

**“Face your future, fight your past”:
studying the time travel narrative as a genre
and as desire**

Abstract: This research discusses the fascination and popularity of time travel as a theme in popular culture, and in particular in film. Utilizing Rick Altman's 1999 semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, it is tested not only if the time travel narrative can be considered a genre in film, but also if it reveals insights on cultural and/or societal desires and fantasies.

Keywords: time travel, science fiction, metaphysical spatialization of time, desire, escapism, semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach.

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“Face your future, fight your past” is the tag line of film LOOPER (2012)

“I don't want to talk about time travel because if we start talking about it then we're going to be here all day talking about it, making diagrams with straws.”

-Older Joe, LOOPER (2012)¹

Barely two years ago, CERN, the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire, conducted a research showing that certain particles could travel faster than light. This would mean that these particles could move back and forth on the timescale. Basically, what CERN proved was the possibility to travel through time. Soon after, the whole world was turned upside down. Numerous articles, messages and discussions were dispersed over the Internet arguing about the relativity of time and the possibility of moving through time.² However, after many tests, the CERN laboratory unfortunately proved itself to be wrong: the particle was not traveling 60 billionths of a second faster than light, it was moving at the exact same speed.³ Thus, as CERN has once again proven: we cannot yet travel through time... But Superman can. In 1947, in one of the episodes of the comic book series, it was introduced that Superman can use his speed to move faster than light and thereby break through the time barrier. Traveling through time has since been a recurrent theme in the Superman comics.⁴ Many series of other comic book heroes such as Wonder Woman and Batman have, over the years, also touched upon practices of traveling through time. Whereas Superman can make himself into a time machine, Wonder Woman and Batman are more likely to use machines and other tools such as ‘time rays’.⁵ Not only in comic books has time travel as a theme been appropriated. Numerous other cases of time traveling practices can be found in different forms of media. The Doctor, for example, has been time traveling in his police telephone booth since 1963 in the television series DOCTOR WHO, they are singing about time warping in cult classic film ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW (1975) and pop singer Cher has been dreaming about turning back time in her 1989 ‘If I Could Turn Back Time’. These are just a few of the many examples in popular culture wherein time travel at least is part of the story. Time travel in film is particularly an interesting case, whereas film itself

¹ All films are listed in the ‘Films cited’ on pages 25-27.

² Carl Franzen, “New CERN Test Finds Particles Not Faster Than Light After All,” *Talkingpointsmemo.com*, last modified March 16 2012.

<http://idealab.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/03/new-cern-test-finds-particles-didnt-move-faster-than-light-1.php>

³ “OPERA experiment reports anomaly in flight time of neutrinos from CERN to Gran Sasso,” *Cern Press Office*, last modified June 8th 2012.

<http://press.web.cern.ch/press-releases/2011/09/opera-experiment-reports-anomaly-flight-time-neutrinos-cern-gran-sasso>

⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, *Superman*, DC Comics, 1938 - .

⁵ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), 14.

“has the properties of a time machine.”⁶ Since the earliest days, cinema has been experimenting with time through the means of montage, such as the showing of flashbacks, flash-forwards and the ability to parallel storylines. This characteristic inherent to film causes it to be an excellent medium for time travel stories.⁷ The number of films touching upon practices of time travel over the years is indeed astonishing. With *BACK TO THE FUTURE* (1985) as the most obvious example, other notable examples include *THE TERMINATOR* (1984), *BILL AND TED’S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE* (1989) as well as *STAR TREK* (2009) and *THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE* (2009), to name a few. One of the latest examples illustrating this trend is the film *LOOPER* (2012), provoking new discussions concerning time travel, and thus clearly illustrating a profound fascination with the subject.

Paul J. Nahin argues in his *Time Travel: A Writer’s Guide to the Real Science of Plausible Time Travel* that, while time travel has been a central concept within popular culture and science fiction for a long time, it has only become a topic of serious research in physics in the past twenty years.⁸ The fact that time travel has become a hot topic of scientific research and has been a popular theme in popular culture over the years, shows us the excitement and fascination surrounding it. “Humans have long been fascinated by the idea of visiting the past and of seeing what the future will bring,” as Ken Perszyk and Nicholas J.J. Smith state in their “The Paradoxes of Time Travel.”⁹

I would therefore like to discuss the fascination and popularity of time travel as a theme in film, but also as a subject of desire in society. To do so, I believe I would have to study time travel in film not only as a trend, but more importantly, discuss it in terms of the possibilities of being a genre in film. While many scholars have discussed time travel in terms of its physical possibility, not much has been written about the time travel narrative itself. Moreover, if scholars write about the time travel narrative, it is mostly in terms of being a characteristic of the science fiction genre, but not in terms of outlining recurring elements that may constitute generic borders of this narrative. In this research, I will therefore examine whether or not the time travel narrative may be considered a genre. This will be the main question covering the discussion of the trend, but hopefully also opening up the opportunity to talk about a genre in terms of an articulation of societies’ desire, for as we shall see, genre represents the way people have thoughts or feelings about their society and culture.¹⁰ Thusly, it is interesting to approach the time travel narrative in terms of the

⁶ Constance Penley, “Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia,” 1986, in *Liquid Metal: the Science fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (Columbia: Wallflower Press, 2004), 128.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Travel: A Writer’s Guide to the Real Science of Plausible Time Travel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), xi.

