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## 1 'You're gonna see some serious shit': New New Hollywood in Action

### Form and style

If Stephen Prince's 'Spielberg–Lucas style' was the light-hearted and comedic presentation of action-heavy and spectacle-oriented adventure melodrama, then *Back to the Future* clearly signals Zemeckis's participation in this. As Peter Krämer notes, Zemeckis has told

intimate stories, either about childlike men (Marty McFly, Roger Rabbit, Forrest Gump, even to some extent Chuck Noland in *Cast Away*) and their familial or quasi-familial relationships in a largely fantastic (or exotic) universe, or about women and their fantasies, desires, and anxieties (concerning adventurous romance, eternal youth, and murderous husbands) which, quite shockingly, become real.<sup>24</sup>

These women include Joan Wilder in *Romancing the Stone*, Madeline Ashton and Helen Sharp in *Death Becomes Her*, Eleanor Arroway in *Contact* and Claire Spencer in *What Lies Beneath* (2000). Kristin Thompson has charted, in a sequence-by-sequence analysis, *Back to the Future's* narrative process, and shows just how indebted the film is to classical narrative structures, indicating Zemeckis's wholehearted participation in Spielberg–Lucas Hollywood revivalism.<sup>25</sup> This is not to deny the formal particularity of Zemeckis's work, however.

For example, Zemeckis tends towards the use of a highly mobile camera. While establishing shots from a moving camera are common, Zemeckis employs particularly lengthy examples, and then, when a breakdown into static coverage would be expected, uses movement wherever possible. In *Back to the Future*, although his

camera was often static when action necessitated it, when it did not, he tended to incorporate a mobile point of view, known as ‘reframing’. Consequently, 42 per cent of the shots in *Back to the Future* include appreciable movement. Marty’s journey to school in 1985 is all moving shots (which underlines the mobility he achieves using the skateboard), and the musical number, even Marvin’s call to Chuck Berry, is composed virtually entirely of moving shots, as is the scene where Marty and Doc retrieve the hidden DeLorean. Zemeckis is also fond of the slow dolly-in, often to connote increased intimacy or intensity, and (in *Back to the Future* in particular) eeriness, in such instances as Lorraine’s ‘I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out’, and Marty’s uncomfortable writing of the warning letter to Doc.

New Hollywood had made much of using camera movement as a method of transferring the point of view from location to location, which, in the place of edits, made for shots of relatively long duration. *Back to the Future*, by contrast, with an average shot duration of 5.5 seconds, reflected a general decrease in average shot duration that had begun in earnest during the 1970s. As David Bordwell points out, between 1930 and 1960, the average shot duration of most films fell between 8 and 11 seconds. During the 1970s, roughly three-quarters of films averaged between 5 and 8 seconds, and during the 1980s this narrowed to 5 to 7 seconds.<sup>26</sup> Although Zemeckis did not seek to make extensive use of camera movement in place of edits until *Cast Away*, *Back to the Future* achieved this low average shot duration in spite of his use of camera movement as the basis for some noticeably lengthy shots. The opening shot lasts for 2 minutes and 6 seconds, a brief insert reveals the pile of dog food, then a further 30-second shot shows Marty’s entrance. The later shot in this scene, where Marty talks to Doc on the phone, is 41 seconds long. The lack of incidental music in this 5 minute and 39 second opening scene also directs attention to the visual track (a trait Zemeckis would also take to an extreme in *Cast Away*, which lacks incidental music for its first 70.8 per cent). Other shots that are deliberately lengthened by the decision to use

camera movement in place of editing include the coverage of Marty and Jennifer's encounter with Strickland (56 seconds); their ensuing conversation while walking through the square (48 seconds); Doc and Marty's discussion when alone in the school corridor (57 seconds); Marty following George home (35 seconds) and Doc setting up the 'experiment' by the clock tower (30 seconds). After all, if 'New Hollywood' was Hollywood under the invited influence of the techniques of the various post-war European 'new waves', then 'New New Hollywood' was a resurgence of classical Hollywood that was nonetheless unwittingly influenced by the techniques of New Hollywood.

