

# The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity



Miguel Sebastián Martín

© Miguel Sebastián Martín, 2020

**Abstract:** This paper reconsiders Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo's first feature film, *Timecrimes* (*Los Cronocrímenes*, 2007), a film characterised by a peculiar combination of science-fictional and metafictional forms, two fictional modes which are not often studied together. More specifically, Vigalondo's movie is examined as a metacinematic allegory of postmodern subjectivity, arguing that the film's parodic depiction of a time-traveller can be read as a reflection on some dilemmas of contemporary individuals—dilemmas such as ideological confusion and relativism, or individualistic isolation and helplessness. Among other considerations, attention is paid to the essential kinship of time-travelling and cinema as subjective experiences (a parallelism which provides the base for *Timecrimes*'s allegory), while, in parallel, contextualising the film within the postmodern historical epoch, in which audio-visual spectacles and entertainment exert a determining influence on human subjects and their experience of time. Thus, Vigalondo's film is considered, first, from a more formalist perspective—looking at its systematic use of the metacinematic allegory and comparing it to similar devices in the director's prior works and influences—and, subsequently, from a more narrative-thematic perspective, with the aim of disentangling the socio-philosophical implications of the story.

**Palabras clave:** Nacho Vigalondo, *Los cronocrímenes* (*Timecrimes*), metafictional science fiction, allegory, time travel cinema.

El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río. (Borges, 1974: 771)

Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river. (Borges, 1999: 332)

If our subjectivity is indeed a river which flows through time, as Jorge Luis Borges (and many others) have told us, how

much could a recent time-travelling film like *Timecrimes* (*Los cronocrímenes*, Nacho Vigalondo, Spain, 2007) tell us about



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

postmodern subjectivity?<sup>1</sup> Although with some degree of polemicisation, it could be rightly said that postmodernity has turned individuals into (at least psychological and/or cultural) time-travellers: we often find ourselves in (to reference Borges again) a garden of forking time-flows. And indeed, postmodern perception is relatively more fragmented and fragmenting, confused and confusing on numerous fronts, given how 'basic truths' like reality, time and truth itself have all become empty or at least suspicious. One important explanation for this present ideological maze could be that, as thinkers like Fredric Jameson and Jonathan Beller emphasise, postmodern subjects live under the immense pressure of an increasingly omnipresent audio-visual spectacle (i.e. the culture industry and the mass media) which construes human subjects as mere spectators/consumers of a constant but random flow of images.<sup>2</sup> In this

sense, time in postmodernity is not a 'free' time where one can pursue one's own goals, but rather a rapid, mighty river in which one's subjectivity floats, is carried and eroded. It is in all these manners that I say that postmodernity is turning us all into awe-struck and lost time travellers. Thus, we may ask: *how could postmodern subjective dilemmas be fictionalised?* To which I (and perhaps Nacho Vigalondo) would reply: *precisely through a narrative of time travelling.*

Therefore, the basic assumption of this article is that some interesting possibilities of understanding postmodern times may be found in Nacho Vigalondo's first film, *Timecrimes*, a relatively neglected,<sup>3</sup> modest production which launched the career of the Spanish director.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, I here analyse said film as a *metacinematic allegory of postmodern subjectivity*, one which self-reflexively plays with time-travelling tropes in order to portray the postmodern condition.<sup>5</sup> But

<sup>1</sup> This essay would not have been possible in its current form without the help of my former teacher and supervisor at Cambridge, Bryan Cameron, who repeatedly revised and commented on the work. In addition, Sara Segura Arnedo is to be thanked deeply, given how she disinterestedly acted as proof-reader and critic at an extremely busy time for her. And last but not least, I must also thank my current PhD supervisor, Pedro Javier Pardo García, who kindly agreed to read and comment on a later version, offering some very thought-provoking suggestions that helped in nuancing my understanding of metafiction. The work required for this article was partly realized under a predoctoral research contract co-funded by the European Social Fund and Consejería de Educación de Castilla y León.

<sup>2</sup> These diagnoses can be traced back to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry," a profound critique of the standardisation of culture (and of human individuals) by said industry –and a critique which has been developed and updated by

many authors, like the above-quoted Jameson and Beller, as well as, more recently, Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, which delves into the increasingly time-consuming demands for attention and productivity.

<sup>3</sup> The attention paid to the film in academic publications is limited to roughly a handful of articles, even when counting essays both in Spanish and in English. Cf. Bruckner, Coëgnarts, or Ruiz Navarro.

<sup>4</sup> As of 2020, Vigalondo has written and directed four feature films (*Timecrimes* included) as well as making a range of short films and participating in several series, the most recent being Netflix's superhero parody *El vecino* (The Neighbour, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> A whole sub-section of this article is devoted to exploring and illustrating the notion of a metacinematic allegory, which is why the concept is left undeveloped here. Nonetheless, I should already clarify that my approach to time-travel films, at least as ideologically



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

why would this specific film merit such a close scholarly attention? Besides the currency and interest of many of the postmodern dilemmas surveyed above (which are indeed reflected by so many more films, novels and artworks in general), I want to take this movie *as a representative example of the many ways in which science fiction and metafiction may be combined in an audio-visual medium, resulting in (self-)reflexive SF narratives*. The convergence of these two narrative modes, although it once mostly occurred in 'new wave' SF literature,<sup>6</sup> seems to be by now well established in other media and popular culture, and I believe this phenomenon has not yet received enough attention within SF scholarship. Even though there are serious discussions of an ongoing 'metareferential turn'—that is, in broad terms, the gradual growth and spread of 'meta' elements across all media during the last decades—, SF has not been included in such debates, thus my intention of including *Timecrimes*.<sup>7</sup> In so

---

sketched thus far, was partly inspired by Joshua M. Hall, who scrutinises the sub-genre as a fictionalisation of Gilles Deleuze's postmodern philosophy of time.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the small number of scholars who have foregrounded and analysed the confluence of science fiction and metafiction have all drawn from the 'new wave' movement/period, singling out specific works by Samuel Delaney, Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick or Joanna Russ, among others. Cf. Ebert, Dillon, and Malmgren.

