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Time Travel as a Motif of Science Fiction Literature

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1 The Fascination of Time Travel

Everyone of us can travel in time. When we visit exhibitions, we can feel as if we have been put back in former times. When we travel to different places and enter different time zones, we travel backward or forward a few hours. The countries that we visit are not only different in their culture, but also in their state of development. We might *feel* as if we have travelled into the past or into the future. Paul Alkon gives a suitable example of this phenomenon:

“Americans ... were and are more likely than Europeans to equate geography with time, and thus spatial with temporal travel, because in the New World, especially during America’s expansionist nineteenth century, the western frontier stands for the future whereas eastern states and Europe (‘the old country’) stand for the past. To travel west is to go toward a cultural future. To travel east is to go toward the cultural past. The further east one goes, the more one encounters old buildings and monuments and the greater their antiquity. Americans crossing the Atlantic eastward to Europe ... are also in effect visiting their collective past.”¹

But these possibilities lack two important features of time travel. We cannot move freely in time and we cannot influence the past or the future.

Mentally, we can travel to every point of time that we would like to. People often concentrate more on the past or future than on the present. Especially older people think of “the good old days” whereas younger people set their hopes on the future.

We often ask ourselves: “What would have happened if...?” “What would have happened if I had not...?” “What would have happened if I was to ...?” Is the present not exciting enough? We often speculate how our present lives would have been different, if we had made different decisions in the past. We try to imagine our future because we cannot cope with the uncertainty of not knowing.

¹ Alkon, P. 1994: 120

2 Science Fiction

2.1 Definition

“Modern science fiction is the only form of literature that consistently considers the nature of the changes that face us, the possible consequences, and the possible solutions. That branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings.”²

Science fiction anticipates our future from our present knowledge and the cultural, social and scientific trends of our time. It shows us where current events may lead us. Imaginary inventions or discoveries in natural sciences are the basis of science fiction stories. Science fiction tries to “foresee how mankind may adjust to the new condition”³ that is caused by new discoveries. That means, it often does not describe the story of a single person, but of a whole civilization. Science fiction authors invent whole civilizations with their own specific language, behavior, legislation and jurisdiction; whole worlds. They use the atmosphere of scientific credibility for speculations in physical and social science, philosophy, space and time.⁴

Science fiction literature became established in the 19th century. The rapid explosion of knowledge and scientific progress and the growing interest in natural science led to the development of a new branch of literature that was based on elements of scientific progress.⁵

“The history of science fiction is also the history of humanity’s changing attitudes toward space and time. It is the history of our growing understanding of the universe and the position of our species in that universe.”⁶

New discoveries widened man’s view of the world and let him imagine the formerly unbelievable, that now seemed to be within reach. In science fiction dreams are often described, that later became realities of scientific progress. Jules Verne described in his novel “De la terre à la lune” (1865) (From the Earth to the Moon) an expedition to the

² Asimov, I. In: http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html

³ Bailey, J.O. In: http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html

⁴ Moskowitz, S. In: http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html

⁵ Bär, T. 2000: 36

⁶ Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 3

moon, an undertaking that seemed impossible to his contemporaries and yet became reality in 1969. In his novel “Time and Again”, Jack Finney very amusingly combines former visions with today’s realities. He describes how Julia, a woman who has travelled from the year 1882 to the 1970s, is not surprised to see airplanes because she has read about them previously in books by Jules Verne.

“...science fiction could begin to exist as a literary form only when a different future became conceivable by human beings – specifically a future in which new knowledge, new discoveries, new adventures, new mutations, would make life radically different from the familiar patterns of the past and present. ...the division between realism and fantasy begins to fade...”⁷

Science fiction authors often pretend to use scientific knowledge as the basis of their story. Sometimes, like in “The Time Machine” by H. G. Wells, the scientific premises turn out to be wrong. Nevertheless, these stories do not depend wholly on the truth of their scientific foundations, but on the skill of the author to make them seem believable.