Zemeckis's fondness for camera movement also meant making extensive use of focus racks. For example, rather than cutting from the close-up of Doc's remote to a medium shot of the DeLorean reversing, the camera merely racks focus from the one to the other. The urgency of the alarm clock going off on the dashboard is underlined by the use of a focus rack rather than a cut. Just after Marty is hit by Lorraine's father's car, George sits up into the frame (which involves a quick double focus rack away from Marty onto George and then onto Lorraine's father). The beginning of the culminating race-against-time sequence is signalled by a shot that



begins at a steep upward angle on the clock tower, rapidly refocuses on the foreground when Doc walks into the shot, and then tilts down to become level as he walks away from the camera, panning left and right as he moves about in anticipation. The loudhailer of the 'battle of the bands' judge is deliberately allowed to loom out of focus, as is the Libyan 'nationalist's' rocket-launcher, both for comedic effect.

The unacknowledged influence of New Hollywood's heightened camera movement (although movement was also notable in the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Wells) was also retuned by Zemeckis: he made use of camera movement in three dimensions rather than maintaining any equivalent of a human observer's standard head height. The camera moves above and around the DeLorean when it first backs out of the van, it cranes down from above to show the DeLorean covered in ice when it returns from the first time experiment, and it cranes up and tilts down when Marty inserts the connecting hook. It is persistently placed at the height of the DeLorean's bumper when it is in motion, and, linked to the skateboarding and dancing, frequently returns to this position to follow characters' feet. Zemeckis also often 'allows' his camera to lose track of its subject, which usually, in the place of a cut, leaves the camera on the next relevant part of the *mise en scène*. When Lorraine and her friends run off at the sound of the bell, the camera backs away to initially track them but then stops so as to let them leave the shot, which leaves the shot composed on Doc. Although the introduction to Marty in the first scene follows the common filmic pattern of establishing a protagonist by 'listing' shots of their body parts before finally revealing their face (we see his eyes 1 minute and 35 seconds after first encountering his body), the first of these, showing Marty's lower legs as he enters Doc's workshop, is taken from 'dog height' (appropriate given the preceding action with the dog food) and framed in this way only incidentally (at least overtly), because this is where the camera was positioned at the end of the previous event (the dog food can falling into the bin).

Zemeckis's camera movement also, at least overtly, wanders away from the main action (another New Hollywood trait). After the

camera shows Marty's lower legs entering Doc's workshop, it then allows him to walk out of shot, instead following his skateboard as it trundles along the floor to bump into the plutonium case.

When Marty leaves, he is again ignored and disappears, out of focus, in deep space, while the plutonium is kept in focus in the immediate foreground, filling just under half of the frame. Before the audition, the last of the shots following Marty to school allows him to leave the frame when it 'notices' the Goldie Wilson van, and after the audition, a shot following the now moving Goldie Wilson van allows it to leave the frame to follow Marty and Jennifer. Nonetheless, true to New New Hollywood form, such camera movement is motivated: all these shots reveal pertinent details. The case of plutonium marked 'HANDLE WITH CARE' (and which will not be handled with care) is handled carelessly when Marty's skateboard bumps into it. The film extensively foreshadows future events in this way (events also mostly located in the historical past). When Marty arrives home, the camera stops following him to dwell on the wrecked car, but this is to emphasise what it means for his nascent sexuality. When the camera moves away from Marty and George in the diner to follow Goldie Wilson soliloquising about the possibility of becoming mayor (in a shot that is 26 seconds long), this occurs so that, once the camera returns to Marty, the audience will share his surprise that George is gone. The camera then also briefly lingers in the diner, watching Marty's frantic pursuit of George through the window along with the diner staff, rather than, for example, using an edit to an exterior shot to follow him outside; keeping the viewpoint with the diner staff also serves to express Marty's sense of alienation in 1955.

Zemeckis's frequent use of movement and focus racks also means that actors often have to undertake complex and precise choreography relative to the camera, as in the lengthy shot when Jennifer is consoling with Marty after his failed audition. The 1985 Strickland slowly draws in towards Marty's face, the camera moving closer to them both to eliminate any empty space. When the DeLorean is revving up to drive towards Marty and Doc, and Marty is edging

off to one side, the camera moves in to eliminate the gaps on either side and exaggerate the gap between them. Marty's improvised 1955 skateboard turns in the immediate foreground, and the camera follows it with a drastic pan.

