BOOK REVIEW:
Modernism and Time Machines

Robert Finnigan

Tung, Charles M. *Modernism and Time Machines*. Edinburgh UP, 2019. ISBN 978-1474431330.

In the opening pages of *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895), H. G. Wells's time traveller declares: "There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of space, and a fourth, Time" (6). The now-familiar trope of traveling through time has continued to preoccupy the popular and scholarly imagination since the publication of Wells's "The Chronic Astronaut" (1888), and as works like Rene Barjavel's *Future Times Three* (1944), Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (1955), Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships* (1995), the cinematic *Back to the Future Trilogy* (1985–1990), and television's *Doctor Who* (1963–present), to name a small selection, can attest. Yet as Charles M. Tung astutely observes in the opening of his new study, *Modernism and Time Machines* (2019), although the time machine as a device first appeared in the early stages of modernist history, the "aesthetic experiments that we typically associate with the singular noun 'modernism' have not been considered in relation to this foundational science-fiction trope" (1). To remedy this neglect, Tung expands the well-documented modernist fascination with time and seeks to reframe time-travel in modernist works and illuminate alternate histories, and narratives that go beyond simply moving "back and forth in history" (2). Given this study's focus on literary and visual trends, modernism, SF, variable speeds of clashing chronologies, and possible untaken roads of history, many scholars will find this study illuminating.

Beginning with a substantial introduction, Tung provides an informative overview of scholarship devoted to modernist and SF pre-occupations with time. Analysing Jon May and Nigel Thrift's assertions regarding the multiplicity of time, he explores the trope of time machines and offers a brief rereading of

the "Modernist cult of Time" and rereadings of Aestheticism and Impressionism as modernist movements. In doing so, Tung lays much of the groundwork for this study. Yet readers may be surprised by Tung's assertion that because of modernism's self-conscious experiments with and questions about the "concert with psychological, social and historical mechanisms" (2), it is and acts as a metaphorical time machine. It should be noted that the spectre of Wells does loom large throughout this introduction, and, indeed, the whole study, as every chapter contains a discussion, either in passing or in a focused way, about Wells's works. Given Wells's prominence in SF and his considerable contribution to the development of the time-travel theme, his presence can be somewhat distracting at times. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach and drawing on materials from the visual arts, literature, history, film and media studies, and physics, Tung carefully avoids oversimplifications and the dangers of his assertion leading to the assumption that modernism is a transitional or liminal experiment. Tung skilfully draws on the works of Adam Barrows, Sara Danius, Ezra Pound, and Mark Currie concerning an understanding of time, its narration, and shape in articulating his argument, particularly in his statements that, like Barrows, he wants to demonstrate that "modernist time machines critique the imperial and commercial 'one true, cosmopolitan time of modernity'" (3). Likewise, by using Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conceptualisation of the "machine" with its configuration of disparate components, and Levi Bryant's definition of 'machinic' entities based on "their outputs and operations" (2), Tung ably illuminates the intersections of modernism and SF, and the multiplicity of seeing and imagining history as through alternate lenses. Throughout the introduction, however, Tung employs a high level of jargon, which, combined with his concerted attention to detail in every paragraph and his allusions and references, frequently makes this opening more akin to a study on quantum theory.

In the first chapter, Tung shows examples of "augmented reality" by exploring Jason Powell's "Looking into the Past" project (2009), the Museum of London's "StreetMuseum" app, J. G. Ballard's "The Sound-Sweep" (1960), and Robert Delaunay's "The Eiffel Tower" (1909–1912/1928) Cubist paintings. Arguing that these works offer present-day audiences and readers windows through time by gathering many different views and "technolog[ies] of omniscience" (35), Tung emphasises the idea of mixed and mottled threads of the past and the present by discussing the intersection of multiple histories. This brief discussion establishes much of the context of Tung's examination of historicity in terms of defamiliarisation and reconfiguration. Providing close readings of Pablo Picasso's "Primitivist" time-space warping paintings, T. S. Eliot's sense of historical fragmentation, and Murray Leinster's alternative-history short story "Sidewise in Time" (1934), Tung assembles a patchwork of historicity concerning the themes of irregular and polytemporal timelines. Challenging the criticism that modernism and augmented reality represent the present as dishistoricised, Tung contends with refreshing insight that Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) engages in the plurality of histories by placing different histories side-by-side. In his reading of this painting, Tung suggests that it moves beyond simple dramatisation of a backward glance, one version of time-traveling.

