

REINVENTING THE REEL:
THE “OMNIS” TEXT IN NONLINEAR FILM DISCOURSES

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by

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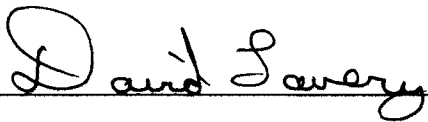


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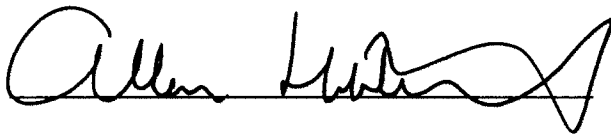
REINVENTING THE REEL:
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Reinventing the Reel: The “Omnis” Text in Nonlinear Film Discourses

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DEDICATION

For the loves of my life—Kim, Jillian, and Hilary,
whose self-emptying love and care for me far exceed the tests of time.

ABSTRACT

Narrative films have experimented with nonlinear storytelling structures since the beginning of film history. However, over the past 20 years, nonlinear narratives in film have become increasingly more popular. As these forms have gained momentum, filmmakers invoke them, from time to time, with a growing complexity and ingenuity. Even so, the study of what we often hear referred to in film criticism and commentary as the “nonlinear film”—an idea that distinctly challenges the strong temporal dependency of film art as opposed to the definitively lesser temporal demands of the written word—is alarmingly scant during a millennial transition when creative storytelling, particularly storytelling expressed through film, wants to reinvent itself in a rapidly expanding cloud of digital convergences internationally.

With the understanding that nonlinear films seem to serve as one valuable barometer of contemporary cinematic creativity since the early 1990s and stand apart from other alternate plot structures, the purpose of this study is to provide a discrete theory of nonlinear discourse in film and, in the process, delineating precisely what constitutes a nonlinear film (and what does not), how nonlinear films are constructed and work structurally, and how they signify thematically. What qualities do nonlinear films essentially share? How do they give polychronic primacy to a film narrative and what might this priority mean thematically, if anything? Are nonlinear films useful in terms of cinematic storytelling or tapping into film’s potential as an art form and why should we

care as viewers? Using selected narratological tools, a textual approach to reader-response criticism, and an ontological lens through which to perceive and interpret a fuller grasp of time, this study hopes to respond meaningfully to questions like these and determine what the ultimate usefulness of nonlinear films may be.

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CHAPTER I

THE “END”:

MEANINGS OF NONLINEAR DISCOURSE IN FILM

Time is the substance of which I am made.

Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river;

it is a tiger which mangles me, but I am the tiger;

it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time"

We're at the end of a hundred years of cinema, and we're at a place right now where film should be getting more and more complex. Instead, I think, it's going the other way. They're so simple now . . . that I don't even understand why most movies are made. I still think I'm excited for the future of cinema, but I'm not one of those people also who's making a declaration of the death of cinema. I think that basically film is still really very much in its infancy and [...] since Griffith 'til now I think that film has kind of gone in one narrative direction. And [...] I think that [...] it's important to start to tell stories in a different way.

—Harmony Korine, "The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy"

Possibly wrestling with his own anxieties, upstart indie filmmaker Harmony Korine may have broadly captured the essence of a tacit challenge facing twenty-first-century screenwriters and directors: what is the next truly inspired step for narrative film? Over roughly the past two decades, the unprecedented proliferation of Hollywood movie remakes, mash-ups, ceaseless sequels, backstory-prompted prequels, and connect-the-dot, formulaic blockbusters seems not only to reflect changes in the cultural and marketing strategies of revenue-hungry producers but also to contribute to a perception that the major American studios are grappling with ways to re-discover and sustain truly creative approaches to storytelling. Mark Harris wryly quips that, among the studio releases in summer 2012 alone, we can expect to see “an adaptation of a comic book, a reboot of an adaptation of a comic book, a sequel to a sequel to an adaptation of a comic book, a sequel to a reboot of an adaptation of a TV show, [...] a sequel to a sequel to a cartoon, a sequel to a sequel to a sequel to a cartoon, a sequel to a sequel to a sequel to a sequel to a movie based on a young-adult novel,” and so forth (1). This blind redundancy, fueled by a millennial, global media oligopoly with its synergistic horizontal integration and its industrial, commercial and political excesses, naturally engenders the kinds of trifling storylines which are, to Korine and many other maverick filmmakers, “so simple” and which account for what is essentially deemed an artistic shortfall in genuine cinematic innovation. Indeed, the most inventive work of aspiring filmmakers is suggestive of an apparent “used up-ness” of creativity in narrative film after only a century of activity—what Patricia Ducey has tentatively dubbed, in the spirit of John Barth, a “cinema of exhaustion.” Yet, just as what Barth had christened the “literature of exhaustion” in the 1960s found some promise in an appropriating, palimpsestic “literature of

replenishment,” so, too, some forty to fifty years later, narrative film finds itself in a similar *kairos* moment where an apparent, inevitable exhaustion of the imagination cries for replenishment.

Gradual experiments in narrative form, particularly narrative explorations in which stories unfold without a traditional, chronological order, have served as a fairly strong response to this recognized challenge. Whether audiences or critics would argue that narrative film is flagging or flourishing, one of the most visible and increasingly obvious ways in which visionary filmmakers seem to reinvent storytelling in the face of ostensible exhaustion is a class of films bearing the now-commonplace, but frequently misappropriated, label “nonlinear.” Not to be confused with nonlinear editing in “the cutting room,” nonlinear films are determined at the level of cinematic discourse and involve narrative structures designed by screenwriters or directors specifically to subvert the cinematic diegesis by re-arranging the time order of its parts. The turn of the twenty-first century marks an unprecedented number of films that can be categorized as “nonlinear”: movies featuring stories told in reverse, repeated from various character points-of-view, and told in seemingly random, chaotic time order. This burgeoning of nonlinear films over the past twenty years can be detected on all levels and standards of filmmaking, from fringe efforts like *Purgatory House* (Cindy Baer 2004), *Eye of God* (Tim Blake Nelson 1997), and *Kill the Poor* (Alan Taylor 2003) to more widely acclaimed achievements such as *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2003), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino 1994), and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000). A majority of these films, particularly on the indie circuit, seem to want to speak to a heavily

mediatized, fragmented, and disillusioned postmodern culture bent on trying to re-imagine itself through untapped narrative departures. As these nonlinear forms have gained momentum through the 1990s and into the 2000s, filmmakers have proceeded to invoke them from time to time, often with a growing complexity and ingenuity. Moreover, the unprecedented upsurge in the nonlinear playfulness of film and television narrative discourse during the past two decades is symptomatic of a far-reaching and ongoing contemporary narrative trend in film that owes largely to the fictional novel and is sparking more inceptive critical attention in recent years than ever before.

Storytelling out of chronological sequence is nothing new, of course, and certainly from at least the stage plays of Shakespeare and his early modern English contemporaries to the narrative puzzle box novels of Sterne, Nabokov, Vonnegut, and Morrison, authors of literary fiction have tampered with time. Gerard Genette famously argues that, in contrast to the strict chronological conventions of folklore, our Western literary heritage is, in fact, “inaugurated by a characteristic effect of anachrony”—a word Genette has used to describe the instances in which the temporal sections of a narrative discourse relate events differently than they arise in the order of temporal segments within a story (36). In the same breath, Genette hints, too, at how the stock abstractions of analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flashforward) have been in usage for centuries. In some ways, the authoritative corpora of Proust and Faulkner can be said to be largely responsible for the modern hastening of these kinds of explorations in discourse time versus story time—or, simply put, “nonlinearity”—and part of our nonchalance with these divergences as readers may be that they are now generally taken for granted

because of their common usage by twentieth-century writers. Likewise, but much less frequently and on a smaller scale, narrative films with nonlinear devices have their own long (if not patchy) tradition over the past century, from their most rudimentary silent appearances, in films like Edwin S. Porter's *Life of An American Fireman* (1903), to the mid-twentieth-century masterpieces of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941) and *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa 1950), to the more recent and palpable experimentation of screenwriters like Quentin Tarantino, Charlie Kaufman, or Guillermo Arriaga. Whether mainstream theater audience members adjust as readily or as comfortably as seasoned readers to those kinds of narratological devices may be more a question of lowbrow/highbrow acculturation.

Over the past century, one could maintain that nonlinearity has nearly become the rule in contemporary literature rather than the exception, whereas in film nonlinearity has taken longer to take hold. Be that as it may, film and television, too, have now finally not only begun to taste some of that same creative narrative freedom through the nonlinear treatment of stories but lately have become culturally emblematic of that freedom and, in the process, triggered a relatively new nonlinear trend in film. Scholars and film critics have placed this shift in the early 1990s about the time of Tarantino's arrival on the directorial scene with his *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino 1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (although one could make a case for Ramis and Rubin's almost-as-"cool" *Groundhog Day* (1993)). Evan Smith has dubbed Tarantino "the first poster child" of what he refers to as "thread structures" (92), and Charles Ramirez Berg goes so far as to hail this phenomenon "The Tarantino Effect"—a current of films since that time seeking the same

“cool” factor by way of comparable nonlinear piquancy. Indeed, some of the most firmly ensconced nonlinear films since then were released during an intensely active six-year window, from about 1999 to 2005.

Several contemporary film scholars have taken notice of this trend, acknowledging the ongoing experiments with narrative time and alternate plot structures in film generally—of which the frequent employment of nonlinear film discourse in the 1990s and 2000s plays a part. In response, they have sporadically attempted to offer explanations for the causes behind these escalating phenomena of narrative innovation. David Bordwell has recently suggested in the broadest terms—in what he restates as an era of “postclassical” cinema—how young filmmakers (like Korine) tend to become the casualties of “belatedness” and “allusionism”—mere dilutions of Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” (*Hollywood* 21-23). This anxiety seems to be symptomatic of many young writers and directors of nonlinear film narratives. Tarantino, for instance, openly confesses his “sibling rivalry” with Stanley Kubrick—a clear influence on Tarantino during his writing of *Reservoir Dogs*—claiming with characteristic self-indulgence, “This is my *The Killing*,” while refusing to thank Kubrick or to give any credit for his influence. Bordwell expresses an optimistic belief that change and continuity in the artistic patterns of Hollywood over the last eighty years have had a positive dialogical relationship as “belatedness” and “allusionism” co-exist. Even so, Hollywood films from the last fifty years, according to Bordwell, continue to “depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era” (21). On the whole, his observations epitomize the adage, “The more things change, the more they stay the same”—the kind of perspective that

would undoubtedly further catalyze Korine's artistic misgivings about the state of Hollywood.

On the other hand, Bordwell argues that a few aspiring directors (Cameron Crowe, for example) appear to esteem and seek to "sustain," rather than reject or "overturn," the canons of Hollywood's Golden Age, looking to learn from (and even, at first, emulate) the masters before they themselves find their own distinct voices. Bordwell claims that these young filmmakers go about this creative task several different ways: reiterating traditional strategies, extending or amplifying those strategies, or recasting "familiar forms into experimental shapes" (21-22). In each case, these approaches demonstrate how young filmmakers seldom entirely forego the conventions of narrative film simply for the sake of novelty. Nonetheless, Bordwell notes a tension in most of these ambitious filmmakers between honoring the work of their precursors and still feeling the need to surpass them by unreeling celluloid stories in fresh ways.

In addition to Bordwell's speculation that Bloomian anxieties and misreadings in young filmmakers may be partly responsible for recent attempts at narrative ingenuity in film, other, less industrial causes suggest themselves as well. In his substantial and cogent 2006 treatise, "A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the 'Tarantino Effect'," Berg conjectures that the effects of hypertextual popular culture may be largely to blame for the snowballing of inventive narrative forms at the turn of the new century. He suggests these effects specifically include "the ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity [. . .] and repeatedly take players back to the same situations; the

branched experience of surfing the net; and hypertext linking” (6). The interactivity of the cinematic hypertext in alternate film plot structures, Berg asserts, serves as the filmmaker’s invitation to viewers to participate in creating the meaning of the text, presumably in the spirit of reader-response, and to deconstruct the “illusion of any singular meaning in the text” (6). In considering causes, Berg, in particular, goes on to begin pursuing the narrative novelty trend and what it looks like via various alternate plot structures, some of which are to be considered nonlinear.

New narrative forms, particularly nonlinear film narratives, also sometimes seem to be manifestations of nothing more than substandard, badly edited filmmaking. Nicolas Roeg’s aptly named *Bad Timing* (1980), for example, is a nonlinear character study of obsession that seems devoid of many of the meaningful thematic or creative benefits that anachronic experiments potentially yield. Actress Theresa Russell’s account of Roeg’s haphazard sessions with film editor Tony Lawson in a 2005 interview that accompanies the Criterion DVD edition suggests that the film’s narrative nonlinearity is a blurred afterthought on Roeg’s part—a last-minute editing decision designed to cover mistakes rather than a thoughtfully-conceived directorial concept. Even the seductive Russell onscreen, the expert acting of Harvey Keitel, and the enigmatic, quirky casting of Art Garfunkel do not redeem the film’s narrative confusion. *For a Few Lousy Dollars* (Michael Bafaro 1998)—one of a few slavish rip-offs of Quentin Tarantino’s groundbreaking *Pulp Fiction*—represents another brand of nonlinear turkey similarly lacking any real meaning because of its capricious anachronic plot digressions and abuses. Such missteps seem, again, to reflect a fascination in some screenwriters,

directors, and contemporary film audiences with the novelty and “cool factor” that presumably should come with nonlinear storytelling tricks, yet they show little or none of the narrative competence of literary authors who do so with purpose and significant impact. Whereas, in narratological terms, defamiliarization—or “making the familiar strange by impeding automatic, habitual ways of perceiving” (Prince 18)—is a common strategy in novelistic writing, it is the opposite idea, algebrization—which “overautomatizes perception and allows the greatest economy of perceptive effort”—that remains the formulaic standard in most Hollywood studio practices, making it more difficult for film artists and mainstream American moviegoers alike to create and interpret, respectively, true narrative inspiration in the form of nonlinear cinematic discourse.

Despite the recent trend in both popular and unsuccessful nonlinear films over the past two decades and isolated academic attempts at identifying and categorizing these narratives, no one so far has examined carefully the exclusive merits of what can be called “nonlinear” discourse in film. Some attention (such as Berg’s sweeping taxonomy) is afforded to alternative plot structures in film narratives generally; yet, in light of the scattered and irregular discussion about nonlinear discourse in film taking place in the cultural and academic margins, the specific notion of polychronic innovation with the cinematic image remains largely un-defined and out of view. A more explicit discussion of this trend, however, would seem especially fitting since theorists like Genette, Ricoeur, and Mendilow give priority to the grand concept of “time” in narrative functionality and sophistication. In turn, such established film and narratology scholars as

Gerald Mast, Mary Ann Doane, and Gregory Currie consistently point to the ways in which cinematic art (and, by extension, television) is uniquely positioned to exploit and benefit from experiments with discourse/story time simply because the “moving picture,” of all the arts, is the one rooted most palpably, frame-by-frame, in the temporal, rather than the spatial. Given that the idea of time is central to film as a medium of expression, this lacuna in scholarly and critical conversation is surprising. If fiction writers have many tools at their disposal through the power and versatility of the written word, filmmakers uniquely depend, as affirmed by numerous film and language theorists over the years, from Bazin to Bordwell, on imagery in time (via “moving” images) for their storytelling.

In *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, Stephen Kern articulates this kinship between film and time as having something to do with how the lifespan of film as an art has historically seemed to parallel the developed world’s heightened awareness of time and the cultural emergence of the need to “control” it. In her discussion of modernity, contingency, and cinematic time, Mary Ann Doane advances the same scheme, reminding us of what a century of film theorists have now concluded: “[f]ilm, television, and video are frequently specified by the term *time-based media*” (4). Gregory Currie goes even further, exercising Gerald Mast’s claim that cinema is the “truest time-art of all” to defend not only how film is “especially adapted to the representation of the temporal,” but that its “capacity for representing the temporal is peculiarly rich and subtle” as well (101).

Even so, the study of what we often hear referred to in film criticism and

commentary as the “nonlinear film”—an idea that distinctly challenges the strong temporal dependency of film art as opposed to the definitively lesser temporal demands of the written word—is alarmingly scant during a millennial transition when creative storytelling, particularly storytelling expressed through film, wants to reinvent itself in a rapidly mushrooming sphere of digital convergences internationally. Given that time plays such an important role in the global strands of society and culture and, significantly, in the assertions of film as an art form during a time of industrial re- evaluation and restless experimentation with narrative time, a careful treatment of nonlinear discourse in film and its possible meanings seems a timely and meaningful contribution to film scholarship. Nowhere have films expressly identified with nonlinear discourses been brought together for a thoughtful comparative study of their inner workings and for a sound investigation into the explicit merits and pitfalls of nonlinear methods in film.

This study is intended to fill that gap by defining and regarding nonlinear film narratives in a clear and useful way. Specifically, with the understanding that nonlinear films seem to serve as one valuable barometer of contemporary cinematic creativity since the early 1990s and stand apart from other alternate plot structures, my purpose is to provide a discrete theory of nonlinear discourse in film and, in the process, delineate precisely what constitutes a nonlinear film (and what does not); how nonlinear films are constructed and work structurally; and how they signify thematically. What qualities do nonlinear films essentially share? How do they differ from one another? How do they give anachronic primacy to a film narrative and what might this kind of priority mean thematically, if anything? Does the tenor of a nonlinear discourse in a film ever move

beyond merely the etiological (cause and effect) and into a more radically intuitive direction that is teleological (purposeful with an end in mind), or even eschatological (ending with a purpose in mind)? Are nonlinear films useful in terms of cinematic storytelling or tapping into film's potential as an art form, and why should we care as viewers? Do nonlinear films constitute an entirely new genre? Using selected narratological tools, a textual approach to reader-response criticism, and an ontological lens through which to perceive and interpret a fuller grasp of time as it relates to story events and character evolution, this study hopes to respond meaningfully to these questions and to determine what the "end" or ultimate usefulness of nonlinear films may be.

Whenever nonlinear films happen to be the subject of discussion in other critical work, the dialogue routinely turns to inquiries about possible industrial rationales as to why a particular screenwriter or director might have chosen to relate the events of his/her story out of time order. Resisting the "why" or "what for" as much as possible, this study is more interested in what happens next to the cinematic text itself in this process. As a result, the thrust of the study is structuralist and narratological by design, although a strong textual approach to reader-response criticism will also be valuable for unpacking nonlinear discourses in film and how they signify.

The basic format of the project divides nonlinear films into five intrinsic categories based on the narratological design of each distinct discourse. The first and most prevalent category, films of "non-diegetic non-locality," looks at movies in which the discourse can be considered "kaleidoscopic" in terms of time. These films, some of

which are entirely achronic, contain stories in which the events fall into complex and seemingly arbitrary non-chronological discourse patterns with no apparent diegetic cause. Many films are considered in this chapter, with Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956) and Terrence Malick's recent masterpiece *Tree of Life* (2011) both standing tall as categorical exemplars. This first category is foundational in the way it serves to establish some normative narratological and ontological attributes within the entire community of nonlinear film discourses.

From the first category, the study proceeds to look at another, closely-related category of nonlinear films: "lucid dream" films. In this category, the protagonist is unable to make clear and informed choices because he or she cannot adequately discern reality from illusion. Charlie Kaufman's and Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) is an impressive example of this category and serves well as its centerpiece. As we'll see in most films from this category, what makes the anachrony distinctive is that the protagonist is often aware of the anachrony—what Wayne Booth refers to as "privileged" (160)—but is unable to control it because of another force which, at times, behaves like an omniscient, unseen and unheard narrator or "authority" (again, Booth's term), who inexplicably may or may not be responsible.

The last three categories offered for analysis—"view variori," "forked paths," and "retrocausal riddles"—are smaller, and, except for forked paths, are perhaps the least discussed types of nonlinear films; yet, they are equally fascinating in their novelty. In the first group, what are frequently referred to now as "forking path" films (based on Borges's distinguished short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths"), viewers are shown

possible alternatives or potential outcomes for a protagonist's choices in life. As the *ne plus ultra* of this set, Ramis and Rubin's *Groundhog Day* receives special attention. The second of the three, which, for the purposes of the study, can be termed "view variori": that group of films in which the viewer is shown the same incident from multiple perspectives or character points-of-view within the diegesis. As a result, each of the versions of the incident seems to change from perspective to perspective, and viewers' understanding of these differences usually relies on a clear grasp of the relationship between the film's story time and its discourse time. Mike Figgis's *Time Code* (2000) will be a point of special interest here, as well as Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), which is perhaps one of the strongest representatives of this category. In the final segment, "retrocausal riddles," viewers are typically shown "what went wrong" in a broken relationship between two or more characters, and then are led by the discourse backward through the story to ask and discover why this relationship went wrong. These movies express the story as revealed in reverse chronological order, a process that often (but not always) seems to have no apparent narrative cause. As a point of interest, *Memento*, although not neatly retrocausal, represents the category well for that very reason.

Prior to these considerations, however, Chapter 2 first seeks to provide a strong blueprint for the theory, including important definitions, a lexicon, the scope and methodology for the study, a review of the theory itself, and some delimitations. Out of the proverbial starting gate, an unambiguous definition of the term "nonlinear discourse" is established, particularly the word "nonlinear" as it applies to cinematic texts since the word is often either misunderstood, misapplied, or mistaken for something else entirely.

The chapter then briefly surveys previous attempts to systematize nonlinear films in order to further demonstrate the need for a consistent practice for looking at these films, followed by a more detailed introduction to the five categories of nonlinear discourse in film. Foundational to the mechanics of this proposal for a nonlinear film theory is the little-used term “syllepsis,” coined by Gerard Genette, a term which cleanly unites all five nonlinear categories into a single idea which, in turn, becomes a philosophical concept for nonlinear films as well. Much of the narratological language in the discussion relies on the work of Booth, Genette, Chatman, and Gerald Prince. In addition to the narratological means by which the study tackles nonlinear films, a particular textual approach to reader-response criticism—an approach involving story-driven, information-driven, and point-driven ways of reading developed by Russell A. Hunt and Douglas Vipond—is conflated with the concept of “syllepsis” to further create a workable theoretical model that helps to foster a keener understanding of how nonlinear films actually signify.

Another section of the next chapter is devoted to locating a shared understanding of the ways we think about time. As alluded to earlier, time is that key feature of film art under the greatest scrutiny in this study, and a brief, but important discussion of chronology versus temporality seems in order. Included in this consideration is a meaningful amalgam of at least three compatible, key ideas: J.M.E. McTaggart’s “B-series” theory of time (versus the more commonly held “A-theory”), a plain application of Theodore Sider’s curious ontology of “four-dimensionalism,” and a fair estimation of Augustine of Hippo’s speculations on the nature of God of time in his *Confessions*. As

the next chapter elucidates, when taken together, along with Genette's narratological concept of "syllepsis" and with Hunt and Vipond's position on theme-driven stories, these representations of time form a larger philosophical, even theological idea as manifested in films with nonlinear discourse.

This idea, for lack of a more fruitful term, might be thought of as a kind of "*omnis* yearning." What is meant by *omnis* or "all" or "every" in this context is the manner in which filmmakers, at times, seek to employ the movement of images, through one nonlinear strategy or another, and to express them in such a way that viewers see "all" of an incident or "all" of an idea or "all" of a person's life somehow more completely than they could possibly see them by watching those images unravel in a more conventional diegetic fashion. (By the same token, the *omnis* seems to make available a means by which to potentially circumvent the persistence, the irrevocability, or the fortuity of time as displayed in film. By applying the notion of the *omnis* to these categories of nonlinear discourse in film, this study hopes to demonstrate how nonlinear films are useful to cinematic storytelling in unanticipated ways. To talk, then, about the "end," or the ultimate usefulness, of nonlinear films is to take these narratological, reader-response, and ontological ideas together and explore how they specifically engage a variety of films that are considered to be nonlinear.

Chapter II

SYLLEPSIS AND OMNIS:

WHAT A NONLINEAR FILM REALLY LOOKS LIKE

A film should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order.

Jean-Luc Godard

Who shall lay hold upon the mind of man that it may stand and see that time with its past and future must be determined by eternity, which stands and does not pass, which has in itself no past or future.

Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book XI

The unexpected proliferation around the turn of the new century of what can be called “nonlinear films” and their distinctive new role in cinematic innovation as a means by which to help combat Hollywood’s apparent storytelling malaise begs for a system of ideas that can help us better grasp the magnitude of these creative films and how they signify to audiences. Such a system would enable one to compare and contrast the qualities of these films, to explore in imaginative ways how time-based anomalies in narrative structure inform and often mirror thematic intent, and to begin to grasp the

kinds of unique ideas these films might point to beyond a mere sleight of hand with cause-and-effect. As this study hopes to develop that system, some discussion about what exactly constitutes a “nonlinear film”—a term that is more specific than “alternate plot films” and that recognizes films in a rather different way than those that may be part of what Alissa Quart has referred to as “hyperlink cinema” (48)—must precede that work and help establish some helpful definitions, perspectives, and methodologies to provide a way in.

An appropriate launch point may be first to look at how the term “nonlinear” itself has been used previously with regard to film. In blogs, discussion forums, and other forms of online interactivity and social media, the term tends to be applied as an umbrella expression for all movies that demonstrate some irregularity in their plots, particularly as it may have to do with time. The word “nonlinear” seems foggy even in some formal discussions. For example, in Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush’s book, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, the opening paragraphs of their chapter devoted to “The Non-linear Film” use the word in varying contexts that raise questions about its efficacy. In their first sentence, they refer to nonlinear films as “voice-oriented” (154). The chapter does not go on to make this connection clear except to suggest that nonlinear films, in Dancyger and Rush’s thinking, afford viewers an opportunity to hear the multiple voices of many characters. If one subscribes to the notion that film is a time-based art form, then “nonlinear,” in the anachronic sense, is a “time-oriented” phenomenon, rather than “voice-oriented.” Later in the chapter, Dancyger and Rush add that “the non-linear story has multiple main characters rather than a single-goal directed

character” (156).

Parenthetically, their description here resembles what Evan Smith has called “thread structures” and what Charles Ramirez Berg has referred to as either the “polyphonic” or “ensemble” alternative plot (when multiple protagonists are all in the same location) or the “parallel” alternative plot (in which multiple protagonists are located in various locations), ideas that other critics and scholars have shared over time (14-18). When Smith claims that a “single, driving story line” is the “hallmark of linear structure,” we assume then that by “multiple story threads” he wants to think in nonlinear terms; but this notion of the multiple protagonist is not the time-based approach in film that most commonly constitutes what seems to be meant by “nonlinearity.” Smith goes on to distinguish between ensemble stories in film—stories with multiple characters that “feature only one main story, a single dramatic journey”—and “thread structures” in film, in which each of the several protagonists is “the hero in his or her own story” (90). Berg makes this distinction as well, but draws on Gerald Prince’s term (via Bakhtin) “polyphonic” to describe such “thread structures” and, unlike Smith, chooses to use the term interchangeably with “ensemble” (14). It is important to recognize here, however, that, in terms of time-based nonlinearity, the “polyphonic” nature of films is less relevant than the “polychronic” nature of films. Prince explains that polychronic narration “involves and exploits a multi-valued system of temporal ordering, including not only such values or concepts as earlier-than-(temporal reference point) X, later-than-X, or contemporaneous-with-X but also indeterminately-situated-vis-à-vis-X (which is not to be conflated with timeless, dateless, strictly achronic)” (77). Consequently, as will be

recommended over the next several pages, nonlinear films, as they tap into (and, indeed, depend on) the time-orientation of film art in general, should not be determined on the basis of multiple protagonists or multiple plots, although they may and frequently do contain them.

Dancyger and Rush claim, too, that the recent development of the “non-linear film” has been “paralleled by the development of non-linear editing and of computer applications in special effects, animation, and video games” (154). Though their histories may dovetail with one another, non-linear editing as a mere technological convenience is now used for all kinds of narrative filmmaking, both linear and nonlinear alike, and is manifestly unrelated to the most meaningful implications of nonlinear film as an art form with regard to narrative strategy. More tenable is their association between the trend in nonlinear films and the video gaming boom of the last two decades as digital sophistication has skyrocketed. Berg, too, cites the potential influence of the “ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity [. . . that] repeatedly take players back to the same situations [. . . and] hypertext linking” (6). Just prior to Berg’s treatise on “alternate plots” in film, in her review of *Happy Endings* (Don Roos 2005), Alissa Quart offered a similar look at what she calls “multitasking web-inflected films” that, for Quart, inaugurate a new genre of film altogether (48). Yet, again, while some “alternate plot” films containing multiple protagonists or locations conspicuously tinker on occasion with chronology in a movie (as in *Pulp Fiction*, *Go* [Doug Liman 1999], *11:14* [Greg Marcks 2003], or *21 Grams*, for instance), many others among those movies do not overtly do so

(*Magnolia* [Paul Thomas Anderson 1999], *Traffic* [Steven Soderbergh 2000], *Crash* [Paul Haggis 2004], *Look Both Ways* [Sarah Watt 2005], and so forth) and, so, nonlinear films persist as essentially only one kind of “alternate plot” film, a polychronic subdivision that until now has not been explicitly regarded.

Further diluting our understanding of the term “nonlinear” are the proposals that certain films may be single-handedly responsible for the category. Dancyger and Rush make a decisive historical assertion that Buñuel and Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* of 1929 was “the first nonlinear film” (154). Given the criteria that both authors present above, along with that of Berg and Quart, Dziga Vertov’s achronic *Man With A Movie Camera*—also from 1929 and released just one month before *Andalou*—could equally qualify as a hyperlinking, multi-location “first” nonlinear movie. Indeed, at least as early as Edwin S. Porter’s 1903 experiment *Life of an American Fireman*, in which the viewer is shown the same rescue scene twice from two different points-of-view, we observe an early filmmaker handling time nonlinearly with no title card or other identifier to help his presumably savvy audience make the perceptual leap. Again, using the broad criteria for nonlinearity above, one might argue that D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) moves generously back and forth across time and, as Seymour Chatman has argued, represents a form of “achrony” (apparent randomness or timelessness), a term he borrows from Genette (66). While the ongoing exchange of views as to “why” movies with alternate plot structures, including nonlinear films, have become more popular in recent years can be substantially revealing in terms of artistic influences and industry thinking, they tend to focus less on the details of “how” the cinematic texts themselves behave or what their

behavior may mean for the viewer. Looking historically at extolled milestones of creative cinematic achievement, then, provides only a small glimpse into what most nonlinear films really look like.

Although a distinct, consistent definition of nonlinear films is nearly absent in published film theory, many scholars have talked around the subject. “Anachrony,” what will be detected as an overriding principle in nonlinear films, is the term Genette has assigned in literary analysis to any shift in the temporal order of narrative discourse—highlighting “analepses” (flashbacks) and “prolepses” (flashforwards) even in their simplest forms (36)—and, thus, is the subject of various discussions regarding time in both literature and film. Seymour Chatman’s well-known *Story and Discourse* demonstrates how prolepses and analepses operate as potentially complex strategies of discourse in film language (63-7). Significantly, Chatman also emphasizes the third anachronic option introduced by Genette: achrony. According to Chatman, a possible function of this third alternative—which may meaningfully speak to the specific behavior of nonlinear films later—is to “mystify us about the order in which events occur, the mystification being a function of the unreliability of the narration” (66). Chatman also hints at nonlinear discourse when he contrasts traditional plots that resolve naturally through linear cause-and-effect with so-called “modern plots” in which “it is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically), but rather that a state affairs is revealed” (48). Though he mentions the greater significance of temporal order being suited to “resolved” plots, as opposed to “revealed” plots, Chatman never broaches nonlinear discourse directly.

