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Uchronia as Crisis: Trauma and the Collapse of Futurity in The Time Machine (2002) by Simon Wells

اليوتوبيا اللازمونية كأزمة: الصدمة، وانهيار المستقبل في فيلم آلة الزمن (٢٠٠٢) لسيمون ويلز

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Abstract :

Time Travel offers a broad space for reimagining time and existence beyond traditional narratives of linear trajectory. Simon Wells' *The Time Machine* (2002), a cinematic adaptation of H.G. Wells' classic novella, presents a dystopian vision of the future marked by temporal collapse and the breakdown of technological utopianism. Rather than enabling transformation, time in the film becomes a site for fatalism, where history loops back on itself and human agency collapses. This paper explores how the film constructs a Uchronian "no time", challenging dominant teleologies of progress. This study engages with the philosophical insights of Henri Bergson's *durée*, Walter Benjamin's concept of historical time, and Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, the paper reveals how the film interrogates the erosion of futurity and the disillusionment with modern humanist ideals. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that draws from speculative theory, trauma studies, and science-fiction cinema, the article analyses the film's critique of ideological paralysis in late modernity.

Keywords: Uchronia- Temporal Collapse- Time Travel- Fatalism- Science-Fiction.

ملخص:

يتيح السفر عبر الزمن فضاءً واسعاً لإعادة تخيل الزمن والوجود خارج السرديات التقليدية للمسار الخطي. يقدم فيلم آلة الزمن (٢٠٠٢) لسيمون ويلز، وهو اقتباس سينمائي عن رواية هيربرت جورج ويلز الكلاسيكية، رؤية ديستوبية للمستقبل تتسم بانهيار الزمن وتفكك اليوتوبيا التكنولوجية. فالزمن، بدلاً من أن يكون أداة للتحويل، يصبح في الفيلم موقعاً للحتمية حيث تعيد الأحداث التاريخية نفسها وتنهيار الإرادة البشرية. تبحث

هذه المقالة في كيفية بناء الفيلم ليوتوبيا لا زمنية (Uchronia) تتحدى التوجهات السائدة نحو التقدم. ومن خلال استحضار رؤى فلسفية مثل "المدة" لهنري برغسون، ومفهوم الزمن التاريخي لدى والتر بنيامين، و"العود الأبدي" لفريدريك نيتشه، يكشف التحليل كيف يطرح الفيلم تساؤلات حول تآكل المستقبل وخيبة الأمل في المثال الإنساني الحديث. تعتمد الدراسة على منهجية متعددة التخصصات تشمل النظرية الاستشراعية، ودراسات الصدمة، وسينما الخيال العلمي لتحليل نقد الفيلم للشلل الأيديولوجي في الحداثة المتأخرة.

كلمات مفتاحية: السفر عبر الزمن؛ اليوتوبيا اللازمنية؛ خيبة الأمل التكنولوجية؛ انهيار الزمن؛ سينما الخيال العلمي.

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1. Introduction:

"I want to believe."

—*The X-Files*, season 1, episode 1

From its earliest expression, science fiction has traditionally been a domain of boundless imagination, where writers and filmmakers dare to speculate about the futuristic technology and the human condition. Whether using wholesome utopian scenarios, troubling cautionary dystopia or juxtaposing the two to create complex worlds in between, science fiction persistently challenges the linear time and ingrained social assumptions. It is an open invitation to explore the wide spectrum of possibilities. One of this genre's popular instruments is time travel, and by using it, it has always promised escape: escape from fate, history, and for this article; even from loss. Time travel has served not only as a narrative device but as a unique philosophical lens, and within this tradition emerges *Uchronia*, a term combining *utopia* and *chronos*, which refers to a speculative form of alternate timelines that challenges teleological history and opens both the past and future to radical reinterpretation. It functions as a subversive form that often extends utopian thought by suggesting alternative timelines. The exploration of 'what if' histories allow the audience to reimagine key events and their ripple effect on the present time. In cinema, this idea is vividly brought to life through visual narrative structures and speculative imagination.

