

# BACK TO THE FUTURE

Directed by Robert Zemeckis  
Produced by Neil Canton and Bob Gale  
Distributed by Universal Pictures  
Released in 1985

When a pianist plays a composition that he has practiced many times, but has never really played correctly, he can read the music and play the wrong notes—the same wrong notes—every time, simply because his brain has learned the piece incorrectly; 'muscle memory' has more bearing than the notes on the page. Similarly, when a writer proofreads a document over and over again he can miss the same typo each time; his brain has all but memorized the words and, when the writer reviews those words, he is drawing on his faulty memory of the words, rather than reading what is actually on the page.

It's hard to see something with fresh eyes.

*Back to the Future* may qualify as one of the most popular movies in history. First-time viewers are exhilarated by it. But watching it over and over again is akin to happily visiting a good-natured friend whom we don't take too seriously. We've heard it all before.

Ah, but with *Back to the Future* a repeat viewer risks missing out on some extraordinary subtleties. There are hints and implications buried in the film that make its popular reputation as an action-comedy something of a joke, itself. Consider:

- Marty grows up being told he is named after a mysterious stranger who breezed into town when his parents were in high school. After becoming their good friend, he performed at the high school dance and then disappeared forever. When does Marty realize, as he is growing up, that this mysterious stranger is actually him; ever? Do his parents think he looks like the old Calvin Klein-Marty or do they not have enough memories in order to become suspicious? Do they—can they—remember him at all? Maybe it's a good thing for the space-time continuum that nobody took a picture of 'Calvin' in 1955.
- Doc doesn't know where he is getting shot. A bullet-proof vest is good protection, but he, having thought about this for 30 years, surely realizes that he could get shot in the head. Does he give in to temptation, as he cultivates a friendship with Marty, to stage things so Marty thinks he is dead and goes back to 1955? He could hire guys who look fearsomely Libyan and have them shoot at him with blanks. Of course, he makes sure that Marty has written documentation about when the clock tower was struck. In this manner Doc would ensure that his own life was spared, but he would risk his own future. Marty may handle things in 1955 a little differently, and just as the DeLorean disappears, Doc could watch the world collapse on itself, as a chain reaction brought about by his hubris destroys every life, not just his own.
- Doc waits 30 years for the fateful night to arrive where he must ensure that Marty goes back in time. Doc Brown makes a big stink about the letter Marty

wrote, but that letter does not just address Doc's survival, but Marty's—Doc needs something to tell him what the circumstances are that sent Marty to 1955; if those circumstances cannot be replicated then the singular event of Marty going back to 1955 will not be replicated infinitely, but will become more off-kilter each time, until Marty cannot get back to 1985. For Marty 2, whom Marty 1 watches go back in time at the climax of the film, will be watching Marty 3 go back in time when he (Marty 2) returns to 1985. And the cycle continues, hopefully without fatal variation. Basically Doc Brown must seem to get shot by the Libyans, at the very least. Doc can only hope that he can keep his incredible secret from Marty and that he does nothing different compared to what he would—except he doesn't know what he did, exactly, that led Marty to go to 1955! Doc's best chance might be to complete the time machine ahead of schedule, time-travel to October 26, 1985 and watch what happens. Then he could go back and make sure it happens that way (except for Doc dying). Or, Doc could try to escape his potential death by heading 30 years into the future before October 26, 1985. Thus, even if he died/dies in 1985 in this timeline, he escapes his death by skipping over it. Or does he?

- When George unwittingly confronts Biff, who is abusing Lorraine, Biff twists George's arm around like a piece of licorice and Lorraine fruitlessly attacks Biff, only to be shoved away. As she and George look into each other's eyes, George realizes (perhaps) that Biff is their common tormentor, and he will dominate their lives forever unless George does something right now. (As an aside, isn't it an exquisite idea to have George and Lorraine at the mercy of the same tyrant, such that they already have a great deal in common, and George's triumph for his own good simultaneously rescues Lorraine forever?) George becomes enraged. Why at no other time in his life (as he lived it before) did a combination of love for Lorraine and hatred for Biff push him over the edge? Was he, perhaps, steeled against his fears that fateful Friday because of what Marty told him, advice that he passed on to his son years later? He said, "If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything." Only a few days before he shared this axiom, Marty, who was afraid to send his demo tape to the record company because he feared rejection, realized, sitting at lunch with his father and those ever-unread science-fiction stories, that he was only repeating one of the key mistakes of a man that he thought he was distancing himself from in every way. Marty thought that he was cool and his dad was a dork. But there, in 1955, he saw how wrong he was. He realizes what this fear of rejection will lead to—his father 30 years on—and decides to instill in his "Dad-Dad-Daddy-O" the self-confidence he needs to succeed.
- When Marty is preparing to meet the lighting strike, the alarm clock goes off, but the DeLorean will not turn over. Finally, in frustration, Marty punches the steering wheel with his head, the engine starts, and Marty's on his way. He does not put his foot all the way down on the accelerator the whole time. It's a miracle

that he hits the cable at the right moment. What if Doc knew that getting the timing right was impossible, and was just hoping for the best?