<sup>7</sup> Werner Wolf's recent volumes, *Metareference across Media* and *The Metareferential Turn*, have studied this turn in much greater depth, in a commendable attempt to expand and adapt the concepts and terminology of literary metafiction onto all media, even (quite interestingly) music. However, despite (or due to) these works' transversal spirit, no studies of SF are included, neither of the audio-visual nor of the literary kinds.

doing, I do not want to enshrine Vigalondo's film as *the* determining predecessor,<sup>8</sup> but to take it as an initial case study, keeping an eye on the many science fiction films and TV series which nowadays conflate metafictional elements with more 'properly' science-fictional forms and themes.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what I aspire to do with this article is to open pathways for the study of metafictional science fiction in the audio-visual media, a phenomenon yet to be studied but worthy of attention in its own right.<sup>10</sup> My long-term goal is to consider how, as *Timecrimes* shall illustrate, science fiction and metafiction may function coherently and draw from their affinities in a way in which they may reinforce each other's critical potential.

Narratively speaking, *Timecrimes* has a plot that is in many ways unsurprising

---

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, more 'paradigmatic' examples could be previous films like *The Matrix* (1999) or Crichton's *Westworld* (1973), both interpretable as (implicitly) metacinematic reflections on the artificial, illusory aspects of reality.

<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, the case of HBO's series *Westworld* (2016-), a show already analysed as metafictional SF in a recent essay (cf. Sebastián Martín) or others like *Black Mirror* (2011-), a SF-themed show with a self-referential focus on the media environment from which it stems (with narratives about streaming services, social media, videogames, etc). Besides series, there have also been adaptations of metafictional SF literature for audio-visual formats are Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013), an adaptation of Stanisław Lem's equally self-reflexive *The Futurological Congress*, as well as Amazon's production *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-19), which adapts Philip K. Dick's eponymous novel.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, this is the topic of my ongoing PhD research, which has led me to focus on meta-SF in recent TV narratives, a work which I shall share and publish in due time.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

within the time-travelling subgenre of science fiction: it is the story of Hector (Karra Elejalde), a man who, after unwillingly travelling back in time (twice), finds himself duplicated (and then triplicated), all to the effect of provoking a spiral of unexpected complications. However, upon such seemingly clichéd and worn-out narrative proposition, the film manages to turn the protagonist's experience of time-travelling into an allegory of postmodern subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> The film's connection with postmodern reality is foregrounded first of all by its choice of setting, which is in no way the typical future or alien world where time-travelling would usually happen, but rather a world which is, by all measures, unmistakably contemporary to most twenty-first-century audiences. The establishing shot places us in a supermarket's car park, a blatantly symbolic (if not banal) locus of late-capitalist consumer societies. And the focal character, Hector, is just an everyman of the postmodern world: an average married man who has just moved into a newly built chalet in a tranquil spot of the countryside. Thus, the time-traveller-to-be is nothing but an anodyne, textbook characterisation of contemporary middle-class conditions and, especially, dissatisfactions. Nevertheless, the contemporaneity of character

and setting does not do away with the science-fictional, estranging potential of the whole narrative. On the contrary: a single SF trope set against an otherwise mundane background validates and approximates the story to contemporary spectators, and the film manages to weave an overtly unrealistic allegory into the fabric of postmodern everyday life—thus representing the psychic fragmentation and alienation that goes hand in hand with ordinary existence.

But, beyond these basic premises, how is this film self-reflexive? I argue that *Timecrimes* is metacinematic inasmuch as it is a film which acknowledges itself as such: in other words, it is a self-referential film which exhibits its own (and cinema's) fictionality and trickery, reflecting on itself primarily by allegorical means. To uncover *Timecrimes*'s relatively implicit meta connotations, it is first of all essential to observe how the movie's time machine is a seemingly photographic apparatus. The main character, Hector, is sent back in time by entering a tank full of a white liquid, like a negative being soaked in photographic developer. Once inside, to the sound of a click and a flash, he travels an hour and a half back in time (the standard feature film length), arriving at a moment in which he can see himself in the past—which, as a matter of fact, matches the beginning of the film itself. Hector thus relates to a filmed subject in that he is mechanically reproduced and preserved in time (like a photo, or perhaps more like a gif file), and he also relates to spectators in that, after every time loop, he watches his past, spectral self from an impotent distance, as though he were suffering a hallucination or an out-of-body experience.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>11</sup> Of course, this should not be regarded as fully original to *Timecrimes*, since time-travelling already seems like a fitting metaphorical shorthand to understand our (so to speak) time-consuming times. For instance, social critic Mark Fisher, upon noting the contemporary rises in depression and anxiety disorders, interestingly explains them in relation to a feeling of impotence about past and future, a feeling that may make us wish to flee our present in whatever direction. Bearing this in mind, perhaps the most groundbreaking film in its use of time-travelling would be Christ Marker's experimental short *La Jetée* (1962).