In his meticulous book, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science*, Gregory Currie resorts to Genette's anachronies to cogently refute the "Claim of Presentness"—postulated by Béla Balázs, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and others—in which the images of film are said to occur only in the present, with no past or future. In addition, Currie contends that "ellipsis"—a gap between two story events while moving chronologically forward in story time—can serve, now and then, as a fourth kind of anachrony despite Genette's insistence that ellipsis is part of his "duration" classification rather than that of narrative "order." Collectively, these particular narratological terminologies among Genette, Chatman, Currie, and others bring us somewhat closer to a consistent working definition of nonlinear discourse in film yet are still incomplete by themselves, for one or more of the anachronies (analepsis, prolepsis, achrony, ellipsis) can be discovered within the discourse of nearly all movies, the majority of which would not be considered "nonlinear," as we shall see.

Outside of strictly narratological conversations, relatively few others have offered a strong critique of nonlinear films. J.J. Murphy recounts the flashback framework of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* as boasting a "scrambled-time structure" (144) and approaches Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, with its disorienting anachronies, as a "puzzle film" (180). In his treatment of Stanley Kubrick's narrative and stylistic techniques, Mario Falsetto devotes considerable effort toward the nonlinear discourse in *The Killing* (1956), establishing how the "film's presentation of narrative information may be fragmented, but the audience ultimately possesses more information than any of the characters" (7). Possibly the most thoughtful, general consideration of nonlinear films—

and the one that, in some ways, most closely corresponds to the approach taken for this study—can be found in Linda J. Cowgill’s book *Secrets of Screenplay Structure*. In her pragmatic chapter dealing with “the nonlinear plot,” she submits that

The nonlinear film also defies the conventional rules of plot construction because it breaks apart the standard notion that the plot’s scenes must proceed in chronological order, from the opening exposition to the conflict’s climax and resolution. A nonlinear structure deconstructs a complicated event, situation, character or a combination of these elements by reordering the time sequence and creating a new composition for dramatic (or comedic) purposes. (148)

Cowgill goes on to contrast nonlinear films such as *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci 1970), *Two for the Road* (Stanley Donen 1967), and *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen 1977) with films that have only strong flashbacks in them (*Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz 1942], *Midnight Cowboy* [John Schlesinger 1969], and *Ordinary People* [Robert Redford 1980]) but which, in her thinking, do not constitute nonlinear films. Nonetheless, her rationale for these distinctions is unclear and often repetitive, and her analysis is peppered with several apparent contradictions. Initially, she cautions aspiring screenwriters to avoid “confus[ing] the nonlinear film for one that utilizes flashbacks” (148) but then later reflects that “[n]onlinear films are made up of flashbacks and many also use flash forwards” (159). Likewise, she alludes in her opening to films like *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer 1995) as nonlinear; later, she advises that “films like *The Usual Suspects* and *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella 1996), which use only two time frames with

scenes proceeding in a chronological order in each one, are essentially linear films” (159). Despite some of the incongruities in her observations regarding nonlinear discourse in film, however, Cowgill provides a valuable entry point into a more cohesive definition for these kinds of films, particularly when she concludes that “[d]ramatic unity in great nonlinear films is achieved by the intersection of two key ingredients: 1) a controlling theme or idea; 2) a framing action” (151). Her first ingredient here begins to make possible a way to better understand nonlinear discourse in film.

To define solidly what a nonlinear film looks like, an idea expressed in a mere footnote by Genette must be placed front and center in our thinking—the notion of “syllepsis.” Genette’s word, though a bit clunky, is thoroughly obliging as a term that provides the fulcrum for nonlinear films. In his discussion of order—specifically retrospection, anticipation, and timelessness through the anachronies of analepsis, prolepsis, and achrony, respectively—Genette asserts the possibility of a particular relationship among these anachronies and labels this relationship a “syllepsis,” which he stipulates as “the fact of taking together [...] anachronic groupings governed by one or another kinship” (85). Gerald Prince’s translation of Genette’s term is similar: “[a] group of situations and events governed by a non-chronological principle rather than by a chronological one” (97). While no other discussions of nonlinear films seem to have tapped into this narratological idea of syllepsis (rather than the grammatical or rhetorical), the meaning of the term precisely describes the time relationship among anachronic scenes in movies that are deemed nonlinear. In both Genette’s and Prince’s definitions, the key action that serves with the greatest clarity to divide nonlinear films

from traditional linear films is the “governing” process of the discourse time, and it is in looking at how and to what extent the various story events in any given film are *governed by* non-chronological principles that we can label and begin to categorize appropriately films in which the discourse is unquestionably nonlinear. Not only does the expression “nonlinear discourse” convey that the discourse time re-arranges the chronology of events located in the world of the story, so as to reveal or display the story events, rather than recount them (Chatman 32), but “nonlinear discourse,” understood in a sylleptical context, also crucially entails that this re-arrangement of story events is featured *prominently*. Cowgill’s suggestion that “a controlling theme or idea” is a key ingredient for clarifying nonlinear discourse in films is, in a sense, headed in the right direction; yet, it is not quite accurate, for whereas “theme” is a diegetic concept and, so, is relegated to story instead of discourse, “syllepsis,” on the other hand is a discourse-based concept and, therefore, a truer representation of how story events in films are related to viewers out of chronological sequence. In nonlinear films, “theme” is to “story” as “syllepsis” is to “discourse.”

When a film, then, is genuinely nonlinear, or *governed by* non-chronological principles or sylleptical kinship, it eliminates the possibility of brief or solitary anachronic activity as a marker of nonlinearity in a film’s discourse. Instead, as a baseline, the narration is polychronic in some form or another. Consequently, this definition confirms that common, single uses of flashbacks or flashforwards in a film cannot alone qualify a film as nonlinear, thereby excluding films like *Casablanca*, *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly 1952), or *Lord of the Rings: The*

Fellowship of the Ring (Peter Jackson 2001) as nonlinear, for example. Similarly, movies that employ simple frame stories or bookending structures (*Amadeus* [Milos Forman 1994]), *Saving Private Ryan* [Steven Spielberg 1998], *Titanic* [James Cameron 1997]) or extreme *in medias res* measures (*The Hudsucker Proxy* [Joel and Ethan Coen 1994], *Mission Impossible III* [J.J. Abrams 2006]) cannot be counted in the category because their limited impact does not govern a larger filmic anachrony by means of any conceivable kinship of its few existing non-chronological parts. Straightforward time travel narratives, too, are off-limits: their manipulation of time is almost always entirely diegetic; any anachrony between story and discourse times is nonexistent; and the likes of Dr. Who, Marty McFly, and other time travelers who notoriously navigate the past and future are fully aware of the time shifts within the world of the story, unlike most characters represented polychronically by way of a nonlinear film's discourse. By putting syllepsis in the service of defining filmic nonlinearity, questionable movies with otherwise simple polychronic configurations such as *The Usual Suspects*, *The English Patient*, *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh 1998), *Freedom Deep* (Aaron Stevenson 1998), *Body Shots* (Michael Cristofer 1999), *Kill Me Later* (Annette Goliti Gutierrez and Dana Lustig 2001), *Sex and Lucia* (Julio Medem 2001), Hare and Stephen Daldry's adaptation of Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (2002), *Where the Truth Lies* (Rupert Holmes/Atom Egoyan 2005), *The Lake House* (Alejandro Agresti 2006), and *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan 2006) all arguably could pass the test of nonlinearity as they alternate among two and three timelines, respectively. Although each timeline by itself in each of these films moves forward in a consistent, chronological way, they are also all *governed* by the non-chronological principle of jumping back and forth between two or more different time

periods for the duration of each film, which brings into stronger relief for viewers a particular kinship (to be determined as relational, spatial, thematic, etc.)—kinship that is clearly not chronological and therefore may signify ideas or perspectives quite different from those of a more traditional plot structure.

To be clear, when one speaks of nonlinear films in the sense just described, one is considering, in actuality, the nonlinear *discourses* of films. Chatman has helped to spell out the corresponding terms of Aristotle (mythos, logos), the Russian formalists (sjuzet, fabula), and Günther Müller (Erzählzeit, Erzähite Zeit) by giving us the plain terms “discourse” and “story” to describe the difference between the representation of a sequence of events and the sequence of events themselves. For that reason, a “nonlinear film” is not a movie in which the events within the world of the movie occur out of chronological order (such as in a time travel narrative), but rather a movie in which the events of the story are represented out of order in the telling, and so the expressions “nonlinear film” and “nonlinear discourse in film” may be seen to function interchangeably. In order to avoid possible confusion and for ease of discussion, deference will be given in this study to Chatman’s accessible terms “story” and “discourse” instead of to other comparable narratological designations.

If a nonlinear film is one in which discourse is *governed by* non-chronological principles or the sylleptical kinship among its parts, then a meaningful correlation becomes visible between nonlinear films and a recognized textual approach to reader-response theory adopted by Russell A. Hunt and Douglas Vipond in their investigation, “Crash-Testing a Transactional Model of Literary Reading,” which looks at ordinary

reading events with an eye toward real-world conditions (in contrast to pure literary theory and criticism) and sees them as “transaction[s] among three mutually transforming entities: The reader, the text, and the situation” (24). From their observations, Hunt and Vipond conclude that specific instances of reading tend to fall into three general modes which can be simply labeled, “information-driven,” “story-driven,” and “point-driven.”

Hunt and Vipond have found “information-driven” reading to be performed by readers who are interested mostly in the process of fact-finding as they read a story, readers who want to “walk away with new information” (27). “Story-driven readers,” on the other hand, seem to be characterized by “a desire to enter imaginatively into the storyworld” for a kind of “vicarious experience” with the characters (27). The last mode, “point-driven reading,” which they found to be the rarest mode of reading among the participants in their fieldwork, expects in a story that “the teller will be ‘getting at’ something. As we use the term a point is *not* equivalent to a ‘moral’ or a ‘theme’ or the ‘gist.’ Usually points are difficult or impossible to put into words [...]” (27). Point-driven readers tend to look at the text “as an intentional, purposeful piece of discourse” (28). The Venn diagram below best illustrates how they perceive the relationships among these three modes of reading (26). Because nonlinear films re-arrange the chronology of

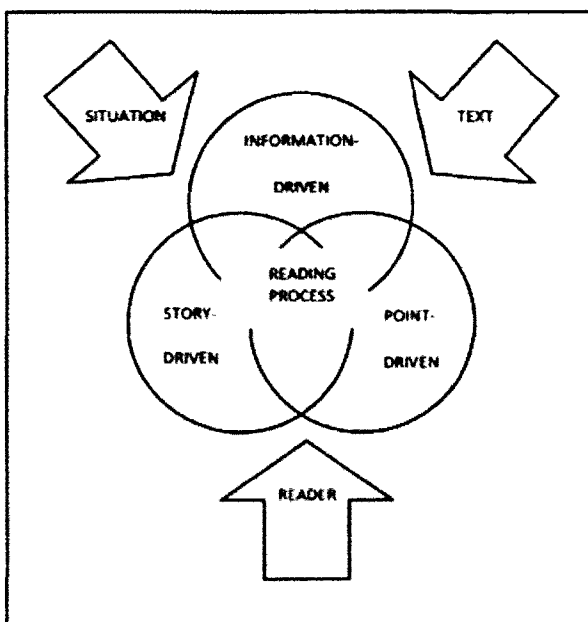


Figure 1. Hunt and Vipond's three modes of reading.

story events so as to bring bolder attention to the discourse, these films disrupt the natural, causal story flow with the jarring effect of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* and may discourage story-driven “readings” of and engagement with the filmic “text.” For the same reason, because they are contingent upon the exceptional kinship of non-chronological story segments governing the viewing experience, nonlinear films would seem more likely to attract viewers who are disposed to be either information-driven or point-driven.

As this study examines nonlinear films, these last two strands of reading mode invitations may shed some light on how these films signify and why their collective contribution might be meaningful to film studies. Specifically, nonlinear films with an

appeal for information-driven viewers may lead them to search for clues in the story by playing cause-and-effect games with the disrupted plot, creating mysteries to solve and puzzles for viewers to piece together by putting time back into its correct order mentally. This etiological strand would seem to require audiences to pay close attention to story details, such as scanning for clues in a heist movie, for example, in order to discover the reason(s) for or origin(s) of an action or event shown earlier in the discourse, but occurring later in the story proper. Unlike the etiological strand, the second strand of nonlinear films is conceivably composed of filmic texts that lure the most point-driven viewers into “reading” the anachronic components of these films as “intentional, purposeful pieces of discourse.” The texts in these second-strand films, in which the non-chronological sum is greater than the chronological reconstitution of a story’s parts, may lend a greater purpose through the lens of polychronic narration—telic in nature, and perhaps, in the case some films, even ecabatic. Craig Keen, professor of systematic theology at Azusa Pacific University, suggests that a *telos* is “an end that is already present in seed form,” whereas *eschatos* signifies “a certain end.” As such, the root of “teleology” signifies “to complete the circle,” while the root of “eschatology” actually denotes the idea of “outside.” A nonlinear film that invites a point-driven reading may gravitate toward either one of these “endings” that call attention to an elusive ontological core, depending on how the non-chronological principle that governs the film unfolds.

This ontological core—point-driven in a way that is “difficult or impossible to put into words,” as suggested by Hunt and Vipond—centers on several key notions of time, particularly since film art is so strongly time-based and since our working definition of

nonlinear film relies on narratological syllepsis. In order to understand nonlinear films more fully, then, we should recognize their relationship with relevant interpretations of time. Time is an expansive topic, of course, with treatises on the metaphysics of time appearing as early as Aristotle. More recent theories from approximately this past century regarding the ontology and tenses of time afford ways of considering how time informs the discourse behavior of nonlinear films. From these perspectives, three of them in particular, which are mutually compatible and interface each other, can be tapped for the benefit of this study. To begin, J. M. E. McTaggart's legendary and mildly controversial distinction between what he has called the "A-series" of time and the "B-series" is briefly considered. Moreover, aligning closely with the B-series, we will contemplate the connection that nonlinear films seem to have with "four-dimensionalism," a little-known concept debated by philosophers specializing in metaphysics. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Augustine of Hippo will be summoned to enhance these connections through his meditations on time from a Christian worldview.

A nonlinear film's discourse is made up of temporal parts that have been rearranged for the viewer, and so these parts have a relationship or kinship with one another that is not chiefly chronological. As a result, what viewers might perceive to be past, present, or future may be partially clouded by anachrony and, in fact, may not even be important to the larger "point" of the discourse. In his 1908 essay "The Unreality of Time," McTaggart grapples with tenses as he attempts to improve our understanding of time. He arrives at a compromise between thinking of time as tensed—"was, now, will"

or “past, present, or future” or “yesterday, today, tomorrow” (“A-concepts”)—and thinking of time as tenseless—that which “comes before or earlier than, is simultaneous with, comes after or later than” (“B-concepts”), although he emphasizes the greater significance of the latter in his case for time’s “unreality.” As Prince has shown, this contrast is helpful for identifying polychronic narration and its internal workings.

Extrapolating this notion narratologically, then, the A-series seems to correspond with linear discourse, just as reductionist B-judgments coincide with nonlinear discourse, for “[t]he mark of B-concepts is that they can be applied without knowing at what point in time they are being applied, whereas A-concepts require a vantage point” (Sider 12).

Vantage point is precisely what a linear discourse imparts; nonlinear discourse, conversely, draws its power from tenseless applications of time and the uncertainty of vantage point.

Consider the difference, in this respect, between a traditional linear film and a nonlinear film. In *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming 1939), for instance, as a viewer follows the story linearly, the order of the movie’s discourse time matches the order of its story time, and the A-series predominates as it becomes clear that Dorothy *was* in Kansas, is *now* on the Yellow Brick Road, and *will* reach the Emerald City, in that order, if she perseveres. No syllepsis occurs, and the viewer is led, through Dorothy’s eyes, to focus on a traditional chronological pattern revealing each progressively intensifying event in the diegetic world. In Arriaga and Iñárritu’s *21 Grams*, on the other hand, a viewer digests the story nonlinearly, and the ensuing polychronic narration that follows the linear journeys of each of the three primary characters against the nonlinear

representation of those journeys in the discourse requires a kind of B-conceptual thinking on the part of the viewer to unscramble the story. For the viewer here (as opposed to the characters living chronologically within the story), the ideas of “past, present, future” hold little meaning; a viewer, on this occasion, will try to discern what temporal parts of the story “come before, are simultaneous with other scenes, or come after.”

Interestingly, in time travel narratives on film, because they defy categorization as neither linear nor nonlinear, A-judgments and B-judgments seem to relate to story and discourse quite differently. In Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* (1985), for instance, Marty McFly has traveled to an “earlier” time in which, although he acknowledges it as the “past,” he must still live as though it is his “new present” (B-thinking). His goal is to get back to a “later” time—what used to be his “present” but has “now” shifted to become his “future,” or “what comes after” (again, B-thinking). Paradoxically, the viewer is invited only into A-thinking because the discourse time is linear here, even if the story time is not. The viewer readily labels the “past” and the “present” without feeling their shifting effects the way that Marty does. The title of the movie cleverly intimates these new, inverted roles between the A- and B-concepts of time and their relation to the story/discourse process.

Associated with McTaggart’s beliefs about time, and also helpful to a clearer grasp of nonlinear film is the concept of “four-dimensionalism.” Michael Tooley, Michael Rea, and numerous other notable philosophers who have written extensively on metaphysics and time have articulated their thoughts on four-dimensionalism as a means of better understanding how time might work. Theodore Sider is one of the foremost

authorities on this idea and addresses the subject exhaustively in his book *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, which submits the term as a “doctrine of temporal parts” and a picture of persistence over time. In four-dimensionalism, Sider suggests, a person may be comprised not only of spatial parts (head, feet, kidney, heart, and so forth), but also of temporal parts (infancy, adolescence, middle age, old age); and, just as spatial parts can be larger or smaller (head, mouth, lips, skin cells), so temporal parts can be larger or smaller (adolescence, a year in the life of, a day, or one life-changing minute) (2-3). “According to this principle,” Sider explains, “any group of objects has a sum, even a group of objects that is very scattered” (7). Sider also carefully connects the dots between four-dimensionalism and an idea known as “eternalism,” which serves as his defense against an opposing philosophy called “presentism.” Sider claims that, with eternalism, “past and future objects and times are just as real as currently existing ones. [...] Reality consists of a four-dimensional spatiotemporal manifold of events and objects—the so-called ‘block universe.’ [...] According to *presentism*, on the other hand, only currently existing objects are real” (11). Sider also gives a nod to Tooley and others who have expressed a popular variation of four-dimensionalism—the “growing block universe”—in which the past and present are real, while the future is not.

One common way to illustrate this idea of four-dimensionalism is to imagine a bicycle standing halfway through a door frame, say, the front entrance to a house. Spatially, part of the bicycle is inside, part is outside, and part is exactly in the door frame itself. If space can be used as a metaphor for time, and if one is to talk in terms of

temporal parts instead of spatial parts, then it could be said that part of the bicycle comes earlier (or prior to), part of it comes later, and a very small part of it is "simultaneous with" (again, B-judgments, in McTaggart's thinking). As a result, the bicycle, in "time," is actually the sum of its temporal parts. Applied more directly to a person (or an object), it might then be said that a person (or object) is defined by the total sum of their life (or the object's "existence"), not just by what has come before, or by any particular moment, or by what is yet to come.

A more detailed discussion of four-dimensionalism and the kindred ideas of eternalism and perdurantism would require more space than available and is not essential for the purposes of this study; suffice it to say, the discourses of nonlinear films seem to grant opportunities for viewers to employ some level of both B-conceptual and four-dimensionalist thinking. Not only do these discourses invite point-driven "readings" and compel viewers into tenseless musing and deciphering, but they do so by bestowing upon them an authorial, almost godlike power to grasp, within the context of the whole viewing experience, how past and future times are just as real as present ones and that *any* group of anachronic images has a kinship or sum that requires an interpretive dexterity beyond routine expectations of basic chronological discourse. Not unlike the Shakespearean "poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling" (V. i. 12) or, creepily, an "Observer" from the world(s) of *Fringe*, the viewers of nonlinear discourses are uniquely privileged to look beyond the constraints of time, to "glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" (V. i. 13). That being so, viewers of *Annie Hall*, *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch 2001), *The Red Violin* (François Girard 1998), and other nonlinear films are called upon

to unpack the syllepses (without necessarily reassembling the temporal parts into chronological order) and, ultimately, to construe the sum of their parts.

This authorial control that allows viewers to peer from the outside of a film's diegesis through the lens of nonlinear discourse and into the sylleptical trappings of a narrative suggests at least one more important way of looking at time. In the eleventh chapter of his *Confessions*, Christian philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo considers time and eternity from a strong, point-driven position. In the Augustinian tradition, God as such, exists in eternity, which is perpetually in the present, and outside of the dimension we know as *chronology*, or tensed time, which Faulkner's Quentin Compson details as the kind of time "clicked off by [the] little wheels" of clocks (54).

Augustine argues that God's "vision of occurrences in time is not temporally conditioned" (221) and asks, "What times existed which were not brought into being by you? [...] you are the cause of all times [...]. You have made time itself. Time could not elapse before you made time. [...] Your 'years' neither go nor come. Ours come and go so that all may come in succession. All your 'years' subsist in simultaneity, because they do not change" (229-30). Most importantly, Augustine asserts, "In the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present. But no time is fully present. It will see that all past time is driven backwards by the future, and all future time is the consequent of the past, and all past and future are created and set on their course by that which is always present" (228). Augustine's claim that the "whole is present" while "no time is fully present" distinctly smacks of eternalism and, specifically, four-dimensionalism; by the same token, he makes clear that only God can operate in the way he describes, outside of time,

which serves to further legitimize the presumed sacred objectivity required to survey “earlier, now, later” all at once, and in any order. A nonlinear film may offer viewers a similar Augustinian, godlike, “beyond-time” experience as they watch the discourse unfold sylleptically unbeknownst to the characters. Furthermore, Augustine’s ontology of time may radically facilitate a keener sense of the extraordinary ways nonlinear films signify.

In her book *The Fire in the Equations*, Kitty Ferguson illuminates these temporal meditations of Augustine with a short list of fitting questions:

What would it be like if events were not ordered in chronological time? If God knows everything in the universe that ever has happened and ever will happen [...], in what way would that affect God’s power to affect the universe? What meaning could cause and effect have in such a setting? What would happen to ‘predictability’? Where events are not filed chronologically, is there some other sort of filing system? (226)

Ferguson’s line of questioning is not only an eloquent response to Augustine but a telling line of inquiry for exploring the discourse of nonlinear films. Her thinking speaks to a nonlinear vision of events, to the potential effects that order exhibits on causality and predictability, and to a nonlinear “sort of filing system” that bears an uncanny consistency with the sylleptical kinship to which Genette refers.

Brought together and synthesized—the anachronies of film, narratological syllepsis, a reader-response propensity for fostering information- and (especially) point-

driven readings, the tenseless B-concept of time, four-dimensionalism and, at last, an Augustinian account of authority over temporality—all of these connected ideas form a strong amalgam, a new schema by which one can more effectively think about the wide variety of significations and merits of nonlinear discourse as it appears imaginatively in film narratives. In a broader, less pragmatic sense, this schema seems already to embody a deep-rooted yearning in filmmakers and audiences for something that the cinema seems capable of fulfilling as a time-based, imagistic art form, essentially a yearning not unlike Bazin's vision of "the myth of total cinema." For the benefit of this study, that apparent, innate thirst or impulse for such a multi-dimensional, time-spanning vision of life, as visible in the texts of nonlinear films, will be thought of as the *omnis* yearning—that is, an intrinsic, *a priori* property in cinematic texts unique to the strategies of nonlinear discourse that prompts and persuades us to look, at times, beyond the local and the transient to something more far-reaching: the "all" or sum of a character's encounter or journey that may somehow be viewed more completely than could possibly be glimpsed merely by watching that encounter or journey unfold under time-locked conditions. In this way, the *omnis* may serve as a helpful means by which to consider and to circumvent the limitations (persistence, irrevocability, and fortuity) of time as ordinarily displayed in film.

In the following chapters, the narratological "syllepsis" and the ontological "omnis" will be applied to the five groupings of films introduced in the opening chapter. In addition to this methodological point of departure, each chapter will include an explanation and definition for that particular category of nonlinear films, a general

discussion of representative domestic and international films within the category, and a brief analysis of the structure and signification of highlighted samples or a single sample. Again, the final chapter will draw some conclusions about nonlinear films based on these analyses and recommend further directions for the study of nonlinear films.

Since the study will be limited to representative examples of nonlinearity in films to delineate the mechanics of each category, the rationale for those limits should be touched upon briefly. As they were alluded to earlier, narrative films that only make use of basic flashbacks, flashforwards, frame stories, or other simple or commonly used devices involving shifts in narrative time are not candidates for consideration as nonlinear films because, in those devices alone, such films do not satisfy the essential requirement of syllepsis. Their only mention, then, will be as points of comparison or contrast with films under discussion. Likewise, films that are regarded as part of the time travel genre will be avoided since syllepsis in the case of time travel applies only to the diegetic world itself rather than to the extradiegetic narrative discourse, which is the focus of the study.

Inevitably, some nonlinear films will qualify for two or more of the categories. The decision to place these kinds of films firmly in one camp or another is based largely again on syllepsis and on approximately which non-chronological principle seems to govern the discourse more interestingly or more prominently. So, whereas *Memento* falls easily and fairly equally into both the “lucid dream” category and the “retrocausal riddle” category, the latter seems most fitting, in the end, since the alternating backward movement of the plot is the most conspicuous structure to most viewers. Similarly, the adaptation of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (George Roy Hill 1972) qualifies for

inclusion in both the “non-diegetic non-locality” and “lucid dream” categories; yet, because protagonist Billy Pilgrim’s mental state dominates a viewer’s attention, this film is lumped with other “lucid dream” films.

A final, practical factor in determining which representative films to account for in each category is the ability to access the films themselves. The included films, whether domestic or international, are selected based on their availability through normal avenues of distribution. The level of ingenuity among international filmmakers in first- and third-world countries alike is unprecedented and breathtaking. Many of those films, nevertheless, do not see wide distribution and are difficult to obtain for viewing. Even so, the nonlinear films encompassed within this discussion represent a vast range of nationalities, historical periods, and types of films (from studio blockbusters to independent films), indicating just how pervasive the notions of syllepsis and the omnis impulse in film art can be.

Chapter III

NON-DIEGETIC NON-LOCALITY:

FOUR-DIMENSIONALISM IN FILM

[. . .] only when the clock stops does time come to life.

William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury*

Everything is important and stands big and full and fills up Time and is so solid that you can walk around and around it like a tree and look at it. You are aware that time passes, that there is a movement in time, but that is not what Time is. Time is not a movement, a flowing, a wind then, but is, rather, a kind of climate in which things are, and when a thing happens it begins to live and keeps on living and stands solid in Time like the tree that you can walk around.

Robert Penn Warren, “Blackberry Winter”

In the movie *Suspect Zero* (E. Elias Merhige 2004), a former FBI agent—Benjamin O’Ryan (played by Ben Kingsley)—is possibly a serial killer, known as “suspect zero,” who kills serial killers. We discover, through the investigations of Agent Mackelway (Aaron Eckhart), that O’Ryan had been trained to find people in remote locations by way of tapping into the extra-sensory or paranormal potential of his mind

and that he may be using this special skill known as “remote viewing” to wreak vengeance against the killers through whose eyes he had looked while they committed their heinous acts. In a supplementary interview on the DVD release of the film, Dean Radin, PhD—a senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences—explains the concept of “remote viewing” and talks in terms of “non-locality” or “the ways in which things appear to be separate [when they] are, in fact, not separate.” He adds that the “connections that occur between the objects transcend both space and time. [...] Common sense says that an object—this object—is right here, and it’s here in time and space. Non-locality says, well that’s true, but it is also connected to virtually the rest of the universe in ways that are not obviously visible to us.” Radin’s notion evokes quantum entanglement and a glimpse (or not) of “Schrodinger’s cat” as it looks for meaningful relationship between two or more, spatially separated objects or events.

Radin’s use of the notion of “non-locality” can be appropriated and applied to the “omnis” schema, a polychronic process that would emphasize looking for connections among objects and events separated by different times, rather than by different physical spaces. “Non-locality,” then, for our purposes, describes a certain category of nonlinear film in which the scenes of the film narrative are displaced in time into complex and seemingly arbitrary, non-chronological, discourse patterns. If the polychronic framework of scenes in films of this kind appears to have no diegetic cause for its anachronies, we might refer simply to this framework as “non-diegetic non-locality.” Despite the lack of anachronic causality from the story itself in these narratives, the nonlinear discourse can provide a means by which viewers eventually understand the interrelationship of objects

and events in causal ways. In fact, in some of these films, scenes may appear entirely achronic, further obfuscating the diegetic timeline. The “non-locality” of any of these films, however, implies that McTaggart’s A-series of “past, present, future” is irrelevant and that, if causality becomes important, it is the tenseless B-series of “before, now, after” that are more significant in the filmic text. The authorial presence of the filmmaker seems palpable here because the apparently random manipulation of events plainly begs for a governing principle (again, the *syllipsis*) from a unifying force.

Obversely, the protagonist’s awareness of the nonlinearity (or this awareness within any character, for that matter) is nonexistent most of the time in a film of “non-diegetic non-locality.” In the majority of cases, as we’ll see, when a protagonist *is* aware of the nonlinearity, it is because they are unable to distinguish between reality and illusion and are participating, usually unwittingly in some form of “lucid dream,” a nonlinear category that will be further discussed in the next chapter. On rare occasions, a film may fall in-between these two extremes, qualifying as a “diegetic non-locality” without being a “lucid dream”—if the protagonist is aware of the film’s nonlinearity but is also clearly not dreaming or having a vision. A couple of instances of this exception will be touched upon later in this chapter as well.

Berg suggests that movies with these “jumbled plots” boast a “scrambled sequence of events [which are] motivated artistically,” but he gives too much credit for this idea to Tarantino and his structures in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, calling what he has done “an original, innovative technique” (41-2), even though film history brings to mind a number of antecedents for non-diegetic non-locality, such as Donen’s *Two for the*

Road, Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, and *Wetherby* (David Hare 1985), to name a few.

Perhaps the singular achievement with which Berg rightly credits Tarantino, based on the acceleration of nonlinear filmmaking since 1994, is how the video store auteur has undeniably made it “cool” to employ such non-diegetic non-locality.

