

On the Future of Narrative

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which narrative responds to the concept of the future, and how the future has been dis/enabled by the 21st Century. It explores the relationship between the concept of the future and the concept of the past, and considers how one often embodies the other through the concept of the present. This exploration is considered through examples, such as Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* trilogy (dir. 1985-1990), and Justin Roiland's and Dan Harmon's *Rick and Morty* (dir. 2013–), where time-travel is employed as a narratological device that blurs the lines between what is past, what is present, and what is future.

Key words: time, narrative, future

In 1990, Robert Zemeckis directed arguably the best *Back to the Future – Part III*. Set in 1885, out in the Old West of Hill Valley, it has a bear in a cave in the middle of the desert for a plot device. Picking up where *Back To the Future – Part II* (dir. Zemeckis 1989) promptly left off in *Back to the Future – Part I*: 'safe and sound now, back in good, old 1955' (dir. Zemeckis 1985, min. 00:41:04–00:41:45), *Marty* (reprised by Michael J. Fox) must save the *Doc* (reprised by Christopher Lloyd) from *Biff's* great-grandfather outlaw *Buford 'Mad Dog' Tannen* (played by Thomas F. Wilson).

There is something confronting about this trilogy of films which, in the presence of time travel, ultimately fears the future. It avoids its traversal whenever possible, and hides behind the consequence of causality, some pretext for the self-fulfilling of a prophecy, despite the inherent paradox that time travel represents in a linear universe that is also willing to entertain the notion of alternate realities. When it does venture *Back to the Future – Part II*, it is hazardous, it is unwelcoming, it is on the verge of dystopia, and still somehow manages to recycle the past in the future of the present.

The much maligned *Part II* takes place in the yesteryear of 2015. Hill Valley has a hodgepodge of hairstyles, holograms, hoverboards, and Hare Krishnas. Nearly every car can fly, and nobody seems to care whether or not four teenage hooligans haze *Marty* in the middle of the town square. At most *Marty* spends ~15 minutes of the film in the

future, and impersonating his son, should he meet himself, the result of which, postulated by the *Doc*, could ‘unravel the very fabric of the spacetime continuum and destroy the entire universe!’ (1989, min. 25:10–25:36).

In a somewhat pathetic attempt to meet the expectations of this fictional future, several retailers capitalised on the 30th anniversary of *Back to the Future* in 2015. Nike, for example, double downed on a pair of self-tying shoes, the HyperAdapt 1.0: ‘the first performance vehicle,’ according to Nike, ‘for [its] latest technological breakthrough, adaptive lacing. The shoe translates deep research in digital, electrical and mechanical engineering into a product designed for movement.’ (Nike, para. 1).

The anniversary also helped popularise the self-balancing scooter, entrepreneur Shane Chen’s answer to rapper Seth Sentry’s demands for a hoverboard in the hit song *Dear Science* (2012), and that were later recalled due to a number of exploding batteries in 2016. Christopher Lloyd even did a guest reprisal for Universal Pictures, two slick, promotional YouTube clips as the *Doc* advertising the re-release of the trilogy on Blu-ray Disc and DVD. ‘The future has finally arrived,’ the *Doc* says, popping the door of a misplaced DeLorean, before admitting: ‘Yes, it is different than we all thought, but don’t worry. It just means your future hasn’t been written yet. No-one’s has. Your future is whatever you make it. So make it a good one.’ (2015b, min. 00:22–00:39).

These are the same lines *Doc* assures *Marty* and *Jennifer* (reprised by Claudia Wells) with at the end of *Part III*, before blasting off into the sunset in a pimped out Sierra No. 3. ‘Where are you going now?’ *Marty* asks: ‘Back to the future?’ to which the *Doc* replies: ‘Nope. Already been there.’ (1990, min. 01:48:32–01:48:42). It is almost as if the future, by its very purchase, holds no object, blurring the lines between what it is that constitutes the past, or the present, or the future, relative to oneself. The anniversary, in particular, more than demonstrates this purchase, again, recycling the past in the future of the present.

While *Part III* makes various, and somewhat distracting, allusions to the author Jules Verne, particularly the works *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), the author and the work *Back to the Future* simultaneously shares the most and the least in common with, is H. G. Wells and *The Time Machine*. First published in 1895, ten years conspicuously after the events of *Part III*, the unnamed protagonist, simply referred to as *The Time Traveller*, has no interest in the past, their maiden voyage takes place in the year ‘Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One’ (Wells, p. 27).