<sup>12</sup> However roughly, here I echo the terms with which apparatus theorists like Jean-



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

the scientist who tricks Hector into going into the machine is played by none other than director Nacho Vigalondo, who cast himself for the role, thus equating filmmaking with a literal manipulation of time and spectators (Hector in this case).

Taking all these apparently intentional details as cues,<sup>13</sup> it becomes possible to rethink the whole of *Timecrimes* as a *metacinematic allegory*, in that time travelling is portrayed as a cinematic experience all throughout the film's narrative development,<sup>14</sup> thus establishing a structural combination of the SF trope with the meta-connotation. Accordingly, *Timecrimes's* diegesis and, particularly,

Hector's character development can all be re-interpreted, beyond their literal meanings, in the terms of such science-fictional, metacinematic allegory. In this sense, complementing previous studies which primarily reflected on Hector as a Hitchcockian voyeur,<sup>15</sup> here I take him as a fictional representation of the postmodern subject who, in being a time-traveller, also stands as filmed subject and film spectator. This allegorical layering is what, in turn, allows Hector's condition to pose relevant questions to us, real spectators of *Timecrimes* and dwellers of the postmodern society of the spectacle.

We may now ask: how is Hector's condition framed (and in turn, how are we, spectators, framed)? Is he a tragic figure with whom the audience is called to empathise, or is he the butt of some twisted joke on behalf of the director? Although there is something of both the tragic and the comic, we shall begin by noting that *Timecrimes's* metacinematicity cannot be fully understood without prior consideration of the film's humour. All throughout the film, there underlies an irony which is essential to wholly comprehending the film's rendering (and implicit mocking) of the postmodern subject. Consider the subversive-comic functioning of the opening sequence for what is supposed to be a SF/horror thriller:<sup>16</sup> to the sound of Santi

---

Louis Baudry described spectators, to the point of describing the movie-goer as a prisoner of Plato's cave: impotently confronted with a simulacrum of his/her own life. See "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema."

<sup>13</sup> Of course, not all the connotations that I mention here would be noted by all spectators, with some details probably remaining as so-called "easter eggs" for the more attentive viewers. Nonetheless, I would still argue that the allegory as a whole does come across to most viewers, even if from fewer symbolic details.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, I base my reading on Pedro Javier Pardo's notion of the "metafictional allegory," although emphasising a more medium-specific metacinematicity. Such an allegory is defined as "una historia en la que ni aparecen gentes de cine (actores, directores, guionistas, etc.) ni autores, personajes o lectores, pero cuya acción los convierte en sus equivalentes, emblemas de estas figuras, de modo que alegóricamente acaba siendo una reflexión sobre la ficción y sobre el cine" (2011: 168). My translation: "a story in which [intradiagetically] there are no film people (actors, directors, scriptwriters, etc.) and no authors, characters or readers, but whose action turns them into their equivalents, emblems of those figures, in a way in which the story becomes an allegorical reflection on fiction and cinema."

---

<sup>15</sup> Focusing precisely on *Timecrimes*, R. T. Bruckner elaborates on the parallelisms between time-travellers, spectators and voyeuristic characters. Besides, Bruckner and (in a different context) Laura Rascarolli have noted the affinities of time-travel films with Hitchcock's *Vertigo*—understanding it as a story of a nostalgia-driven, voyeuristic kind of time travel—, a film which is also referenced by *Timecrimes's* ending, as I will mention later.

<sup>16</sup> The film has been overtly publicised and popularly labelled as both horror and SF, as seen in IMDB for example.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

Ibarretxe's "Dark Country" (a low-key, ominous instrumental music), *Timecrimes*'s establishing shot places us in the middle of a shopping centre's car-park. Here viewers may wonder: "where is the dread of such an ordinary place? Something has to be going wrong." Subsequently, to the sound of a car's engine being started, the camera is slowly driven away without the audience knowing who is driving or where they are going, conveying an eerie sense of disembodiment that underscores the mystery. And then, as shown by a series of fast-cut travelling takes of an increasingly rural and abandoned landscape, we get to know that we are gradually getting away from the safety of the urban: perhaps, as in so many horror movies,<sup>17</sup> we are headed back into the heart of darkness. The music then changes to a higher pitch, as in tense anticipation, and camera movement progressively slows down to reveal a trail of dropped objects on the road: we are made to expect that a tragedy has happened, an accident or something worse. However, the mysterious foreboding is suddenly interrupted: camera tilts up, music fades, and we see Hector, meekly coming out of the car to see how his shopping fell from the boot upon arriving home. He shouts for his wife's help, to no avail, and he clumsily and wearily starts collecting everything on his own.

In such simple but meaningful sequence of less than two minutes, Vigalondo has thus introduced us spectators to his humorous, parodic style by using and abusing the audience's expectations. Be-

sides, with this strategy, the filmmaker has introduced Hector as a laughable, pathetic character, one who appears to take the petty tragedies of his ordinary life as the tragic plot of some horror movie<sup>18</sup> in the same way as we spectators were misled into having exaggerated expectations for the sequence. Thus, both character and spectator are from the very beginning mocked for their own narrow, cinematically conditioned perception of reality. And as we shall later observe throughout the remainder of the narrative, *Timecrimes*' metacinematic elements function as a satiric indictment of Hector's perspective as well as, through allegorical parallelism, of the spectators' perspectives.

