

# Make the Impossible Possible

## Time Travel as a Transcendent Motif Editorial

As we all know, time flies, and that is also true for us: JRFM is celebrating its 10th anniversary. When we think back to the beginnings of our journal, we take a mental journey through time. This issue is therefore dedicated to the topic of time travel, which is a strong motif in the media and popular culture. The cover of this issue evokes a character influential in popular culture for over 150 years: Alice, renowned for her adventures in Wonderland, strides resolutely across the gears of the Grand Clock of All Times to start a journey into the past. The books in which Lewis Carroll developed the character of Alice have been widely read and often adapted: The time-travel motif is central in the Disney film *ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS* (James Bobin, US 2016). At the start of the film, Alice's mother dismisses her daughter's confession that she once believed she "could do as many as six impossible things before breakfast",<sup>1</sup> but the film will deliver the impossible over the ensuing ninety minutes.

This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* is dedicated to the apparently impossible phenomenon of time travel. Time travel is a frequently explored motif in literature, art, music, and audiovisual productions. In this editorial, we navigate with *ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS* through this fascinating theme, formulating theses that thread through the motif of time travel and presenting the contributions in this issue.

The Disney film is intriguing in its allegorical conception of time and in presenting associated religious moments that prompt us to reflect on values and power, on identity, and on our understanding of the world. In this issue we discuss time travel as transcendent per se – it cannot be observed and is impossible in everyday life. If we understand religion as a process of negotiation with the transcendent, then time travel can be taken as in effect

1 ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:10:58.

a religious motif. Time travel exists in narrative content, but it is also heavily influenced by its media staging. With their unique cinematic techniques, films can take us on a journey through time, inviting us to contemplate our understanding of time and reality, of fantasy and contingency, of transcendence and immanence. This issue proposes that time, an inherently abstract concept, is materialised on multiple levels in media, in its narration and in its aesthetics.

## Alice Back in Wonderland

ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS is a good example of how time travel is staged in the media and what it means to approach time travel as a reflection on transcendence. British author Lewis Carroll wrote his children's books with Alice as their protagonist in the 19th century. Since then, time travel has remained an important, and also complex, theme in children's literature. In her contribution, entitled "Conceptions of Time Travel in Literature for Children and Young Adults", Sabine Planka discusses three case studies. She shows how time travel within the narrative enables the reader to identify with, for example, the protagonists and how it constructs history as moments that can be "visited" by the reader. Norms and values in relation to history, humankind, and life are formed as the reader goes with the protagonists on their adventures.

In ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, we accompany the adolescent protagonist on her adventures in the fictive country Underland. In Underland, which had already appeared as a world of adventure in the first instalment of the film series – ALICE IN WONDERLAND (Tim Burton, US 2010) – up is down and down is up, animals speak, and chess pieces rule. It is the setting for a time-travel adventure that begins in London in the year 1875. Following an extensive expedition to China, Captain Alice Kingsleigh returns home safely. Upon being informed that she must sell her father's ship to keep the family home, Alice flees through a mirror and enters Underland, known to her since her childhood as "Wonderland". She is expected: the Mad Hatter is in crisis, believing his family to be dead. Finding a hat he had crafted as a child, he begins to wonder if he is right. Alice is tasked with traveling back in time to save the Hatter's family. She steals the Chronosphere from personified Time, enabling her to travel through time. Alice experiences past moments but realises she cannot alter events. She recognises, however, that

the Hatter's family must be alive and, together with her friends, manages to save them. Time is physically connected to the Chronosphere, but if the Chronosphere stops, time will run out. In the final moment, Alice succeeds in returning the Chronosphere to its place, saving everyone.

The film's employment of a background story and various internal stories prompts viewers to repeatedly question the boundaries between reality and fiction. It explores themes of family and friendship, repeatedly asking what might have happened if things had been different. The transcendence of time is particularly evident. Time is a possibility expressed materially, but "at the same time" it goes beyond what can be experienced in the everyday and what can be perceived. The film – as is typical of the time-travel motif – disrupts our idea of temporal linearity. Materiality plays a central role as a visualisation of this transcendence.