In those shots where he did not employ appreciable reframing, Zemeckis often made comedic use of off-screen space. After Doc finishes his obscure reverie about Peabody, he looks at his van and then determinedly exits the frame, leaving a panicked Marty to take his place in a visual augur of things to come. When Biff is about to leave the McFly home, the set-up places him close to the camera and large in the frame; thus, when he leaves both the house and the frame, George is revealed, diminutively, much further away and much smaller in the frame. Marty baffles Lou the diner owner for 28 seconds, throughout which time Lou's body fills most of the frame, so obscuring another customer sitting next to Marty at the bar; when Lou finally moves aside, the reveal on George sitting in exactly the same posture as Marty is all the more comedic. The shot where Lorraine runs out of frame, throws Marty's trousers into the shot, appears in a reflection in a mirror and then vacates both the room and the reflection in the mirror, leaving Marty to fall out of the shot while trying to put his trousers on, is rapid-fire visual comedy.





After bringing Marty down to dinner, Lorraine's mother walks right up to the camera while Marty, Lorraine and the three children eat in the background, and then shouts into close off-screen space for Lorraine's father, who subsequently backs into the frame with the television, a structure that emphasises the strangeness of the technology recently introduced into mealtime experience.

## Genre

*Back to the Future* is a comedy adventure science-fiction time-travel love story.

Robert Zemeckis, 1985<sup>27</sup>

Zemeckis wasn't exaggerating. But *Back to the Future* is not multi-generic in the sense of mere light-hearted irreverence for the supposed mutual exclusivity of genre. He and Gale built together a broad catalogue of implicit and explicit references to established genre tropes. The time-travel concept encapsulated in the title and the poster certainly made claims about *Back to the Future's* membership of the science-fiction genre, as did such minor details as the electronic sounds that issue when the solely mechanical back door of Doc's



van opens to reveal the DeLorean, and the unexplained smoke that escapes from the DeLorean when Doc opens the door; and, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the film's trailer allied it to a short cycle of teen-science films. But *Back to the Future* also moves much more widely in the field of genre, far beyond the confines of science fiction.

Timothy Shary, Stephen Prince and Vivian Sobchack are among those who, in spite of the film's overt science-fiction identifiers, categorise *Back to the Future* as a comedy.<sup>28</sup> Slapstick and farce play a substantial part. Michael J. Fox was chosen as Eric Stoltz's replacement for his more overtly comedic physical behaviour. When the DeLorean first disappears, the disparity between Doc's enthusiasm and Marty's incredulity is made comedic by a lengthy shot in which the two repeatedly walk in opposite directions, away from and towards the camera. Visual humour also features in Doc's sincere apology for the crudity of his expertly constructed model. In encounters with both George and Biff, Marty is framed so that he is peeping out from behind them. Alongside Marty's tendency to knock his head on the DeLorean's gull-wing doors, the film also features, as Andrew Gordon has noticed, fourteen instances of people either falling or being knocked down,<sup>29</sup> and is book-ended by two falls by Marty: first, his encounter with the huge amplifier, and last,

his fainting out of the frame (a classic slapstick composition) when he meets his improved parents. The more overt, even cartoonish, moments of physical comedy include the glint of Marty's 'cocked' guitar pick; Doc looking down the barrel of the gun that won't work; the twirling of the DeLorean's shed number plate; the puff of dust when the DeLorean is driven into the barn and Biff's pirouette when punched by George. Verbal humour is also prominent. Dramatic irony, for example, appears early on, in Doc's advice, shortly after the amplifier has exploded, that 'you'd better not hook up to the amplifier, there's a slight possibility of overload', and is shot through the film's 1955 section, including Lorraine's father's promise to Lorraine (about Marty) that if 'you ever have a kid who acts that way, I'll disown you', and Doc's remark to Marty about George, 'maybe you were adopted'.

*Back to the Future* also has two genre climaxes, the first a romantic-comedy climax in which the geek gets the girl at the school dance, and the second a science-fiction climax featuring the almost impossible task undertaken in the disorienting lightning storm. The film also evokes the Western, in such instances as George grabbing the chocolate milk slid to him down the bar of the diner, and the showdown between Marty and Biff in the main square. There are



The comedic juxtaposition of light-hearted capering with paralysing shock

also buddy-movie elements, centring on Doc and Marty's relationship (which stresses the successful coordination of collaborative action). The two sport matching head injuries in 1955, and a homosocial intimacy far more relaxed than Marty's nervous encounters with women is clearly expressed in the shot when, upon being asked to the dance by Lorraine, Marty retreats back to Doc and leans against him, fitting neatly around his friend. Marty's performance at the dance also brings the film briefly into the territory of the musical, not just because of the involvement of a musical performance, but also because the number stops the plot for a brief period, a fact that Zemeckis was conscious of when editing the film for time.<sup>30</sup> The overt use of 1950s songs, including The Chordettes's 1954 release of 'Mr Sandman', Fess Parker's 1955 version of 'The Ballad of Davy Crockett' and Etta James's 'The Wallflower (Dance with Me Henry)' alongside Marty's encounters with caricatured elements of 1950s culture, alludes to *American Graffiti* (1973), one of George Lucas's pre-New New Hollywood films, usually regarded as a New Hollywood product. Lucas's soundtrack included popular songs, one for each scene, and most were 1950s hits. Zemeckis, however, chose to make all of this music occur in the story space, further identifying the film with the musical.



