"The future isn't what you thought": Evolution, Degradation, and Scientific Romance in Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time* (1979)

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Abstract:
In Nicholas Meyer's 1979 science-fiction fantasy *Time After Time*, H.G. Wells, played by Malcolm MacDowell, travels from Victorian London to twentieth-century San Francisco in pursuit of Jack the Ripper. His quest to save utopia takes several unexpected turns, not least of all because all of his concepts of self and society have proved erroneous. In life and work, H.G. Wells's utopian speculative fiction was informed by a Victorian idealism rooted in socio-economic theories in turn rooted in concepts of biology and physics, which now seem as quaint as the idealism itself. The twinned forces of evolution and degradation inform a great deal of Victorian writing, particularly speculative and scientific study. Meyer's film differs from 'straight' or 'direct' adaptations of Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) in many important respects, but at its core is the philosophical and ideological conflict between utopian and dystopic visions of human 'progress' as in 1979 Jack the Ripper is less 'deviant' than the upright Wells, and adapts to modernity with much greater ease. The film is also a late 1970s romantic comedy, which re-asserts traditional masculine and feminine roles through the use of the Victorian frame, even as it touches upon the New Hollywood *zeitgeist* of contemporary adult relationships in the light of new feminism.

Keywords: cinema, contagion, degeneration, evolution, feminism, romance, science, time, *Time After Time* (1979), utopia.

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In writer/director Nicholas Meyer's 1979 romantic fantasy thriller *Time After Time*, H.G. Wells journeys from London of 1893 to San Francisco of 1979 in pursuit of Jack the Ripper, falling in love with a modern 'liberated' woman on the way. This high-concept hook was sufficiently quirky for the relatively modestly budgeted film to find an audience in the era of both the burgeoning blockbuster, being released the same year as Robert Wise's *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), and of the new romantic comedy, in the wake of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). Like other films of its time, the

combination of retro postmodernism and new classicism (generally known as New Hollywood) was both a selling point and a focus of some subtle generic revisionism. Yet the central conflict in *Time After Time* is, as in H.G. Wells's novel *The Time Machine* (1895), upon which it draws, philosophical and ideological, with Wells here representing Victorian idealism and the Ripper embodying the novel's *realpolitik* of the id. The protagonist and antagonist, Wells and the Ripper, might respectively also be seen to represent the dialectically opposed forces of evolution and degradation or degeneration: the twinned anxieties of the Victorian period about the shape of the future.

Certainly few who read Wells's first novel assumed it was anything less than part of a developing social and political argument upon which Wells had been given to expound in various forums. Its mythic framing of Marxism and Darwinism in the context of the possibilities for human progress took the form of a story of time travel. In the novel, the unnamed Time Traveller journeys from Victorian London to the future of England and finds that what initially seems a harmonious subjugation of nature by a tranquil, pastoral *homo sapiens* is in fact a counter-evolution of man into two species of abhuman beasts – one of which feeds upon the other.[1]

As Robert M. Philmus points out in his analysis of the logic of prophecy in *The Time Machine*, this projected future is derived directly from a reading of the currents and crises of the Time Traveller's (and therefore Wells's) present. In fact, according to Philmus, the Time Traveller is aware of this, at one point saying: "At first proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position" (Wells 1982: 58). David Lodge has also observed that Wells's writing was based on observation of and frustration with the British social system, but additionally notes that Wells's 'prophecy' is not so much either scientific or pseudo-religious, but "intuitive and imaginative. Its power is a rhetorical power, its truth is a literary truth" (Lodge 1971: 27). At the novel's conclusion, when the Time Traveller tells his tale to his skeptical party guests, he adds "No. I cannot expect you to believe it. Take it as a lie–or a prophecy. Say I dreamed it in the workshop. Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere stroke of art to enhance its interest"

(Wells 1982: 58). This makes both the authorial reflexivity and the social agenda quite explicit, even if neither the Time Traveller nor the narrator is specifically personified as H.G. Wells.[2]

The Time Machine has been filmed several times, most famously in 1960 by George Pal and most recently in 2002 by Wells's own great-grandson, Simon Wells. It has been observed by more than one commentator that the cinema's capacity to visualise shifts in temporal frame and temporal consciousness by editing and other cinematic devices makes it a type of time machine in itself. Brooks Landon has observed that this is not merely just a textual concern, but a matter of ontology: "The idea of time travel may have been codified first in SF writing, but film's narratives merely invoke that general idea as a rationale for assembling a syntax of film-specific practices" (Landon 1992: 82). Much of the experience of cinema in late Victorian and early Edwardian times was of wondrous and disorienting spectacle, what Tom Gunning has christened a "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1990: 102),[3] built around tricks and gimmicks positing what would become a profound shift in the perception of space and time. Early cinema innovator Robert Paul even filed a British patent for a type of fairground attraction based on Wells's time machine in 1895: a device that would create the illusion of the rapid passage through space and time by means of a slideshow presentation of views projected around a rocking platform (see Jay 2006).