⁹ Ken Perszyk and Nicholas J.J. Smith, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel,” in *Maui and the White Rabbit: Maori and Pakeha Concepts of Time*, ed. Hamish Campbell (Te Papa: National Museum of New Zealand Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art and Industry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 12, cited in Frank Manchel, *Film Study: An Analytical Bibliography* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 176.

generic, of being a genre; it may reveal insights on cultural and/or societal desires and fantasies.

I will firstly focus upon different genre theories, outlined by film scholars such as Tom Ryall, Will Wright and in particular Rick Altman. Then I will give a description of the development of the time travel narrative in fiction and more particular in film throughout the years. Important points in the history of the narrative, marked by popular cultural texts, will be discussed depending on what has been written about the time travel narrative historically and philosophically. Finally, I will analyse multiple films in order to outline the borders and characteristics of the time travel narrative and determine how it may be considered a genre and an articulation of cultural and societal desires.

Genre theory

The study of genre has been a topic of great discussion for many, many years. Already taken up by Aristotle and Horace, it becomes clear that the study of genre, or the question of literary types, has led to debates for centuries long. Theorists such as Aristotle and Horace have created what we now call the classical genre theory, creating the fundamentals of modern day genre theory. While this classical theory could now be considered as simplified and failing to incorporate various aspects of genre, Aristotle and his *Poetics* are still responsible for the birth of the basic assumption that different types of poetry can be distinguished by a distinct medium, distinct objects and a distinct manner or mode of imitation. Aristotle managed to inspire many into writing and theorizing the different literary types over the following centuries. With Italian Renaissance authors in the sixteenth century making up the so-called neo-classicists, to the romantics in the nineteenth century turning to a more scientific model based on Charles Darwin's evolutionary schemes; they all inspired twentieth and twenty-first century scholars in their ways to theorize genre.¹¹ It would seem that after centuries of studying and theorizing, the definition of genre should easily be possible to outline. However, this is precisely the thing that creates the most complications. Even the explanation of the meaning of the term *genre* remains problematic; let alone the actual practice and use of the term. While all these literary genre theories do form the ground of genre theories related to film, it should also be noted that film genre differs greatly from literary genre, as Rick Altman explains in his 1999 study *Film/Genre*. From the late 60s on, film genre studies flourished and opened up spaces for film scholars to create an own theoretical atmosphere, referring to each other rather than to literary theorists.¹²

¹¹ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 1-8.

¹² *Ibidem*, 10-13.

In 'Teaching Through Genre' (1975), Tom Ryall draws a simple definition of film genre from where we could begin our study: "Genres may be defined as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by the audience."¹³ It becomes clear that at the core of genre exist the connections and structures between the filmmakers, the film itself and the audience; thus the production, distribution and consumption processes.¹⁴ This trisection is also exactly where film genre studies differ from literary genre studies.¹⁵ However, as Andrew Tudor points out in his 'Genre and Critical Methodology', genre categorization is often based on settled and untested assumptions and agreements between films, producers and the audience, thereby limiting the discussion of genres that overlap.¹⁶ It might bring about genre labels that are too fixed: that a film should contain all elements of a genre in order to belong to it.¹⁷ For genre theorists it is crucial not to cling to the created genre taxonomies; many films exceed these boundaries and may share characteristics with other generic categories. Views of early film genre theorists, such as Will Wright, are therefore contained within their own created boundaries of the genre, not being aware of the possible inherent relations between the structures and conventions of different generic entities.¹⁸ Furthermore, the model of film genre was mostly only discussed in relation to the model genres of the western and the musical: "It might be argued that many of the ideas and models developed within genre criticism at this time really only worked for the western (and then only to a limited extent), and when it came to constructing a broader understanding of other genres and genre in general, genre studies as it stood was relatively ill-equipped for the task," explains Peter Hutchings in his 'Genre Theory and Criticism'.¹⁹

These are just few of many complications film genre theory may bring along. In 1984 Rick Altman proposed an approach to study film genres in his 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', which was at that time deemed adequate in studying different genres. By combining the syntactic and the semantic and its multiple connections, one can establish a new approach to genre, relating film analysis, genre theory and genre history.²⁰ Various scholars before Altman approached genre in the semantic as well as the syntactic way, but as Altman argues, these two approaches are complementary and should be combined in order to distinguish and describe a genre. Altman's approach entails at first the establishing of the semantic elements (common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations,

¹³ Tom Ryall, "Teaching Through Genre," *Screen Education* 17 (1975): 27-33, 28.

¹⁴ Frank Manchel, *Film Study: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 173.

¹⁵ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 15.

¹⁶ Andrew Tudor, 'Genre and Critical Methodology,' in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1976), 118-126.

¹⁷ Frank Manchel, 176-177.

¹⁸ Peter Hutchings, "Genre Theory and Criticism," in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 71.

¹⁹Ibidem, 65-71.

