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Time Travel (Book Review)

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with other scholars from many disciplines, which leads to fruitful footnotes for the reader. The conversation is going on at two levels, and the bottom of the page is as much fun as the top. However, because of the many valuable sources in the footnotes, I was disappointed to find no bibliography at the end of the book. The indices are also skimpy, running only 2 ½ pages for names and 1 ½ for subjects. I found this especially frustrating for a book partly aimed at scholars.

With that said, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* is a ground-breaking effort. I will refer to it again and again in pursuing my own research agenda, seeking to better understand how worship works.

Endnotes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans, Colin Smith (New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005).
2. In explaining *habitus*, Smith draws mostly on Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).
3. Martha Moore Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008)

You might've seen this one before: it's a familiar science fiction (SF) plot. Frustrated by his inability to defeat the Superhero, the Archvillain builds a time machine to travel to the past, intending to kill the Superhero as a child. Someone therefore needs to save this child; otherwise, the Archvillain will take over the world. Because of this threat to the past from the future, the plot, as it were, thickens.

"But wait," you wonder. "If the Archvillain really did kill the child-Superhero, then why would he need to travel to the past? Wouldn't the Superhero already be dead in the present? In fact, the Superhero never would have existed in the first place, meaning that the Archvillain wouldn't ever need to travel to the past after he time-traveled! He built the time machine, but if he kills the Superhero, he never actually built it!"

Such time-travel paradoxes have long been fodder for SF stories, but few have considered them to be more than silly puzzles or fun little thought-experiments for analytical philosophy. David Wittenberg's book *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, however, challenges us to consider why so many SF narratives feature time-travel paradoxes like this as crucial plot elements. For Wittenberg, Associate Professor of English at the University of Iowa, time-travel stories fundamentally challenge our understanding of narrative. These stories ask, as he puts it, "many of the most basic questions about storytelling, […] about the philosophy of temporality, history, and subjectivity" (2). In other words, time-travel fiction literally depicts key questions about the construction of history and the phenomenology of reading and interpreting. This is a serious kind of fiction in which readers and viewers become, perhaps unwittingly, "narrative theorists" (8).

Wittenberg spends much of the book arguing and demonstrating, via close readings of SF texts such as episodes of *Star Trek* and the first *Back to the Future* movie, that time-travel challenges our assumptions about narrative. As he points out, literary theorists have long distinguished between "story" and "plot," or, in Wittenberg' preferred terms (coined by Russian formalists), between "fabula" and "sjuzhet." The *fabula* is the chronological order of a narrative's events, while the *sjuzhet* is the order of events as presented by a narrative. Thus, for *Back to the Future* (1985), the *fabula* begins in 1955 and ends in 1985: first, Marty McFly in 1955 tries desperately to get his parents to meet and fall in love, and then in 1985 McFly time-travels in a DeLorean into the past. But the *sjuzhet* of *Back to the Future* depicts McFly as beginning his story in 1985, travelling to 1955, and then back to 1985.[1] Wittenberg demonstrates that narratologists and many writers, such as Henry James, have long preferred *fabula* to *sjuzhet*. In James' view, for example, writers should be a kind of "historian," thinking first of *fabula* and then constructing the *sjuzhet* (120). Moreover, when we think about the events in a story, we tend to re-tell them chronologically, even if the narrative does not present them chronologically. Wittenberg calls this common preference for *fabula* "fabular apriority."

Time-travel stories, as in this example of *Back to the Future*, challenge fabular apriority. They depict, literally, via time-travelers within their plots, a crisis of narrative priority. What if, as in a reader/viewer's experience of narrative, the *sjuzhet* is really prior to the *fabula*? By trying to change his past, the Archvillain who intends to kill the child-Superhero challenges traditional narrative theory. His story posits that the

Superhero's present could be erased by an alteration of his past (i.e, that the *sjuzhet* must be altered if the *fabula* is changed). But the paradox here is that the Archvillain's present, when he builds the time-machine, must occur narratologically before the historical past he travels to—in other words, the *sjuzhet* must be prior to the *fabula*. This common time-travel paradox foregrounds, then, problems with the presuppositions about the *fabula-sjuzhet* dichotomy of classical and Jamesian narrative theory. Curiously, Wittenberg observes, most time-travel stories resolve themselves by re-postulating fabular apriority, as if we need to believe in it. They tend to conclude by preserving their timelines, by declaring that what has happened in the past cannot be altered much if at all. These stories are fundamentally "conservative" about issues of historical revisionism and the theoretical possibility (in physics) of alternative universes (149-152).

