

TIME TRAVEL MOVIES

BY JOHN BROSNAN

It's the classic example of a time travel paradox — you know how it goes I'm sure: What would happen to a time traveller if he went back in time and killed his grandfather before he'd met his grandmother? Would the time traveller then cease to exist? But if he never existed who killed the grandfather? And so on.

The intellectual challenge presented by such problems has always attracted science fiction writers and produced, over the years, a large number of fine and ingenious time travel stories, like Robert Heinlein's famous *All you Zombies*. A reworking of one of his earlier stories called *By His Bootstraps* it's about this time traveller who, after a sex change operation, goes back in time, has sex with his former self and gives birth to . . . himself, thus leaving the reader pondering the question of who came first.

Not surprisingly film makers have tended to avoid such mind-boggling conundrums when they've come to make time travel movies, preferring to use time travel as a straight-forward transportation device to get their characters into an exotic locale. Very rarely have they tried to take full advantage of the full potential offered by time travel themes, but then it's rare for film makers to satisfactorily handle *any* science fiction theme.

But I was quite surprised, when I started digging around in my files, at just how many time travel films have been made. One of the earliest wasn't exactly a time "travel" story but dealt instead with the manipulation of time. It was a French comedy made in 1913 called *Onesime Horloger* and featured the then famous clown Ernest Bourbon (known as "Onesime") as a lovesick suitor who tampers with time in order to speed up

the arrival of his wedding day, with the result his son outgrows him almost before the honeymoon is over.

This is said to have been the inspiration for another, later French film — Rene Clair's *Paris Qui Dort* (*Paris Asleep*) made in 1923. This was about a scientist who accidentally freezes all of Paris into a split-second of time with an experimental ray, with the exception of a small group of people who remain unaffected and decide to treat the frozen city, with its equally frozen inhabitants, as a vast playground. I have never seen this but John Baxter says, "Even today it's a film of wit and charm . . ."

I suspect both films were originally inspired by the H.G. Wells short story *The New Accelerator* about two scientists who inject themselves with a drug that speeds up their metabolisms so much that the world around them appears to slow



down — people, animals and objects all seem to be frozen in time. Best reworking of this fascinating idea was John D. MacDonald's very amusing novel *The Girl, the Gold Watch and Everything*. It was turned into a TV movie a couple of years ago but has yet to appear on British television.

Another early sf movie dealing with time was a 1922 one-reeler called *The Sky Splitter* made by an American called John R. Bray. Also a comedy it concerned a scientist who exceeds the speed of light in his experimental spaceship and finds himself reliving his life. I haven't seen this either so I can't tell you if John Bray is the forgotten George Lucas of his era.

At the end of the last century, and at the beginning of this one, there was a vogue in stories about people falling asleep under odd circumstances and waking up in the far future, as in Wells' novel *The Sleeper Wakes* (1910) and the French writer Louis Boussenard's *10,000 Years in a Block of Ice* (I kid you not), and this was reflected in the cinema in such movies as George Melies' *One Hundred Years After* made in 1911. This two-reeler had a young scientist put himself in a safe deposit vault, in a state of suspended animation, for 100 years. He emerges from the vault in 2011 to discover that women have taken over. They are not only wearing the pants but men are wearing dresses. When taken before the town's female ruler the man from 1911 so impresses her with his love-making that she gives the vote back to men. Melies probably thought he was making a totally absurd comedy. Little did he realize . . .

Other movies in this genre include *In the Year 2000* (1912), *In the Year 2014* (1914) and *Percy Pimpernickel, Soubrette* (1914 . . . and no, I haven't seen the latter either but *soubrette* means "serving maid" if that's any help). Most lavish of these whimsical looks ahead was *Just Imagine*, the embarrassingly awful musical made in 1930 which had comedian El Brendel waking up in 1980 after being struck by lightning, and most recent, and funniest, was Woody Allen's *Sleeper* (1973).

And let's not forget the most famous of the many characters who have slept their way into the future — Buck Rogers. He first appeared in a serial in *Amazing Stories* in 1928, became a comic strip character in 1929 and then in 1939 reached the movie screens in the Universal serial starring Buster Crabbe. In 1979 he had a new lease of life in a TV movie, and subsequent series, but this Buck Rogers had little to do with the original.

But unless you count the various versions of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (made in 1921, 1931 and 1948) and I don't, then genuine time travel movies were thin on the screen until the 1950s. And even during the big sf film boom of the 1950s the theme didn't interest very many film makers until the end of the decade . . .