²⁰ Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" *Cinema Journal* 23:3 (1984): 6-18, 13.

sets and other elements), which make up the genre, and then determining the syntax (the constitutive relationships between those elements, and/or between the semantic elements and the society at large). “The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged.”²¹

Altman realized after the publication of ‘A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre’, that there was something missing in his approach. At the moment that films start to have similar semantics and syntax, then a genre begins to take form. However, what was neglected in his 1984 approach was the realization and acknowledgement that different viewers may perceive genres differently due to variation in recognition of semantic and syntactic elements. He thus added pragmatics to his semantic/syntactic approach in order to address the multiple users (different viewers, but also different producers, distributors and exhibitors) and their different readings of a text, their connections and relations to each other and the effects of these multiple various uses of a text.²² Altman thus argues that his approach “treats genres as a site of struggle and co-operation among multiple users...”²³ Hence, genre is part of cultural processes, being a discursive process itself. Genre theory should then articulate the generic processes within cultural contexts, the fluidity of genre over time and the constitutive practices of genre by industry as well as audience.²⁴ Genre as a discursive process, or rather a generic cluster, contains multiple meanings and definitions coming together to form a certain genre, but can also take on new meanings over time in different historical and cultural contexts. “Genre historiography, then, should provide a genealogy of discursive shifts and rearticulations to account for a genre’s evolution and redefinition, not just a chronology of changing textual examples.”²⁵

The semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach thus allows one to not only look at the recurring elements that may outline the time travel narrative, but also to the historical context and the development of the narrative and therefore touch upon the way the time travel narrative is connected to society and culture. What do these films say about the society that is producing and at the same time consuming them? What do these films provide for the fulfilment of our needs?

Something that was already quite clear from the start of film genre theory and something that most genre theorists *do* agree upon, is that genres often articulate a collective consciousness. Will Wright states for example in his *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*: “Stories (myths) relieve boredom, permit escape, relate custom and history, enrich experience, reinforce values, relieve psychological conflict, produce social cohesion, create

²¹ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach,” 10.

²² Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 207-214.

²³ Ibidem, 211.

²⁴ Jason Mittell, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 37-64, 46.

²⁵ Ibidem, 47.

social conflicts [...], strengthen status demands, teach children violence...”²⁶ Or as Thomas Schatz describes in *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art and Industry*: “[Genre] represents the way artists and audiences feel and think about their culture: about their art, politics, storytelling, perceptions, social values, institutions, individuality, and so on.”²⁷ It thus becomes apparent that it is not only interesting but necessary to approach the time travel narrative in terms of the generic, of being a genre, for it may reveal insights on cultural and/or societal desires and fantasies. So let us now look at the development of the time travel narrative within popular culture, and in particular, within film.

The time travel narrative: time after time

Early beginnings

In his essay ‘Time Travel Fiction’ John Bigelow describes how no real time travel stories were told (or were remembered), anywhere in the world before the end of the nineteenth century. While there were some hints of time traveling in stories before, the time travel narrative made its real debut with well known stories such as Mark Twain’s 1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and H.G. Well’s 1895 novel *The Time Machine*. “Since then there has been a veritable plague of time travel fictions.”²⁸ But why was it only until the end of the nineteenth century that these stories began to emerge and began to take hold? Bigelow explains that the rise of the time travel narrative was inherently related to a distinctive new metaphysics for time that was gradually beginning to emerge. “It is only against the background of this new metaphysics, that time travel stories can either be produced or consumed.”²⁹

For a time travel narrative to be at least somewhat consistent, time has to be *spatialized* in the fictional world. To comprehend time travel narratives, or to even create them, time thus has to be understood as spatialized. While time has been spatialized by mathematical physicists, such as Galileo, Descartes, Newton and even already by Aristotle, this mathematical level of spatialization (the measure of change and rates of change in time) is insufficient for the production and comprehension of time travel narratives. For a time travel narrative to come into existence, there must also be a certain kind of *metaphysical*

²⁶ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 192, cited in Frank Manchel, *Film Study: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 175.

²⁷ Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art and Industry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 12, cited in Frank Manchel, *Film Study: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 176.

²⁸ John Bigelow, “Time Travel Fiction,” in *Reality and Humean Supervenience: Essays on the Philosophy of David Lewis*, ed. Gerhard Preyer and Frank Siebelt (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2001), 77.

²⁹ John Bigelow, 58.

spatialization of time, according to Bigelow. Thinking of time as spatialized, means that time does not really pass; time is a place one can arrive at and return to. It is impossible to understand for example a jump forward in time, without the spatialization of time. Without it, it would be understood merely as a kind of long sleep. *Sleeping Beauty* is for example not a time travel story, for it does not force a spatialization of time; she has ‘traveled’ time, but “she may have done so only in the way we all do, swept along by the relentless passage of time.”³⁰

So when the idea of the spatialization of time gradually began to be known to the wide public by the end of the nineteenth century, more and more time travel stories began to appear. “When people were ready for it, [...] the time travel idea hit popular culture the way rabbits hit Australia. There has been a pandemic of them ever since. And they have been evolving.”³¹ And so began a period of a strong attraction and inherent relationship between physics and fiction, constantly influencing one another.³²