This article carefully examines Simon Wells' *The Time Machine* (2002) as a case study that subverts the Uchronian impulse. The film stages a temporal impasse instead of encouraging speculative reinvention. In this narrative, time travel no longer generates possibility, but rather, it reveals a recursive logic of both trauma and loss. The future, far from a space of renewal, becomes a projection of present anxieties: ecological collapse within social entropy, and technological decay. Scientific mastery that used to be symbol of progress, becomes a metaphor for historical paralysis. *Uchronia* no longer asks "what if?" but shifts to a confronting

“what now?”, staging the collapse of futurity as both a narrative failure and a cultural symptom of historical paralysis. In this context, Uchronia is not just a tool for historical revisionism through non-linear experience, or speculative world-building; it becomes a critical framework that stages a crisis of time itself, where the future has become unthinkable, and the past can no longer be changed.

Despite the fact that the film takes place across mass stretches of time, it does not imagine the future as a space of transformation or renewal. This interpretation resonates with Fredric Jameson’s claim that under late capitalism, it has indeed become “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Jameson, 2003, p. 76), positioning the film within a bigger cultural and ideological paralysis. Similarly, Mark Fisher’s theory of “capitalist realism” argues that this foreclosure of futurity leads to a recursive cultural logic, where catastrophe is endlessly replayed and alternative possibilities are rendered unthinkable (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). The analysis draws on an interdisciplinary framework that includes Darko Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement, Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope, and the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra to highlight how *The Time Machine* (2002) portrays a wider cultural condition of temporal stagnation and spectral memory.

2. Science fiction as a temporal critique: Theoretical framework

For decades, realism has dominated artistic expression with influential figures like André Bazin in film and Georg Lukacs in literature advocating it as the highest form of representation, while claiming that it offered the most faithful reflection of historical and social reality. However, speculative fiction emerged as a distinct category of literary texts, where the line between fiction and reality blurred for the first time, and the division can no longer be accounted for. This new category of narrative contains many genres: science fiction, fantasy, horror, utopian and dystopian fiction, alternative history, and other hybrid forms. Interestingly enough, despite all the fame these genres have gained over time, an unshakable hierarchy has been established only to put science fiction on the top of the list due to all the discussion that it kept triggering.

In What is an Author? Michel Foucault introduces the concept of “Inevitable necessity” where scholars in particular fields constantly revisit and reinterpret the foundational ideas and concepts set by a “founder of discursivity” (Foucault, 1977), someone who does not only create a particular work but establishes an entire field of discourse that can bow to all sorts of possibilities. Unlike the known traditional author, a founder of discursivity’s influence defines all sets of foundational ideas and rules that guide and/or shape the works in that domain. For instance, in the field of

science fiction studies, Darko Suvin occupies this foundational role. His insistence on returning to core definitions and function of science fiction continues to shape critical approaches. Most importantly, Suvin argued that science fiction is a literary and philosophical mode of interrogating reality, ideology, and the limits of human agency, and it does not only connect with technological speculation or futuristic fantasy.

As a narrative mode, science fiction operates through its entangled engagement with time. It is through temporality that science fiction creates meaning and estrangement. With time, this genre has been adapted through different media, but it echoed especially in literary fields and most recently, in film studies. Just as science fiction literature once fought for its place in literature, science fiction cinema has gone through a rougher journey, often dismissed by some critics while admitted by others. It is important to explore science fiction's formula that captivates and challenges critics to clearly understand how it negotiates temporality in all its fluidity. Suvin mentioned in an earlier essay that science fiction is "a belief in the potentialities of reason with methodological doubt in the most significant cases" (Suvin, 1979, p 11). Science fiction craftly applies critical scrutiny, and it is always ready to question all kinds of assumptions. This mix of both reason and skepticism is what makes this genre so thought provoking.

2.1 Darko Suvin and the *Novum*

Suvin, as a foundational figure, is what Foucault might refer to as a 'founder of discursivity'. He initiated critical conversation about science fiction that scholars continue to engage with today. While academic study of science fiction predates Suvin's contributions, contemporary critics must still respond to his work whether they supported, built upon, or challenged him. Suvin's foundational notion of "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin, 1979, p.4) has come to define how science fiction is interpreted and theorised. He argues that science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition" and he adds that science fiction builds "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment." (Suvin, 1979, p.4).

