

Twenty-one
Time Hugo
Nominee!

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The Time Machine by H. G. Wells; adapted and directed by Dan Bianchi

Radiotheatre featuring Frank Zilinyi and Kate Siepert;
produced by Horse Trade Theater Group
reviewed by Jen Gunnels

Science fiction is no stranger to radio drama, particularly the work of H. G. Wells, whose *War of the Worlds* became perhaps the most famous of radio dramas with Orson Welles's landmark broadcast on October 30, 1938. The very real fear the broadcast created, regardless of the caveats provided for the audience that this was a fictional invasion, revealed that, like any truly horrifying monster, the less seen the better. The imagination provides better grist for terror (or mental postcards of alien landscapes) than anything CGI can whip up, making the pairing of sf and radio both inevitable and opportune.

RADIOTHEATRE
H.G. WELLS
THE TIME MACHINE

Adapted &
Directed By
DAN BIANCHI

LIVE!
On Stage!

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OPENS DEC 12
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A Horse Trade Production

Special Timelessness Issue

Borges, Gibson, and Gygas—together at last!
Joan Gordon: Sheri Tepper's Righteous Anger
Jari Käkälä on the Frontier and the Foundation
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Ursula Pflug and the Sunburst Awards
Gregory Benford foresees the computer virus
Jen Gunnels: H. G. Wells on the Radio
Stephen Delaney on Carol Emshwiller
Robert Bee pays tribute to the Dying Earth
Plus! Mistakes abounding and snow descending!

Chris n. Brown

Some Monster Manuals for the Evasion of Capitalist Networks

Zero History by William Gibson (2010)
On Mysticism by Jorge Luis Borges (2010)
The Social Network (2010) (dir. David Fincher)
Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction, edited by Mark Bould
and China Miéville (2009)
“Atemporality for the Creative Artist” by Bruce Sterling,
Transmediale 10, Berlin, February 2010
Continental Airlines Flight 088, EWR-AUS, December 9, 2010

1. The idea of atemporality is everywhere these days. Not to suggest you can easily find it. Atemporality is an emerging theory of Network culture, exploring the ways in which the gathering of all accumulated human knowledge and narratives into a massive but barely organized public network, together with the migration of daily human experience and thought into the realm of that network, obliterates the elaborate taxonomies we have developed to conceptualize our existences. As one wrestles to situate the concept, perhaps it is unsurprising that this theory of the Network is so hard to find *on* the Network—there's not even a Wikipedia entry prepared by the Network's diligent volunteer info-gnomes. To the extent they exist, the clearly marked signposts are more authentically gnomic: Twitter hashtags, captions to nonwritten representations on Flickr and Vimeo, fragments of blog posts riffing nonsequiturs about speeches you haven't heard. Atemporality is everywhere and nowhere, right now and no-when.

2. Atemporality shows up when you are not looking for it. Including times before it existed. Like 1920s Buenos Aires, as you imagine it from your aisle seat on a late night transcontinental airplane flight, reading one of the new Penguin Classics themed recombinations of the work of Jorge Luis Borges, *On Mysticism* (whose very existence is itself an accidentally Borgesian expression of atemporality, collecting mostly previously published works that include the essay “A New

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Monster Manuals for the Evasion . . .

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Refutation of Time”). In her introduction, Borges’s widow Maria Kodama traces Borges’s mystical thread to a seminal experience of his late youth—an evening stroll that led to a revelation of atemporality, long before that term’s current coinage. Kodama cites several pieces in which Borges recounted walking outside after dinner in a somewhat unfamiliar neighborhood, setting out with proto-psychogeographical intent on a walk without fixed destination, following “a random course, as much as possible,” accepting “the most obscure invitations of chance.” The random walk leads to a street corner in a poor neighborhood. Borges stops to take it in:

I stood there looking at that simplicity. I thought, no doubt aloud, “This is the same as it was thirty years ago.” I guessed at the date: a recent time in other countries, but already remote in this changing part of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for him a small, bird-sized affection. What stands out most clearly; in the already vertiginous silence the only noise was the intemporal sound of the crickets. The easy thought, “I am in the eighteen hundreds,” ceased to be a few careless words and deepened into reality. I felt dead—that I was an abstract perceiver of the world; I felt an undefined fear imbued with knowledge, the supreme clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe that I had traveled across the presumptive water of Time; rather I suspected I was the possessor of the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*. Only later was I able to define that imaging.