In the sequences that follow the above-described opening, Hector is further depicted as an absurdly self-victimising man who is unhappily dispassionate towards life, and all for no apparent reason. Even though he could be enjoying his new countryside home with his cheerful, passionate wife, Hector is rather shown as a ridiculously dejected 'siesta lover,' a guy whose only hobby is passively watching the surrounding landscape with his binoculars, which he apparently enjoys more than sex. And it is precisely his inescapable voyeuristic drive (again something shared with spectators) which becomes in a way his 'original sin' and the narrative's trigger, since his misadventures begin once he sets out to find a naked girl whom he spots in the woods through his binoculars. But his fantasies are soon overturned: as soon as he finds her, he is attacked and chased by a mysterious man with a pink-

<sup>17</sup> A paradigmatic example of this (and perhaps an intended allusion) is Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (United States, 1980), which famously opened with a car drive away from urban civilisation on top of a similarly eerie, unnerving music.

<sup>18</sup> This impression is to a great extent built on the masterfully tragicomic performance of Karra Elejalde, who successfully strikes a balance between a comic corporeal clumsiness and a tragic emotional helplessness.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

bandaged face. And subsequently, upon clumsily escaping from the mysterious chaser, he reaches a facility where Vigalondo-as-scientist, amidst all the confusion, tricks him into hiding inside the time machine without even telling him what it is. Thus, the whole loop begins: completely unheroically, Hector has unwittingly become a time-traveller.

From then onwards, the whole movie is narratively focalised from Hector's perspective so that the spectator accompanies him in his tragicomic hardships, never knowing more than he does and thus being equally disoriented by the paradoxes of time travelling.<sup>19</sup> Even though this character-centred focalisation induces a degree of empathy with Hector, Vigalondo has shown us from the outset that he is not a person to fully identify with, but rather one to watch from an ironic distance. On the one hand, we may root for him throughout his misadventures: he is after all a contemporary everyman who in many ways perceives and behaves like us (the implied spectators). But on the other hand, precisely for behaving in so many ways like a stereotypically passive film spectator, powerless and subject to all kinds of manipulation, Hector is also the butt of the film's humour (and so are we the viewers). Therefore, an ironic realisation should gradually strike us upon viewing: the realisation that, behind Hector's pathetic misadventures, there lies an indictment of us, spectators of *Timecrimes* and real dwellers of late-capitalist postmodernity. As we shall continue to see, the joke is on us.

If we take a momentary detour from *Timecrimes* itself, we may better under-

<sup>19</sup> In terms of camera perspective, this limitation is achieved by means of the use of mostly close- and medium-range shots including either Hector or his surroundings.

stand it by seeing how similar kinds of self-conscious irony are a constant in Nacho Vigalondo's works,<sup>20</sup> fictions which frequently mock their contemporary male protagonists. For instance, in his Academy-Award nominated short film *7:35 de la mañana* (Spain, 2003), a black-humour parody of the musical genre, we get to enjoy a self-consciously clichéd musical number by which a man declares love to a woman. However, this short eventually reveals that what has truly happened is that a mentally deranged man, having coerced a whole bar at gunpoint, has forced everyone to sing and dance with him for a woman whom he had been stalking. Similarly, in the short film *Domingo* (Spain, 2005) and the feature film *Extraterrestre* (Spain, 2011), the SF motif of the UFO sighting is parodically turned into an excuse to trigger absurd arguments between contemporary couples, in which both lovers (but mainly men) are caricaturised as only caring for themselves and utterly incapable of grasping what is happening in front of them (the message being that if we cannot understand our beloved, why should we care about aliens?).

In addition to these, there is another of Vigalondo's prior works that deserves a special emphasis due to its affinities with *Timecrimes*: the short film *Código 7* (Spain, 2002). Conceived as another metacinematic narrative that mocks several SF tropes (like virtual reality and aliens), this short film has a Hector-like, bored, mediocre man as the main character and object of satire, as well as self-conscious narrative twists. Specifically, *Código 7* is

<sup>20</sup> Although it is beyond my scope here, Ruiz Navarro's essay constructs a very useful map for locating Vigalondo's work within Spanish SF and fantasy film, as well as exploring these genres' relationship with comedy and irony.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

structured in three parts which are visually identical: for three times in a row, we are shown the same footage of a man's morning routine in an austere flat in Madrid –the difference is that a voice-over narration radically changes the story from one iteration to next. At first, we hear a self-consciously clichéd SF story of an alien unwittingly imprisoned in a virtual reality that simulates contemporary Spain; subsequently, we hear a sequel to that story in which the prisoner has become tragically aware of the repetition and the deception of his imprisonment; and finally, in the third iteration, the story which we hear is a set of supposedly autobiographical comments by the actor himself, who outspokenly complains about his precarious life, about boredom and unemployment.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in these cases (and *Timecrimes*), strategies like parodic plays with genre conventions (usually SF) or metaleptic narrative turns are all used with an underlying irony, since they all pave the way to some sobering revelation about our (the spectators') real experience of postmodernity. In light of examples like *Código 7*, it would appear that *Timecrimes* is only a more complex elaboration of similarly satirical aims.