While the spatialization of time must have been laid out before the time travel narrative could be comprehended, fiction writers were the ones properly elaborating and fantasizing about the practices and consequences of this spatialization. Thus, as is interesting to point out, time travel stories, such as Mark Twain’s and H.G. Wells’, gave early expressions of the time travel ideas many years before the physicists fully detailed it: Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity came some twenty years later than the time travel stories of Mark Twain and H.G. Wells.³³ The development of the time travel narrative necessarily is closely related to the development of physic theories and technology in society, but as we have seen, it also works the other way around. More and more theories have been developed and more and more discoveries concerning time travel have been made, which makes it not strange that people start to fantasize about it and that time travel fictions increasingly emerge. In this way, time travel itself seems to be more and more plausible. And this seems concurrent with the ever-increasing trend in popular culture. The effects of the close correlation of fiction and physics are prominent in the development of the time travel narrative over the years. This is especially apparent in David Wittenberg’s account on the history of the time travel narrative, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, wherein he divides the development into three different phases that embody and are defined by different scientific developments.³⁴

The first phase that he describes is a phase of evolutionary time travel stories. This phase runs from the late 1880s, beginning with Edward Bellamy’s 1887 *Looking Backward*:

³⁰ John Bigelow, 57-59, 78.

³¹ Ibidem, 81.

³² Scott Mowbray, “Let’s do the Time Warp Again: The Science and the Fiction of Time Travel Are Weird. But the Science is Weirder,” *Popular Science* 260:3 (2002): 47-51, 48.

³³ John Bigelow, 78.

³⁴ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 29-30.

2000-1887. In this phase, time travel is part of utopian fiction that is influenced by naturalist Charles Darwin's popular evolutionary models of social and political development. Time travel narratives conveyed a plausible utopian future that was directly 'evolved' from present-day conditions, rather than a fantastical unrealistic view. *Looking Backward* for instance, tells the story of a man from 1887 who is transported to a utopian world in 2000 via hypnotic trance. H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, as the most famous example, was also influenced by this evolutionary scheme. It does become clear that Darwinism, and biology in general, at that time were of great prominence in society and therefore in popular culture.³⁵

Time travel in popular culture

The second phase signifies the beginning of the time travel narrative as becoming popular and well known within popular culture. This phase is marked by the introduction of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity in 1915, replacing the evolutionary paradigm by further developing the spatialization of time.³⁶ With his theory of space-time he suggested a Parmenidean four-dimensionalist metaphysical conception of the world in time, space as existing in the first three dimensions and time being the fourth dimension. Time was thus spatialized, and as a four-dimensional space it should technically be possible to journey through it.³⁷ While spatialization of time was of course already introduced, Einstein took this a step further and opened up possibilities for speculating about *actual* time travel in his relativity theory.³⁸ "What relativity physics provides, mainly, is a repertoire of new plot possibilities: temporal dilation or reversal, physical access to one's own past or future (or alternate presents), viewpoints encompassing many or all possible worlds, 'narcissistic' or 'oedipal' meetings, and so on."³⁹ It opened up structures of narrative, creating possibilities of parallel or multiple narrative lines and worlds. But the knowledge that time travel should technically be possible also encouraged writers to explore the practices of time travel, also encountering paradoxes related to it. The second phase can therefore be characterized by paradox stories. One theme that became quite popular amongst writers in the 1940s, was the 'time loop' or 'closed causal loop' story, surrounding the principle that it is impossible to point out where it begins; whether a cause precedes or follows its effect. Within time travel, the world line of people and particles can be regarded as a hula-hoop, a circle with no ends, rather than a straight line from a beginning to an end.⁴⁰ Short story *By His Bootstraps* (1941) by Robert A. Heinlein is the first well-known example introducing the closed causal time

³⁵ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 30.

³⁶ Ibidem, 30.

³⁷ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, 99.

³⁸ J. Richard Gott, *Time Travel in Einstein's Universe: The Physical Possibilities of Travel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 5.

³⁹ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 31.

⁴⁰ J. Richard Gott, 20. And: David Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 31.

loop, telling the story of scientist Bob Wilson who meets a strangely familiar man from the future and becomes a so-called interloper himself, traveling through time portals.⁴¹ This closed causal time loop is also perfectly illustrated by the short film *LA JETÉE* (1962), wherein the protagonist travels back in time only to find out that the traumatic incident in his youth concerned his future self.⁴²

Furthermore, in the 1930s time travel began to first appear in other forms of popular culture, such as in the comic book. Commencing with comic *Alley Oop* (Oop being a caveman who travels through different centuries by means of a time machine) in 1932, these forms of popular culture brought time travel to the consciousness of an even wider public.⁴³ After *Alley Oop*, time travel became a more recurrent theme in the comic books. Wonder Woman, Batman and Superman for instance all traveled through time quite regularly by means of superpowers, or special space transformation machines.⁴⁴

Time travel in film

The third phase that Wittenberg distinguishes is the multiverse-filmic phase. This phase, beginning end 1970s, is characterized by the extreme growth of time travel films and television series, and the legitimization and popularization of multiverse physics and cosmology. In this phase narratives explore the more psychological of time travel paradoxes, as for example the Grandfather paradox.⁴⁵ Additionally, the time travel narrative can now be characterized by the usage of multiple universe stories.⁴⁶

According to Andrew Gordon and his 'Back to the Future: Oedipus as Time Traveler', significantly more time-travel-based films have been made since the end of the 1970s.⁴⁷ Films such as *TIME AFTER TIME* (1979), *SOMEWHERE IN TIME* (1980), *TIME BANDITS* (1981), *TIMERIDER* (1983), *THE PHILADELPHIA EXPERIMENT* (1984), *THE TERMINATOR* (1984), *BACK TO THE FUTURE* (1985), *PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED* (1986) and *BILL AND TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE* (1989), containing at least one element of

⁴¹ George Slusser and Robert Heath, "Arrows and Riddles of Time: Scientific Models of Time Travel," in *Worlds Enough and Time: Explorations of Time in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Gary Westfahl, George Edgar Slusser, David Leiby (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), 15.

