The Erasure of Historical Consciousness and the Hegemony of the Present in Time Travel Films

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Abstract: The paper discusses how the present became absolute and colonized the historical past in the mass culture of late capitalism, by examining the ideological premise of time travel films of the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's and David Lowenthal's views of history and popular culture, the article suggests that the primacy of the present and the disappearance of historical consciousness becomes really striking in narratives that thematize the unnatural structures and causal logics of multiple, co-existing temporal planes. The course of history is presented as an evolution towards superior social structures, culminating in the liberal democracy of the United States, and any interference with this system is portrayed as a threat to social order. Its hegemonic aspirations are glorified in the narratives through the affirmative attitude of the fictionalized historical characters towards it.

Keywords – Sci-Fi, Time Travel; Popular Imagination; Historical Consciousness; Presentism, Americanism.

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1. The absolute present

The 1980s saw a resurgence in the popularity of time travel films in Hollywood. A few successful and influential film franchises – mainly *The Terminator* (1984) and *Back to the Future* (1985) – have ensured that their central narrative element – influencing the past – has become a common plot device for commercial filmmaking in the following decades, and the film cycles[1] have contributed to the establishment of an independent genre, in the sense Rick Altman (6) has defined the process. Classic time travel movies of the previous decades – often adapted from literary texts – were focused on observing, admiring, and learning from another era (the exemplary film is *The Time Machine*), finding a clever way to survive or adapt to an alien environment (here *The Planet of the Apes* can be cited), or noble gestures to help the (often primitive) "locals" in possession of greater knowledge (like the many adaptations of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). In this new era of more complex time travel narratives, the diegetic rules of their extraordinary realities allowed the main characters more agency in shaping reality, even affecting the time traveller's own present. The conflict in the plot was generally concerned with the paradoxes arising from the violation of causality and their possible solutions, so that these stories not only challenge basic concepts of narrative and serve as a "narratological laboratory" (Wittenberg 2), but also required a necessary commitment to a certain hypothetical conception of reality (physical, mental, but also social) and human existence: Can the past be changed? What happens to the present as I know it if I change the past? Is there free will if I can travel forward into a predetermined future?

I argue that a recurring theme and implicit logical foundation of mainstream time travel films of the era is the priorization of present in two interrelated senses: a narratological and an ideological. The first sense of the term refers to the dominant position (the meaning- and plot-organising power) of the process of narration, the direct experience of presentation, the actual present of "discourse" in the narratological sense, which determines and, where necessary, overwrites the logic of the explicit or implicit rules of the diegesis. In other words: the logic of the discourse will determine the development of the events depicted, rather than the causality of the storyworld (which may of course be complicated by the specific laws of time travel); the texture of the film, the dramatic arrangement of sequences organizes the logic of the events, the spatiotemporal and causal relations of the story. Because the logic of the told is dominated by the logic of the telling, the different timelines exist not in a rational but in a certain kind of magical interconnection, in an uncanny simultaneity, as if they existed not in temporal but in spatial separation.

As a consequence, the way in which these narratives are structured reflects their concept of time and temporal relations in a revelatory way. Interestingly, it is precisely in the narratives that make the relativity and interdependence of timelines imaginable that the idea of the

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[1] Steve Neal defines film cycles as "groups of films made within a specific and limited time span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes" (9).

"disappearance of time" (Fisher 19) in a historical sense becomes a tendency, insofar as the present is posited as a privileged, special, absolute milieu, and its conditions and circumstances as a metaphysical principle. The message of these films is precisely that interfering with the past is dangerous, as it can have unforeseeable consequences for the present reality that is the starting point and origin of the films (even if this "here and now" is set in the near future to rationalize the time travel technology, these realities function as a metaphor for the horizon of the present in terms of viewer identification.)