Besides the rest of Vigalondo's work, it is also worth pausing at an acknowledged hypotext of *Timecrimes*, Alan Moore's short comic strip "Chronocops."<sup>22</sup> Moore's

comic makes a similar use of self-conscious devices in a context of time-travelling science-fiction, and in this way also illustrates the transmedial roots and possibilities of metafictional SF. Essentially, "Chronocops" is the story of a future, alien policeman who returns to the same 'place in time' after every of his frustrated missions, where he attempts to catch a very elusive, time-travelling criminal. In so doing, Moore repeats entire panels, but every time he provides us with changed narrative perspectives that progressively show previously hidden details in the "past"—until, in the end, we readers come to realise how the policeman was unwittingly paving the way for his own conviction. Thus, "Chronocops" constructs a diegetic universe that is riddled with time and causation paradoxes, all to the effect of constantly disappointing both reader's and characters' expectations. But it is perhaps in terms of characters that we find a considerable parallelism with *Timecrimes*, since both comic and film confront us with an easy-to-mock and incompetent time traveller, bored and frustrated with the literal time loops of their lives, and helpless in the face of their (mis)adventures.<sup>23</sup> Even though these are mockable, caricaturised anti-heroes, their sentiments can to a great extent comprehended by spectators who, like us, live in the postmodern world of boredom-inducing mass entertainment, where nothing would seem new but rather a

<sup>21</sup> The actor-narrator self-consciously closes *Código 7* by cynically sentencing: "Ciencia ficción... Ya podía ser mi vida de ciencia ficción y no esta puta mierda". My translation: "So apparently we're making science fiction... I wish my life were like science fiction and not this shit."

<sup>22</sup> In the documentary *Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD* (Paul Goodwin, United Kingdom, 2014), Vigalondo openly recognises the importance of "Chronocops" for his film: "If I [had not read] 'Chronocops' back at the time, I

would never [have been] the director of *Timecrimes*" (1:29:58).

<sup>23</sup> The comic's protagonist introduces himself to readers by laconically saying "I like my coffee weak and sugary. I like my women the same. I speak in short sentences. I'm just a guy, doing his job" (Moore, 2013: 114). Such introduction, much like Hector's own, succinctly conveys and mocks the character's boredom and lack of ambitions.





## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

constant repetition of a mind-numbing sameness. In this sense, these time travellers, caught in both literal and metaphorical time loops of boredom and mediocrity, should be grasped as allegorical illustrations of how postmodern subjectivity is dominated by a sense of powerlessness and confusion, a feeling of perplexity that is perhaps shared by many readers/spectators when they try to comprehend the paradoxes of these time-travelling narratives.<sup>24</sup>

But also, beyond these time travellers' characterisation, the comic's narrative structure of time loops and revelations is perhaps Vigalondo's greatest debt to Alan Moore. Just like "Chronocops," *Timecrimes*'s narrative structure and suspense depends upon, time loop after time loop, revealing (to both Hector and spectator) new details about past situations by means of changes in camera and character perspective. That is precisely how, in the film, the audience is led to a series of striking revelations (to which I return below): for instance, that Hector's pink-bandaged chaser is none other than his time-travelling, duplicated self, Hec-

tor-2, as he and the scientist later refer to him. Just like repeated, visually identical panels in "Chronocops" gradually showed us how the protagonist was causing his own downfall, *Timecrimes*'s re-framing of "past" scenes are essential in unfolding the details of Hector's misadventures. In these manners, we can safely say that *Timecrimes*'s strategy for the construction of suspense appears to be modelled on Moore's own self-conscious narrative schemes, for it is time travelling which provides viewers and characters with a constant flow of revelations (and dilemmas). Meta-SF, at least in this instance, thus appears to have multiple transtextual and transmedial roots, and seems to thrive upon such relationships.

Now, to return to my main analysis of *Timecrimes*: thus far, I have limited myself to examining the ways in which (1) self-conscious games with genres and tropes (like horror movies or, more importantly, the SF trope of time-travelling) and (2) satirical portrayals of contemporary subjects are the base to understanding the structure of Vigalondo's work and influences. With this in mind, we may return to one of my initial questions: what does *Timecrimes*'s allegorical narrative tell us about the postmodern subject? As I argued, postmodern subjectivity, at least as evinced by Nacho Vigalondo's film, implies a fragmented and confused experience of our time (and our reality as a whole), which creates a feedback loop of frustration and impotence. One's own time is felt as something external to the self, out of his/her control, in such a way that individuals experience a deep alienation from their own selves, from the temporal unfolding of their life, and from their socio-historical context. In other words, postmodern individuals would feel as though they have lost the possibility of any mean-

---

<sup>24</sup> Although I am reading the film (and the comic) as an allegory of postmodern subjectivity in a rather de-gendered, abstract way, there is indeed a strong gender-specificity to the narratives, obviously derived from Nacho Vigalondo's (and Moore's) own male identity. Although it remains beyond my scope and expertise, it would be interesting for future studies to reflect on how much and in what ways these narratives (self-consciously or not) deconstruct and mock masculinity from within. Besides, given how *Timecrimes* parallels many of Hitchcock's voyeuristic motifs, it would perhaps be relevant to re-consider Hector as a parody of Hitchcockian voyeurs (in themselves potential objects of mockery, as Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure" can in some ways suggest).



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

ingful self-awareness and effective agency, living with the apparent incapacity to express, comprehend or act upon their predicament. Fredric Jameson famously described such alienating relationship with time by comparing it to schizophrenia – with the postmodern subject being the schizophrenic. Jameson explains that “the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (1991: 27). That is to say, the “schizophrenic”-like subject is overwhelmed by the passing of time because s/he cannot find any logical way to relate the successive instants of time, as though s/he were the helplessly passive spectator of an incomprehensible film, perpetually living in an alien present. The situation is such that there seems to be no way for the postmodern individual to understand reality in a meaningful way, no apparent cause-and-effect logic that s/he can interpret as s/he experiences time.