One exception was Edward Bernds, former sound effects man for *The Three*

Stooges, who wrote and directed *World Without End* in 1956. This had 4 astronauts caught in a time warp and dropped into the 26th century where, inevitably, an atomic war has ravaged the earth and one-eyed hairy mutants roam about committing anti-social acts (sounds like my neighbourhood in 1983). The remaining "real" humans live underground but are helped by the astronauts to regain the surface. It's a very trite and predictable film made on a budget barely big enough to cover the mutants with sufficient hair. I preferred Bernds' later sf films — *The Return of the Fly* and *The Three Stooges in Orbit*.

Time travel played a small part in *The Invisible Boy* in 1957 and a bigger part in *Terror from the Year 5000* (1958). This was an AIP cheapie made by Robert Gurney about a scientist who can pluck people and objects out of the distant future with his "time vault". Naturally the future world has been ravaged by an atomic war and the things he finds in his vault tend to be both radioactive and rather odd-looking (eg, a cat with 4 eyes, etc). The device also extracts an evil and disfigured woman from the year 5000 who is anxious to breed with uncontaminated men . . .

Apparently this isn't as bad as it sounds (nope, I haven't seen this either) and I'm told it has a small (very small) cult following due to the presence of Salome Jens (she plays the evil lady) but don't ask me why as I'd never heard of her.

In 1960 came George Pal's version of H.G. Wells' seminal book *The Time Machine*. Shorn of the original's political and sociological content the film is a typically lightweight Pal production, though far superior to most of his other films such as the truly awful *Conquest of Space* and *Atlantis the Lost Continent*.

It has moments of genuine, 24 carat Sense-of-Wonder, as in the actual time travelling sequences and the scenes dealing with the time traveller's arrival and exploration of the future world but on the whole it fails to do justice to the Wells story. Everything is over-simplified to the point of absurdity — the twin societies or Morlocks and Eloi are reduced to two small groups in the film and the hero is able to rouse the Eloi from their centuries-long apathy with ridiculous ease.

Another flaw was the miscasting of Australian macho-man Rod Taylor as the Victorian time traveller (he seemed as Victorian as Sylvester Stallone) but at least the film *looked* good, especially the time machine itself . . .

A much inferior time travel movie made the same year was *Beyond the Time Barrier* which had a similar plot to *World Without End* and an even smaller budget. A test pilot goes zooming through the usual time warp and lands in 2024. He finds the usual desolation — this time the result of a nuclear war in 1971 (I must have been away on holiday at the time) — and the usual mutants roaming about a above ground while the usual humans huddle underground, etc, etc, (the exact



Above left: Rod Taylor finds that a burning stick a day keeps the Morlocks away in George Pal's *The Time Machine*. Above right: Napping on the job in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Right: Gil Gerard as Buck Rogers visits the grave of his parents with Twikki (Felix Silla). Below: Malcolm McDowell as H.G. Wells in *Time After Time*. Bottom: The other *Time After Time* star, David Warner also appeared in *The Time Bandits*. Below right: Peter Cushing as *The Doctor* and Roy Castle as *Ian* indian-arm-wrestle a Dalek in *Doctor Who* and the Daleks. Following spread, left: Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve in *Somewhere in Time*. Robot surgery in *Spaceman* and *King Arthur*. Right: A portrait of Malcolm McDowell as a young H.G. Wells.





reverse of the situation in *The Time Machine*, I've just realized). It was directed by the cult film maker Edgar G. Ulmer and written by Arthur G. Pierce (I have a soft spot for Pierce — he wrote one of the looniest sf movies I've ever seen, *Space Invasion from Lapland* — a true turkey classic).

A much more serious treatment of time travel was attempted by French experimental film maker Chris Marker in 1962 in his short movie *La Jetee* (*The Pier*). It is set after World War 3 (of course) when a group of French scientists, living underground (of course), send a man back through time by use of drugs. A particularly vivid childhood memory acts as a catalyst for the time traveller — it concerns a day when, as a small boy, he had been watching a particularly beautiful girl at Orly Airport and then seen a man, running nearby, killed.

The time traveller successfully reaches the past but falls in love with the girl he remembers from the airport and decides to remain in that era. When he attempts to run away with her he is shot dead by another traveller from the future and we realize that, as a child, he had seen *himself* being killed that day . . .

What's most interesting about this evocative short film (it's only 29 minutes) is that it's composed almost entirely of stills (the exception is a brief moment when a close-up of the girl's face suddenly comes to life).

But it's back to the old familiar formula with *The Time Travellers* made in 1964. Once again a group from the present end up in the future, via a time "portal", to discover a world ravaged by the effects of an atomic war and the human survivors besieged by marauding mutants. It did have an interesting twist though — one of the four protagonists ends up by getting trapped in a perpetual time loop, which means he will have to keep reliving the events of the movie for all eternity, poor sod.

