

Projecting a Nostalgic Future: Nostalgia as Time Machine

Projeter un futur nostalgique. La nostalgie comme machine à voyager dans le temps

Zoë Anne Laks

Volume 29, Number 2, Summer 2021

Nostalgies du présent

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1079803ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1079803ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Laks, Z. A. (2021). Projecting a Nostalgic Future: Nostalgia as Time Machine. *Cinémas*, 29(2), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1079803ar>

Article abstract

Nostalgia conjures the past, but what does it mean to be nostalgic for a future time? This article develops a theoretical model for a critical nostalgia for the future, one that sets both past and future at a temporal remove from the present, exposing both the longing and the impossible distance—the pain (*algia*)—that lies at the heart of all nostalgias. Using a case study on *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960), this article examines how to address three temporal problems that arise from nostalgias for the future, which seemingly lead to a regressive and deterministic model of futurity. Through a present-bound perspective and anachronistic logic, this film demonstrates how nostalgia for the future can reflexively reveal nostalgia's inbuilt sense of distance, in order to unsettle linear and teleological conceptions of time and to open the possibility of an unwritten future.

Projecting a Nostalgic Future: Nostalgia as Time Machine

Zoë Anne Laks
Concordia University (Canada)

ABSTRACT

Nostalgia conjures the past, but what does it mean to be nostalgic for a future time? This article develops a theoretical model for a critical nostalgia for the future, one that sets both past and future at a temporal remove from the present, exposing both the longing and the impossible distance—the pain (*algia*)—that lies at the heart of all nostalgias. Using a case study on *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960), this article examines how to address three temporal problems that arise from nostalgias for the future, which seemingly lead to a regressive and deterministic model of futurity. Through a present-bound perspective and anachronistic logic, this film demonstrates how nostalgia for the future can reflexively reveal nostalgia's inbuilt sense of distance, in order to unsettle linear and teleological conceptions of time and to open the possibility of an unwritten future.

When we feel nostalgic, what and when is it that we long for? We may usually think of nostalgia as looking affectively back to the past, but this longing may also manifest as nostalgia for the future. Such logic recurs in certain brands of political rhetoric and advertisements, which can involve projecting the past onto a future with the promise of future gain.¹ Elsewhere, I have discussed a critical form of nostalgia that stages a longing for a fantastically unreal past, one not tethered to the present and articulated through a formal logic of artifice (Laks, forthcoming). I argued this reflexive nostalgic logic sharpens the dialectic embedded within all nostalgias, as a longing for fulfillment premised on its own inability to be fulfilled. This distance that lies at the heart of nostalgia is what prompts the *algia* (pain) of nostalgia, and in critical formulations may result in the recognition of the falsity of the nostalgic object, or *noema*.² Here

I extend this theory of “nostalgic artifice” to a forward-directed nostalgia: nostalgia for the future.

A future-directed nostalgia may appear inherently unproductive or regressive, as it involves retreating into an idealized past and mapping that past onto the future, and thereby closing that future off to new possibility. In line with contemporary scholarly discourse on nostalgia that works to recuperate and nuance its critical functions, however, here I aim to reclaim the critical potential of a future-directed nostalgia. I argue that a critical nostalgia for the future, one with the possibility of opening new horizons and taking a critical perspective on nostalgia’s function, must address three temporal problems: the indexicality problem (the way a future-nostalgia links to the past), the grounding problem (the way a future-nostalgia links to the present) and the circularity problem (the way a future-nostalgia links to the future).³ Here I apply these three problems to *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960), a film that is nostalgic for both future and past, to show how a future-oriented nostalgia might expose its own impossibility and reveal an unsettled or “critical temporality” (De Cristofaro 2018) and unwritten future. The film enacts a reflexive future-nostalgia through a traumatic rupture in linear narrative temporality that opens an “elsewhen,” an abstracted time set at such a distance that the nostalgic object becomes teleologically disconnected from the present. Because of the film’s formal and narrative logic of nostalgic artifice, which grounds the film within its historical moment of production (mid-nineteenth-century America), anachronisms expose the gap between the film’s present and the longed-for nostalgic *noema* of the future-past. Ultimately, this dialectical position of distance and proximity to the nostalgic object locates the film’s fantasy future at a temporal remove, within the unfulfillable gap at the core of nostalgic experience.

Nostalgic Artifice and *The Time Machine*

The Time Machine tells the story of George Wells, a man who invents a time machine on the eve of the twentieth century and relays his journeys into the near and far distant future to a circle of dinner party guests in the year 1900. George travels to 1917, 1940 and 1966, though the majority of his adventures take place

800,000 years into the future and detail his encounters with the descendants of humankind, the effete Eloi and the savage Morlocks. The film's narrative closely follows H. G. Wells's eponymous 1895 novella, although it departs from the original bleak conclusion to the Eloi's story, in which the Time Traveller (unnamed in the novella) accidentally sets a fire that kills his Eloi companion Weena and returns to the present having effected no lasting change on this untroubled future civilization. In contrast, the film depicts George leading a successful Eloi rebellion and suggests his return to a future with Weena at the end of the film.⁴