In further defense of his claim, Berg argues also that *Citizen Kane* is a false antecedent to Tarantino because Welles's plot is a frame story consisting primarily of multiple flashbacks, rather than a story governed by its non-chronological order. The argument here is that the organizing principle in the film is the frame story—reporter Thompson's process of interviewing various people about Kane's life. Yet, while Thompson is the diegetic link for the flashbacks, the governing principle of that anachrony is actually located in the comparisons and contrasts that viewers bring to bear on Kane and the bulk of his life among the flashbacks themselves. Though Tarantino himself wrongly defines flashbacks as rigidly diegetic in nature, according to the definitions supplied by Genette, all of the flashbacks in *Citizen Kane* are, as it seems, diegetic (characters “remember back”) and, more importantly, they dominate the movie. The result, relative to our sylleptical definition of nonlinear film, is that *Citizen Kane* remains a true antecedent to Tarantino, for the film's carefully composed flashback structure, forcing the viewer to frequently jump back and forth in time, firmly governs the discourse of the cinematic narrative and its greater implications for Kane's life, loss, and loneliness throughout the film.

So, what do films of non-diegetic non-locality look like and how do they thematically signify? Based upon the way in which plot points can be connected, this

group of films seems to branch roughly into four smaller subgroupings: the vague idea, the relationship mystery, the crime caper or heist film, and the meaning of life and/or death. In the “vague idea” subgroup, the nonlinear discourse does not suggest a strong rationale for polychronic scenes to be viewed and interpreted. Not to be confused with a purposefully ambiguous narrative, which is often meant to raise questions via open-endedness or the possibility of multiple interpretations, a “vague idea” film contains a systemic problem: either the film’s premise reads as ill-conceived, or its execution appears to have been handled poorly somehow. The “relationship mystery” is a more focused nonlinear film that draws on anachrony to create relational inquiries among two or more characters. The viewers’ task in this instance is to move from the initial and incomplete impressions received about a relationship or group of relationships to a more sophisticated grasp of those relationships. The nonlinear “heist film” is the subgroup with the most serious “cool factor” because its anachronies are rather slick tests for viewers, requiring them to sort through temporal clues and other information in order to better understand or solve a crime or to arrive at the source (usually a person) of a larger issue—the proverbial “something-bigger-is-going-on-here.” In addition to general discussion about nonlinear “heist films,” *The Killing* will be treated closely as the historical template for this subgroup. The final subgroup, which broaches, in some form or another, the “meaning of life and/or death,” may be the most conspicuous invitation toward a point-driven reading of the four subgroups. It applies the idea of “something bigger” to all of life itself and resists the mere etiological expressions of the other subgroups in favor of teleological and eschatological renderings instead. Our exemplar for the category of non-diegetic non-locality, *The Tree of Life*, branches out of this last

subgroup. We can better understand each of these subgroups and their larger significance by sifting through a few strong examples.

The aforementioned movie *Bad Timing* by Roeg is a “vague idea” film. Originally titled *Illusions*, shot chronologically (in contrast to industry standards) and later edited polychronically as a mercurial afterthought with Tony Lawson, Roeg’s story is a farrago of memory, obsession, and accountability. Between recurring scenes in a hospital and elsewhere (at a party, in a bedroom, on exotic vacations, through miscellaneous rendezvous between the romantic interests of Alex [Garfunkel] and Milena [Russell], and during an interrogation with Inspector Netusil [Keitel]), the erratic crosscutting throughout time is unreasonably difficult to follow. A Pinter anthology appearing on the seat of Alex’s car in one scene and the Inspector’s penchant for mazes perhaps should prepare viewers for the absurdities and *non sequiturs* in the nonlinear discourse, but the abruptness of lingering 70s-style editing and indiscriminate transitions and scene order among the time periods of “before, now, and after” make the diegesis barely comprehensible. In an interview, Roeg has tried to make some sense of the film narrative for viewers: “The maze is like life. And it’s also a puzzle, a wonderful puzzle—like [the] Rubick’s Cube. And the maze is an extraordinary piece of art as well, and difficult to get through. I’m fascinated with mazes; I like mazes.” Unfortunately, the polychronic scene structure of Roeg’s cinematic maze in the film neither quite develops into a clever, clue-filled “relationship mystery,” nor is it a purely preserved, consistent, unadulterated, achronic surrealism, either as Milena’s hospital fever-dream or in the form of Alex’s swelling obsession. The text of the film is, in the end, unsure of itself.

“Vague idea” films often lead to a sense that the polychronic structure muddles the plot pointlessly. Like *Bad Timing*, one of Elizabeth Taylor’s late career lackluster films *Identikit*, or *The Driver’s Seat* (Giuseppe Patroni Griffi 1974) dislodges the story from its chronology and, in the process, suggests that the film is one part “relationship mystery” and one part crime film. The viewer surveys Taylor’s character “Lise”—apparently in pursuit of someone whom she hopes will kill her at her request—intercut with scenes from earlier at the airport and in the garage when she meets Carlo and with scenes from “later” as foreign investigators sort out clues by interrogating various people with whom Lise has recently made contact. In a nonlinear film with a good “relationship mystery,” its anachrony raises questions as to why a relationship seems at first to be in a particular state (of conflict, of love, of doubt, etc.) and then may slowly deliver clues leading the audience to fill those narrative gaps for themselves. The effects of a relationship, in essence, subtly precede the causes for the relationship. In *The Driver’s Seat*, however, the questions are raised by the anachrony, but the film fails to provide the means by which viewers can reach their own conclusions. Likewise, a good crime film is interlaced with clues to the factors or events leading up to the crime. Yet, none of the police detectives’ investigation scenes, which have been intercut among clerks at a store where Lise purchases a scarf, a hotel employee, a restaurant bartender, and a man who meets Lise on her plane, provides meaningful insight into the significance of Lise’s behavior. The end result of such vague anachrony is that the filmic text resists the kinds of story-driven and information-driven readings one might customarily expect for “relationship mysteries” or “heist films” and induces point-driven readings instead for no purpose other than simply trying to assign a relative value to the film.

Other lesser films, like *Too Beautiful for You* (Bertrand Blier 1989), *Heaven* (Scott Reynolds 1998), and Alan Taylor's *Kill The Poor* also suffer, rather than benefit, from their anachronic indeterminacies. Blier's film won several awards for its attempted creative leaps with storytelling (inner monologues spoken aloud, asides spoken in third-person in the middle of scenes, and direct addresses to the camera à la Alvy Singer or Ferris Bueller). Even so, the affair-filled romantic intrigue constitutes a "vague film" because its non-locality confuses diegetic and non-diegetic anachronies and blends "earlier, now, and later" so seamlessly at times (such as during a speech at the dinner table) that the distinctions becomes un-navigable. Also, the film's non-locality is so achronic throughout most of the film—without hinting at the possibility of a "lucid dream"—that its construction resembles, more or less, no more than an acausal collection of vignettes containing story elements wanting to suggest a "relationship mystery," but ultimately failing to develop one. At one point late in the film, as if to intimate that there is no other way to do so, the philandering protagonist "Bernard" must plainly speak aloud the "point" of the film: "A man wants to live several lives. But he can't; he only has one . . . and it's short." Reynolds's *Heaven* suffers from many of the same symptoms due in large part to confusing edits between immediate action and what appear to be diegetic "visions" of events that questionably occur at points later in the discourse.

Perhaps one of the most baffling instances of these indeterminate phenomena in "vague films" is the case of *Kill the Poor*. The film's polychronic narration is composed of seven different focal time shifts revolving around a multiple-protagonist cast in an urban tenement building ("the corporation") and attempts to unveil recent defining

moments in the lives of these characters, particularly Joe and Segundo. In the earliest part of the diegesis, the beginning of Joe's new life with Annabelle unfolds in a series of anachronic intercuts. Later in the discourse, an analepsis of Joe and Annabelle's moving day into their new apartment introduces Delilah who, in turn, introduces other residents of the tenement building using a complicated, hypodiegetic intercutting flashback/flashforward structure that, by nature of its odd (and, at times, arguably irrelevant) content, groundlessly challenges viewers to sort through the imagery for a larger significance. The film's coup de grâce lies in its seventh time shift, which consists of wild, hypothetical, multiple "alternate realities" of possible arsonists among the tenants who may have caused the fire in Carlos's apartment. As these various possibilities intercut the last half of the film among other scenes leading up to the arson, one recalls the score of time shifts in Benjy's chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* (but with far less adroitness than Faulkner) until finally the anachronic structure in *Kill the Poor* becomes so convoluted that both story and discourse are lost to aimlessness.

Because the transitions and chosen scene order in these films do not make it feasible either to piece together character evolution among the key roles or to corroborate that the images are the persuasive evidence of a "lucid dream," the texts lose much of their power to signify in meaningful ways. These narratives seem to want to become "relationship mysteries" or "heist films," but the B-series of time, as it is inadequately manipulated in the editing of these films, again tends necessarily to move these texts away from all three types of reading formations: story-driven, information-driven, and point-driven. These discourses do not support a four-dimensionalist understanding of a

life or a community of lives in these diegetic worlds because they do not shape and transcend their anachronies into meaningful non-localities. Furthermore, they show little or no sign of the governing kinship indicative of syllepsis or any genuine authorial power over narrative temporality, the most characteristic of the *omnis*.

The non-diegetic non-locality of “relationship mysteries” behaves differently than in vague nonlinear films. In most linear discourses—but especially in those focusing on character studies, romantic alliances, family conflicts and the like—a viewer conventionally relies on the polar attitudes of the lead characters for thematic cues. Characters are seen to be motivated by their pasts and pulled into their futures via their intentions in such a way that viewers can contrast who these people are at the beginning of a story against who they are by the end of the story (polar attitudes). This process of identifying a character’s polar attitudes and what they seem to say about the film substantially depends on the linear cause-and-effect of the discourse. Christopher Nolan, while discussing his nonlinear film *Following* (1998), has argued that his film was designed so that viewers would naturally focus on “what happens—the simple piecing together of what’s actually happened—rather than thinking about why it’s happened, or how the protagonist has gotten drawn into it.” Similarly, in a nonlinear “relationship mystery,” the causes and effects are reorganized temporally so that “why” something is caused or “why” a character changes no longer becomes the immediate focus or the means by which a story’s meaning is derived through a consideration of polar attitudes. Instead, attention is centered first on “what” has happened and eventually on “how” something is caused or “how” a character changes when time frames are placed side by

side. This adjustment to emphasis assigns a boldly different kind of participatory authorial power to viewers and may move them into more point-driven readings as a result.

“Relationship mysteries” are discovered among independent and mainstream films alike. Two or three samples among the quirkier experiments in this subgroup can be culled from some of Steven Soderbergh’s nonlinear exercises—*Schizopolis* (1996), *Che: Part One* (2008), and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009)—and the work of Atom Egoyan, including *Exotica* (1994), *Ararat* (2002), and *Adoration* (2008). Although the protagonist of the surreal *Schizopolis*, “Fletcher Munson” (played by Soderbergh), and his boss Schwitter both allude self-referentially at one point to the possibility that the film is a kind of “lucid dream” (Fletcher: “Eventualism is not a cause, a course, a fashion, or a religion.” / Schwitter: “Eventualism is a state of mind.”), the film’s non-locality is ultimately non-diegetic and satirically dissects the familiar impotence of language and absence of real communication in relationships, with an aware touch of Brechtian alienation on one hand and of Beckettian absurdism on the other. “How” power and language struggle with each other becomes more critical than “why” they do and, as if to confirm this strategy, Schwitter later in the film pronounces, “Eventualism isn’t designed to answer all the questions. It’s designed to question all the answers. It’s not about healing pain. It’s about the pain of healing.”

Different in mood and guise than Soderbergh’s playful narrative games, Egoyan’s serious nonlinear dramas use cause and effect in syllepsis carefully to mete out temporally rearranged scenes into a strange narrative patchwork that suspends a viewer’s

understanding of how each character is positioned in relationship with the others until the closing scenes of the discourse. *Exotica* juxtaposes, via intercutting, the “now” or “later” scenes of Francis, Christina, and Eric at the club against the “earlier” scenes of Christina and Eric searching for Francis’s dead daughter in a field; Francis with his wife and daughter (including young Christina who babysits); and home video footage of Francis’s wife and daughter at the piano. As the discourse delivers the events polychronically in scenes of varying lengths and clue revelations, the representation of the relationship between Francis and Christina is gradually revised from nightclub customer/dancer to fatherly figure/former babysitter, and the viewer, at last, learns how the tragedy of Francis’s daughter’s death has propelled Francis into a delusion that keeps him connected to his daughter through his distorted interactions with Christina.

In the same way, Egoyan’s *Ararat* exploits syllepsis to connect the characters through several timelines a traditional linear form would not afford. One excellent illustration of this tactic in the film is a sequence that moves viewers from “later” in time as young filmmaker “Raffi” shows customs inspector “David” his film footage of the ruins in Turkey (which will be used in the film he is making); to a “non-diegetic” flashback of the actual 1915 Armenian genocide and forced exile of the survivors (a film within a film); to the grown character of “Gorky” staring at the portrait he is painting—reminiscing, and remembering the exile—in his NYC studio in 1934; to Celia, in the “now,” staring at larger-than-life photos from the museum exhibit of Gorky’s life and family. In sequences such as this one, the text not only reinforces the family and aggressor/victim “relationship mysteries” in the story while simultaneously beginning to

unravel its secrets, but it also begins to reach promisingly toward the four-dimensionalist idea that what has come “before” and what will come “after” are just as real as what is happening “now.” The “omnis” position here of seeing all times at once with godlike power begins to move us in the direction of the final subgroup in this chapter—the “meaning of life/death.”

Mainstream films also dabble with non-locality using varying degrees of sophistication for comic or dramatic effect in a “relationship mystery.” First, as previously indicated, very few nonlinear films can be considered “diegetic non-localities,” as opposed to non-diegetic. Though well-known movies like *Citizen Kane* and *Annie Hall* are nonlinear, they are anomalies: they satisfy the first category of nonlinearity only tangentially since their non-localities are fueled diegetically and with authority by the quite purposeful reporter Thompson and the neurotically intentional Alvy Singer, respectively. The highly evolved text of *Annie Hall* moves effortlessly through time in ways that are not unexpected by viewers because the film begins with a direct address that justifies the discourse outright. Alvy has ended his relationship with Annie and is reflecting back in the form of a frame-story which jumps wildly out of order: “I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship through my mind,” Alvy tells us, “and examining my life and trying to figure out where did the screw-up come, you know, and a year ago we were . . . in love. . . .” In similar fashion, but with less narrative virtuosity, the offbeat movie *Click* (Frank Coraci 2006) taps into the standard formula of a workaholic too busy for his family who is given a supernatural opportunity to change parts of his life by rewinding or fast-forwarding to them with the aid of a very special

remote control. The effect of having this capability is that he seems able to interact with any moment of his life at will, even though the “butterfly effect” is not fully accounted for in the plot points. *Citizen Kane*, *Annie Hall*, and even *Click* are solid examples of “diegetic non-locality” in that key characters cause or have authority over the syllepsis in the discourse and are not in a dream-like state. (*Click* briefly teases at the possibility of a dream near the end of the movie, but quickly reaffirms Michael’s reality again when the “gift” of second remote control appears.) Despite their inventiveness, then, these films do not fit neatly into this nonlinear category but employ non-locality, nonetheless. Comparably, some film texts of non-locality like *Atonement* (Joe Wright 2007), *The English Patient*, and *Holes* (Andrew Davis 2003), all of which happen to be adaptations, can fool an audience with a syllepsis that toys with levels of involvement by privileged characters or is falsely non-diegetic. Although the recurring sound of a clacking typewriter interwoven into the orchestral soundtrack of *Atonement* serves as a clue to the diegetic nature of the film’s non-locality, it is not until the end of the movie that viewers discover that the discourse is, indeed, controlled by the strong-handed, diegetic narrator: the much older, remorseful, and “revisionary” Briony Tallis.

Several of the films by director Alejandro González Iñárritu and companion screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga—particularly their collaborations *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams*, and *Babel* (2006)—stand among the most explicit examples of non-diegetic non-locality as “relationship mysteries” in mainstream films. Each of these films uses multiple protagonists and three or four consistent, braided time frames to wind up the taut “relationship mysteries” among their characters. Of the three films, *21 Grams* is perhaps

the most interesting example of nonlinearity because its carefully orchestrated polychronic scenes establish syllepsis and non-locality early in the movie, eliciting a point-driven reading almost instantly and engendering the “omnis” as the operative lens for following the film.

21 Grams begins with a shot of a man and a woman in a bedroom, presumably after sex. She is still sleeping, and he is comfortably smoking a cigarette. We assume the time is “now,” and the scenes immediately to follow might suggest that the beginning invokes *in media res*. After the movie title appears, we’re shown a series of scenes in the following order: a father and his two daughters are seen leaving a restaurant; Cristina Peck, the young lady in the opening bedroom scene, is at an addiction recovery meeting, talking about her near-death experience at a hospital and about how her husband and girls have “stood by [her] for so long”; Jack Jordan, a new Christian at a small, local, store-front church is intensely evangelizing a young punk off the street; we see an achronic shot of hundreds of birds at dusk, flocking around a building; Paul Rivers, the young man in the opening scene, is lying in a hospital recovery or holding room; Cristina is into some drugs in her bathroom (is she not clean, after all, or is this another time?); Paul’s wife reveals during her gynecologist appointment that she has had an abortion; Jack breaks up a fight among street youths playing basketball outside of the church but gets into a scuffle himself and then drives home to his family; we see Paul with a revolver, sitting at an emptied pool behind a motel; Jack, as a new inmate, is being calmly walked into a prison cell (is this before or after Jack’s conversion?); Cristina is swimming at the local pool and misses a call before she leaves; as the pastor preaches Sunday morning,

Jack's wife seems to struggle with something while Jack repeats the words of the pastor in unison with others; Paul, in bed at home with his oxygen tank, sneaks a cigarette in the bathroom and is reprimanded by his wife (is he sick before the hotel pool scene, or after?); we see Jack, Cristina, who is upset and crying, and Paul, who is shot, all together in a hotel room, and at that point, all three are now connected.

These polychronic scenes open the first fourteen minutes of the film, and the attentive viewer is "hooked" to the action at that point because he wants to know first "what" is happening and also "how" these scenes/people are connected. (Arriaga provides just enough, but not too much information in these opening scenes to avoid allowing the question of "why" to take over the progression.) Again, this alienating technique reminds the viewer of the unreality of the discourse so that he/she can more directly move attention to the point of the film rather than staying focused on the story or its information. As the anachronies of the film continue, suspense remains sustained about "how" these characters are connected, while occasionally providing just enough linearity in the evolution of Cristina and Jack to help a viewer with questions regarding "why." Industrially, some of the reason for this behavior in the text is the result of the filmmakers working through their own style, as Arriaga demonstrates:

Many people in films want to make everything clear. I have been working with people and they say, "Why this, why that?" and I answer, "Because we are contradictory, paradoxical human beings." Many human acts cannot be understood if they are not under the light of contradiction, not under logic. [. . .] You know when we speak in real life we don't go from

A to B to C to D. For example, if I want to tell you about how I met my wife I would begin with yesterday, then go back to three years ago and then to when my first child was born. You go back and forth in time and I wanted to have this point of view of someone dying, going back and forth in time. [. . .] I have no problems structuring time in my mind because I think a little bit like that. What I was trying to make was a yin-yang, balancing things. [. . .] I think when you have one scene by itself it has one meaning. When you have one scene preceded by another and it is itself preceded by another scene, it changes the context of the scene completely. So I was very careful to have these symbolic and poetic linkings. (xiii-xv)

Arriaga's explanation seems to suggest, too, that syllepsis and omnis, in part, resonate with the dialectical montage of Eisenstein, as if the placing side-by-side of incongruous time periods might carry some of the same potential for amalgamating new ideas that colliding images, shots, or sounds sometimes achieve when juxtaposed with another.

Arriaga's bisected screenplay for *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones 2005) seems to reflect this same design in its use of non-diegetic non-locality for the first half of the film, sustaining the mystery of the "how" behind the relationships among Estrada, Perkins, and Norton; then, unexpectedly, the film's text moves into a strictly linear journey in the second half, seeking to unearth the "why" at the bottom of Norton's and Perkins's opposing actions.

Stanley Donen is perhaps best known for his direction of Hollywood musicals, especially *Singin' in the Rain*; but his depressing little nonlinear experiment with non-diegetic non-locality called *Two for the Road*—in which the protagonistic couple, played by Albert Finney and Audrey Hepburn, seems to bicker ceaselessly—offers some far-reaching insight into the “relationship mystery” subgroup overall, recommending a four-dimensionalist *modus operandi*. In an early scene of his directorial commentary in *Two for the Road*, Donen elucidates:

And I think this is one of the sort of major differences in the way we organized this movie—that it wasn't simply a flash from one period back to another one, and then back again to the present. What we were trying to do is say: all sequences in this movie are the *present*—everything you see in their life is carried with them from the beginning of their relationship until the end of their lives. And so, every sequence was supposed to feel just as *present* as any other. There was no one time in the picture when we said THIS is the time period for the picture. [. . .] The *entire* period is the present. (emphasis added)

Films in the “relationship mystery” subgroup are predisposed to show the whole of a relationship over time just as Donen has described here, thereby making the individual developmental stages of a relationship less important than the total sum of the relationship or the overarching meaning of that relationship as it transcends time. This kind of four-dimensionalist thinking reaffirms the potential of the nonlinear filmic text to invite story-driven, but especially point-driven readings of character relationships, to

bestow an authorial power upon the viewer through an interactive discourse that leads viewers to think much differently about character evolution, and to forge original strategies for storytelling within the realm of time-based patterns and expectations.

The nonlinear films in the “heist film” subgroup treat non-diegetic non-locality somewhat differently than those in the “relationship mystery” subgroup, although they share the benefits of syllepsis and omnis. “Heist films” tend to focus more on physical action and events than on dramatic action or character, although the measure of disparity between the two will often depend on the intent and level of sophistication in the screenwriting and final editing. For example, the partial nonlinearity peppering Soderbergh’s remake of *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001) compels viewers to pay attention more closely to the details of information and planning for the heist, but it also constantly triggers amusement at the “cool cat” members of Danny Ocean’s retinue when the scene order has been temporally twisted or a scene gets re-played from another frame of reference to let the viewer in on hidden facts, tricks, private jokes, and disguises.

Playfulness with time in “heist films” is not new. *The Conformist* was among the first films—precursors to Tarantino—to make non-diegetic non-locality savvy in a crime thriller. Bertolucci and his cinematographer Vittorio Storaro both confess that they stumbled upon this possibility only by accident after hiring a new editor, Franco “Kim” Arcalli, to work on the film. Bertolucci talks of his excitement at the prospect of Arcalli editing the film with “a kind of wild force—chaotic, unshaped,” somewhat in the spirit of the “rushes” or “dailies” on shooting days, while Storaro talks of the production team discovering *memory* as the unifying device (syllepsis) for the four separate time frames

juggled in the film. The usual kinds of clues via camera work and editing that might have suggested that the movie is actually comprised—dream-like—of the mixed memories of Marcello Clerici seem to be missing, however, and non-diegetic non-locality dominates most of the film as a result. Only in a couple of sequences in the middle of the film—particularly one in which scenes of Marcello as a boy are intercut several times with scenes of his grown self “now”—do we glean something richer and more poignant about his character beyond the details of his secret instructions within “the program.” Just the same, the nonlinearity of the film plays out as a sophisticated crime yarn in which the audience is encouraged toward information-driven readings in order to piece together the details of “how” the events unfold.

Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) attempts a feat comparable to, perhaps more intentional than, Bertolucci’s film. Braiding three distinct time periods (1910, 1933, and 1967), *Once Upon a Time* creates a four-dimensionalist rendering of the Jewish mobster David “Noodles” Aaronson. Using non-diegetic non-locality to shift effortlessly back and forth among Noodle’s life, “before, now, and later,” the text withholds final judgment on Noodles until the whole of his life has been unfurled. Even so, although character evolution and nonlinear “relationship mystery” stand out as prominent elements in Leone’s sprawling saga, a good deal of the movie, like Bertolucci’s thriller, is devoted as much to the navigation of details in the lives of the characters, if not more so, and invites an information-driven reading as well.

Unquestionably, Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* as members of this subgroup have been discussed and written about more than any of their precursors and

more than any crime thrillers since the early 1990s when they smartly arrived on the scene. Accolades abound for these films from the pantheon of critics over the years and, suffice to say, *Reservoir Dogs* was first touted as “another startling aesthetic victory for a small, undeclared American film movement” (Crouch ix), while *Pulp Fiction* has been hailed as the movie that confirmed Tarantino’s “promise as one of the most electrifying voices in film since the advent of Martin Scorsese” (Dargis). Many reasons for the success of these two movies have been bandied about by critics, scholars, and pop culture fans, and always, the conversation leads back to their auteur and his penchant for pastiche. Credit must be (and is) given largely to the ingenious dialogue in each film, which is what powers the unorthodox characters and their multi-layered interactions more than any other aspect of the films, including their independent brands of nonlinearity, which, by themselves, carry sufficiently heightened levels of the “cool factor,” partly because of the perceived novelty of nonlinearity and partly because that novelty is executed so brilliantly.

Reservoir Dogs is a grab bag of nonlinear tricks, including individual non-diegetic backstory flashbacks, a diegetic flashback-within-a-flashback, simple achronies, and so forth. *Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, is a nearly rigid example of non-diegetic non-locality, as the anachronies occur unbeknownst to any of the characters (with the exception of the Captain Koons diegetic flashback experienced by Butch just before the “The Gold Watch” section of the movie). In both films, the syllepsis is strong, and the omnis is invoked in such a way that the strategic suspension and delivery of information out of time order prompts an information-driven reading that lends itself even more to

remarkably pleasurable repeated viewings. For instance, when anachrony permits Vincent to return miraculously for a few more scenes after the discourse has already established his death in “The Gold Watch” segment, the viewer may be happily surprised to have him “back.” Perhaps one of the draws of *Pulp Fiction*’s narrative structure for viewers has been that the text’s manipulation of ideas about who these characters really are, as furnished by the rearrangement of the sequence order, only dimly invites a point-driven reading (i.e. there may, or may not, be “something bigger”) and that, ultimately and gladly, the text instead conjures more lively story-driven and information driven-readings. For as audacious and intelligent as they are, Tarantino’s tongue-in-cheek usage of non-locality communicates basically on an intrinsic, etiological level “just for fun,” with no teleological ambitions to suggest that “there’s a reason for everything.” Indeed, these two films famously demonstrate a belief that there is not.

Since the early 90s, other “heist films” have tried to tap into the success of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* using similar forms of syllepsis and etiological experimentation that play primarily with story-driven and information-driven readings. Most of them, however, do not display a clear grasp of nonlinear narrative, especially in their (mis)handling of the diegetic versus non-diegetic non-locality; and, for that reason and others, none of them have rivaled the distinctive style, wit, and humor of Tarantino’s work. *The Funeral* (Abel Ferrara 1996), for example, shifts uncertainly among central figure Johnny’s wake and funeral in the “now,” “earlier” scenes that lead up to Johnny’s murder, and even “much earlier” scenes from Johnny’s childhood past. Both *Chain of Fools* (Pontius Löwenhielm and Patrick von Krusenstjerna 2000) and the *Snatch*-like

Swedish comedy *Smala Sussie* (Ulf Malmros 2003) also move predictably between “now” and varying times “earlier,” visions of “later” times, and replays of scenes from alternate points of view (which will be discussed with other films as the “view variorum” category in Chapter Five). In Oxide Pang Chun’s desultory adaptation of Alex Garland’s novel *The Tesseract* (2003), his noir-ish gallimaufry seems to take more ontological, almost teleological directions. Though the discourse itself lacks the sure-footedness of nonlinear finesse, the story is able to bring central character Rosa to a point of confiding in Wit, a young boy, by sharing one of the viable tenets of non-diegetic non-locality: “Our lives collide, don’t they? It’s random and chaotic, but there’s a plan. Cause and effect. Cause and effect.”

Maybe the most glaring rip-off of Tarantino’s narrative prowess within the “heist film” subgroup is Michael Bafaro’s 1998 disaster *For a Few Lousy Dollars*, which plays more like a misguided tribute to Tarantino than any serious attempt at narrative innovation. The polychronic collection of scenes in the back of a restaurant, in a pizzeria, in the interior of a car, and so on, scrupulously parrots *Reservoir Dogs*, but with none of the charm and aplomb of the source material.

Just the opposite, Christopher Nolan’s noir-ish, low-budget film *Following* has been perhaps the most intelligent response to Tarantino to-date. As Nolan describes in his commentary his rationale for editing as he did, we glimpse yet another piece of evidence suggesting that the “heist” subgroup of non-diegetic non-locality generally has the effect of inviting information-driven readings, even though careful first looks and multiple re-

watching may begin to form story-driven readings also, as character evolution becomes more discernible with additional exposure to the discourse:

I wanted the story to have these parallel narrative timelines that we would cut between, and in that way expand the story in three dimensions at once: the way that we receive stories in everyday life, even conversationally, the way that we reorder information, and make peculiar narrative connections, rather than us telling the story chronologically. [. . .] I just wanted to cut in these strange images that you don't understand the first time you see them, but that later on in the film become clear. And, if you're watching the film a second time, have a slightly different meaning and all these scenes have a slightly different emphasis the second time you see the film, which was very important to me. [. . .] we connect things through objects, or through particular details of the story, relate the details of a different aspect of the story. We wanted the film to unfold in that way, rather than the chronological way.

Following reflects, then, a filmic text that works extremely well etiologically. Effect and cause are critical in this crime film because the effects shown to viewers “earlier” in the discourse (but “later” in the story) rely significantly on small details—where objects are placed in a room and the degree of changes in the facial hair of the protagonist. The “big picture” that’s formed over the course of the narrative focuses more on information than on a character’s purpose in life or the meaning underlying the sum of a life or series of

actions. Even more so than in “relationship mysteries,” the sylleptical kinship we find in the “heist film” subgroup is mostly of the information-driven variety.

To speak fairly of source material for the “heist film” subgroup of non-diegetic non-locality, a serious consideration must be given to Stanley Kubrick’s *The Killing*, which remains the definitive nonlinear precursor to Tarantino and to all others with respect to this subgroup. David Hughes has briefly commented on *The Killing*’s influence on Tarantino’s early work and goes on to describe the film eloquently as “a landmark in narrative acrobatics rarely equalled [sic] among the many films it has influenced.” Producer James B. Harris has said himself that, while many of the crew, the cast, and the agents of some cast members sought to convince Kubrick and Harris to adapt the story linearly for the sake of clarity—a direction that would have contradicted Lionel White’s original narrative structure in *Clean Break*, the novel on which the film is based—Kubrick and Harris “had enough sense to realise this structure was the most interesting thing about the story” (qtd. in Hughes 39). A partial analysis of the movie’s plot and character development reveals how *The Killing* authoritatively anticipates/precipitates the soaring appeal of nonlinear narratives in film forty years after its release.