3. Borges precociously reveals the ways in which the Situationist *dérive* prefigures Network culture’s labyrinth of detours. And, just as a peculiar stance is required to evade the commercial slipstream of the city, Borgesian transcendence is hard to find while navigating the fruits of the operating system’s self-expression. The screens inside our mirrorshades want to operate as blinders: time-saving innovations designed to better harness our capabilities as draft primates working words and numbers. Like the half-dozen young business casual Dell database jockeys who surround you while reading the above passage, manically playing in-flight musical chairs in their well-conditioned effort to turn the lost time of the flight into billable increments of labor, comparing their tunings of the algorithms underlying a series of elaborate spreadsheets they are developing to present the speculative financial model of a business process outsourcing pitch, using USB sneakernet to replicate the Network where it does not exist. For them, the Network is a means to multiply the math logic of the transactional into every component of the day.

4. Perhaps these fresh business school products can be excused their apparent ignorance of their own alienation. They were incubated after “The End of History,” in the utopia of neoclassical economics, where all desire is optimized through the mechanism of price. They are native inhabitants of the Network. And they accept as a given that the Network exists to eliminate any frictions that would impede the deeper permeation of market functions into the fabric of consensus reality. Every Abercrombie model a jacked-in Jack Bauer, special operative of the Network, receiving instructions from the central Server: what the numbers want.

5. There is no manual on the bookshelf for escape from the dominion of the digital clock. The only cure for unrequited Obaman aspirations of benevolent patriarchal change is cathode ray rebellion in grainy CNN or CGI-crisp sf, vicariously experienced as the revolution we wish *we* could have. Our myriad fictions provide occluded mirrors but no real Narnian wardrobes leading to a better place. The available manuals are all variations on *Dungeons & Dragons*—quantify your abilities, choose an occupation, perform tasks, accumulate experience points, and acquire new talismans that are represented by bigger numbers than the ones before.

6. William Gibson’s *Zero History* is a caper. A heist in which the objects liberated by the protagonists are more semiotic than crystalline. Gibson’s analog to Steven Soderbergh’s *Ocean’s Thirteen* (your in-flight movie, as it happens): how to steal from the house when the Network is the casino.

7. The most fulfilling victories in *Zero History* are characters’ successful evasions of ubiquitous surveillance. An elfin Catalonian car thief tricks London’s CCTV by wearing a T-shirt printed with a giant illustrated face that confounds the facial recognition algorithms. An employee on an electronic leash—a phone that tracks and listens to him—has the revelation that he can opt out and cuts off the God-presence of the employer by stashing the phone in a Faraday pouch and later dropping it into the pram of a well-bodyguarded Russian mother. In the world of *Zero History*, the ultimate emancipation is to go off-Network. Can the Network, so thoroughly overlapped with Capital and the State, also provide the tools of escape?

8. You read Borges among the excelling Dellions, while the ambient televisions screen scenes from illusory fantasies of “reality,” and the noise-canceling headphones play Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross’s original score for *The Social Network*. Not-quite-ambient electronica that provides the ethereal counterpoint to David Fincher’s class drama about the real-life conquest (or construction) of cyberspace by Mark Zuckerberg. The soundtrack includes one cover, of Grieg’s “In the Hall of the Mountain King,” which sonically paints the ultimate room from Ibsen’s most famous *D&D* campaign. Cyberspace, it turns out, is not made of luminescent ziggurats of data but of pictures of girls ranked by a teenage boy’s misogynistic algorithm.