The fixation with the past is an uncharacteristically introduced theme within the future, the germ of which can be traced throughout the many adaptations of *The Time Machine* itself. The 1948 radio adaptation, performed by Jeff Corey and John Denher, prunes

about ~700,000 years from the maiden voyage, and that instead takes place in the year 100,080. The 1960 film adaptation, directed by George Pal, and that won an Academy Award for its use of time-lapse photography, despite being set in 1895, actually travels into the past when it travels into the future, of World War I, and World War II, the events of which proceed the publication of *The Time Machine* by 19–44 years.

The 1978 film adaptation, directed by Henning Schellerup, and the 2002 film adaptation, directed by Simon Wells, the great-grandson of H. G. Wells, take considerably more artistic license, however. The 1978 adaptation is not only set in 1970, its maiden voyage takes place in 1692, in an unrelated Salem, Massachusetts, during the Salem witch trials. The protagonist, a *Dr. Neil Perry* (played by John Beck), is unsurprisingly accused of witchcraft, almost as if the film deliberately wants to chastise the prospect of time travel. *Perry* even escapes through the past, through the Californian Gold Rush (1848–1855), before returning to the present.

The 2002 adaptation is instead set in 1899, the maiden voyage of which is more a Möbius strip than a true destination, and takes place in alternate 1899s, over and over again like *Groundhog Day* (dir. Ramis 1993). In these alternate 1899s, the protagonist, an *Alexander Hartdegen* (played by Guy Pearce), attempts to save his fiancée, *Emma* (played by Sienna Guillory), from dying. The prospect of saving her from this death is actually the reason behind creating *The Time Machine*. Only when the past proves to be too obstinate does the protagonist suddenly recall the future, the nonpreferred recourse, a degenerate wasteland full of cannibals and overgrown children.

This germ can be seen infecting other films that feature time travel as well, with numerous examples, such as James Cameron's *The Terminator* (dir. 1984), Stephen Herek's *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (dir. 1989), Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (dir. 1995), Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (dir. 2001), Shane Carruth's *Primer* (dir. 2004), Steve Pink's *Hot Tub Time Machine* (dir. 2010), and Rian Johnson's *Looper* (dir. 2012). In each of these examples, the future is threatening, or inhospitable, or just downright uncool. The past is somehow made into an exploitable resource, the twisted innocence of which is lucrative, like the penultimate revenge of some historian buff.

This is the stuff of franchise, and reboots, and remakes, capitalising on the past in the future of the present. Its indirect exploitation can be seen everywhere, even in examples without time travel for trope, films such as Renny Harlin's *Die Hard 2* (dir. 1990), John McTiernan's *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (dir. 1995), Len Wiseman's *Live Free or Die Hard* (dir. 2007), John Moore's *A Good Day to Die Hard* (dir. 2013), as well as the yet to be released origin story *Die Hard Year One*, all of them, and rather impotently, trying to reproduce the power of its progenitor, John McTiernan's unbeatable, unstoppable, *Die Hard* (dir. 1990).

A seemingly incorruptible pillar of the prospect of the future, creator Gene Roddenberry's brainchild, *Star Trek*, has also, and unfairly, been infected with the past of its own past. The reboot trilogy of films, J. J. Abrams' *Star Trek* (dir. 2009), and *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (dir. 2013), and Justin Lin's *Star Trek: Beyond* (dir. 2016), although they do feature in a predominantly alternate reality, are also recreating the characters of the beloved *Star Trek: The Original Series* (dir. Roddenberry 1966–1969). The recent television reboot, however, *Star Trek: Discovery* (dir. Fuller and Kurtzman 2017–), takes place boldly before those, splitting hairs between *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (dir. Berman and Braga 2001–2005).

A growing number of other examples, pioneer films such as Ti West's *The House of the Devil* (dir. 2009), and Panos Cosmatos' *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (dir. 2010), and television serials such as Matt Duffer's and Ross Duffer's *Stranger Things* (dir. 2016–), are returning to the 1980s, in setting, and style, and tone, purposely trying to recapture the past of the past itself, and with great appeal. They are like a contemporary version of a period piece, the legacy of which still lingers, on the television, on the radio, in endless re-runs without pause. The future is more the past than the past ever was, an unsettling prospect, given the nature of history itself.