This deliberately all-encompassing mixture coheres closely with New New Hollywood's broad attitude to genre. New Hollywood had paraded a revisionist approach to genre conventions, not by disregarding genre but by setting out generic motifs to contradict them or leave them unfulfilled, as in such 'genre' pieces as *M\*A\*S\*H* (war film; dir. Robert Altman, 1970), *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (Western; dir. Robert Altman, 1971), and *Chinatown* (hard-boiled detective drama). New New Hollywood, by contrast, mixed numerous multiple genres. Although, as Michael Allen notes, '[t]here has ... always been a tendency for films to combine diverse generic elements in an attempt to try to offer a broad audience appeal',<sup>31</sup> the New New Hollywood blockbuster piled up genre tropes in no particular pattern, treating genre as content rather than a mode of operating. This was related to the idea that if each genre attracts a relatively exclusive segment of the public, attaching multiple genre tropes to a film would make it more likely to attract a larger audience.<sup>32</sup> Stephen Prince notes, for example, that although the science-fiction/fantasy genre dominated the blockbusters of the 1980s, a major strain of these films also emphasised whimsy and light comedy.<sup>33</sup>

This genre mixture was also, in part, an outlet for Zemeckis and Gale's simple impulse to make films in classical Hollywood genres, an impulse that would manifest itself more explicitly in *Back to the Future Part III*, a Western in an era when the genre had been virtually demolished for its imperialist ideological underpinnings. The principle over which they had bonded with Spielberg and Milius was that crafted storytelling was more virtuous than the apparently pointless transgressions against narrative convention undertaken by the various 'new waves'.<sup>34</sup> Structurally, the film adheres closely to classical Hollywood principles. Marty moves along the classical narrative trajectory of a hero's progress in the face of more and more complex impediments, from the 1955 Doc's initial refusal to believe that either time travel or Reagan's presidency are possible, through the interference of the gang of school bullies, George's refusal to court Lorraine's affections to the race-against-time at the second

climax. *Back to the Future* also sought to renew Hollywood practice by distilling, into concentrated form, the classical equilibrium–disequilibrium–equilibrium story formula. Instead of a disequilibrium that merely implies that a negative future might cohere in unspecified future story time, Marty’s temporal situation means that the changes to the future resulting from his disequilibrium are changes in a historical present that we have already seen; these are played out immediately rather than implied, as the images of both his siblings fade in the photograph and even his own body begins to disappear, a threat that is even reflected in the score. In the scene when Biff has George in an armlock, the diminishing possibility that George will ever end up with Lorraine means imminent erasure for the protagonist in addition to mere teen failure, and Silvestri accompanies this with an eight-note phrase played repeatedly on two different octaves of a piano, with the lower octave syncopated, generating a sense of the unravelling of reality. The shots of Marty fading away onstage are accompanied by the rapid scraping of strings usually reserved for horror movies. In a reflexive comment on film history, the film also opines that the most thrilling technological and spectacular developments are likely to be those that have been incubated by a man who has isolated himself in his workshop since 1955, the era of classical Hollywood’s apparent rescue by the introduction of widescreen, and before the arrival of the back-to-basics technological array, unmotivated protagonists, broken editing rules and location shooting of the French *nouvelle vague* and New Hollywood.