## The Materiality of Time

In the account of Alice, Time is an allegory, dressed like a king – or a god. He emphasizes his supernatural character when he introduces himself: "Young Lady, I am Time. The infinite... the eternal... the immortal... the immeasurable. Unless you have a clock."<sup>2</sup> The eccentric character stages himself as a great, inevitable, and divine power, but at the same time, he makes clear that his force depends on the measurement of time. So, time is only relevant when it is conceived and acknowledged as a concept. In the course of the film, it becomes clear that Time is vulnerable, reliant on mechanical measures and not as mighty as he initially seemed. His extravagant appearance is supported by his attire. He wears a splendid costume, his shoulders resemble the wings of a clock key, and an hourglass is worked into his sceptre. The figure is the personification of time but also a cyborg, with a mechanical clockwork in the back of his head. He is therefore staged as "supernatural" on several levels. Time is physically connected to the Grand Clock of All Times, an experienceable manifestation of time but also an abstract concept connected with the idea of eternity; a miniature of the Grand Clock of All Times is enclosed in Time's chest (fig. 1). The Grand Clock of All Times also materialises time on a second level. The clock face refers to the measurement of time, while the display of the moon phase represents lunar time (fig. 2). Within the

2 ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, 00:29:34.



Fig. 1: Time, the personification of time, has a miniature of The Grand Clock of All Times within his chest. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:31:05.



Fig. 2: The Grand Clock of All Times represents ways of measuring time. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:30:57.

Grand Clock of All Times lies the Chronosphere, a small ball that provides energy to the clock, keeping it running as, in effect, a perpetuum mobile. This energy is depicted by imaginings of electricity. The Chronosphere glows brightly, flashes of lightning darting through it, connecting the sphere to the clock (fig. 3). In the Victorian style of the clock and the portrayal of electric-



Fig. 3: The Chronosphere provides energy to the Grand Clock of All Times, which is depicted through imaginings of electricity. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:37:13.

ity, the film adopts a steampunk aesthetic, representing time as transcendent and thereby creating a stylistic journey through time.<sup>3</sup>

The Chronosphere is both the energy at the core of the Grand Clock of All Times and a vessel that makes time travel possible. On falling to the ground, the sphere transforms into a kind of boat, allowing Alice to traverse the Ocean of Time. So, we find here different but connected metaphors of time: the clock as measuring time and in this sense materialising the abstract; electricity as activating time, which “runs” and needs to be driven; and time as an ocean, emphasizing the fluidity and expanse of time, on which – so the film – a person can travel.

The materialisation of time plays a central role in Monika Weiß’s article, entitled “Time Travel as Living History. Exploring the Media Representation and Sensual Experience of Historical Everyday Life”. Weiß analyses three living-history TV shows, in which individuals travel back in time. This travel is staged as the relocating of contemporary people to historical settings, where they then live as if in the 19th or early 20th century. The article demonstrates the significance of the body and of clothing for this experience and for its filmic staging. The participants wear clothes of the period to which they have “travelled” and work without modern tools. The time

<sup>3</sup> See Stiglegger 2014, 43.



travel in these examples is material and emotional – and always set against current ways of living.

## What Would Have Happened If Things Had Been Different?

Time is an abstract concept given form in media, as is evident when Alice steals the Chronosphere. The time travel is literal: Alice moves with the Chronosphere across the Ocean of Time, a wild, undulating area with images that emerge from within the waves. The space is neither here nor there, or rather, simultaneously above and below. Moments exist within the waves, shown via audiovisual footage that depicts fragments of different times (fig. 4).

Alice seeks to travel back in time in order to alter the moment when the Hatter's family was killed. She wants to land at Horovendoush Day – the day all evil began – but veers off course and arrives instead at the coronation of the Red Queen, Iracebeth. There Alice discovers that Horovendoush Day occurred because Iracebeth, whose head is oversized, shattered the crown during her coronation. Alice learns that the Queen's head became disproportionate as the result of an accident. She travels back into the princess's childhood with the goal of stopping Iracebeth's head from enlarging. As the young princess run towards an obstacle, Alice seeks to clear the path. However, Iracebeth still falls, striking her head, which causes it to swell. Alice realises she cannot



Fig. 4: Alice crosses the Ocean of Time to immerse in a past moment. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:40:29.

alter the past and the diachronic effects of time. Her failed attempt leads to a reflection on what would have happened if everything had turned out differently. Her journey is not in vain, as it provides insight that ultimately saves the Hatter's family. While it is initially portrayed as a powerful, inevitable, and intimidating force to which humans are subjected, by the end of the film Alice realises that time is not inherently negative for it can enable learning and understanding. This potential for change is inscribed within the motif of time travel, where history is not only experienced but can perhaps be shaped.