2. Plot strategies for time travel

In *Back to the Future* and its sequels (1989, 1990), and as well as in *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) the greatest threat is the idea of tampering with the past, which threatens the life of the protagonists. If *Back to the Future*'s Marty (Michael J. Fox) unwittingly changes the past, and his mother (Lea Thompson) is unable to get back together with his father (Crispin Glover), then he himself will never be born and will be erased from existence. Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd), the inventor of time travel, says that simply meeting one's former or future self can end the space-time continuum (that is, the entire universe). In the second film, this idea moves beyond the personal to the communal, and the film tries to show that interfering in history can have disastrous consequences: the heroes' eternal adversary, Biff Tannen (Thomas F. Wilson), gains such wealth and power thanks to a sports almanac from his future self that in 30 years he is able to transform the entire city, and metaphorically America itself, according to his own aberrant desires. (Here the film is not criticizing the system or the economic elite in general, but rather just the archetype of the undeservedly wealthy individual who is endowed with Donald Trump's iconography.) What originally exists, the homely, the normality that functions as a reference, must therefore be preserved, conserved, protected from all intrusions. Instead of unpredictable changes (which could even transform the whole society), the film favours stability, the familiar (even if not perfect, but functioning and liveable) Reaganian world. Whereas in the dystopian 1985 of the second movie we see the devastating but cartoonish result of deliberate change, the ending of the first episode clearly shows that the protagonist's positively changed micro-environment is the reward for his efforts to avert change in a grander scale and preserve the existent reality. In other words, the film has no problem with change if it only affects the protagonist and his family in a positive way, but does not upset the social order. The virtuous hero brings change to his own life, while the immoral anti-hero actively seeks to extend his influence and power to everyone else. The key idea of the whole series and the organizing principle of the plot is in each instance to repair the consequences of accidents, mistakes and intentional meddling with the existing order of the present.

In another commercially successful film, *Timecop* (1994), the prohibition is elevated to the force of law: altering the past is a serious crime because it can bring a different present and future, potentially unfavourable to the political power. The need for strict government regulation (and hence US appropriation) of time travel is legitimised by the following argument: what would happen if Saddam Hussein travelled back to 1944 and, in possession of US technology, made Iraq the world's first nuclear power? They argue that they could not go back to kill Hitler because it would lead to a chain reaction that could even bring about the end of humanity. The government official says they must "protect time", but what they are really doing is protecting their own position of power. In doing so, the film makes the paramount requirement of preserving the social status quo abundantly clear.[2] The present

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[2] The tendency of positive characters to be guardians of the status quo and villains to destroy or change the social order has been pointed out several times in relation to Superhero narratives (Graeber) and

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(American) world order is literally the most advanced imaginable, since, as it is said in the film, it is a "law of nature" that you cannot travel into the future, you can only travel backwards in time. Since the future is non-existent and the now is the most forward moment in time, the present is effectively absolutised. (This means that you can always tell exactly whether you are in the singular present or in a multitude of pasts.) Let us not forget that the need to maintain hegemony is the ideology of the positive characters or the system that seeks to protect its citizens. We see the main villain coming from within the government not as part of the system, but as its defect, its corruption: as commissioner of the Time Enforcement Commission, Senator McComb (Ron Silver) exploits its weaknesses and amasses a fortune from the past for his own presidential campaign, for which he won't even spare innocent lives. It is clear that the film only condemns overtly violent acts committed for self-interest, for the sake of personal power, with the aid of an easily hated antagonist. When, at the end of the story, the protagonist Max Walker (Jean-Claude Van Damme) decides to break the law and change the past, his action, which is motivated by a very personal and emotional reason, is presented as legitimate and ethical, as he wants to save the life of his wife and unborn child.