This film depicts nostalgia for both future and past, but fundamentally, I argue here that the film's nostalgia is a critical one; its nostalgia does not function as purely regressive or escapist, but instead admits a reflexive perspective on its own operation. It does so by emphasizing the falsity of the nostalgic *noema*, revealing it to be attractive yet artificial; the film thus eschews an uncritical regression into nostalgic fantasy. This is a dialectic built into nostalgia, but it is rarely expounded upon for its critical potential.⁵ Applying this lens to *The Time Machine*, we find that the film uses a melodramatic aesthetic of visual excess in order to draw out nostalgia's dialectic; the film thus has more in common with the 1950s aesthetic of Douglas Sirk than with the more overtly ironic and self-conscious tone that emerged during the nostalgic turn in the United States in the 1970s. In contrast, the 2002 remake of *The Time Machine* (Simon Wells) is openly reflexive in its nostalgia, at one point even breaking the fourth wall in referring to the original novella and film and stage adaptations by name. The remake follows in the wake of the American nostalgia boom in the 1970s, which generally relied upon an iconic and idealized vision of the 1950s, and ended up popularizing an artificial Populuxe-inspired language for nostalgia that remains a visual code for nostalgia today (Sprengler 2011, 39–64). Despite predating the nostalgia boom by a decade, the 1960 version of *The Time Machine* bridges the 1950s Populuxe aesthetic and the 1970s nostalgia for that aesthetic, employing its *mise en scène*, particularly a hyperbolic colour scheme, to link us dialectically to a past coded as both artificial and affective, as a form of nostalgic artifice.

Scholars have mapped similar functions to hypercoloured nostalgic aesthetics—for example, Eli Friedlander (2011, 41) provides a

psychologically based treatment of how immersive uses of colour in images may evoke a mood of childhood and the fantasy of totality through a sense of attachment to the world. Paul Grainge (2003, 214) discusses nostalgic uses of colour that offer the potential to reveal traces of the past transformed by the present. Similarly, Ute Holl (2014, 171) describes a process where past and present become connected through colour as “an instant affect.” *The Time Machine*’s luscious rendering in Metrocolor operates in a related way as Friedlander’s, Grainge’s and Holl’s discussions of the affective-nostalgic potential of colour, as it helps tint its past nostalgically with both fondness and artificiality. The film’s *fin-de-siècle* reconstruction is both stagey and abstract—interior sets are overburdened with clocks and other timekeeping devices, antiques and luxurious tones of red and brown which evoke an impression of the grand and antiquated as both nostalgically attractive and hyperbolically artificial.

When reading this film through the lens of nostalgic artifice, however, it becomes clear that this dialectical nostalgic position between attraction and distance pervades the film beyond its visual aesthetics. This occurs because the film both exploits the temporal gap between the *fin-de-siècle* time frame of the novella and the (then) present-day mid-century perspective of the film, and redoubles the uncertainty towards time travel espoused by the novella.⁶ More specifically, this uncertainty is drawn out because the film locates George’s adventures in an extended flashback sequence set off by dissolves and a suggestively oneiric musical prelude, thereby aligning his journeys through time with a venture into interiority.⁷ The film also explicitly aligns its time travel with nostalgia—George proclaims himself dissatisfied with the present because of the ubiquity of war, instead preferring the future to either past or present.⁸ Indeed, both novella and film suggest the possibility that these adventures through time might be taking place within the mind of the Time Traveller as an exercise in nostalgic imagination.⁹ Prior scholarship on this story has taken up this open invitation, for instance reading the story as a psychoanalysis session analogue and as a metaphor for the cinema; as Wong Hiu Wai (2014, 134) asserts, an air of doubt pervades the Time Traveller’s storytelling in the novella as a result of his interlocutors’ scepticism, with the narrator eventually losing an objective position as the Time Traveller’s

analyst and becoming embroiled in the imaginary of the analyst. Similarly, Jonathan Bignell (2004, 137) claims that the film allows the cinema-spectator-as-Time-Traveller to traverse different times and spaces to “an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhere.”¹⁰ As Siorcha Ní Fhlainn (2015, 180) puts it, time-travel narratives enact “a magical journey that permits a fantastic glimpse into the past, or of a potential future.” In this way, the film’s nostalgic time-travel sequences take place in an uncertain temporal relationship with the present, aligning the film’s nostalgia with the fantastical operations of imagination and memory.

***The Time Machine* and the Three Temporal Problems of a Nostalgia for the Future**

So far, we have examined the film’s relationship to nostalgia for the *fin-de-siècle* past. The film’s nostalgia not only points backward, however, but also forward into the future. *The Time Machine*’s nostalgia for the future specifically manifests through its mapping of an image of the past onto the future through a fabulative form of memory. A related blending of future and past through the creative operation of memory has been explicated by Domietta Torlasco (2013, vi) via her notion of the “future anterior,” which involves a digital memory that “originates from the future—one that remembers not only what happened but also what did not happen in our cinematic past (and yet might have, under different conditions), what ‘will have happened’ by virtue of these eccentric appropriations.” Torlasco applies this concept to archival theory through the digital “heretical archive,” but this notion of the future anterior also may help to explain the workings of nostalgia for the future, as a similarly porous approach to temporality and an analogous “disturbance in the order of time” (ix). In the case of *The Time Machine*, this unsettling of temporal order through nostalgia, as a creative form of memory, results in a messy future-past. Specifically, the future of *The Time Machine* is bound up with the past because of its contextualization within a flashback—as a retold event, the film’s future becomes its de facto past.