In the article "Time Travel as Homecoming. A Journey for ETERNITY AND A DAY (Theo Angelopoulos, GR 1998)", Haotian (Walden) Wu explores the questions of what if the past had been different and what it means to look back on time. Wu analyses the Greek film ETERNITY AND A DAY from a philosophical perspective. The film's topic is "homecoming" in the sense of a farewell to life. We accompany the protagonist, the poet Alexandros (played by Bruno Ganz), on his last day. The film ends at the sea, which metaphorically anticipates time and the (last) journey. The article highlights how the film brings together time (travel), life, and memory to form a complex network that transcends today and tomorrow. As the title of the film suggests, time is portrayed as both liminal and eternal.

Liminality is also important in Alice's story. When Alice disappears through the looking glass, she lands, significantly reduced in size, in a room where the butterfly Absolem talks to her. He guides her to a door, in which

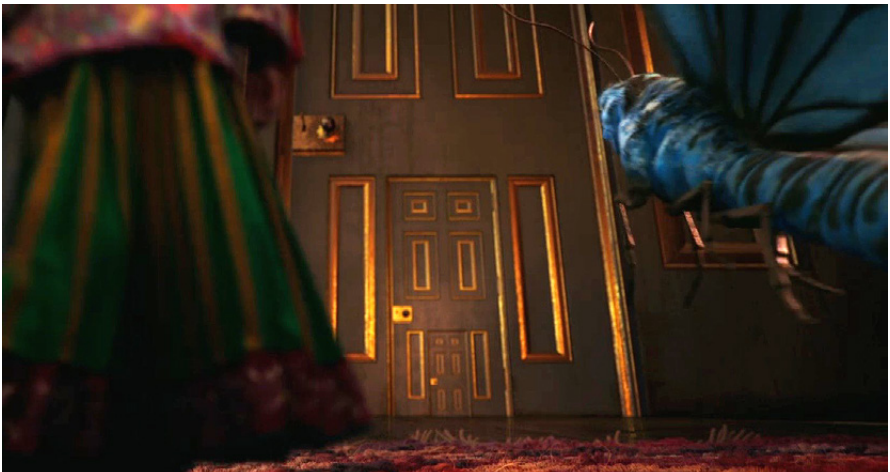


Fig. 5: A door within a door within a door. Visual representation of *mise en abyme*. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:15:24.



Fig. 6: The reflecting mirrors create an impression of infinite depth. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 01:34:49.

a smaller door is embedded, within which an even smaller door is embedded (fig. 5). Alice exits the room through the smallest door and lands in Underland.

At the end of the film, the visual interlacing is revisited as Alice leaves Underland. She stands with the Hatter in front of a mirror, with another mirror on the opposite side. The two mirrors reflect each other, creating an impression of infinite depth (fig. 6).

The materiality of time is present in ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS not only thematically but also in the film editing that connects various timelines. The integration of temporal levels within frame and subplot involves temporal shifts. The transition between these levels is strongly connoted with the motif of the gaze, of looking, of eyes. Alice disappears multiple times through mirrors into which she has looked, the camera films the faces of the Hatter or his dog Bayard, focusing on the eyes, thus symbolising the following scenes are memories of events that took place in the past. The film is self-referential on more than one level: it specifically addresses and presents time travel, but the film itself also traverses time through its representation and narration. While the entire story spans several years, the film is only 113 minutes long. This self-reference is captured through *mise en abyme*: things within things within things. Visually, *mise en abyme* plays a role at the beginning and end of the film, framing the entire narration.



Such filmic self-reference in relation to time travel is addressed by Temi-tope Abisoye Noah in the article “Time Travel and Bodily Epistemology in Ava DuVernay’s *SELMA* (FR/UK/US 2014) and Haile Gerima’s *SANKOFA* (BF 1993)”. Noah analyses two films by two Black filmmakers of different generations, in particular their negotiation of slavery, oppression, and protest: *SELMA*, a film about the marches championing voting rights for Blacks in the South in 1965, was nominated for four Golden Globes and two Oscars, and *SANKOFA*, a film about African slaves in American plantations. Noah shows how *SELMA* is inspired by *SANKOFA* and how the idea of time travel is used to reflect on power, identity, and history. The *mise en abyme* can be used in light of self-reference, but it can also provide a strong visual account of power processes.