How is this relevant in *Timecrimes*? Jameson's account of schizophrenia seems to be embodied in Hector's experience, beginning when he arrives in the past and watches himself from afar. A priori, he (or any given time traveller) could assume that a time machine (like photography or cinema in their indexical relation with reality) would give him/her full, immersive access to another temporal reality, meaning that s/he will be able to freely interact with the past and with his past self—perhaps even assuming that he can change history. Nevertheless, if time-travelling is viewed from a metacinematic perspective (as *Timecrimes* would lead us to do), we come to notice that, in André Bazin's famous words, “photography [...] embalms time” (1960: 8)—and, in this case, so does cinema, and so does the time machine. Hector himself is quick in discovering time's *embalment* by himself.

After travelling back in time for the first time, the scientist (Vigalondo) advises him to avoid interactions with reality until his past self enters the machine and he is no longer duplicated, but Hector rebelliously refuses to listen: he assumes that he can change the past. However, as we eventually find out, the actions of his futile rebellion paradoxically contribute to causing the events which led him into the machine in the first place. Cause-and-effect logic thus becomes reversible and redundant: there is no knowing what caused the loop because causation itself has become a loop. In other words, the possibility to establish any signifying narrative chain interweaving temporal reality disappears—which parallels the way in which, under postmodern culture, coherent ‘grand narratives’ are repudiated and perceived as an impossibility in an ever-more complex, multidimensional reality.<sup>25</sup> Lacking a way to narrate to himself what is really happening, Hector (and the spectator with him) feels alienated both from himself and from time in that he experiences everything as predetermined: as embalmed time, part of a narrative that's forever beyond his grasp. Like a schizophrenic, Hector is left incapable of making sense of an overwhelming reality.

In such a helplessly alienated situation, what are the ways that the postmodern subject has for coming to terms with reality? From the standpoint the film's narrative, all possible approaches would seem equally bleak and ludicrous to attempt. On the one hand, Hector could try and rationally understand what is causing his misadventures, but everything he (and the spectator with him) tends to as-

<sup>25</sup> As is well known, Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) can be taken as an exemplary description (and as a symptom in itself) of this situation.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

sume about reality is usually mistaken. The futility of his attempts at rationalising is seen, first and foremost, when Hector discovers that he himself was the pink-banded man who terrorised him in the beginning, as well as when, towards the ending, he mistakes the identity of a dead woman whom he thought to be his wife. On the other hand, Hector could trust others' accounts of reality (like the scientist's), but these turn out to be equally misleading, given how Vigalondo-as-scientist (often following both Hector-2's and Hector-3's orders from the "future") shamelessly manipulates him under the pretext of preventing further complications. Therefore, through Hector's case, the postmodern subject is shown as being deprived both of an independent rationality and of trust in those around him/her. Even the postmodern subject him/herself engages in twisted forms of self-deception due to his/her internal contradictions and psychic fragmentation—an internal conflict which in Hector's case is represented quite literally, seeing how he willingly deceives himself, plotting against Hector-1 as Hector-2, and against both Hector-1 and 2 as Hector-3. Thus, the implication would be that, to the postmodern subject, meaning is always either absent or misleading, hidden under multiple layers of (self-)deception and alienation. It is in all these ways that the subjective experience of time in postmodernity can be understood in parallel with the experience of the time traveller, since this is an individual who is helplessly trapped in an unalterable, looping past, without any possibility of effective agency or of understanding its logic, because such logic is non-existent and/or paradoxical.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The time-travelling hypothesis of an unalterable past was originally described by H. G. Wells as the "Universe Rigid," which is

Furthermore, helplessness in the face of time is a covertly but profoundly meta-cinematic theme, inasmuch as Hector comes to be the epitome of a passive film spectator who is, so to speak, swallowed by the screen. As Roland Barthes once argued in *Camera Lucida*, "the Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because nothing in it can be refused or transformed" (91). This seems to be precisely Hector's story: in quite a literal sense, his senses and his subjectivity are filled by force; like a passive spectator, he cannot do anything to change what is happening before his own eyes, let alone to comprehend it. Instead, everything in the past, present and future (as in the image, and as in postmodernity) is felt to be part of a set of external, uncontrollable, ungraspable forces. Inasmuch as postmodern reality is overdetermined by an omnipresent cinematic spectacle, this is "a reality one can no longer touch" (2000: 87), like Barthes said of photography, or "a world of autonomised images where even the deceivers are deceived" (7), like Debord claimed in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The parallelism is evident: for the time-traveller, the past also appears as a separate reality one can no longer modify—as fixed as a photograph, as a film or as the whole of our mass media society.

Hector, as a postmodern subject, is thus swallowed by time in terms of being overwhelmed by incomprehensible, uncontrollable stimuli, but he is also literally swallowed as a subject by Vigalondo's photographic time machine. After time-travelling, he becomes an objectified image in the past, which is no longer himself

"a perfectly rigid unalterable apparatus, entirely predestinate, in which things [are] always the same" (6).



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

but a spectral someone else, out of his own control, a mere object of regret or contempt.<sup>27</sup> During his time travels, he repeatedly grabs his binoculars to watch his other selves from afar, and the vision is clearly an uncanny one—also for the spectator, who sees repeated scenes of the film from a new, bleakly comic and unsettling perspective.<sup>28</sup> Hector's autoscopic (or rather, *retroautoscopic*) experiences confront him with a profound fear: that he too could be another spectre trapped in another loop, and thus his free will could be an illusion. And in turn, the film's looping narrative, in its recursiveness and self-consciousness, seems to indirectly throw the same question at the spectators: could we be too, spectres in a loop? Could the much-lauded individual freedom of postmodernity be nothing but another spectre?

