FLASHBACKS IN FILM

Memory & History

Maureen Turim

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In memory of my father, Sol Turim,
a generous and loving man.

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Definition and Theory of the Flashback

Why a study devoted to the flashback in film? Why single out one narrative device and trace its use over eighty years of cinematic expression? The selective focus on the trope of the flashback is a way of slicing through the enormity of film history, a method for considering the aesthetic history of film as just such a diverse composite of the history of filmic forms. We will ask what role the flashback played in the history of film, in the life of various film aesthetics and particularly in the development in cinematic modernism. As complex as these issues are, the goal of this book is not simply that of a focused aesthetic history.

The flashback is particularly interesting to theoretical conceptualization of film. The flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history. Studying the flashback is not only a way of studying the development of filmic form, it is a way of seeing how filmic forms engage concepts and represent ideas.

Most readers are probably familiar with what we mean by a flashback in film. For many, Hollywood classics have defined this familiarity with the flashback technique including such famous examples in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, (1941), cited in virtually every dictionary of film that attempts a definition of the flashback.[1] A body of literature discussing the flashback exists, ranging from scriptwriting manuals to introductory books on film study.[2] In its classic form, the flashback is introduced when the image in the present dissolves to an image in the past, understood either as a story-being-told or a subjective memory. Dialogue, voice-over, or intertitles that mark anteriority through language often reinforce the visual cues representing a return to the past. Both earlier and later in film history, other forms of flashbacks occur that are less obviously marked. We therefore need a more general definition for the flashback that includes all types of flashbacks. In its most general sense, a flashback is simply an image or a filmic segment that is understood as representing temporal occurrences anterior to those in the images that preceded it. The flashback concerns a representation

of the past that intervenes within the present flow of film narrative. As we shall see shortly, there is a great deal more to be said about the definition of the flashback and the implications of this term.

Memory, in its psychoanalytic and philosophical dimensions, is one of the concepts inscribed in flashbacks. Memory surges forth, it strengthens or protects or it repeats and haunts. A plethora of depicted memories are offered across the history of flashback use, each slightly different in form, ideology, tone. Some are subjective, interiorized; others represent a telling-in-language whose degree of subjectivity might be considerably less. To analyze this constant play of difference, the films need be examined as fragments of a cinematic discourse on the mind's relationship to the past and on the subject's relationship to telling his or her past.

The cinematic presentation of memory in these films can be compared with the knowledge proposed by various disciplines that research and speculation on memory processes. We shall find that this comparison shows some mirroring and some fascinating discrepancies, some anticipations of the future of science by art and some anachronisms used blithely because they correspond to some dramatic imperative of a given mode of fiction.

If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience. This process can be called the "subjective memory," which here has the double sense of the rendering of history as a subjective experience of a character in the fiction, and the formation of the Subject in history as the viewer of the film identifying with fictional character's positioned in a fictive social reality. The play of different voices within film narration, however, implies certain departures or divisions within this formation of subjectivity. Even flashbacks that are themselves marked by subjectivity or the single focalization of a character may engender a representation of history not so subjectively circumscribed, or so unified. The telling or remembering of the past within a film can be self-conscious, contradictory, or ironic. Some flashback narratives actually take as their project the questioning of the reconstruction of the historical. A close study of the variations in flashbacks is actually a means of questioning the conceptual foundations of history in its relationship to narrative and narrative in its relationship to history.

The goal of this study is to produce a multidimensional overview of the functioning of flashback. Multidimensional because film history, film theory, film analysis merge in the investigation of the flashback and open to the issues of social history and philosophy. Multidimensional also due to the manner in which the analysis of the films themselves is considered a project of multiple perspectives. This first chapter aims to define these goals, as emblemized by five words—form, image, voice, memory, and history.

Etymology of the term "Flashback"

One aspect of a definition and theory of the flashback as a cinematic device is the etymology of the term itself. The term "flashback" is a marvelously appropriate turn-of-the-century coinage, sparked with the modern notions of speed, movement, energy, of the relativity of spatio-temporal relationships and the vicissitudes of mental processes. How did these connotations come to reside in this particular word, and how did it come to be used as a cinematic term?