The ontological concept of an absolute, pervasive present also appears in the film *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Stephen Herek, 1989 and its sequel, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991), both created from an idea and script by Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon.[3] At the beginning of the story, we meet two lovable but dumb high school seniors from San Dimas, California, Bill S. Preston (Alex Winter) and Ted "Theodore" Logan (Keanu Reeves). The two youngsters' greatest ambition is to have a successful musical career with their rock band, but they can't even play their instruments. They fail history at school, but their teacher gives them one last chance if they succeed in their end-of-year presentation. Rufus (George Carlin), their mentor from the future, tells them that the fate of civilization is in their hands: they must succeed with their band to bring world peace and save the future of a society built on the message of their music. Their mission is threatened by their possible separation if they fail history, so Rufus offers to help. The borrowed phone-booth time machine gives the duo a close-up look at iconic periods in history. By a happy coincidence, Bill and Ted come up with the idea of bringing some of history's most famous people to the presentation the following day, so they can share their thoughts on 1988's San Dimas in person. Along the way, they get involved in a series of exciting adventures and humorous situations as they try to collect figures such as Napoleon (Terry Camilleri), Billy the Kid (Dan Shor), Socrates (Tony Steedman), Sigmund Freud (Rod Loomis), Ludwig van Beethoven (Clifford David), Joan of Arc (Jane Wiedlin), Genghis Khan (Al Leong) and Abraham Lincoln (Robert V. Barron). Their mission succeeds, of course, and the future is saved for now. What is really remarkable is how time works in this narrative. In a revealing moment, the protagonists are warned to keep an eye on their watches, because while they are travelling in the past, their own present time is constantly passing

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Marvel films ("The MCU and an Inflexible Status Quo"; "Marvel Defenders of The Status Quo"). The antagonistic forces of social change (utopian imagination) and the incentives to preserve the status quo is discussed in detail by Charles Tryon's unpublished dissertation on the politics of time travel cinema.
[3] The first two films were followed by successful and less successful sequels. An animated series: *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventures* (1990–91), a live-action series of the same name (1992), and the third movie (*Bill & Ted Face the Music*) riding the latest wave of nostalgia. They have also released a cereal (*Bill & Ted's Excellent Cereal*) and a video game (*Bill & Ted's Excellent Video Game Adventure*, LJN, 1991) under the brand name. (For all other products see: Cummins.) The films' cultural impact (beyond TV spin-offs, merchandise and cultural events) is demonstrated by their effect on young people's language use in the years following their release, with the proliferation of slang terms used by the main characters. According to Alex Winter, angry literature teachers have started writing to him, claiming that their students are increasingly talking like the time travellers they are portraying. ("Dude! Bill & Ted's Excellent Impact"). See also: "How The Language Of 'Bill & Ted's"; and Hill.

(regardless of their current temporal location), and they have to return there "on time". We might understand the dramaturgical necessity of introducing this seemingly ad hoc rule as a way of credibly maintaining a sense of urgency and restoring the weight of the consequences of the characters' actions to the narrative, elements that are often lost in time travel stories due to the easy manipulation of time.

Interestingly, the ideological consequence of such rules is usually the privileging of the present in stories that absolutize a concept whose very relativity could have a liberating power and exciting narrative potential. A typical example of this absolutization is when a change in a later timeline (or its elements) is the result of an intervention in the earlier plane by the time travellers. In this case, the modification is not only represented later in the sense of the temporal sequentiality of the discourse (that is, we as spectators do not only see it happen later), but it seems to occur in the diegesis only after the triggering event and *because* it has been represented as having happened. This logic applies to the famous fading characters in the photo (and then in the film's reality) in *Back to the Future*. Here, the film shows how the subsequent timeline changes in the light of the outcomes that become likely as a result of past events. If Marty does not reunite his parents, he and his siblings are literally erased from reality. The dramatic extension of the self-correcting logic of time can be found in the action thriller *Looper* (2012), where the act of mutilation of a character's past body *is* a parallel process to the deformation of the present body of that character. There is a voodoo doll-like effect between people's former and current bodies as if past and present were happening at the same time. (Here, the difference between *showing* and *being* is eliminated, that is, the logic of representation and the reality of the fictional world collapses into each other.)