Pal's as well as Wells's versions of *The Time Machine* are easily read within both aesthetic-technological and socio-political paradigms: as cutting-edge vehicles for special effects technology and legible as rather politically conservative readings of heroism and future-shock. In both cases the sturdy Victorian hero aligns himself with the saintly Eloi against the mutant proletarian Morlocks (as does the protagonist of the novel, granted), but neither film represents the indolent passivity of the Eloi as itself a type of degradation (which the novel does), more a case of a repressed people needing a bit of a push to overcome the obstacles presented by their monstrous others.

Writing of Pal's film, Douglas Palumbo observes that the substitution and emblematising of the politics of the Cold War for Victorian-era debates on class and evolution fundamentally shift that film's view of utopia and of socio-political and biological entropy. He observes how a considerably simplified and more optimistic parable of messianic

death and resurrection where Cold War mythology permits the film to "resist any suggestion of irreversible regression" (Palumbo 1995: 206-07). Steven McLean further argues that Wells's text consciously inverts Herbert Spencer's developmental hypothesis (which sees evolution as increasing differentiation and diversification, a hypothesis, McLean argues, which reinforces class and caste-based oppressions under Victorian capitalism) and posits a social and biological degeneration into simpler and less identifiably human beings (and societies) "in order to challenge Spencer's complacent assumption that evolution is necessarily progressive" (McLean 2012: 24). John Partington further extends this to encompass the eugenic dimensions of Wells's characterisation of the Eloi and the Morlocks. He speculates that the Morlocks oversaw the breeding of the Eloi (who seemed incapable of desire or love). This suggests the deployment of then-modish positive eugenics with disastrous outcomes "both by the Eloi when maintaining themselves as a class apart and afterwards by the Morlocks when farming the Eloi for food, which is supported by the stereotyped imagery throughout the story" (Partington 2002: 65).

This is, as McLean argues, entirely readable within the context of a class-based argument about the need for social reform that characterised both the fiction and the journalism of H.G. Wells. Darko Suvin makes the point that in Victorian science-fiction, the emergent cognitive, philosophical, and political counter-hegemony represented by the consideration of 'othered' identities, such as those framed by working class or female experiences, were largely "sterilised" by "contaminating them with mystifications which preclude significant presentations of truly other relationships with the horizons of power and repression" (Suvin 1983: 419), which heightens both the critical and the class-based dimensions of Wells's tale. In Pal's version, the Eloi are innocent and pure; in Simon Wells's they are resourceful and intelligent, just technologically disadvantaged. In both cases they are ideologically aligned with the hero, whose Victorian idealism is perhaps challenged by his discovery of their oppression, but this ultimately proves the key to both the Eloi's rescue and their redemption. Again as Palumbo points out, the novel's de-evolved humans are more like sub-human creatures, where the Pal film presents them as cleanly and identifiably human, which "undercuts the entropic implications of Wells's depiction" (Palumbo 1995: 207).

In *Time After Time* Wells himself at last becomes the actual central character, taking the role of the Time Traveller for real (so to speak) by journeying from Victorian London to late twentieth-century San Francisco. The reason for his journey is not curiosity, or even a demonstration of Victorian technological mastery, but to save the future. Like the Time Traveller in the novel, Wells (played by Malcolm McDowell) unveils the time machine, which he has actually built but has not had the courage to use, to a group of friends enjoying a "luxurious after-dinner atmosphere" at Wells's home one foggy evening in 1893 (Wells 1982: 1). One of these friends, a Dr. John Stevenson, seemingly a respectable surgeon (played by David Warner), is also Jack the Ripper. After murdering a prostitute in the opening scene, Stevenson has been tracked to the Wells house by the police. It is Stevenson, then, who becomes the first chronic argonaut, using Wells's machine to flee justice by escaping into the future. The machine returns automatically some time later, leaving Wells with no choice as a decent Victorian gentleman but to face his fears about using the machine himself and go after his former friend. "I've turned that bloody maniac loose upon Utopia" (Meyer 2002: 16:16) he reproaches himself, and so determines that he must do his duty to the future.

Though the film on the whole might fall within the general demesne of what Antonija Primorac identifies as 'aftering' where Victorian novels are adapted with intertextual, self-conscious, and ironic dimensions which present "a version of heritage shaped and produced along the lines of contemporary needs and expectations" (Primorac 2013: 90), I would argue that Meyer's film is more akin to Wells's own engagement in discourse with Huxley, Spencer, and the broad church of Utopian and reformist debate in his time. *Time After Time* is a scientific romance for the late twentieth century that specifically and deliberately deploys elements of the original texts and contexts to reflect and speculate upon human values and the prospects for evolution or degeneration (grounded both in science and in love), as seen through the prism of late 1970s American society.

A key scene occurs when Wells confronts Stevenson in the hotel where the latter has been staying, demanding that the killer should return home to Victorian London to face justice. They do not belong there, he argues. Stevenson is calm and patient, and explains with the aid of images of warfare and terrorism spanning the twentieth century from channel surfing the hotel TV, that he very much belongs in this world: it is Wells

who is the anomaly. The scene makes clear that Stevenson has not only adapted to 1979 in terms of how he is dressed and how he handles technology (the TV remote, television itself), but how he feels at home in a world saturated by inhumanity. Wells, meanwhile, is at first naively convinced that confronting Stevenson will be enough for the perpetrator to 'see reason', but then finds to his frustration that his only possible action is to slap Stevenson, a recourse to violence that the character nominally abhors. The scene concludes with Stevenson noting, chillingly, knowingly and somewhat tenderly to his old friend that violence is evidently contagious.