We know for certain that the term flashback is highly derivative of certain uses of the verbal and nominative form of "flash," but other aspects of the etymology are more speculative and arbitrary. The term "flashback," probably came to its cinematic context in a migration from mechanics and physics, where the term "flash" and the phrase "to flash back" were in general usage at the turn of the twentieth century. "Flash," long used to describe a brief interval of light, as in "lightning flashes," had come to be used to describe the brief and violent consequences of combustion. Flash was therefore applied to explosions and the firing of engines. "To flash back" evolved to indicate a kind of misfiring, as in the example from the *Encylopaedia Britanica* of 1902 cited in the *O.E.D.*: "A still further addition of air causes the mixture to become so highly charged that it flashes back into the tube of the burner."[3] This evolved, according to the *O.E.D.*, into the nominative form, at first hyphenated: "the highly flammable vapor of petrol and a 'flash-back' resulted in the total destruction of the car" *(Motoring Annual).*[4]

Beginning around the mid-nineteenth century, "flash" comes to mean a quick glance, as in the following examples the O.E.D. cites from literature: "Cyril flashed upon him one of his droll glances, and laughed" (M. Gray, *Silence of Dean Maitland*, 1844); "The young man flashed his insolent eyes at her," (R. Langbridge, *Flame & Flood*, 1903). "Flash" becomes connected to vision, paving the way for the figuration of memory inherent in the cinematic flashback.

This combination of brief instances of light, of explosive power, and of the change in direction and quality of a glance, are appropriate antecedents to the term flashback in its cinematic sense. The O.E.D. gives the cinematic definition as follows:

> **flashback**, *sb.* [f. the verbal phr. * *to flash back*], . . . **2.** *Cinema:* A scene which is a return to a previous action in the film, a * CUT-BACK; hence a revival of the memory of past events, as in a pictorial or written presentation, . . .
>
> **1916** *Variety*, 13 Oct. 28/4 In other words the whole thing is a flash-back of the episodes leading up to her marriage. **1928** J. Gallishaw *Only two ways to write a story* I. vii. 177 With *Sunk* the method of presentation was chronological . . . In the case of *Paradise Island* the method is reversed. The order instead of being chronological is anti-chronological: It is the flash-back method. **1934** H.G. Wells *Exper. Autobiogr.* II. vii. 486 When goddesses and Sea Ladies vanish and a flash back to the ancestral chimpanzee abolishes the magic caverns of Venus, human beings arrive. **1947** *Times* I Nov. 6/4 The film relates, in a prolonged flash-back how the innocent Indian became corrupted by

bewildering contact with those supposed to be his superiors in civilization. **1957** *Times Lit. Suppl.* 26 July 453/2 In his new novel . . . [he] uses with enviable ease a complicated system of flash-backs (p. 1099).

The *O.E.D.* definition seems to confirm the hypothesis that the term flashback was first used in its sense of narrative returns to the past in reference to film, rather than other forms of storytelling. Literature and theater certainly used techniques similar to the flashback before cinema, but the etymology of this term for a return to a narrative past inserted in a narrative present is apparently derived from the speed with which cinematic editing was able to cut decisively to another space and time. Flash—the audience was transported in the movie's time machine—back in time. It is my sense that only after the term "flashback" was accepted in film criticism and screenwriting did it attain a more general application to literature and theater, both to describe contemporaneous works, and to be retrospectively applied to similar techniques of narration in earlier poems, novels, and plays.

Eventually "flashback" becomes incorporated into literary terminology, and its probable etymology as a cinematic term is not necessarily noted, as is indicated by the "plot" entry in M.H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

> In the novel, the modern drama, and especially the motion picture, exposition is sometimes managed by flashbacks: interpolated narratives or scenes (which may be justified as a memory or a revery, or as a confession by one of the characters) which represent events that happened before the point at which the work opened. Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries* make persistent and skillful use of this device.[5]

Abrams's definition, in merely describing the "flashback" as occurring in the novel, the modern drama, and the motion picture gives us no sense that whatever literary and theatrical precedents there were for the concept, the term "flashback" was not apparently used until the advent of cinema and then only ten or fifteen years after the first filmic flashbacks appeared.

