Chapter 9
Waterworld
Bodil Petersson

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TIME TRAVEL
EXPERIENCING THE PAST IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by
Bodil Petersson
Cornelius Holtorf
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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY
## Contents

Preface ................................................................................................................... vii

**Introduction**

Chapter 1: The Meaning of Time Travel ................................................................. 1  
Cornelius Holtorf

**Part One**

*Emerging Possibilities in Virtual Time Travels*

Chapter 2: Time Travel Using 3D Methodologies  
Visualising the Medieval Context of a Baptismal Font ..................................... 25  
Nicolò Dell’Unto, Ing-Marie Nilsson† and Jes Wienberg

Chapter 3: The Kivik Grave, Virtual Bodies in Ritual Procession  
Towards New Artistic Interactive Experiences for Time Travellers .......... 47  
Magali Ljungar-Chapelon

Commentary: Time Travel Paradoxes and Archaeology ................................. 79  
Per Stenborg

Commentary: Taking Us to the Past and the Past to Us ..................................... 83  
Isto Huvila

**Part Two**

*Time Travel as an Educational Method*

Chapter 4: Use the Past, Create the Future  
The Time Travel Method, a Tool for Learning, Social Cohesion and  
Community Building ............................................................................................ 89  
Ebbe Westergren

Chapter 5: To Make and to Experience Meaning  
How Time Travels are Perceived amongst Participants ............................... 113  
Niklas Ammert and Birgitta E. Gustafsson

Commentary: Forming Bridges Through Time Travel ................................... 129  
Cecilia Trenter
Part Three
Living the Distant Past

Chapter 6: Performing the Past
Time Travels in Archaeological Open-air Museums .......................... 135
Stefanie Samida

Chapter 7: Being There
Time Travel, Experience and Experiment in Re-enactment and ‘Living History’ Performances ................................................................. 157
Mads Daugbjerg

Chapter 8: Face-to-Face with the Past
Pompeii to Lejre .................................................................................. 175
Cornelius Holtorf

Commentary: The Power of Time Travel ................................................. 191
Roeland Paardekooper

Commentary: Mediated and Embodied Pasts – A Comment ................. 195
Carsten Tage Nielsen

Part Four
Time Travel on Screen

Chapter 9: Waterworld
Travels in Time between Past and Future Worlds ............................... 201
Bodil Petersson

Chapter 10: A Cup of Decaf Past
An Archaeology of Time Travel, Cinema and Consumption ............... 213
Dawid Kobiałka

Commentary: On Time Travelling and Cinema ..................................... 229
Laia Colomer

Commentary: A Cup of Decaf Past and Waterworld ............................. 233
Niklas Hillbom
Part Five

Time Travel and Contemporary Society

Chapter 11: History as an Adventure
Time Travel in Late Modernity from the Perspective of a European Ethnologist .......................................................... 241
Michaela Fenske

Chapter 12: Time Travel to the Present
Interview with Erika Andersson Cederholm .................................. 257
Cornelius Holtorf and Bodil Petersson

Commentary: Time- Travelling Tourism
Reflections on the Past as a Place of Fascination as well as Refuge .......... 271
Thomas Småberg

Commentary: Time Travels as Alternative Futures .......................... 277
Britta Timm Knudsen

Conclusion

Chapter 13: Anachronism and Time Travel .................................... 281
Bodil Petersson

About the Authors ........................................................................ 299

Index .............................................................................................. 305
Chapter 9
Waterworld
Travels in Time between Past and Future Worlds
Bodil Petersson

Abstract
In the future-oriented action film Waterworld (1995) the world has been flooded for centuries because of melted ice caps due to environmental destruction. This film gives an opportunity to explore the materiality of both past and future worlds as the film-makers create the world anew in an explicitly material sense, with several connotations of our present that have been transformed into a distant past. On top of what aspects of a material past do they construct this future world? The text explores aspects of materiality in a fictive future setting. The conclusion is that film is a cheap way to get to other places and times. It is also an easy way for film-makers to create another universe where it is possible to invert values and intentions, to draw conclusions of our own way of life here and now and bring us to the probable future world to get us to see the consequences of our actions now. It is sometimes a laughing mirror to take the edge off the rhetoric. You can laugh at certain situations and consequences even if time travel goes to Dystopia.