Cognition, in this sense, refers to the imaginative elements of science fiction that are grounded in a way that makes sense within a rational framework. This allows the audience to engage with the story intellectually as well as imaginatively. Meanwhile, estrangement refers to the dislocation from the familiar world. It allows readers to view their own reality as strange or constructed. Together, these forces produce a dialectical experience that combines recognition and disorientation to provoke critical reflection. Suvin's seminal concept of the *Novum* is introduced as a

cognitively plausible yet radically unfamiliar motif that differentiates between science fiction's fantasy and allegory. The *Novum* is what estranges the reader while introducing a new conceptual order. In this formula, time is a contestable structure and not a neutral backdrop. The *Novum* becomes a critical tool for interrogating dominant teleologies of progress and modernization. Whether through time travel or imagined futures, science fiction's *Novum* unravels how temporality itself can be a source of conflicting narratives.

The term *Novum* is Latin for "new thing" which is central in the science fiction world. It refers to a scientifically plausible innovation, or concept that is logically integrated into the fictional world. *Nova* (plural of *Novum*) should be rationally and scientifically grounded within "the fictional logic" but not necessarily as "the logic of fiction" itself (Suvin, 1979, p. xx). While *Nova* serves as a spectacular device, they must also generate meaningful philosophical or political reflection. A *Novum* disrupts the audiences' assumptions about the limits of time and history, and it is not effective just because it entertains.

2.2 Cognitive Estrangement and Historical Imagination

This notion of cognitive estrangement is closely tied to what can be called science fiction's historical imagination. The genre reconfigures the past and the present through speculative dislocation, and it does not only go forward in time. This permits the reader to perceive present conditions as historically contingent, and therefore open to change. The temporal dislocation is not neutral; it is always ideologically charged. As Fredric Jameson argues, science fiction is less about the future per se and more about the historical conditions of its production. The genre holds what Jameson calls "a symptomatology of our own time," (Jameson, 1991, p. 16) encoding the hopes and anxieties of late capitalism in its representations of other worlds and other realities. In this way, speculative temporality becomes a medium through which culture confronts its own limits, its own aporias of meaning and development.

Science fiction's temporal experimentation is not decorative or escapist; it functions as a critique of linear, development models of history. Through its temporal disruptions, the genre challenges the inevitability of progress, and the fixity of the historical record. Suvin's concept of the *Novum*, when read in conjunction with cognitive estrangement, offers a strong critical lens, one that reveals science fiction as a genre of historical intervention instead of a prophetic vision. As it folds, it becomes less about predicting the future and more about destabilizing the present.

3. Uchronia as Crisis: Temporal Collapse and Trauma

The time loop structure in science fiction is a deep psychoanalytic motif that resonates with the logic of trauma and repetition. It has never been just a narrative gimmick. As theorized by Freud, the repetition compulsion includes the subject's unconscious return to a traumatic event to master it retroactively. Moreover, the time loop enacts a form of narrative and existential purgatory. It allegorizes the impossibility of historical movement in a post ideological age or what Fisher, on the other hand, identifies as "slow cancellation of the future." The loop, in this sense becomes both a symptom and a critique of a world where change seems structurally foreclosed and the past traumatic wound cannot be laid to rest. Science Fiction distinguishes itself through its ability to defamiliarize time. In reconfiguring historical and future trajectories, it reveals how ideas like progress or causality are just myths. This capacity to rework time directly challenges the modern belief in progress. "The wanting of historicity affects both our experience of the present and our ability to imagine a different future" (Jameson, 2005, p.284). In Jameson's view, the collapse of temporal imagination is symptomatic of late capitalism. Science Fiction, by contrast, destabilizes the assumption that history unfolds along a fixed, linear path.

Even this destabilization, however, is not free from its own structural repetition. Miéville's provocative call to temporarily exclude science fiction in favor of fantasy, ironically to "continue" the Suvinian-Marxist project, highlights a critical paradox: critiques of Suvin replicate the dialectical structure of his thinking. Suvin privileged categories such as cognition and utopia, but his critics replace them with other notions like alterity or ideology, while preserving the same allegorical form of reading (Miéville, 2009). This dynamic reveals a deeper impasse within speculative thought. The tools designed to challenge hegemonic narratives are caught within the orbit of Suvin's founding logic. As Mark Bould noted, critics continued to inhabit the "Suvin event horizon," whether they embrace or resist it (Bould, 2009, p.18). This recursive theoretical structure mirrors the narrative time loop, historical paralysis, and foreclosure of radical change that contemporary science fiction increasingly portrays. "Temporal continuity, Jameson highlights, "is often a projection of cultural myths" (Jameson, 2005, p. 284).