A more detailed look at the filmmakers' introduction of the technique and the critics' introduction of the term "flashback" will occur in chapter two, where it will be treated as a part of the historical development of the technique rather than as the specific etymology of the term. We will also examine the interplay between film and literature later in this chapter, as well as the next one. Suffice it to say for now that except for the earliest period of flashback films (before 1915), films of the avant-garde, and more recent modernist films, the "flash" presented in films is often a rather slow dissolve and that the audience is offered explanatory intertitles or verbal support to smooth the time travel. Still, the term "flashback" that gained currency in the late teens and early twenties marks a recognition that something particularly transformative and jarring occurred in cinema's montage of disparate temporalities in disjunct order.

The etymology of the term "flashback" includes a fascinating migration into our language beyond its original reference to narrative technique. It has now been adopted by psychology to refer to the spontaneous recall of a memory image, especially in the context of a war trauma, in which former soldiers are said to have "battlefield flashbacks." "Drug flashback" may have started as a counter-culture slang term, but it is now used by the medical profession to describe recurring effects of drug experiences. The phrase even has a more general colloquial use to describe an individual's personal memories, often shortened as the phrase "I just flashed on" (". . . what we were doing last year at this time" or ". . . the last time I was in Y's house," etc.). This colloquial use of the term indicates how movies as popular culture begin to affect the way people think about their own experience. Cinematic renderings of storytelling and memory processes may have borrowed from literature and sought to reproduce human memory mimetically, but ironically, the cinematic presentation of the flashback affects not only how modern literature is organized and how plays are staged, but perhaps also how audiences remember and how we describe those memories.

The Question of Formalism and the Device

The analysis of flashbacks in film is first of all a history of formal changes in storytelling techniques. As such, this study owes much to Russian formalist methodology in establishing a theory and method for analyzing the permutations of form found in flashback films. The formalists introduced the basic distinction in terminology between story and plot.[6] The term "story" refers to narrative events as understood in a "real" temporality, a logic of linearity and causality that refers to the ordering of time in the "natural" world. Plot is the inscription of events in their actual presentation in the narrative (the book as read or film as viewed). Thus plot order can vary from story order to various effects, and story order is often left for the reader/viewer to conceptualize according to different cues of dating and reference.

Another concept Russian formalism introduced was the notion of a "device," a construct within form that complicates the formal patterning of the textual object, providing form with variations. The flashback can be seen as one such device, as it rearranges plot order. In some ways the device is similar to the notion of the figure within earlier rhetorical theory, but it is at once a larger category and one which has a different status. Rhetoric in the earlier tradition saw figures as creating meanings that the reader/analyst's job was to explicate and evaluate. The formalists inverted the device/signification relationship previously assumed in explanations of how texts functioned. Content exists to naturalize or justify the device, except in cases where the device is bared in displays of narrative reflexivity.[7] The great contribution of early formalism was to accentuate *another* history of textual development by inverting the value assigned to content over form.

Recently, a "neo-formalism" has been introduced into American film theory by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson which makes much use of this story/plot

distinction and its theoretical consequences, as well as the theory of fictional devices.[8] Their work demonstrates the continued significance of these principles as fundamental to the theory of narration.

Returning to Abrams's gloss of the term "flashback," we can see how his treatment of flashbacks as a device of narrative exposition subscribes to the formalist inversion. According to his view of narrative construction, such expository devices must be naturalized or as he says, "justified" somehow.[9] Flashbacks typically hide their formal function, he says, by being presented as memories, dreams, or confessions. This formalist explanation only begins to suggest the complex weave of factors that are at play in the evolution of narrative structures.

While acknowledging the debt to formalist theory, let me also suggest that the formalism that informs this study is not a formalism conceived of as separate from or in opposition to a larger sense of historical development; quite the contrary. My premise is rather that the history of the flashback from 1902 through 1985 is also a complex fragment of more general developments within film history and social history. By slicing through film history focusing on a single narrative technique we can examine important changes in cinematic representation and ideology, not always discussed in formalist studies as such.

We can easily suggest that the flashback developed as a means of mimetic representation of memory, dreams, or confession, and in so doing we are not necessarily returning to an outmoded thematic treatment of technique. We can instead see flashbacks simultaneously as both devices to be covered with referential and narrative justification and as a means of portraying thought processes or circuitous investigations of enigmas. We can see that it is this weave of motivation that makes the inscription of flashbacks in fact so fascinating.