Keywords: Archaeology, materiality, time travel, film, climate change

Departure
Travelling in time with the aid of film is probably both the easiest and most efficient way to access other eras. In today’s cinemas you get immersed in alternative worlds of experience, and you can get astonished by surroundings you never knew before. In very recent times it has also become possible to experience films in 3D, and this further enhances the experience of other worlds.

In the future-oriented action film Waterworld (1995) the earth has been flooded for centuries because of melted ice caps due to environmental destruction. Actor and director Kevin Costner presents the film Waterworld, which at that time was the most expensive Hollywood film production in history. This film gives the viewer an opportunity to experience materiality of both past and future worlds as the film-makers create the world anew in an explicitly material sense with several connotations to the present. Upon what material past do they construct this future world for viewers to experience and understand? In this text, I explore aspects
of materiality that we encounter when we are immersed in this fictive future world. It is obvious that there is a very close connection between materiality of the past (our time) and the construction of future worlds. It is also obvious that one important device used to generate travel in time is truly material: to load the surrounding material objects with good or evil connotations relating to the past world in the film’s plot line.

The climate threats and the future
At the beginning of the film, there is a very special transformation of the earth as the logo of Universal Studios is seen from space today. Suddenly the ice caps melt, and the land slowly disappears below the rising sea level. Soon there is only water left covering the earth’s surface. For us, from the perspective of our time, the scenario is both frightening and familiar. In this fast-forward development we see one suggested effect of our own lifestyle projected onto a future world scenario.

Let us start with a short time travel back 20 years to 1995. The climate threat defined as global temperature rise is recognised and highly debated. Since 1988 the United Nation’s IPCC ([Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] http://www.ipcc.ch reports on the effects of climate change, accessed 28 December 2014) has been studying climate change, and in 1992 it published a report on climate changes and how they affect global temperatures. The cause of melting polar caps are intensely studied, and the thoughts on consequences of human action on the global state of our environment also affect themes in the world of films.

The story of Waterworld
In short Waterworld is about the few remaining people on planet earth, who, after the great future deluge, try to survive even though the sea level has risen to incredible levels. Climate changes have totally melted the polar ice caps, and no land can be seen. Only in myth do surviving ideas exist about how it once was to live on land, and in myth this area is called Dryland.

People fight bravely in this world of water and evil. The star of the film, Kevin Costner, portrays the sailor Mariner (Figure 9.1). In his daily life he lives alone on board an advanced trimaran raft. Now and then he visits floating trading stations; in the film they are named atolls, where it is possible to trade valuable goods. Together with a woman and a girl who has a map tattooed on her back, he searches for the mythical Dryland.

Mariner has discovered a way to use a primitive diving bell to sustain himself underwater. While diving, he finds traces of the flooded world that existed 600 years ago, which everyone above water already seems to have forgotten in their daily struggle for life. Under the surface are, among other things, the remains of cities
with skyscrapers and a sunken submarine. The lost civilisation appears as a sunken Atlantis. During his visits to this underwater world from times gone by, Mariner collects certain items, which he trades with at the atolls. Other factors become keys to the understanding of the bygone world and represent pure sensory experiences of the past. What these objects and experiences represent I return to later on.

A Hollywood film is not a Hollywood production unless it contains elements of struggle between good and evil. The film’s sinister characters are called ‘Smokers’, who are small-scale polluters who indulge in the consumption of a residual layer of oil, and like pirates they travel the sea on water scooters plundering and ravaging. For unclear reasons, they also have good access to both tobacco and alcohol, which they consume in large quantities. The film’s basic story is thus built up around the conflict between these evil Smokers and ordinary people striving to survive in a cruel and hard, aquatic world.
**Future past**

I am interested in how we imagine the past and the ways in which we choose to reconstruct it, bring it to life and make it comprehensible in our own time (Petersson 2003, 2009a, 2009b; Petersson and Narmo 2011). After exploring notions of the past I have also become interested in ideas about the future. It is obvious that attempts to reach the future, for example through time travel in films or reconstructions, is not a movement in a single direction. Travelling goes to the future as well as back to the present in shifting intervals. If you travel to the future, as in the movie *Waterworld*, the destination is influenced by the present, just as is the case when travelling back in time, because the present is always the basis for interpretation of a hypothetical future. The imagined future also has a past to look back on, and imagination must be put in motion to create the future past in partial decay.

