



# BACK TO THE FUTURE AND KALA CHAKRA: CYCLICAL TIME IN 1980S WESTERN CINEMA

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## Abstract:

In Vedic cosmology, time unfolds through vast and repeating cycles rather than linear progression. For example, yugas within *kalpas* that cycle perpetually from creation (*srishti*) through preservation, decay and finally dissolution (*pralaya*). This paper analyses *Back to the Future* (1985) as a secular and popular embodiment of this *Kala Chakra*. Marty McFly's DeLorean navigates through timeline ripples that reflect cosmic flux. Parental alterations trigger existential fading like *Kali Yuga* entropy. These crises are resolved through lightning-struck resets, similar to divine renewal. The film's mechanics, such as flux capacitor activations, photo erasures, and perfected returns, emerge as playful visualisations of eternal recurrence, contrasting Western linear causality. By bridging ancient metaphysics and 1980s science fiction, it democratises cyclical time, which in turn offers moksha-like timeline harmony without explicit spirituality. This reading uncovers an unrecognised Vedic resonance in the mainstream cinema.

**Keywords:** Vedic cosmology, cyclical time, kala chakra, *Back to the Future*, yuga cycles.

## Introduction:

In the film *Back to the Future* (1985), lightning strikes the clock tower at 10:04 PM on November 12, 1955, and the DeLorean blazes back to 1985. This is the film's most iconic time reset. This is the moment of renewal that resolves Marty McFly's timeline crisis and restores his existence after parental meddling that nearly erased him. Yet, below this spectacle, lies a profound structure of time as looping cycles of disruption and repair, not as a straight path of cause and effect.

Dr. Rakesh Patel, in his article titled "Hindu cosmology, its rays and significance" describes cosmology in Hinduism as the "ideas Hindus have about the universe and how it works" (Patel 27). Based on this, Vedic cosmology's *kala chakra* structures time through repeating *yuga-kalpa* cycles of creation, decay, and renewal. This paper analyses *Back to the Future Part 1* (1985) as a secular embodiment of these cosmic rhythms. Marty's timeline ripples like existential fading from parental tweaks, lightning-struck resets, flux capacitor fire trails, perfected 1985 returns reflect the flux of *Kali Yuga* entropy, yielding divine restoration.

Unlike multiverse science fiction's branching realities, *Back to the Future*'s single, mutable timeline operates through recursive correction, in which crisis triggers renewal and subverts Western linear causality, in which past changes birth new futures. The DeLorean serves as a cinematic *kala yantra* that spins through time's wheel to achieve *moksha*-like timeline harmony.

This paper addresses two objectives: To demonstrate how *Back to the Future Part 1*'s (1985) timeline mechanics structurally enact Vedic *kala chakra* through key visual and narrative sequences, and to reveal this as the first Vedic cosmological reading of the film, contrasting its recursive renewal with Western linear time models.

This study is guided by the following research question: How does *Back to the Future Part 1* (1985) visualise Vedic cyclical time through the repeating cycles of creation, decay, and renewal in its single, mutable timeline and reset sequences?

This study employs comparative textual analysis and close reading of four specific sequences from *Back to the Future Part 1*: the fading photograph (*Kali Yuga* decay), the lightning-struck clock tower (*pralaya* reset), the DeLorean fire trails/flux capacitor (cycle activation), and the perfected 1985 return (cosmic renewal). Puranic cosmology provides the interpretive lens, and the secondary sources include film studies on *Back to the Future* timeline rules and introductory Vedic cosmology texts. Focus remains interpretive comparison revealing unrecognised resonance.

### Literature review:

The existing research on *Back to the Future* (1985) film has viewed it as a Western text that is framed by the aspects like adaptation, genre convention, and audience reception. SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN “‘There’s Something Very Familiar About All This’: Time Machines, Cultural Tangents, and Mastering Time in H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy” reads the trilogy as a conscious reimagining of H.G. Wells’ “*The Time Machine*” for a 1980 American context. The author traces motifs like clock imagery, lightning, constant threat of self-erasure etc (Ní Fhlainn). She also argues that both wells and Zemeckis encode the cultural anxieties of their eras. Wells responds to the Victorian fears of class degradation and evolution, and Zemeckis to Reagan-era concerns regarding upward mobility, and nostalgia. This frames the DeLorean’s temporal mastery as a local, optimistic, and oriented towards personal betterment instead of cosmic entropy (Ní Fhlainn). Charles Tyron in “*Time Lapse: The Politics of Time-Travel Cinema*” extends this historical anxiety. He treats time-travel cinema more broadly as a way of organising time, memory, and subjectivity, suggesting that although the characters of such films are allowed to revisit the past or imagine futures as a form of critique, they “often discovers that his or her everyday world is in fact the best world, that it is merely in need or reform, rather than wholesale change”(Tyron).