Science fiction also reveals the attitude of society towards scientific discoveries. Jules Verne, the first author who wrote mainly science fiction, believed strongly in scientific progress and in the solution of social problems by technical means. Other authors were more sceptical concerning new discoveries. An example of this scepticism is shown in H. G. Wells’ novel “The Island of Dr. Moreau” (1896) which is about the irresponsible biologist Dr. Moreau and his creatures. Wells describes in this book the dangers of the manipulation of the genetic code without having the biological knowledge.

“SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious.”⁸

⁷ Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 7

⁸ Benford, G. In: http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html

2. 2 Motifs of Science Fiction Literature

The themes of science fiction can be divided in two groups: those of biological origin (including stories of nonhuman beings and problems of race and sex) and those of physical origin (dealing with problems of space and time).⁹

“A persistent aspect of the vision of science fiction is the desire to transcend normal experience.”¹⁰

This transcendence can refer to all of the motives mentioned above. A very popular topic of science fiction is nonhuman beings. These fictional characters can be of two forms: either they are artificial creations, like robots, androids, golems or they are extraterrestrial beings: aliens. The protagonists of science fiction stories travel to other planets and – they travel in time. All these possibilities do not seem entirely impossible to us, but it will take a very long time until they become reality. There are so many planets in the universe, is it not possible that some of them could be inhabited? In 1969 Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, and the slowing down and acceleration of time when space flight nearly reaches the speed of light is the first form of time travel.

Machines play an important role in science fiction literature. We can look at machines from two sides: first, the usefulness. As long as they are under human supervision, they can make life easier and more comfortable. But machines develop and become more and more independent from human control. This loss of control makes many people afraid of being hurt by machines. Mary Shelley wrote the novel “Frankenstein” about an artificial creature that gained control over its creator. In “Der Golem des Rabbi Elijah von Chelm” by Jakob Emden, the golem, who was created to be a servant, hurts its creator to protect itself.

Science fiction literature portrays the changing attitude of mankind towards machines. At the beginning, writers took a positive view of machines as servants to humanity. After World War I, when science and technology had shown their negative sides, disillusionment also became apparent in literature. A question that often concerns people is whether machines will replace them and make them superfluous. Since the Industrial Revolution human labour was replaced more and more by machines and this

⁹ Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 175

¹⁰ Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 175

development goes on and on.¹¹ Karel Čapek, the inventor of the word “robot” described in his play “R.U.R.” how the robots, who were designed to make man’s life easier, gradually develop their own ideas and aim to become masters of the humans. In the end they revolt against their former masters and take control.

3 Time Travel as a Motif of Science Fiction Literature

3.1 General Remarks

Science fiction suggests that it could be possible to travel in time, analogously to travelling in space. Generally speaking, there are two possible directions of time travel: travelling forward into the future or back into the past. These possibilities can be employed in three different ways. Either a person from the present day travels into the past or future, or, a person from the past or future travels into the present, or, the story is set in the past or future and is told from the point of view of a person in that time who meets a person who has travelled from the present day into that time. This is the case in Poul Anderson’s “The Man Who Came Early”. The first way is perhaps the most frequently used idea and it seems to be the one which offers the most interesting speculations about our future and about how our present would be if something had happened differently in the past.

Time travel into the future can be seen as a tactic for displacing the story’s setting. Authors anticipate the state of our world from present scientific knowledge and send their protagonists into the future, then the action goes on like in any other story.

Travelling back in time, on the contrary, questions the nature of causation, asking: “If one can exist in a time before one was born, then what is the nature of that existence?”¹² A problem that goes along with this question is the so-called “Grandfather-paradox”. If the hero of a time travel story goes back into the past and kills his grandfather before his mother or father was born, he will never have existed. But how can he then have travelled back into the past to kill his grandfather? Many time travel stories deal with these kinds of paradoxes. They speculate about the consequences of actions that the hero performs in the past. The Grandfather-paradox reverses the law of causality which says that the cause has to precede its effect. If the grandson (the

¹¹ Asimov, I. 1984: 194-204

¹² Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 176

effect) precedes (by preventing) his conception (the cause), the cause becomes non-existent: the effect would exist without its cause.¹³