9. *Zero History* includes the story of one character’s rediscovery of the world with a uniquely fresh perspective: reentering mainstream reality after the erasure of addiction and hermitic rehabilitation. Gibson’s hyper-alienated Milgrim explores Earth as the alien planet, expressing an eccentrically blasé sense of wonder as he journeys from a market of winged porcelain dog angels under the Islamic flag of South Carolina to the Hermès redecoration of a postmodern Bond villain’s Russian *ekranoplan* flying boat. Milgrim experiences the world first through things and then through the Network, which he learns can be used as an uncodified manual for the operation of the world. By finding his own way through the Network, Milgrim learns how to evade control by his employer, how to experience simple sensory pleasures without the need for orbital oversight by the superego, and fragments of how the world really works.

10. Bruce Sterling, “Atemporality for the Creative Artist,” *Transmediale 10*, Berlin, February 2010:

Now, history is a story. And to write down the story of the fourteenth century, to just ask yourself—“what happened in the fourteenth century?”—Feynman style—is a very different matter from asking the atemporal question: “What does Google do when I input the search term ‘fourteenth century?’” I think we are over the brink of that. It’s a very, very different matter.

History books are ink on paper. They are linear narratives with beginnings and ends. They are stories created from archival documents and from other books. Network culture, not really into that. Network culture differs from literary culture in a great many ways. And step one is that the operating system is an unquestioned given. The first thing you do is go to the operating system, without even thinking of it as a conscious choice.

Then there is the colossally huge, searchable, public domain, which is now at your fingertips. There are methods to track where the eyeballs of the users are going. There are intellectual property problems in revenue, which interferes with scholarship as much as it aids it. There is a practice of “ragpicking” with digital material—of loops, tracks, sampling. There are search engines, which are becoming major intellectual and public political actors. There is “collective intelligence.” Or, if you don’t want to dignify it with that term, you can just call it “internet meme ooze.” But it’s all over the place, just termite mounds of poorly organized and extremely potent knowledge, quantifiable, interchangeable data with newly networked relations. We cannot get rid of this stuff. It is our new burden, it is there as a fact on the ground, it is a fait accompli.

There are new asynchronous communication forms that are globalized and offshored, and there is the loss of a canon and a record. There is no single authoritative voice of history. Instead we get wildly empowered cranks, lunatics, and every kind of long-tail intellectual market appearing in network culture. Everything from brilliant insight to scurrilous rumor.

This really changes the narrative and the organized presentations of history in a way that history cannot recover from. This is the source of our gnawing discontent.

11. Science fiction has always loved atemporal cut-ups. Fandom's Wold-Newton imperative virally generates new backstory interconnecting different narratives, continuously weaving together the infinite tapestry of the sf metatext—each disparate character and storyline is eventually revealed to be connected to others, jumping the fences of copyright and trademark. Temporal context is one of the sets in this playscape of the fantastic, evidenced by things like steampunk, *Gotham by Gaslight*, *Star Wars*, the endless shelves of Alternate Hitlers. These experiments are mostly *pre*-political, prolonging childhood play. But they provide clear precedent for understanding how Network culture creates new works from the ones that already exist. And now the toybox has every toy that ever was, or will be, made.

12. In "A New Refutation of Time," Borges explores the sense of wonder implicit in the English logicians' analytical attack on the idea of past and future. By uncoupling thought from the linearity of time, the author liberates himself from the constraints of traditional fictive narrative.

13. *Zero History* is a novel in which plot and character emerge from the relentless compilation of referents surrounding the protagonists—the latest example of the emergent post-cyberpunk literature of *things*. Describing consciousness through the objects with which it interacts is a fresh way to explore themes of alienation (the self expressed as a reflection of commodification), a liberation from plot, character, or grand *novum* as narrative engine room, and a way to construct a novel using the native ingredients of Network culture.