As in any drama, the transfer of values is in play in this scene, and indeed this theme informs much of the characterisation in the film as the hermeneutics of utopia and dystopia are negotiated through character conflict. As both men enter the later twentieth century, they are ultimately shown to be outside of the constitution of the normative hegemony, or, as Kelly Hurley describes the abhuman subject: "bodily ambiguated or otherwise discontinuous in identity" (Hurley 1996: 5). For both men there are potential positives and potential negatives in their seemingly inherent nature in terms of how they interact with the society of future time. The Ripper has broken the social mould of Victorian fin-de-siècle consensus (if such a thing could be said to exist), and he is precisely the kind of degenerate described by Hurley as akin to a disease requiring biological, social, and national imperatives to expunge from the body politic: "As an unchecked source of contamination, the degenerate could destroy a family, a race, a nation, or even Western civilization itself" (Hurley 1996: 79). Yet his capacity for decisive action is seen paradoxically both as strength and adaptability as he finds himself rather at home in 1979. Violence and destruction have, after all, as the film shows us, ultimately driven the evolution of mankind in the twentieth century.[4] Meanwhile Wells's sense of decency, morality, and obligation to the future, based in his confidence in his own present projection of a future Utopia, is shown to be charmingly anachronistic in the face of the actual passage of time. (At one point he refers to McDonalds as a Scottish restaurant; at another he tries to pawn jewellery to a dealer on his word of honour "as a gentleman" that it is not stolen [Meyer 1979: 30:00].) Nonetheless, this can also be seen to be heroic, redemptive, and romantically attractive to the modern woman Amy Robbins (played by Mary Steenbergen).

Early in the film, Wells and Stevenson are shown to be chess rivals in Victorian London, but Wells has been unable to defeat Stevenson in their games because he is unable to think like him. Pacifistic, passive, and intellectual, Wells represents an intelligence made moribund by adherence to social norms, even as he argues for progress in his newspaper columns. In some ways this reading parallels Van Wyck Brooks's analysis of Wells from 1915, where he remarked on the distinction between, as Mark Hillegeas puts it, "the intellectual, who views life in terms of ideas, and the artist, who views life in terms of experience" (Hillegas 1967: 13). Wells the intellectual Victorian cannot think outside the box, or maybe, more accurately, he cannot act outside it. He is therefore a cipher for late Victorian inertia, for what Suvin terms the "hegemonic bourgeois consensus" (Suvin 1983: 410): the arrogance and presumption that mastery of the future or the self was even possible within the framework of a social system that in many ways had already envisioned its state of perfection. It is precisely this entropic indolence that defines Wells's characterisation of the Eloi in *The Time Machine*, after all.

Whereas Wells blunders comically around 1979 San Francisco in the classic 'fish out of water' role until he meets Ms. Robbins, Stevenson has blended seamlessly into the dark heart of the urban jungle where he hunts anew and afresh, becoming yet another in the list of atrocities that the film shows to have defined twentieth-century American life. Yet, using the chess game motif deployed by the film, it is only by emboldening himself and beginning to, as it were, 'think like' Stevenson that Wells can rise to the challenge and become a hero, thereby absorbing the counter-evolutionary elements of degenerate behaviour and reconstituting them as a positive, proactive, transformative energy. In other words, this Wells needs to be shocked out of his paralysis by the actions of the Ripper in order to become the progressive hero his destiny demands.

The real Wells, Suvin observes, was ultimately part of the speculative drive to question late Victorian ideological immutability, and it is interesting that *Time After Time* therefore initially envisions him as aligned with that which he would ultimately oppose. This gives the character an evolutionary story arc that makes him admirable. It is important to the thematic core of the film that the Victorian time setting of the story is prior to the publication of *The Time Machine*, thereby making the character's experiences in 1979 instrumental in framing his imaginative and

rhetorical consciousness. Wells 'learns' from the future and returns to create his corpus of artistic work, thereby creatively reframing the conception of the Victorian present with an eye *to* the future – much as, in reverse, neo-Victorianism reframes the past in the light of the present. In this, his achievement becomes akin to the description of active selfhood described by Eliot Deutsch, whereby the creative act "is a shaping, a formative act, which involves expressive power" bound up with a sense of the mutability of time (Deutsch 1982: 71).

There are many parallels between *The Time Machine* and *Time After Time* as a work of social commentary when seen in this light, and also as a work of speculative apposition. Meyer was a former publicist and screenwriter whose fame to the point of making *Time After Time* rested on his novel and subsequent screenplay for another Victorian mash-up, *The Seven Per-Cent Solution*, published in 1974 and filmed in 1976. In it a drug-addled Sherlock Holmes is brought to see Dr. Sigmund Freud, and as they together unravel the mystery of Holmes's addictions, they solve a perplexing mystery of kidnap and murder. Again here the blend of the real and the fictive provides Meyer with an opportunity to juxtapose sets of assumptions and values within an engaging blend of genres. I have written about this film in more detail elsewhere, noting that "a classical image is consciously challenged and a new set of epistemological parameters is put in place, another shadow from the point of origin that illuminates rather than obscures the world in which it has been produced" (O'Brien, 2013: 70).