The interpretations made of present and future times are also a depiction of our self-understanding, and through this connection comes an unbroken line between our interpretation of the past, our lives today and our conception of the future. Travelling to and fro ties together our self-understanding in an interesting way. Materiality is of interest, since the depiction of how we as humans relate to and are affected by the things surrounding us shows how we look at things, how they matter in our lives and how they affect us (cf. Miller [2005] for a discussion on materiality and its meanings and Hodder [2012] for an archaeologist’s view of materiality).

The cinema presents good opportunities to show how we create our material surroundings, how they affect us for generations and how matter continues to also mean something in a not-so-well-known future. In films about the future it is common that new technologies are displayed based on the latest technology available in the present. If this technology is retrieved, for example, from the 1970s, it is easy to recognise elements such as physical form and choice of colours as they appear in 1970’s aesthetics, even if the time represented is supposed to be hundreds of years ahead of this period of time. In films like *Waterworld*, which instead look back on the remains of material culture from a bygone era (in this case our own present time), it is easy to recognize the parts that constitute comprehension of material culture; but the selection of objects is unique, because it is about the filmmaker’s valuation of what part of our contemporary material culture is possibly unique in the future. As archaeologists, with trained understanding of the material world and of the role of materiality in our lives, it is easy for us to recognize and analyse the perception of the material world then, now and in the future, and even put ourselves into a fantasy about how the material world that surrounds us affects people over time.
Film as portrayal of history and future

Historians have analysed cinematic representations of historical events and developments, and a particular focus of our time is on questions of identity and history: that is, how people react to the storytelling of various historical phenomena in films and then use ideas as confirmation of our own construction of identities in the present (e.g. Jönsson 2004; Zander 2006). One historian who has focussed on Hollywood films of history and identity formation today is Ulf Zander. In the introduction to his book *Clio at the Movies* (2006; author’s translation, in Swedish: *Clio på bio*) he notes that historical films succeed best if the film’s narrative is linked to the ‘ideological preferences and prevailing scientific ideals’ of the times (Zander 2006:17). To relate to a film’s identity-building role is perhaps the most obvious perspective when historians consider how we see ourselves and our world then and now. But for this text, I have chosen a slightly different point, namely the presence of the physical world, its activity and connotations for the observer, in theoretical contexts now often referred to as *materiality*. As an archaeologist, it is a way of viewing things’ meanings close at hand. I have also chosen to base the analysis on a future setting instead of a past one, but as we shall see, this has less importance as the result nevertheless relates clearly to a study of the past.

Past materiality in a future setting

Independent of *Waterworld* and its qualities as epic narrative, I find the film interesting based on how future relics of the past constantly pop up and are given compelling roles in the film’s plot. Although the theme of the film is basically dismal and dark, as in most films about the future of humanity, it is within this futuristic scenario that there is also room for sparks of hope. The hope as well as the darkness the past represents is clearly expressed in the material world that viewers glimpse in the film.

Communication through the senses

A film is evidently made primarily for the sense of sight, and most situations experienced through cinema are intended for the eye. But hearing is also an integral part of the experience. Even the other senses are involved through the film, because indirectly smell, touch and taste are also present. Through our imagination, we can thus use all our senses in a film experience. This is a fact that the creators of *Waterworld* have used well in the film’s production.