- Marty returns to Doc's garage after his besting of Biff, and finds Doc replaying the videotape over and over, fixated on this: "They found me. I don't know how, but they found me. Run for it, Marty!" We hear no explanation of who found him, we hear nothing about what happens next. Doc does not know who lived and who died. This is Doc Brown staring into the abyss. When Marty tries to explain what happened/happens, Doc cuts him off, saying that knowing too much information about the future could jeopardize his existence, just as Marty has jeopardized his own. Of course, '55 Doc Brown knows that his future is/was in jeopardy even before Marty took off in the time machine. Is Doc Brown, deep down, trusting Marty to save his life, and figuring that if he involves himself with particulars of what happened/happens he could end up defeating his own plans to stay alive? Or, is it possible Doc figures that he is already a dead man, and he simply wants to ensure that Marty survives the future? It would be in keeping with the character of the man for, in the very events he's watching, we see Doc sacrificing himself to save his friend.
- Marty tells George, "It's just an act!" when George questions this plan of Marty's where he will accost Lorraine to make her upset, setting up George as her rescuer. But since Lorraine isn't in on this she's going to have to be legitimately upset to welcome an intrusion by dippo George McFly when she's with her "dreamboat" Calvin Klein. Moreover, she's a little more loose than Marty thought she would be (based on her 1985 assertions that she didn't fool around with boys). So what happens if Marty tries to upset her—and nothing he does is too much?! How far will he go?
- "Another one of these damn kids jumped in front of my car!" Lorraine's dad says this after Marty gets hit pushing George out of the way. So this has happened before, at least once. This means that Lorraine is some kind of sexual menace, tormenting young men with her unshrouded disrobing.
- Marty returns ten minutes earlier than he left, arriving at the mall just soon enough to see Doc shot and his other-self blast into the past. As will be revealed in spades the next day, but is only revealed in passing now, the future/present has changed. Twin Pines Mall is now called Lone Pine Mall, and Doc survives—he wore a bullet-proof vest. So though Marty is seeing himself blast into the past, he is not 're-watching' what he experienced a week earlier. This is different, even though many of the elements are the same. So does this 'new' Marty go back to a 1955 that looks exactly like 'old' Marty found it a week earlier? Perhaps, but if Doc couldn't resist including the entire case of plutonium (so Marty would be assured of returning) then what would be at risk? One, Marty could be discovered with it by the authorities, and history would have been changed irrevocably. Or, two, more particular to our story, Marty would probably never have gone to town that Saturday morning, never "bumped into" his parents, and George McFly would have remained a hopeless loser. But, these

ruminations aside, why is it when Marty watches his alternate-universe self blast into the past, and runs up on Doc's prostrate form, he finds Doc's eyes open in a death stare? If he was knocked unconscious by the pain of the bullets striking his bullet-proofed chest, his eyes would be closed! (We can, of course, observe that the filmmakers wanted to maximize the drama to the nth degree so they allowed Doc to look dead, but let's pursue an answer in keeping with the story.) What if Doc really is dead? What if, somehow, the space-time continuum is catching up all around Marty? What if, at that very moment, there is no BMW in his parents' driveway? What if Biff Tannen is not (yet) an auto-body detailer? Thus, Doc is dead because he does not have a bullet-proof vest on. Could it be that, as his eyes flutter, unseen by us, the vest appears on Doc, underneath his radiation suit, just as Marty's hand disappeared at the dance? (At the dance, we must recall, the reality that George and Lorraine never had kids is finally impressing itself upon Marty, just as, according to the photograph, it already has his older siblings.) Could the vest have some kind of retroactive effect, saving Doc? Surely not, we must conclude. The bullets have already pierced him! Yes, but they disappear from their lodgings inside his body as the vest appears. Indeed, when the natural course of events are bent by the disruption of time travel, the effects may not be instantaneous, but gradual.

- It all works out in the end, but is it not curious that Marty's parents benefit by what happens? They are in much better shape in the new-and-improved 1985. By fate, providence, or luck they remember what they need to, and forget what they don't. It's not just George knocking out Biff that changes his life. George's 1985 novel is entitled "A Match Made in Space." And on the cover, bringing the couple together, is a radiation suit-clad figure that recalls Marty's incognito encouragement as "Darth Vader [...] from the Planet Vulcan." Also, Marty warned his mother to go easy on the booze. Did that admonition prevent her from becoming an alcoholic? So, if Doc had actually thrown away the torn-up letter, would he end up better than he had been, like George and Lorraine? 1955 Doc told Marty that, even in his brief visit, he had made "a real difference in [Doc's] life." Might not Doc stay alive, rather than die? 'History' doesn't have to repeat itself, because we're already in a new timeline! Perhaps that letter, as a tangible artifact of that extraordinary week in 1955, kept Doc from forgetting anything, while George and Lorraine, devoid of a tangible artifact of Marty's visit, were left to proceed with their lives, blissfully ignorant.

As with any of us, who can really know why things turn out the way they do? But wouldn't it be an encouragement if we, like Marty, could have a true understanding of how much worse things could have been? And we, possessing this rare wisdom, would be, as a consequence, grateful for all that might otherwise have gone unappreciated.