The basic premise of *Time After Time* was actually arrived at by credited story writers Karl Alexander and Steve Hayes, who had been inspired by *The Seven Per-Cent Solution* to draft a rough novel and show it to Meyer. Meyer optioned the property and managed to convince Warner Bros. to let him direct, based on his own screenplay. At no point in the research for either the novel or the screenplay were the writers concerned with directly copying or parodying *The Time Machine* or even with historical accuracy. This again partly mitigates against Primorac's concerns that "aftering" results in a dominant and prescriptive narrative "that clouds the ideologically suspect undercurrents at work" (Primorac 2013: 90, 93), in which neo-Victorian imaginings of this period and after are inevitably interlinked with Margaret Thatcher's famed counter-progressive exhortation for a return to Victorian values. Meyer freely remarks on the DVD commentary that he knew very little about H.G. Wells and even less about

Jack the Ripper. He saw them as what he called the constructive and destructive sides of the human coin. Likewise, Bernard Bergonzi famously observed that *The Time Machine* itself is not really realistic fiction or even science fiction, but rather, as he dubbed it, "ironic myth", going on to conclude:

> Since the tensions are imaginatively and not intellectually resolved we find that a note of irony becomes increasingly more pronounced as the traveller persists in his disconcerting exploration of the world where he has found himself. *The Time Machine* is not only a myth, but an ironic myth, like many other considerable works of modern literature. And despite the complexity of its thematic elements, Wells's art is such that the story is a skillfully wrought imaginative whole, a single image. (Bergonzi 1976: 55)

Bergonzi is here identifying something we might note as characteristic of many Hollywood films – what we call 'high concept', where a pitch, a hook, or an idea comes to embody not only the film as a work of story, but as a measure of its economic viability. Ironically enough, Warner Bros. were initially skeptical of the box office potential of the film. Yet its core hook – "H.G. Wells races through time to catch Jack the Ripper",[5] or, as the original poster put it "Imagine! A scientific genius named H.G. Wells stalks a criminal genius named Jack the Ripper across time itself in the most ingenious thriller of our time" – its juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional, its intertextuality of the real and the fictive, its blend of generic frames (thriller, sci-fi, adventure), are all contained by this single imaginative idea: namely, the mutability of time that enables the collision between the Victorian and the (post)modern.

As a blend of horror, adventure, science fiction, and romance released in 1979, *Time After Time* is both in keeping with many of the spectacular adventure films of the late 1970s and yet also something of an antidote to them. The film shares with the blockbusters an embrace of old-fashioned heroism through which, as in George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) or Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), the leading character's self-consciously 'old-fashioned' (or anachronistic) sense of decency works to counterpoint and undercut 1970s irony and yet also plays to it. Such films were clearly

representative of a type of nostalgic postmodernism which, in the words of David A. Cook, evoke in the adult audience "the experience of Saturday afternoon serials and early series television, while at the same time appealing to children and teenagers as a thrilling action-adventure" (Cook 2000: 248). Yet conversely, their narrative address was to a stable temporality,[6] without active textual collision between registers of past and present as we find in *Time After Time* and, later, James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) and Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985). In these later films, to borrow terms from Eliot Deutsch, the characters' heroism and personhood is determined by freedom from the constraints of "public time" (socially determined consensus temporality) and an embrace of the freedom of creative, transformative energy that comes with "experiential time" (conceived of in terms of the self) (Deutsch 1982: 90, 93).

In *Time After Time* the very specific dynamic conflict between images of evolution and degeneration, centred on characters representing these impulses through postmodern neo-Victorianism, clearly reinforces the thematic preoccupation with the value of the past and the values of that past relative to those of the then present – this hero (and, indeed, the villain also) actually come *from* the past, and thereby shape the future (our present).[7] With reference to neo-Victorian (which he also terms 'retro-Victorian') literary fiction, Christian Gutleben remarks that the referral to the past occurs "at least partially because the present is deemed inadequate, wanting, deficient" (Gutleben 2001: 195). Yet as has already been argued, this is not to imply that a state of perfection or a more advance moral or ethical status quo existed in that past. Wells must leave Victorian London for the doubly 'new world' of both the future and the United States (in plot terms because the time machine is part of an exhibition of the author's possessions that has toured from London and San Francisco) to discover his capacity to affect agency upon self and society.

In spite of this metaphysical challenge and its generic framing at least partly within the demesne of science fiction, *Time After Time* is a remarkably low-key and effects-light film by comparison with contemporaries including the already cited *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and Gary Nelson's *The Black Hole* (1979). It also varies from more 'adolescent fare' in that its cast included two actors associated with dramatic and important (even countercultural) roles in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

not fresh young faces like Christopher Reeve or Mark Hamill. Its emphasis upon adult romance and the presence of a serial killer bring generic registers into play undreamed of in the aforementioned blockbusters. The opening murder scene, for instance, is filmed from the killer's point-of-view in the manner of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), and the film does not shy away from gore – the aftermath of the murder of Amy's work colleague is still genuinely shocking even today.