⁴² Elena Del Rio, "The Remaking of "La Jetée's" Time-Travel Narrative: "Twelve Monkeys" and the Rhetoric of Absolute Visibility," *Science Fiction Studies* 28:3 (2001), 383.

⁴³ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, 13-14.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 14.

I am aware that there are time travel films before the 1970s, such as *BERKELEY SQUARE* (1933), *THE TIME MACHINE* (1960) and *LA JETÉE* (1962). However, it was not until the 1970s, that time travel in film became a popular theme, at least, not to such an extent.

⁴⁵ The question if you went back in time and kill your grandfather, what would happen with you in the future? This paradox is for example explored in the narratives of *BACK TO THE FUTURE* (1985) and *THE TERMINATOR* (1984).

And: Gary Westfahl, "Introduction: The Quarries of Time," in *Worlds Enough and Time: Explorations of Time in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. George Edgar Slusser, David Leiby (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), 3.

⁴⁶ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 31-32.

⁴⁷ Andrew Gordon, *Back to the Future: Oedipus as Time Traveler*, in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 116.

the time travel narrative, illustrate this flourishing. Hence, it was only recently that time travel has become a frequent cinematic theme. One of the reasons for this can be traced back to the decade before. The two World Wars had shattered many utopian dreams of scientific progress, putting any developments or progress to a halt. After the wars, it was quickly picked up again as a result of the Cold War competition between the Russian and American superpowers. This competition took the form of a so-called 'Space Race': the race between the two nations focused on being the first in space traveling. It boosted scientific developments in the field of rocket science and space travel significantly, becoming a major national and cultural concern amongst society. The Space Race helped breathe new life into the image and reputation of science and technology among American culture and society.⁴⁸ The dispersion of scientific matters into everyday life familiarized the public with the scientific and technological developments, and thus themes as space and time travel were being brought into the homes of many.⁴⁹ By the 1970s, nearing the end of the Space Race, these themes were fully familiarized and were now part of everyday American life.⁵⁰ Rocket science and the science of time travel were thus well known concepts, but at the same time it remained to be something that was understood as something incomprehensible with many believing that it was possible, but not quite understanding all the parameters and practices. The fact that time travel was conceived of as something incomprehensible also made it something wherein fantasies could be further explored and wherein new realities could be created.

It is therefore not strange that Gordon ascribes this sudden popularity and growth also to the political and economic crises shaping this decade (caused by the tensions of the Cold War and the political and social unrest of the Vietnam War), creating a flight mentality among society. Time travel films are then the perfect means for expressing this desire, speaking to "our nostalgia for the past, our dissatisfaction with the present and our dread of the future."⁵¹ For the time travel narrative can allow the viewer to project their fantasies and desires onto it and create new realities. Whereas the viewer can go back in time, alter the present and/or the future, allows to correct things, mend history and return to a glorious present or future.⁵² Most of the above mentioned films involve time traveling to the past, adhering to the existing nostalgic feelings to the past. Most time travel films do not even attempt to visualize the future in this period, but when they do, the future is black, rotten and post-apocalyptic.⁵³ The overall dread of the future in society and the belonging negative

⁴⁸ Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 76-77.

⁴⁹ By for example the popular TV series *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969), incorporating space as well as time travel elements.

⁵⁰ Lincoln Geraghty, *American Science Fiction Film and Television* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 28.

⁵¹ Andrew Gordon, 124.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 116.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 116.

Hollywood vision of the future, are probably most famously illustrated in James Cameron's 1984 film *THE TERMINATOR*. This film tells the story of a future that is dominated by artificial intelligence machines, attempting to exterminate the entire human race. The future is bleak and rotten, and one of the main characters has to travel back in time in order to save the human race in the future.

Nowadays and in the future

Nowadays, starting from the 1990s, to the 2000s and to the future, is the period that has not yet been defined as a distinct phase. The growth and flourishing of time travel films from the end 1970s to the 1980s, continued to culminate into the 1990s until now.

Paul J. Nahin argues in his *Time Travel: A Writer's Guide to the Real Science of Plausible Time Travel* that, while time travel has been a well-known concept in fiction, popular culture and physics, it is only recently that it really became a serious and hot subject within physics.⁵⁴ This was due to the fact that in 1997, three scientists finally proved with physical evidence that time travel is actually possible, despite the multiple efforts of scientists (such as Stephen Hawking) looking for physics laws that would make time travel impossible. "Once considered to be fringe science, time travel has suddenly become a playground for theoretical physicists."⁵⁵ Consequently, tests related to the possibilities of time travel were being conducted more and more (such as CERN's test, addressed here earlier), significantly more scholarly analyses of time travel began to appear and an increasing amount was being published in serious scientific journals.