But what is time? To define it simply, time is "relational structure of processes or events", (Jameson, 2005, p. 303) Time requires three main properties to function, starting by *order*, which allows time to arrange events in a clear sequence. All events can be placed in a timeline to determine that one happened before, after or at the same time as another event. Then there is *continuity*, which means that time flows in an unbreakable manner. It doesn't jump from one moment to the next abruptly,

instead it progresses. Lastly, *duration*, the measurable length of time between events. The ability to quantify how much time passes between point A and B. These properties of time are crucial in uchronian narratives to help frame how time diverges from a known history (Maudlin, 1990, p.303). Uchronia represents a conceptual crisis that theorises the collapse of temporal continuity, challenging the audience's understanding of linear history by exploring alternate timelines and exploring speculative scenarios that disrupt the usual time properties. Science fiction's relation to Uchronia, the "no-time" or alternative time has changed a lot in the recent decades from speculative detour to existential impasse. Where the genre added more political and philosophical potential. Contemporary science fiction increasingly stages Uchronia as a symptom of crisis. As these alternative temporalities are no longer spaces of utopian experimentation but rather temporal collapse.

3.1 From Speculative Detour to Temporal Dead End

The traditional Uchronian narrative used to ask, "what if history had taken a different path?" this speculative impulse functioned as both critique and possibility, imagining liberating divergences from actual history. However, in the current state, these speculative gestures are often devoid of political traction. In his study of narrative structure, Mark Currie observes that time travel "makes time itself strange, unsteady, and revisable" (Currie, 2007, p.130) nevertheless, the 2002 film refutes and disable this idea. The alternate timeline no longer signifies the ability to create a radical difference; it registers the impossibility of change within the present. At the heart of this shift is a profound crisis of historical understanding. The collapse of grand narratives as identified by the poststructuralist thought has led to a fragmentation of historical sense. Jameson's concept of "the waning of affect" and the postmodern hyper-saturation of pastiche project the dilemma differently: history becomes aestheticized, commodified and decoupled from its teleological function. Reinforce the sense that history no longer "goes anywhere." (Jameson, 1991, p.19).

3.2 Temporal Paralysis and the Foreclosure of Change

Uchronia as a crisis is not an alternate past or future but the suspension of the very possibility of difference of the future. Building on Jameson's and Fisher's analyses, the end of futurity must be understood as an affective and ideological condition. It is interesting to note that Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of my Life* explored the concepts of temporal paralysis, lost futurity and hauntology. After the tragedy of the protagonist, Alexander, the audience can notice a fixation with traumatic memory that echoes Fisher's diagnosis of "hauntology" captures this condition of apathy: one is haunted by futures that never arrived. Fischer writes about how contemporary culture is dominated by "formal nostalgia," not a genuine longing for the past but a

fixation on cultural artifacts that prevent engagement with new ideas and genuine futurity. Jameson, cited by Fisher, also discusses the end of historicity and the collapse of clear temporal distinctions. He wrote that contemporary artifacts exist as a “nostalgia mode,” which “seeks to appropriate the past by recoding it in the glossy imagery of present-day consumption” (Jameson, 1988, p. 19). These artifacts such as film and music no longer belong to any specific period, instead, they inhabit an ahistorical state of timeless repetition. *The Time Machine* (2002) visualization of post-apocalyptic and tribal future resonates with Jameson’s notion of Uchronia. In the film, alternative pasts and futures do not have a significant difference but just variations within temporally static conditions. This theory encourages the film’s portrayal of ideological suspension of a genuine temporal difference. To examine how these theoretical concerns manifest in narrative and visual form, the following section analyses *The Time Machine* (2002). Through its visual structure and symbolic logic, the film dramatizes the recursive, melancholic, and crisis nature of Uchronian time under late capitalism.