But *Time After Time* has yet more cards to play. The theme of social destruction as predation clearly comes from *The Time Machine*, but Meyer's film is also a love story, which *The Time Machine*, in spite of the romance sub-plot between the protagonist and Weena, is most definitely not. The film is actually quite romantic at heart, and we might again wonder at the ways language presents us with tantalising conjunctions when we consider that Wells thought of his works as 'scientific romances' in quite a different sense. In film terms, *Time After Time* is as much a romantic comedy as it is a science-fiction thriller, making it as cognate with *Annie Hall* as with *Star Wars*.

The film follows the basic structural drive of the romantic comedy in that, as Claire Mortimer puts it, "the central couple are characterised by paradox: they are objects of desire, and yet remain incomplete, and imperfect, until they are ultimately united with each other" (Mortimer 2010: 6). Its drive to unite two seemingly different but simpatico individuals against obstacles including temporal anachronism and a serial killer's murder spree may be a tad atypical,[8] but the basic structure is familiar, as are the cinematic registers of burgeoning romantic attachment, including conspicuous consumption, geographical montage, and comical misunderstanding, all of which culminate in the modern progressive woman choosing the Victorian progressive male as her ideal mate over the men of her own time. Though Sheila Jeffreys would write scathingly that the sexual revolution was "a counter-revolution and constituted a timely adjustment to the fine-tuning of the heterosexual institution" (Jeffreys 1990: 93), this configuration of an ideal equality between ideological epistemes exceeds even Julia Kristeva's notion of "Women's Time", where all women across generations and experiences of feminist identity "are part of the *logic of identification* with certain values: not with the ideological (these are combated and rightly so, as reactionary) but, rather, with the logical and

ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation-state" (Kristeva 189: 1997).

In this sense, *Time After Time*'s "displacement of temporal consciousness" becomes very much bound up with explicitly political ideals of gender roles (Landon 1992: 81), which of course constitutes one of neo-Victorianism's predominant foci. It is the subject of Meghan Jordan's analysis of the 2011 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* where that film's articulation of the costs and limitations of female power and independence as represented by the narratives of Jane and Bertha, respectively "reveals the tension between the elevation of heteronormativity and Bertha and Rochester's failure to achieve this ideal" (Jordan 2014: 80). Jordan makes the point that old-fashioned procreative values of love and childbirth no longer held currency by the late twentieth century and so "some other motivation must be used to secure the value of love. Thus, filmmakers post-1980 tend to concentrate on the loveless life as an incomplete one" (Jordan 2014: 79).

Love and romance were, of course, central to the Victorian ideal of a perfected self. As Eva Illouz notes, it was through love that a Victorian came to know themselves because "[l]ove was a template for the authentic, albeit restrained, expression of their inner self, but it was also a means to attain spiritual perfection" (Illouz 1997: 47). *Time After Time* depicts both Wells and Robbins coming to such a state of 'perfection' that, again in Illouz's terms, "projects an aura of transgression and both promises and demands a better world" (Illouz 1997: 7-8). The Victorian Utopianism central to the juxtaposition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideals in the (dystopic) Wells/Ripper dynamic is mirrored (and reversed) in the film's embrace of a higher morality of love entirely in keeping with the source period, if not the nominal source literature. Again, though, Meyer is dealing in unifying ideas and images, rather than with actual historical referents, as neo-Victorian fictions more commonly tend to do.

A large chunk of the film is taken up with the friendship and courtship between Wells and Robbins. Again, games are played with history in the use of the name of an actual bride of H.G. Wells as the name for his romantic interest in the film, but this Amy Robbins is a Foreign Exchange Officer with the Charter Bank of London in San Francisco and bears no historical relation whatsoever with the historical Wells's wife of the same name. Amy first meets Stevenson when he comes to her seeking to

exchange his 1890s pounds for 1970s dollars, after Wells deduces that must be what his quarry has done and visits several banks in search of leads. Amy falls for Wells, finding him quaint, cute, and rather charming in his naivety. When Wells thinks Stevenson has died in a car accident, leaving him free of obligation to society, a nervous lunch becomes the prelude to a developing romance. The result is a series of protracted scenes typical of any romantic comedy, including beautiful geographical montages of San Francisco and its environs, which are part of the lexicon of cinematic romance, where emotional connection is negotiated via externalised image-sets – rituals of courtship abstracted as montage sequences. A sense of both collision and connection between these two individuals, who seem so different and yet destined to be together, is played out through scenes of dialogue in which the distances between them (their contrasting world views – here the result of both historical and cultural distance) are overcome by tolerance and a sense of mutual discovery. Together they create a companion couple that, in Mortimer's terms, "respects society's structures and dominant ideologies, offering a resolution that reinforces tradition and conformity" (Mortimer 2010: 76). In this sense, Meyer's film runs counter to the more prominent strain of much neo-Victorian romance focused on transgression and norm-violation, as in the television adaptations of Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian trio – Andrew Davies's *Tipping the Velvet* (2002), Tim Fywell's *Affinity* (2008) and Aisling Walsh's *Fingersmith* (2005), all privileging lesbianism over heteronormative desire – or Sandra Goldbacher's *The Governess* (1998), featuring cross-ethnic and cross-faith romance.