To be honest, it's a much better film than *World Without End* and *Beyond the Time Barrier* (it has a slightly bigger budget too) with a fair script by Danishborn writer/director Ib Melchior, who was involved with several sf movies during his career. The best of these was *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, for which he wrote the screenplay, and the worst was *Reptilicus*, an incredibly silly dinosaur picture set in Copenhagen (*Reptilicus* would make a good double with *Space Invasion from Lapland* — Scandinavia's two worst contributions to the genre, if not the *only* ones . . .)

Speaking of *Space Invasion from Lapland* its author Arthur C. Pierce actually wrote a relatively impressive screenplay for a film called *Cyborg 2087*. Unusually for a time travel movie it's concerned with one of those time paradoxes I was discussing at the start of this article. Michael Rennie plays Garth, a cyborg (part-human, part-machine; the old term for "bionic") from the future who returns to 1966 (the year the film was made) to prevent a scientist from building a device that will later be used as

a mind-control weapon by a totalitarian government in the year 2087.

With the assistance of the scientist's attractive assistant he persuades the scientist to abandon his invention even though Garth knows that if the device is destroyed its disappearance will eliminate the possibility of his own existence. And that's what happens. Garth vanishes and all memory of his visit is eradicated from the minds of the people who encountered him, even the girl who'd fallen in love with him.

It's hardly a masterpiece, and it has the look of a cheap made-for-TV movie, but at least it's logically self-consistent and it has a few clever moments. Like the sequence where two government cyborgs from the future appear and begin tracking Garth through the town, never deviating an inch from the invisible trail they're following, even if it means pushing cars to one side or running straight through a houseful of party guests.

I can't think of a single good word for William Castle's *Project X* made in 1968. Based on a *couple* of novels by British author Leslie P. Davies (one would have been more than enough) it's a confusing mess about a secret agent in the year 2118 who has the identity of a bank robber from 1968 implanted in his mind. Nor is the film helped by underwater sequences consisting of cartoon animation by the Hanna-Barbera studio . . . *Project X* is both a genuine oddity and a genuine turkey. Avoid at all cost.

Well, I've been trying to postpone the inevitable but I suppose I *have* to mention Doctor Who, or rather the two film versions based on the TV series which looks as if it's going to last until the end of time. Produced by Milton Subotsky and Max Rosenberg they starred Peter Cushing as the Doctor and can best be described as . . . disappointing. The first was *Doctor Who and the Daleks* (1965) and not only did the Doctor have to contend with the malign, mobile pepper pots but also the wince-inducing Roy Castle who played his assistant. *Daleks -- Invasion Earth* (1966) was a little better (mainly because Bernard Cribbins had replaced Castle) but not much.

Now back to the *real* movies...

Not that I like this next one very much — *Je T'aime, Je T'aime*, made in 1969 by Alain Resnais. When a failed suicide is discharged from hospital he is abducted by a group of scientists who place him in a very organic-looking time machine that resembles a giant pumpkin. They intend to transport him back one year in time but the machine malfunctions, not surprisingly (only a fool would get in a time machine that looks like a giant pumpkin) and he begins to oscillate back and forth in time. The remainder of the movie consists of fragments of his previous life that slowly build up to create an atmosphere of humdrum monotony as well as a suspicion that he may have murdered his dreary girlfriend. The film ends with another suicide attempt by the protagonist, the implication being that this

one will be successful. Pretentious in the extreme and for Resnais fans only, who like this sort of thing.

Slaughterhouse Five is also about a man who starts bouncing back and forth in time but it's much more enjoyable despite being seriously flawed. Based on the novel by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. it concerns the predicament of middle-aged American businessman Billy Pilgrim who begins to experience time shifts back to the period when he was a POW in the German city of Dresden. He is again forced to live through the massive fire-bombing of the city by the Allies which killed over 100,000 people in a single night. He also experiences forward shifts in time when he has become the prisoner of an alien race who keep him in a zoo with a half-naked Hollywood starlet (Valerie Perrine) . . .

But while the juxtaposing of the horrors of Dresden with the whimsical fantasies of the alien zoo was a successful literary device it just doesn't work in the movie. The Dresden sequences are very impressive but the ones involving the starlet in the zoo are rather embarrassing. When watching the film it's easy to see where the strengths of its director, George Roy Hill, lie — he can handle the grim reality of the German sections but when it comes to fantasy he falls apart. Even so, *Slaughterhouse Five* is a better than average movie . . .