In *ALICE*, the visual *mise en abyme* relays the depth of the friendship and connection between Alice and the inhabitants of Underland. It also shows that Alice is exactly where she belongs: “What we typically see in a mirror, besides our own image, is what lies behind us – in a sense, not where we are going, but where we have been.”<sup>4</sup> The set-up of the mirrors means that Alice is in front and behind simultaneously, her past, present, and future coincide in a reference to time travel.

The *mise en abyme* is an astonishing optical phenomenon. It is used in literature, film, and art to suggest change.<sup>5</sup> The reproduction of what is seen prompts the question of what if it were different. This possibility is exactly what *ALICE* captures, making a feminist interpretation viable.<sup>6</sup> Alice’s original setting, Victorian London in the late 19th century, is depicted as a patriarchal society. Alice is to marry Hamish Ascot, and as she is a woman she should not interfere in men’s affairs. She escapes from Underland through a mirror to evade the pursuing Time, but she wakes up in an institution in London, where a doctor diagnoses her with hysteria.<sup>7</sup> We can interpret her in a feminist way because she defies the misogynistic diagnosis of hysteria and is not crazy, but self-determined. Alice succeeds in escaping. She travels the world as a captain, bravely saves all of Underland, and at the end of the film, she and her mother establish a trading company.

4 Rackin 1991, 72.

5 Wolf 2008, 502–503.

6 Director James Bobin was aware that the original Alice, Alice Little, was born in the same decade as Emmeline Pankhurst, a leader of the twentieth-century Suffragette movement in England. He integrated the feminist position into his film. See Hua 2016.

7 On the motif of female hysteria in 19th century medicine, see Gilman 2020.

In cultural history, the mirror is closely associated with knowledge and self-awareness, perspectives and reflections.<sup>8</sup> *ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS* incorporates these elements, taking the audience on a journey through time to reflect on gender norms, the boundaries of good and evil, friendship, and forgiveness.

## A Pool of Religious Symbols

This issue approaches time travel as religious in that it negotiates transcendence. Additionally, depictions of time travel often refer specifically to religious symbols, traditions, and values. Jochen Mündlein considers this relationship between religious symbols and time travel in his article “Bodies in Space and Time. Time Travel in *INTERSTELLAR* (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2014)”. In light of this connection between religion and time travel and in the context of current debates, Mündlein notes the anthropological themes of the film and how it shapes normative ideas. Religious symbols and religious values are used in this film, Mündlein argues, to articulate hope for a better future in which love unites people. Religion provides a symbolic “language” with which to speak of the transcendent.

Religious symbols are moulded, however, by their cultural context, as are the idea and materialisation of time according to *ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*. The film makes clear the conditions in which time travel takes place: Time reigns over time in Underland but not in London, which illustrates that time is a culturally variable concept. Alice is chosen to undertake the journey into the Mad Hatter’s past as she exists outside of Underland, having been raised in a counter-world. According to the internal logic of the narrative, when a person perceives themselves as a time traveller, time freezes and everything petrifies. This moment occurs again at the end of the film, when Iracebeth travels back in time and sees herself as a child witnessing her deformed future adult self.

At the beginning of the movie, Time is a powerful divine entity; he resides in a grand castle in the heavens, existing in light and darkness simultaneously. The castle is not accessible to everyone. Alice reaches it only through

8 See Konersmann 1988.

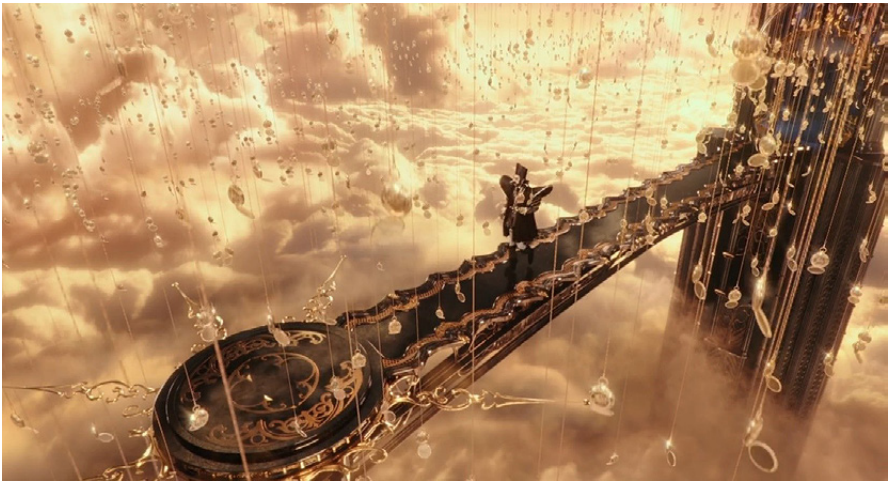


Fig. 7: In the realm of the living, Time holds sway over their lifetimes, which are preserved in pocket watches. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 00:27:51.