The opening voiceover of the film subtly alerts viewers to the nonlinear discourse that is to follow and to the etiological (and perhaps even teleological) nature of the film’s content and themes. As the sober Marvin Unger moves to the ticket counter near the start of the film, the voiceover narration suggests that here is a man with questions, questions like missing fragments in a “jumbo jigsaw puzzle” in which he is a part and is searching

for the “pre-determined final design” and whether he can perhaps “affect the final outcome.” This opening metaphor may lead viewers to believe that Marvin is the protagonist in this story. However, it quickly becomes clear that this act of searching is symptomatic of all the central players in the film—even Johnny Clay, the mastermind behind this assembly’s ambitious heist plot. As Mario Falsetto has proposed, it also eventually becomes clear that the disembodied, omniscient voiceover is really an unreliable narrator—giving times and clues not to be trusted—despite being God-like in its authorial presence and convenient as a device to jockey the nonlinear discourse more effortlessly (3-5). More importantly perhaps, the opening metaphor of the puzzle and the more overt imagery of the race serve as the film’s invitation to information-driven (and possibly point-driven) readings in order for viewers to work through the gaps in the larger narrative fabric. As Falsetto has also alluded to in his meticulous account of *The Killing*’s nonlinear discourse, most movies about robberies focus closely on “temporal construction” and the “revelation of the mechanics of planning and executing the crime,” and, in *The Killing*, those factors are uniquely pivotal (6).

Perhaps for the first time in the history of the film noir genre, the viewer is required to move beyond simple recognitions of the iconic, brooding, expressionistic tricks of light, shadow, and smoke, beyond the easy character pegs of the femme fatale and private dick, and beyond the classic “whodunit” endgame. *The Killing* requires of viewers not only enough resolve to find the answers but, more importantly, the tenacity to determine the questions. The film’s sylleptical power is in the metaphor of the puzzle and the way in which *The Killing*’s discourse strong-arms a viewer into piecing together

both plot information *and* character relationship, effect *and then* cause, reality *and* illusion. The process a viewer experiences requires one to call upon his or her own personal encounters with memory, to share perceptions and opinions with other viewers, and to consider the actions and intents of the characters, both contextually and intertextually, based on overlapping events within the film and based on one's own past experiences with film noir as a genre.

One specific way of looking at *The Killing*'s use of movement forward in time and its use of analepsis is their correlation to character and plot, respectively. An attentive viewer may notice that scenes in the film shown "forward" or in the "nearer present" are almost always narrative moments that contribute to an understanding of the relationships between two or more characters in the story. Good examples include the first time the viewer meets Sherry and George in their apartment; when George is coerced into divulging the details of his meeting with "the boys" to Sherry; the scenes with Nikki at the racetrack (interspersed with racehorse footage to suggest passages of time); and the sequence of scenes following Johnny to the florist, the bus station, and Mike's apartment, only to be followed moments later by Mike going from his apartment to the bus station, and finally to the racetrack locker room.

On the contrary, the scenes in which the audience observes "earlier" actions are nearly always designed to serve the diegetic purpose of driving along the plot. Those scenes supply detailed information about the robbery or motivational clues about what drives each character to participate in the heist (a device that would be incorporated much later in *Reservoir Dogs* in the form of character backstory flashbacks). The forward

scenes help to ground the audience by giving the characters (as the viewer sees them) “normal” time to re-group and discuss the impact of their intentions and behaviors on others, and the choices that others around them are making in response along the way. This phenomenon seems to be especially true of George and his wife Sherry until the alternations between the forward “now” and the analepses, through which the audience has been required to view George and Sherry through much of the film, at last, culminate and converge during their climactic final encounter with each other.

As viewers weigh the nonlinear variables for character, effect, and cause throughout the kaleidoscopic shards of time in the discourse, *The Killing*’s film noir storytelling code becomes increasingly foreign, chaotic, and ultimately ironic. The broader construct of the plot, which can be considered in three palpable sections, reflects this challenging process for the viewer. The opening section of the film—a Saturday in the last week of September—moves the viewer forward and then backward in time twice before pressing on through the rest of Saturday. The viewer gathers from Marvin’s first scene that a meeting is about to take place. Randy’s meeting with the loan shark an hour “earlier” in the next scene implies that the money he plans to repay his loan shark may be connected to the meeting Marvin finds out about an hour “later.” Is it significant that the

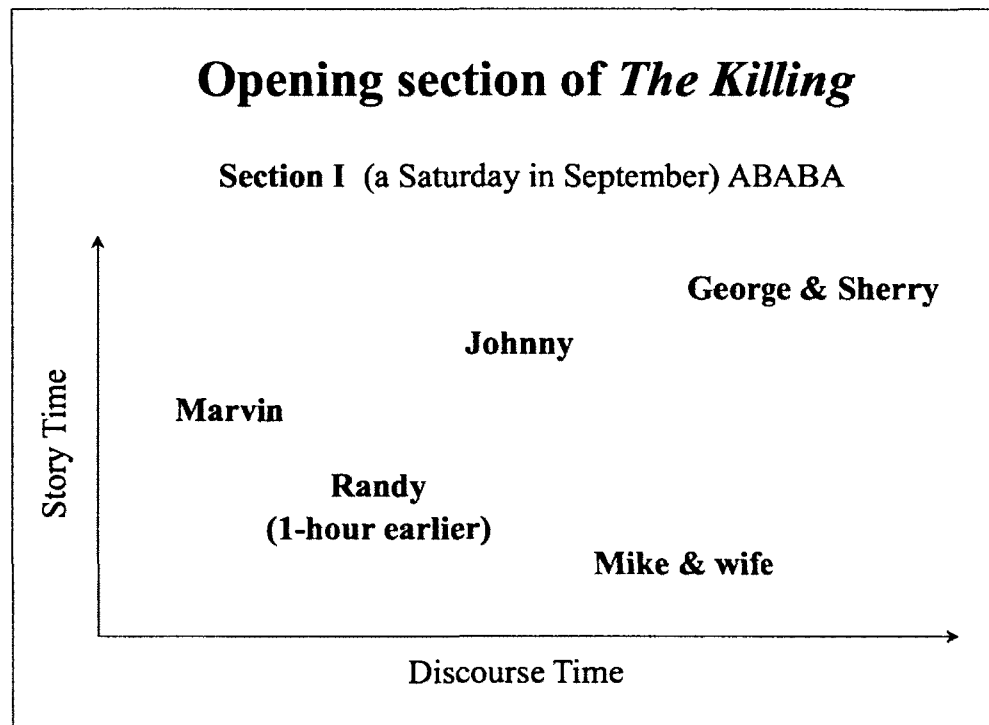


Figure 2. Opening nonlinear section of *The Killing*.

viewer experience this information—along with the next three scenes with Johnny (“now”), Mike the bartender and his sick wife (“earlier”), and George and Sherry Peatty (“later”)—in that particular order? The answer is yes for two reasons. First, viewers must be given the nonlinear implement on the front end so that they can grasp the methodology of the film early. Secondly, the appearance of somewhat random introductions strategically preserves most of the ambiguity of the players’ status or importance in relation to one another until “later” in the movie.

The second broad section of the plot moves the viewer mostly forward in time through the rest of the first day into evening, then jumps via ellipsis, but linearly, to a

time three days “later,” followed by the final day of the discourse (again, via, ellipsis, four more days “later”). The third and final plot section occurs at a time in the middle of the story (a week after it has begun), “after” Mike arrives at the track and the first race begins. From this point, the viewer is displaced in a scenic reverse-forward cycle of “earlier”-“now” four times before the movie’s ironic, but not unexpected conclusion. The deliberate interspersing of documentary-style racetrack footage to mark the shift to flashbacks or flashforwards, and the rapid-fire, dialectical editing also both speak strongly to the subtle artistry with which the images in the film reinvent our perceptions of narrative.

Having surprised the viewer at the start of the film with a nonlinear approach, followed by a “settling into” the comfortable, mostly linear routine in the middle of the film, *The Killing* primes its viewer for the return to a nonlinear structure for the final act with a specific target in mind. In a bold move of cinematic social constructivism, the film lures the viewer into puzzling through, almost interactively, the remaining pieces of the flawed, human clockwork of Johnny Clay’s brilliant plan in order to see “how” everything falls apart. As Falsetto expresses the theme, “No matter how predictable or rational the world, there are always unforeseen elements that can potentially disrupt that orderliness” (5). If one agrees with Falsetto’s read, then one should concur, too, that *The Killing*’s structure perfectly suits its content and intent. The film’s gutsy anachrony, placing emphasis on the “what” and “how” of the discourse, helps shed new light on the ways in which people, ideas, and pieces of information can be connected through the time

art of film, which is something that may not otherwise happen for the viewers of films that are made using a traditional, strictly linear structure.

Whereas *The Killing* often is cited as an imitation of *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston 1950) or as a progenitor of the original *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone 1960), the context for comparison is nearly always one of genre and formula, rather than of narrative form. Neither of the other two movies attempts to tell the film noir tale of a “heist gone wrong” by capitalizing on inventive nonlinear discourse to create nearly an entirely new work of film art. Unlike other directors working with adapted material during this early part of his career as a filmmaker, Kubrick keenly demonstrates the difference between artful innovation and slavish imitation. We may notice here, too, that nonlinear inventiveness appears to be symptomatic of a chronic cinematic “anxiety of influence,” especially when we recall that so many of these films—*The Killing*, *Annie Hall*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Schizopolis*, *Following*, *Amores Perros*, and *21 Grams*—are films made early in the career of each director and, in most cases, represent only the first or second full-length feature film by that director.

The last area of non-diegetic non-locality for us to consider is “the meaning of life/death” subgroup, in which teleological and eschatological concerns play more important roles than in the other subgroups, and point-driven and four-dimensionalist readings are most encouraged. This last subgroup has been around for at least as long as D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916). Despite its politically controversial place in film history, if *Birth of a Nation* (1915) reveals Griffith to be a visionary and gifted storyteller of linear discourse in film’s infancy, *Intolerance* certainly establishes Griffith equally as

a visionary who sees the potential for nonlinear discourse as a storytelling technique in film. In one respect, *Intolerance* aids audiences in tracking four alternating storylines in four vastly different time periods through the use of tinting to identify each different timeline with a different color—an effect that has since been restored by Image and Kino to match the original release prints and is still imitated on occasion by contemporary filmmakers like Soderbergh (in *Traffic*, for instance). *Intolerance* takes additional pains for the sake of clarity as well, viz. explicit title cards in the film providing instructions to the audience:

Our play is made up of four separate stories, laid in different periods of history, each with its own set of characters. / Each story shows how hatred and intolerance, through all the ages, have battled against love and charity. / Therefore, you will find our play turning from one of the four stories to another, as *the common theme* unfolds in each. / Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.

[Achronic shot of actress Lillian Gish rocking the cradle of humanity.]

Today as yesterday, endlessly rocking, ever bringing the same human passions, the same joys and sorrows. (emphasis added)

Head on, *Intolerance* tackles the “meaning of life” in this tale of epic proportions, both in content and in form. Time figures prominently in the telling: the nonlinear discourse directly engages the omnis by endowing the viewer, truly for the first time, with the God-like power of seeing all times simultaneously, as if outside of time. The story (and title

cards: “today as yesterday”) affirm this perspective, and together they espouse a four-dimensionalist and point-driven reading of humanity. The viewer is summoned to judge all of humanity, not by its fleeting, individual moments, but rather by its expansive, interactive non-locality throughout the history of civilization.

Since the experimentation of *Intolerance*, surprisingly little creative work has appeared in the way of employing non-diegetic non-locality in film in order to undertake the theme of the “meaning of life” or the “meaning of death.” Projects like Vertov’s self-referential, agitprop *Man with a Movie Camera* or Buñuel and Dali’s surreal *Un Chien Andalou* may qualify, although most surreal experimental films, from Buñuel to Maya Deren to David Lynch, seem diegetic enough in their dream or vision states to be reserved for the “lucid dream” category of nonlinear films. Not until near the end of the twentieth century do we begin to see again assertive attempts to create film in this way and for this purpose; and even so, the number of films that strive to do so is scant in comparison to the other non-locality subgroups.

David Hare’s *Wetherby* does its part by examining a small, relationally and sexually repressed English town whose sylleptical kinship takes the form of loneliness. The polychronic narration in this setting moves the viewer freely at any moment among four time periods—from “now” to “very recently” to “recently” to “a long time ago.” The film accompanies protagonist Jean on her journey to understand love and community and to cope with loneliness as a widow—a journey that spans the better part of her life from youth to old age. As the scenes and subplots with other couples tangle among each other in and out of time, and as the viewer gradually gathers “what” has happened

between Jean and the mysterious drifter John, and “how” it has taken place, the viewer begins to assimilate Jean’s diegetic remembrances of her true love Jim from long ago with the numerous non-diegetic analepses and prolepses surrounding her current situation. For example, a scene of John’s solitary arrival by train and securing an isolated hotel room in town “earlier” is placed directly against the scene of Marcia and Stanley’s visit to Jean at her house sometime “after” John’s suicide and their ensuing discussion of loneliness. In another juxtaposition of scenes, the film cuts to the central dinner scene to show Jean and her friends talking, laughing, and preparing the table, followed immediately by a shot of Jean, later, after John’s suicide, walking down a desolate street at night to the local restaurant to get away from the house. Taken as a whole, the re-ordered scenes visually and rhythmically emphasize the loneliness that Jean, John, Jim and others experience, especially in a nonlinear manner that more closely resembles how loneliness may really “look” and “act,” achieving an emotional dialectic for life and love that is stronger and more clearly understood than a linear progression through time might otherwise supply. As if to ensure that less attentive viewers “get it,” Jean’s neighborly friend Stanley, in a (mid-life) crisis of his own, contemplates loneliness with finality in his remark to Jean near the end of the movie: “with the years, you find you become a prisoner of dreams.”

Of the few other nonlinear films in the “meaning of life/death” subgroup that have been produced since the 1980s, *Eye of God*, *The Red Violin*, and Olivier Dahan’s *La Vie En Rose* (2007) most visibly take their cues from *Wetherby*. *Eye of God* similarly uses four timelines and, early into the film, begins to play out as part “whodunit,” part

“relationship mystery.” But like *Wetherby*, the nonlinear discourse promptly moves ahead—weaving in and out of time around the characters of Jack, Ainsley, and Tommy, and highlighting even larger issues of religious faith, control, and unconditional love, as those motifs illuminate the reasons for Tommy’s suicide and Ainsley’s abortion. The culmination of this effect arrives late in the film in a challenging sequence that rapidly intercuts among four different times from the abortion clinic, the police station, the lake, and the house of Tommy’s aunt. The end result—like Robert Penn Warren’s broad description of “Time” (as opposed to “time”) in his short story “Blackberry Winter”—is more of an overarching, God-like impression of time and feelings about life and death, instead of a mere chronicle of story events.

The Red Violin follows suit, but exerts an even more complex nonlinear structure than the others. On the initial discourse level, in the “now,” the viewer is part of an auction at which the collector Charles Morritz is in attendance and is researching a cache of violins, including what is well-known to be “the red violin,” an instrument famously hand-crafted by the inimitable Nicolo Bussotti. On this level, the viewer is privy to the auction multiple times, interspersed throughout the narrative using a “view variorum” style (a category of nonlinear film that will be discussed in a later chapter). On a second level, the progressive trans-temporal and transnational discovery of the violin, from Italy to Austria to England to China, up until the time period of the auction, is steadily revealed by way of alternating analepses. On a third level, the viewer is immersed in a non-diegetic tale of the circumstances surrounding the actual creation of the violin during the Italian Renaissance.

Within this remaining level, however, the tale behind the creation of the red violin, which occurs from a much “earlier” time period, is told nonlinearly within itself (hypodiegetically). A woman, Anna, has her future interpreted by Cesca using five Tarot cards, one card at a time; then, we see Anna with her husband, Nicolo, from “early” in her pregnancy to her death during childbirth, which is then followed by a scene of her husband staining the violin red; finally, the specific details unfold about how her husband actually came to stain the violin: with her blood in the pigment and her hair for brush bristles. Each of these levels extends across the entirety of the discourse, and the last scene of film is the one in which Cesca finishes her card-reading session with Anna at last. *The Red Violin* stunningly shows viewers something bigger than the “now”—something that transcends the power of temporal locality and our own evanescence; for, when all of these characters are connected through the unifying force of the red violin, the violin takes on mythic proportions. The violin and the great loss of love associated with it over a span of several lifetimes represent the sylleptical kinship governing the anachronies of the film and informing the omnis with the notion that what has “already” come and what is “yet” to be is just as real as what is happening “in this moment.”

The final scene of *La Vie En Rose* captures beautifully in Edith Piaf’s final moments before death precisely these kinds of thoughts regarding the omnis. The entire film is another extraordinary illustration of non-diegetic non-locality; the film’s last scene, however, moves into diegetic non-locality when it becomes clear that the anachronic edits are snippets of Piaf’s fading memory. “I’m afraid, Simone,” she says, “I’m losing my memory. It’s very serious. My thoughts are muddled. I’m trying to

remember, but I can't. Other memories are surfacing, not the ones I want to see." She refers to Marcel's watch, and the next shot is a slow, reverse zoom out from the mantle clock, which dissolves into a brief recollection of scenes from her childhood. Then, we are "back" in her room. As she prays, more images from her memories are flashed across the screen. The diegetic twist with which this final scene materializes is enough to bring into question the narrative reliability of all the prior scenes of the nonlinear discourse, but it also serves as the basis for the sylleptical kinship of all the shots and scenes throughout the film. Memory is a sylleptical implement used for all varieties of nonlinear films; but, as in *Atonement*, the idea of memory's fickle nature is introduced in *La Vie En Rose* as the unreliable source of and sylleptical kinship for the anachronies of the discourse leading up to that moment in the film. As Piaf's memory blurs, she gradually loses her Boothian "authority," and the film moves into the realm of "lucid dreams."

In 2002, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman cleverly delivered *Adaptation*, an imaginative satire about the (un)creative process in Hollywood and a remarkable nonlinear circus act of hypodiegetic leaps—from film into screenplay and still deeper into novel, then back out again, only to repeat, and using almost every conceivable variation in the process. The film includes a metacinematic, screenwriterly running gag about ambitious screenplays that try to do too much, and so it incorporates several wildly improbable, but humorous scenes in the film, including one in which the discourse jumps from "now" to "Four Billion and Forty Years Earlier"—a montage of the beginning of life on Earth and, specifically, in Hollywood, California. The discourse plunges into yet another preposterous hypodiegetic scenario a little later, from a scene in which Orlean is

writing her book to a scene within the book itself, entitled, “One Hundred Years Earlier in . . . Venezuela, Bornea and China.”

Some of the same kinds of far-fetched narrative leaps, with potentially the same comic effects, take place in Terrence Malick’s 2011 film *The Tree of Life*. The obvious difference in Malick’s film, of course, is that most of his scenes are not amusing; instead, they are deeply in earnest about the significance of life and death. Upon careful reflection and with the omnis in mind, one is better positioned to understand how the exquisite polychronic flow coursing through *The Tree of Life* entirely belongs there and wholly befits the film’s story. The dearth of non-diegetic non-locality films in the final subgroup of this chapter speaks to the formidable challenge of either writing/producing or viewing/reading a film that wants to come to grips with articulating the “meaning of life/death” in this way. Notwithstanding this challenge, *The Tree of Life* can be regarded the paragon film in this penetrating subgroup.

Viewings of *The Tree of Life* bring extraordinary attention to its cinematography, special effects, music, and acting, but the most influential aspect of this film is its nonlinear discourse. The discourse operates in four ways: the achrony of the lone flame and of other images and sounds and of whispered voiceover narration; the polychronic of the 1950s Texas home and neighborhood scenes; the four-dimensionalism of the characters, particularly the oldest (prodigal) son, Jack; and the all-embracing four-dimensionalism of existence. Only when taken together do these four facets bring a richer appreciation of the film’s non-locality and omnis.

Not unlike the achrony of *Intolerance*'s "Eternal Mother" rocking the cradle, the achrony of the diverse, recurring metaphoric images in *The Tree of Life* is useful in the way it generates the through-line or thread linking all of the film's anachronic shots together like beads on a necklace: a slowly burning, orange flame in absolute darkness; chance encounters among people walking across a bright ocean beach; the trunk and inner branches of a large tree shot from the ground up, sometimes as sunlight breaks through the leaves and sometimes at night; a riverbank; a streetlamp; amorphous planets in space; white, diaphanous, wind-blown curtains at an empty window; and a constant upward movement along the steps of an interior staircase, of old stone steps, or of sundry ladders. Along with occasional dream-like images, such as a young boy floating upward out of an oddly situated bedroom immersed underwater, or the same young boy riding a tricycle in a small attic, these recurring images function to establish the kinship or relationship of the syllepsis. By their achronic presence sown throughout the discourse, viewers are galvanized into questioning their meaning and led into a point-driven reading of the entire film's non-locality by internally looking for the answers to questions such as, "What do these images have in common? What do they represent in the context of the entire film? Where do they occur in time—before, now, later, always, never—or, does that even matter? Does anyone see the images diegetically, and, if so, who? (Jack? God?) How are they connected specifically to the characters in or the scenes of the O'Brien family? How much authority does this gathering of images provide the viewer over temporality?"

The achronic content and mere presence of these images not only stimulates thematic understanding; their ordering and adjacencies to other images amplify the omnis as well. After the textual quote from Job, the lone flame introduces the film as the first achronic image, followed by a series of three timeframes in the life of the O'Brien family: "now" at the time of middle son R.L.'s death, "earlier" when the three sons were boys, and "much earlier" when Mrs. O'Brien was just a girl. The next achronic image we see is the flame again after the inciting incident of the story—the death of R. L.—has been established in the "now" timeframe. In this second occurrence, the flame changes, blurs, and produces an image resembling high-speed photography of traffic and city lights at night. This change introduces a fourth timeframe presumably years after R.L.'s death, where we spend time with the Grown Jack in the office interiors and exteriors of a large business complex, intercut with achronic scenes of people on the beach, at the pier, among the sand, and with an "earlier" image of Mrs. O'Brien by a sheer window curtain. An achronic shot of a flock of starlings dancing against the city sky (nearly identical, stylistically, to the shot of birds in *21 Grams*), followed by a "now" shot of Mrs. O'Brien walking through a sunlit forest, distraught by her son's death, launches the provocative prehistoric section of the film, which closes with the image of a meteor striking the surface of planet Earth.

From this point, the film develops a long, more linear section in which the timeframe that has read as "earlier" (when the boys are young) in the first part becomes the "now" in the middle of the film. This mid-section is peppered with more impressive achronic imagery and concludes by cutting to the candle again in Grown Jack's kitchen,

which he lights in memory of his brother. The candle seems connected to the “Eternal Flame” that appears time and again in the film. The film finishes with an increased attention to the achronic imagery, culminating in a long shot of an expansion bridge at sunset, followed by the lone flame in the darkness again. By the close, the imagistic achrony has made it difficult to reflect upon the more familiar images and conventions of the diegesis without bringing to mind the idea that something much more radical and far-reaching is at work here, something which can only be glimpsed truly through the nonlinear representation of the entirety of a person’s life, a representation formed by placing the achronic imagery side by side with the defining moments in the lives of these characters.

Like the achronic imagery, the recurring background sounds of the beach and the multi-character voiceover narration are useful for moving viewers into omnis thinking. The sound of seagulls and waves underscoring the sequence of Grown Jack at the office—moving through elevators, hallways, and meetings—carries with it a contrapuntal force, an incongruence that neither a story-driven nor information-driven reading will satisfy. The sound of the beach, presumably either signifying “eternal,” or originating from a much “later” time, is anachronic with respect to the concurrent imagery of Grown Jack at the office in the “later” timeframe—a kind of synchronous nonlinearity that communicates dialectically and four-dimensionally in order to glimpse multiple parts of his life simultaneously, which neither the sound nor the image could accomplish alone.

The Tree of Life is brimming with omnis-inducing voiceover narration, most of it whispered by Young Jack and Mrs. O’Brien. Although the latter speaks most of the

opening narration, which straightforwardly discloses the central theme of “grace versus nature” in the film, it is Grown Jack who speaks as if in memory or recollection: “I see the child I was. I see my brother. True. Kind. He died when he was 19.” It is the only direct hint of diegetic non-locality in the film. Later, Young Jack’s narration dominates the mid-section of the film and also conveys a four-dimensionalist tenor: “What was it you showed me? I didn’t know how to name you then. But I see it was you. Always you were calling me. [. . .] Father. Mother. Always you wrestle inside me. Always you will.” The voiceovers of Grown Jack (“Keep us, guide us, till the end of time”), Mrs. O’Brien (“Life of my life, my search for you, my hope, my child”) and Mr. O’Brien (“I dishonored it all and didn’t notice the glory . . . I’m a foolish man”) behave similarly in their teleological searching and their ontological expanse of vision. Mrs. O’Brien’s narration, though, moves us even farther, from start to finish, into eschatological provinces, from innocence (“They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end”) to complete surrender (“I give him to you. . . . I give you my son”).

The principle thread of the discourse is the polychronic braid that traces and re-traces the O’Brien family. Although the opening of the film introduces the family at a time “earlier” when the O’Brien sons were boys, most of the opening shows Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien “now” and Grown Jack “later” as they respond to and remember the death of Jack’s brother, R. L., respectively. The mid-section of the film takes advantage of McTaggart’s tenseless B-series and shifts the “now” from R. L.’s death to the time of the boys’ youth, polychronically mixing scenes together that span their lives from infancy to puberty. The final act of the film begins after the family has moved away and the film

cuts “later” to Mrs. O’Brien mourning the loss of R. L. again on her porch, signaling one more shift in time, so that Grown Jack is in the “now” and all the other scenes have come “before.” This section evolves into a visual elegy, a prayer, an eschatological montage of revelation, reconciliation, and afterlife. Despite a general sense of forward movement from act to act in the film, the nonlinear handling of the details throughout (specific scenes and shots) suggests that one is best able to access and fathom the secrets of *The Tree of Life* through the lens of four-dimensionalism and looking at a life or group of lives thematically rather than chronologically.

The two characters that benefit most from this lens are Jack and Mrs. O’Brien. By itself, Jack’s thread in the film is essentially a frame story. His first appearance is as Grown Jack, lighting the candle, reminiscent, looking out the kitchen window, his wife wandering. After several more voiceovers from Grown Jack and a fragmented sequence showing him in his work routine at the office, the coming-of-age story of his youth is unveiled in jumps and leaps, followed finally by a return to Grown Jack at the office and, then, into the symbolic “beyond” of Grown Jack’s thoughts, hopes, imagination, and/or death (or, at least, his contemplation of death). Mrs. O’Brien’s life path takes much the same direction. As the discourse begins, we become briefly acquainted with her youth via images of a girl at a window and on a farm in spring or summer with animals, accompanied by her father. We then move back and forth in her mid-life between mothering the boys when they are young and grieving the death of her son years “later.” Our last images of her appear on the beach that transcends time. As with the film’s achronies, the portrayals of these two lives relay a general sense of forward movement in

the discourse; yet, the narrative overflows with anachronies and, because the depictions are so fragmented, emphasis is steered away from a story-driven reading and re-directed toward a more point-driven, four-dimensionalist reading.

A final thought regarding four-dimensionalism in *The Tree of Life* should be extended to the film's controversial evocation of the totality of all life, including the prehistoric. One much-discussed part of the film that cannot be overlooked, principally with respect to the omnis schema, is the prehistoric timeframe in the first act, during which we witness Earth's beginnings and the dawn of primordial life. As the polychronic braid from the O'Brien story bears witness to the "grace-nature" friction in the human experience—summed up in Young Jack's paraphrase of Romans 7:15, "What I want to do I can't do; I do what I hate"—so the anachronies of Time's beginning extend that "grace-nature" friction beyond the human experience and into a universal experience. "Cause-and-effect" and "there's-a-purpose-for-everything" are taglines that have little to do with this type of polychronic approach; and it is precisely because of this sequence in the film that the richest understanding of the eschatological aspect of the human experience is available to be gleaned. While the mesmerizing artistry of cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki and legendary special effects consultant Douglas Trumbull make it pleasurable to lose sight of the significance that this sequence plays in the overarching meaning of the film, the weight of the film's concern with the "grace versus nature" theme and its four-dimensionalist manifestations would be seriously diminished without the sequence. In so many words, numerous positive critical responses to and reviews of the film have given at least some indication of recognition that the film, as A.

O. Scott perceptively observes, “contemplates human existence from the standpoint of eternity.” Few, if any, however, have acknowledged specifically that this omnis sensibility essentially stems from the nonlinear discourse in the film.

In seeking to define the nonlinear film category of “non-diegetic non-locality” and discuss key film samples within its four subgroups, particular combinations of possible viewing strategies have presented themselves. The “vague idea” films, for the most part, seem to fail to signify in meaningful ways and, because their texts require so much effort for a viewer to decipher, none of Hunt and Vipond’s reading formations are serviceable for discerning those texts. Though the films are nonlinear because they barely pass the test of syllepsis, the kinship of their temporal parts is weak, four-dimensionalism cannot be measured, and their bewildering texts do not imbue a viewer with the authorial power of the omnis. The “relationship mystery” subgroup, on the other hand, brings special attention to character evolution, and consequently invites both story-driven and point-driven viewings and affirms four-dimensionalism as a kind of mandala for questioning and understanding the effects of human interactions and their causes. The tendency of “relationship mystery” films, then, is to move only so far as the etiological, rather than continuing beyond into the teleological (i.e. “a reason for everything”). Third, the “heist film” subgroup bears some likeness to the “relationship mystery” subgroup in its preoccupation with effects and their causes. Yet, the viewing strategy placed in play by most of these films is an information-driven game of collecting clues from a artful line of “big picture” questioning that usually leads from deciding first “what” happened and “how”; then, eventually, to “why” it happened. Lastly, the challenging “meaning of

life/death” subgroup epitomizes both the four-dimensionalist concept that “before, now, after” are all equally real, as well as the Augustinian corollary that, in order to see the “before, now, after” in such a way, one must step outside of time to look on from a “God-like” perspective. Such shifting of perspective results in a thrust in the direction of point-driven readings and eschatological rumination and assessment.

In the commentary for his film *Eye of God*, director Tim Blake Nelson tries to explain his choice for using nonlinearity to shape the non-diegetic non-locality of the film:

Now the reason for the film using time as it does in terms of showing scenes [. . .] out of sequence with one another is not simply to create mystery around the story of Ainsley’s death, or even why it happened, but to look at time in a way which is more divine than human. And the premise would be that if God is eternal, then God would not see time as we humans do—in chronological order—because we have finite lives. God might see events as they relate thematically or spiritually instead of seeing events as they relate chronologically. And so events in this movie and scenes in this movie are connected to one another editorially in ways that I hope are deeper than we experience events as human beings, one after another. And that’s the reason for the way the film uses time—to find a deeper way that the events described in the movie relate to one another.

By the same token, to some degree, most of the films in this chapter want to do precisely what Nelson characterizes about his film and how it signifies. They seek “to find a deeper way that the events [and characters] relate to one another” through their non-diegetic, non-local approach to nonlinear discourse. Indeed, we will see, as we continue, that nearly all of the films covered in the study want to achieve a similar narrative objective.

In this first category, then, we see how the achronies and seemingly random anachronies of many nonlinear film discourses begin to crystallize into meaningful, B-conceptual syllepses that carry with them the omnis impulse—that desire to envision a larger picture, even to behold an entire life (or lives), beyond the time-locked boundaries of mere chronology. This first category of non-diegetic non-locality and the films situated within it represent the most common type of nonlinear film and likewise provide the framework for further variations of nonlinearity that make up the other four categories. The first of these variations—“lucid dreams,” which also depends greatly upon non-locality—is the most closely related corollary of the first, foundational category and is the focus of the next chapter. In that chapter, we will glimpse what happens when characters within the diegetic world recognize the syllepsis but have little or no control over its development or signification.