The objectification of the time-travelling, postmodern subject should also be considered in parallel with his/her increasing isolation and irrelevance within the whole of the social reality of his/her time. Although postmodern ideology places an unprecedented emphasis on the subject and his/her individual freedom

above all else, neoliberal economy in fact ends up swallowing subjectivity in a much cruder way than the time machine, to the extent that individuals just count as numbers in abstract calculations, both to the system and to each other.<sup>29</sup> In the words of Jonathan Beller,

the shattered subject of the postmodern is a result of an organization of labor that produces value and takes life in inorganic units, units that do not respect, or better, have transcended the unity and indeed the singularity not only of locales, communities, and families, but of the human individual. (2006: 9)

In *Timecrimes*, we see Hector naturally assuming the use of numbers to refer to himself and his duplications: respectively, Hector-1, Hector-2 and Hector-3, a way of naming oneself which may be humorously illustrating the frivolity with which we are all numbered (rather than named) as part of a larger, ungraspable whole. For Hector, the ungraspable whole is indeed the unalterable and incomprehensible (anti-)logic of time-travelling, which crushes the individual traveller, but for postmodern subjects in general, the whole is none other than the apparently unalterable (anti-)logic of late capitalism, within which an human individual in isolation is but a helpless cog in the wheel.

---

<sup>27</sup> Here I am consciously echoing Barthes's narration of his being photographed, which I believe parallels Hector's experience of seeing himself in the past: "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre" (14).

<sup>28</sup> In an analysis of *Timecrimes* from the perspective of situation model theory, Coëgnarts *et al.* explain how seeing oneself in the past implies a semantic break in both temporal and entity continuity (119-120). In other words, there is temporal discontinuity in that perceiver and perceived belong to different times, and entity discontinuity in that perceiver and perceived are one and the same subject.

---

<sup>29</sup> On the matter of the emptying of "individual freedom" as an ideological slogan that's abused by the powerful, I would refer to David Harvey's almost self-explanatorily entitled chapter "Freedom's Just Another Word..." In addition, on a wholly different subject matter but similarly focused on individualism, Jane Elliott's *The Microeconomic Mode* examines the many ways in which neoliberal individualism has pervaded and, in many respects, reshaped contemporary audio-visual production and culture.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

Even when an individual like Hector tries to temporally or spatially escape from this social order, his subjectivity is already too deeply, ideologically shaped by his being a part of the whole apparatus: he cannot see beyond. Like many of us, Hector seems to forget that he depends on many others who are just like him—in his case, quite literally, if we think of his numbered doppelgängers. He (perhaps, sadly, like many of us too) only seems to learn by sheer force of the many accidents that he suffers, all of which reveal the very individual helplessness that he futilely tries to escape from. Postmodern capitalism and its cinematic spectacles thus seem inescapable because they appear to have conquered and divided society to the point of provoking a feeling of isolation and impotence that is just like that of Hector, our tragicomic (anti-)hero.

In this paper I have argued that *Timecrimes* functions as a metacinematic, ironic allegory in which the postmodern subject is shown as helpless, fragmented, passive, objectified, disoriented and trapped by the flow of time. But still, a final question raised by the film's *Vertigo*-like end twist is whether this subjective condition is escapable or not. Halfway through the film, Hector-2 witnesses a woman's fall from the roof who he thinks is his wife, and this motivates him to travel back in time for a second time to prevent it. And subsequently, as Hector-3, he finds no other solution than to kidnap the girl in the woods, to dress her like his wife and to let her suffer the accident, all while locking up his wife to put her out of harm's way. Thus, he swaps one woman for another: what he saw in the past has not changed, but now the girl dies, and his wife lives. With this ruthless scheme, Hector seems to have tricked time, somehow overcoming his own helplessness and fooling the system, so to

speak. However, there is an ironic ambiguity in this resolution. When these events are witnessed following the film's narrative chronology, they appear to unfold in a chain, but (within the fictional world's intradiegetic chronology) these events happen simultaneously. Therefore, the causation chain which the film may at first suggest is perhaps illusory since, in the temporal loop, cause-and-effect logic has become redundant. Maybe Hector's wife is saved from death, or maybe she never died at all. Or to put it differently: maybe Hector fools time, or maybe he just fools himself. And, whatever the case, he is nonetheless guilty of murder. With this final ambiguity, Vigalondo's film seems to suggest that perhaps there is a happy ending in which the postmodern individual gains the ability to effectively understand and act upon time. And simultaneously, the film seems to imply that the subject's rebellions can never become anything other than futile attempts: doomed to cause violence and casualties, and only to be eventually absorbed by the omnipotent anti-logic of the time-travelling loop—or by the perpetual fluctuations of postmodern capitalism. Whether there is hope or not is ultimately for the spectator to decide, but even if *Timecrimes* does not provide answers or solutions to postmodernity's subjective entrapment, at least it lets us laugh anxieties away in a thought-provoking and amusing way.