A magical connection is also present in *Back to the Future*, because here elements that are out of their own time or timeline (such as Marty's photograph) continue to behave as if they belong to their source time or reflect the conditions of it. These objects and characters retain some kind of "time stamp" on them, some kind of transcendent connection to their source timeline (which is more like a version of reality) when they travel through time, and are therefore not only subject to the familiar physical rules of the world in which they currently exist.

The concurrency of the events in these films creates a sense of spatial separation, rather than a temporal one. Two illuminating examples of this trend can be cited from the *Bill & Ted* series. In the second installment, Chuck de Nomolos, the film's 27th century antagonist, has a "live" video call with the present, with "real-time" back and forth communication between him and the protagonists' evil robot replicas. *Bill & Ted Face the Music* (2020), the late third part, pushes this paradox to its limits with its conclusion where the film cuts back and forth between a present in which our heroes are trying to save the future and a future that is on the verge of an apocalyptic event. The reality of the future regains its stability precisely when our heroes finally manage to create the piece of music they had been unable to compose until the tense finale, but then, in a collaboration with people from all over the world, succeeded in completing the task.

3. The spatialization of time

According to Thomas Elsaesser (114), the idea of time travel – which appeared at about the same time as the invention of film – was from the beginning an expression of the spatialization of time, insofar as the act of travelling in it began to assume time as a physical dimension that could be explored in several directions, similar to space. We can see how this idea really coming to the fore in narratives that deal with the interdependence and interaction of different temporal planes.

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Vivian Sobchack analyzed this process in the context of the transformation of the science fiction genre in the 21st century. In her view, what we are witnessing is an accelerating process of science fiction's conversion into fantasy, since from the turn of the millennium the genre has not only given way to the ever-growing fantasy film industry in terms of quantity, but has also undergone an internal transformation. While the stylistic elements of the genre have been retained, the logic of the stories has changed significantly, and this mode of plotting "returned us (if with a significant difference) to what [Hayden] White calls 'mythical' reasoning, but what we today call 'magical thinking.' It has also led to the dramatic rise in the popularity of that mode of 'representation of the world' known as fantasy, which, unlike sf, owes no allegiance to 'realism'" (287).[4] She attributes this transformation to a change in our attitude towards space and time: "Spatially, – she argues – all things and all people seem technologically—and also magically—'interconnected.' Temporally, our sense of sequence and duration has given way to that of simultaneity. Cause and effect have imploded to brief instants in which desire, affect, and agency coincide" (287). With my examples above, I wanted to show that the roots of the trend described by Sobchack go back to well before the turn of the millennium and can be observed in the logic of time-travel science fiction films from the 1980s onwards. If science fiction (understood as a particular ethos of modernity) demands or requires the structuredness and orderliness of historical time, then the fantasy mode is a convenient escape route (for both creators and recipients): With its mythic narratives, it precisely disrupts and cuts through this system and constructs the past and the future from an unreflected present – though often full of artefacts of the past – confined to its own horizon and its own questions.

An essential characteristic of the fictional realities of contemporary science fiction films – which is inseparable from the previous phenomenon and is related to the change in the relationship to temporality (or the loosening of causation) – is their "multiverse" nature, that is, a set of alternative universes that exist in parallel and open up to each other, offering countless narrative possibilities to the creators of long-running film franchises. The logical foundations of this now spectacular trend were also laid by time-travel films, in which parallel timelines appeared alongside a strict before and after order, although initially they were mostly organized according to some kind of restrictive logic. We should consider not only films such as *Groundhog Day* (1993) or *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*, 1998), but also works such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy, in which parallel dimensions (i.e. alternative "timelines") are specifically created through time travel. Beyond other narratological, dramaturgical, industrial, actor- and format-related reasons, the ideological aspect of this tendency of times that happen simultaneously with the present is also worth discussing.