We might also extrapolate a complex pattern of evolution and influence among novel, play, and film. Film influences the modern novel to duplicate a cinematic sense of the flashback mimetically, while the traditional novel, especially the 19th-century novel, can be seen as already containing the literary equivalent of a filmic flashback, though "naturalized" in language.[10]

The history of the flashback device is not linear, however, and formalist method can help overcome a tendency to make history into a linear or developmental progression. The chronological organization of this study, in fact, serves to point out the asynchronous and paradigmatic aspects of the history of this device. The development of the flashback is not a linear progression from an awkward form to an increasingly complex and sophisticated inscription. If we can apply terms to periods of flashback uses like "primitive" "classical," and "modernist," we also find that there are asynchronic developments that place some of the most modernist and innovative uses of the flashbacks in films of the twenties. The modernist innovations of flashbacks during the sixties are a reprise of the flashback concepts developed in the twenties avant-garde. Further, the earliest flashbacks of silent American films are, as we shall see, rich and suggestive images. Though they may appear more simple in form (a single shot tableau or a reprise of shots already seen) this inherent

simplicity of imagery actually functions to create an expansion of meanings. These tableaux function as context-dependent signifiers and concentrated junctures in narrative coding. The flashbacks of the Hollywood sound period present a different kind of semiotic complexity, for the sound/image relationships weave between different temporalities and focalizations. The most recent Hollywood flashbacks, conversely, are often less sophisticated than those found in films of earlier periods; they are redundant in their internal coding and serve primarily to deliver missing narrative exposition. So this study poses the question of why and how certain forms appear at certain historical moments in different cultures. We will see that there are prevailing philosophies and ideologies that favor flashback narration in some periods and discourage it in others.

The link between the 19th-century novel and early film was astutely made by Sergei Eisenstein in his essay,"Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today."[11] Eisenstein cites passages from *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Hard Times* to show literary equivalents to cinematic montage. Parallel montage, the cutting from one series of actions in one space to another simultaneous series in another space, is the main object of Eisenstein's attention. He also discusses the use of "close-up" details in descriptive passages and the montage insert of an element of the action in a kind of "skipped" order. Eisenstein mentions Stefan Zweig's discussion of the masked autobiographical memory traces that give *David Copperfield* a richness of details as it describes the hero's reminiscences.[12] Flashback narration as such, however, is not one of the elements that Eisenstein discusses as a point of comparison between Dickens and Griffith, though it certainly is among their shared narrative techniques; temporal shifts are less Eisenstein's concern in this essay than are spatial shifts and metaphoric montage.

The literary equivalent to the flashback is often less distinct and abrupt than the cinematic flashback in its temporal shifts. Verbal storytelling can ease temporal shifts through the sustaining power of the narrative voice, whether that of authorial omniscience or of a character in first-person narration. An arsenal of verb tenses and qualifying clauses render these shifts as an invisible act of language. The concept "flashback" as developed by the cinema makes us more aware of these temporal shifts in literary narration. After cinema makes the flashback a common and distinctive narrative trait, audiences and critics were more likely to recognize flashbacks as crucial elements of narrative structure in other narrative forms. This may be particularly true for the popular conception of narrative temporality among a general audience, but it is perhaps also a factor in scholarly recognition of modes of narrative temporality, first in formalist literary theory and more recently in structuralist theory. Both the formalists of the early years of the 20th-century and the post-World War II structuralists developed their narrative theories with film as a common cross-reference to their usually primary focus on literary narration. As Gérard Genette acknowledges in the context of a discussion of the contribution of the Russian formalists, "Everyone knows that the birth of the cinema altered the status of literature: by depriving it of certain of its functions, but also by giving it some of

its own means."[13] The flashback may well be one of the functions that cinema altered and gave back to literature. It seems likely that the manner in which the cinematic flashback manipulates narrative temporality highlights literature's differential treatment of temporal modalities.