14. In *Zeitgeist* (1999), Bruce Sterling invented a postmodern Don Juan who uses semiotics as a magical system. Illuminated users can enable things—objects, words, signs—to realize their intrinsic potency as tools for manipulating reality and sparking the sense of wonder. It makes sense that the cyberpunks would find this path because the imagination and depiction of information networks inevitably highlights the representational nature of consensus reality. The building blocks of science fiction narrative reveal themselves as semiotic *Dungeon Master's Guides*: conjuring alternate futures (and pasts) in order to redirect the present.

15. *Zero History* is a novel of the Network. It is also a Networked novel, if a protean one. Google is knowingly used by Gibson as the not-so-secret glossary of a text that layers in eyeball-kicking cool things with marzipan density. It is also an electronic text. In the Kindle edition, this means it is annotated by the reader, with the ability to share each reader's annotations with all. For example, as of my reading, the following sentence at Section 1748 of the Kindle edition had been highlighted by 83 readers:

Some very considerable part of the gestural language of public places, that had once belonged to cigarettes, now belonged to phones.

16. *Zero History* mixes a design culture appropriated from the real world with a popular culture invented by the author and layered on top of the real world. Though there are many imaginary bands in Gibson's post-9/11 novels, there is no actual popular music. The inability to open YouTube and watch a vintage video of The Curfew preserves some narrative negative space inside this fictionalization of real things (proving that perhaps imaginary popular culture is the best kind). Network culture will not long tolerate this omission: witness the *Pattern Recognition*-inspired lines of clothing (jackets, shoes, bags) that can now be purchased in the "real" world.

17. The chapter headings of *Zero History* are the track listings of an unwritten original soundtrack. Tweeted concrete poetry, coding an

abstracted version of the book in which one reads only the headings, potentially in jumbled order. Consider:

4. PARADOXICAL ANTAGONIST
7. a herf gun in frith street
9. fuckstick
12. compliance tool
13. muskrat
14. yellow helmet
17. homunculi
31. secret machineries
34. the order flow
35. dongle
40. enigma rotors
44. the verbals
45. shrapnel, supersonic
49. great marlborough
54. air glow
64. threat management
66. zip
67. a crushed mouse
69. the gifting suite
77. green screen
81. on site

18. *The Social Network* depicts an adolescent boy's channeling of his social desires through cybertech, multiplied through wary transactions with Capital, in an effort to break out of his alienation from his peers and from himself. Zuckerberg gains his introduction to Capital through a corrupted guide—Justin Timberlake as Napster founder Sean Parker, who sees in Zuckerberg a manipulable alter ego who might be led to accomplish what he failed to do and who achieves his revenge by withholding transactional consummation. And so Zuckerberg achieves the conquest of cyberspace (along with some class revenge), propelled by venture capital, at the cost of reducing all of his personal relationships to the barest transactional essence. The life of the mage is a lonely one.

19. There is no game of *Dungeons & Dragons* played in the 2010 theatrical release of *The Social Network*, but an entire weekend campaign is included as a special feature in the DVD of Tarkovsky's 1975 remake. Tarkovsky includes scenes of Zuckerberg's years at Exeter to articulate the unexplored atemporality of Facebook: a project grounded in the social reality of an eighteenth-century boarding school, where meritocratic imperatives collide with the unspoken realities of American class. The original Facebook was the one Zuckerberg discovered as an incoming "Upper" at Exeter—a paper directory of the thousand or so inhabitants of the school that year, which Zuckerberg and his dorm mates would annotate with pen-and-ink graffiti, including ratings of the girls. These techniques now serve as the foundation for a Networked community of 500 million of the world's inhabitants, recreating their lives each day as a page in a high school yearbook.