The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976) is a time travel movie of an unusual sort. Not only do the events of the story seem jumbled up in time but the characters seem to be living at different rates to each other, some appearing to age more quickly than others (of course this could be the result of an inefficient continuity girl . . .). But it does have one moment of straight-forward time travel — in the charming sequence where David Bowie's limousine suddenly slips back in time and materialises in a field near some home-steaders in the last century . . .

My favourite time travel movie has to be *Time After Time* (1979), written and directed by Nicholas Meyer (he later directed *Wrath of Khan*, true, but I have decided to forgive him for this). One of the most appealing things about it is its sheer *audacity*. I mean, there haven't been many films that have featured a car chase in present day San Francisco involving Jack the Ripper and H.G. Wells . . .

But apart from the cleverness of the basic idea the film also succeeds on an emotional level. Thanks to the acting talents of Malcolm McDowell as the young Wells and Mary Steenburgen as the liberated girl he becomes involved with, the characters become real people (David Warner has less success with Jack the Ripper but that's more the fault of the script). The relationship that develops between them is both believable and touching, thus providing the film with a strong element of credibility which helps to offset its more far-fetched plot contrivances.

Meyer even managed to introduce and *solve*, a couple of time travel para-

doxes. One occurs when Wells takes the girl forward one day in his time machine and she reads in a newspaper that she is to be the Ripper's next victim; Meyer gets round this satisfactorily and also the problem of how Wells can take her back to his own time without altering history...

All in all *Time After Time* is a very superior fantasy movie and I couldn't understand why it wasn't a box office success, either here or in America. But then neither was *Somewhere in Time*, another film about a romance between two people from different eras . . .

As I said in my review of the movie in *Starburst 31* I think it comes a poor second to *Time After Time*, being much too sentimental and mawkish (but then so was Richard Matheson's original novel



Bid Time Return). Admittedly, however, director Jeannot Szwarc does a good job at creating a consistent mood of dreamy "other-worldliness" in the sequences set in the past and by the end of the film you almost believe that to be in Michigan in 1912 was to be in the best of all possible worlds, the lack of penicillin and other modern necessities notwithstanding . . .

As the time-crossed lovers Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour give good performances (even though Reeve was miscast) but couldn't capture the intensity of feeling displayed by McDowell and Steenburgen in *Time After Time* (but as the latter two were subsequently married I suppose that's not surprising).

There's yet another cross-time rom-

ance in *The Final Countdown* (1980), this one between a girl from 1941 (Katherine Ross) and a scientist from 1980 (Martin Sheen), but it's only a minor sub-plot in the film which is mainly about what happens when a nuclear aircraft carrier gets sent through a time warp to 1941 and right in the path of the Japanese attackers on their way to Pearl Harbour. Unfortunately, despite this intriguing premise, nothing *does* happen — the film-makers avoid the problems of creating a paradox by simply having the ship whisked back to 1980, thanks to a convenient reappearance of the time warp, before the confrontation between the two forces can take place. *Final Countdown* is nothing but a long build-up to a giant cop-out. Maybe they should have stuck to the original story which had a World War 11 submarine being sent back to World War 1...

The same idea, though on a much smaller scale, is the basis of the forthcoming movie *Time Rider* which is about a motor bike champion finding himself and his machine transported back to the Wild West. Sounds a lot more fun than the above movie (also sounds as if it was inspired by that time travelling limousine sequence in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*) but as I haven't seen it yet I can't comment.

Finally, a look at two time-travelling comedies: one of them is *The Spaceman and King Arthur* (1979), the fourth version of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur* to be filmed. A Disney production, it's a mildly amusing, small-scale movie about a young American astronaut who goes through a time warp (space must be *full* of these damn things) in his shuttle and lands in King Arthur's England.

Much, *much* better was Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* (1981) which must rate as one of the most inventive time travel films ever made and far superior in terms of ideas and atmosphere than the majority of "serious" efforts in the genre. Its episodic story about a group of dwarfs who have stolen God's map of all the time warps in order to plunder the treasures of past and future has a few *longuers* along the way but on the whole it's a witty and impressive piece of work.

It made me wish that other film-makers would be equally as daring as Gilliam and attempt to make similarly inventive movies on more serious time travel themes. There's certainly a large body of published sf novels on the subject just waiting to be picked up, such as Asimov's *The End of Eternity*, Wilson Tucker's *The Year of the Quiet Sun*, Rober Silverburg's *Up the Line* and Gregory Benford's *Timescape* to name a few of the best...

It's about time (sorry) that the time travel equivalent to *2001* or *Star Wars* was made. Film-makers have really only just begun to scratch the surface of the space-time continuum — let's hope they become more adventurous in future (sorry).

The time is ripe ■