The alignment between future and past is reinforced visually through the film’s depiction of the year 802,701. This future time appears as an Edenic (and Aryan) paradise (though one with a dark

underside) which is also futuristic, especially in its minimalist and geometric interior design; its sense of futurity is also tainted with a sense of visual ruin, as a world of “ruinous splendour” (Wells 1895, 46). The film trades in tropes of pastness, including Egyptian icons (the sphinx-headed building and pyramid-like museum interior), outmoded styles of painting (including backdrops resembling neo-classical landscape painting and a rococo-style garden) and colonialist depictions of “primitive” peoples (who are rendered illiterate, ahistorical and childlike on the one hand, or degenerate, subhuman and cannibalistic on the other). Within this far-flung future age, the film thereby stages a sometimes problematic myth of returning to the past, enacting both regression and advancement and disturbing an easy sense of future or past, reality or fiction. This temporal overlap reflects the larger trope in science fiction of techno-primitivism, a technological anxiety which Doran Larson (2004, 198) has suggested in the context of the cyborg may serve as a sort of retreat, where we might “search for where we went wrong, for the place where we can ourselves rewrite history by turning technology against itself.” In this light, it becomes tempting to read future-oriented nostalgias and other confluences of past with future as an inherently regressive endeavour—a cyclical move towards a myth of safety and assurance in imagining the future as a return to the past. In order to properly interrogate how this future-oriented nostalgia may work in a critical, reflexive fashion, however, we must examine what this nostalgia actually takes as its object.

Prior scholarship has various answers to the question of what the nostalgic *noema* is: a spatio-temporal sense of belonging, often represented in childhood (Muller 2006, 740, 756); a non-existent, lost home (Boym 2007, 7); a spatially embodied past being (Malpas 2011, 94); or “a world as it was once established in a place” (Casey 1987, 363); among others. In my formulation, nostalgic artifice is nostalgic for the idea of pastness, or temporal loss in an abstract sense—this nostalgia longs not for a real past, or even a specific event in time, but rather operates as a generalized experience of pastness itself.¹¹ This configuration matches with *The Time Machine*’s depiction of nostalgia; the film’s pre-credits sequence, for instance, portrays various timekeeping devices (a sundial, an hourglass and manifold clocks) floating through an otherwise-empty

black screen. This imagery establishes the film's relationship to the passing of time in an abstract non-place. This same effect occurs in the film's time-travel montages, which employ time-lapse footage of flowers on an unlocalizable black background. Indeed, the film generally relies on symbols of pastness rather than specific historical or spatial anchors to the past—Bignell (2004, 143) describes this as the film “draw[ing] on the cultural currency of signs in the physical environment which were in circulation in the period when the film was made.” In this sense, the film's nostalgic artifice places its abstracted past at a fantastical remove from the present, as pure constructed fantasy rather than as an embodied past; while it does not directly interrogate those tropes as constructions, as we shall see, the film does enable a reflexive perspective by displacing these nostalgic objects into the future.

Given that the nostalgic *noema* of nostalgic artifice—like other formulations of nostalgia—is past directed, how is it that this nostalgia might be redirected towards the future? Other work on future-oriented nostalgias describes the projection of a past into the future to yield different critical functions.¹² Yao Sijia (2017, 91), in her eco-critical analysis of Jia Zhangke's films, describes a nostalgia for the future that functions as a critical and painful reflection on both the loss of the past and the ruins of the present as a call to future action. Frederick J. Solinger (2014, 75) theorizes a nostalgia for the future as being “for that which has yet to happen but feels as though it already has,” so that in response to a dissatisfaction with the present, the nostalgic operation looks forward to realizing a novel future (79, 80, 85). Yet in both Yao's and Solinger's formulations, while the nostalgic experience is forward directed, the nostalgic *noema* is still an object from the past. Just as with *The Time Machine's* nostalgia, this has to be the case, because while the past may be anticipated or projected nostalgically into the future, one cannot be properly nostalgic for the future in itself, only for the past somehow nested in the future. This is because nostalgic artifice, as with most articulations of nostalgia, is a form of memory, and therefore its affective relationship is past directed, even as its *noema* is unbounded from a historically verifiable past.¹³

Given that nostalgia for the future must allow the projection of a past into futurity, it becomes helpful to conceive of this taking

place within a porous time detached from linear temporality. As both Solinger and Yao emphasize, future-nostalgia “transcends a linear understanding of time” (Solinger 2014, 78) and entangles past, present and future (Yao 2017, 94). Here I refer to this as an “elsewhen” or time otherwise, in which a nostalgia for temporal loss and pastness takes place in an abstract time not tethered to a specific “when,” in order to enable a temporal flattening between past and future. This, in other words, is one answer to the indexicality problem for a future nostalgia—or, in other words, how nostalgia for the future links to the past. Nostalgic artifice and, as we shall see, *The Time Machine*, articulates its nostalgia for a sense of pastness as pointing towards an elsewhen, thereby asserting a non-teleological relationship with temporality; by displacing the nostalgic object of the past into the future, the nostalgic *noema* is flung an impossible temporal distance, set at the furthest remove from nostalgic fulfillment.