As fate would have it, Meyer's film itself has turned out to be a visual record of the courtship of Malcolm McDowell and Mary Steenbergen, who became an actual couple during filming and subsequently married. Listening to McDowell's commentary on the DVD, one can sense a real affection for his now ex-wife with whom he had two children, and he freely concedes that their performances in the film reflect their own genuinely emergent feelings for one another, which is not entirely irrelevant when considering the slippage between signifier and signified that the romantic scenes therefore represent. As opposed to a film like *Annie Hall*, which retroactively metonymises the then failed real-life relationship between Woody Allen and Diane Keaton and from it creates the archetype of 1970s 'nervous comedy',[9] *Time After Time* incidentally captures a

moment of inception that mirrors its own romantically optimistic view of love as the only utopia still conceivable in the present-day.

In a key scene, in which Amy invites Wells to lunch at the Equinox rotating restaurant, the characters encounter each other with intellectual curiosity while consuming food in a hedonistic setting (as befits the ritual). At one point in the conversation, Wells's self-satisfied Victorian complacency about the implications of his role in women's liberation as a social commentator in 1893 is shown to be as anachronistic as his sense of justice was in confronting Stevenson earlier in the film, although here the film is much gentler with both the past and the present. Amy is amused when Wells attempts to be flirty and impressive by telling her he was a proponent of 'free love' in his newspaper column in England. She laughs indulgently and notes "Free Love! I haven't heard that old tune since the eighth grade" (Meyer 2002: 50:55).

Amy is an embodiment of the aftermath of the sexual revolution: forthright in her desires, exercising her choices, and aggressive in her pursuit of Wells. During a later love scene where he falters, saying "I don't want to compromise you", she replies, "Compromise me? Herbert, I'm practically raping you" before she kisses him (Meyer 2002: 1:02:08). In the twentieth century, sexuality, as Jeffreys and Illouz both point out, was the new currency of relationships, supplanting the Victorian emphasis on stability and social status. Amy is shown to be successful in her career and already divested of one husband who attempted to repress her (as we learn from backstory); she is unafraid to express her sexual desire for Herbert, who is somewhat taken aback by this, and, in a sense, thereby places Amy in a position of control insofar as desire and romance are in question. She is also shown to be more engaged in the world she lives in than Wells (naturally enough), and hence more in control of everything that happens (including routine elements of modern life that are science fiction to this Wells, like driving a car or operating a telephone, which he learns from watching her). In this she becomes the type of romantic comedy heroine described by Mortimer as dealing with a romantic hero who is a "naive innocent who needs to be guided by a woman in order to find happiness" (Mortimer 2010: 17). In the romance/seduction scene, in a reversal of the classic romantic/comedic cliché of removing the dowdy female's eyeglasses to reveal the beauty beneath, it is Amy who takes off Wells's glasses and quips "Why, Ms. Jones, you're gorgeous" (Meyer 2002: 1:01:21).

Her position is privileged by comparison with that of women in the Victorian era, of whom we presume Wells understands relatively little because, as a privileged, professional male, he would, as Suvin observes, have only the cognitive experience of the ruling class, for whom the worlds of women and workers were comparatively 'othered'. This sense of class distinction is explicitly observed in a contemporary context as Amy speculates whether Wells would know an acquaintance of hers that works for Coca-Cola in London, but concludes: "You probably move in different circles anyway" (Meyer 2002: 50:05). Amy is capable of an exercise of choice which Illouz discusses in terms of a shift from the perceived need for stability and status (in the Victorian era) to emotional satisfaction, romantic intensity, and female economic independence. Amy's determination to pursue 'Herbert' as she calls him represents the kind of "present-oriented" (Illouz 1997: 47), culturally mediated desire for coupledom that becomes both sexual and spiritual.

Sexual desire, sexuality, and idealised love are extremely important elements of both the plot and the film's sense of what is valuable in humanity throughout time. As Illouz observes, though cultural frames define and delimit the norms of romantic love within their episteme, "love contains a utopian dimension that cannot be easily reduced to 'false consciousness' or to the presumed power of 'ideology' to recruit people's desires. Instead, the longing for utopia at the heart of romantic love possesses deep affinities with the experience of the sacred" (Illouz 1997: 7-8). A distinction is made in the film between licentious and predatory sexuality and a sense of equality in love and desire between men and women. Here again the Ripper becomes a significant figure, representing not so much sexual violence as the reactionary negation of overt sexuality – the counter-evolutionary impulse.