Although this has only been a specific case study, it is my hope that it has given a detailed first impression of how meta-SF can potentially function when it is systematically woven together, as in *Timecrimes*. What more could this fictional mode do? Examples seem to abound across media, and, like Vigalondo's film, many are works that merit further reading and viewing, both for scholarly interest and for entertainment.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

### Works Cited

- ADORNO, Theodor W., and Max HORKHEIMER (1944, 2016). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming (trans.). London: Verso.
- BARTHES, Roland (1980, 2000). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.). New York (NY): Vintage.
- BAZIN, André (1960). "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Hugh Gray (trans.), *Film Quarterly*, 10.4: 4-9.
- BAUDRY, Jean-Louis (1976). "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," *Camera Obscura*, 1.Fall: 104-128.
- BELLER, Jonathan (2006). *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Hanover (NH): Dartmouth College Press.
- BORGES, Jorge Luis (1952, 1974). "Nueva refutación del tiempo," Carlos V. Frías (ed.), *Jorge Luis Borges. Obras Completas 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 757-771.
- BORGES, Jorge Luis (1999). "A New Refutation of Time," Eliot Weinberger (ed.), *Selected Non-Fictions*. London: Viking, 317-332.
- BROOKER, Charlie (creator) (2011-). *Black Mirror*. Channel 4/Netflix.
- BRUCKNER, René Thoreau (2015). "Why Did You Have to Turn on the Machine?: The Spirals of Time-Travel Romance," *Cinema Journal*, 54.2: 1-23.
- COËGNARTS, Maarten, Miklós KISS, Peter KRAVANJA & Steven WILLEMSSEN (2016). "Seeing Yourself in the Past: The Role of Situational (Dis)Continuity and Conceptual Metaphor in the Understanding of Complex Cases of Character Perception," *Projections*, 10.1: 114-138.
- CRARY, Jonathan (2014). *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso.
- EBERT, Teresa (1980). "The Convergence of Postmodern Innovative Fiction and Science Fiction. An Encounter with Samuel R. Delaney's Technotopia," *Poetics Today*, 1.4: 91-104.
- ELLIOTT, Jane (2018). *The Microeconomic Mode. Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Popular Aesthetics*. New York (NY): Columbia University Press.
- FISHER, Mark (2009). *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books.
- FOLMAN, Ari (dir.) (2013). *The Congress*. Bridgit Folman Film Gang.
- GOODWIN, Paul (2015). *Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD*. Deviant Films.
- DEBORD, Guy (1967, 1992). *Society of the Spectacle*, Ken Knabb (trans.). London: Rebel Press.
- DILLON, Amanda (2011). *Prism, Mirror, Lens. Metafiction and Narrative Worlds in Science Fiction*. PhD Thesis. University of East Anglia Archive.
- DICK, Philip K (1962, 1992). *The Man in the High Castle*. New York (NY): Vintage.
- HALL, Joshua M (2016). "Time-Traveling Image: Gilles Deleuze on Science-Fiction Film," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 50.4: 31-44.
- HARVEY, David (2007). "Freedom's Just Another Word..." *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5-38.
- HITCHCOCK, Alfred (1958). *Vertigo*. Paramount Pictures.
- JAMESON, Fredric (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.
- JOY, Lisa, and Jonathan NOLAN, creators (2016-). *Westworld*. HBO.
- KUBRICK, Stanley (1968). *The Shining*. Warner.
- LEM, Stanislaw (1971, 1974). *The Futurological Congress*. New York (NY): Seabury Press.
- LYOTARD, Jean-François (1979, 1984). *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- MALMGREN, Carl (2002). "Meta-SF: The Examples of Dick, Le Guin, and Russ," *Extrapolation*, 43.1: 22-35.
- MOORE, Alan (2013). "Chronocops," *The Complete Alan Moore Future Shocks*. Oxford: Rebellion, 114-118.



## The Potential of Meta-SF: An Analysis of Nacho Vigalondo's *Timecrimes* as a Metacinematic Allegory of Postmodern Subjectivity

- MULVEY, Laura (1975, 1999). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Leo Baudry & Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 833-844.
- PARDO GARCÍA, Pedro Javier (2011). "La meta-ficción de la literatura al cine. La anagnórisis metaficcional de *Niebla* a *Abre los ojos*," *CELEHIS-Revista del Centro de Letras Hispanoamericanas*, 20.22: 151-174.
- RASCAROLI, Laura (2001). "Scopic Drive, Time Travel and Film Spectatorship in Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* and Bigelow's *Strange Days*," *Kinema*, 15: 29-41.
- RUIZ NAVARRO, Amanda (2013). "De cronocrímenes y extraterrestres: fantástico y ciencia ficción en Nacho Vigalondo," *Pasavento: Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 1.1: 135-150.
- SEBASTIÁN MARTÍN, Miguel (2018). "All the Park's a Stage. Westworld as the Metafictional Frankenstein," *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, 39: 51-67.
- SPOTNITZ, Frank (creator) (2015-2019). *The Man in the High Castle*. Amazon Originals.
- VIGALONDO, Nacho (2003). *7:35 de la mañana*. Ibarretxe & Co. S.L.
- VIGALONDO, Nacho (2002). *Código 7*.
- VIGALONDO, Nacho (2005). *Domingo*.
- VIGALONDO, Nacho (2008). *Los cronocrímenes*. Karbo Vantas Entertainment.
- VIGALONDO, Nacho (2011). *Extraterrestre*. Antena 3 Films.
- WELLS, Herbert George (1975). *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, Robert M. Philmus & David Yerkes Hughes (eds.). Berkeley (CA): University of California Press.
- WOLF, Werner (ed.) (2009). *Metareference across Media. Theory and Case Studies*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- WOLF, Werner (2011). *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media. Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.