Alongside these cultural readings of the film, others emphasise the film’s generic and affective dimensions. Jarvis Tyrell identifies a recurring set of rules that govern how time travel is portrayed across the genre. He mentions three rules around which cinematic time travel is built. These three rules are the temporal (Grandfather) paradox, the rule against self-dealing and the rule against contacting other versions of the self. The author says that the older time travel films like *Back to the Future*, *12 Monkeys* and *Timecop* follow these rules more strictly. Whereas post 2000 films increasingly adopt mechanisms like board games or genetic disorders to achieve time travel, and frequently limit the travel range strictly to a character’s own lifetime (Curry). Emma Pett on the other hand foregrounds reception rather than rules. The author argues that *Back to the Future* has attained and emergent cult status among the younger viewers with the help of nostalgia as a cultural style and through specialised appreciation of the partnership between Micheal J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd (Pett). She says that repeat viewing, fan merchandise, and quotable dialogue rituals position the film as a middle ground between mainstream blockbuster and cult object, a space that existing scholarship on both categories has tended to overlook (Pett). By taking together all the arguments so far, *Back to the Future* is situated within Western frameworks of adaptation, politics, genre and fandom. However, none of them inspect film’s temporal structure through non-westerns models of time.

On the contrary, the existing work on Vedic conceptions of time give a rich account of cyclical temporality without engaging cinema to a large extent. Harold Coward distinguishes Hindu *Kala* from the Western linear models. He argues that time in this tradition is considered cyclical and something that is without a beginning (*anadi*) rather than simply a metric of duration (Coward). Drawing from Vedic sources and Bharthari’s *Vakyapadiya*, the author presents *kala* as the power of Brahman. He uses the metaphor of “wire-puller” to describe time or *kala*, that manifests the phenomenal world through the complementary energies of permission and prevention. This gives rise to the cycles of birth and decay (Coward). Dr. Sharma and Dr. Agrawal complement this account with a structural one. They show that the Vedic time system ranges from minute

units such as *truti* and *prana* to vast cycles like *yugas*, *mahayugas*, *manvantaras*, and *kalpas*. They argue that this framework is both internally coherent and also can be broadly comparable to modern cosmological estimates (Sharma and Agrawal). Roopa H. Narayan further demonstrates that these cycles arise from attempts to harmonise astronomical observations of the sun, moon, planets and longer cycles such as precession, and that understanding is concretely encoded in Vedic ritual, altar design, and temple architecture through precise numerical correspondences linking cosmic order, ritual practice, and calendar systems (Narayan). These three studies present Indian cosmology as a sophisticated recursive system in which astronomy, ritual, architecture and metaphysics express the same cyclical conception of time.

These two bodies of scholarship on *Back to the Future* and on the Vedic cosmology remain largely separate. Scholars have read *Back to the Future* through adaptation theory, genre rules and politics of nostalgia. But this has always been with the help of Western intellectual traditions. Scholars of Vedic time have mapped *Kala*, *yuga* cycles and Vedic cosmology in a considerable detail, yet their work remains confined to religious studies and the history of science. There is no reference to popular cinema or Western narrative to a substantial degree. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that *Back to the Future* part I (1985)'s recurring decay, crisis and restoration structurally resemble the Vedic models of *kala chakra*. It reveals the Vedic resonance that is invisible within exclusively Western frameworks of interpretation.

## Analysis:

### I. Decay: The Fading Photograph and the Logic of *Kali Yuga*

The opening of the film *Back to the Future* does not begin with an action or a spectacle. It begins with a scene showing dozens of clocks, cuckoo contraptions, and pendulum mechanisms that fill in Doc Brown's laboratory (00:00:30-00:01:20). The camera just moves across the hall without any dialogues or commentary. This goes beyond mere set dressing. The film opens by a declaration that time is its true subject. The instruments through which modern Western culture measures and regulates time are already present in abundance. What the film does is that it subjects these instruments to disruption, dissolution, and re-emergence. This structure enacts the Vedic cosmological model of *Kala Chakra* (the wheel of time) through which universe cycles perpetually between creation (*srishti*) and dissolution (*pralaya*).