Chapter IV

LUCID DREAMS:

THE SYLLEPSIS OF BLURRING PROTAGONISTIC REALITY

He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all . . . Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing . . . (I can only wait for the final amnesia, the one that can erase an entire life. [. . .])

Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*

Harmony Korine's first film *Gummo* is, more or less, a collection of related vignettes that develop slowly and arbitrarily as we connect the dots and get to know his characters from scene to scene. As J. J. Murphy points out, Korine has been scorned by the spectrum of film critics, from Janet Maslin to J. Hoberman, the latter of which has christened Korine as "the glue sniffer's Jean-Luc Godard" in response to *Gummo* (277). Equally, Korine has been touted as an "envelope-pusher" with "restless originality"

(Screen International) and hailed by Bertolucci as having “created a revolution in the language of cinema.” In the midst of these wildly mixed responses, Korine attempts to argue that the rationale for his subversive approach lies in his belief that narrative is not even particularly necessary to film: “I don't really care in a basic narrative. I don't see narrative in life. I see stories, and I love stories, but I don't see anything ever beginning or finishing, and I don't feel like there's a middle to anything in my life, so, I just rather show scenes and just things that exist, and go on and on and on.” *Gummo*'s erratic syllepsis and Korine's disheveled, four-dimensionalist manipulation of those nonlinear pieces of discourse that make up the film with no narrative connection to the story proper provide another example of non-diegetic non-locality as discussed in the last chapter.

Two years after *Gummo*, Korine produced and directed his second maverick film, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, again a work with few visible plot threads. The syllepsis of its scenes, however, does not reflect the same objective, acausal, authorial “engineering” as in *Gummo*. Throughout the discourse of *Julien*, the title character becomes emblematic of narrative subjectivity and is more privileged with access to the syllepsis, and a viewer gleans from the subjective camerawork and editing (frequent close-ups, spinning shots, etc.) that the narrative consists largely of Booth's “inside view” represented in the schizophrenic perspective of Julien. The filmic text here begins to move away from non-diegetic non-locality into a diegetic non-locality, and the protagonist is endowed with a kind of consciousness about, though rarely an authority over, the discourse and its sylleptical behavior.

A few branches of diegetic non-locality persist in film, and one of them occurs when the film's protagonist becomes unable to discern reality from illusion and when he experiences the syllepsis of the discourse in the same manner that the "authorial" viewer does. The film at that point can be said to have moved into a branch of diegetic non-locality that qualifies as a new nonlinear category, one we might refer to, for our purposes, as "lucid dreams." The expression seems occasionally to have found its way into broader uses within film scholarship as a means of describing what Berg calls "the subjective plot" ruled by "a character's internal (or 'filtered') perspective" (44; cf. Booth 160-65). Berg's classification is part of a larger, umbrella phylum of alternate plots he describes as "Classical Rules of Subjectivity, Causality, and Self-Referential Narration," which is cousin to nonlinear discourses, but which does not involve them directly. The subjective plot, according to Berg, "is meant to represent the character's psychologically disordered perspective, or to present the disorienting process of switching back and forth from external to internal worlds" (45), which is sometimes another way to think of the phenomenon in psychology known as lucid dreaming.

Syllepsis (and even polychronic narration generally) is not guaranteed in films that reveal the protagonist to be experiencing events in a surreal way—half awake, half asleep, conscious of dreaming. *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne 1990), *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater 2001), and *Geomi Sup*, or *Spider Forest* (Il-gon Song 2004), for instance, are good examples of films that behave in this way (i.e. surrealistically sans syllepsis). Notwithstanding, in cases in which the filmic text represents diegetic non-locality to the extent that the disoriented protagonist, in his or her dream or memory state,

becomes privileged to respond directly to the nonlinear discourse and its sylleptical behavior, the expression “lucid dream” seems the right (and most constructive) choice. For this reason, our reassignment and specialized use of the title “lucid dream” here will explicitly apply only to those subjectively shaped films composed with nonlinear discourses.

To be clear, classifying nonlinear films that contain this form of narrative subjectivity simply as “diegetic non-locality” would be an imprecise designation. One should observe, for example, that time-travel movies, another branch of diegetic non-locality, operate differently than what we will call “lucid dream” films. In time-travel movies, which are, by our definition, more linear than nonlinear (but ambiguously so), characters are aware of the shifts in time, but those shifts are highly intentional and controlled solely within the world of the story. They do not necessarily carry with them the “inside view” fostered by the private perceptions, memories, dreams, reflections, and visions of a particular character, nor does their discourse have authority over such time shifts. Occasionally, exceptions occur where lucid dream and time-travel movies are intertwined and the waters are muddied: for example, films that focus on time travel but that also question the activity as if a dream, as in *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam 1995) and, with so many still images using a photo-novel technique, its precursor *La Jetée* (Chris Marker 1962); or that begin with the premise of some kind of vision or dream (either literally or ideally) and then seem to move into the remote suggestion of time travel, as, for example, in *Somewhere in Time* (Jeannot Szwarc 1980), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly 2001), or *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber 2004).

As touched on in an earlier chapter, while the majority of time-travelers diegetically move through time—usually of their own accord and always in the “now” via the experiences of B-thinking—the *viewers* of time-travel movies will look on from afar but retain their A-judgments (“past, present, and future”) via the discourse.

Unlike its function in time-travel movies, the diegetic non-locality of lucid dream films, with its syllepsis of the protagonistic “inside view” and its blurring of reality, essentially depends upon a film’s discourse, not its story, for its anachronies and for its cultivating in viewers the B-thinking of “before, now, and after” with all its inherent incertitude. Essentially, in time-travel movies the temporal shifts occur in physical, measurable ways, solely within the world of the story. In contrast, the temporal shifts of lucid dream films occur in both external and (mostly) internal spaces (psychological and/or spiritual), are nearly impossible to measure, and can be signified primarily by way of the anachronies between the film’s story and its discourse—a difference that, in the end, gives authority to the narrative discourse and situates lucid dream films distinctly as nonlinear.

By our definition, few “pure” lucid dream films exist; more films fall along the margins of the type, and even more within the same “extended family” can be identified as part of the larger realm of narrative subjectivity films. Berg calls upon George Bluestone to account for what they jointly perceive to be a scarcity of films even in the latter, attributing the shortage of subjective plots in movies to an intrinsic difficulty that screenwriters and directors face when seeking to translate memories and dreams into

celluloid. The problem, they say, is due to the established fact that neither thoughts nor feelings can be rendered effectively through visual perception and dialogue (44).

While this fact may hold true for the “inside view” of subjective plots in film generally, the same cannot be said necessarily of films that incorporate memories or dreams specifically. The internal thoughts and feelings of characters that are neither dreaming nor remembering are indeed difficult to convert mimetically for the screen. The memories and dreams of characters, however, are already image-based and dialogue-based, which presumably makes the transference into moving images a less daunting task. As the majority of diegetic flashbacks in film will attest (if capably edited), memories are essentially comprised of images, dialogue, and emotions, all of which require little help to be translated cinematically. Dreams, too, operate similarly, providing images and dialogue readily for translation to film. Although memories and dreams are extensions of our thoughts, we (and characters) actually see and hear them (and feel them), rather than think about them as they are happening. Whenever memories and dreams are involved, images, sounds, and dialogue occur immediately during the memory or dream itself, while *reflective* thought, on the other hand, occurs (gets in the way) only *after* the images, sounds, and spoken dialogue of a dream or memory have taken place and one has awakened. *Lucid* thought in lucid dream films operates differently, of course, as we shall see, and is even more challenging since lucid thinking occurs *in both* a film’s story time and the discourse time. Whether as memories (*Amadeus*, *Memento*, *Atonement*, etc.) or as dreams (*Mulholland Dr.*, *Abre Los Ojos* [Alejandro Amenábar 1997], *Inception* [Christopher Nolan 2001], etc.) or as fantastic

undertakings (*The Wizard of Oz*, *The Phantom Tollbooth* [Chuck Jones 1970], *The Princess Bride* [Rob Reiner 1987], etc.), the “rendition[s] of mental states,” declared by Bluestone and included in Berg’s broad class of “narrative subjectivity,” yield, in fact, a large number of films that seem to suffer little, or not at all, as the result of presumed, “writerly” translation difficulties.

In contrast to the larger field of narrative subjectivity, the few lucid dream films that exist bear a unique challenge. Although the images and dialogue that occur naturally in memories and dreams favor the translation of lucid dream material into film, the category’s heavy reliance on lucid thought as an important bridge between the diegesis and the discourse creates additional tension and resistance in translating the material to film. Before looking more closely at a few strong examples of lucid dream films, a brief survey of marginal films in the category will be beneficial for recognizing the strains and varieties of this challenge as they surface in related nonlinear forms.

Most “premonition” films should not be considered lucid dream films, per se. Movies dealing with psychic visions as in *The Dead Zone* (David Cronenberg 1983) and *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg 2001) demonstrate a limited proleptic event or premise that is less interested in syllepsis and more interested in desultory anachronies as loose prompts for plot riddles. There are exceptions, of course, like *Premonition* (2007), which operates ironically like a lucid dream film with a rudimentary syllepsis and a post-traumatic trigger, as seen through the experiences of its main character Linda Hanson and as reflected in director Bill Kelly’s musings about Hanson: “And it struck me, ‘What if the days of her week were like playing cards, and you threw them up in the air, and

wherever they landed and you picked them up is how the whole thing would play out? [. . .] It's about the idea that all of us can kind of lose track of our days to where it feels like we're living the same day in and out.” Occasionally, premonition films like Roeg’s disturbing *Don’t Look Now* (1973) illustrate what happens when the prolepses become frequent enough and strong enough to make them nearly polychronic in the recurring visions of the film’s unstable protagonist, John Baxter. Generally, however, these “vision”-ary movies tend to behave like non-sylleptical discourses that employ ordinary un-featured diegetic (memory-prompted) analepses (*Out of the Past* [Jacques Tourneur], *The Big Clock* [John Farrow 1948], *Chump Change* [Stephen Burrows 2000], *Fried Green Tomatoes* [Jon Avnet 1991], etc.): prolepses in most premonition movies are also essentially un-featured and diegetic (premonition-prompted).

Other films located on the periphery of the lucid dream category—such as *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson 2004), *La Mala Educacion* (Pedro Almodóvar 2004), *The Forgotten* (Gerald Di Pego 2004), and *The Science of Sleep* (Michel Gondry 2006), to name just a few—tend to resist nonlinearity in their sporadic uses of anachrony (mostly through frequent diegetic flashbacks). Syllepsis, consequently, does not materialize in these films. Only Almodóvar’s effort possibly shows the promise of nonlinearity in its attempts with integrated diegetic analepses, while taking the hypodiegetic form of a screenplay-within-a-screenplay-within-a-film. In a few instances, “rabbit hole” environments like the unsettled world of Truman in *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir 1998) or of Harold Crick in *Stranger Than Fiction* (Marc Forster 2006) seem symptomatic of lucid dreams, too, reflecting a slight surrealism in which a God-like outside force

increasingly complicates their presumed realities; yet, tampering with discourse time is missing in these films altogether.

Another marginal brand of lucid dream movies, one that involves an identity crisis and the physical and/or mental transformation of the protagonist, also tends to exercise nonlinearity to varying degrees. For example, neither the inside view of Arthur/“Tony” (Rock Hudson) in John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds*, who hires an organization known as “The Company” to fake his death and alter his identity, nor the gradual personality transfer between Alma and Elisabeth in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*—films both from 1966—incorporates shifts in time as part of its respective protagonist’s delusional bewilderments with regard to their new situation. Cammel and Roeg’s *Performance* (1970), on the other hand, takes the viewer nonlinearly into the world of the mysterious “Turner” (Mick Jagger) and his drug den brimming with Polaroids (which undoubtedly informs the choices of Roeg-influenced Nolan in *Memento* thirty years later), psychedelic trips, dubious identity, and multiple references to Jorge Luis Borges, all of which clearly point to a hallucinatory nonlinearity in the discourse. Remarkably, in both *Seconds* and *Performance*, precisely the same line is spoken in reference to or as a reflection of the protagonist’s nebulous state of mind: “It’s time for a change”; but only in the second film does the line perform as a double entendre: Chas’s and Turner’s faces are mutually superimposed, toying with the viewer’s comprehension of each man’s true identity and hinting at how the nonlinear fragments might adhere as a conceivable whole.

Many films of “identity crisis” play similar dual-personality games with the protagonist without being strictly nonlinear—*Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven 1990), *Shattered* (Wolfgang Peterson 1991), David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), and *Unknown* (Jaume Collet-Serra 2011), for example. Other films like these, however, are, instead, more nonlinear and thus invite even more engagement from the viewer to grapple with resolving the incongruities between the dream world and the waking world: Alan Parker’s *Pink Floyd The Wall* (1982), *Abre los Ojos* or, *Open Your Eyes*, or its American re-make *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe 2001), or *Mulholland Dr.* In his chapter entitled “Dream Logic and *Mulholland Dr.*,” J. J. Murphy likens the melding of Rita and Betty in Lynch’s challenging masterpiece to that of Bergman’s actress and nurse in *Persona*, and maintains that *Mulholland Dr.*’s nonlinearity (especially its achrony) relies on a “narrative logic found only in dreams, as characters shift identities abruptly, time becomes elastic, and objects and events resonate with multiple meanings” (202). This kind of logic, of course, represents a trademark for Lynch in the majority of his work, particularly *Twin Peaks*, *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Inland Empire* (2006).

Much of Aronofsky’s work, particularly *The Fountain* (2006), provides yet another interesting kind of “dual-personality” lucid dream with questionable nonlinearity. What initially appears to be a simple alternation among three very different time phases (Hugh Jackman as conquistador-doctor-space traveler) turns out to be a representation of three extreme levels of narrative that produce the illusion of polychronic narration. The Spanish conquistador is from a story in the historical novel *Izzy* (Rachel Weisz) is writing concurrently during her and Tom’s (Jackman) contemporary “now,” which is the

actual main plot of the film. Because Tom is also reading the novel concurrently and simultaneously projecting himself and his own personal circumstances emotionally into the novel, the illusory conquistador thread surfaces as if something from “the past,” even though the same actors in the “now” appear as characters in “the past.” In contrast, the scenes in which a version of Tom is floating in his bubble to Xibalbe constitute a surreal, visual allegory representing the spiritual evolution of Tom, particularly with regard to his deepening realization of life and death. The dream-like movement through planetary space in those scenes creates the sense of a “futuristic” vision—again, easily (but mistakenly) read as another thread of time.

The three threads are braided and held together by the common denominators of the two actors’ reappearances and the recurring theme of “trees”: the conquistador’s quest for the “tree of life” to save the queen, Tom’s immediate search for Izzy’s cure from a variety of tree species, and the old, giant tree overwhelming the bubble of the strange space pilgrim. An omnis-like sensation is the natural result of this transcendent plait that affords an expansive perspective on life and death; and yet the three threads do not unify sylleptically and therefore, in themselves, do not tidily constitute nonlinearity. At least two scenes, however, are shown three times (the conquistador’s encounter with the Mayan guard and the flaming sword, and the day Izzy leaves for a walk in the snow), both of which are changed or appear different the third time. It is, in fact, in these repetitions of time, these interior revisions of Tom’s emotions and psychological state, that we recognize the film’s true nonlinearity.

The diversity of ancillary lucid dream forms is evident from this sampling. Gleaning critical features of the category from these outlying relations, we may now more usefully turn to the lucid dream films that tend to take advantage of those features the most. Again, specifically, lucid dream films are identified as filmic texts of diegetic non-locality in which a disoriented protagonist, in his or her dream or memory state, becomes privileged ("inside view") to respond directly to the nonlinear discourse and its sylleptical behavior. As a lucid dream film advances, the protagonist finds the distinctions between illusion and reality to be increasingly clouded. Whereas related notions have focused mostly on "rabbit holes," identity crises, and the multiple personalities of such protagonists, the lucid dream category of nonlinear films is strictly a matter of discourse time, protagonistic awareness of that discourse time, and the balance of authorial power.

Parenthetically, this last statement may suggest that even the bulk of New Wave films, including the somewhat nonlinear discourse games of Jean-Luc Godard in films like *Alphaville* (1965), do not fit this category neatly. Among the work of those filmmakers, it may be Alain Resnais's work that arrives most closely to our definition of the "lucid dream." With what he has called "memory editing," a process of "cutting between the past and present, memory and reality, to create a haunting document of conscience and loss" (Dixon and Foster 249), Resnais's films—particularly, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), and, most of all, *Muriel* (1963)—hover around a protagonistic awareness of their respective discourse times: the representation of an effort to reconcile memory, identity, and presentness. None of these

films, however, makes completely clear the extent to which their respective protagonist engages their discourses.

Buster Keaton's brilliant 1925 film *Sherlock, Jr.* provides one of the first strong looks from film history at this blurred experience; yet it is, in fact, only a glimpse, as seen through the dominant anachrony of the film's slick, but simple conceit: the projectionist's dream (essentially, the interval of dream time versus reality time) within the diegetic cinematic-projection-within-a-cinematic-projection. Toward the end of the movie, as life and art merge for Keaton's troubled projectionist, the amalgam of illusion and reality takes on new, if not indeterminate meaning for the character, and, ultimately, the romantic and comic effect is largely dependent upon the resolution of the rather uncomplicated syllepsis. Since that time, numerous films have tried inventively to tap into Keaton's expression by incorporating the surreal into a film's imagery, sound, and narrative structure; but the majority of these films, as we have seen so far, are prone to resort to a quasi-nonlinear discourse in the process.

Some of the strongest nonlinear precedents of lucid dream films since the early experiments of Keaton and others interestingly are based on novels that experiment with narrative structure. Buck Henry's 1970 adaptation of Joseph Heller's satirical novel *Catch-22*, directed by Mike Nichols, helped to propagate a breed of anti-war satires that had already been set in motion by the likes of Chaplin and Kubrick. Bearing a resemblance in tone to the earlier *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* which came out the same year, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (George Roy Hill) just two years later, *Catch-22* unpacks a surreal series of incidents that, on the whole, seem to show a

forward movement after the initial *in medias res* event in which Yossarian is stabbed by a “raker” (Natelly’s whore). Because the flashback-dream structure grows into a central feature of the film, the narrative becomes sylleptical and the film becomes nonlinear.

The film relies on three basic anachronies intersecting the main forward-moving plot: the *in medias res* which begins and penultimately wraps the film with the stabbing of Yossarian, a recurring dream-like scene in which Yossarian tends to the injured Snowden in the cockpit of one of the planes and a series of more dream scenes, oddly achronic, such as a naked woman on a diving platform at the beach or Yossarian in the hospital, but as another person. Even within the central narrative thread, surreality abounds, from the airbase (mess hall, infirmary, air field, briefing room, etc.) to the streets of Rome where Yossarian wanders at night. In one scene that takes place in Major Major’s office, the image within a picture frame hanging on a wall changes with each shot-reverse shot round. In another sequence—typical of the film’s uncanniness as a whole—the viewer sees Hungry Joe killed by an airplane flown by McWatt who subsequently flies his plane into the side of a mountain; a cut to Hungry Joe’s funeral, with Yossarian up in a tree naked while Milo tries to talk to him; a cut to Yossarian talking in bed with the woman he followed in the streets of Rome (earlier?); a cut to the lobby of a brothel where Natelly talks to an Old Man; a cut to Yossarian, Milo, and others in an airplane, looking for Orr among his plane wreckage in the ocean; a cut to Orr working on a gadget in his room in the middle of the night; and so on. The overarching effect is one of paranoia and distrust in one’s own eyes as details shift and ambiguity

reigns. The effect resists story- and information-driven readings and invites point-driven readings as a strategy for resolving the nonlinear discourse's bizarre incongruities.

That invitation is further affirmed by Nichols in terms of his own sense of viewer responses to the movie. When prompted in a discussion with Steven Soderbergh that the film seemed as though a kind of "fever dream," Nichols corroborates that their whole idea for the structure of the film was "a kind of circular 'underneath.'" But the challenging point-driven reading required from the audience for such a structure resulted in mixed reviews.

I would like to have been a little more aware of taking the audience by the hand and leading them through this extremely confusing series of events: when is what taking place? Although like with all such devices, if you just give up and go with it, it does, I hope, become clear. [. . .] Again, I think somehow, some of the time, I sacrificed clarity for this style. It isn't always that easy to know physically what's happening, which turns out to add to the dream feeling. [. . .] The first two films I made did lead to a huge audience reaction, and cheering and carrying on and so forth. But there was a sense during the preview and, in fact, the run of [*Catch-22*] that it was not completely connecting with the audience.

The omnis of Yossarian's disorientation and distorted perspective (i.e. his lucid dream) is less digestible without, at some point, adopting a point-driven reading stance and crediting a four-dimensionalist "inside view," where "before, now, and after" are equally real as far as Yossarian is concerned. Perhaps part of the frustration of the film for

viewers, too, may be the uncertainty regarding what triggers the syllepsis and Yossarian's "inside view" and what kind of outside force or "authority" might be represented exactly by the discourse.

Stephen Geller and George Roy Hill's adaptation of Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* begins to solve some of the textual problems of *Catch-22*'s nonlinearity by establishing its syllepsis, its protagonist Billy Pilgrim's "inside view," and the "authority" of an "other" or outside force, all in the opening scene as Pilgrim types a letter famously explaining that he has become "unstuck in time." The film proceeds to span four timeframes in Pilgrim's journey—life after the death of his wife (now), life with his wife after he's returned from WW II (earlier), his capture and subsequent travails in Dresden (much earlier), and life on the Planet of Tralfamadore (much later)—all of which, together, represent Pilgrim's "unstuckness," of which he is fully aware but has no control. Like Keaton's projectionist, and through a powerful Brechtian force that jolts us into another time period just as we are settling into the routine of the time immediately prior, this lucid dream results in a shared understanding between the viewer and Pilgrim of the omnis effect, of seeing his life in all times at once, never entirely sure of any given moment's actuality, with a kinship encapsulated in the words "sink or swim" spoken by Pilgrim's father who throws Billy, at six years of age, helplessly into a swimming pool. Again, here, the lucid dream clearly begs for a point-driven reading more than the other two types of reading in order to answer the question "so what?" that is intrinsic to the syllepsis.

In a less jarring, but equally enthralling way, Soderbergh's adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's science-fiction novel *Solaris* spans the life of a relationship nonlinearly in the form of a lucid dream that puts brokenness, loss, and despair in relief against healing, hope, and the hereafter. Whereas Fridrikh Gorenshtein and Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 adaptation of the same novel is vaguely nonlinear only with respect to minor diegetic flashbacks that take the form of dreams, Soderbergh's more recent, subtly-paced interpretation is fully sylleptical in its mesmerizing combination of lucid dream anachronies and curious camera moves, all of which revolve around Kelvin and his emotional and psychological states. By the end of the film's second act the viewer has become vividly aware that it is the living, hypnotic, planetary entity known as "Solaris" that is generating the lucid dreams of either longed-for companionship or threatening personal incubi.

Excepting cinematic adaptations from literature, surprisingly few fresh, unadulterated nonlinear film texts have tried to explore the lucid dream category in comparison to the myriad films located in the previous category of non-diegetic non-locality. Nevertheless, three strong, idiosyncratic illustrations may help to signify a few of the creative possibilities for lucid dream films in terms of risk-taking and sophistication within the category. The first of these is a little-known, low-budget film called *Purgatory House* (2004) by Cindy Baer, in which the viewer follows three types of time: purgatory time, Earth time, and memories in non-time.

Purgatory time is marked by interior scenes inside of what appears to be a kind of addiction center or recovery house. These scenes by themselves are nonlinear at times

and typically begin with a generic time designation (e.g. “Day 61, 7:30 am, etc.), followed by shots of protagonist Silver Strand moving through the paces of each “day.” Earth time is unveiled, as Silver, in purgatory time, writes reflectively in her personal journal about life before her death. Like purgatory time, the Earth time segments are also nonlinear as they anachronically bounce around, each time instructively beginning with a countdown prior to Silver’s imminent suicide: “D(eath) minus 2 months,” “D(eath) minus 6 months,” “D(eath) minus 1 month,” “D(eath) minus 4 minutes 15 seconds, and so forth. The third element achronically represents Silver’s memory in non-time. In these achronic segments, the viewer participates in Silver’s dreams.

One of these dreams is the memory of her death in which—to the soundtrack of “Spirit in the Sky”—angels, baby dolls, and a lot of rainbow color effects, not unlike a music video, saturate the screen. Silver finds herself in an hallucinatory blue heaven that begins as a pathway into the clouds but turns into a game show with God as the host. God is portrayed as a cross-dresser, wearing fuschia and a pink wig. He is cynical and flippantly dismisses unconditional love while he sends contestant Silver to purgatory house. In another dream segment, Silver hypodiegetically experiences the multiple sensation of waking up only to discover that she’s still dreaming and, at one point, notices the hands on the face of her alarm clock physically moving backward in time. A third dream segment releases a highly fragmented, non sequitur-filled series of jump cuts showing Silver in different clothing and hairstyles before a transforming background. Included in the fourth and final dream segment is Silver, seen with several others seeking to escape purgatory house, holding hands in a circle chanting and singing. As the final

words are declared—“Only in celebration do we go beyond the circle of life and death”—the images suddenly begin to move backward, the entire movie literally rewinding at high speed to the beginning before her/our eyes until Silver re-awakens “on Earth” in a hospital.

Despite the preachy didacticism and inferior production values (including the confusing application of color versus black and white in post-production), this unassuming independent film makes some daring decisions with respect to its nonlinear discourse and its relationship to the lucid dreaming of Silver. With a linear discourse, the text of this film might read as a story-driven movie-of-the-week afternoon special designed for young teens. In its nonlinear form, however, the film advances to a level of narrative sophistication that challenges the viewer to adopt a point-driven reading formation with a two-fold function. First, the nonlinear discourse cogently juxtaposes scenes from a world of consequences and regret with moments in Silver’s life in which poor decisions are made regarding drugs, romantic relationships, and the tension between herself and her father. Secondly, Silver’s lucid dreaming seems to want to provide—in ways that only the editing mechanics of film as a time-based art form can do—an opportunity for the viewer to move beyond looking solely at the choices and consequences of life and to consider the possible meaning or purpose of one’s own death.

Tom Tykwer takes similar risks in his short story *Fauborg Saint-Denis*. In the romantic film anthology, *Paris Je T’aime*, a mélange of short stories unfolds (each constrained roughly somewhere from five to ten minutes and helmed by a different experienced film director), and Tykwer’s tale of an aspiring young actress in Paris and

the young blind student she meets is among the most inventive in its use of nonlinearity, time-lapse photography, and lucid dreaming. The short film is structured as a frame story, bookended by two phone calls from Francine to Thomas. After the first call, the camera zooms quickly and tightly into Thomas's head, and everything that follows in-between those two framing phone calls represents the dream-like memory of Thomas.

The memory-dream begins with the moment in time when Thomas serendipitously first meets Francine. She is late for her audition, and, through happenstance, he assists her in getting there quickly using a shortcut. The film speed then begins to increase dramatically, interspersed with brief moments at normal speed, as Thomas arrives at the omnis of his lucid dream by virtue of his fanciful and significantly revealing voiceover narration.

Francine, I remember exactly. It was May 15th. Spring was late, it was about to rain and you were screaming. And you were accepted, of course. [. . .] And one day, you kissed me. [*We see Thomas and Francine moving in time-lapse now.*] Time went by, time flew and everything seemed so easy, so simple, so free, so new, so unique. We went to the movies, we went dancing, we went shopping, we laughed, you cried, we swam, we smoked, we shaved. For no reason, or for a reason. Yes, sometimes for a reason. [*Thomas and Francine are facing each other, standing still, as the world moves around them in time-lapse.*] I brought you to the academy, I studied for my exams, I listened to your singing, to your hopes, your dreams, your music. You listened to mine. We were close, so close, ever

so close. We went to the movies, we swam, we laughed. You screamed, sometimes for a reason and sometimes without. Time went by, time flew. [*We see Thomas and Francine facing away from each other, standing still, as the world continues to move around them in time-lapse.*] I brought you to the academy, I studied for my exams. You listened to my Italian, German, Russian, French. I studied for my exams. You screamed, sometimes for a reason. Time went by for no reason. You screamed for no reason. I studied for my exams, my exams, my exams. Time went by, you screamed, you screamed, you screamed. I went to the movies.

The rapidly time-lapsed vignettes that accompany this monologue, several of which are repeated multiple times at frequent intervals, represent a montage comprised mostly of moments in the blossoming relationship of Thomas and Francine. Intermixed within that time-lapse, another kind of time-lapse reveals isolated instances of the couple standing still on the steps of a public building or inside of a large train station while others swarm and surge around them in the secondary time-lapse. Both kinds of time-lapse and the nonlinearity within the first not only efficiently and artfully reflect the passage of time; they also disclose a vantage point from outside of time, one in which “before, now, and after” show the span of the birth (and, until the resolution of the framing device, possibly the death) of the relationship four-dimensionally.

Two key issues are solved by discourse of this text in “one fell swoop” here. First of all, this otherwise simple story of love—found, lost, and regained—is conveyed via the doubts and fears of a protagonist who, though blind, can “see” lucidly and four-

dimensionally by way of his daydream. Although Thomas has no “authority” over his daydream, his privileged “inside view” allows him to accompany the viewer in instantly surveying the sum of the temporal parts in his relationship with Francine and judging its overarching meaning. Secondly, Tykwer, in contrast to the other skilled directors contributing to the anthology, is more creatively able to meet the challenge of telling this story in a matter of just a few fleeting minutes by bringing syllepsis to bear on the positive outcome of this extended encounter between the two young lovers.

The third and final representation of nonlinear discourse in lucid dream films—indeed, the outstanding exemplar for the category—comes from Charlie Kaufman and Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The movie seems to supply all of the ingredients for a lucid dream film in just the right amounts: a disoriented protagonist (Joel) in a memory-dream state for the better part of the film; his lucid awareness of and his privilege (“inside view”) to respond directly (and conspicuously) to the nonlinear discourse and to the diegetic “authors” of its sylleptical behavior (Dr. Mierzwiak and the Lacuna crew) both from within his memory and outside of it; and the constantly blurring lines between illusion and reality. Kaufman’s narrative structure and Gondry’s post-production techniques boast a Buñuel-esque richness while, at the same time, they imaginatively demonstrate (in the bold spirit of Keaton in *Sherlock, Jr.*) how story time can find creative ways to talk to discourse time. In addition, because the viewer is privileged to jump back and forth between the subjective world of Joel and the objective world of Stan, Patrick, Mary, etc., the viewer is endowed with the utmost sense of perspective and “authority,” one that, among the lucid dream films, lends itself greatly

to the omnis effect. In order to address the issues of nonlinearity in this film effectively, however, some delineation of the plot will be necessary.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is a love story about Joel and Clementine. The story depicts the growth and deterioration of their relationship after first meeting at a beach party (an encounter introduced late in the discourse). As their relationship develops, conflicts arise from their mutual personality differences, but primarily from Joel's seeming inability to accept Clementine for who she is. Eventually, Clementine stumbles upon an organization by the none-too-subtle name of Lacuna, Inc., a medical practice of sorts that specializes in the procedure of selectively erasing unwanted memories, and she elects to erase from her memory everything about her entire relationship with Joel. (Once a viewer accepts the premise of this procedure as possible, even plausible, the rest of the movie becomes rather harrowing through eyes of Joel.)