The Time Machine opens this elsewhen at a temporal rupture point: a moment when past, present and future collapse together. One way of understanding such a rupture is through the analogy of the traumatic aporia or paradox.¹⁴ A traumatic aporia is a moment that threatens to sever historical and subjective narrative (Sklarew 2010, 104, 107; Pollock 2009, 40) and thus stands radically apart from representation—not as an event but as “some kind of gap” (Pollock 2009, 42, 43). While the time machine itself creates minute points of narrative and representational rupture in its jumping across disparate times, this realization of an elsewhen occurs most conspicuously when the volcanic eruption—the film’s metaphor for war trauma—ruptures the narrative timeline. During his sojourn in 1966, George finds himself in the middle of an escalated Cold War, when, amidst air raid sirens, an “atomic” nuclear satellite explodes and destroys the street in front of him; in this apocalyptic sequence, the sky turns orange, houses and trees are set ablaze, and the ground cracks open. These shots are temporally and spatially discontinuous from one another, serving as abstracted indices of destruction not tethered to context or temporality, taking place both anywhere and anywhen. A similarly spatio-temporally disconnected shot of a volcano erupts and across a series of cuts pours lava onto the street, reducing the city to ruin and returning human civilization to the

Earth. As George climbs into his time machine and speeds far into the future, enveloped by darkness under a cascade of cooling rock, this moment serves as the narrative and temporal breaking point severing the present from the future, the familiar from the elsewhere, connecting him to the year 802,701 while also separating this unfathomably distant future from the present. As a traumatic rupture point, this volcano sequence detaches George's journey from a linear timeline and opens up the elsewhere, a fantastically untethered temporality that enables the collapse of past with future.

Thus far, we have seen how the film's future-directed nostalgic artifice takes its object to be the idea of pastness, specifically a past in the future, within an unbounded elsewhere. As it stands, however, this formulation of future-directed nostalgia remains uncritical and regressive, as it seemingly enables a circularity where the future can be reduced to a simple repetition of the past. As we shall see, the way in which the film overcomes this circularity is by grounding itself in a present perspective which allows its anachronisms to undermine nostalgic attachment through a sense of unbridgeable distance. *The Time Machine* anchors its elsewhere in the 1960s American present through its formal logic, which resonates with a Populuxe aesthetic sensibility bound to its time period, for instance sharing a visual resemblance to Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli melodramas of the same era. The film's visual style remains coherent throughout the film, despite traversing frame narratives and flashbacks, from the 1890s to the 1960s, as well as the inconceivably far future almost a million years removed from the modern world. The film's present is otherwise conspicuously absent, except through its political and aesthetic sensibilities. Even its projected vision of 1966 is futuristic from a distinctly 1960s vantage point,¹⁵ while at the same time, in Jonathan Bignell's (2004, 142) words, resembling "a sunny American suburb." The film's anchoring of its aesthetic logic in a continuously present-day sensibility is how it addresses future-nostalgia's grounding problem, by establishing a connection to the present moment. By orienting the film around an underlying sense of the (then) present-day, *The Time Machine* thereby provides the foundation for a gap to emerge between the nostalgic experience rooted in the present, and the nostalgic *noema* which is located in another temporality. As we will see, this anchoring proves vital for

a critical formulation of nostalgia that recognizes the impossible distance to the nostalgic *noema*: without a sense of nostalgia's place in the present, its attachment threatens to smooth over the constituent gap within nostalgia, leaving a nostalgic individual floating blissfully in a temporally unbounded elsewhere.

This gap emerges in *The Time Machine* as a result of the film's anachronisms, which serve as temporal disruptions and stage a dis-belonging of the past in the present. Stefano Baschiera and Elena Caoduro (2016, 1) have made a case for how nostalgia becomes aligned with the anachronistic, which in their words forms part of our "new sensibility towards the past"; in their account, anachronisms, as well as archaisms, allow possibilities for creativity in the future through "a dynamic practice of exchange between past and present" (5). The anachronistic-nostalgic gap which enables such an exchange between then and now shares with Torlasco's (2013, 51, 53) concept of "archiving otherwise" an imaginative and interpretative mode of temporal relation that places a virtual past in dialogue with the present and future. Torlasco uses the example of the filmic cut as a fold bearing a memory from the future (53), serving as "the promise (and the threat) of a heterogeneous continuity, the site of an excess, a self-effacing and yet fruitful remainder" (59). In *The Time Machine*, a similarly excessive and heterogeneous fold occurs in the case of the film's anachronisms. The clearest example of this is the motif of the air raid siren—introduced in the 1966 section of the narrative, it recurs in the year 802,701 when the Morlocks use the siren to lure the Eloi into their underground lair. This displacement of a distinctly twentieth-century technology to a time 800,000 years removed functions anachronistically, even as it attempts to provide a continuous and teleological relationship with the present. In this way, the film's anachronisms serve as examples of hysteresis, that is, as persistent effects of a cause which is no longer present. Philippe Théophanidis and Ghislain Thibault (2016) have applied this term to the case of media, arguing that hysteresis in media objects might take the form of outdated features in newer technology in order to maintain a continuity with the past and "smoothe[n] the experience of novelty" (16) while at the same time acknowledging the discontinuity it attempts to bridge (13). Just as with Théophanidis and Thibault's hysteresis,

The Time Machine's anachronisms thus enact discontinuity even as they attempt to smooth over ruptures in time.