4. Cinematic Reading: *The Time Machine* (2002) as a Temporal Allegory

Born in 1866, H.G.Well lived through a time of immense industrial transformation. Over the course of his eighty years, he observed the rise of systems that would eventually shape the modern consumer society. He also witnessed groundbreaking shifts in science, including the rise of evolutionary theory through Darwinism with its emphasis on natural selection and the survival of the fittest. He also observed the theory of relativity and the new physics that evolved alongside it. In his lifetime, H.G.Well witnessed how Europe and the United States had different societal structures, especially when he saw it through the lens of class conflict, where two struggling groups are in opposition. In the United States, it was a matter between the rich and the poor, in other words, those who “own” and those who “can’t own”. H.G.Well noticed the influence of the Darwinism thought mainly in its application to social structure, he even had to witness the collapse of Nazism, one of the most racist interpretations of social Darwinism.

In *The Time Machine* (1895), the author critiques the biological and social implications of applying Darwinist thinking to human society. By doing so, he is expressing the fear of modernity and showing perspective of a forward socialist thinking, while engaging critically with the rapidity of the evolving events at that time. On the screen, Simon Well’s (2002) adaptation comes to a historical juncture, recreating a foundational text of science fiction through the lens of early twenty first century cultural anxieties. The film reflects how the novel can be interpreted in a post-globalized world, which is challenged with the irreversible impact of events like 9/11 and the war that followed shortly after. The film aligns with the dominant

concerns and perspectives of its respective eras. While maintaining some core narrative structure from the 1895 source, the film orients its temporal imagination to address themes of technological overreach, and the foreclosure of utopian vision. It is a film haunted by both the ghost of the past and the collapse of the plausible future. In the novel, where the protagonist did not have a name aside from being referred to as the Time Traveller living in London and belonging to a middle-class social circle. This man, who appears so casual and barely noticeable, hosted a dinner to share his obsession with the theory of the fourth dimension, *time*, and that people usually experience time as a one-way path and that he discovered how to move through it on his own will. While attempting to host a second dinner, following his delayed arrival, he recounts his first journey into the future.

On the silver screen, the film took a different approach. In this version, this time traveller is called Alexander, a Columbia University professor living in New York City. The shift in setting transforms the story from nineteenth century London to twentieth century New York. That said, the most significant change between both protagonists is their personal life: Alexander has a fiancée, Emma. He proposed to her on a late December evening in a park, where they got attacked while being mugged and Emma was accidentally shot and murdered. This unfortunate event became a central obsession for Alexander and resulted in him building the time machine and trying desperately to go back in time and alter their fate as Alain Badiou argued "I think it is the task of philosophy, as well as other fields, to rally to (love's) defence [...] Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort." (Badiou & Truong, 2012, p. 11). His time machine operates within a protective time-exempt bubble, a dramatic effect that will end in being strategically important and emotionally charged on a later stage of the film: anything that transcend this bubble, becomes vulnerable to the effect of time. Alexander tries to save Emma, only to fall for the predestination paradox. As the holographic librarian tells him: "you built your own time machine because of her death. If she lived, it would never have existed." This quote explicitly reveals the deterministic trap: his desire to change the past guarantees its repetition. This detail is proof that free will is limited when it comes to time travel, and the universe will always self-correct any attempt to change key events that are crucial for its own timeline.

4.1 Trauma and Temporality in Post 9/11 Cultural Memory

In the aftermath of 9/11, science fiction became a key cultural form for expressing trauma, and the erosion of historical continuity. As theorists like Mark Fisher and Fredric Jameson have suggested, contemporary culture is marked by recursive loops of nostalgia and anxiety instead of progressive movements. Science fiction serves as a platform for exploring the political, and socio-cultural implication

even through the ongoing memory of 9/11. By doing so, many of these works expose the limitations and risks of the time travel mindset which often shapes the narratives about identity and community. As Suvin once described science fiction “a mapping of possible alternatives” (Suvin, 1979, p.12) and in the aftermath of 9/11 the genre has increasingly envisioned ways of questioning whether humanity can transcend its own cycles of destruction and rebuild differently.

The Time Machine (2002) was released less than a year after the attack. It operates within the same cultural logic. The film’s narrative of sudden loss, temporal disorientation and compulsive return resonates deeply with post 9/11 temporal logic. That period was known for its rupture, and traumatic foreclosure for historical continuity. The protagonist’s attempt to go back and alter the past tragedy reflects the collective desire to undo or re-narrate a national trauma whose effects remain unresolved. Time in this film is neither progressive nor redemptive. In many aspects, the events of 9/11 quickly assumed an apocalyptic role within the States national consciousness. It symbolizes the tragedy but also a dramatic turning point, an end to one era and the unsettling beginning of another. The most significant element of political narrativization of 9/11 attacks was their interpretation as acts of war and not crimes.