It is apparent that, together with the increase of interest from the physicists, the time travel narrative is appropriated even more in this period than before. The 1990s actually begin with sequels to 1980s time travel films *BACK TO THE FUTURE* and *THE TERMINATOR*, adequately introducing the new decade to time traveling. The 1990s further saw films appropriating the time travel narrative, such as *LES VISITEURS* (1993), *GROUNDHOG DAY* (1993) and *TIMECOP* (1994). *12 MONKEYS*, which hit theatres in 1995, is one of the best-known examples of time travel films, being based on other time travel film *LA JETÉE* (1962). The film starts in 1997, when James Cole (a convicted criminal) is sent back into time to prevent the deadly virus to spread that caused 1997's Earth to lose a big part of the population, being a narrative quite similar to those nostalgic fuelled narratives of the 1980s.

The 2000s saw even more films that treated the time travel narrative. It is remarkable how the time travel narrative takes on complete different forms in different sorts of films. *DONNIE DARKO* (2001) for example, is about a teenager traveling through time by means of wormholes, while *THE TIME MACHINE* (2002), a remake of the 1960s version, and

⁵⁴ Paul J. Nahin. *Time Travel*, ix.

⁵⁵ Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration of the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation and Time Travel* (Penguin UK, 2008).

PRIMER (2004) both involve time traveling by an actual time machine. More diverse narratives can be found in the following films, with comedies CLICK (2006) and HOT TUB TIME MACHINE (2010) that put the time travel narrative to use as comical element, whereas in DÉJÀ VU (2006) and SOURCE CODE (2011) time traveling is the source of action and suspense. This is also the case in recent box-office hit LOOPER (2012), that tells the story of how in a distant future, time travel is being used to kill people by sending them back from the future into the present, in order to avoid the problem of getting rid of the bodies.

It is not just films that are concerned with it, other forms of popular culture also frequently use the time travel theme. Time travel can be found in music lyrics (such as the song 'Tijdmachine' by Dutch rapper Dio) and novels (such as 2013s *The Loop* by Shandy Lawson and *Time Thief* by Katie McAlister) or television series. DOCTOR WHO (1963 -) for example, is still on television and going strong and in the television series HEROES (2006-2010) multiple characters were able to travel through time.

There are some new time travel narratives ahead of us, in our distant future. Firstly, Richard Curtis' romantic comedy ABOUT TIME, which will hit theatres at the end of this year.⁵⁶ Another future project is Christopher Nolan's INTERSTELLAR (2014); still in the pre-production phase, but it is believed to become an exploration of physicist theories of time travel, wormholes and other hypotheses that Albert Einstein for example was never able to prove.⁵⁷

The time travel narrative has thus not yet been exhausted and may even be growing further in popularity in a time like this, characterized by the great importance of physics, general science and technology. In the 1990s and evidently even more in the 2000s, the time traveling narrative is further being excessively explored for its different narrative and thematic possibilities and abilities, as we can detract from the many different stories that emerge involving time travel.

Time traveling: a genre and/or desire?

Science fiction: an adequate umbrella term?

Many consider time travel as being a subgenre of science fiction.⁵⁸ Science fiction in this case can be defined as a story set in an imagined world that differs from our own world, but this

⁵⁶ "About Time (2013)" *Imdb*, accessed June 6th 2013 - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2194499/>

⁵⁷ "Interstellar (2014)" *Imdb*, accessed June 6th 2013 - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0816692/>

⁵⁸ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, xv. As well as:

M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 15-27.

difference is rationally explicable (because of scientific advances).⁵⁹ However, this definition of science fiction would then exclude at least half of the narratives that have been acknowledged as being time travel. Paul J. Nahin concurs with this definition of time travel as a subgenre of science fiction in his *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction*. He is only interested in physical time travel *by machine*, excluding those stories that entail time travel through other forces than a time machine, such as for example a blow to the head in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*. Nahin explains that he believes time travel is not to be compared with fantasy travel. That means that stories wherein time travel is conducted by any other means than a time machine, is not actual time travel according to Nahin.⁶⁰ The difference between the time traveling and fantasy traveling would be dependent on the manner of traveling. "If the character uses a machine, psychic ability, or some other form of technology, then it is science fiction. If the character happens to trip over a magical toadstool while touring Celtic sites in Ireland and wakes up in the past, then it is fantasy time travel."⁶¹ If the means of traveling is thus unexplained, or mystical, it is considered fantasy.

However, how do we know that the latter instance of time travel is mere fantasy? It is not explained by a time machine, but it is also not clear whether it was a dream or not. Accordingly, these stories could also be part of the time travel narrative: 'mind' travel is also a form of time travel, for as long as they are not conceived of as mere dreams. These stories could then also be considered as time travel because as viewers of the narrative, we *are* time traveling within the story. The protagonist may not be moving through time by means of machines, but he/she is at that moment living in another time, may it be actual or hallucinating. The mind travels through time, where the body may not be, being time travel nonetheless, for the protagonist as well as the viewer is told to believe that the protagonist has actually travelled through time.