A motive of science fiction literature that springs from this problem is that of alternate time streams. Time travellers can, by their actions in the past, “split” history. The result is an alternate time stream. This time stream parallels ours, but is not our own time stream. Something has gone differently in the past so that the world of this time stream has developed differently from our own world. By using the idea of alternate worlds, science fiction authors evade time travel paradoxes.¹⁴

A possible result of time travel could be the duplication of the time traveller. He can exist in two different time streams. It is clear that the second time traveller has the same genetic code as the first, but is not actually himself. The idea that somebody could – by doubling himself in this way – make different decisions concerning one problem and thus experience the alternative consequences is an illusion. But the idea of not having to always decide for one alternative is surely behind the idea of alternate time streams.

“The alternate time stream at its most serious raises questions about history and progress that are not so accessible to any other fictional form. Above all, this form emphasizes the way that the actual events of history have shaped cultural values which we sometimes take to be absolute.”¹⁵

3. 2 Motives for writing about Time Travel

The problem of time travel raises a philosophical question. Is our future already a matter of fact? If yes, we have no right of self-determination because our destiny is fixed. We cannot change it when we travel into the past. If no, we cannot travel into the future because it is not yet existing.¹⁶

Time travel is also a means of contrast. If the author just wanted to tell a story about the past or the future, he could have written a historical novel or a science fiction novel without employing the topic of time travel.

¹³ Nicholls, P. 1983: 90

¹⁴ Nicholls, P. 1983: 97

¹⁵ Scholes, R. / Rabkin, E.S. 1977: 177

¹⁶ Armer, K.M. / Jeschke, W. 1994: 781

“...der direkte Vergleich verschiedener zeitlicher Realitäten, der Zusammenprall ganz unterschiedlicher Verhaltensweisen und kultureller Normen erregt unser Interesse und animiert uns zu kritischer Reflexion.”¹⁷

The world of the protagonist and the world of the time he travels into collide. A good example for this is Poul Anderson’s “The Man Who Came Early”, where a man (Gerald) travels, without recognizing it, from 1957 into the year 1000. He cannot cope with this situation because everything he knows is useless to him. When he tries to work as a blacksmith, he fails because he is unable to use the old tools. His technological knowledge is much more developed than that of his fellows, but it is of no use to him because the premises for the use of this knowledge are not yet given. The collision of two different times / worlds becomes apparent in the narrator’s (a person from the year 1000) description of Gerald’s property, customs etc.:

“His clothes were made with pockets. He brought out a small parchment box and from it took a little white stick that he put in his mouth. Then he took out another box, and a wooden stick therefrom which burst into flame when scratched. With the fire he kindled the stick in his mouth, and sucked in the smoke. We stared. ‘Is that a Christian rite?’ asked Helgi.”¹⁸

The collision of two different worlds, which is a general subject of science fiction literature, makes us think about our behaviour and our opinions which we often believe to be the only appropriate ones.

Time travel stories can be a means to criticize our present world by showing where current developments may lead us to. This intention becomes very clear in H. G. Wells’ novel “The Time Machine”. The time traveller interprets the situation in the year 802701 as a result of the division of mankind into two species: the Eloi and the Morlocks. The reason for this biological division seems to be the social segregation between rulers and workers. But in the future, the relationship between exploiters and exploited has been reversed. The Eloi, leading their life free of work on the surface, are provided with clothes by the Morlocks. The latter, working under the surface, live on

¹⁷ Armer, K.M. / Jeschke, W. 1994: 783

¹⁸ Anderson, P. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 349

the Eloi. The evolution of these two races questions Darwinian theories by presenting a kind of reverse evolution toward lesser intelligence and lesser adaptability.¹⁹

“From a parodied Morrosite model (‘Communism’, says the Time Traveller at first sight) through the discovery of degeneration and the persistence of class divisions, he arrives at the anti-utopian form most horrifying to the Victorians – a run-down class society ruled by a grotesque equivalent of the nineteenth-century industrial proletariat. Characteristically, the sociological perspective then blends into biology. The laboring and upper classes are envisioned as having developed into different races or indeed species, with the Morlocks raising the Eloi as cattle to be eaten.”²⁰

Time travel stories in which the protagonist travels into the past can, on the other hand, celebrate the old times. An example for this would be Jack Finney’s novel “Time and Again”, where the narrator almost praises the past.

