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# SOMA

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PLIGHT OF SAARINEN'S TWA TERMINAL

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## TRIPPED OUT TIME TRAVEL

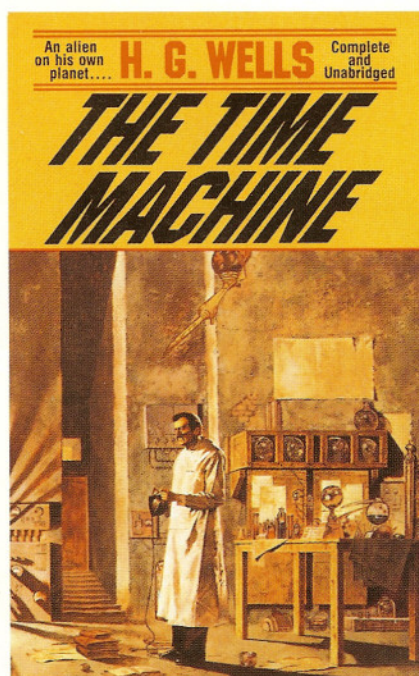
H.G. Wells' original *Time Machine*, the film that followed it, and the upcoming Hollywood "re-telling."

text Mark von Pfeiffer

**Things to do today:** flagellate the meathead who made 8th grade a living hell, take a shuttle to Mars to peruse the stunningly deviant collections of prophylactics they'll no doubt be famous for in the year 3,500 AD and avert the apocalypse by making sure that Oprah's parents never met. Ahhh...time travel. Granted, the French novelist Jules Verne took readers to the Moon, the center of the Earth and the deepest reaches of the oceans decades before H.G. Wells—the Babe Ruth of Sci-Fi—stepped to the plate and belted out *The Time Machine* in 1895. Wells was Christ to Verne's John the Baptist: not content with movement through space, he fingered time as the backdrop for his first novel.

In a one-man charge, the kinghell genius rolled over the Gothic beachhead of fantasy built by Poe and Shelley. Wells studied under the eminent British biologist Thomas Huxley, a collaborator with Darwin and grandfather Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*). Wells' education, fevered imagination, grim hopes for mankind's future—and perhaps some absinthe—gave him the balls of fire required to crank the budding genre of Science Fiction to a new level: one where the laws of Victorian science, primitive but well-intentioned, aided the willing suspension of disbelief. All his works are lanced through with a heavy-handed sense of satire—which in the case of *The Time Machine*, is concerned with the ever-widening gap between the upper and lower classes in England at the century's close.

Academy Award-winning director George Pal, king of studio-driven Sci-Fi and fantasy in the late '50s and early '60s, gave *The Time Machine* a crack in 1960. For the leads he cast the pretty-as-a-picture duo of Rod Taylor (*The Birds*) and Yvette Mimieux (*Diamond Head*). Formidable, but when viewed with today's desensitized eye, the picture comes off as enjoyable kitsch—men in monkey suits meets *Gone with the Wind*. Now, centuries...er...decades later, Simon Wells—the great-grandson of Herbert George—has offered up not a revision, but a retelling of his sire's sire's sire's story.



Sometimes irony's pretty ironic...you know?

What henchmen did SW enlist to properly represent HGW's Victorian vision of tomorrowland? A formidable gaggle of mental beefeaters to be sure: screenwriter John Logan (*Any Given Sunday*, *Gladiator*), composer Klaus Badelt (*M:I 2*, *X-Men*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Gladiator*) and effects house Digital Domain, spearheaded by supervisor Jonathan Egstad (*The Fifth Element*, *X-Men*, *Titanic*), to provide the brain-buggering visuals that time travel would...probably generate.

Egstad, winner of a Technical Achievement Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his contribution to NUKEM: a quantum leap of a compositing program, was still screwed to the floor at press time—entrenched in various points of fine-tuning. "It was challenging," he admits, "to maintain a sense of pseudo-reality with the backdrop of that old-time machinery contrasting with such high-technology effects. We were dealing with antiquated steam engines causing objects to

levitate—here's a machine that, powered by old lead acid batteries, is producing dazzling arrays of light as it folds time." Golly. "It was a difficult line to walk, and different than say, *The Lord of the Rings*—where reality is out the window altogether. When you're dealing with things that could conceptually happen in real life, you have to be quite meticulous. In the end, *The Time Machine* is far superior to what we've done in the past simply because our technical capabilities have grown so exponentially. The power of the computer is 10 times what it was five years ago."

"H.G. Wells has lots of depth," says composer Klaus Badelt, "It's not just an adventure story. You get to the final confrontation and there are really deep questions about being and life, social aspects—so many things are going on in there." Badelt faced the same dilemma of blending the archaic with the super-futuristic, "What you are seeing is a New York that's been broken into a primitive state. I tried to come up with sounds—a feel, a basic combination of things that you, as a human are familiar with, and hybrid them in a way that it sounds like something you've never heard. I cross-pollinated voices: I took an operatic choir and a tribal choir and had them sing together—such a novel combination that you find yourself thinking 'What is that?' The movie is that way visually as well. Also, John [Logan] wrote a brilliant screenplay. His work always seems to fall somewhere between a historically correct documentary and a fun Hollywood movie—and in the end the characters' motivations make perfect sense."

The theatrical release of *The Time Machine* completes this holy circle for true fans of the genre. The silver screen has finally reached a state of technical evolution where it can properly represent the first true work of Science Fiction. What was in its birth a shellshocking apoplexy to the Victorian mind may very well have the same effect on denizens of the 21st Century. And there was much rejoicing. ■