Nahin's and others' exclusion of these sorts of narratives is correct, but only if one considers time travel as a subgenre of science fiction. However, as I have argued, narratives that include mind or fantasy travel might also be considered as time travel. In this case, science fiction is inadequate as an umbrella genre, for it does not deal with those specific narratives and with the possible appropriation of elements of different genres. Especially since genre is also functional in predicting and targeting a certain audience through genre films and genre signifiers; a romantic movie involving time travel would for instance not necessarily be targeting a science fiction audience.

Rather, there should be a framework for the time travel narrative that incorporates all the different forms the narrative can have. This means that this framework should not only be able to incorporate the common elements of the time travel narrative, but should

⁵⁹ M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, 4.

⁶⁰ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, 8-11.

⁶¹ Derek M. Buker, *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Cyborgs, Aliens and Sorcerers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2002), 52-53.

also be able to deal with the different generic aspects it might adopt. Approaching the time travel narrative as a possible genre might be a way of creating such a framework.

The time travel narrative as a genre

As Altman states, films must have a common topic, similar elements and structures, in order to be recognized as a genre. It is not enough for films to have a similar topic; this topic must also be treated and structured in similar ways.⁶² Outlining semantic elements within the time travel narrative is not as easy as it might seem, for time travel can be connected to a multiplicity of genres, causing it to be inconsistent in time, place, attributes etcetera. The building blocks of this narrative are not the same as what we have seen in the model genres the western and the musical; there are no archetypical tough cowboys and lonely sheriffs set in the sphere of the Far West. The time travel narrative does however exist of two building blocks, but these are less direct and less clearly confined.

The most important (and most obvious one) is the narrative theme of the actual *traveling through time*. One or more of the characters becomes dislocated in time by means of time traveling. May it be by wishing dust (13 GOING ON 30), a remote control (CLICK), a particular gene (THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE), a heart attack (PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED), a magical spell (LES VISITEURS) or a DeLorean DMC-12 (BACK TO THE FUTURE), in all cases characters have been transported into another time. As Ken Perszyk and Nicholas J.J. Smith explain in their 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel': "What's needed is a discrepancy between the interval of time traversed from departure to arrival and the duration of your journey, such as traversing 65 million years in a very short time..."⁶³

The second building block is one of the most important effects of the time traveling, namely the *changing of things*. Traveling through time enables the characters to change things in the past, in the present, in the future. In BACK TO THE FUTURE for example, Marty McFly is unintentionally almost wiping out his own existence when his mother falls in love with him, rather than with his father. Other examples include LOOPER, wherein the time traveling is used as a means to kill future 'criminals', and PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED, wherein her traveling back to her high school years enables her to rethink and save her present marriage.

These two elements form the basis of the time travel narrative. Syntactic elements are the structures into which these building blocks are arranged. There are three structures into which we can divide the changing nature of the time traveling practices: the first structure implies the undoing of things in the past, the second one the prevention of things that are to happen in the future and the last one involves unintentional and unwanted changes.

⁶² These findings are based onto a number of films that are not all discussed here, but are to be found on the list 'Films cited' on pages 25-27.

⁶³ Ken Perszyk and Nicholas J.J. Smith, 1.

The *undoing of things in the past* structure sends characters back in time in order to undo certain things, or to do things over, such as in PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED. Another example of this structure is the 1993 film LES VISITEURS, wherein two 12th century knights are supposed to be traveling back a couple of hours by a magic spell to prevent the killing of the bride's father, making the main goal of time traveling the undoing of things in the past.

The second structure involves the *prevention of things to happen in the future*. For instance in THE TERMINATOR's case, to make sure John Connor is conceived in order to save the future. In LOOPER, time travel is used in order to kill people from the future, by sending them back into the past where hitmen kill them. The future in the film is dark, bleak, rotten and ruled by the evil Rainmaker. In order to prevent the future from becoming so rotten, protagonist Joe changes things in the present so that the Rainmaker would not become the Rainmaker. The film SOURCE CODE (2011) also adequately illustrates this structure. SOURCE CODE describes the story of a soldier who is being sent back in time by a time machine - not to change the past, but to find out the truth to keep a terrorist attack from happening.

The third structure involves the *unintentional and unwanted changes made by traveling through time*. Characters are traveling back in time and unintentionally change something that may have grave outcomes for the future. In BACK TO THE FUTURE, main character Marty McFly travels back to 1955 and meets his parents when they are at high school. When he is close to accidentally preventing his parents from marrying (his mother starts to fall in love with Marty himself), he sees himself fading out of a picture. The changes he made almost prevented him from existing. Another example of this structure is the film A SOUND OF THUNDER (2005). When a man travels back in time to the prehistoric era and wanders off the path he was supposed to walk on, accidentally stepping on a butterfly, he causes a chain reaction of enormous changes in history.

These semantic and syntactic elements are the means by which the viewer recognizes the genre and creates expectations of the genre. These characteristics are the ones that are recognizable and able to trigger the viewer's awareness of other films within the genre. Time travel as a genre also requires from the viewer a willingness to believe in the narrative, even though it cannot always be scientifically and rationally explained. Time travel then clearly is a label important in targeting an audience: described as a way of escaping the present. At the same time, time travel transcends the science fiction genre, for the narrative can be appropriated by every other genre. "Time travel makes for a nifty plot device, a catalyst that works across genres, including comedy, romance, horror, fantasy, and detective story..."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Scott Mowbray, 48.