To travel into the past, whether fictionally or figuratively, is to admit that the future in which one resides is somehow undesirable. It is also a simple mastery. The overcoming of the unknown, and the anxiety that this unknown, sometimes, represents, because the past is known, because the past is familiar, even when it is threatening. Especially those traumatic aspects of the past, like World War I, like World War II, like Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (dir. 2017), their traversal is like an attempt to reassure the future of the past, that the past is coming, that things will get better, that it will all be over soon.

It makes more sense, now, for those narratives, like George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (dir. 1977), that take place 'a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away' (min. 00:00:12–00:00:24). What is being watched is like a history, and to be in the presence, in the present, of making that history 'far, far' outweighs the prospect of a humble future. It is curious, then, that the past, the manifest potential, having already happened, embodies a sense of hope, one that it can never fulfil, whereas the future, the unmanifest potential, having yet to happen, embodies a sense of imagination instead, full of unrealised fear.

All of the moving image is a rudimentary form of time travel, because it has always, already happened, despite that it is happening while it has already happened. The moving image is the past, and yet, it is also the scaffolding with which the prospect of the future can be best imagined, enabling narratives that could not be told otherwise. Those narratives, like *Back to the Future*, also take place within a history that was only

just starting to come to terms with the prospect of quantum physics, and the possibility of a non-linear universe of infinite dimension.

What is meant by *On the Future of Narrative*, is not strictly an analysis, therefore, of speculative-, or science-fiction. While this genre, in particular, as well as its respective subgenres, like cyberpunk, like hard, like post-apocalyptic, like space opera, remain at the forefront of the discourse about the future, they are also, and inescapably, a part of the past. As are its many authors, such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert, Stanislaw Lem, some of their works of which have since been adapted into the moving image. They are the forerunners of the prospect of the future from the past, and they reside on a unique cutting-edge, somewhere between the past and the future unlike the present, their works always, and admirably, pushing on the cusp of consciousness as it is un/know.

It is also worth considering that no other genre, not crime, not horror, not fantasy, is capable of carrying the prospect of the future, forward, without being science-fiction in some way, and that science-fiction, of late, has also come to loosely represent the future itself. Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (dir. 2015), for example, is but the latest fare in a long list of films, including, but not limited to Holger-Madsen's *A Trip to Mars* (dir. 1918), Lesley Selander's *Flight to Mars* (dir. 1951), and Brian de Palma's *Mission to Mars* (dir. 2000), that represent an enduring aspiration to travel to this planet.

Back to the Future represents the past, now, having transitioned from the future, and one that invariably invokes Justin Roiland's and Dan Harmon's television series, *Rick and Morty* (dir. 2013–), an animated spoof of *Doc and Marty*. The nature of the spoof, in general, is one that highlights the absurdity of its progenitor through intertextuality, with a number of popular examples, including, but not limited to, Dean Parisot's *Galaxy Quest* (dir. 1999), a spoof of *Star Trek*, and Seth Green's *Robot Chicken: Star Wars* (dir. 2007), a spoof of *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*. By its very intertextuality, the nature of the spoof is like an unconscious analysis of sorts, one that processes the mistakes of the past, only, with the intention of encouraging humour at its expense.

This intertextuality is an ironic interplay of the past in the future of the present, and one that relies on the audience and their familiarity with its progenitor. It is not that *Rick and Morty* cannot be enjoyed standalone, it is that its potential to affect is at its most affective when this interplay and this familiarity align. The more intimately they align, the more humorous the expense. The tenth episode of season three, *Rickmancing the Stone* (dir. Polcino and Archer, 2017), for example, recalls Robert Zemeckis' *Romancing the Stone* (dir. 1984), in title, and tone, as well as George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. 2015), in setting, and style.

Rick and Morty is forcing a different kind of intertextuality, though, one that hijacks the

process of remembering, and that also simulates time travel, while criticising both. It is the veritable antithesis of *Back to the Future*, one that inhabits a non-linear universe instead, without causality, and therefore, without consequence. What is meant by the past, or the present, or the future, is relative to *Rick* (voiced by Justin Roiland), a self-serving, self-centred, smart-ass of a scientist. For *Rick*, the past, and the present, and the future, are unstable variables, more like the directions on a meaningless compass.