20. The characters of *Zero History* (and the prior two books, *Pattern Recognition* [2003] and *Spook Country* [2007], which contain many of the same characters and work as a trilogy) are also seduced by Capital but maintain an arms' length relationship with it. They are all free agents, independent creatives and translators and mercenary operatives who wish to exist autonomously, free of the long-term employment contract in which one's daily life is consumed by the transaction. Milgrim recalls his past as an addict to anti-anxiety drugs as "transactional," the blurred memory of when his life was no more than a series of deals that dominated his emotional state and thoroughly characterized his condition.

21. Each of the books in the Bigend trilogy is about the search for some mysterious work of art that also carries with it the qualities of a consumable product. The principal characters are assigned to look for the piece by the Belgian aestheto-capitalist Mr. Bigend, finding in the course of their assignments revelations about the contours of their own alienation. Bigend's intention is always to transform the work of art into a consumer product that will enable him to extract value from it. The protagonists (a lone coolhunter in *Pattern Recognition*, two parallel searchers in *Spook Country*, and the same two searchers

united in *Zero History*) spend much of their time engaged in the search without self-awareness, until their interaction with the thing being targeted brings about some revelation about the unique *identity* of the thing—the (typically unspoken) realization that it has been imbued with autonomous character by its author and that it does not *want* to be appropriated as a product (unlike all the other lovely things peopling Gibson’s postcyberpunk Goncourt journals, perfectly happy to be the court retainers of 21C bourgeois meatspace). This revelation enables the thing in question to serve as a mirror for the protagonist (a player-character alter ego for the reader) to consider the nature of their own service.

22. In *Zero History*, the work in question is a mysterious line of retro denim work clothes that rebels against all conventions of branding. The denim has no real brand and no name, though Gibson’s characters invent one to be able to talk about it. The only label on the clothing is an embossed silhouette of some vaguely demonic chimera, hence the “Gabriel Hounds.” The clothing is not “marketed”—it appears sporadically in underground flash events, global but geographically random. The revelatory invention, we learn in the denouement, of a character from another book who has a unique psycho-aesthetic sensitivity to brand. Through accumulation of experience points in the dungeon of market capitalism, this character has ascended from player character to non-player character, from researcher of other’s designs to designer, and figured out how to create a magical cloak that successfully evades the maelstrom of product commodification. Eliminating any real indicia of brand identity is the start. The more important characteristic is the elimination of any clear temporal indicia, using antique equipment, a seasoned contemporary sensibility, and the authorship of hand craft to create a thing that could have been made in the distant past, the future, or this afternoon.

23. By liberating the things they create from commodification by Capital, the creatives inhabiting the Bigend novels maintain their own autonomy—independence from the soul-crushing alienation of a fully transactional life. Applying the “does your FTL drive really work?” critical approach of the typical sf reader, one might wonder how any of these people pay the rent . . . only to realize that none of them appear to have homes. They are twenty-first-century cyber-nomads, who inhabit zones of transportation—the closest one can come to actually living inside the ethereal cloud of the Network. Viewing the world from a train in motion is a first step to maintaining an atemporal life. The only money you need is enough for the next ticket.

24. Hollis Henry’s Breakfast with Bigend:

“Brand vision transmission,” he said.

“Yes?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Narrative. Consumers don’t buy products, so much as narratives.”

“That’s old,” she said. “It must be, because I’ve heard it before.” She took a sip of cooled coffee.

“To some extent, an idea like that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Designers are taught to invent characters, with narratives, who they then design products for, or around. Standard procedure. There are similar procedures in branding generally, in the invention of new products, new companies, of all kinds.”

“So it works?”

“Oh, it works,” he said, “but because it does, it’s become de facto. Once you have a way in which things are done, the edge migrates. Goes elsewhere.”

“Where?”

“That’s where you come in,” he said.

“I do not.”

He smiled. He had, as ever, a great many very white teeth.

“You have bacon in your teeth,” she said, though he didn’t.

