Cameron 2009), *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven - Director, 1997) - pretty much any futuristic film with a militaristic bent depicts humankind acting in a barbaric manner, denying evolution. *The Terminator* (James Cameron - Director, 1984) pivots between advancement and devolution - it is our own advancement that causes our destruction and we are reduced to a devolved state.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "ignorant" is here used in its literal sense, meaning unknowing or unaware, and is not intended to carry a value judgement; *Just Imagine*, while a wildly inaccurate prediction of the future, is still an entertaining insight into people's vision of the future, in the past. A similar futuristic, historic perspective can be seen in any of the Tom Paris / Captain Proton episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* (1985-2001) - where the space faring ensign recreates scenes from a show from the 20s and 30s, largely based on *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* - we are watching a scenario set in the future of a man interacting in a setting in the past based on an alternate future imagined from the past.

Disney / Pixar also plays on the theme of our advancement causing our destruction in *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton - Director, 2009) but instead of humanity being left to fend off an army of intelligent robots, the robots are empathetic and do not forget their purpose for humanity. Instead, humanity simply picks up and abandons the mess that it has made - a scenario far more consistent with actual history. Furthermore, the CGI not only allows for photorealism in the cinematography, it allows for such absurd and foreboding visualizations as mammoth mountains of refuse, an interstellar cruise ship and space dwellers with extraordinarily high BMIs.

Regardless of your perception of the future or preferred futuristic film, predicting the future is fraught with danger as *Blade Runner* and *Back to the Future* demonstrated. How to deal with such a situation? Easy. Simply ignore it. *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve - 2017) simply acts as though the original world of 2019 was true. Similarly, *Escape from L.A.* (John Carpenter - Director, 1996) has Kurt Russell's Snake Plissken in a futuristic Los Angeles, set several years after his epic escape from New York in "1997", only a year after the actual film *Escape from L.A.* was made. New York was never a maximum security prison but John Carpenter simply didn't seem to care. His world is different to ours and *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter - Director, 1981) was not a prediction, so much as, again, an alternate history.

If you want some accuracy in your time travel movie then it's far safer to have your protagonists travel into the past, and this is the fourth and final concept that I will be examining. Again, not a new idea: Bing Crosby perhaps puts on the best performance in the 1949 production of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Tay Garnett - Director). Based on the book by Mark Twain, it is the story of a man who, inexplicably awakes in Medieval England. Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter met Billy the Kid, Napoleon and Joan of Arc, to name a few, in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Stephen Herek - Director, 1989). Both films are in danger of the same problem and handle it the same way.

Travelling into the past isn't completely safe; in any time travel story, one must consider the temporal paradox - if Bill and Ted go back in time and introduce themselves to historical figures or if Hank Martin convinces King Arthur that he's a mystic because he could predict an eclipse and pass it off as him hiding the sun, then that will change history and will have God-knows-what consequences to our reality, now. *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis - Director, 1985) plays with this idea directly. After Marty returns his father has realized his dream of being a successful science fiction author; a direct consequence of him standing up for himself in the 1955 in which Marty was present. The Twin Pines Mall becomes the Lone Pine Mall after Marty knocks one of the saplings down with the DeLorean when he enters 1955.

I know I'm not the only one who was irked that Biff managed to go back to 1955 and change the past to the point that he took complete control of the town and yet could go back to the same 2015 that he left in order to give himself the Almanac. In theory, once he gave the almanac to himself in 1955, the future would be changed, leaving Doc and Marty stranded in their 2015 (remember that Biff stole their DeLorean and now they would have no way back) if existing at all. Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg)

agrees with me and argues as much in *The Big Bang Theory* Season 8 Episode 5: *The Focus Attenuation* (Mark Cendrowski - Director, 2014). One would imagine something like *Connecticut Yankee* or *Bill and Ted* would be fraught with such dangers and they are, but the producers handled it in a very clever way. They completely ignored it. Such ideas are secondary. Again, one must consider the alternate history.

I'd like to conclude by presenting a couple of peripheral ideas. If the past is safer, how about someone from the past travelling into the future? Malcolm McDowell said that he was surprised to be chosen to play H.G. Wells, the aforementioned father of the Time Travel genre, in the film *Time After Time* (Nicholas Meyer - Director, 1979) (Weiner, n.d.). He and I agree that it's a special film as it turns the time travel concept on its head. By having H.G. Wells actually create a time machine and travel into the future (1979 at the time of the film's release) Meyer was able to present the same wonderment of the futuristic scenario and the character's reaction to it (like Single O in *Just Imagine*) but within the parameters of our reality.

And perhaps the final word should go to *Star Wars* (George Lucas - Director, 1977). Lucas created a futuristic story but set it in the past ("A long time ago") and divorces it from our reality ("in a galaxy far far away"). This gives him *carte blanche* to create any universe he wants in a medium that is limited only by his imagination.

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