4.2 Failed Utopias, Racialized Futures: The Eloi vs. Morlocks

Initially, the film’s reimagining of the Eloi and Morlocks departs from the strict class allegory of Well’s novel. It depicts distinctly racialized and postcolonial aesthetics. The Eloi are visually coded as non-white, vaguely Polynesian or Indigenous in appearance. They have brown skin, flowing garments made of organic fibers reflecting the image of a romanticized “primitive paradise”. Their language is untranslatable for much of the film, placing Alexander in the position of colonial interlocutor. The mise-en-scène reinforces this ethnographic gaze: in the early scenes with Mara and Kalen, wide angle shots position Alexander in the foreground, often standing above them or speaking while they remain seated, creating an implicit power hierarchy between the white, male scientist and the “native” Eloi. They are in Harmony with nature. The “noble savage” in a defined post-apocalyptic setting. This visual composition brings to mind colonial cinema’s hierarchy of knowledge and speech, where language, as Ella Shohat observes, often signifies cultural superiority or lack thereof.

In contrast, the Morlocks are a revolutionary product of technological hubris and genetic engineering gone awry. They are pale, monstrous, subterranean, and entirely dehumanized, invoking a Gothic horror tradition and evoking the post-human managerial class. Their design draws on visual tropes from post-apocalyptic and body horror genres: overgrown limbs, growling mouths, and abrupt movement,

all framed in a dim cinematography that reflects the disorientation of a society broken by technocratic decay. They decided to launch daytime attacks triggered by a horn blast, hunting the Eloi until the signal ends. The Eloi, passive and fearful, do not resist due to the complete disconnection to both history and ambition. The Morlocks are a dystopian figure of post-human managerialism.

Together, the Eloi and the Morlock prove how utopia has failed twice over through environmental collapse and unchecked instrumentalization of science. They are no longer just class divisions but a racialized futurism. Whether intentionally or not, the division between Eloi and Morlock is not a product of ideology, it is also a flaw in human reasoning. The film suggests that human nature itself harbours the seeds of both creation and destruction, this duality will only create catastrophe, potentially dividing everything into two opposing paths. But while this societal division dramatizes collapse on a macro level, the film's more intimate exploration of crisis lies within the emotional and technological journey of its protagonist through a distinct narrative.

4.3 Technology, Grief, and the Temporal Looping mix

Narrative is an important way to understand time: it has a nearly infinite ability to impose, restore or even break apart how time is ordered. Storytelling changes timelines by changing the order in which events are being told, and it can also override the linear path inside the story. One of the most common storytelling tools that messes with the linear progression is the time loop, which is considered as the constant return to a previous moment. It has two types: a formal loop which is literal and diegetic returns to a previous point within the timeline. Or alternatively, it can be metaphorical and symbolizes an emotional return such as revisiting a trauma or memory which both definitions were present within *The Time Machine* (2002). To analyse a time loop, it is crucial to consider using the lens of positive and negative time loops. A positive feedback loop indicates that every cycle builds on the previous one leading to escalation for example: anxiety spirals, climate disaster acceleration or in film's case, the destruction of the moon.

On the other hand, there is the negative feedback loop that self regulates, aiming towards creating balance and stability. It is apparent that the protagonist, while trying consistently to go back in time, functions as a positive feedback loop as each iteration intensifies his emotional distress and reinforces the unchangeability of the trauma. Alexander travels far into the future and witnesses the long-term consequences of human activity: the environmental collapse, societal division, and the environmental breakdown of civilization into the Eloi and Morlocks. Which reflects a deep awareness of human impact on the planet, aligning with what Hailar

Duffield calls “Anthropocene Consciousness” (Duffield, 2025), it defines as the current era in which human activity is the main influence on the planet’s climate and environment. It can either shape, limit or expand the possibility of imagining what the future might look like. If this consciousness is “hopeful” or solution oriented, it permits alternative futures of sustainability, recovery and adaptation. While it is dominated by fear or fatalism, it projects a block of the ability to imagine anything beyond collapse and mass destruction. In the film, by the end, Alexander chooses to stay in the future and help the Eloi rebuild their world. This symbolizes a shift in awareness of the damage humans caused transforms into a reason to work towards a better tomorrow.