In a similar way, an anachronistic and hystericist temporal disruption occurs when George attempts to project the twentieth-century present into the future—to make the future resemble his own time. Unlike in the novella, in allowing George to lead a successful Eloi rebellion, the film depicts George bringing (back) to the Eloi a sense of scientific curiosity, ending their so-called life of leisure in helping them overthrow the Morlocks. In this moment George, and the film, threatens to succumb to nostalgic attachment as the sense of distance that separates the present from the nostalgic elsewhere borders on collapse, as here George essentially attempts to live within his nostalgic desire. In George attempting to erase the gap between the nostalgic future-past and the present, he risks trapping himself in an uncritical nostalgia, as well as a circular formulation of the future. Once the distance to the present vanishes, and the year 802,701 begins to resemble the year 1960, the Edenic illusion of the nostalgic future-past is destroyed. For what happens when the Eloi's life of leisure ends, when they must begin to work for a living and they once again develop a historical relationship to time? The cycle can only start again, and the human preoccupation with war and conflict threatens to begin anew. Thus the film's anachronistic discontinuities re-emphasize that however much we may wish to escape into our nostalgia, this process is both unproductive (as it threatens to trap the future within a circular relationship with the past and restart the cycle of dissatisfaction with the present) and impossible or paradoxical (as it results in anachronism). *The Time Machine's* answer to the grounding problem is thus not only to anchor the film within a present perspective, but also to allow gaps to emerge between the present and the nostalgic elsewhere, thereby critically recognizing the function of the painful distance between now and an imagined then within the nostalgic dialectic.

In spite of this recognition of the necessity of distance to the nostalgic object, the film concludes with George's decision to once again leave his home in 1900 and return to the future to "build a new world" with Weena. While this seems at first glance to stage a retreat into an uncritical and regressive nostalgia, the film also posits that this nostalgic future is one we may never reach, and it

thus frees itself from a deterministic view of the future. We may make sense of how the film does so through Diletta De Cristofaro's concept of critical temporalities, which disturb traditionally teleological and hegemonic time. In De Cristofaro's (2018, 3) analysis of post-apocalyptic fiction, she argues that critical temporalities undo "traditional apocalyptic logic [...] to order time and make it intelligible, by disclosing that the whole course of human history is tending towards a final resolution which will make sense of everything that happened before." As a time-travel narrative, *The Time Machine's* time machine establishes de facto an uneasy teleological relationship to time—the spatialized and traversable configuration of the fourth dimension allows a temporal play that collapses linearity. Both versions of the story also avoid the "grandfather paradox" problems associated with determinism, which would be fatal for a critical future-nostalgia; this is because viewing the future as fatalistic, a determined product of the past and present, espouses a regressively teleological view of the future. Instead, as Elizabeth Grosz (2005, 3) reminds us, the future is essentially indeterminate, having "no existence in the present," and only being "generated through the untimely reactivation of the virtuality of the past." Indeed, both *The Time Machine's* original film and novella are concerned with maintaining the possibility of an open future, with George explicitly asking "Can Man control his destiny? Can he change the shape of things to come?" and the novella ending with the assertion by the narrator that "the future is still black and blank—is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of [the Time Traveller's] story" (Wells 1895, 152).

How a future-directed nostalgia addresses the idea of a deterministic future is the circularity problem—specifically in the case of *The Time Machine*, how nostalgia might move beyond the apparently regressive flattening and circularity that is involved in collapsing the present with the nostalgic future elsewhere. Just as with Torlasco's (2018, x) future anterior, this is a move towards "transformative repetition, instead of closing past and future in a circle of blind, compulsive return." *The Time Machine* addresses this problem by leaving the fate of the future visually and narratively indeterminate. While it certainly depicts a far future time, one that is implied to exist in a teleological relationship with the present, its fantastical

and anachronistic elsewhere raises uncertainty as to its status as *the* future.¹⁶ As with all time-travel narratives, future possibilities multiply with every tick of the eponymous time machine. But beyond this, the future also becomes unbounded from a teleological relationship with the present when it is treated through the lens of nostalgia—by reading the time machine as a nostalgia machine, the nostalgic future-past (the elsewhere) becomes unbound from a linear, logical and teleological connection with time. However, and most importantly, the film avoids positing a circular relationship between past, present and future because of its frame narrative and flashback structure. As the film's future exists diegetically within the film's past—in other words, as a flashback—the notion of a predetermined future becomes uncertain; in other words, the future has already happened, but only insofar as it is George's past. The future proper never exists in the diegesis without being filtered through George's narration—his retelling of his own past—because the time-travel sequences only exist within George's memory in the wider frame narrative.