“Today’s faces are different; they are much more alike and much less alive. On the streets of the eighties I saw human misery, as you see it today; and depravity, hopelessness, and greed; and in the faces of the small boys on the streets I saw the premature hardness you see now in the faces of boys from Harlem. But there was also an excitement in the streets of New York in 1882 that is gone. [...] Their faces were animated, they were glad to be just where they were, alive in that moment and place. [...] They weren’t bored, for God’s sake! Just looking at those men moved through their lives in unquestioned certainty that there was a reason for being. [...] Faces don’t have that look now; when alone they’re blank, and closed in.”²¹

3. 3 The Means of Travelling in Time

“Using the justifications of visionary experience, drug experience, or preternaturally extended sleep, literature since ancient times has used time travel to go forward, into the future. But in the sense of travelling backward, into the past, the closest approximations

¹⁹ Alkon, P.K. 1994: 50-51

²⁰ Survin, D. In: Huntington, J. 1991: 26

²¹ Finney, J. 1970: 218-219

before Wells involve the interrogation of spirits of the dead about their lives (as in Homer's Hades or in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*).”²²

H. G. Wells invented the idea of a time machine and he is often seen as the founding father of a new series of science fiction stories that are concerned with exploring the problems of time travel. The time machine is very vaguely described. It is “a glittering metallic framework”²³. “Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal.”²⁴ It is not surprising that Wells left his description so vague. In reality nothing exists that is in the slightest way similar to a time machine, he had no indication how to construct it. Besides, the protagonist is very accurate in explaining his theory of time as the fourth dimension, which is possibly more necessary to make the story more believable. Furthermore, the time machine is not the most important factor in Wells' novel. His intention was to show the possible development of mankind, the machine was just a means for the protagonist to travel into the future himself and to later tell his friends about it. Without the time machine, Wells could have speculated about the evolution of mankind only in an abstract way.²⁵ The time machine roused the interest of the reader in the story and there are certainly many readers who never realized what Wells' intention was when writing this novel.

“The New Accelerator” is another time travel story by Wells, but it is no conventional time travel story in the sense that someone travels into the future or into the past. The protagonist, Professor Gibberne, has found an essence that makes it possible to “think twice as fast, move twice as quickly, do twice as much work in a given time as you could otherwise do”²⁶. The reason for this is that the essence makes one's heart, lungs, muscles, brain and everything else move much faster than normal. The consequence, and the disadvantage is, that it brings one nearer old age. Wells' doubt of man's ability to control science and technology becomes very clear in this short story. Professor Gibberne and his friend, the narrator, try the accelerator without knowing exactly how much faster it will make them and how long the effect of the essence will last. They take some of it and go out into the street. The two men experience a feeling of superiority. They are able to observe other people and make

²² Scholes, R. / Rabkin E.S. 1977: 175-176

²³ Wells, H. G. 1984: 11

²⁴ Wells, H.G. 1984: 17

²⁵ Nicholls, P. 1999: 66

²⁶ Wells, H.G. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 40

jokes about them without being noticed because they move so fast that nobody can see them. Professor Gibberne abuses this effect of the accelerator when he hurls a dog, that does not realize what is happening, through the air. At the end of the story, the professor and his friend plan to invent a retarder that extends time. The two men are aware of the fact that these essences might be abused, but they do not feel responsible for it. The last sentence of the story sounds quite ironical: “We shall manufacture and sell the Accelerator, and, as for the consequences – we shall see.”²⁷ The story raises the question whether scientists are only responsible for the invention of certain things or whether they also have to account for its (mis)use.