On a different lens, at the core of this film lies a profound ambivalence towards technology, depicted by both personal trauma and planetary catastrophe. This tension is symbolized in the sequences where Alexander works obsessively on his time machine in a cold, dimly lit lab. The *mise-en-scène* here is striking: mechanical blueprints are scattered across metallic tubes, gears and levers dominate the background, and Alexander is bathed in a bluish-white light that isolates him from the warmth of the surrounding world. These visual choices signal not just his alienation, but the emotional sterility of a life driven by techno-rationalism. His grief is displaced into engineering: technology becomes not just a means of progress, but a surrogate for intimacy and mourning. This was projected in the holographic librarian scene, where Alexander searches for comfort and meaning through a digital surrogate. The librarian, rendered in sterile white robes with a blank effect, reflects cold factuality, offering no catharsis or emotional resolution.

The sterile *mise-en-scène* is glassy and symmetrical which mirrors Alexander’s internal void. As Vivian Sobchack might suggest, this is a moment of “cinesthetic subjectivity” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 94), where the film’s affective mood and the protagonist’s emotional state converge through audiovisual form. The film also depicts technology as the ideological machinery of late capitalism that promises liberation but only creates more alienation. The film illustrates trauma through repetitive iterations of the same profound loss, effectively projecting a “temporal PTSD”. Each repetition serves as an attempt to resolve the traumatic event, while consistently failing to provide closure or relief. The protagonist’s final decision to remain in the future indicated that he was able to “form” his “choice”.

Similarly to the scene of the dramatic destruction of the moon, depicted in a sweeping, desaturated wide shot as lunar fragments cascade toward Earth, triggering seismic devastation, the film uses large-scale spectacle to depict post-millennial skepticism and the consequences of unchecked scientific ambition. This catastrophic moment acts as a temporal rupture in the narrative, pushing Alexander further into

the future while simultaneously marking the death of any utopian imagination. It mirrors the emotional devastation he experiences in his personal timeline.

The mise-en-scène in these moments mechanical noise, and flickering lights, Alexander's isolated figure surrounded by metallic surfaces, visually reflect his technological obsession with emotional repression. Thus, the film ties technological mastery to both environmental collapse and affective stagnation, reinforcing the motif of recursive trauma in the narrative.

5. Conclusion: The Future Has Already Happened

In *The Time Machine* (2002), time is not a resource to be disturbed, mastered or remade. It is a close circuit, looping back on itself in different patterns. The film subverts the very logic of Uchronia: instead of proposing an alternative history or a hopeful divergence, it enacts the breakdown of historical imagination altogether. Only endlessly circled, the past cannot be rewritten, the future cannot be reached. Through the lens of trauma theory, speculative historiography, and science fiction formalism, this article has argued that the film does not dramatize the utopian possibility of time travel, but rather the melancholic limits for futurity under late capitalism. Reflecting Fisher's diagnosis of cultural hauntology and Jameson's theory of postmodern historicity, *The Time Machine* (2002) with all its historical fixations, captures the recursive logic of a society suspended in its own aftermath. As François Hartog's presentism suggests, one no longer looks forward or backward in time, one dwells in a stretched-out now, where memory and prediction have collapsed into affective repetition.

Seen from this angle, Uchronia becomes less of a speculative genre and more of a symptom. It no longer offers detours through alternate pasts but reflects the growing incapacity to envision a different future. This is the deeper irony of Alexander's machine: built to escape history, it ultimately ends up reinforcing its inevitable course. The film's final gesture where a choice to stay with the Eloi and help them rebuild must be made, does not redeem the narrative with a utopian closure. Instead, it registers a quiet shift from escape to endurance, from rewinding time to confronting its weight. Perhaps, the film's most unsettling proposition is not that the future is doomed, but that the future is already here looping in different disguises. In a culture where imagination has become predictive, *The Time Machine* (2002) highlights the utopian gaps and mourns the fading capacity to believe in a better future at all.

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