Genette's Delineation of Narrative Temporality

Structuralist approaches to narrative owe much to the formalist tradition of narrative theory, but structuralism, coupled with semiotics, makes a new contribution to our understanding of the basic ways in which texts function. First, structure is for the most part not isolated within structuralism the way form is within formalism. Structures function, they generate meaning. The tendency to replace the notion of "structure" with that of "structuration" in more recent structuralist writing indicates a movement towards a more dynamic concept of textual processes, a more advanced semiotics. Two major figures in structuralist and semiotic theory, Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes, introduced a series of concepts concerning narrative textuality that provide a background against which a theory of the flashback can be constructed. I will therefore summarize briefly the relevant aspects of their approaches to the text. We should keep in mind, however, that their models are usually literary, especially significant in light of the preceding discussion of the difference, historically and semiotically, between literary and filmic texts.

In his essay "Discours du récit" in *Figures III*, Genette considers the ordering of narrative events one of the basic aspects of narrative construction.[14] He establishes a series of useful terms to describe variations in order. "Anachrony" is the general term he proposes for any temporal rearrangement, while "analepse" indicates a movement from a narrative present to the past (as in a flashback) and "prolepse" indicates a movement from a narrative present to a disjunct future (as in a flashforward) (pp. 79–82). Both the analepse and prolepse can be distinguished further by the opposition interior/exterior; an interior analepse is one that returns to a past of the fiction that remains within the temporal period of the rest of the narration. All flashbacks which repeat incidents narrated previously or referred to elliptically within the prior linear development of the narration are interior analepses. Exterior analepses jump back to a time period prior to and disjunct from the moment of the narrative's beginning.

The interior/exterior distinction is related to Genette's notion of the "portée" of the analepse, that is, how long ago the past event occurred. Flashbacks can skip back over years, decades, days, hours, or just a few moments. "Amplitude" is Genette's term for the duration of the event within the analepse, or to put it more simply, how much of the past is told in the flashback. A flashback can cover a period of time in the past understood as being several years long or conversely, just a few moments (pp. 89–92). The term "duration" then is freed to mean the actual length of the flashback as it is told. In literature this can be measured in lines or pages, while in film we speak of minutes. Each of these concepts, amplitude, portée, and

duration, is significant in the analysis of the flashback as a narrative device; each not only contributes to the more precise description of differences between flashbacks, but the nature of the structural view implied in these terms allows us to conceive of the flashback in the context of the narrative structure as a whole.

Genette also develops the notion of ellipses (periods of time that are left out of narration) beyond its definition in standard literary analysis. We can combine these terms to formulate analytical statements about flashbacks; for example, we find that analepses sometimes retrospectively fill in ellipses. This combination of devices is one of the ways narratives build suspense by withholding the revelation of information until an efficacious moment, often the climax of the story. The combination of terms can also provide a description of another kind of flashback; we can say that in these cases analepses themselves contain ellipses. Sometimes flashbacks carry this to an extreme, bracketing several incidents together to relate the past paradigmatically. The incidents narrated within the analepse can themselves be organized achronologically.

Genette often diagrams passages from literature as part of his analysis of their structure, creating a visual description of order, portée, amplitude, and duration. I will use similar diagrams in this book to explain and amplify a point I wish to make about flashback structure.

Genette's purpose in *Figures III* seems divided between the illustration of types of temporal organization and the analysis of the function of specific types in Proust. This division in his theoretical purpose has two consequences, the first of which is that his terminology is cumbersome, especially in transliteration into English. While a passage from Proust can be used to explain the notion of amplitude, the converse is not so evident. In actual textual analysis, one can speak directly and perhaps more convincingly of the actual arrangement of temporality in the passage. It therefore seems unnecessary to use Genette's terms for the dimensions of flashbacks in all the actual analyses in this book—"amplitude" or "portée" can be discussed in simple language, by analyzing, for example, how a certain flashback inserts a reference to a day in time several years earlier, for example. This seems more direct than saying the amplitude of the flashback is restricted (one day) while its portée is fairly extensive (several years). The decision on my part to use more direct language may have the unfortunate consequence of making what are elements of the theoretical dimensions of temporal organization seem like mere description; it is therefore in reference to Genette's exposition of what is at stake for narrative in temporal organization that I hope such specific analyses of analepse structure can be read.[15]