The Time Machine's uncertain attitude towards futurity emerges plainly in the film's final moments, when George's return to the future remains a narrative gap. The future is only inferred by those who remain in the present through the traces and absences George leaves in his wake (the flower, the tracks left by the time machine, the missing books) in the same way as we all must divine the future from our position in the present.¹⁷ Both versions of the story thus leave the future indeterminate—whereas the novella suggests that the Time Traveller may have travelled anywhen, in the film this untold narrative gap allows the future to remain similarly polysemic, disavowing a teleological position for the future and with it, the ability to retrospectively assign a logical and deterministic sense of progress to events. In De Cristofaro's (2018, 19–20) account, she similarly emphasizes the importance of the narrative gap in critical temporalities' potential to open future possibility and agency; in an unwritten future, De Cristofaro asserts, such "critical temporalities [...] invite us to conceive of narrative, and therefore of history, beyond the sense of an ending" (19). In this sense, the film offers no concrete ending or "happily ever after" for George and Weena.

Thus against the (dis)comforting assurance that the future can indeed resemble the past, the film conspicuously leaves

any realization of the future absent. If more traditional views of future-oriented nostalgias hold true, such as M. Mike Nawas and Jerome J. Platt's (1965, 55) early hypothesis that these nostalgias arise from concern or dread over the future, this is indeed a radical move, since foreclosing indeterminacy would allay such concerns, and would ultimately enable a retreat into an unproblematized and fully realized nostalgic future. Instead, the film's future-directed nostalgia, its nostalgic *noema*, is placed forever out of reach and the future thereby remains unwritten. This move opens a critical perspective on the film's nostalgic longing for the future and escapes the problem of circularity for future-oriented nostalgias—by re-emphasizing the constitutive distance within the dialectic of nostalgia, the gap at nostalgia's core remains unfulfilled. *The Time Machine's* untold ending thereby functions as profoundly nostalgic, maintaining a critical edge in balancing its attraction towards the nostalgic *noema* (evidenced in George's desire to return to his past) with a profoundly distanced position (uncertainty over his future). Through its nostalgic artifice, the film thereby ultimately asserts that however much we may desire to map an idealized and mythic past onto the future, we can never realize this desire both because the nostalgic *noema* lies at an impossible distance from us in the present and because the future is indeterminate.

In closing, as we continue to map the terrain of nostalgia both for the future and the past, it remains vital that we critically assess the inner workings of nostalgia to parse how each configuration might be rejected or reclaimed. When we consider nostalgias for the future, reclaiming a non-teleological vision of the future remains paramount, especially in our current climate of uncertainty. As we navigate today's global pandemic, neo-liberal economy and geological age of the Anthropocene, we all must increasingly learn how to live in a state of precariousness, uncertain of both our future and the future of the planet. While we may be tempted to regress into nostalgic fantasy in response, as we have seen, the danger in failing to recognize nostalgia's grounding in the present moment leads to an uncritical, regressive and circular configuration. This is because such nostalgias lose the sense of their pain, the distance that separates us from what we may desire, as an uncritical longing can insidiously pave over the reality of the past and our distance to it, an especially

alarming effect when mobilized in contemporary political contexts. However, as I aimed to show here, even future-directed nostalgias remain theoretically productive and can retain a critical edge, and the key to unlocking new and creative uses for nostalgia lies in the recognition that the future of nostalgia remains unwritten.

NOTES

1. In the context of advertising, the projection of the past onto the future can occur by configuring the past as a consumable object in the tradition of Fredric Jameson's (1991, 18) nostalgia film, which "convey[s] 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image." See, for example, Ryan Lizardi (2014, 31, 36) on nostalgia's "ready-made" consumable past and Paul Grainge (2002, 11) on nostalgia as mode or "consumable style." Emmanuelle Fantin (2014, 101) has argued that nostalgic advertising in Citroën advertisements opens a discontinuity of time where temporalities merge so that the nostalgic object may become "a palimpsest of time" (103).
2. *Noema* refers to the object of thought, originating from the Greek word νόημα.
3. These conventions serve as my own conceptual framework for future-nostalgia's temporal relationships, although they may also be applied to nostalgia more broadly. What a nostalgia indexes is what its *noema* points towards, whether it be a distinct past time connected to the present through an imprint or trace, or an imagined connection to a general sense of pastness unattached to a linear timeline. Nostalgia's grounded quality specifies how localized the experience of nostalgia is within the present moment. Circularity refers to how the nostalgic *noema* is projected into the future, specifically how nostalgias for the future avoid or reinforce a temporal loop dictating that the future will repeat the past.
4. The film employs a problematic cocktail of sexual and racial politics, projecting the fantasy of colonial white patriarchy, where the white man, as embodiment of rationalism and scientific discovery, brings both curiosity and knowledge to subaltern colonial subjects. In this respect, the past for which the film is nostalgic is not one undeserving of its own criticisms—this does not mean, however, that the way in which the film enacts its nostalgia cannot be recognized for its critical potential. Indeed, this distinction between nostalgic object and nostalgic experience presents a pitfall for nostalgia scholarship more broadly, as we run the risk of conflating the nostalgic *noema* with its operation when imprecision in language can yield confusion between what nostalgia is and what nostalgia is for. For more on this distinction, see Christine Sprengler (2011, 63–64).
5. This critical function is evoked to greater and lesser degrees when scholars emphasize a nostalgic recognition of the impossibility of retrieving the lost nostalgic object—see, for instance, Annika Lems (2016, 434–53), Edward S. Casey (1987, 379–80) and Jeff Malpas (2011, 89).
6. In the novella, memory serves as an implicit analogue for the time machine, as both enact the possibility of "jump[ing] back for a moment" (Wells 1895, 7). Additionally, the Time Traveller eventually expresses doubt over his own memories of time travelling: "Did I ever make a Time Machine, or a model of a Time Machine? Or is it all only a dream?" (147)
7. The Time Traveller of the novella similarly recounts his adventures to his companions retrospectively; unlike in the film, however, his demonstration with the

prototype time machine occurs within the outer frame narrative rather than in flashback.