Joel discovers from friends what Clem has done and decides to do the same thing to himself as a response to his hurt, loneliness, and anger. As the procedure is underway, he becomes self-aware and also aware of the erasure process while he is dreaming his memories. As the procedure continues, Joel begins to recognize all that was positive in his relationship with Clem and, coming to his senses inside of his memory, he decides to "call it off," to discontinue the erasure. From within and out of his dream, he lucidly attempts to halt the process, but he cannot. (At one point, he is even able, from his dream state, to will his eyes to open in his apartment during the procedure.) Nonetheless, at last, all traces of Clementine are erased, despite his every effort to hide some of his memories "off the map" from the erasure crew: Stan, Patrick, Mary, and Dr. Mierzwiak.

Both Joel and Clem, now with erased memories of each other, happen to meet again the next day. They hit it off, but, thanks to Mary (in her subplot), they soon discover the “memory tapes” that they both recorded at Lacuna as part of the client intake protocol. Suddenly aware of having a history with each other, one that ended in a violent break-up, they recognize their need to better understand, trust, and give to each other, and with this “re-start,” they agree to hope that their relationship might now have a second chance. The Lacuna team represents four individual subplots weaving in and out of the mix as well. This quick summary of the plot is how the film might read as a linear discourse.

Though some critics have ballyhooed Kaufman’s narrative structure in *Sunshine*, calling it demanding and complex, his approach—though unorthodox—is surprisingly direct. The narrative begins *in medias res* with Joel waking up in bed. He gets ready for the day, goes outside, and notices a gouge in the side of his car, unsure of how it has happened. The details are important here because the viewer does not yet know that the film’s long opening prologue sequence in the discourse actually occurs much later in the story. The remainder of the prologue shows Joel and Clem at a diner; then on the train talking (where Clem, at one point, drops a hint for the viewer: “Do we know each other?”); a ride home in Joel’s car; her apartment for drinks; out in the middle of a frozen lake the following night; and the next morning in Joel’s car outside of Clem’s apartment while he waits for her to get her toothbrush so she can “stay at his place.” Then, the opening credits roll.

At this point, although the viewer is not informed explicitly, the film's discourse jumps backward in the story to nearly a week earlier. The film cuts to Joel, distraught, crying as he drives at night in the rain, headed home. He has little dots on his temples that he didn't have before. At home, he takes some medicine, gets ready for bed, and goes to sleep. While sleeping, Stan and Patrick enter the apartment, hook equipment up to the unconscious Joel, and begin their work. (The viewer now is in the dark in terms of the story's relationship to the discourse.) From this moment in the narrative until the last fleeting memory has been erased and Clem says "Meet me in Montauk," the nonlinear discourse alternates regularly between the forward movement of time, measured via the activity of the Lacuna crew in Joel's apartment, and the backward time movement of Joel's life via his memories of Clem in the dream state.

Kaufman makes the curious choice to situate the film's four subplots within the minutes and hours of the forward time movement in the discourse (a place that might be reserved for the main plot, typically), while the film's central conflict between protagonist Joel and Clem unfolds backwards through time, interrupted by repeated ellipses over weeks and months, all by way of Joel's unreliable memories while he is in a dream state. As has often been observed, most of the viewer's contact with Clem in the movie is through the unreliable memories of Joel. The only times the viewer will see the actual Clementine is in the prologue (*in medias res*) and at the end of the film after Joel regains consciousness. Therefore, the careful viewer is compelled to use the film's nonlinear cues to piece together a true understanding of Joel and Clem's relationship, rather than being allowed to rely on familiar cues from linear narrative conventions. As

we have already seen in so many nonlinear films, the algebrization that comfortably goes hand-in-hand with linear viewing essentially has been eliminated in *Sunshine* and the defamiliarization process mentioned in Chapter 1 is imposed on viewers instead, so that in “making the familiar strange by impeding automatic, habitual ways of perceiving” (Prince 18), viewers must begin to look at the construction of a relationship outside of the normal mechanics of chronology, a vantage point well beyond the norms of natural human experience and viewpoints.

To aid in deciphering what Kaufman has done structurally in the film, the graph shown in Figure 3 provides a quick glance at the general directions of the story and discourse. This graph is the most cursory of representations and is meant to suggest the gist of the nonlinear discourse only, rather than the details. A complete graph would have to show an extraordinary number of additional divots and crests, particularly for multiple collages in the film where rapidly edited (and, in some cases, time-lapsed) montages bring many moments together, such as the scene on the lake in Joel’s memory as he tries to hide Clem in his apartment; an old movie theatre; a train station; the house of his friends, Rob and Carrie; Dr. Mierzwiak’s office; etc. Also omitted are the memory scenes from Joel’s childhood, which would take our line off the chart several times.

Aside from what is omitted out of necessity, the chart illustrates at least two important aspects of the film’s nonlinearity. First, the graph visually represents the *in medias res* prologue and the film’s conclusion (their identical start points being denoted by the horizontal dotted line). Both sections (and the night of Joel’s procedure up to the

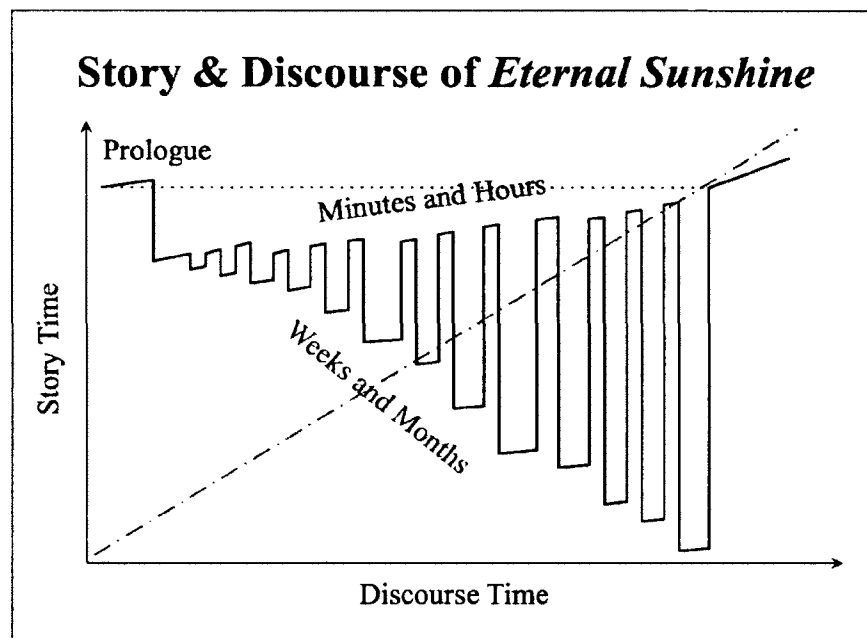


Figure 3. Rough plotting of story and discourse movement for *Eternal Sunshine*.

moment of the procedure) are not to be confused as part of Joel's lucid dream. This fact is important for viewers who become baffled by whether or not the whole film is a dream and the extent to which Joel should be considered an unreliable narrator. Unlike the famously unreliable narration of Tom Wingfield, who recalls, by "memory," scenes in which he never appears, some scenes in *Sunshine* are clearly not a part of Joel's lucid dreaming—such as the exterior scene between Stan and Mary outside of Lacuna in the third act—and, so, viewers should recognize, at least on repeated viewing, that only part of the film is a lucid dream. For this reason, viewers also glimpse the real Clementine as well.

Secondly, and more importantly, the diagonal dashed line crossing from the lower left side to the upper right side represents the approximate path of a standard linear discourse. Compared to the discourse path shown for *Sunshine*, the linear path demonstrates the limiting perspective of the discourse as it closely follows the chronology of a story. Like a paper sheet of music running through a player piano, the pattern of movement of the nonlinear discourse creates a plain visual for the “melody” of this particular discourse’s syllepsis. Were we to map out each nonlinear film, we would find that every pattern would be quite different (especially among the five categories) and that they would tend to fill up the graph’s white space more thoroughly than relatively simple linear discourses would do. Likewise, the ways in which a nonlinear discourse path on the graph fills the white space, creating multiple points of view all over the chart, begins to emphasize visually the four-dimensionality of the omnis. The temporal parts of a life stand out like the “exploded view” from step-by-step instructions for putting a bicycle together, and the viewer steps powerfully out of time to take in and either unscramble or reinterpret those parts from this new, singular perspective.

A closing thought about *Sunshine* concerns some of Michel Gondry’s post-production techniques as they relate to the film’s nonlinear discourse. For the portion of the movie in which Joel is dreaming and remembering, Gondry’s directorial choices, of course, simulate the looks and sounds of the common human dream experience. The art direction and other “plasticities” of the physical set and lighting contribute to this nimble effect on many counts—most notably the recurring handheld flashlight effect and the subtle wiping effect applied to storefront signs, the Barnes and Noble shelf labels, and

endless book titles as the Lacuna crew “search and destroy,” chasing down Clem and the memories she inhabits from outside the dream world; but the lion’s share of the dream state is engendered in the narrative editing of image and sound.

As in the finale of *Purgatory House*, the film of *Sunshine* is “run backward” using reverse time-lapse for several brief moments—Joel and Clem eating Chinese take-out in one instance, and the two of them (symbolically) knocking over a fragile house of cards at Rob and Carrie’s house in another. As in *Fauborg Saint-Denis*, too, time-lapse is exercised in a forward progression. The time-lapse in both directions reinforces the lucidity of the dreaming and also echoes the nonlinearity of the discourse. The text of *Sunshine* evolves such editing “tricks” from being merely “cool,” as might be said of one of Tarantino’s films, and instead has invested them with meaning and emotion, making them crucial to the dramatic action.

Bringing further attention to Joel’s lucidity, the text periodically juxtaposes images from the dream world and the waking world in the same shot. For example, at the beginning of the erasure process, Joel is seen sitting in bed, in focus, in the foreground, while in the background, out of focus, the recent scene of Joel at the mailboxes with Frank is replayed as it slowly fades to white. The resistance against depth of focus in this shot signifies the removal of a memory and establishes the look for the rest of the memory erasures. At other times, Joel’s bed appears in unlikely dream locations—on the sidewalk, on the beach, etc. Joel is able to “snap out” of his dreaming at least twice, once in the woods with Clem and once in his childhood memory of getting a bath from his mother in the kitchen sink. Although these brief moments of incongruity between dream

and reality don't directly speak to the film's nonlinearity, they serve as another way to remind the viewer of Joel's lucidity, creating narrative flags to stop, mark, and map the anachronies in the film's syllepsis.

The voiceover narration and the sounds of the Lacuna crew's voices are also integral components in the development of the film text's nonlinear strategies. When voiceovers are made use of in nonlinear films, they are almost always disembodied agents of plot details or character information, detached from the immediate physical action of the diegesis, such as in *The Killing*, *Memento*, and even *The Tree of Life*. In contrast, the voiceover narration of Joel brilliantly conveys an immediate bearing on the physical action at hand between Joel and his memory erasers, and it is always diegetically justified in the nonlinear discourse. By the same token, the voices of Stan, Patrick, and Dr. Mierzwiak in the waking world are heard frequently by Joel, reminding the viewer repeatedly of his lucidity. Their voices are also a reminder that the nonlinear discourse of the film is triggered, in large part, diegetically. Both Joel's and Lacuna's manipulations of his memories are, in fact, accountable for nearly all of the film's nonlinearity, which bestows upon them influential positions of narrative authority within this "inside view." The only conspicuous instance of the implied author(/filmmaker) insinuating his way into the nonlinear discourse is the use of *in medias res*. This negotiated sharing of narrative control over the discourse time among the film's protagonist, its secondary characters, its implied author, and its viewer seems unique among the films in the lucid dream category, carving a special niche for *Sunshine* in terms of its omnis potential.

Looking back across the lucid dream category of nonlinear films, several indispensable observations can be taken into account and assumptions made. One of these is the notion that, although the syllepses in these films represent views of the world as seen through the unreliable and often hallucinating eyes of their protagonists, these protagonists nonetheless still wield little or no authority over their “inside view,” a discrepancy that seems to characterize the concept of “lucid dreaming.” Another observation is that, like films of non-diegetic non-locality, the “lucid dream” brand of film in the province of diegetic non-locality seems to want to move in the direction of inviting viewers into point-driven readings. As the “inside view” in these films becomes disorienting for their protagonists, so the viewer becomes disoriented by the nonlinear discourse. The knee-jerk response for most viewers might be to begin searching for clues to a clearer understanding of the discourse using the modes of story-driven and information-driven reading. Lucid dream films seem to insist, however, that viewers accept the discourse as is, forgoing the piecing together of a film’s puzzle by means of re-ordering time. These films seem to resonate with the same conviction Mike Nichols has dared to offer: “like with all such devices, if you just give up and go with it, it does, I hope, become clear.”

Lucid dream films also move in the direction of the omnis effect. As viewers acquiesce to the point-driven, nonlinear demands of the discourse and as they are slowly extricated from the shackles of time, then the beginnings, middles, and ends of these narratives start to take on new meanings for the viewer and, in the case of lucid dream films, for the protagonist as well. Attention to the etiological and the teleological

trajectories of characters's lives begins to fade, and instead, the eschatological priority of many of these films comes to the forefront. This movement is visible particularly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Catch-22*, *Solaris*, and *Purgatory House*. Even in *Fauborg Saint-Denis* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the potential death of a relationship is at stake, called into question, examined for meanings, given primacy.

Finally, lucid dream films seem generally to underscore something that few other films can successfully do, even among the nonlinear films. In one example after another, the films represented by this category of nonlinear discourse demonstrate precisely what “the movies” do best as a time-based art form. Syllepsis, polychronic uses of sound, multiple exposures, repeated shots, time-lapse editing, and images moving in reverse—combined and diegetically justified—not only produce an incomparable nonlinear effect that novels, short stories, theatre, and the visual arts (painting and sculpture) cannot attain, but they tap into the very elements of time, image, and technology that distinctly set film apart from other the arts. In comparison to linear narratives in film, the lucid dream category of nonlinear discourses seems to make this claim unmistakably clear and, consequently, performs an invaluable service to the cause of film as art.

Chapter V

FORKING PATHS, VIEW VARIORI, AND RETROCAUSAL RIDDLES

[. . .] For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects;
Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon
Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry
Distinguish form. [. . .]

“Bushy” in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* (2. 2.16-20)

So you are all right. But you are all wrong, too.
For each of you touched only one part of the animal.
To know what an elephant is really like,
you must put all those parts together.

“The Prince” in *The Blind Men and the Elephant*

I always thought the joy of reading a book is not knowing what happens next.

“Leonard Shelby” in *Memento*

“People often refer to *Memento* as having a nonlinear structure,” argues director Christopher Nolan. “But it isn’t. It is very linear, more so than a conventional film. You

actually cannot remove a scene from the film because each scene depends on its relationship to the preceding scene and the one that follows. It's totally linear; it's just reversed, essentially." What Nolan sees here from his perspective as a filmmaker reflects one of the basic challenges of nonlinearity in film, which, in turn, is based on one of the basic general tenets of narrative.

The tenet is one that has been addressed by numerous structuralists and film theorists over the last thirty years and was most clearly articulated by Roland Barthes in the mid-1970s. In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Barthes addresses two types of narrative activities with regard to the order of story events. The first he refers to as *cardinal functions* of narrative, which focus on causality: particularly, the succession of story events based on both their chronology *and* their logic. The second type is what he calls *catalyses*, which are identified as consecutive story events that occur simply in chronological order with no inherent logic. Whereas the second type involves story events as only consecutive units, the first type sees story events as both consecutive *and* consequential: "Indeed, there is a strong presumption that the mainspring of the narrative activity is to be traced to that very confusion between consecutiveness and consequence, what-comes-*after* being read in a narrative as what-is-*caused-by*" (248). Barthes goes on to explain that these two aspects of narrativity are directly connected to discourse and story respectively.

Film theorists have since tried to further develop Barthes's idea as it applies broadly to film narrative. David Bordwell's systematic analysis in *Narration and the Fiction Film* in the mid-80s, for example, begins to toy with consecutiveness through a

discussion of temporal order, specifically organizing an action-based breakdown of simultaneous and successive “events” and “presentations” between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* (77). A few years later, using scenes from *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles 1947) to make his case, Edward Branigan provides an even more rigorous examination of temporal and spatial order. Dealing less with consecutiveness and more with consequences, Branigan arrives at four significant principles, two of which are especially curious in their connection to Barthes: 1) “cause must precede effect,” and 2) “an effect cannot work backward in time to create a cause” (39-40). If one is to regard all films, both the linear and the nonlinear, as obedient to Branigan’s principles, then two important caveats come to mind. First, one must remember that, as nonlinear films have demonstrated already and will continue to reveal, these principles are true for all stories (diegeses) in film, whether their discourses are linear or nonlinear. Without these etiological principles equally in play in stories that are shaped by nonlinear discourses, the discourse games and puzzles of nonlinear heist films or relationship films, for instance, would ultimately prove meaningless. Viewers would not accept information- and story-driven invitations to go clue-finding for causes because cause and effect would be irrelevant. All stories, then, regardless of discourse patterns, depend on “what-is-caused-by” in order to reflect consequences, as Barthes suggests.

Secondly, with respect to the *discourse* in nonlinear films specifically, Branigan’s causal principles are sometimes true, but are, at other times, clearly *not* true. So far, in Chapters 3 and 4, in films either of non-diegetic non-locality or of diegetic non-locality, we are able to observe that Branigan’s causal principles hold mostly untrue in those

discourses. Indeed, we have seen, that effects can and do precede causes, relative to the discourse. We have also seen that, through a film's discourse, effect can "create" a cause. Essentially, the viewer first encounters something in a discourse that happens "later" (effect) in the story and, as a *consequence*, is led ("creates" in the viewer a desire) to go looking for next in the discourse what came "earlier" (cause) in the story. The result shows this movement to be sylleptical and four-dimensionalist because a non-chronological principle governs a grouping of situations and events, transcending time to show viewers what could not be perceived about a situation or a person otherwise.

In this chapter, the focus will now rest on what are arguably three final categories of nonlinear films—forking paths, view variori, and retrocausal riddles—each of which relies on discourses that are not structured in the same way as the all-over-the-map "non-locality" films of the previous two chapters. Because of the differences that these "local" structures present, we shall see that their discourses behave more in keeping with Branigan's causal principles than "non-local" discourses do. The discourse structures of these three categories link their scenes and sequences together more causally, even though their chronologies are still blurred, jumbled, or complicated in some way. Again, the syllepsis and the omnis yearning continue somehow to manifest themselves in these various discourse structures that take shape in these categories.

"Forking Path" Nonlinear Films

When George Bailey, in desperation, wishes that he had never been born, and the angel Clarence grants his wish, the viewer of *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra 1946)

joins George and Clarence on a miraculous journey that, literally, only God would normally be privileged to see—a premise that is established, in fact, by the movie’s opening scene. As if encountering an alternate universe on *Star Trek* or *Fringe*, George, Clarence, and viewers are then shown what the lives of others might have looked like, had George never been born. In the process, George discovers, more profoundly than he could have imagined, the vital difference that his life—his presence and the life sum of his own choices and actions—has made on the lives of others for whom he cares and loves in Bedford Falls. Whether this experience can be interpreted simply as a vision, or something else, is not the concern of the story. When George prays on the bridge, it starts snowing again, he re-discovers ZuZu’s petals in his pocket, and his lip begins to bleed once more, what becomes important in the story for George is that he has a memory now of another path along which he has seen his friends and family in a very different place because he and his life choices don’t exist at all in that other version of Bedford Falls. With the movie’s gradually soaring popularity in the U.S. in the last half-century, the film has become a seasonal flirtation with what is described now in recent film scholarship as the “forking path” conception of film narratives, in which one’s choices may be seen to shape one’s own life as well as the lives of others in a radical way.

The forking path category is coined after Jorge Luis Borges’s well-known short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” and considers narratives in which the viewer is shown multiple possible alternatives of a protagonist’s choices in life, inviting viewers into a kind of reader-response contract to interpret for themselves the moral implications

prompted by these various potential life outcomes and the choices that led to them. Typically, these films move along a single, constant path at the outset of their respective narratives and then split the narrative into two or more paths. Based on our definition of nonlinear discourses, these few films (which are often thought to be nonlinear), in fact, may or may not be nonlinear, depending on the strength of their individual sylleptical structures. By the same token, in terms of nonlinearity, they may or may not be diegetic, subject to the levels of discourse awareness of each protagonist. To more closely consider the nonlinearity of the forking path category, a handful of films that are widely considered representative examples of the forking patch conception will be discussed briefly: Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* (1981), Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998), Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998), and *Groundhog Day*.

In a 2002 issue of *SubStance*, David Bordwell discusses forking path plots at length—the first academic discussion really to begin a serious dialogue about these kinds of films. Mining Borges's text and drawing on the precepts of folk psychology (which he argues is best suited for the way in which mainstream viewers interpret movies, rather than via philosophy or quantum physics), he cogently considers how the “exfoliating tendrils of Borges's potential futures have been trimmed back to [what he deems to be] cognitively manageable dimensions” (90). The “parallel worlds tales” of the many-worlds theoretical tradition, he claims, are limited to only two or three forked paths because the average viewer, for several mental and cultural reasons, will encounter difficulty imagining, much less tracking, more than that number of alternative worlds within a narrative (cf. Young 116). In order to accomplish his goal, Bordwell alludes to

four films in the forking path category and identifies seven conventions by which he sees these films operating. The first convention he proposes (and the only one that will be taken up here briefly) is that forking path films are linear.

For Bordwell, linearity in the forking path films is less an issue of temporality and more a matter of causality. Because these narratives usually do not branch after the first fork and do not “split into more proliferating consequences,” he believes they should be thought of as linear: “Instead of each moment being equally pregnant with numerous futures, one becomes far more consequential than the others, and those consequences will follow strictly from it” (92). The language of Barthes’s cardinal function for narratives can be heard in Bordwell’s causal thought (“proliferating *consequences*” and “far more *consequential*”); even so, this view of linearity does not seem to take into account the anachronies making up the potential syllepses in these films. Using a bifurcation criterion alone to determine nonlinearity—a test relying on the sheer number of causal forks as the chief means of evaluation—only the film *Groundhog Day* would qualify as nonlinear under his standard—a film that boasts more forks in its daring plot than a small diner. Oddly, the film receives only cursory mention by Bordwell. While forking path films place a special emphasis on choice, consequence, chance, and providence that other films don’t, they are able to achieve that emphasis first and foremost through the power of observing human activity outside of ordinary temporal constraints. In the end, the degree to which these films should be thought of as nonlinear largely depends on the role that syllepsis plays in the re-prioritization of narrative governance in each film.

Looking back at Capra's film for a moment, we see that its narrative is essentially linear and presents only a symptom of nonlinearity. A solitary anachrony in the discourse, prompted with George's wish and concluded with his prayer, temporarily forks backward in time to the alternate path of George's nonexistence and makes up only a short portion of the film's overall length. As a result, the key component of syllepsis required for nonlinearity is missing from the film. Metaphysically speaking, George behaves, for just a short time, a bit like a "Capra-corn" version of Schrodinger's proverbial cat, with the exception that, as it turns out, he is given a choice between "death" and a second-chance at life (unlike the cat!).

Like *It's A Wonderful Life*, most of Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* is free of polychronic narration. In fact, other than the framing device of the protagonist Witek's scream on the plane at the beginning (and end) of the film, the entire first half of the plot is anachrony-free. Witek is a medical student who expresses concern that he has "lost his vocation" or calling in life. He decides to take a temporary leave of absence and, on the day of his departure to Warsaw, hurries to catch his train. The scene at the train station marks the starting point for the three forking paths that are to follow.

The first rendering shows Witek catching the train and chronicles his gradual affiliation with the Communist Party, ending with the defeated Witek and other Party members detained at the airport from taking their trip to Paris as the result of Polish Solidarity strikes. The second rendering jumps immediately backward in time and begins with Witek at the train station again, this time missing the train and being arrested for getting into a brawl with police at the station. With the "butterfly effect" in full force,

Witek's life path veers from its earlier trajectory wildly as he joins the "underground university" resistance and matures in his spiritual/political beliefs. His conversations with Father Stefan and with a woman whose house has been ransacked by the resistance both reflect Witek's evolving perspectives on chance and the nature of God. In the final rendering, Witek misses the train again but stays at home to finish school and marry a former lover named Olga. Living relatively free of political affiliations, although never entirely removed from them, he accepts a request by one of his politically active professors to fly to Paris and lecture on his professor's behalf. On the plane, the film comes full circle as Witek screams again, and the plane explodes as it leaves the runway.

Although Kieslowski had disavowed any strong political ties in the 1970s and 1980s, considerable commentary and analysis have been written about the political upheaval in Poland in his lifetime and about how those years may have influenced his early films all the way up until *Decalogue* (1989). The three paths of Witek are thus assessed politically, philosophically, and theologically in attempt to decode Kieslowski's precise meaning regarding choice, chance, and providence. Part of that decoding process must involve narratological deliberation on the part of viewers because of the interactive, participatory nature of the discourse. While it is true that each of the three renderings is causally linear, comparisons among the three would be virtually impossible if it were not for the two overt anachronies in the plot (those precise moments when the discourse leaps back twice to the train station to begin a new narrative rendering). Because this comparison is made available as a result of temporal re-ordering, the discourse of *Blind Chance* is symptomatic of nonlinearity. A faint omnis yearning is detected, a desire to

view one's choices, one's possible worlds, outside of time's boundaries—to get an Augustinian glimpse from God's perspective to see the whole of one's life and to glean its meaning. As Kieslowki's friend and collaborator, filmmaker Agnieszka Holland, describes it, this yearning is a “look beyond the surface realism at something more personal, spiritual [. . .] a look, perhaps, at the mechanics of human destiny, probing into a dimension other than the purely realistic one.” Again, similar to Capra's classic Christmas film, *Blind Chance*, however, not only lacks polychronic narration, but falls short of syllepsis as well. Chronological principles still seem to dominate each of the three renderings of *Blind Chance*, despite the broader anachronies, which, sylleptically, are but “bleeps” on the nonlinear radar.

Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* is structured in a manner similar to *Blind Chance*, although Tykwer's film is far more sophisticated and audacious in its narrative choices. Divided into three parts, it chronicles Lola's attempt to save her boyfriend Manni from his gangster boss by coming up, in 20 minutes, with 100,000 replacement deutschmarks for the money he has lost. Tykwer employs a wide range of original storytelling techniques in order to keep the dramatic pace up and sustain viewer interest extremely effectively: high-speed photography (which anticipates his subsequent entry in *Paris, Je T'Aime*), animation, achronic “and then . . .” quick-edits of alternate sub-plotlines of secondary characters, etc. In the mix, the recurring symbol of the “spiral” (the “Spirale Bar” near Manni; the labyrinthine, spiral staircase at the start of each of Lola's replays; the spiral symbol on the front door of her apartment; the spiral tattoo on Manni's arm; etc.). The film opens with an achronic, low-angle montage of crowds of people walking

on the street, visually highlighting secondary characters that we meet later and including a godlike voiceover narration that somberly meditates on “Man . . . probably the most mysterious species on our planet. A mystery of unanswered questions.”

Run Lola Run differs from *Blind Chance*, however, in its emphasis on repeated action. Berg refers to the forking path category of films as “repeated action plots” (presumably based on the repeated start point of each alternate rendering) even though the majority of these films tend to focus attention on what is actually different about each rendering or forked path within a film. As the prominent precursor for the rest of the category, *Blind Chance* establishes that aspect with its stress patently placed upon the differences in each alternate future. In contrast, *Run Lola Run* is the one forking path film in keeping with Berg’s nomenclature because its stress is placed on what is the same. Though the differences in each rendering are clear and numerous, much of the same action is repeated by Lola: running, moving through the same streets, encountering the same people (even if only seconds later or before), and so forth. Because of this emphasis on repetition and the meaningful multiple flashbacks (spoken diegetic analepses show up in black and white, and interiorized diegetic analepses are filtered in red), *Run Lola Run* is even more symptomatic of nonlinearity than *Blind Chance* and is perhaps situated on the brink of classification as a true nonlinear film with an identifiable syllepsis.

Moreover, Lola’s nonlinear process and point of view are clearly established as all-seeing, outside of time. From the moment of the first rendering’s start point until the end of the third, the viewer is positioned inside of Lola’s head as she imagines and tests

or plays out each scenario. We know that these renderings are internal from the cues provided: as she lies dying at the end of the first rendering, she utters the word “stop,” and the viewer leaps back in time to the moment of decision for action again; as Manni lies dying at the close of the second rendering, she says to him “You’re not dead yet” to which he responds, “No?” and again the viewer leaps back in time from there. Each rendering represents a new possibility as she works through her options for coming to Manni’s rescue.

Sliding Doors, yet another form of forking path film, is arguably even more nonlinear. The structure of this romantic comedy is notably different than either *Blind Chance* or *Run Lola Run*, despite accusations from some that its filmmakers ripped off Kieslowski. In *Sliding Doors*, the plot moves back and forth (as suggested by the title) between two alternate timelines in the life of Helen. She races to catch a subway train, and the doors either close or remain open long enough for her to catch the train, much as in *Blind Chance*. From that point, the similarities end.

One rendering of the protagonist’s life appears to be sad while the other is more upbeat, landing on a positive outcome—a duality that Woody Allen would press home a few years later in *Melinda and Melinda* (2004). The plot jumps back and forth between the two alternate futures throughout the entirety of the film, and, in due course, these leaps become the narrative *modus operandi* for the movie. More significantly, the viewer also comes to recognize that, as the narrative jumps back and forth across futures, Helen’s actions are not synchronous, and it is the differences, not the similarities, between the renderings that are foregrounded. The upshot of this structure is sylleptical,

dealing with a prolonged and steady oscillation between futures that draws more extra-temporal attention to the chance possibilities than to the consequences of actions. Like *Run Lola Run*, but using a different forking path construct, the established syllepsis of the *Sliding Doors* situates the film comfortably within the margins of nonlinearity.

Among the forking path films, the discourse of *Groundhog Day* best exemplifies the potential for nonlinearity in the category. The story opens, as with the first three films, with a linear introduction of the characters and their given circumstances. Phil Connors is a cynical weatherman on a fourth-round assignment in Punxsutawney to cover Groundhog Day with the help of his producer and cameraman, Rita and Larry. Phil's bumptious behavior, his unkindness to others, and his self-preserving dismay at the prospect of being stranded in town for a day or more all coalesce to display him as an utterly unlikable person in the eyes of everyone he meets. Only Rita and Larry show any signs of tolerance of Phil, which they eventually abandon as well. At 6:00 AM the next morning, the start of Groundhog Day, Phil embarks upon a day that he will repeat innumerable times for no apparent reason, jumpstarting his initial shock and confusion.

