

**JULIAN HUXLEY'S TIME MACHINE: A BIOLOGIST'S RETELLING
OF WELLS'S SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE?**

INTRODUCED BY JOHN S. PARTINGTON

[What follows is an excerpt from Julian Huxley's 'Philosophic Ants: A Biological Fantasia', taken from his *Essays of a Biologist* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), 175-203 (193-200).

The chapter originated as a paper read before the Heretics Club, Cambridge, in May 1922 when Huxley was a Research Fellow at Oxford University. In it Huxley speculates upon the biological effects of a sort of time travel upon the traveller. The piece deserves to be reprinted here as, not only does it bear relation to Wells's stories *The Time Machine*, 'The New Accelerator', *The Invisible Man*, 'Under the Knife' and 'Man of the Year Million' (amongst others, no doubt), but it also reveals the potential effects of time travel upon the travellers physical condition. In addition to these major connections, this short piece is riddled with many other Wellsian references (in addition to Wells's own appearance in the text). One cannot help but feel that, with his use of the Wellsian four-dots and certain of his opening descriptions (the 'quartz terminals', the 'gauges of rock-crystal' and the dinner-party of middle-class guests a la *The Time Machine*), Huxley is mocking Wells to a degree... I have never found this essay referenced in relation to Wells's stories, but it is clearly of value when reading his scientific romances and short stories. The footnote, incidentally, is Huxley's own.]

[...]

Almost more startling might be the effect of altering the rhythm at which we live, or rather at which we experience events.

If only I were Mr H. G. Wells, I could make a mint of money by a story based upon this idea of rhythm of living.¹ Let us see... First there would be Mercaptan the distinguished inventor, who would lead me (lay, uninstructed, Watsonish me, after the fashion of narrators) into his laboratory. There on the table would be the machine – all but complete: handles, coils of wire, quartz terminals, gauges of rock-crystal in which oscillated coloured fluids, platinum cogwheels... dot.. dot.. dot.. dot.. He hardly dared to make the final connections, all clear and calculable though they were. He had put so much of himself into it: so many hopes... fears... dots...

¹ The reading of this paper brought a string of informants eager to let me know that Mr Wells had already written a story on this theme. I was grateful to them for having caused me to read 'The New Accelerator', which by some strange chance I had managed to miss: but Mr Wells's treatment is so wholly different from that which I have sketched that I feel no scruples in letting it stand: and, if amends are needed, at least I make him a present of a germ of a new tale, and so feel that honour should be satisfied.

Then there would be the farewell dinner-party – first the inventor’s voice on the wireless telephone, summoning Wagrom the explorer, Glosch of the *Evening Post*, Stewartson Ampill the novelist, and the rest of our old friends: then the warm friendly light of the candles, the excellent port, the absence of women, the reminiscences, the asterisks, the.....

Mercaptan refuses to allow the rest to come into the laboratory, in case something should go wrong. He straps the machine on his shoulders, makes a final connection; his life processes begin to work faster, faster, ever faster. The first effect of course was a change of colour. The blue oblong of the window became green – yellow – orange – red. Meanwhile each wave-length of the ultra-violet became blue, and itself ran down the gamut of colour. Then came the turn of the X-rays – by their dim light he groped about, till they too became relatively too slow for his retina. That ought to make him blind, of course – but no! Mr Wells had thought that all out; and he came into a state of nearly maximum speed where he perceived a brilliant, phosphorescent light given out by all objects, generated by disturbances of a wave-length unimaginably, undiscoverably small. Meanwhile he had passed through an amazing experience – he had heard the veritable music of the spheres! That had happened when in his acceleration he had, so to speak, caught up with the light-waves, until they were tuned in his ear’s organ of Corti: and all that had been visible in his ordinary life was now to be appreciated by hearing. Unfortunately, as his ears possessed no lens, this universal music was to him of course merely a hideous babel of sound.

At last, as the workings of his body approached the rapidity of light’s own oscillations, he entered on a new phase – surrounded on every side by an ocean of waves which lapped softly against his body – waves, waves, and still more waves...

He was in that region not unlike that from which life has escaped when it ceased to be infinitely little, a region in which none of the events that make up our ordinary life, none of the bodies that are our normal environment, have existence any more – all reduced to a chaos of billows ceaselessly and meaninglessly buffeting his being.

‘Mi ritrovai in una selva oscura.’

Life is a wood, dark and trackless enough to be sure; but Mercaptan could not even see that it was a wood – for the trees.

Yet it was soothing: the very meaninglessness of the wave-rocking released one of responsibility, and it was delicious to float upon this strange etheric sea.