Alfred Bester’s story “The Men Who Murdered Mohammed” uses again the idea of a time machine. When Henry Hassel, the protagonist, sees his wife in the arms of another man, he decides to travel into the past and kill her grandfather. Immediately, he constructs the machine:

“He opened a drawer labeled DUODENUM and removed a .45-caliber revolver. He opened other drawers, more interestingly labeled, and assembled apparatus. In exactly 7 ½ minutes (such was his rage), he put together a time machine (such was his genius). Professor Hassel assembled the time machine around him, set a dial for 1902, picked up the revolver and pressed a button. The machine made a noise like defective plumbing and Hassel disappeared.”²⁸

Nothing more is said about the time machine except that Hassel returns to his own time by the “automatic recall of the time machine”²⁹, its functioning is not described. The story is not interested in the invention of a new machine that allows the protagonist to travel in time. Time travel is common in Hassel’s day. The story is more concerned with the Grandfather-paradox and its possible solution.

In Poul Anderson’s short story “The Man Who Came Early” a man called Gerald Samsson, is sent, without his knowledge, by a bolt of lightning from the year 1957 to the year 1000. The narrator, a viking, supposes that Thor’s hammer knocked Gerald back almost 1000 years. Thor’s hammer, Thor being the germanic god of thunder, could be seen as a symbol for the war that is taking place in Iceland in 1957, the time from

²⁷ Wells, H.G. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 48

²⁸ Bester, A. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 373

²⁹ Bester, A. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 374

which Gerald comes. The lightning that made him travel into the past connects these two worlds. It is important to the story, that is told from a person of the year 1000, that the time-traveller was sent into the past by a bolt of lightning. If Gerald had travelled in a time machine, it would have disturbed the world of 1000, this is not the concern of the story. The main subject of the story is how Gerald adjusts to this new situation, a world totally different from his own.

Simon Morley, the hero of Jack Finney's novel "Time and Again", travels by means of hypnosis from the 1970s into the year 1882. The primary reason for not using a time machine in this case is so that nobody is able to tell that he comes from another time. The second reason is connected with the theory about time that runs throughout the story, the coexistence of the past and the present. In the next chapter this theory will be examined further.

3.4 Theories about Time

In most of the stories that have been discussed a theory about time, that is closely connected to the mode and the consequences of time travel, becomes clear. This chapter will deal with these theories and their influence on the course of action.

Time is often compared to a river, we say that time flows. In "Time and Again" this imagery is used.

"He [Einstein] said we're like people in a boat without oars drifting along a winding river. Around us we see only the present. We can't see the past, back in the bends and curves behind us. But it's there. [...] And my own tiny extension of Einstein's giant theory is...that a man ought somehow to be able to step out of that boat onto the shore. And walk back to one of the bends behind us."³⁰

The underlying idea of time travel in this story is that the past is always with us, but we are unable to see it. That is why Simon Morley, the time-traveller, does not need a time machine. After some preparations – he has to learn about the customs of that time, the history, and everything that is necessary for him to manage in every day life – he is hypnotized, and when he awakes, he finds himself in the year 1882. He has to be careful

³⁰ Finney, J. 1970: 52

not to change the present by his actions in the past, but his employers have a theory about this danger:

“...a theory we’ve been calling ‘twig-in-the-river’. [...] Well, time is often compared to a river, a stream, as you know. What happens at any point in the stream depends at least partly on what happened upstream earlier. [...] It’s possible, or would seem so, that even the smallest of twigs might have an effect; might lodge, for example, and eventually cause a barrier that could affect the entire course of even that stream. [...] What are the chances? There is virtually a one-hundred-percent probability that a twig tossed into that enormous and incredibly powerful current ... will not and *cannot* affect it *one goddamnit bit!*”³¹

Every day we have to make a lot of decisions and often we think ‘If I had not done this, that would not have happened to me!’. Every decision that we make can affect our future. Some of our actions may result in only minor consequences and if we had to make a decision about which path to take, the alternatives may have a similar result, but other decisions influence our future significantly, although we may not be aware of it at the time.