In a direct parallel to the world of archaeology, the film displays characteristics of what is called *contemporary archaeology*, which focusses on the recent past, for example the years from 1950 and onwards into our own time. Most archaeologists
appreciate the distant past more than the recent past, so therefore a specific argument is needed to highlight the importance of contemporary perspectives on materiality of the recent past. One argument is how experiencing objects from the past involves our senses and evokes memories and through this re-awakening makes us reflect existentially on our being in the world. Archaeologists of contemporary times are philosophical and existential (e.g. Burström 2007:87ff.), something that is not so usual when it comes to archaeological reflections on more distant pasts. Usually the distant past is instead presented in a more scientific and technical manner: nutrition or building techniques, just to mention a few approaches.

In the film Waterworld we are confronted with objects as symbols of a lost world. These symbols are material objects filled with connotations relating to the past: that is, our own times. These objects tell us important stories about how time travel affects inherent meanings of material objects, but they also give us a clue as to why it is important to know the context of objects. Otherwise we can really get lost in interpretation. The objects in this sense become a laughing mirror intended for archaeologists, since we here can discern a critique towards our professional way of handling objects from the past as relics that we do not understand the dimensions of anyway. If we were not able to travel in time in the world of film, we would not be able to decode our feelings relating to the chosen objects, and the objects’ inherent second meanings would definitely get lost in the story. For us to understand this effect of time travel to future worlds, I have picked some examples of relations to materiality – the meaning and communicative aspects of the material world – from Waterworld to illustrate the phenomenon.

**The rear-view mirror**

In an early scene in the film Mariner entertains some children by using a rear-view mirror to reflect sunlight. Given that the earth has been flooded for hundreds of years, the mirror he uses must be a truly odd relic to the living people on this water planet, perhaps even something unknown. A mirror such as this one gives us time to reflect. We are given the possibility to relate to the past world through an object we are very familiar with, but we realise at the same time that this object has lost its original meaning in this future situation. It is of course also possible to consider a deeper meaning in the use of a rear-view mirror, when the fact is that the film evolves around consequences of human actions in the past. To have a look in the mirror can reveal a lot about one’s own time. The expression itself, to look in the rear-view mirror, is something that we use today when we look back at something that happened in the past, so the mirror metaphor is a good starting point for time travel.
Desired dirt

Mariner, who is a kind of travelling salesman, arrives at an atoll to sell dirt in a jar. It isn’t clear where he got the dirt, but he has probably picked it up during one of his secret visits underwater. It is obvious that dirt has become scarce, and is now much sought after. Everyone is willing to pay a lot of money for it. Soil, which for us here and now is ever present albeit polluted, exploited and artificially fertilized, is in Waterworld a much-sought-after rarity.

Entering the new world with old prestigious boots

In another early scene Mariner has been below the sea surface and among other things has picked up a pair of ski boots from the 1990s. He puts them on his feet and uses them during his visit to the atoll. The boots obviously impress the surrounding people at the atoll. Just as in the case of the rear-view mirror the viewer experiences something eye-opening with the message inherent in the material: the impossibility in this world of skiing in the sparkling white snow on a cold winter’s day. This experience has become something quite impossible and has even been forgotten in the new situation for planet earth. We are made to reflect on the existential matter that ice and snow are melting very fast from the earth’s surface in present times, and maybe future generations will not be able to experience this phenomenon with their senses, just as it has become the case in the film.

Newsprint paper

In a jar on his raft Mariner keeps some wrinkled papers from National Geographic magazine. Both the text content and the outstanding natural images in the magazine, depicting the earth and trees as well as the smell of the paper when the lid of the jar is opened is a relic for Mariner and others that see this artefact. The magazine shown in the film is an issue from December 1995; maybe it was also a question of advanced product placement? The journal focuses on images of people, animals, nature and on earth and its survival. This focus makes National Geographic a good choice as an example of material remains in this particular film. The magazine carries the message of the importance of preserving and saving the global environment with all the plants, animals and humans that inhabit our world (http://www.nationalgeographic.com/, accessed 6 January 2015).