a long case clock belonging to the White Queen. Time can control the lifetimes of all living beings in Underland, for he preserves their personal time in pocket watches hanging from the heavens (fig. 7). When he closes the watch of a resident, he hangs it in the dark realm of the dead. As the personification of time, Time is granted a power typically attributed to transcendent figures in religious systems: he decides on life and death, and with his demise, Underland faces destruction, a fact revealed throughout the film.

As Time weakens because the Chronosphere has been stolen, his influence over Underland diminishes. He loses his power, which increasingly falls to Alice. Not only is she tasked with saving the Hatter's family, but by the end of the film she has also become the saviour of Underland itself. One of the final scenes in this peculiar world alludes iconographically – in terms of composition, motif, image of a hand, underlying meaning, and the spark – to a work by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo: Alice assumes a position reminiscent of God in *The Creation of Adam* (fig. 8). Underland is completely petrified, and just as Alice returns the Chronosphere to its place, she too begins to petrify. The sphere remains in Alice's hand until a small spark, a tiny bit of energy between the clock and the Chronosphere, causes Alice's hand to loosen its grip, allowing the sphere to return to its original location.



Fig. 8: After a spark jumps from the Chronosphere to the Grand Clock of All Time, the petrification of Alice's hand dissolves and Underland is saved. The scene refers iconographically to Michelangelo's ceiling fresco *The Creation of Adam*. Film still, ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016), 01:28:34.

The iconographic reference to *The Creation of Adam* expresses a connection to a religious tradition with which many viewers of the film are likely acquainted. Michelangelo's ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican depicts the creation of life by God, with the spark of life passing from God's finger to Adam. This motif is recalled in the film, where the spark that raises all life in Underland is depicted as a lightning bolt. It is Alice who manages to establish the connection and turn events towards the good. In ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, time is a transcendent category closely associated with religion; time travel is about negotiating transcendence, for it overcomes borders and boundaries and asks questions about life, death, and the position of human beings in the world.

## Reflections on Kings and Honor

This issue is dedicated to the motif of time travel, but it contains two additional articles in the open section. In both contributions time plays a crucial role. In her article "The Making of a King through Space and Time. Mediatisation of Transcendence in the Coronation of King Charles III", Caroline Kloos analyses the coronation ritual of the new British king, a

ceremony that constructs Great Britain and the king as transcendent. This portrayal occurs not only in Westminster Abbey, through the materiality of the ritual, which transforms the monarch, the monarch's power, and British history in stages, but also in homes around the world to which it is broadcast. Thus, transcendence is formed in and through media representations.

The second article in the open section, by Christian Feichtinger, is entitled "'Jesus Was a Good Gangster'. Honor and Religion in the YouTube Channel *Grim Hustle*". *Grim Hustle* is a YouTube Channel that presents speeches by a so-called "Russian mafia boss". He gives life advice and provides normative rules, suggesting how to act for oneself and how to deal with other people. In these short videos, Feichtinger focusses on the concept of honour and on its relation to religion. He demonstrates how values are linked to religious ideas but argues that both are reinterpreted in *Grim Hustle* for a contemporary (mostly male) audience.

In both articles, time forms identity by connecting the past with the present. Which leads us back to Alice and her travel through the looking glass. Identity is also a core theme of ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS. Time travel is associated with a transformation of the self. Alice becomes the saviour of Underland, a Messiah figure who, on the cover of this issue, walks on the materialisation of time.

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## Filmography

ALICE IN WONDERLAND (Tim Burton, US 2010).

ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (James Bobin, US 2016).

ETERNITY AND A DAY (Theo Angelopoulos, GR 1998).

INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/UK 2014).

SANKOFA (Haile Gerima, BF 1993).

SELMA (Ava DuVernay, US 2014).