As it later becomes clear, the protagonist of the story is supposed to change the past in a way that the government thinks is best. Simon Morley pretends to do what his employers want, but when he goes back in time, he prevents the parents of the Director of the project, Dr. Danziger, from becoming acquainted with each other. Consequently, Dr. Danziger will never be born and – maybe – the project will never be started. The question is then, how can Morley have travelled back into the past to prevent Dr. Danziger’s parents from ever meeting? The solution to this Grandfather-paradox might be that the past and the present run parallel to each other, or maybe that Morley was unable to prevent the project this way because someone else, not Dr. Danziger, founded the project. The reader is not told whether he was successful. Morley stays in the New York of 1882.

The theory about the past and the present running parallel to each other does not sound very convincing. But time travel itself is not the main subject of the novel. The narrator feasts upon the past, he gives descriptions of places, people, customs etc.. The

³¹ Finney, J. 1970: 139-140

idea of time travel is just a method of displacing the story's setting and to make it more exciting. At the end of the novel there is a discussion about who can decide whether and in which way the past should be changed. This is a very difficult question. Who knows what change results in what effect? There are too many unknown factors. Who can say interfering in the past will result in a desirable outcome?

The Grandfather-paradox is the main topic in "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed". Professor Hassel, who sees that his wife is unfaithful to him, decides not to kill her or her lover, but to go back into the past and kill her grandfather, so that she will never be born. But neither killing her grandfather nor her grandmother made his wife disappear. He then decides to murder famous people, like Columbus, Napoleon and Mohammed, who would have had greater influence on history, just to be sure that his wife will never be born. He does not care about results these murders will have on history. But when he comes back into the present day, nothing has changed. This mystery is soon explained by professor Lennox, who was an authority on time travelling. Hassel could not kill his wife because

"...time is entirely subjective. [...] There is no universal continuum, There are only billions of individuals, each with his own continuum; and one continuum cannot affect the other. [...] When a man changes the past he only affects his own past – no one else's."³²

Everyone perceives the world in another way because everything is subjective. We have different opinions concerning one and the same subject. We know different things. What is familiar to one person, is strange to the next one. Our preferences and our dislikes, our experiences – our character shape our view of the universe. That is why we are often unable – or unwilling – to understand each other. Each of us live in our own world, separated from the everyone else. Time is subjective too. It is an individual experience. There is no universal future or past because the past of someone is always the future of someone else and vice versa. Sometimes we think that time passes slower or faster than normal.

The story closes with an unusual idea. Professor Hassel, and Professor Lennox before him, have, by changing their past, committed "chronicide"³³ – they are dead.

³² Bester, A. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 380

³³ Bester, A. In: Silverberg, R. / Greenberg, M.H. 1983: 381

In “The Time Machine” the possibility of time travel is justified by the scientific explanation of time as the fourth dimension. This idea goes back to contemporary speculations about time. Wells got the direct inspiration to his novel from an essay of a fellow student, E.A. Hamilton-Gordon, published in the “Science Schools Journal” in april 1887. Wells used the scientific explanations to make his unbelievable story about time travel seem more believable. The time-traveller explains to his listeners that

“...any real body must have extension in four directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and – Duration.”³⁴

The only difference between time and the other three dimensions is that our consciousness moves along it. We are always travelling in time, from the present to the future. Although his listeners doubt that it would be possible to travel in time, they picture the possibilities of such a voyage: one could travel back into the past to study history or forward into the future to profit from the investments one made in the present.

4 Conclusion

Science fiction looks into the future. It tries to anticipate inventions, discoveries and developments. Time travel as a motive of science fictions literature is a special means to displace the story’s setting into future times. Moreover, the simple possibility of time travel often indicates that the story is set in the future.

Time travel mirrors some of man’s greatest wishes. A time traveller can see the future. He can travel back into the past and undo his own actions. He is not forced to decide ultimately for something because he can repeat this decision again and again. Time travel opens the possibility to speculate about question like “What would happen if ...?” This seems to be the reason why time travel is so popular in science fiction literature and movies.

³⁴ Wells, H.G. 1984: 4-5

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