4. The disappearance of history

Drawing on the work of György Lukács, Fredric Jameson has pointed out that the emergence of historical consciousness was itself a historical development, the first significant artistic manifestation of which was the historical novel in the early 19th century. He argues that the form

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[4] Following a similar line of thought, Tom Moylan (26), in his influential monograph on the emancipatory potential of the science fiction genre, argues that the last wave of sophisticated manifestations of "utopian imagination" in popular culture can be found in a series of works that fall within the category of "critical utopia" created in the 1970s. Herbert Marcuse's concept of utopian imagination is not simply a positive vision of the future from the point of view of the community, but the ability to imagine a radically different socio-political system or collective vision of the future from the present. (*Eros and Civilization*, see also: Moylan 25 and Ricœur 25)

in its modern sense was certainly preceded by literary works which evoked the past and recreated historical settings of one kind or another: the history plays of Shakespeare or Corneille, *La Princesse de Cleves*, even Arthurian romance: yet all these works in their various ways affirm the past as being essentially the same as the present, and do not yet confront the great discovery of the modern historical sensibility, that the past, the various pasts, are culturally original, and radically distinct from our own experience of the object-world of the present. ("Progress Versus Utopia" 149)

Historical consciousness is therefore not simply the knowledge of historical data (people, events, trends and their supposed connections), but the idea that people of past ages had different ways of thinking, values and principles from those sof today. According to Jameson, historical consciousness is nothing other than the consciousness of differences, a reflexive moment of perspective and ideology, through which we can recognize in the other its strangeness and in our own its constructedness (*Postmodernism* 283). He was among the first to thematize – and in a sense predict – that historicity is disappearing again in consumer society, a trend that is spectacularly visible in the mass culture of the 20th century. Historian David Lowenthal argued in 1985 that it is increasingly common to see representations in which "[b]eyond their costumes, characters differ only in age and gender and status; the same motives and mentalities animate medieval as modern folk, elemental passions enacted on a timeless stage" (*The Past is a Foreign Country* 594). He concludes that "today the past is ever more comprehensively domesticated" (594), or as others have put it, the loss of authentic narratives caused the assimilation, colonization, or the "exploitation" (Sweeney 47) of the past by the present. According to Lowenthal the medium of cinema is especially suitable for creating a sense of "intimate immediacy" when depicting the past, and "[a] major consequence of thus folding past into present is a growing inability to accept that bygone folk held other principles and viewpoints – that the Zeitgeist alters over time" (596). He notes that this is particularly important in the United States, where the belief in the superiority of "American" culture – or, in Antonio Gramsci's terminology, American cultural hegemony – has long been a dominant idea among the country's ruling class: "Since historians themselves continued well into the twentieth century to view American history as the unfolding of a divine and immutable mission, it is not surprising that many Americans still cleave to their redemptive escape from the toils of history" ("The Timeless Past" 1265). Jameson further argues that in the popular imagination, cinematic representations have in many cases replaced scientifically more accurate knowledge of important historical facts and events, so that the former have now become "more recognizable and convincing than the authentic, original lineaments. Many viewers seem less impressed by Charles Lindbergh's original Spirit of St. Louis in the Smithsonian Institution than by the plane Jimmy Stewart flew in the movie" (1267). In other words, the bombastic, mythical representations of the culture industry began to devour the more authentic signs of the reality of the past and started to function as a simulacrum in the Baudrillardian sense (*Simulacra*).

5. Historical consciousness in time travel comedies

Famous as a light-hearted teen comedies, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* and its sequel were made at a contentious time when the virtual (ideological-cultural) and then actual (economic-political) disintegration of the Cold War bipolar world was promising the dominance of liberal democracies (whether American-style market economies or Northern European social democracies) and allowing for spectacular optimism about the future. On the surface, the first

film has the seemingly innocent educational message[5] that learning about the past (in a new, experiential way) is the key to creating a better future for society. However, at the heart of the cultural condition captured by the representation is the idea of absolutizing the present, of elevating it above all else, and the hope of a bright (and thus virtually unchanging) future that follows from it. The film and its sequels depict with surprising accuracy this cultural state of transition where historical consciousness is disappearing again.