As Phil re-lives February 2 over and over again, he is fully aware of the repetition and of his re-formation of alternate futures for himself each of those days. His awareness, as in a lucid dream, causes the film's nonlinearity to be diegetic in a way that is distinct from the nonlinearity identified in *Run Lola Run*, where the filmic text suggests that Lola re-lives her 20-minute ordeal only in her mind, instead of externally, in a physical reality, like Phil does. In her superb analysis of the film, Kristin Thompson eloquently details how Phil moves through several stages of adjustment to his new

situation, from the initial jolt of the first two repeated days into a devil-may-care escapade of doing whatever he pleases—waggishly exploiting others around him and failing multiple attempts at suicide because nothing seems to matter—and, at last (presumably through years of repetitions), into a phase of surrender and self-betterment in his desire to grow as a person and to know the secret of loving Rita truly and loving her well (132-52). Thompson also astutely calls to mind that even though *Groundhog Day* exhibits many of the trappings of a classical Hollywood romantic comedy, it offers no clear motivation for its “shifts in time” the way that films like *Back to the Future* and *It’s A Wonderful Life* do, until near the end of the movie, at which point the viewer gathers intuitively from various clues that “a supernatural agency of some sort” seems to have been intervening—even affecting Rita somehow over the redundancies of Phil’s days—and finally honoring Phil’s transformation of heart by breaking the time loop (132).

The syllepsis in *Groundhog Day* draws its strength from these untold temporal repetitions as they are represented in the film’s highly sophisticated discourse, and its impressive residual effect on viewers as a shared means of omniscience for both Phil and for “readers” of the filmic text is worth noting. Moving beyond the bounds of time’s ceaselessness, Phil takes on a godlike capacity, even if only for a “day,” to move four-dimensionally all over the story-discourse map and to discover what matters most in people and in life, to wander “on his own time” through the meanings of life’s contingencies and consequences. To illustrate the nonlinear discourse’s handling of Phil’s wandering agenda, Figure 4 below visually juxtaposes the time-shifting plot

movement of Phil (solid line) against the traditional upward trajectory of a linear plotline (the dashed and dotted diagonal line).

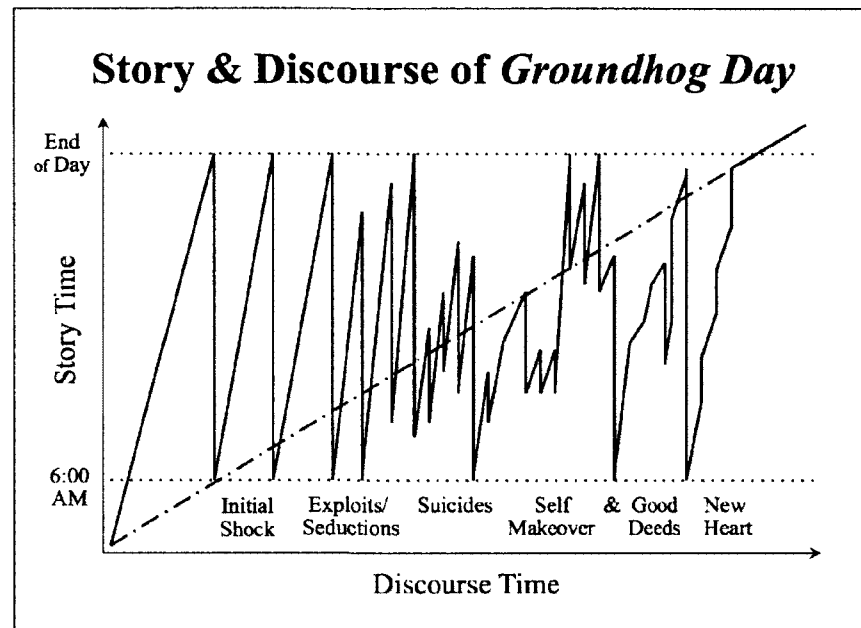


Figure 4. Rough plotting of story and discourse movement for *Groundhog Day*.

As with the graph for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the variances charted for *Groundhog Day* are represented with broad, approximate strokes designed merely to suggest a “feel for” the general movement of the discourse. Many smaller variances (e.g. quick edits of repetitions such as Rita slapping Phil on the face several times in a row) cannot be adequately shown on this scale. The thrust of the graph is to convey the fact that, between 6:00 AM on the repeated day of February 2 and the end of that day (the horizontal, dotted lines), the time shifts are extreme enough and numerous enough to warrant syllepsis. Not only does the film significantly outnumber the other forking path

films in the quantity of anachronies; it conspicuously outshines them in its ingenious interplay among two of Genette's key narrative ingredients: order and duration. As is true for many of the sequences depicted, the sequences showing Phil's early attempts to seduce Rita (at the bar, in the town square at evening, in Phil's room) are not only strategically ordered as repetitions to signify failure or success on Phil's part, but the shifting start and end points for each reiteration and the varied durations of each are carefully integrated into that new forked path structure in order to achieve comic effects. Of all the forking path films, *Groundhog Day* is perhaps the most palpably nonlinear; its humorous and mind-boggling syllepsis of repetition stimulates viewer curiosity regarding the smaller details and character interactions in the plot, but, more so, it continues to return viewers to point-driven questions centering on what exactly will be required of Phil in order for him to break free from the repeating day.

Taken as a whole, the forking path category of film points to a wide range of nonlinearity according to our definition of the concept. On one end of the continuum, *Blind Chance* presents marginal symptoms of nonlinearity in its discourse with a hint of polychronic narration, but with too few anachronies to qualify for syllepsis. *Run Lola Run* similarly replays time, but does so more creatively, and with special attention to a larger range of anachronies. Internally diegetic by design, *Lola* moves closer in the direction of definitive nonlinearity. The discourse of *Sliding Doors*, in contrast to the first two films, decidedly marks an entry point into the nonlinear via its alternating, but not necessarily synchronous timelines throughout the film. The most stunning example of nonlinearity in this category, however, comes in the form of *Groundhog Day* and the

syllipsis it achieves through its intricate weaving of many possible futures into the fabric of the protagonist's growth into personhood and healthy romantic love. The diversity and degrees of nonlinearity represented by these discourses speak to imaginative, defamiliarizing, point-driven strategies with which current filmmakers continue to search for meaning in the temporal parts of a character's life by looking at possible paths they may take based on choice, chance, and/or providence.

“View Variori” Nonlinear Films

The investment of trust in our eyes and the images they record has permeated our modern and postmodern attempts to define our conscious, socio-cultural self-worth as a civilization. Kobo Abe's *The Box Man* describes that investment as a wager: “The reason men somehow go on living, enduring the gaze of others, is that they bargain on the hallucinations and the inexactitude of human eyes” (86). In fact, the “hallucinations” and “inexactitude” of our perceptions have been the subjects of storytellers at least as far back as Shakespeare, who makes clear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and others of his plays that not all is what it seems and that truth may be shaped differently contingent on where one stands. In his book *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze*, Norman K. Denzin's discussion of multiple gazes and reflexivity in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* would seem to allow for some of Shakespeare's plays even to be considered as similar, self-referential invitations to the theatre audience to assume the role of voyeur and to draw their own interiorized meanings based on the vantage point of a particular character or group of characters in

the play. Since Shakespeare, other literary authors—Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *As I Lay Dying*, or Toni Morrison in her *Beloved*, for example—have brought special attention in varying degrees to character perspective and our understanding of truth.

Naturally, films too have tapped into pervasive notions related to perception, truth, distrust, surveillance, and a kind of ocularcentric paranoia that often sets in when enough ways of looking differently at something present themselves that, eventually, one stops knowing what to believe. The nonlinear form that these films take typically depicts a single, pivotal event but does so by repeating that event, or the time period during which the event takes place, from a variety of vantage points, frequently implying the distinct perspectives of various characters. Ultimately, the justification for and benefits from such films do not seem to lie in the event itself, as Berg postulates (33), but rather in the distinct vantage points, or accounts, and the manipulation of time necessary to bring them to light for the viewer, what might be called a “view variorum” of sorts—a portrayal or report disclosed in a film discourse, “containing variant readings” (OED). The “view variorum” nonlinear strategy is rarely diegetic, and relies on a temporal “blind-men-and-the-elephant” approach, in which only when the temporal parts of something are taken together, rather than individually as in synecdoche, can they lead to a true understanding of the whole. In the following examples, one may be able to discern that, as with the forking path films, view variori films achieve nonlinear status when their discourse times becomes sylleptical by requiring temporal comparisons among the replayed segments of a story.

Courtroom dramas provide the most obvious evidence of this phenomenon, of which Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon* (1950) operates as the quintessential precursor. The groundbreaking "courtroom" analepses occurring in *Rashomon*, which propose at least four different perspectives of the same attack in the woods, cause viewers to question everything they have been watching. Which character's point of view is the version closest to the truth? How can one know? *Rashomon* famously established a precedent upon which countless episodes of flashbacking television crime series—*CSI*, *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, *The Forgotten*, etc.—still are based, even though their discourses do not maneuver through time enough to be considered sylleptical and cannot be branded as nonlinear per se.

Other films have followed suit with the "courtroom" and conflicting viewpoints metaphor. Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956), though best representing the non-diegetic non-locality category of nonlinear films, is also a strong example of a film that looks at single scenes or events by going back in time and re-playing them from another character's viewpoint. George Cukor's zesty "dance show meets crime drama" called *Les Girls* (1957) also incorporates *Rashomon*-like diegetic flashbacks in a courtroom in which three versions of an affair are recounted, leaving the viewer to question just which version is true. *Courage Under Fire* (Edward Zwick 1996) and *Basic* (John McTiernan 2003) both take diegetic flashbacks to the contemporary military front, depicting several versions of their respective battle incidents from which the viewer is led to believe that the last one is true in each case. In the case of Ying Xiong's *Hero* (2002), again,

Rashomon-like flashbacks appear as three different versions of the backstory, as related by two characters: Nameless and the King of Qin.

Possibly the most bizarre instance of the “courtroom/conflicting viewpoints” psychology appearing in a nonlinear film occurs in Mario Bava’s unorthodox little film with the barefaced title, *Four Times That Night* [*Quante Volte...Quella Notte*] (1972). Bava’s *Rashomon*-like sex comedy follows Gianni and Tina, who meet at a club, leave together, and disappear for the evening. Later, Tina’s mother catches her sneaking back into the apartment at 3:30 a.m., and Tina proceeds to explain what happened in a series of crosscutting diegetic flashbacks. The discourse then moves the viewer back to the club where Gianni has returned and is now talking to the other guys there. His friends ask to hear his version of what happened, and the viewer witnesses a very different story as Gianni recounts it. The discourse then cuts to an apartment building janitor who, meeting a friend that evening, tells him the version of Gianni and Tina’s story that he witnessed last night. After the three versions are disclosed, the apartment doorman rubs his eyes, and the cinematic screen is suddenly divided into quadrants showing the janitor, Gianni, Tina, and an inkblot from a Rorschach inkblot test.

An entirely new, achronic section of the film begins, one that is characterized by the ponderously didactic authorial intrusion of a bookish psychologist who speaks directly to the viewer about everything shown in the film so far:

None of it is true. Or, if you prefer, it all is. Three different versions: his, hers, and the doorman’s. Which one would you put your money on?

Which of the three told the truth? Which one lied? [*An extended lesson*

about Noah's Ark ensues, underscoring the mixed viewpoints of its various human occupants.] These are nothing but blotches. Blotches made without design. Yet when we show them to our patients, each sees something in them; something that only they see; something that others don't see; something that, since there is nothing in the blotches, belongs to them . . . and only to them. [*Shows a picture of Gianni.*] Something he puts in them unknowingly. [*Shows a picture of Tina.*] Or that she puts in them without realizing it. [*Shows a picture of the doorman.*] Or something the doorman puts in them unwittingly. But the truth is always something else. Would like to know it? Let's see how things might have gone.

The "lesson" concludes with the viewer being shown a fourth possibility by the psychologist—presumably what really happened—that culminates in Tina and Gianni going to his apartment and toasting "To all that we won't ruin." Eventually, they end their relatively innocent tryst by leaving for his car so he can take her home and, as they do, the hand of the intrusive psychologist startlingly enters the frame and appears to pinch the car between his forefinger and thumb. The film cuts to the psychologist holding a Matchbox-size replica of Gianni's car, at which point the psychologist asks, "Do you believe it? Do you think that's really how the day went?"

Bava's quirky experiment moves the subtext of the view variorum intent to the surface of the filmic text and makes risibly clear to viewers that the movie is not as much a story about rendezvous and romance as it is a tutorial on the problem with perceptual

truth in human social behavior. While no other view variori films wear their discourses “on their sleeve” with quite the same candor, *Four Times That Night* does help to illustrate the kind of point-driven thinking encouraged, even expected, by the discourses in this category, particularly through its use of syllepsis to conduct a glaring evaluation of the subjectivity of truth and of personal narratives. The underlying assumption is that a traditional chronological integration of these perspectives would not afford viewers the potential for surveying the totality of the situation without the distortion of time in the discourse. Granted, Gianni’s and Tina’s stories turn out to be almost complete fabrications, but the implication remains that in order for us to be able to discern and interpret the sum meaning of a scattered group of temporal parts, as four-dimensionalism would have us do, isolated, linear narratives do not suffice.

Although the “courtroom” psychology behind such view variori projects can be attributed almost single-handedly to *Rashomon*, the inspiration for these films actually materializes much earlier during the silent, “cinema of attraction” years of early film, seen most saliently in the experimental work of Edwin S. Porter. Charles Musser and others have detailed at length the contribution that Porter’s *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) has made to film in multiple respects, including his vision for nonlinear storytelling. The two most widely discussed shots in the movie are shots 8 and 9 which show the rescue of a woman and child in a bedroom from two difference perspectives, interior and exterior. Musser calls the film “one of the most extreme expressions of early cinema’s distinctive nonlinear continuity” and concludes that “[t]ogether, these final shots [8 and 9] provide a ‘complete’ idea of what is actually taking place, demonstrating

how indicational rather than verisimilar temporality within scenes compliments the relationship between scenes” (327-9). Had Porter used the same strategy for all six minutes of the film, then syllepsis might be equated with what Musser takes to be an “indicational temporality” (or governing, nonchronological principle) at the end of the narrative; by the same token, one should read “omnis” where Musser talks of the two-shot conclusion’s “complete idea.”

Porter does, however, attempt another form of view variorum earlier in the film during the long fire run scene, which depicts one fire truck after another, racing down various streets. Jonathan Auerbach’s cogent analysis of long shots 6 and 7 seem to make particularly clear that an “omnis” effect is at work in some form, even in these otherwise simple edits:

[. . .] no effort is made to match particular vehicles or streets, and yet in this repetition-without-resemblance, we are made to feel *action greater than any of its individual agents*. The repetition of fire engine after fire engine produces a sensation of endless blurring or merger, creating in effect *a single composite grand engine* driven by a kind of abstracted motion that doesn’t seem to depend on or be measured by chronological time. (673, emphases mine)

That this impression of “a single composite grand engine” acting upon viewers with an “action greater than any individual agents” is freed by the discourse from chronology’s restrictions so early in film’s history, it’s surprising that more creative risks were not taken with view variori and other nonlinear categories during the first one hundred years

of film. Interestingly, Porter would later find an occasion for full-fledged syllepsis in his “actuality” film, *Launching of the USS Battleship “Connecticut,”* in which five separate views from five different positions are shown using temporal repetitions (Musser 385).

Not only are different positions or vantage points foregrounded in view variorum films; those shifts in perspectives must support syllepsis also, whereby analepses are exercised in a predominant, frequent way to replay an event but from a new location in space. Many linear films meet the first criterion in one or two scenes or sequences (as in Porter), but because the second (key) requirement of syllepsis is not attained, these films can be said to demonstrate only symptoms of nonlinearity and should not be deemed nonlinear films in full. For instance, Lewis Milestone’s 1960 original version of *Ocean’s Eleven* captures the attention of viewers with its slick partial view variorum in the opening edits, as time jumps and Danny Ocean affably gathers his crew. After the opening, the rest of the story unreels linearly from an objective point of view. Soderbergh’s savvy and sophisticated 2001 remake bumps the incomplete view variorum to the back end of the film for a finale that divulges the clever secrets of the heist from replayed various points of view. Viewers often look for nonlinearity in *Jackie Brown* (1997) because of Quentin Tarantino’s first two nonlinear films, but the only anachronies in his third film occur during the shopping mall money-switching scam, which, in Alexander Walker’s mind, is included simply “to help us sort out who the hell’s doing what, to whom and why.” Another fitting example of the incomplete manifestation of nonlinearity through view variorum shows up in Gus Van Sant’s *Last Days* (2005) which repeats moments in the film from different characters’ points of views roughly three or

four times and somewhat arbitrarily—a view of the world perhaps from one character’s (Blake’s drug-induced perspective. Movies like *Go* (Doug Liman 1999), *Amores Perros* (Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu 2000), *11: 14* (Greg Marck 2003), and *Babel* (Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu 2006), containing story threads that eventually converge on a location and/or action, are often mistaken for complete view variori films as well, even though the only isolated symptoms of nonlinearity appearing in them occur when the viewer is, at last, shown a recap of a culminating encounter, within a sequence or within the entire film, from the individual points of view of the participants.

Most of the films that have succeeded in the view variori category over the past several years have done so with some narrative difficulty and still seem to struggle in terms of reflecting “omnis” significance. Two films from 2000, *Tick Tock* (Kevin Tenney) and *About Adam* (Gerard Stembridge), try their hand at multiple perspectives, the first as a sour relationship murder mystery in three perspectives and the second as a fruitless wedding relationship drama in four views. *Tick Tock*’s discourse takes advantage of crosscutting and braiding the storylines throughout the film, while *About Adam* addresses one perspective at a time: Lucy, Laura, David, and Alice. (Adam, from the title of the second film, ironically, is not permitted a point of view since all of the story’s action revolves around the encounters and feelings each of the others have with/for him.) Time lapse in *Tick Tock*, using hands on a clock face, is engaged for moving both forward and backward in time to help flag the viewer during those transitions; the anachronies, however, become so frequent and are performed at so many different intervals and durations along the film’s two-day timeline, the perspectives in the

discourse easily become lost on a viewer. More importantly, the syllepsis of the multiple perspectives of *Tick Tock* offers little in the way of significance beyond the novelty of narrative experimentation. Likewise, after delineating four threads that revolve around relationships with the enigmatic Adam and then, fusing them together into a master thread in anticipation of Lucy and Adam's wedding, *About Adam*'s syllepsis fails to develop any serious four-dimensionalist insights beyond the basic perils of romantic trysts and deceptions.

The syllepses of most other view variorum films reflect similar mixed shortcomings in their nonlinear striving. For example, *One Night at McCool's* (Harald Zwart 2001) weaves together three points of view (of Randy, Carl, and Dehling in their interactions with Jewel) and does so in two separate timelines for each of those perspectives. Despite the film's syllepsis, the discourse never moves beyond the "cool" factor, finding no strong connections to the story in support of it. The end result is a rather shallow street-smart comedy that fails to tap into nonlinearity as a means to an end but rather employs it only as an end in itself. The same is true for the more somber *Los Debutantes* (Andrés Weissbluth 2003), in which we follow Victor's version of events, then his brother Silvio's take, and finally the perspective of Gracia, a dancer at a local club, only to find that the temporal variations in the discourse have no significant bearing on the outcome or the meaning of the story. *Vantage Point* (Pete Travis 2008)—in which the events of an assassination and bombing are retold six times by shadowing six different characters or groups of characters at the scene, followed by a seventh re-telling from an "objective" point of view—suffers from the same dilemma: the syllepsis is

there, but the movie fails to move beyond mere exercise and to identify its greater “omnis” significance. *The River* (Jarmo Lampela 2001), too, traces six stories; the difference, here, is that they all periodically overlap and replay each other and, in the process, soberly knit the lives of the protagonists together into a larger tapestry of humanity. *The River* seems to show more promise of inhabiting the “omnis” text in the way it glimpses the “universal” in the “local”—the specific temporal parts of characters’ lives measured in relief by the anachronies of the discourse.

Two view variori films that arguably manage to substantiate the category in highly effective but highly different ways are Mike Figgis’s *Time Code* and Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*. The first film stands alone as comprising one of the most innovative discourses in film history. Dividing the cinematic screen into halves, thirds, or quadrants for certain scenes in films represents a form of visual trickery that extends as far back as the silent film era. The “bedroom comedies” of the 50s and 60s tapped into the technique frequently, which, in turn, has shaped the snappy look and feel of movies like *Down With Love* (Peyton Reed 2003) and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters 2004). Nevertheless, no film text has been audacious enough to depict a full-length feature film in four quadrants until *Time Code*.

Essentially, the hour-and-a-half-long film portrays four stories, one in each quadrant, occurring simultaneously in real time, all in one take. On a few occasions, in defining moments of the plot, the storylines intersect one another, and a character the viewer may have been following in one quadrant suddenly joins the scene of another character in another quadrant, at which point the viewer is able to watch the same scene

from two vantage points simultaneously. Does this particular structure meet the requirements for nonlinearity and view variorum? The answer to both parts of the question is “yes.” To the extent that the four-quadrant structure (a non-chronological principle) satisfies the test for syllepsis, the film can be considered nonlinear, despite the reality that to watch only one quadrant alone, the others being invisible to the viewer, would be, in contrast, strictly a linear activity. The film requires that the viewer multitask by somehow remaining attentive to all perspectives at once, and yet, priority (both visual and aural at points) is inevitably bestowed upon one quadrant or another for the duration of the film. To the extent the entire, uninterrupted 97 minutes of the film can be considered a single event in itself that is “repeated” four times (albeit simultaneously) by the split screen from a variety of vantage points, the film then also meets the criteria for inclusion in the view variorum category of nonlinearity as well. In *Time Code*, the rules of temporality are still tinkered with, even though the four perspectives are not linked and interlaced one-dimensionally in the discourse in the way that all other nonlinear films are. The ability to access the lives of others, then, as if observing furtively via closed-circuit, mobile security monitors yields a godlike perspective to the cinematic experience, even though the greater significance of that perspective, as in most of the other view variori films, may have to do with little more than seeing “what goes on behind closed doors.”

In contrast to the simultaneous viewpoints of *Time Code*, the structure of Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* bears similarities to some of the previous view variori films in its one-dimensional breakdown of temporal parts, with the exception that the execution of that structure in the text is a nearly flawless example of the view variori category. When

considered in the context of the story of the blind men and the elephant, Van Sant's film, with its apt, metaphorical title, epitomizes the nonlinear category. The slow moving tempo follows the lives of several high school students, mostly in a single day, in a large, average American high school, investing the viewer in the needs and desires of these specific individuals using long tracking shots at head-height behind them to follow them through hallways and outdoors. The film ends when two of the students, Eric and Alex, who have long prepared for this day, go on a Columbine-like shooting spree throughout the halls, classrooms, bathrooms, cafeteria, and library of the school.

The discourse is shaped in a fashion (multiple viewpoints in a series of long takes) similar to the shape of *Sátántangó* (1994) by Hungarian film director Bela Tarr, a strong precursor of and influence on Van Sant's style in his films. Although several of Tarr's films probably marginally qualify as nonlinear, that fact may be overshadowed and obscured by his extraordinary signature experiments with two of Genette's other interests, speed and duration, that seem more seriously to inform his 7-1/2 hour film, in contrast to *Elephant*'s meager 81 minutes of screen time.

In spite of the long sections of uninterrupted story in the film, the case for *Elephant*'s nonlinearity draws its support from at least two factors: 1) what is required of viewers mentally to (re)contextualize each subsequent scene whenever a new character viewpoint is introduced into the narrative; and 2) the behavior of the text as it crosscuts between the day of the shooting and the previous day(s) of preparation by Eric and Alex. The first of these two factors involves the long, tracking shots of Nathan, Nathan and Carrie together, John, Elias, Michelle, Brittany-Jordan-Nicole, Benny, and Eric and Alex

during the shooting. John and Elias are the two characters that serve as threads or through-lines to hold the school scenes together on the day of the shooting—John is seemingly everywhere that day, and Elias focuses on his camerawork and darkroom photography. As we see the view *variori* play out, certain scenes are replayed several times, such as John's exit from the school just before the shooting, which is shot from John's POV and Eric/Alex's POV outdoors, but then also through Brittany/Jordan/Nicole's POV from within the cafeteria where John can be seen outside through the windows leaving the grounds. As with all of the strong view *variori* films (but as seen particularly clearly in *Elephant*), the viewer must perform the mental exercise of jumping back in time and restarting the clock each time a new viewpoint begins. At the same time, the viewer is expected to track similarities in order to match up the timing of actions and events between points of view, but is likewise expected to identify the differences that make each vantage point unique and personal, which is a crucial component in the viewer's cathartic attachment to the tragedy ahead.

The filmic text also crosscuts between the day of the shooting and the preparation that Eric and Alex undergo ahead of time, and thus the text requires a certain additional level of engagement by the viewer. Until the second act of the film, when John is shown exiting the school for the first time, a viewer is unable to contextualize the clues in the discourse that make clear Eric and Alex have likely prepared for the school shooting days in advance. Once the viewer begins piecing these anachronies together, the immediacy of their presence in the school after the long set-up adds the urgency and disorientation needed to make each student's encounter with the young gunmen a truly terrifying one.

In the process of taking in all eight of these rather intimate viewpoints, having replayed them mentally as well as having had them replayed in many of the scenes themselves, the viewer is likely to be drawn to the meaning (or, point) of the connections between the temporal parts more than being drawn to the meaning of the stories themselves or the character activities therein. Even though a certain amount of deep care for the characters is fostered by the long tracking shots that follow them, the crosscutting effect, coupled with the abrupt ending of the film, seems to reinforce the point-driven reading to which a viewer is invited through a subtle brand of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*.

To summarize the view variori category of films, “Bushy” from *Richard II* may hold the most fitting words: “[. . .] For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears, / Divides one thing entire to many objects; / Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry / Distinguish form” (2.2.16-20). The form, then, as we might distinguish it from most of these view variori films, in which perspectives are “eyed awry,” is sylleptical in many cases and tend to be point-driven in nearly all. We can observe that films with partial view variori in place (films that do not attain syllepsis) tend to implement the strategy for utilitarian purposes or for added effect, a concoction for incorporating the “cool” factor. Evidence from *Time Code* and *Elephant* has suggested, though, that a small few of the view variori films seem to include discourses that creatively *and* carefully navigate through the subtle, built-in anachronies that emerge in the process of viewing multiple perspectives. When that kind of narrative is in place, the cinematic equivalent of Bahktinian heteroglossia may occur as the vantage points converge to allow a new, conflated vision that is, at once, both local (“many objects,” or

individual frames of reference) and global (“one thing entire,” or a four-dimensionalist “omnis” outside of time).

“Retrocausal Riddles” Nonlinear Films

To a small group of rare films that relate their stories by reversing the order in which their scenes are presented chronologically, some commentary has assigned the labels “reverse films” or “backward plots.” Though somewhat accurate, these terms may read as simplistic because of what these films really do from a sylleptical perspective. Are “reverse films” simply films that run through digital editing equipment or a projector in reverse? Cecil M. Hepworth’s 1902 short film “Bathing Made Easy” depicts two swimmers diving into water, and then the images move in reverse as they jump backwards out of the water and their clothes miraculously jump back onto their bodies. In Harold Pinter’s and David Hugh Jones’s *Betrayal* (1983), a tired extramarital affair between a wife and her husband’s best friend is shown at the end of its natural course, and then viewers are shown scenes from their relationship over a several year span in reverse order chronologically. Can both films be said to be “reverse” films? Is there a difference? François Ozon’s *5 x 2* (2004) recounts the disintegration of a married couple’s relationship using the same method as Pinter’s *Betrayal*, while Nolan’s *Memento* tells a story in which its scenes are presented in reverse order chronologically but which also contains other, intercut scenes that seem to be moving forward in time. Can both films be called simply “backward” plots?

Most of the films in this final nonlinear category do not use a structure that puts screen action literally in reverse. Even Hepworth's short film moves forward in time at its beginning. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Tony Scott's *Domino* (2005) have used literal reverse movement justifiably for a few seconds in a couple of scenes but not for the entirety of each movie. To watch a movie of any length that literally runs backwards would surely be a daunting, if not tedious task. The only aspect of the films in this category to which "backwards" applies is the order in which scenes are presented in

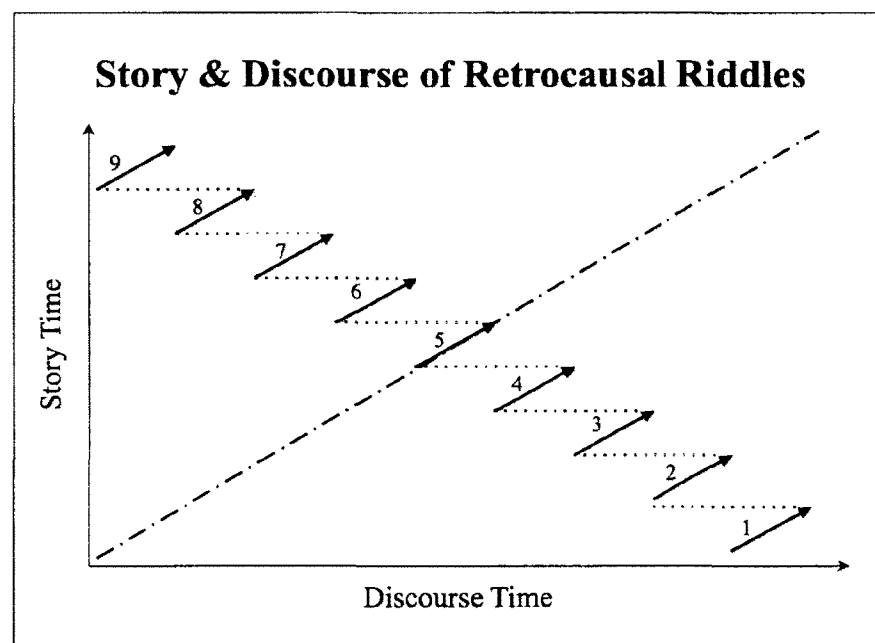


Figure 5. Rough plotting of story and discourse movement for a typical retrocausal riddle.

the discourse. By themselves as independent units, scenes contain actions that move forward through time, even though they do not do that in relation to each other. Figure 5

above helps to illustrate the pendulum-like movement of this viewing process for these films. The graph aids in understanding that in a film in which the order of the scenes has been chronologically reversed, the action in each scene still moves in a forward direction in time, nonetheless. So the first scene in the film's discourse is the last scene in the story being told (Scene 9 in the example); when Scene 9 ends, that is also the end of the story proper. The next scene, Scene 8, starts some time in the recent past, and as it moves forward in time, it will eventually come to an end as well. If, chronologically, there is no elision between scenes, then Scene 8 ends where Scene 9 began. On the other hand, if time has passed between scenes (elisions), then, the causal connections between them could be more arbitrary in some cases. Berg believes that this nonlinear film group's "focus on consequences of actions makes causality the de facto subject of backwards plotted films": "what fuels their narrative engine is the search for the first cause or causes of known effects" (27-28). While this may be the case, a brief, but closer look at the discourse and syllepsis in these films may reveal minor fluctuations in the presumed primacy of causality.