The semantic and syntactic of the time travel genre are thus loosely listed elements in order to allow for the time travel genre to *mix* with other genres.⁶⁵

The time travel narrative: articulating cultural desires

“No idea from science fiction had captured the human imagination as much as time travel. What would you do if you had a time machine? You might go to the future and take a vacation in the twenty-third century. You might bring back a cure for cancer. Then again, you might return to the past to rescue a lost loved one. You could kill Hitler and prevent World War II...”⁶⁶

This quote by astrophysicist J. Richard Gott illustrates most accurately the existing fantasies and desires surrounding time travel.⁶⁷ The fact that physicists and writers have been fantasizing and writing about it for so many years, only proves this point.

In the discussion of the historical development of the time travel narrative, the connections between physics, scientific progress, cultural mentalities, feelings and the time travel narrative were already put forward. Time travel narratives fascinate us because they make us think. Think about time, about our past, about the future, about science and technology.⁶⁸ Fiction and science have always been closely linked and interrelated in the history of the time travel narrative. As we have seen, in fiction time travel fantasies and desires have been expressed influencing scientific progress, but at the same time scientific progress and developments of time travel have influenced fiction.⁶⁹ So at the moment in history when everyday life is being affected by economic and political crises, and significant scientific progress about traveling in time and space is being made, it is in fictional fantasies about those scientific developments, where one can escape to.⁷⁰

Time travel films were and are the perfect means for expressing the desire to temporarily escape everyday reality, speaking to “our nostalgia for the past, our dissatisfaction with the present and our dread of the future.”⁷¹ Within the time travel narrative the viewer can together with the protagonist be transported back in time (a retreat to the purity of the childhood), altering the present and/or the future, being allowed to correct things, mend history and return to a glorious present or future.⁷² And this is exactly

⁶⁵ Daniel Chandler, “An Introduction to Genre Theory,” last modified July 5th 2000 - <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre1.html>

⁶⁶ J. Richard Gott, 3-4.

⁶⁷ Ken Perszyk and Nicholas J.J. Smith, 1.

⁶⁸ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, 3.

⁶⁹ Scott Mowbray, 48.

⁷⁰ David Seed, *A Companion to Science Fiction* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 268.

⁷¹ Andrew Gordon, 116 - 125, 124.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 116, 124.

what society desires. As the tagline of PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED adequately points out: "To do it again... the golden opportunity almost everyone has longed for at least once."⁷³

Time travel films indeed allow the undoing of things in the past or for example the traveling to the future: themes that are inherent (or even exclusive) to the time travel genre. At the same time, the practices of time travel remain something that most cannot yet fully grasp. This is due to the fact that the actual practice of time traveling has yet to be made possible, and for that reason it remains unclear what the actual practice will be like and what consequences it might bring with. Time travel is thus still something intangible, incomprehensible and thereby mysterious. This, however, did make possible the exploration of these fantasies related to time travel and the creation of new and other realities within the narrative.⁷⁴

The intangible character of time travel also creates a certain distance, which is important for the escapist desires to be accommodated, the possibility for the creation of new realities within the narrative and the (in)direct addressing of mentalities, issues or feelings of the society in the present. In the modern world, where one might feel powerless and/or dissatisfied with the present, time travel can allow the individual to feel that he or she is making a difference. As Sean Redmond argues in his *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*: "...time travel suggests that Everyman and Everybody is important to shaping history, to making a real and quantifiable difference to the way the world turns out."⁷⁵ But while actual time travel itself cannot achieve this feeling yet, time travel films can.

Conclusion

In this research I questioned if the time travel narrative could be considered a genre in film. And as we have seen it appears we may indeed consider the time travel narrative as a film genre. While it is not as clearly confined by generic borders as for example the musical or the western, it can be distinguished as a genre by characterizing the semantic and syntactic elements. The time travel genre does however also overlap with other genres: different time travel narratives may involve different genres to tell the story. By outlining the historical development of the time travel narrative and its connection to society, it became apparent that the time travel narrative is a genre that develops and is being reformulated over time by different desires and fantasies in society. Time travel as a genre thusly can, because of its intangibility, articulate certain desires, fears and mentalities of culture and society. Films

⁷³ Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines*, 18.

⁷⁴ Mark Brake and Neil Hook, *Different Engines: How Science Drives Fiction and Fiction Drives Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁷⁵ Sean Redmond, *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader* (Columbia: Wallflower Press, 2004), 114.

belonging to this genre then are a perfect means to support the desire for time travel, for fulfilling the nostalgia to the past, the curiosity for the future, for the creation of new and other realities and for the feeling of being able to change things. At the same time, the time travel narrative functions as a place for expressions of personal fantasies and of scientific theories. Time travel is thus something we can talk and fantasize about for hours, or even decades. As Older Joe in *LOOPER* adequately puts it: "...if we start talking about [time travel] then we're going to be here all day talking about it, making diagrams with straws."

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