25. If *Pattern Recognition* was science fiction without the future, *Zero History* is science fiction without the present. (Except, perhaps, for the boxes of unsold books by Hollis Henry lurking offstage at various points in *Zero History*.)

26. In *Red Planets*, novelist China Miéville and film professor

Mark Bould curate a contemporary Marxist survey of sf literature and film. One might posit that a rigorous examination of the Singularity under the weight of all three volumes of *Capital* is the kind of atemporal exercise likely to cause an accident. In the case of Steven Shaviro’s dissection of Stross and Kurzweil (“The Singularity is Here”), the application is potent—revealing that “the whole point of Kurzweil’s speculation—its ideological function, if you will—is precisely to bring us to utopia without incurring the inconvenience of having to question our current social and economic arrangements.” While one might challenge the immediate relevance of many of the pieces in *Red Planets* (can a survey of Weimar sf film criticism advance contemporary political change?), the book cogently calls out the failure of sf to really express its political potential. Monolithic nineteenth century theories of industrial society are clumsy instruments to fathom Network culture. But in an atemporal moment where all narratives of socio-economic organization are arguably tenable, considering the political economy of speculative fictions is an important undertaking.

27. Atemporal protagonists don’t really emancipate: they evade. They avoid transactional indenture by declining to be branded with the requisite signs, but they don’t take direct action against the system. They stay outside the system, on the move, in orbit, transient. This strategy of disengagement means the atemporal is also the apolitical.

28. *Zero History* does not subscribe to *Red Planets*’s utopian aspirations for sf. Instead of imagining better futures, it documents strategies to mainline the Gernsback Continuum in the real world, and use it to create a different sort of freedom, more existential than political.

29. During his tenure in New England in the 1970s, Borges developed an elaborate *D&D* campaign through which he would guide an elect party of five graduate student adventurers during marathon weekend sessions. The campaign was based on an expansion of “The Circular Ruins” across a tabletop-sized sheet of hex paper and several ruled notebooks. One notebook contained Dungeon Master Borges’s compilation of a new series of arcane spells, seven of which are collected for the first time in *On Mysticism*.

30. Sterling posits that atemporality is a transitory condition arising out of the chaos of a newly emergent Network culture in which all knowledge suddenly becomes immediately available with no system of ordering it. While he may be right in diagnosing the moment, he misses the eternality of atemporality as revealed by Borges’s mystical moment on the backstreets of pre-WWII Buenos Aires. Atemporality is a method of rewriting the terms of our engagement with the information web of the capitalist city, to evade its transactional traps and achieve an esoteric counter-semiotics that enables autonomy, like Neo learning to see and manipulate the data structures underlying *The Matrix*. Atemporality is not new—the Network just makes it more pervasive and potent.

31. If the networked global sprawl is overtaken by ethereally perambulating cyber-flâneurs, will they change the terms of the society’s bargain, or just live off of it as a band of Istari walking among us? The time traveler is rarely invested in the moment she visits.

32. In Borges’s epilogue to “The Library of Babel” translated for *On Mysticism*, the Argentine Aleph anticipates Sterling’s speculations about Network Culture. The postscript prefigures a mediasphere in which the Network creates new texts to complete those left unfinished or unimagined. In this imagined realm, the unused William Gibson script for *Alien 3* develops a “viewership” greater than the film which finally emerged from development hell under David Fincher as director. In time, the actual film envisioned by Gibson appears on the Network, eventually in multiple versions: Ridley Scott, Walter Hill, Nicolas Roeg, and Fincher. Later will come the Gibson screenplay for *The Social Network*, Ridley Scott’s *Neuromancer*, Kubrick’s *Solaris*, Tarkovsky’s *Dhalgren*, and the Yash Raj production of Bruce Sterling’s musical *Islands in the Net*, starring Kalki Koechlin as Laura.

33. Network culture is not utopia, but it does contain large quantities of liberated territory that have not yet been mapped. ▲

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