Stevenson is not interested in women sexually; he is simply driven to kill them, particularly women who are blatantly available sexually. In one key murder scene, he kills a call girl, who is drawn to the pocket watch which he carries with him and uses to play a musical tune when he kills. In the midst of rolling a marijuana cigarette, the girl asks what time it is, to which Stevenson replies "later than you think" before cutting her throat (Meyer 2002: 1:18:46). A drop of her blood splashes onto his face, forming a tear-like streak from beneath the Ripper's eye. Time and death are inextricably interlinked throughout the film, with the competing sense of

idealism and despair centred on sexualised relationships at the heart of the dialectic. To the Ripper, there is no future for the human race – only death. His hunting of prostitutes is seen to be socially and psychologically destructive, but also to arise naturally out of the permissive society's failures. Sexuality without reproduction is not biological evolution, and the Ripper demonstrates no sexual desire, merely a desire to kill – in effect, to end sexuality by destroying it. His future, like all of humankind's as he sees it, is a literal dead end. This is exactly, of course, what the Time Traveller finds at the conclusion of *The Time Machine*, on the bleak entropic inertness of Terminal Beach.

John Partington points out that Wells's own endorsement of a form of negative eugenics in *A Modern Utopia*, where the procreation of violent criminals and drug abusers, for example, should be either discouraged through chastity or blocked outright through celibacy "would not harm his idea of an evolving species; indeed it would assist it, as it would allow plenty of individual choice whilst protecting the collective wellbeing of society as a whole" (Partington 2002: 66). The Ripper, in this sense, like the sympathetic monster of any horror film, embodies a deep-seated devolutionary agency that selectively expunges the contagion that threatens the body politic: destructive, repressive, dangerous, and yet, as are all monsters, endemic to the human condition. In this sense he hates himself, of course, as much as he hates women, prostitutes, procreation, and humanity, and this will be seen to be crucial in the film's resolution.

Meanwhile, Amy Robbins, the liberated woman representing an ideal of social progress in 1979, falls in love with H.G. Wells, whose stoic belief in decency, love, and social and personal obligation she sees both as quaintly amusing and admirably courageous. Her overt desire for Wells is framed not as promiscuity but as genuine romantic attachment deriving from a sense of emotional and ideological connection. Her response to his "Victorian chivalry" and refusal to wield a firearm later in the film – expressed in the line "the first man to raise his fist is the man who has run out of ideas" – is to say "I love you" (Meyer 2002: 1:26:23 and 1:27:03) Here, in a sense, the very fixed sense of Victorian romantic idealism (elsewhere subject to critique) is seen to have value, allowing Wells's essential bravery and indeed masculinity to cut through the veneer of progress represented by Amy's nominal independence.

The film concludes with this strong-minded, independent and successful modern woman choosing to return in time with this idealistic naif – a motif taken up and recycled by later neo-Victorian films such as James Mangold's *Kate and Leopold* (2001). Though she is far from "deeply rooted in the sociopolitical life of nations" (Kristeva 1989: 197), as Kristeva would put it, Amy jokes that she will change her name to Susan B. Anthony (who would have been fairly miffed about it given she was actually alive at the time). Hers is a surrender of a truly modern woman's life for that of a Victorian woman married to a nominally progressive man, already shown to be foolishly misguided. This is actually in contradiction to much of what the film has to say about sexual equality. On the one hand, both Amy and Wells are shown to be people who have refused to be constrained by partners who wanted them to be limited in their roles. On the other hand, the film opts for the same narrative feint with which *The Time Machine* concludes by having the Time Traveller possibly return to the future to intervene in humankind's decline – though in Meyer's film, the feint works in the opposite temporal direction. Perhaps we are to read Amy's return to Victorian times not so much as surrender, but an indication of the spark of progress travelling back in time, corresponding with the ultimately heroic and redemptive narrative represented by Wells's journey to self-realisation as an artistic as well as political imaginer of the shape of things to come. As Partington observes "Wells's attitude towards evolution was not that humankind should control it (he recognized this as impossible), but that it should direct it" (Partington 2002: 62).

The film's climax revolves around the axiological conflict between love and death in the face of time, as Stevenson, having obtained the key to the time machine from Wells is attempting to flee again. Wells surrenders the key to the machine in exchange for Amy's safety on Stevenson's 'word as a gentleman'. This is a calculated irony, as this is a phrase Wells himself has used earlier in the film to no effect – it has no meaning in this new world. After taking the key while holding Amy at knifepoint, Stevenson remarks that Wells should have realised by now that he is "not a gentleman" (Meyer 2002: 1:41:18), and he takes Amy with him. Wells anxiety has become entirely personal. His fear for Amy and his hopes for romance are now paramount above his pursuit of the killer he thought he had loosed on utopia. Stevenson's hope is escape, and presumably the continuation of his campaign of death, Wells's is rescue and love, representing hope for a future

that will, ironically, take place in the past. As they converse, Stevenson refers to Wells as "an old fool" (Meyer 2002: 1:45:23), a phrase in which the use of the word "old" cannot but have added resonance in this context. Wells replies, "I am an old fool. I love her" (Meyer 2002: 1:45:28). Pure love, simpatico love, romantic love, idealised love – this is what is ultimately paramount, and purifies sexual desire to the point where the Ripper cannot, in thematic terms, kill Amy.