The 1985 in which Marty McFly is first introduced, is portrayed as very chaotic. Marty's father, George, is servile and cowardly, exploited by Biff. His brother Dave wears clothes that resemble a fast-food joint uniform to the dinner table. There is also mention of Uncle Joey, who is in jail. The household exudes what is generally described as the hallmarks of the *Kali yuga*. Luis González-Reimann, in his study "The Mahābhārata and the Yugas", outlines that dharma by one-fourth as the yugas advance, moving from fullness of *Satya yuga* to *Kali yuga*'s residual quarter (González-Reimann 7-8). The McFly household in 1985 is visually and narratively coded as that residual quarter.

The most philosophical expression of this decay in the film is the fading photograph. At approximately 00:55:00, Doc Brown examines the photograph of Marty with his siblings Dave and Linda. He finds that Dave's head has disappeared entirely. Doc exclaims, "Erased from existence" at this moment. There is no physical damage to the photograph itself, and siblings do not vanish in a flash. Instead, they fade, as though existence were a condition that could be incrementally withdrawn. By the time of the Enchantment Under the Sea dance, Dave in the picture has completely disappeared, half of Linda has vanished, and Marty's own right hand begins to lose solidity as he performs on the stage (01:23:50-01:25:50).

In *Kali yuga*, the dissolution does not arrive as a single catastrophic event but as a progressive diminishment. Entropy operates on the social and the spiritual structures on the world. Harold Coward, drawing from Bhartrhari's *Vakyapadiya*, identifies *kala* in Hindu thought as an independent power of *Bharman*. And this operates through two energies of *Pratibandha* (prevention or decay) and *anhyanuajna* (permission or growth). The time permits the arising of a phenomenon and also has the authority to prevent the continuation (Coward 25-26). The fading of the photograph portrays this precisely. *Kala*'s preventive function withdrawing permission from McFly siblings to exist within that timeline whose foundation has been compromised. Photograph is not merely a plot device or a metaphor. It can be treated as a medium through which cosmic time expresses itself. When the cause is removed, its effect begins goes through erasure from the future backwards.

It is also significant to note that the entire photograph does not undergo decay. Rather, only the subjects, people in this case, begin to vanish. Harold Coward's analysis of Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya substantiates this by showing that *kala* (time) functions as an independent entity that operates through permission and prevention. Just like the way photograph remain intact other than the people in it, Coward emphasises that "time remains eternal although the actions of growth and decay come and go". The phenomenal world may be subject to withdrawal, but it never loses its ontological identity with eternal foundation (Coward 24-25).

## II. The Instrument of Cycles: The DeLorean as *Kala Yantra*

In the tantric practice, yantra does not just act as a geometric diagram or a tool. It works as an instrument that helps mediate between the practitioner and the deity. It is designed to focus attention, support meditation and channelise forces that are linked to particular deities, and mantras. It also aims at aspects such as protection, healing or spiritual transformation.

The DeLorean time machine operates on this very logic. Doc Brown does not invent travel in the sense of generating a new property of the universe. He engineers the conditions under which an already existing natural force, like the lightning bolt he knows will strike the Hill Valley clock tower at 10:04 PM on November 12, 1955. This he understands can be channelled into temporal displacement. DeLorean here functions as a yantra as its function is to align its operator with forces that already exist in the cosmos.

The twin fire trails that DeLorean leaves behind on the road at the moment of the temporal displacement have a cosmological resonance. In Vedic practice ritual, the *Agnicayana* fire altar encodes astronomical time directly into its physical construction. Roopa H. Narayan, in her work "Time Cycles in Indian Cosmology", shows that the altar's five-layered, falcon-shaped structure uses 10,800 bricks. This number corresponds to the number of *muhurtas* in a year. Each of these layers represents either a distinct cosmic realm (Earth, space or sky) or the zone of merging between adjacent realms (*Narayan*). The altar, therefore, can be considered a physical object and also a map of time. Its material form is inseparable from its temporal meaning. The DeLorean's fire trails carry a structurally similar logic. They are the physical marks left at the temporal crossing moment. They are the visible inscription of a passage between one time and another. This is just like the *Agnicayana* altar, which physically encodes the year's astronomical structure in layered bricks.

## III. Activation: The Twin Pines Mall Sequence and the Wheel of Time

In Vedic thought, the *Kala chakra* is not something that is created. It already exists and is moving. What a person can do is align themselves with it, enter it and move with it. Harold Coward explains *kala* (time) as the "primordial power and unifying principle of the universe" (Coward 22). This means that time was always in existence. He also says that the time permits things to arise and also prevents them from continuing (Coward 25-26). So the human role is not to produce this force but to receive it.