To point out a lack of historical accuracy, authenticity or awareness in the *Bill & Ted* films would be trivial and hilarious, because they deliberately choose not to be realistic.[6] But it is precisely this framework of non-seriousness that prevents us from seeing how the narrative reveals Hollywood's relationship to historical time and how it captures a specific historical moment. No matter how comical, funny, or reflexive, the *Bill & Ted* films are not a critique or satire of pop culture, a mockery of stock characters, contemporary public thought or the Hollywood-style representation, but deeply implicated in its ideological machinery. Comedy does not negate ideology, but only obscures it when it leads the viewer to attribute all the strangeness of the story and its style to the humour of the genre (which defies not only the expectation of realism, but also the consistency of narrative causality). This attitude does not denounce institutional representation, but rather reinforces it, "naturalizing it" (András 183) through the gesture of comic framing. It divides the conceptual field when it depicts history, claiming that in contrast to this overtly cartoonish, exaggerated depiction, there are other, more sincere narrativizations of the past. The viewer understands, of course, that the mimetic logic of the narrative is distorted for the sake of the jokes, and the humour *allows* this representation to be perceived as a distortion, unlike more truthful depictions of history and historical figures in "serious" genres.

For the interpreter, however, it is precisely the narrative patterns, representational figures, cultural clichés and genre tropes that the film mobilizes that are of interest. In describing the film's supposed emancipatory potential, Lynne Lundquist inadvertently highlights a fundamental problem with its representation. In the high school presentation scene, "as people from various different times and cultures are gathered together in one unified pageant, a timeless and ahistorical vaudeville show for present-day listeners" (216), the film literally stages a key aspect of its ideology of historicity: with this colourful tableau of eras and characters, it homogenizes different periods of history, so that the past in the framing of the narrative becomes no more than the modestly intellectual Bill and Ted can think of it. The historical figures are merely props for the protagonists' quest, and the journeys to historical times are primarily narrative devices used to unfold their story arc. All of this ultimately serves to support the seemingly naive ideology of Bill and Ted, two hyperbolic but allegorical figures of youthful, trendy America. (For a more concrete embodiment of the myth of Americanism, with its ideals of goodness and innocence, audiences had to wait until 1994's *Forrest Gump*.) A wonderful example of the narrative's curious logic is the moment when our heroes try to find out where Napoleon is, who was previously entrusted to Ted's brother but is lost in the modern resort town. Their first childishly regressive thought leads them to the absurdly correct conclusion that it is indeed the *Waterloo* waterslide park where they find the adventurous general.

The film's message is that while vestiges of the authoritarian, despotic regimes of the past still exist in late 1980s California, they pose only a (mostly psychological) threat to the freedom of individual characters, rather than to society as a whole. Ted's conflict with his policeman father, who threatens to send his son to military school in Alaska, can be seen as a plot device, and in this context, the San Dimas High School no longer seems such a terrible place.

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[5] See Lynne Lundquist's benign and indulgent reading of the film.

[6] Curiously, at the time of its release, the film was criticised by many reviewers for its exaggerated, clichéd and implausible historical characters. (See: Canby, Hinson, Variety Staff, Willman. An exception to this trend is: Jones.)

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The film proves that the answer to the history teacher's question – How would important historical figures see the world of San Dimas, 1988? – is that they are living the happiest time of their lives, because their own time was more primitive, their existence more precarious, their opportunities more limited, with more danger, more suffering, harsher conditions. History here is clearly an evolution towards higher forms of social organization. This "maturation" of civilization is evident in the film's portrayal of all historical figures as wild, childish, selfish or downright idiotic, driven simply by their own primary instincts, making Bill and Ted look like responsible adults.