Then his scientific mind reasserted itself. He realized that he had magnified his rate of life and was consuming his precious days at an appalling speed. The lever was thrown into reverse, and he passed gradually back to what he had been accustomed to think of as reality.

Back to it; and then beyond it, slowing his vital rhythm. This time he was able by an ingenious arrangement to eliminate much of the disturbing effect of his rhythm-change on his vision. It was an idea of which he was very proud: every alternate light-wave was cut out when he doubled the capacity of each process of life, and so on in automatic correspondence. As a result he was able to get a picture of the outer world very similar to that obtained in the ordinary accelerations of slow processes that are made possible by running slow-taken cinema records at high speed. He saw the snowdrops lift their matutinal heads and drop them again at evening – an instant later; the spring was an alarming burst of living energy, the tress' budding and growth of leaves became a portent, like the bristling of hairs on the backs of vegetable cats. As his rate changed and he comprehended more and more in each pulse, the flowers faded and fell before he could think of plucking them, autumnal apples rotted in his grasp, day was a flash and night a wink of the eye, the two blending at last in a continuous half-light.

After a time ordinary objects ceased to be distinguishable; then the seasons shared the fate of the day and night. The lever was now nearly hard over, and the machine was reaching its limit. He was covering nearly a thousand of men's years with each of his own seconds.

The cinema effect was almost useless to him now; and he discarded this apparatus. Now followed what he had so eagerly awaited, something deducible in general but unpredictable in all particulars. As the repeated separate impacts of the ether waves had condensed, at his old ordinary rate, to form the continuous sensation of light, so now the events of nature coalesced to give new objects, new kinds of sensation. Especially was this so with life: the repeated generations seemed to act like separate repeated waves of light, blending to give a picture of the species changing and evolving before his eyes.

Other experiences he could explain less well. He was conscious of strange sensations that he thought were probably associated with changes in energy-distribution, in entropy; others which he seemed to perceive directly, by some form of telepathy, concerning the type of mental

process occurring around him. It was all strange: but of one thing he was sure – that if only he could find a way of nourishing and maintaining himself in this new state, he would be able, as a child does in the first few years of life, to correlate his puzzling new sensations, and that when he had done this he would obtain a different and more direct view of reality than any he had ever obtained or thought of obtaining before.

As the individual light-waves were summed to give light, as the microcosm of gas-molecules cancelled out to give a uniformity of pressure, so now the repetition of the years coalesced into what could be described as visible time, a sensation of cosmic rate; the repeated pullulations of living things fused into something perceived as organic achievement: and the infinite variety of organisms, their conflicts and interactions, resolved itself, through the mediation of his sense-organs and brain at their new rhythm, into a direct perception of life as a whole, an entity with a pressure on its environment, a single slowly-evolving form, a motion and direction.

He put the lever to its limit: the rhythm of the cosmos altered again in relation to his own. He had an extraordinary sense of being on the verge of a revelation. The universe – that was the same; but what he experienced of it was totally different. He had immediate experience of the waxing and waning of suns, of the condensation of nebulae, the slowing down and speeding up of evolutionary process.

The curious, apparently telepathic sense which he had had of the mental side of existence was intensified. Through it, the world began to be perceived as a single Being, with all its parts in interaction. The shadowy lineaments of this being were half seen by his mental vision – vast, colossal, slowly changing; but they appeared only to disappear again, like a picture in the fire.

Strive as he might, he could not see its real likeness. Now it appeared benign; at its next dim reappearance there would be a feeling of capricious irresponsibility about it: at another instant it was cold, remote; once or twice terrible, impending over and filling everything with a black demoniacal power which brought only horror with it.

If he could but accelerate the machine! He wanted to *know* – to know whether this phantom were a reality, to know above all if it were a thing of evil or of good: and he could not know unless he could advance that last final step necessary to fuse the rhythm of separate events into the sensation of the single whole.

He sat straining all his faculties: the machine whirred and rocked: but in vain. And at last, feeling desperately hungry, for he had forgotten to take food with him, he gradually brought back the lever to its neutral-point.

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Of course, Mr Wells would have done it much better than this.

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And then there would have been an ending. I think the newspaper man would take his opportunity to slink off into the laboratory and get on the machine with the idea of making a scoop for his paper;... and then he would put the lever in too violently, and be thrown backwards. His head hit the corner of a bench, and he remained stunned; but by evil chance, the handles of the machine still made connection with his body after the fall. The machine was making him adjust his rhythm to that of light; so that he was living at an appalling rate. He had gone into the laboratory late at night. Next morning they found him – dead: and dead of senile decay – grey-haired, shrivelled, atrophic.

Then of course the machine is smashed up; and Mr Wells begins to write another book.

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