The crayons

The child in the film, a girl named Enola who has a tattooed map on her back that supposedly leads to the mythical Dryland, finds crayons on Mariner’s raft. She uses these crayons to draw pictures that tell the stories she carries with her. In this way, the crayons become bearers of a message of a bygone civilisation when
she draws images emanating from her early childhood memories. In the end of the film it becomes evident that she once lived on dry land. These crayons give Enola the opportunity to present a visual story about mythical Dryland.

**Exxon Valdez**

The most striking, largest and humorous ‘artefact’ throughout the film is the rusty tanker Exxon Valdez, which for many recalls a major oil disaster that once took place in our real world in 1989 off the coast of Alaska. In the film the wreck of this oil tanker has come to new use as the villain Deacon’s ship where he retrieves the remains of the oil to fuel his team of gangster Smokers. The oil tanker is powered as a giant galley with the help of slaves. A scaled model of the ship, made for the movie, was until recently placed at the Mojave Air and Space Port near Los Angeles in California, USA (http://mojaveairport.com, accessed January 6, 2015). Some scenes of the movie were filmed at this location, but the props in the form of a scaled model of the Exxon Valdez moved in the summer 2014 to a private person (http://www.parabolicarc.com/tag/exxon-valdez/, accessed September 26, 2015).

**The oil**

The oil, a fossil fuel that once contributed to the flooding that is portrayed in the film, is the ultimate evil artefact of them all, and now it is in the possession of the evil villain who uses it to loot and reign terror. Here are the connotations of materiality following a well-known pattern in which desired dirt and newsprint paper consistently stand for goodness, while this sticky, black substance – used excessively by the evil side – stands for an ideology that once destroyed the world. As much as we use oil today, it also stands for now as well as in the imagined future everything that is evil and destructive.

**Tobacco and booze**

In Waterworld the addictions of our own time such as smoking and alcohol have become pure attributes of evil. The evil boss, Deacon, and all the other Smokers, smoke all the time (but where do they grow their tobacco?), and they drink booze all the time too. (Where does it come from?) All in all, it is really a question of ‘dark matter’ similar to the oil managed by the evil ones (Figure 9.2).

**Missing high-tech**

Unlike some other cinematic images of future life, there are no real high-tech components in Waterworld. In total devastation everything has been reversed to a basic mechanical technology without computers, mobiles, microchips and nanotechnology. Admittedly, there is a few years between 1995 and today, but technological developments were certainly advanced even in the 1990s. In this imagined future world heavy scrap iron technology is applied. It is not a question
of tailoring art at a high level; fish skin is used as a material as suggested by at least Mariner’s outfit. As an archaeologist, it is easy to recognize the dream of a ‘low-tech’ lifestyle that often exists among archaeologists and others, and that gives the exercise of low-tech knowledge from past times high status in certain contexts (Petersson and Narmo 2011:27ff.). However these future peoples are primarily forced to live low-tech, but they are also very inventive, and this can be seen, for example, in the construction of Mariner’s trimaran and the artificial atolls built by the survivors in this new world.

Discussion on matter and related phenomena

Now we have reached the phase of discussing the topic of materiality of the past in the creation of future worlds and how our cinematic time travel to this future world makes us reflect on how materiality affects us in both small and big issues. But besides a purely material approach, I also discuss more abstract phenomena such as religion and evolution since some expressions of these are also made explicitly tangible in the film. These more abstract phenomena actually transforms into tangible ‘matter’ in a way that is similar to other kinds of matter in the presentation above.
Good and evil matter
Exactly in the same way as Kevin Costner and Dennis Hopper portray the film’s good and evil sides of humanity, it becomes obvious that there are good and bad materiality throughout the film. On the good side is paper, crayons and soil. On the evil side is oil, booze and tobacco. This parallelism between the behaviour of people and inherent actions of materiality is intriguing to ponder. Do we consider the world of matter as evil or good when we judge it? Or is it human actions that load it with evil or good? The film offers no obvious answer to that question, and our own judgement of the issue in our time is probably not entirely unambiguous.

Abstract phenomena become tangible
More abstract phenomena also appear in the film. These are the concepts of evolution and religion. In the world of this film they are portrayed in ways that makes them sensory perceptible, and it clearly shows that these phenomena have become material in their expression and meaning.