Even *Back to the Future*’s clear science-fiction genre identifiers make overt allusions to Hollywood film history. The two Doc Browns of the movie represent the two major science-fiction permutations of the scientist: the absent-minded benign boffin and the crazed lunatic.<sup>35</sup> The Doc of the 1980s produces functional gadgets, entertainments (i.e. the big amplifier and speaker) and toys (even the time machine is a remote-controlled car), experiments in merely making clocks lose time, and has a sense of humour (‘If my calculations are correct, when this baby hits 88 miles per hour, you’re

gonna see some serious shit’) and style (‘The way I see it, if you’re gonna build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style’). Absent-minded, he forgets to turn off his equipment, neglects to tell Marty about the possibility that the amplifier will overload and floats off into recollections. This Doc just wants to go to the future to see ‘beyond my years’ (an allusion to H. G. Wells’s *Time Traveller*), adding the possibility of getting betting information as a joking afterthought. Even his deal with the Libyans is comically irreverent, with its allusion to pinball. By contrast, the Doc of the 1950s is far more remote from the world. When Marty first meets him, the ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ (a high-voltage travelling arc) prominently placed in the background of the shot of Marty with the sucker on his forehead evokes a lengthy history of cinematic representations of the laboratories of hubristic scientists, as does the surrounding smoke and the Doc’s attempt to read his mind. Several of the shots during Marty’s first meeting with the 1950s Doc are framed from below so that the ceiling fills much of the background, a common composition for suggesting a sense of disorientation in the presence of derangement. This Doc is crazed by the discovery that the time machine works, shouting ‘It works!’ while a storm brews in the background, in an echo of Colin Clive’s ‘It’s alive!’ as Henry Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, 1931). The allusion to *Frankenstein* is also redoubled by the final scene, as Doc dangles from a gothic castle during a storm in an attempt to harness lightning (the town hall, although classical in design, also sports gothic statues). As with such monster-creating Hollywood scientists, Doc’s invention becomes a curse. This Doc’s absent-mindedness is far from harmless, instead causing damage to his surroundings, including setting fire to his garage. The ‘Brown Mansion Destroyed’ newspaper headline in the film’s opening shot suggests that Doc either destroyed his family house in an experiment or has intentionally burned it down for insurance money, both of which evoke the excesses endemic to the mad scientist. Marty also briefly blunders into a UFO film when he first arrives in 1955. This allusive texture reappears when



the dialogue explains the film's title. Looking and pointing towards (though not at) the camera, Doc promises Marty: 'next Saturday night, we're sending you back to the future!'. Pointing straight at the audience, Doc seems to be addressing *them* with a promise of a time-travel film as a Saturday-night cinema attraction.

The primacy of action-adventure/science-fiction motifs, which *Back to the Future* shared with its contemporaries, may also explain the film's wider generic mixing. Geoff King is not alone in pointing out that, in regenerating the blockbuster during the late 1970s, Hollywood moved away from the mainstay blockbuster genres of the 1950s – epics, musicals and Westerns – and into action-adventure (arguably cultivated from a mere industry-wide tendency into a fully-fledged genre during this period) and science fiction.<sup>36</sup> He ascribes the prominence of these genres to the perception that because film's spectacular qualities could make the best use of the size of the cinema screen, films heavy in spectacle would be most effective in generating audiences. In 1982, Steve Neale opined that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* 'uses an idea (the signs) of classic Hollywood in order to promote, integrate and display modern effects, techniques and production values'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in *Back to the Future*, recognisable genre tropes provide safe touchstones on which to display the film's foregrounded

effects shots (e.g. when, in the last shot, the car is thrown right at the audience) and its relatively complex foray into temporal movements other than the normal passage of time, notably Marty's return to 1985 before he left. In particular, given that optical effects techniques were still not yet even close to producing photo-real images, they featured heavily in films that were intended to look fantastical, including *Ghostbusters*, *Weird Science* (dir. John Hughes, 1985) and *Highlander* (dir. Russell Mulcahy, 1986).

In mid-1986, even though Noël Carroll saw such films of the past year as a clear example of Hollywood's simple return to the genres of the 1930s–50s (these included *Back to the Future*, *Lifeforce* [space vampire; dir. Tobe Hooper], *The Goonies* [treasure-hunting pirate-gang adventure; dir. Richard Donner], *Silverado* [Western; dir. Lawrence Kasdan], *My Science Project* [teen-science adventure; dir. Jonathan R. Betuel], *Rambo: First Blood Part II* [war; dir. George P. Cosmatos] and *Real Genius* [teen-science adventure; dir. Martha Coolidge]), which had been in progress, in his view, since the mid-1970s, he added that