8. The novella does not contain the same overt layer of nostalgia or dissatisfaction with the present as the film, with the Time Traveller instead championing our age as the “ripe prime of the human race” (Wells 1895, 98). The Time Traveller does express nostalgia for his own time, however, when he mourns the loss of Weena and believes himself to be stranded in the far future: “I began to think of this house of mine, of this fireside, of some of you, and with such thoughts came a longing that was pain” (128). This adaptational change might be explained given each iteration’s relationship to different social anxieties, with the film working in response to the Cold War and the novella in response to class conflict as well as Darwin’s evolutionary theory (Bignell 2004, 136).
9. Such readings are digetically foreclosed by both versions of the story, as they ultimately provide indexical evidence of the veracity of time travel, including far-future flowers in both versions and a shot of the time machine and its subsequent vanishing in the film. Although the story provides these assurances, the alignment of the time machine with interiority nevertheless persists throughout.
10. Bignell’s (2004) argument is related to earlier work expounding upon the deep connections between cinematographic and photographic media and nostalgia, especially vis-à-vis the foundational work of Roland Barthes (1980) and his discussion of photography’s quality of “having been there.” Many scholars in the past decade have also taken up this discussion with respect to television; see, for instance, Amy Holdsworth (2011), Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz (2014) and Kathleen Williams (2016).
11. The nostalgia of nostalgic artifice always remains phenomenological, that is, based in experience, because nostalgic artifice arises through the dialectical contact between spectator and text. Thus if a spectator, then or now, experiences this aesthetic dialectically, the aesthetic is operating as nostalgia, specifically as nostalgic artifice. Since nostalgia can only occur in the now, the validity and meaning of the experience is contained within the present, obtaining its significance intrinsically, as a lived experience like memory, rather than extrinsically, as with history. For more on intrinsic versus extrinsic significance in memory and nostalgia, see Crowell (1999, 94).
12. Magali Uhl and Katharina Niemeyer (2021) also discuss a forward-directed nostalgia in the context of its communicative potential in their essay on the “Les postes du futur” (*Mail from the Future*) project that took place in 2017 in Montréal, Québec, in which residents wrote and mailed postcards to be delivered 25 years in the future.
13. As with other non-indexical and affective forms of memory such as false, non-believed or social forms of memory which might, as Marianne Hirsch (2008, 124) puts it, rely on a sort of “performative index,” here memory is conceived of through its experiential rather than representational properties. Even in this case, however, nostalgia as a form of memory must remain a past-directed experience, as this is one of the essential qualities that distinguishes nostalgia from imagination.
14. See further work on this by Cathy Caruth (1996) and John Van Rys (2013), among others.
15. The chrome radiation gear in particular resembles a similar aesthetic in other science fiction film and television of the era—for example, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, 1959) and the original *Lost in Space* (1965–68).

16. A teleological relationship between past and future is posited and then subsequently rejected by the novella—the Time Traveller puts forward a hypothesis about encountering “humanity upon the wane” as a “logical consequence” of the forward-march of progress (Wells 1895, 50); he almost immediately discounts his theory of progress, however, as incorrect (55).
17. In the novella, the traces the Time Traveller leaves behind are in the form of two white flowers from the future, left in the hands of the narrator, “shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle” (Wells 1895, 152).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland. 1980. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Baschiera, Stefano, and Elena Caoduro. 2016. “The New Old: Archaisms and Anachronisms across Media—Editorial.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 12: 1–7. <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue12/HTML/EditorialBaschieraCaoduro.html>.
- Bignell, Jonathan. 2004. “Another Time, Another Space: Modernity, Subjectivity and *The Time Machine*.” In *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond, 136–44. New York: Wallflower Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/redm336488.22>.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2007. “Nostalgia and Its Discontents.” *The Hedgehog Review* 9 (2): 7–18. <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Casey, Edward S. 1987. “The World of Nostalgia.” *Man and World* 20 (4): 361–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01252103>.
- Crowell, Steven Galt. 1999. “Spectral History: Narrative, Nostalgia, and the Time of the I.” *Research in Phenomenology* 29 (1): 83–104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24654817>.
- De Cristofaro, Diletta. 2018. “Critical Temporalities: *Station Eleven* and the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel.” *Open Library of Humanities* 4 (2): 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.206>.
- Fantin, Emmanuelle. 2014. “Anti-nostalgia in Citroën’s Advertising Campaign.” In *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 95–104. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375889_7.
- Friedlander, Eli. 2011. “A Mood of Childhood in Benjamin.” In *Philosophy’s Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, edited by Hagi Kenaan and Ilit Ferber, 39–50. London: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1503-5_4.
- Grainge, Paul. 2002. *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*. Westport: Praeger.
- Grainge, Paul. 2003. “Colouring the Past: *Pleasantville* and the Textuality of Media Memory.” In *Memory and Popular Film*, edited by Paul Grainge, 202–19. Manchester: Manchester University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jfm0.15>.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2005. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today* 29 (1): 103–28. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>.
- Holdsworth, Amy. 2011. *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holl, Ute. 2014. “Nostalgia, Tinted Memories and Cinematic Historiography: On Otto Preminger’s *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958).” In *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past*,