Considering the potential complications that using terms like "reverse" or "backwards" presents, a fitting alternative description for this nonlinear category might be "retrocausal riddles." It is the "causal" aspect of "retrocausal" that suits so well, for the unusual emphasis in the discourses of these films is the contrast between the reversal of cause-and-effect in the story and the steadfastness of the same in the discourse. As noted earlier in the chapter, nonlinear films seem to transport viewers to uncharted narrative territory where the classical rules of film discourse no longer neatly apply,

especially rules of cause and effect such as Branigan's: 1) "cause must precede effect," and 2) "an effect cannot work backward in time to create a cause." Both in how they are observed and in how they are broken, the short, final "retrocausal riddles" category of nonlinear films in this study is greatly dependent upon these rules.

Whereas both story and discourse in traditional narrative structures move in a cause-to-effect direction, story and discourse behave rather differently in films that are retrocausal riddles. It becomes clear that a retrocausal story moves into the defamiliarizing rearrangement of effect-cause, while the discourse retains its cause-effect structure in order for viewers navigate the anachronies of the discourse more confidently. As we move quickly through the short list of films in this category, we may also observe that some of these "retrocausal riddles" rely more on causality than others.

The films *Betrayal* and *5 x 2* both focus on the disintegration and dissolution of a romantic relationship, the first being an affair and the second, between a young married couple. The discourses of both films commence at the ends of each relationship in the story, respectively. Each film is a study of infidelity, but they retrocausally handle their subject matter quite differently. In the case of *Betrayal*, the deception is clear immediately in the first scene, and once the viewer is aware of the situation, he begins asking "why did this happen?" Furthermore, because the viewer of *Betrayal* can surmise easily enough the likely possibilities for the birth of the affair, he is also likely to be inclined to ask "how did this happen?" so the film, too, examines the mechanics, the machinations of infidelity. On the other side of the coin, *5 x 2* keeps infidelity a secret through much of the film. The viewer is not as likely to ask "how" about anything

because there's no way yet even to speculate what the cause of the problem may be. Only when the viewer arrives at the honeymoon scene late in the discourse does the cause of infidelity become apparent. In comparison, then, *5 x 2* invites a much more causal reading because the viewer spends so much time taking in the consequences (effects) of the young couple's actions early in the discourse, whereas *Betrayal*'s structure seems less concerned with consequences and more focused on the mechanics of sustaining the affair. All the while the retrocausal discourse in each film maintains a cause-effect routine: the viewer understands that the first scene in each discourse reveals the finality of the broken relationship which, in turn, is going to lead to the next scene in the discourse, which will address what came just before (the "straw") that led up to that moment (the "camel's back"), and so on, to the end of the discourse.

Just four other films stand out in this category as significant efforts to tap into the merits of storytelling by virtue of retrocausal riddles: *Two Friends* (Jane Campion 1986), *Peppermint Candy* (Chang-dong Lee 1999), *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé 2002), and *Memento*. In Campion's low-budget, made-for-television movie, the viewer follows high school chums Louise and Kelly through 9 months of their growing relationship, but in reverse—a sort of anti-Bildungsroman. As with the decay in both *Betrayal* and *5 x 2*, the friendship between Louise and Kelly suffers particularly in the last two scenes of the diegesis (aka, the first two scenes of the discourse); yet unlike the themes of affair maintenance and infidelity generated by the syllepses of the first two, *Two Friends* spends more time on coming-of-age issues, with emphasis (moving in reverse) on the loss of childhood innocence.

Peppermint Candy is unlike the first three films in several ways. The contemporary film is Korean, takes place in Korea, and is immersed in Korean culture and values. The story follows Yong-Ho, who is 40 years of age in 1999, back through time to 1994, 1984, 1987, 1980, and 1979, in that order. One quickly notes that, interestingly, the only year not in strict reverse order is 1984, the year that Yong-Ho proposes to his bride-to-be, which sets that segment apart from the rest in the story. The film is also steeped in Korea's turmoil: widespread economic suffering and all-time highs for bankruptcy and suicide in 1999, students demonstrating against the military-controlled government, and leaders , arrested and detained in 1984, and military brutality during mandatory service. Causality, at first glance, seems a likely theme for a retrocausal riddle addressing national events leading up to a personal crisis. According to director Chang-dong Lee, though, the consequences revealed nonlinearly in his story are rooted much more deeply than in etiological reasons alone:

Time is really the essence of this film. Political history did not leave personal history alone, but agitated it unrelentingly, bringing it onto the battleground of this disturbed time period in Korean history that the film takes us back to. I don't go back in time for nostalgic reasons, nor do I place importance on the past over the present. Rather, I see this as the chance for young people today to identify with the young people of the past, and perhaps gain some wisdom: from their predecessors.

For a film to ask only "Why did these things happen?" is not enough for Lee. Using syllepsis to access and engage an omnis text that empowers viewers to "see" outside of

time the effects of the past 20 years of Korean life, a retrocausal film like *Peppermint Candy* is able to ask, “What now? What ideals can be reclaimed that are worth living for in the ‘now’?”

In one of the most harrowing films in movie history for all viewers, the troubling scenes of Noé’s *Irreversible* move backward in time, beginning with an ultra-violent act of revenge in a grungy, strobing, dimly-lit gay bar during the first twenty minutes; reaching the film’s genuinely terrifying emotional crisis in the form of an agonizing nine-minute rape scene; and slowing to land on what, among retrocausal riddles, is characteristically a happy note in the last scene of the discourse (the first scene in the story). The film’s retrocausal discourse seems hell-bent on the violation of viewer sensibilities as its text reviles all that is destructive about “cause and effect,” even resorting to a title card that spells it out plainly in French: “Time destroys everything.” Yet, the syllepsis deals with the extremes of human interaction on a more visceral and brutal level than causality alone can address. The film nonetheless provides another meaningful example of the discourse taking the lead with cause and effect, as each subsequent event in the story time prepares the viewer for the one “before” which occurs next in the discourse. *Irreversible* is also the first retrocausal film among those discussed here for which there is no (or, at least, extremely little) elision between scenes—a quality that, when compounded with other effects in the film (violence, infrasound, etc.) sharply cranks the immediacy of the action to unprecedented frenetic heights.

Of all these riddles in the retrocausal riddle category, the game-like *Memento* requires perhaps the greatest ingenuity in order to ascertain meaning, for its nonlinear

discourse far outweighs others in its radical narrative complexity. The story follows Leonard (Lenny) Shelby, who is seeking revenge against the person(s) who murdered his wife. His nearly insurmountable obstacle in the process of piecing clues together is that he is suffering from a rare memory loss condition that prevents him from remembering recent events while still being able to retain long-term memories. Essentially, he forgets everything he does within approximately ten minutes of doing it and must tattoo himself with the clues he finds and take Polaroid photos in order to be reminded of clues later. Along the way, he receives information and clues from others, primarily two people by the names of Teddy and Natalie. He is not sure whom he can trust and, given his condition, he is an unreliable source of information himself. Because of his diegetic flashbacks, the viewer is led to believe also in the possibility that Lenny may not even be who he thinks he is. Certainly, the discourse could pass for a lucid dream, though its retrocausal structure is more prominent. No explanation is confirmed for his condition, although his flashbacks hint at two probabilities: his condition is a long-standing one that he and his wife had dealt with for years, or he was injured and/or traumatized during the attack on his wife. Because of the uniqueness of the film's discourse and also due in part to Nolan's appealing noir-ish stylings visually, a multitude of responses to the film have appeared over the past decade. What is most important here, however, is what the text of the film does with syllepsis.

To return briefly to the challenge at the beginning of this chapter—Nolan's claim that *Memento* is linear—it can be asserted that, in terms of this study's definitive treatment of nonlinear film, his clever masterpiece is, in fact, significantly *nonlinear*. In

one sense, it is easy to see why *Memento* seems linear to Nolan. The film is carefully structured in what, to some, may seem to be strictly a reverse direction, with scenes linked (retro)causally together. No scenes can be omitted (the way they conceivably could be in any of the “non-locality” films of the last two chapters) and, as Nolan rightly claims, “each scene depends on its relationship to the preceding scene and the one that follows.” Besides *Irreversible*, *Memento* is the only other film on the retrocausal riddle list that does not elide between scenes and so Nolan’s claim is especially legitimate. Again, as with *Irreversible*, the careful avoidance of elisions also effectively keeps the dramatic action at a higher level of intensity and a deeper sense of confusedness and urgency than in the other retrocausal films. Nolan’s description of the film reflects the “locality” of its temporal parts and its causal connections, and, by virtue of that strong structure, the film can seem linear (represented by connecting scenes sequentially in a straight line). Despite this impression, Nolan’s apparent misreading of his film’s discourse does not negate the fact that its discourse time is, nevertheless, greatly rearranged and that a non-chronological principle clearly governs the movie’s situations and events in such a way that viewers are persuaded to look beyond the riddles of the film and toward both a teleology and eschatology of memory itself.

Memento’s discourse divides the story into two parts, one presented in color, the other shown in black and white (b & w). In terms of the story itself, the b & w scenes chronologically precede the scenes that are in color. The b & w scenes show Lenny in his hotel room piecing clues together, tattooing his body, and taking calls, which eventually lead him outside and into his car with Teddy to confront whom he believes is

his wife's killer. In the story proper, all of the scenes that follow Lenny's eventual confrontation with the presumed killer are in color. In terms of the discourse, two complications develop. First, the b & w scenes and the color scenes are mixed together so that they alternate sequentially: b & w, color, b & w, color, etc. This step alone instantly turns the discourse into a nonlinear structure. Secondly, while the b & w scenes remain in chronological order, the color scenes move in reverse order. This step for the color scenes would by itself create a nonlinear structure as well. Combining both steps, a nonlinear structure is all but guaranteed in the discourse. To alert viewers at the start of



Figure 6. Poster cluing viewers into a possible mise-en-abyme narrative structure.

the film to the direction the discourse will take, a brief prologue appears in which the film action briefly runs backward (as in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*): a bullet casing jumps up from the floor returning to its gun barrel, a Polaroid photograph “un-develops,” and so forth.

Some of the promotional hype when the film was released used the idea of an abysmal Polaroid photo image to suggest the sylleptical structure of the film to audiences. As if to herald a fresh start for creative storytelling on film and play on viewers’ narrative sensibilities at the same time, the producers at Newmarket teased with its advertising by making a version of the Polaroid photo idea into the film’s “poster child” (see Fig. 6 above). The Polaroid depicts the infinitely recurring faces of Lenny and shady ally Natalie, along with those telling words scrawled into a caption: “Some memories are best forgotten.” The poster introduces the notion of mise-en-abyme as a possible metaphor for *Memento*’s syllepsis in that it represents spatially—in a single snapshot—what the filmic text attempts to do narratologically.

In his book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale authoritatively delineates the most prevalent symptoms of postmodernism, including concepts such as nonlinear narrative and spatial experiments with language. McHale’s chapter on “Chinese-Box Worlds” demarcates the infinite regress of certain diegetic structures, metalepses,

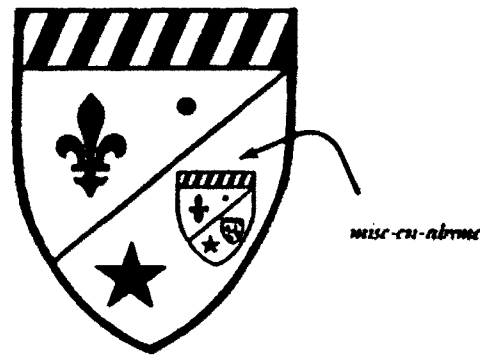


Figure 7. Classical mise-en-abyme.

literary trompe-l'oeil effect, and abysmal patterns. Specifically, his analysis of abysmal fiction illustrates what is meant by Douglas Hofstadter's use of the French term "mise-en-abyme" which aids in our understanding of "an object's parts being copies of the object itself" (see Fig. 7 above), a problematic notion of copying and "sameness" at different levels of recursive structure (124-8).

Having roots in medieval heraldry and used repeatedly by Shakespeare, Jonson, and their contemporaries in the form of a "play-within-a play," the mise-en-abyme concept is not a new one. Susan Hayward explains in *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts*, that the performance of mise-en-abyme

occurs within a text when there is a reduplication of images or concepts referring to the textual whole. Chinese boxes or Russian dolls are concrete examples of mise-en-abyme [sic] – the outer shell being the full-size real thing, those within a constant referral to the original. Mise-en-abyme [sic] is a play of signifiers within a text, of sub-texts mirroring each

other. This mirroring can get to the point where meaning can be rendered unstable and in this respect can be seen as part of the process of deconstruction. (252)

Memento's syllepsis may indeed behave similarly to the mise-en-abyme concept as described by McHale and Hayward, as its discourse—pendulum-like (a facet of retrocausal forms)—alternates between moving forward in time (b & w) and backward in time (color). We should recall, too, that the action within even the reverse-ordered scenes moves forward as well, so as to establish a stepping routine or rhythm of moving forward through one scene, then jumping backward by two scenes, only to begin the process all over—a process recalling the lyrics of a Coldplay song, “Twisted Logic”: “You go backwards but then you go forwards again / You go backwards but then you go forwards / You go backwards but then you go forwards again / You go backwards but then you go forwards.”

This rhythm is critical even in its simpler forms within the other retrocausal riddles—critical in the way it regulates a viewer's means and ability to make sense of the story and, to an extent, invites a story-driven reading in the films of this category. It is no small task to perform the interval leaps required to move through these films. Looking again at Fig. 5 from earlier, the dexterity required to do what is described in the previous paragraph—to leap, for example, from the end of imaginary scene 9 (at the tip of its arrow) immediately backwards by two scenes (9 and 8) to the beginning of imaginary scene 8, through scene 8 until it touches scene 9 again (the horizontal dotted lines), only to be immediately yanked two more scenes backward to the start of imaginary scene 7—

is hard work for the mainstream viewer, or any viewer for that matter. Rather than encouraging retention as traditional linear discourses are highly capable of doing, this rhythm subverts that algebrization, or ease of reading, and makes the familiar strange, going so far as to make it extremely difficult for viewers even to remember what they just watched in the immediately prior scene of the discourse.

Ultimately, the syllepsis in *Memento* creates an omnis text that breaks the rules of time and perceives life outside of time in a way that no other films do in order to initiate a dialogue about memory, identity, and loss. To a degree, all of the retrocausal riddle films are a part of that dialogue. As one joke tells it, when someone plays a country music song backwards, the singer gets their house back, their wife back, their car back, their dog back, etc. The serious subtext of the joke, of course, is that such songs carry a great sense of loss about them when one glimpses all that was good before now. Likewise, but far more grimly, retrocausal films are troubling because of the heightened awareness of loss that accompanies the Brechtian jolt viewers receive in the process of moving backward through time from decay back to a time of health. In these films, the common dialogue reflects loss of memory, of identity, of innocence, of relationship, of faith in other people, and of love. The Augustinian prompt to look from beyond the confines of time through the time-art of film and to reckon four-dimensionally with the temporal parts of our lives, either retrocausally or in combination with forward time, is an invitation into a perceptual and philosophical act not afforded by traditional linear discourses in film.

Surveying the films in this chapter's three categories, we observe a "leaning into" point-driven invitations and eschatological significations, although the other variations of reading formations and theological perspectives are present to a degree as well. The majority of "forking path" films—in their studies of choice, chance, and providence—seem preoccupied with issues etiologically and in some ways teleological. The omnis text in *Blind Chance*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Sliding Doors* concerns itself mostly with causes and effects, although whenever one reflects on possible "futures" outside the limitations of time, destiny and life purpose invariably come into view. *Groundhog Day* alone, among the "forking paths" films, seems to begin transcending the natural properties of those films to consider the eschatology of service, community, and sacrificial love.

Like the "forking paths" films, those among "view variori" predominantly invite point-driven readings, even though some attention must be given to details of information across perspectives in order for those points to be recognized. Even so, importance is given most to cause and effect by nature of the comparisons that viewers are forced to make about a situation or event via the multiple sightlines from several observation positions. Like *Groundhog Day* in its category, *Elephant* here resists the other films in its own category by transcending the obvious etiologically story points to raise some questions also about one's purpose of death.

Finally, to the extent that viewers are able to pick up their cues from the sophisticated reading process, the "retrocausal riddles" invite story-driven readings (to navigate through the disorienting anachronies) and point-driven readings (to make sense of the syllepsis during post-viewing reflection and assessment). The absorption with loss

in these films translates loosely into a form of death-like meditations, and the way these films are shaped four-dimensionally by their discourses, the “death” (of relationship, of pieces of memory, of childhood, etc.) in each instance is the death of a temporal part of the self, the amputation of “a time in the life of” from the whole temporal self. If any form of redemption seems absent from “retrocausal riddles,” perhaps those texts exist in hope that there will be redemption in the viewing. As with any of the nonlinear films in this study that transcend their narrative devices to locate nobler meaning in their forms, any redemption offered may come to the viewer in the form of a deep recognition of some positive thing that is, in the fullness of time, much larger than our customary, linear vision allows us to fathom.

Chapter VI

A BEGINNING? THE FUTURE OF NONLINEAR DISCOURSES

I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.

The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.

I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.

—“Scrooge” from *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

In the turpitude of Time, / Hope dances on the razor edge.

—Robert Penn Warren, “Mortmain”

Cartographers of the nineteenth century were known for their journal maps, which, among other data, contained drawn pictures of the terrain through which they traveled. The landmarks that were captured in those pages—looking forward, looking back, as the landscape changed its appearance en route—became the visual markers by which trails were laid out and recorded by Lewis and Clark and others. In the cinema, another kind of visual marker maps the terrain of difficult passages from the stories of our lives—a terrain spanned not by distance or space, but by time. As if rendered while riding side-saddle to chart the temporal countryside—looking forward, looking back—the discourses of nonlinear films are, at once, both highly unorthodox and inspired, as the preceding chapters seem to indicate.

A survey of the release dates for most of these films confirms that the last twenty years signals an unprecedented eruption of creative nonlinear activity. For the reasons discussed in the opening chapter of this study, nonlinear film discourses represent a phenomenon that requires the attention of all those who are interested in the future of storytelling in film art. Hopefully, the definitions and explorations presented by this study are meaningful early maps of their own and begin to lay further groundwork for understanding what nonlinear discourses really are, how they work, and what they might signify.

As this study has sought to work through some prior inconsistencies and confusions and, in turn, try out new definitions with respect to these types of narratives, the tools of Genette and of Hunt and Vipond have been particularly useful. While the unassuming word “syllepsis” has natural grammatical applications, it is nearly impossible to underestimate its value in its narratological role for the study of narratives that experiment with discourse time, especially in film. The discussions of the five identified categories of nonlinear film have demonstrated that to declare the “governance” of narrative situations and events in films via non-chronological principles is a subjective and, at times, arbitrary endeavor. In most cases, however, we’ve seen that determining syllepsis is less about meeting a certain quota of anachronies within a narrative and more about the range of influence that a collection of anachronies or that a polychronic narration has on bulk of the narrative.

Holding syllepsis in front to light the way, the five proposed categories for how nonlinear films work seem, generally, to hold fast, too. The first category of “non-

diegetic non-locality” stands out as the compilation of films that is most distinctively nonlinear of all the categories. Because of the element of non-locality in these narratives, the contrasts between story time and discourse time seem to be more sharply defined than those in the other four areas. The category adopts a wide range of interests—etiological, teleological, and eschatological—as they search for meaning. The “lucid dream” category is discovered to be a bit messier than the first because of the ambiguities of narration that naturally accompany the “inside view” of a character. Even so, lucid dreams clearly echo the strong invitation to point-driven readings and the eschatological weight given by non-diegetic non-locality films to their subject matter. As the end of Chapter 5 recapitulates, the final three categories “lean into” those same emphases as well, but not with the same crispness as the first two categories. “Forking paths” and “view variori” seem to fluctuate between functioning as inquiries into the nature of cause and effect and the nature of endings or death; “retrocausal riddles,” although relying on causality as a means of “reading” their texts properly, focused almost exclusive on matters eschatological.

Identified in the majority of these films across the categories is the unmistakable presence of the umbrella text that, as Tim Blake Nelson has intimated in his commentary, seeks “to find a deeper way that the events [and characters] relate to one another.” The thinking of Augustine and Sider, regarding a place outside of time, provides a way in for viewers to occupy that space and, by doing so, to be positioned to see, presumably, the world’s activity and the totality of a lifetime’s worth of choice, chance, and providence through the eyes of God. This study has highlighted how this ubiquitous text—this

“omnis” impulse or yearning, permeating all five of the nonlinear categories in varying degrees—is made possible through the syllepsis that defines nonlinearity. Of all the films represented in the study, perhaps Malick’s *The Tree of Life* best exemplifies the film that invites that process of beholding—beyond the time-locked boundaries of mere chronology—the temporal parts of a man’s life and, from that, suggests the whole, or the persistence of time throughout that life, thus giving the life meaning.

Now that nonlinear film has established itself as a form of cinema with broadly consistent characteristics and objectives, additional questions may be raised about the future of nonlinear films. In light of the accelerating evolution of convergence media, one reasonable aspect to consider would be how other media are affected by experimentation in nonlinear film discourses, especially television, which, as cinema’s sister storyteller, shares many crossover properties industrially, technologically, and narratively. Television’s antiphonal response to nonlinear film has been a rash of cutting-edge series that are either nonlinear or symptomatic of nonlinearity. This innovatory work has experienced mixed success, which often seems based more on the quality of character development than on the novelty of their narrative ingenuity.

Television shows such as *Daybreak*, *Flashforward*, *Life on Mars*, *Alcatraz*, and *Awake* have struggled as one-season wonders, while others like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Fringe* have found some staying power. Built upon a “*Groundhog Day* meets *NYPD Blue*” premise, *Daybreak* quickly demonstrated the difficulty for viewership in tracking a “forking path” structure with many repeated facts and altered futures in the form of weekly episodes. Even watching the series on DVD all at once fails to move a viewer

from an information-driven reading (always searching for new clues along the way) into a story-driven or point-driven reading that sustains interest over time. By the same token, the prolepsis-based *Flashforward* and the analepsis-based *Alcatraz* failed to move viewers beyond empty information-driven readings toward characters that viewers could care about. *Life on Mars* and *Awake*, on the other hand, succeed as “lucid dream” structures in promoting story-driven readings, but do not supplement viewers’ interest in their characters with information-driven or point-driven possibilities. *How I Met Your Mother* (story-driven *and* point-driven) and *Fringe* (story-driven, information-driven, *and* point-driven) have found some longevity in their sylleptical structures, no doubt, because of the care with which they have cultivated their characters and the relationships among them.

The most successful nonlinear experiment in television, however, (and the prime precursor to all the others) is the series *LOST*. Undoubtedly, one of the most widely debated ways in which the narrative of *LOST* created (or confounded) meaning for its viewers is the nonlinear aspect of its discourse. As early as the first season, largely dissatisfied fans began grappling with the increasingly intricate flashback structure that governed each episode. One online poster by the name “Coca Lite,” for example, created a thread board on *LOST*’s section of the *Television Without Pity* website entitled, “Lost Is Its Own Monster: The Bitterness Fiesta”—designed as “a refuge for my fellow disappointed viewers”—and initially commented that the show’s apparent “decline in quality” early in the first season could be attributed, in part, to an “over-reliance on flashback as a way to drag out the A-story to daytime-TV-level slooowwwness [sic].”

Over the course of the series, in addition to bloggers, posters, and the media, even the scholarly response to the unique challenges of *LOST*'s narrative and its renegade discourse has been strong, weighing in more and more regularly about how *LOST*'s experiment with story time and discourse time has emerged as one of the defining hermeneutics for the show. As early as Lavery and Porter's *Unlocking the Meaning of LOST*, the prominence of the show's narrative time and its effect on character development, plot points, and thematic revelations has found its way into the discussion. Since then, the conversation has mushroomed with key contributions coming from voices such as Jason Mittell, Marc Dolan, and others, all demonstrating in some way how *LOST*'s unprecedented explorations in serial narrativity and discourse time have changed the strategies with which viewers unpack a televised text. As Erika Johnson-Lewis describes it (in formalist terms) "The *sjuzet* deliberately impedes the ability of the audience to follow the *fabula*" in *LOST* (15). Johnson-Lewis also points to Roberta Pearson's helpful essay "Chain of Events" in which she suggests that the wrestling between the apparent desire of Darlton (show runners Damon Lindlof and Carlton Cuse) to achieve a character-centered (or story-driven reading of the) show and many of the viewers' apparent desire to disentangle what they experienced as a mythology-based text (or, an information-driven reading) help to create the very tension that was largely responsible for the show's sustained success as well as the extraordinary conflict that was equally responsible for the tempestuous disparity in viewer responses after the series finale (Pearson 143-4). Yet, arguably, as with many of our nonlinear films, the most useful means of understanding *LOST*'s narrative voyage is located in neither the story-driven vision of the show runners nor in the information-driven assumptions of the

audience, but rather in the point-driven aftereffect of the *LOST* text as a whole.

No other television text seems quite to have captured the concept of four-dimensionalism or Augustine's perspective on time as ambitiously as *LOST* has done. Likewise, *LOST* became serendipitously and uniquely positioned to suggest the meaning of a life by looking at the sum of a life, or—in the case of the *multiple* island survivors—the individual meanings of their *lives* via the *sums* of the temporal parts of their lives as they are delivered to us nonlinearly. *LOST* accomplishes this feat in at least three ways which can be roughly matched with seasonal groupings. Seasons 1 through 3 are *etiological* in that they concentrate primarily on the non-diegetic causes and effects between backstory and the “island present.” Part of the reason for this is industrial—to the extent that Darlton are said to have waited until they knew that the show would be able to continue after season 3 before beginning to play with time the way that they do in the second half of the series. Needless to say, the first three seasons firmly establish a cause-and-effect *modus operandi*, which allows the show runners to set the audience up for an interruption in that routine.

Seasons 4 and 5, then, become prominently *teleological* in that the attention of the text shifts to flashforwards and time travel, both of which demonstrate ways in which the core characters question their respective purposes *in life*. In the final season, narrative priority shifts again, this time to an *eschatological* dimension in which many of the same core characters question their respective purposes *in death*. And in the series-long process of these transformations from an etiological text to a teleological text and finally to an eschatological text, we discover how time becomes an Augustinian means of grace

for these characters, taking on a newfound point-driven importance as viewers compare and piece together the smaller temporal parts of characters' lives—the “flashes before their eyes”—in order to arrive at the sum of those changes—a fuller understanding of personhood in the persistence of time. In her scholarly discussion of *LOST*, Erika Johnson-Lewis comes close to the mark when she analogizes the way *LOST*'s nonlinear narrative works through a *Dr. Who* quote: “people assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly, timey wimey stuff” (quoted in Johnson-Lewis 15). In the case of *LOST*, the big wibbly wobbly ball is the Augustinian, four-dimensionalist crux of the text.

The unprecedented increase in the nonlinear playfulness of television narrative discourse in *LOST* and in the other recent series seems symptomatic of a wider ongoing narrative trend that owes largely to the nonlinear film discourses that have come before, which in turn owe much more to the fictional novel. Television is now finally not only tasting that narrative freedom with point-driven readings through nonlinear delivery, but could be said to have become emblematic of that trend, with *LOST* remaining clearly the leader of the pack. This movement would seem to encourage further critical studies of nonlinear storytelling for television in the future.

In terms of related media in our convergence culture, a look into the role of nonlinear discourse in the further development of online applications, hypertext, and other digital storytelling forms would likewise be worthy of a closer look. Filmmaker Mike Figgis doesn't “see that within the mainstream of cinema there is a need for

interactive relationships with the audience, they just need smarter films. Interactivity seems to be something interesting to think about for Internet and computer environments.” If Figgis’s suspicion is correct, does nonlinear storytelling perform most effectively as a means by which to enhance interactivity in virtual environments? Also, what is the relationship between creativity and technology, and are nonlinear discourses a defensible part of that relationship? In defending his own creativity with unconventional editing practice and with shaping nonlinear narratives, filmmaker Tom Tykwer contends that “it’s not that [his creative ideas for a film] come to my mind because the technology exists, [but rather] they come to mind and then I look for the right technology to transfer them to the arts.” Do nonlinear structures serve film artists in the same way? Is the omnis simply a means to an end, or can it be thought of as an end unto itself?

Another point of further inquiry might involve looking at whether or not this trend in nonlinear discourses may constitute an entirely new genre in film. Each of the five categories share common ground in terms of style, iconography, and content, and it would likely be fruitful to consider to what extent these shared attributes communicate in the way of genre. In terms of style, several features for comparison come to mind readily: temporal disruptions of narrative (obviously); non-diegetic character intrusion (direct commentary, VO narration, added scenes, etc.); a “God as Auteur” perspective; presence of “anxiety of influence” (homages, experience of filmmaker, etc.); and abrupt, sometimes disorienting shifts in locale or incident.

Similarly, a nonlinear genre might include commonalities in iconography, including car trouble (images of crashes, dangerous driving, or vehicle disrepair); the

repetition of detailed imagery with slight discontinuities; dark, brooding, or even noir-ish sets and lighting; a female protagonist with brightly colored hair; drinks at a bar (and/or a token drinking scene involving the protagonists); and, often a bedroom scene, or a scene with the protagonists on/in a bed. The strongest nonlinear genre connections that an extended study might uncover are conceivably the content associations in these films. Romantic relationships in distress, for example, are common to all. Other typical content points to look for might be a mystery needing to be solved, choices and their possible consequences, effects followed by causes, and evidence, perhaps, of unreliable narration and/or authorship. Whether or not enough consistency and thoroughness exist in any of these aspects to warrant referring to nonlinear work as a genre unto itself would be a matter to decide; but the prospect of introducing a new genre into the scholarship of film studies would be a compelling and bold assertion.

From Kurosawa to Kieslowski, this narratological study has contemplated representative nonlinear discourse activity from filmmakers around the globe. Although the study has limited itself to the textual similarities and differences of nonlinear discourse across cultures, one might speculate, from a strong reader-response critical view, about what impact nationality and culture may have on audience reception and marketability for these films. Is there a particular nonlinear category, for instance, that attracts audiences in one country or one part of a continent but would have the opposite affect on audiences somewhere else? What would be the possible cause(s) for such disparity in responses? Religious beliefs? Social codes? Just as Joseph Campbell confirms the predictable manifestation of the monomyth across cultures, are the results of

the irruption of syllepsis into the monomythic form predictable across cultures as well? One relevant undertaking in terms of further research would be a comparative cross-cultural review of nonlinear discourse to ascertain whether the same etiological, teleological, and eschatological tendencies apply.

The litany of possible directions one might go with nonlinear experimentation is surely longer than the few questions proposed here. Is the art of narrative filmmaking truly so exhausted that it is unable to reinvent itself? Does it need to? Is Harmony Korine justified in his thinking that film may still, in fact, be in its infancy? Maybe, even after 120 years, film is only now just beginning. If so, where is the evidence? Perhaps nonlinear discourses in film offer a clue to potential changes around the corner for an art form on the verge of exploding into new uncharted cinematic territory, one step closer (or one step further removed) from Bazin's vision of "total cinema."

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