[t]his time, instead of churning out simple copies of past hits, Hollywood produced fairly sophisticated confections, larded with in-jokes and arcane allusions to motion picture history. Few in the audience understood those references, but crowds flocked to the new movies – science fiction, Westerns, and other variations on old recipes.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than the playful homage of knowing cineastes, however, the act of stacking together many very different genre conventions could also be seen as part of a larger ideological film-making project. As Andrew Britton argued in his lengthy 1986 critique of contemporary films, 'Reaganite entertainment refers to itself in order to persuade us that it doesn't refer outwards at all.'<sup>39</sup> Spielberg's protégés, in particular, made frequent overt reference to each other's and Spielberg's films. Joe Dante's *Gremlins* includes a reference to the Indiana Jones films, Richard Donner's *The Goonies* contains an

allusion to *Gremlins*, *Back to the Future* references *Star Wars*, the February 1981 draft of *Back to the Future* opened with a shot of the climax of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) on television, and *Back to the Future Part II* includes a reference to *Jaws*. *Back to the Future* builds a substantial catalogue of popular cultural references outside film too. Norman Kagan sees the whole trilogy as characterised by allusions to popular culture, and Vivian Sobchack notes that ‘*Close Encounters*, *Time After Time ...*, *E.T.*, *Starman*, *Cocoon* and *Back to the Future* all show off American popular and “schlock” culture: old movies and TV series, material artefacts, peculiar cultural habits and institutions’.<sup>40</sup> Marty’s attention to television, which involves designating certain dated episodes of *The Honeymooners* as classics and using vocabulary from *Star Trek* as cultural reference points, resonates with the popular-culture connoisseurship commonly seen as characteristic of teens. Other popular-cultural references include, in the 1950s, the 1955 Davy Crocket craze, science-fiction comics and the television series *Science Fiction Theater*, and, in the 1980s, the music of Eddie Van Halen. Given that the 1980s was the first decade when video achieved a presence in the majority of American households, it is significant just how central Zemeckis and Gale made a video recording to the plot:<sup>41</sup> vital information needed to return Marty to the future is only gleaned via the videotape he made of the ‘experiment’ in 1985. In addition, the 1955 Doc is fascinated with the 1985 video camera’s capacity to rewind, and on returning to 1985, Marty ‘re-watches’ the earlier part of the film where he fled the Libyans, albeit from a different angle. Such popular-cultural reference, both explicit and implicit, was a way of signalling affinity with the ‘niche’ film audience of teenage males that New Hollywood had reinforced as the industry’s bedrock (see Chapter 2).

The tendency towards genre pastiche could, of course, be seen as an attribute of a post-modern text. Milton Baines’s question to Marty in 1955, ‘what’s a re-run?’, suggests that Zemeckis and Gale regarded the 1950s as a time before popular culture began, self-cannibalistically, to consume its own tail. Far from ephemeral,

however, this genre tendency has also had a significant impact. As early as 1986, Noël Carroll perceived that the Spielberg generation had already succeeded in what he saw as a ‘revivalist mission’.<sup>42</sup> Collectively, New New Hollywood paid tribute to classical Hollywood genres, plots and scale in a way that exceeded mere reverence for a cinema free of the paranoia of the 1960s and 1970s. These multiple uses of genre are part of what David Bordwell has identified as the ‘more classical’ or ‘hyperclassical’ cinema of the ‘post-classical’ period.<sup>43</sup> The Spielberg–Lucas generation’s certainty that a recognisable array of ideas and images called ‘Hollywood’ had ever existed contributed to Hollywood’s survival, both as a ‘look’ and as a synonym for ‘a major social event’. Amblin’s basis in the Universal lot has, for example, led to much virtually studio-era in-house production, and *Back to the Future* was a significant instance of this. Realising that their plan to have Marty return to the future at ground zero of a surface nuclear test would be unaffordable, Zemeckis and Gale trawled the Universal backlot for a suitable set that might be used, for free, to stage his return, deciding on ‘Mockingbird Square’,<sup>44</sup> most famously used in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (dir. Robert Mulligan, 1962), and more recently on *Gremlins*, the first Amblin project. Zemeckis and Spielberg both seem to have been comfortable with using backgrounds that risk looking like sets. *Back to the Future*’s chosen predecessor was also a classical Hollywood product, the opening scene citing two moments from MGM’s *The Time Machine* (dir. George Pal, 1960).<sup>45</sup>

Having surveyed the *formal* consequences of *Back to the Future*’s place in film history, we will, in the following three chapters, discuss some major contexts for the film’s *content*: teen culture, the backlash against second-wave feminism, recent developments in digital technology, nuclear mythology, theories of time travel and the representation of the passage of time. In addition to the mixture of generic tropes that was characteristic of New New Hollywood, genre features in two more earnest guises in *Back to the Future*, which Chapter 2 will relate to the film’s affinity for the 1950s.