- Present, and Future*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 160–75. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375889_13.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12100qm>.
- Laks, Zoë Anne. Forthcoming. "On Longing for Loss: A Theory of Cinematic Memory and an Aesthetics of Nostalgia." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*.
- Larson, Doran. 2004. "Machine as Messiah: Cyborgs, Morphs and the American Body Politic." In *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond, 191–204. New York: Wallflower Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/redm336488.27>.
- Lems, Annika. 2016. "Ambiguous Longings: Nostalgia as the Interplay among Self, Time and World." *Critique of Anthropology* 36 (4): 419–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X16654549>.
- Lizardi, Ryan. 2014. *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*. London: Lexington Books.
- Malpas, Jeff. 2011. "Philosophy's Nostalgia." In *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, edited by Hagi Kenaan and Ilit Ferber, 87–101. London: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1503-5_7.
- Muller, Adam. 2006. "Notes Toward a Theory of Nostalgia: Childhood and the Evocation of the Past in Two European 'Heritage' Films." *New Literary History* 37 (4): 739–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057976>.
- Nawas, M. Mike, and Jerome J. Platt. 1965. "A Future-Oriented Theory of Nostalgia." *Journal of Individual Psychology* 21 (1): 51–57.
- Niemeyer, Katharina, and Daniela Wentz. 2014. "Nostalgia is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series." In *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 129–38. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375889_10.
- Ní Fhlainn, Sorcha. 2015. "'There's Something Very Familiar About All This': Time Machines, Cultural Tangents, and Mastering Time in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy." *Adaptation* 9 (2): 164–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apv028>.
- Pollock, Griselda. 2009. "Art/Trauma/Representation." *Parallax* 15 (1): 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534640802604372>.
- Sklarew, Myra. 2010. "Crossing Boundaries: Memory and Trauma." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 29: 102–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41206136>.
- Solinger, Frederick J. 2014. "Nostalgia for the Future: Remembrance of Things to Come in Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 45 (3): 75–99. <https://journalhosting.ualgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/35389>.
- Sprengler, Christine. 2011. *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film*. New York: Berghahn Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdbm4>.
- Theophanidis, Philippe, and Ghislain Thibault. 2016. "Media Hysteresis: Persistence through Change." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 12 (1): 8–23. <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue12/HTML/ArticleTheophanidisThibault.html>.
- Torlasco, Domietta. 2013. *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt2jccdz>.
- Uhl, Magali, and Katharina Niemeyer. 2021. "10000 Cartes postales pour 2042. Imaginations et nostalgies instantanées du futur." In *Nostalgies contemporaines. Médias, technologies et cultures*, edited by Emmanuelle Fantin, Sébastien Fevry and Katharina Niemeyer. Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion.

- Van Rys, John. 2013. "Narrative Truth in Canadian Historical Fiction: In Between Veracity and Imagination." In *Truth Matters: Knowledge, Politics, Ethics, Religion*, edited by Lambert Zuidervaat, Allyson Carr, Matthew Klaassen and Ronnie Shuker, 155–71. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32b7h7.1>.
- Wells, H. G. 1895. *The Time Machine*. London: Heinemann. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuc.1323569>.
- Williams, Kathleen. 2016. "The Wonder Years: Nostalgia, Memory and Pastness in Television Credits." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 12 (1): 59–77. <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue12/HTML/ArticleWilliams.html>.
- Wong Hiu Wai. 2014. "Nobody Listens to the Story in *The Time Machine*? Re-Examining Benjamin's Nostalgia for Storytelling from Lacan's Theory of Transference." *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities* 36 (1): 115–42.
- Yao Sijia. 2017. "Nostalgia for the Future: Home Landscape in the Films of Jia Zhangke." *Tamkang Review* 47 (2): 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.6184/TKR201706-6>.

RÉSUMÉ

Projeter un futur nostalgique. La nostalgie comme machine à voyager dans le temps **Zoë Anne Laks**

La nostalgie évoque le passé, mais que signifie être nostalgique d'un temps futur? Cet article développe un modèle théorique pour une nostalgie critique pour l'avenir, qui place le passé et le futur à l'écart temporel du présent, exposant à la fois le désir et l'impossible distance – la douleur (*algie*) – qui se trouve au cœur de toutes les nostalgies. À travers une étude de cas du film *The Time Machine* (George Pal, 1960), cet article cherche comment aborder trois problèmes temporels qui découlent de la nostalgie du futur, qui conduisent apparemment à un modèle régressif et déterministe de l'avenir. À travers une perspective liée au présent et une logique anachronique, ce film montre comment la nostalgie du futur peut révéler par réflexe le sentiment de distance inhérent à la nostalgie, afin de déstabiliser les conceptions linéaires et téléologiques du temps et d'ouvrir la possibilité d'un futur non écrit.