Evolution
Although the time frame of the movie Waterworld is only about 600 years, it is clear that evolution has begun to affect some people’s physical appearance, which is surprising considering how slow evolution works in reality. The hero Mariner, for example, has had time to develop both webbed feet and gills. It has not happened in the same way with the people who live on the atolls, they have not had to adapt to water in the same way. Just because Mariner has evolved, he has become an oddity and an outcast. It is likely that he wears the bulky ski boots on his feet when he enters the atoll to keep his webbed toes undiscovered. The boots effectively conceal the evolutionary impact on his body from the people there. But what he has done is to adapt to the circumstances, while the rest have resisted and not wanted to give up the idea of life on land. In the end of the film, after the actual discovery of Dryland, Mariner leaves for the sea again because he begins to suffer from land sickness, a parallel to seasickness. Physically, he needs to get close to the sea again to feel good. In this evolutionary perspective there is also hope connected to the flooded film world, namely the fact that people have an ability to adapt to new circumstances.

Religion
There are also religious aspects of life in Waterworld. Our own time has already, after only 500 or 600 years, become mythical. Apparently all documentation about the prior 600 years has been destroyed. A document in the film that relates to any kind of belief based on an environmental approach is how dead bodies are ‘recycled’ on the atolls. After death the bodies are lowered down into a muddy mess that bubbles and boils. During the movie it is not clear what this muddy
mess is used for, but probably it goes to some kind of cultivation and in the end nourishment of the population. In addition to ‘recycling’ dead bodies, it is also possible to be sentenced to ‘recycling in the customary fashion’ if you have done something criminal. This penalty is about to happen to Mariner, who, however, manages to escape at the last second.

**The materiality of the past in the future**

In the film there is an obvious relation between past and future materiality. The material culture of our time has been transformed into relics that confuse people of the future, as the objects relate to a bygone world about which little seems to be known. It is exciting to watch the film and guess what fragments are, where they come from and how they are used again by these peoples of the future.

**The resurrected Garden of Eden**

The analogy to the deluge is obvious. Even though the water that has flooded the planet is a disaster, it has also washed away some of our contemporary woes, and the world is made ready to begin anew. Towards the end of the film the Smokers end up dead on the bottom of the sea together with their oil tanker wreck. The heroes, the good guys, find their way to Dryland, which strangely looks like the Garden of Eden. Dryland seems almost untouched, clean and unharmed, and the good people may here begin their lives anew.

**Concluding remarks**

By analysing our visions of the future through time travel that our contemporary film directors create for us, we, who inhabit today’s Western world, might gain insight into ourselves and our view of our contemporary times, as viewed through the staging of today’s material world as something past. Films like Waterworld tie together the past, our own times and the future through materiality. The individual objects and their meaning for us now, then and in the future show how materiality can be pieced together for us to understand our own self-image. Through analysis of how we perceive good and evil matter throughout the film, we can distinguish our contemporary classification of good and evil. (Soil, paper and crayons are good matter, while oil, alcohol and cigarettes are bad matter.) Simplification and sharpening is a part of the film’s rhetoric. Instead of considering other worlds and times through ‘physical’ time travels, we are presented with a completed interpretation, which we may support or reject. But in this world of stories told, materiality is shown to play at least the same role of importance as the props used in all physical reconstructions made of other worlds.

Travelling in time with the aid of film is a cheap way to get to other places and times. It is also an easy way for film-makers to create another universe where it
is possible to invert values and intentions, to draw conclusions of our own way of life here and now and bring us to the probable future world to get us to see, then and there, the consequences of our actions now. This kind of time travel has both moral and ethical aspects. There is a kind of educational tone in these films, often relating to how we manage the world today and how we ought to manage it to avoid the future scenarios presented in the film.

It is also a kind of laughing mirror to take the edge off from the rhetoric. With the aid of humour and somehow comic situations, you can also laugh at certain situations and consequences even if time travel goes to Dystopia.

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