But Wittenberg goes a step beyond challenging fabular apriority. He further argues that the real hierarchy for narrative occurs in this order: *text* ➝ *sjuzhet* ➝ *fabula*, an order implicitly preferred by so many SF stories (140-147, 217-219). On our first encounter with a story, the text—including paratexts and contemporary contexts—comes first. A text's materiality and its paratexts prepare us to experience the *sjuzhet* and shape, even greatly determine, our interpretations of it. For *Back to the Future*, the *text* may include the location in which we watch the movie, the material device or screen we watch it on, the marketing campaigns and discourse we've engaged with prior to the movie, and our knowledge of the actors' celebrity lives and characters they've played elsewhere (e.g., Marty McFly is Michael J. Fox, who was the conservative teenager on the NBC show *Family Ties*, a fact potentially significant for viewings of *Back to the Future*). For books, *text* includes typography, tables of contents, indices, images and illustrations, footnotes and endnotes, book reviews, content pages on amazon.com and other Internet websites, marketing campaigns, bookstore displays, and more. Here Wittenberg correctly reminds us not to divorce story from its materiality, or literary analysis from the physical world, from "readers, texts, eyes, and the material arrangements of bodies" (94).

In making these arguments, Wittenberg rescues the concept of "viewpoint," one disparaged in much literary theory. The time-traveler in SF stories often assumes a "superspatial perspective" above history, viewing plot events from a position beyond the timeline(s) in which they occur. This superspatial perspective, presented literally in much time-travel fiction, is analogous to the position of readers above texts, a transcendent space of "reflexion" from which we may judge narratives and histories. Wittenberg calls this the "viewpoint-above-histories." He argues that such viewpoints are not un-transcend-able, for this kind of viewpoint is within a story, too, one that can be "retold, reassembled, *reflected*," in a viewpoint above or beyond it—this is a central message of much time-travel fiction (114). What Wittenberg misses here is an opportunity to communicate with Christian theology, especially with Reformational theology, about how one can judge between and among viewpoints or worldviews while necessarily inhabiting one.

This is one of the rare academic books that are worth reading all the way through. It works well as a succession of chapters, with each chapter building on its predecessor, though the early chapter on utopian romance in the late nineteenth century is somewhat thin. Along the way, however, Wittenberg loses a crucial point that deserves to be more fully developed. Early on, he mentions that time-travel asks "the fundamental historiographical question," which is how our present revises and is in the continuing process of revising the past (14). How and why do we reconstruct the past as history? What is the relationship between an "event" and its deliberate insertion into a history that is inescapably narrative? If anything, time travel stories necessarily foreground these questions, explicitly comparing one historical era to another and challenging how the past is altered or preserved by the future, as represented by a time-traveler who is an agent of possible historical disruption, emendation, or conservation. The later chapters of the book, however, mostly drop this question from their purview. As well, they also tend to assume that time-travel fiction features only stories about travel to the past. But what of travel to the future (e.g., *Planet of the Apes*, *Back to the Future II*)? Or stories with multiple timelines, alternative universes, future histories (e.g., Olaf Stapledon, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*)? Wittenberg does meditate on this latter question for many pages, but not explicitly with the "fundamental" historiographical question in view.

I have not done full justice to the complexity of this readable book, a rarity for a work that mixes discussion of theoretical physics, analytical philosophy, and narrative theory. Its chapter on *Back to the Future*, especially the careful reading of the moment late in the

movie when Marty McFly watches himself in his own narrative, treats a popular movie with capable, serious analysis. It is a chapter that encapsulates the whole book and is well worth reading. Wittenberg's *Time Travel*, then, is a helpful serious treatment of popular SF fiction, a fiction that deserves our attention as careful, responsible critics of culture.

Endnotes

1. To offer another example for further clarity, I'll use one of Wittenberg's. The *fabula* of *Lord of the Rings* begins when the One Ring is forged, then lost, found centuries later by Smeagol, who becomes Gollum. Bilbo then wins the ring in a riddle contest with Gollum, and it's only decades later when Bilbo gives the ring to Frodo. But the *sjuzhet* of *Lord of the Rings* begins with Bilbo disappearing at his birthday party, followed by his gift of the ring to Frodo, and then Gandalf's relation to Frodo of the story of how Smeagol, long ago, found the ring and then lost it to Bilbo. As you may know, the film version of *Lord of the Rings* has an alternate *sjuzhet*, wherein the Gollum story is told late in the saga, at the beginning of the third film.