In part, this instability also reflects the nature of *Rick*, the by-product of infinite versions of himself, jumping from reality to reality like ‘hermit crabs’ (dir. Archer and Chun 2017, min. 00:20:30–00:20:40), without consequence, and therefore, without responsibility. It is true chaos, in theory, and execution, fleeing the past fearlessly in the face of the fear of the future itself. There is an awareness to this fearlessness, too, one that is critically, if not cynically, questioning the very mechanics of its own storytelling, and the structure of its own narrative.

This awareness is manifest in a number of different ways, from the improvisational tone of the eighth episode of season one, *Rixty Minutes* (dir. Newton and Michels 2014), stifling laughing while delivering lines, to the self-reflexive finale of the tenth episode of season one, *Ricksy Business* (dir. Sandoval and Michels 2014), asking for the episode itself to ‘roll the credits’ (min. 00:20:57–00:20:59). Although it can appear glib, if not crude, at times, in medias res, there does belie a certain serious, albeit callous, quality to this awareness.

The first episode of season one, for example, the seemingly unimaginatively titled *Pilot* (dir. Roiland 2013), is jarring, and spontaneous, without context, or provocation. *Rick* all of a sudden spiels into a bedroom, drunk and dragging *Morty* (voiced by Justin Roiland) off into adventure, and in the middle of the night. A ‘surprise’ (min. 00:00:05–00:00:07), according to *Rick*, tempting *Morty* to blow up the world at the touch of a button, barely within the finish of the first minute of the episode.

There is no sense of the past to this *Pilot*, that is not in some way manifest in situ, the hallmark of a sitcom, like Larry David’s and Jerry Seinfeld’s *Seinfeld* (dir. 1989–1998), or left un/resolved, the hallmark of a status quo ante, like Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone* (dir. 1959–1964). *Rick* and *Morty* are always chasing the prospect of the future, and when the past does catch up with them, for example, by the sixth episode of season one, *Rick Potion #9* (dir. Sandoval and Michels 2014), the solution is one that side-steps the past into an alternate reality, in which the mistake of an alternate past is also the windfall of an alternate future.

The difference between *Rick and Morty* and *Back to the Future* is ultimately a critique about the nature of the prospect of the future itself. In *Back to the Future*, the nature of

the prospect of the future is destiny, the point of departure for *Part III*. In *Rick and Morty*, the nature of the prospect of the future is free will, the point of arrival for the *Pilot*. The difference between the two natures are two sides of the same coin, however. This nature is the prospect of the past in the prospect of the future, the past as a destiny, as a history yet to happen, but one that will have always, already happened. In the presence of the infinite, the alternate exacerbates this nature, the past as a destiny of free will, of every conceivable history yet to happen, and that will have always, already happened, for some realities, but not for others, like a choose-your-own-adventure.

The nature of the prospect of the future is one that remains un/known. It is like a horizon, one that can be chased, or considered from a distance, but never caught, or else constrained. To possess the future is to possess the past in the present of the future, and it is not just that, now, one is able to appreciate the nature of the prospect of this predicament, because of science, or because of science-fiction. The prospect of this predicament has been un/manifest in narrative, in the divine, in the demonic, in reproaches about immortality, since all of storytelling. The future is the thief called time.

It is simple time, and not technology, that limits, like the infinite, like the immortal, by being without constraint, the future of narrative. There already exists the technology to enable a time, like Erika Magnusson's and Daniel Andersson's 51,420 minute film *Logistics* (dir. 2012), and that is about the manufacture of a pedometer. It is more documentary than it is narrative, constitutionally raw in time. Those other narratives, like *Star Trek*, that achieve a similar girth through serialisation, are constitutionally disparate in narrative instead. Where the written word compresses time, the moving image enables it.

The future of narrative is limited, then, by the very sense of imagination it embodies, and that is relative to oneself, and one's own anthropocentrism, of which narrative has yet to, and yet may never, escape from. It is an anthropocentric mortality masking as an anthropocentric causality, that struggles to conceive beyond itself, beyond its progeny, even though technology demands it, now, and exponentially, through science, and science-fiction. What is needed is the ability to create new myths that foster new narratives, because 'All of our cultures have become transfixed by a dominant mythic framework that has evolved from the accumulated knowledge and experience of [the past]' (D'Aloia 1997, p. 4).

The concept of the theme is the germinal seed with which this narrative is invoked, and has always, already, been told, over and over, again. It must be done away with, if not altogether, at least in part. A new horizon of storytelling awaits those willing to accept the past in the future of the present, and to boldly go beyond that, into the unknown unknown, in space, and time, and thought.

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