This is precisely what happens in the Twin Pines Mall sequence (00:18:00-00:31:30). Doc Brown does not invent time. He built a machine that can enter the flow of time that is already there. When the DeLorean reaches 88 miles per hour, it disappears in a flash and does not go somewhere new. It goes to what is already existing. The wheel of time was turning and the machine just entered it.

Doctor brown's explanation of the flux capacitor (00:25:30-0026:00) makes this even clearer. He does not speak of generating power or creating some new force. He just speaks about reaching the right conditions, specifically generating 88 miles per hour and the use of plutonium in order to achieve the temporal displacement. Which means that at that speed, it becomes possible to enter the *kala chakra*. This goes deeper than just being a technological invention. It is in a philosophical sense, an alignment with something that was always there.

#### IV. Restoration: The Enchantment Under the Sea Dance and the Return of Dharma

In the Vedic Yuga system, the decline of the cosmos is not just a physical or temporal process, but also a moral one. González-Reimann, in his study “The Mahābhārata and the Yugas”, outlines that dharma by one-fourth as the *yugas* advance, moving from fullness of *Satya yuga* to *Kali yuga*'s residual quarter (González-Reimann 7-8). This shows that decline is not random or accidental, but is a very integral part of cosmological cycle. This diminishment of dharma is not a permanent. The cycle turns perpetually and what had been degraded is eventually restored. So, the diminishment of dharma across the *yugas* is not the story's ending. It is what makes restoration a necessity and cosmologically meaningful.

The original 1985 in the commencement of the film is, as argued earlier in section 1, a *Kali yuga* household. Here the proper ordering of the relationships where the courage is rewarded, creativity flourishes and the exploitation is resisted, has been inverted. This is what can be identified as the hallmark of *s*.

The Enchantment Under the Sea dance (01:17:00-01:31:00) is a sequence in which the degradation this degradation is reversed. This acts as a period of dharmic restoration. A point at which cosmological cycle turns and right order reasserts itself. The hall is decorated to simulate ocean, a space that is marked as operating under different rules from the ordinary world. It is a space where transformation is not just possible but also inevitable given the demands of the difference.

George McFly's punch to Biff at approximately 01:23:05, is a pivotal act of restoration and not just a simple act of personal courage and victory. In terms of cosmology of the *yuga* system, it is an act through which adharma (force of disorder and exploitation) that has dominated the McFly family is overcome by dharma reasserting itself. George does not become a new person after this. But he becomes someone who he always meant to be with the proper ordering of the cycle. This structure of dharmic restoration is what exactly González-Reimann describes when he speaks about restoration (González-Reimann).

The photograph tracks this restoration as well. As George and Lorraine kiss, Dave and Linda materialise back onto the image, and Marty's own hand solidifies on the stage (01:26:00-01:26:25). The photograph reveals the family that was already existing, the one that was made possible by the proper dharmic order. It is not finally permitted to exist because earlier the conditions were preventing it. The improved 1985 that Marty wakes into at approximately confirms the restoration. In this new 1985, George is a published science fiction author, and Lorraine seems lively and engaged. Biff now waxes their car and calls George “Mr. McFly”. This is *adhrama* serving *dharma*, the inverted hierarchy of the *Kali yuga* household corrected. It is the same world with proper order restored.

#### Conclusion:

This paper has shown that the film *Back to the Future Part 1* (1985) portrays a story that closely resembles how Vedic cosmology understands time. The time that does not move in a straight line but as a wheel that goes through cycles of decay and restoration. The film follows this pattern clearly. The McFly household in 1985 is a degraded and defeated one, resembling a *Kali yuga* state. Marty accidentally interferes and makes things worse. This pushes the family towards near erasure. In the end, the new 1985 is restored and for the better. This is exactly how Vedic cyclical time works. One order breaks down and so that the better one can return.

The DeLorean enters the already existing time wheel instead of creating something new. The Enchantment Under the Sea dance is the moment at which the right order reasserts itself. It is when George overcame Biff, the photograph restores itself, and the family is freed from the ill conditions that were prevailing before.

This paper does not pose an argument that says that there was a conscious use of Vedic cosmological concepts when the film was being produced. It argues that the way the film structures itself follows the same logic that Hindu thought has described for centuries.

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