Instead, Tung argues that *Les Demoiselles* critiques the notion of progressive history, a model used to justify Empire, and considers Picasso's

historicisation of Western ideals through the use of augmented reality in the bordello to suggest that the painting is littered with transhistorical themes. Progressing forward, Tung authoritatively examines the connections between Cubist temporal experiments and Eliot's disruption of linear time. By drawing on the work of Christopher Herbert, James George Frazer, Jessie Weston, and Cleanth Brooks, Tung traces Eliot's interest in anthropological constructs of a variety of pasts that are and were "a gesture towards the availability of different historical lines" (67). Tung contends there is no singular view of history or temporal location of the past and future. As an alternative, by moving sideways, the narrative and the characters reveal the possibilities of the present "comprising a variety of intersecting and parallel trajectories" (56). Although such analysis is not uncommon, especially concerning *The Waste Land* (1922), Tung's interrogation of the overlapping planes of time provides a refreshingly nuanced dimension to an understanding of the poem.

Moving forward, Tung continues his exploration of the polytemporal by considering Fredric Jameson's theory of "incomplete Modernisation", Neil Smith's conceptualisation of uneven development, and Michel Serrer's time-machinic view of crumpled historicity in his readings throughout Chapter 2. Notably, Tung chooses Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to examine the political unconscious and the multitemporal, as each features cross-cut and parallel timelines. Beginning with an analysis of Nolan's film and a comparison with Edwin Peter's "bubbler insert" for *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903), Tung explores the uses of parallel editing as a way of representing a desynchronisation of time frames. In his emphasis on *Interstellar's* embodiment of a class of alternate history by challenging and problematising rhythms and varying timelines, Tung convincingly demonstrates that the film's narrative style requires more than an understanding of desynchronised time. Instead, Tung contends, exiting one timeline does not mean it ends; rather, it creates the possibility of crumpled time and a form of alternate history that exemplifies a "disjunctively cross warped time-space" (86). Exploring alternate histories further in *The Man in the High Castle,* Tung goes on to demonstrate that Dick's novel represents a reconfiguration of alternativity, historicity, and the present in the context of diverging concurrent trajectories. This is best illustrated in Tung's discussion of Dick's use of the *I Ching* (Book of Change) as a plot device and as a thematic tool of divination. Because the *I Ching* is employed as a medium that highlights the ancient and contemporary, the real and fictional nature of singular and multiple moments of time, Tung underscores that by highlighting both the synchronic networks and diachronic chains of history, Dick's narrative questions the stability of history itself.

In one of the most refreshing sections of this study, Tung boldly declares that *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel defined by the running of different clocks simultaneously, which makes for a "stranger construction of the present than we typically ascribe to Woolf" (86). Although this statement is not new, his exploration of the movement and the clock not only thematises time as a technology of configuration and convergence, but also suggests a juxtaposition of Albert Einstein's simultaneity and various notions on the destabilisation of time. By foregrounding that such notions are central to the structure of *Mrs Dalloway*, Tung demonstrates that the novel relies on parallel timelines

desynchronised from one another, particularly in the ways Woolf stresses the post-war present and the remnants of the past, and the ways Clarissa Dalloway remembers Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh before and after the war, for example. Tung's analysis is refreshing because he emphasises that in *Mrs Dalloway*, time must be considered in the context of different possible histories – histories that overlap and intersect with the desynchronised present.