The ideology of *Bill & Ted* is, ironically, best revealed through the perspective of the film's uninitiated supporting characters: for them, the self-proclaimed "historical figures" are merely lunatics in costume who need to be consolidated and tamed in order to behave properly in the vast space of possibilities at the end of the 20th century. Similarly, for the spectator, they are merely emblems of history, two-dimensional pop-cultural icons (or memes) modelled on real people: in this sense, they are (individual) representations of (collective) representations.[7]

The main site for the integration of historical figures is the symbolic space of American consumer culture: the mall. Superficially, the sequence here shows that the characters are completely out of place in this environment: they disrupt order, cause upheaval and offend people. But on the other hand, they enjoy the activities that can be carried out in this space-time immensely; they are far more animated than the "native" Americans, having come here from more austere times to the pinnacle of civilization. Joan of Arc, a virgin soldier who decided at a very young age to serve God and her country, finds fulfillment in the aesthetic shaping of the body, in aerobic training. Like her, the initially reluctant Napoleon, who goes off on his own path, begins to enjoy the Anglo-Saxon cultural environment of the ice-cream parlour and the slide park, the lifestyle of the suburban upper middle class and the consumerism that has been created for them. In the end, of course, they are all arrested because they are overflowing with raw energy; unfortunately, they are still too wild and uncivilized for the "sophistication" (or, as the case may be, democracy) of modern life and do not respect the rules of this society.

In the same vein, but perhaps more spectacularly because of the huge time gap between the eras depicted, the comedy *Encino Man* (1992) shows the integration of Link (Brendan Fraser), a caveman awakening from hibernation, who is transformed by his "explorers" (Sean Astin and Pauly Shore) from a dirty, rough-looking, marauding and aggressive savage into a perfect teenager. It is not simply a depiction of the initially wary caveman beginning to trust and open up to his newfound companions. The film suggests that, with a little cleaning, cosmetic treatment and kindness, Link can become an attractive modern man on the outside and a playful, gentle, selfless and loyal friend on the inside. In fact, this personality has always been hidden behind the wild appearance, it is just that his circumstances have not allowed him to develop it. (It is telling that this role made Fraser a celebrity and a teenage icon.)

There are, of course, some counter-examples of time travellers who fit in easily in the films of the period. Interestingly, characters from the past who travel through time not by technological invention or (pseudo)scientific principle, but by magic or some transcendent force, are generally unimpressed by the wonders of the late 20th century: they largely view the world with fear, frustration or indifference. Stories that emphasize such reactions are predominantly to be found in non-American films. Let me cite two examples from the period

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[7] The more overtly metaphysical second film, whose plot involves the colonization not only of the material world but also of other cultural and religious spaces, such as Christian heaven and hell, makes it clear that there is no distinction between historical, mythical and fictional characters, all qualities dissolving and merging into the postmodern textual world of the discourse: the deaths of Bill and Ted take place in a setting directly evoking a *Star Trek* episode ("Arena"), the personification of Death looks like the iconic character from Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*), etc.

in which there is a rhetorically significant exploration of perspectives other than those of the film's implied audience: in the Australian-New Zealand drama-fantasy film *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (1988), the present remains alien and frightening to the travellers from medieval England. Their sacred quest is more important to them than discovering or understanding the benefits of 20th century New Zealand. The spiritual pilgrims experience the journey as a dangerous voyage through an unearthly realm. By conveying their point of view, the film also attempts to alienate contemporary viewers from their own metropolitan environment. The successful French comedy *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs*, 1993) is far from revolutionary in its attitude when its medieval Count (Jean Reno) condemns the present as sterile, impoverished, in many ways senseless, hostile and inhuman, but it does draw attention to the differences in mentality that arise from the position of the medieval (and contemporary) social classes, most notably when it shows the different attitudes of master and servant (Christian Clavier) to their alien surroundings. (The latter likes the relative freedom he enjoys and increasingly wants to stay in the 20th century.)