Amy escapes the Ripper because of the intervention of Time figured as metaphor, when his pocket watch catches on a part of the time machine and he loses concentration, allowing her to slip away. The narrative is resolved when Wells, with the unspoken consent of Stevenson, now seated inside the machine, pulls out a crucial control device that will send Stevenson into the void of time. As Wells grasps the device, Stevenson, exhausted, nods to his old friend, who pulls the control from the machine and essentially kills him. What is resolved here is the notion of time as belonging to progress, idealism, and evolution, not degradation, destruction, and extinction. The Ripper embraces negative eugenics by entering the void and existing out of time, while Wells lives on within time, and moves through it back to 1893 with Amy in tow, to contribute to the ongoing attempt to improve humanity through romance, reproduction (we presume), and imagination.

Curiously, *The Time Machine* also suggests something not dissimilar with its concluding scenes at the end of time that so shock the Time Traveller: "It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of Man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all that was over" (Wells 1982: 105). Though terrified by his vision of the end of humanity, he does not surrender to it. Instead he is galvanised to act. He returns home, shares his story, and then disappears into time again, perhaps, as the narrator speculates, to further the cause of the Advancement of Mankind; as the narrator says, "for, I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed Man's culminating time!" (Wells 1982: 114). This, of course, is at the heart of Wellsian utopianism, and there is perhaps something to be admired in that – the sense of the possible and of humankind's capacity to affect positive change to eventually transform those possibilities into reality. Partington makes exactly this point in concluding that

> [i]t was through lack of individual initiative that the Eloi degenerated and the world of *The Time Machine* became a 'lethal rigidity'. In the philosophy of *A Modern Utopia*, Wells reverses that situation and creates a utopian formula providing a methodology for everlasting advancement. (Partington 2002: 67)

The sustainability of this commitment to "everlasting advancement", sometimes advocated by Wells via fantasy and sometimes via rhetoric, remains subject to scepticism and challenge. Yet it also holds out hope for the emerging shape of the future as reflected in *Time After Time*.

Notes

1. I am borrowing the term 'abhuman' from Kelly Hurley's 1996 study on *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*. Hurley, in turn, acknowledges the Victorian novelist William Hope Hodgson as its originator. 'Abhuman' describes an unstable, 'not quite human' state of being with the potential to shift either to an evolutionary or degenerated variation on humanity as it stands.
2. Because Wells wrote with such a particular voice and because that voice encompasses what seem two sorts or sets of works – namely those scientific romances or speculative fictions upon which the bulk of his popularity rests and those non-fictive but equally speculative utopian social commentaries upon which the bulk of contempt is usually heaped – it is not unreasonable to assume a degree of textual authorial presence in his fictions. As Miles Link has said, "[t]he egotism of the author is an essential quality of utopian fiction" (Link 2010: oral citation), and observers of Victorian science fiction, including Darko Suvin and David Lodge, have noted that Wells's distinctly philosophical and political bent as a mediator of social reality was partly (sometimes disastrously) informed by his creative imagination. As Suvin remarks, such mediations are crucial structures of feeling expressing anxieties around the inception and constitution of a future society at a moment when Victorian ideals were being openly questioned even by the professional and upper and middle classes. He notes: "Alternative value-sets could now be articulated, exploring different existential structures, often a more or less

purposeful intervention by some societal agents or agency. Such alternatives could be narratively presented either in active form, as better or worse developments, or in passive form, as awful warnings of collapse of values should no restructuring come about" (Suvin 1993: 388).

3. He derives his term from Sergei Eisenstein's usage in describing the dialectical juxtaposition of shock effects in theatre and film in the 1920s. For Gunning, the term is more broadly applicable to the nature of the experience of early cinema as a performative, often non-narrative spectacle of events and novelties (see Gunning 1990: 56-62).
4. This same thematic reading of Jack the Ripper was deployed in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's comic/graphic novel *From Hell* (1989-1992), which also deploys time-slips and flash-forwards to reinforce the Ripper/Sir William Gull's statement that "It is the beginning, Netley. Only just the beginning. For better or worse, the twentieth century. I have delivered it" (Moore and Campbell date: Ch. 10: 33).
5. The description is used as a blurb on the 2002 Region 1 DVD issue of the film by Warner Bros. distributors.
6. The ending of *Superman* notwithstanding in which Superman reverses time by spinning the earth backwards on its axis in order to save Lois Lane.
7. A similar time-bending tale with contrasting moral world views would be tried in John Hough's ill-fated *Biggles* (1986), where W.E. Johns's stalwart WWI action hero encountered his 1986 'time twin', with whom he could swap places in time of adversity.
8. Structurally Mortimer does note this as a variation – i.e., a couple who love each other at first sight are continually frustrated by circumstance in their efforts to get together. Curiously enough, though, temporal anomaly has been less uncommon than you might think, with other cinematic examples including Alejandro Agresti's *The Lake House* (2006), David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), and Robert Schwentke's *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2009), all romantic dramas based on exactly this complication.
9. Mortimer summarises this as reflecting the "angst and world-weariness of the period, where there is no longer any certainty about relationships and identity and happy endings are rejected in favour of greater realism" (Mortimer 2010: 17).

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