Chapter 3 shifts its focus to explore several different texts within the context of time lag: Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and Jessica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle* (2003). Exploring the idea that "time-lag" is an example of different timelines with their own "tempos and varying pace" (24), Tung investigates examples of "bullet time" (122) throughout *The Matrix* and likens it to cubist renderings of objects across multiple narratives and timescales. By employing such comparisons, Tung astutely draws attention to the assembled and constructed nature of Neo's movements and fights, and to ruptures in linear time and metanarratives; he contends that these illustrate a technological fantasy of transcending and manipulating history. Similarly, in his analysis of *The Sound and the Fury*, Tung argues that central to the novel is a form of racialised time lag: not simply between two points on a single historical line, but between different histories that move at different rates. Here, the temporal aspect of double consciousness leads to a consideration of postcolonial treatments of time lag and how historical behindness is represented. In the final section of this chapter, Tung addresses the overlap and collision of time in *Dream Jungle, Apocalypse Now* (1979), Magellan's "discovery" of the Philippines, and the 1970s hoax concerning the "stone age" Tasaday people on the Philippine island of Mindanao. Notably, as each text contains an example of time lag, the dilation of time reveals a heterochronic assemblage of time-paths and historical frames in a manner that reveals a nightmarish "threat of an inappropriate disordering of the synchronization among past, present, and future" (157). Much of the pleasure and insight of this chapter stems from Tung's interweaving of discussions and ideas relating to different disciplines; real and fake media, literature, pseudo-anthropology, and history.

In the final chapter, which examines the aesthetic interest in "representing and exploring enormous timescales" in the 20th century, Tung consciously stresses a micro-cosmic approach. In connecting Wells's time travel, Woolf's far futurism, J.B.S. Haldane's vision of the end of the world in "The Last Judgment" (1927), and Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), Tung shows how modernist attempts to portray the future of the human world parallel the potential utopian or dystopian visions of SF. For example, in his discussion of "The Last Judgment", with the conceit of a human ancestor delivering a school lesson to those living on Venus, Tung weaves contemporary debates concerning degeneration and eugenics with questions about modernity, reflexivity, and myopia. In doing so, and by focusing on time in terms of a planet's rotation and "nature's many clocks" (181), Tung illustrates that time is unstable and therefore multiple. The search for new clocks and the defamiliarisation that results dominates Tung's later discussion of Stapledon's distension of narrative over two billion years of time and Terrence Malick's exploration of cosmic timescales as seen in *Tree of Life* (2011). Demonstrating that heterochronic scaling up and zooming out links with SF's alternative futurity, he astutely observes that the diversity of interest in *Last and First Men*

is represented by the multitude of timelines, not merely within "a mentality or immensity" (189) of the timescale. Equally, Tung's attention to detail concerning the number of timelines in which the figure of scoping, the trope of flight, and the idea of time travel integrate to make a coherent entirety of time is worthy of note. However, as Tung argues, Stapledon dehumanises time by stretching the novel beyond its breaking point, and by calling attention to the impossibility of unifying discordant and clashing timescales. Finally, in a comparison of *The Time Machine* and *Tree of Life*, Tung shows that in the modernist technique of examining and expanding perspectives, not only does it connect with SF's extra and ultra-terrestrial themes, but does so by allowing "readers to view the limits of our time frames or perception of time in relation to others" (24).

Building on his previous essay, "Modernism, Time Machines and the Defamiliarization of Time" (2015), Tung has expanded its scope dramatically, and the level of research, connections, and intersections made throughout this study are remarkable. However, his exhaustive research is, at times, overwhelming, and it can be somewhat difficult to navigate. Likewise, he employs a highly concerted level of academic jargon and theoretical terminology that increases the text's density. Consequently, recommending this study to anyone besides experienced readers and scholars is difficult and problematic. Moreover, given the large amount of attention Tung devotes to Wells, the inclusion of Wittenberg's assessments that Wells's *Time Machine* is "not yet time-travel fiction proper since its movement through time is 'subsidiary' to the imperatives of the utopian macrologue" (qtd. in 205n40) without an accompanying discussion is puzzling. Although some issues make recommending this study to all but experienced readers difficult, *Modernism and Time Machines* is a distinguished and exceptional monograph that will inform scholarship on modernism and SF for years to come.

> *Biography*: Robert Finnigan obtained his PhD at the University of Sunderland and is currently based at Nottingham Trent University. Robert is currently researching Anglo-Irish contributions to Aestheticism and Decadence within the *fin de siècle* period. His primary research interests lie in the areas of Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence and book history, as well as fantasy and SF. For several years, he was involved in the activities and events of the North East Irish Culture Network to promote and encourage research into the various characteristics of Irish culture and society.