Cultural appropriation can be articulated along two basic axes, one temporal and the other spatial. The first is usually related to an image of "a past that mirrors the present and that should be read back from it, reflecting eternal and universal causes, virtues, and vices" (Lowenthal, "The Timeless Past" 1264). In this context, the speech of Abraham Lincoln, one of the most important political figures of the United States, at the end of *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* is quite revealing. Lincoln, as the embodiment of the ideals of honesty, integrity, humanity and freedom,[8] addresses his audience as follows: "These two great gentlemen are dedicated to a proposition which was true in my time, just as it's true today: Be excellent to each other! And party on, dudes!" While the statement obliterates all historicity and difference of cultural horizons (note how it operates verb tenses from the perspective of Bill and Ted's present), it is politically perfectly safe because it is perfectly empty. A striking example of reverse causality is the way in which the 19th century statesman, by borrowing Bill and Ted's iconic slogan, reinforces in his high school audience a (false) notion of some kind of universality across time and culture. In effect, the scene becomes a poignant metaphor for the transformation of the past into the present and the way mass culture works. No less expressive is the speech in the second film, which actually praises the status quo and the existing system. While Rufus' monologue at the beginning of the first film speaks of the greatness of the future San Dimas, Bill and Ted's declaration at the end of the second film is as follows: "Ladies and gentlemen! We've been to the past. We've been to the future. We've been all around the afterlife. And you know [...] the best place to be... is here. And the best time to be... is now."

The other, or spatial axis, has been less discussed so far, but is just as spectacular in the film. It is linked to the "[p]opular historical preconception" that "one's own national or cultural pasts" are usually sharply distinguised "from those of other societies, enabling one either to extol traditional stasis or to deplore primitives' lack of progress" ("The Timeless Past" 1264). The most intelligent and mature characters depicted are those closer to Anglo-Saxon and Western culture: the English princesses, Lincoln, and the mythical figure of the American Wild West: Billy the Kid. It is no coincidence that Billy is the first to be colonized and that he speaks the protagonists' slang ("dude", "excellent") after only one scene. Bill notes that Billy was the quickest to grasp the oddities of time travel, meaning that the further away a historical character is from the protagonists' culture, the more childish or barbaric they are portrayed. This is perfectly illustrated by the difference between the characters who speak English and those who do not: Napoleon, whom we first meet as the authoritative general who orders the heroes to be blown up, is halfway through the film wearing a baby bib to eat, with a smudged

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[8] For a list of spiritual values associated with the President, I have used the description on the official Lincoln Memorial website: "District of Columbia".

face, surrounded by children, scraping the leftovers from the ice-cream bowl with his finger. Its character could also be seen as a cultural critique of American society, pointing out how it infantilizes the individual, but overall, despite the many similar gestures, this cannot become the dominant reading of the film because the comic frame absorbs and neutralises this approach.

We can conclude with a reference to Francis Fukuyama's famous, somewhat anti-utopian idea of the end of history. The political scientist claimed that by the early 1990s we had reached "the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" ("The End of History?" 4). Although Fukuyama has repeatedly taken issue with those who have explicitly linked his findings to the American political structure ("The History"), he has essentially described the hegemony of the Western neoliberal capitalist system. The idea could have quickly become popular, as it articulated a sentiment that was already present in American society and clearly evident in the Hollywood science fiction of the time. Of course, we do not have to accept the validity of Fukuyama's diagnosis of the moment to conclude that the discussed films' view of history is a symptomatic reflection of an idea that by then had clearly "triumphed at the level of the cultural unconscious" (András 182, my translation), insofar as they present the self-image of a social system through Hollywood's (actually political) discourse.

The analysis suggests that in time travel films of the period, the erasure of the historical perspectives on the past is made possible by positing history as a cumulative and teleological process, where the past is nothing more than a retroactive extension of the present. To the extent that films depicting historical periods make any effort to show that the mindsets, values, images and aspirations of people in the past were different from those of today, this is usually explained by inferior material and living conditions and lack of access to knowledge. (A similar statement can be made about the view of differences between cultures.) In this sense the films propagate the notion of cultural evolution, in which the course of history appears as a process of shedding false beliefs and marching towards a happier, brighter future, usually culminating in the liberal democracy of the United States.

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