The second drawback to Genette's project is its potential for remaining at the level of typology. Genette's major contribution in "Discours du récit" is not the typology itself, but his sensitive analysis of Proust's language in relationship to temporality, its rich comparison with a wide range of literature, and the theoretical speculations that occur over the course of the essay. Genette demonstrates how much the organization of events in narrative can vary and how significant this process of variation can be. Ultimately, this essay points out much of what is most innovative about Proust's writ-

ing. In abstracting the level of temporal organization from its naturalized embedding in the narrator's voice, Genette points to how Proust's work achieves its density in constructing time, language, and subjective experience. Though the distinctions Genette introduces are mostly applied to examples from literature, they allow us to develop a concept of a specifically filmic treatment of narrative time.[16]

This relevance to film analysis is suggested indirectly by Genette in the selection of a quote from Christian Metz at the very opening of "Discours du récit":

> [Narrative is] a doubly temporal sequence, . . . There is the time of that which is told and the time of the plot (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier). This duality is not only that which makes possible all temporal distortions that are commonly found in narratives (three years in the life of the hero summarized in two lines of a novel, or in a few shots of a montage sequence in cinema, etc.); more fundamentally it invites us to remark that one of the functions of narrative is to create one time in another time.[17]

While Genette goes on from here to discuss that filmic unfolding is perhaps more fixed than reading time, he accepts the basic parallel between the two narrative processes. Is the figure of duality in itself adequate to describe narrative temporality? Has the binary opposition of the formalist story-plot distinction reemerged as the image of a dual narrative temporality? Similarly, Gilles Deleuze introduces the term "bifurcation" in his *Cinéma 1: L'Image-Temps* to discuss the temporality of the flashback, though he means for the term to indicate a multiple splitting beyond the pair of temporalities bifurcation implies.[18] While this duality may be a basic structuring principle of film that the flashback makes particularly evident, temporality in the filmic narrative may not be so simply double. Analysis of focalization, as proposed by Marc Vernet, is one way of modifying the notion of dual temporality in film: this concept becomes extremely useful in his analysis of the function of voice-off narration in the flashback sequences of film noir.[19] In a more general sense, when we consider narrative as a weave of voices and as a construction of narrative codes as introduced by Roland Barthes, we can see how temporality is multiply inscribed.

Barthes's Narrative Codes and Temporality

Roland Barthes's work on narrative coding, first in a series of articles, then in his book *S/Z,* is another structural view of the ordering of narrative exposition.[20] Less concerned with temporality per se than is Genette, Barthes nonetheless provides important constituents of our theory of the flashback by defining narrative as organized by five different codes, or sets of information. Barthes's analysis in *S/Z* strives in his reading of Balzac's "Sarrasine," to counteract the linearity he sees as recapitulated in the traditional *"explication des textes"* as well as in prior structural studies that stop at "the major structures" (pp. 3–21, 90). This goal becomes all the more difficult since the analysis itself proceeds through the short story from phrase to phrase in order to comment upon the "lexias" of the text, small units of coded

significations. Yet Barthes insists he wants to disperse the text. His phrase is *"étoilé,"* which is rendered in the English translation as "starred"; this unfortunately suggests "marking" rather than the French connotation of a systematically spread out universe of stars (pp. 13–14). His goal is to avoid "assembling" the text, which leads him to statements like the following when speaking of sequential actions: "we shall not attempt to put them in any order." Barthes wishes to highlight "the plural meaning entangled" in actions (pp. 14–15). He contributes to a theory of the flashback precisely because in delineating five narrative codes he breaks with a simple story/plot polarity and provides a more multi-faceted view of narrative inscription, reference, and signification. Barthes's analysis highlights other functions that we might consider for the flashback besides that of affecting order, and allows us to consider temporality itself as more multiple.

A linear, causal temporality is implicit in the proairetic code, or the code of actions as it can be called. This linear sequence of cause and effect forms a hypothetical logic, a kind of assumed background against which narrative events unfold. It is based on a sense of the "way things work in the real world," from the way a street is crossed to what happens when an engine fails on a plane. It borrows heavily from the physical properties of existence and movement in time and space, what might be called the "laws of nature." This logic of time and space is ultimately what helps the viewer to distinguish a flashback from a purely imaginary sequence or an arbitrary narrative disruption. The abstract logic of a hypothetical time-line of events is a necessary prerequisite to understanding a narrative in which any elements are left out or told in an altered chronology. We acquire this abstract logic initially by experiencing chronologies both as observers of the world and as consumers of chronologically narrated tales. This learned expectation which develops as our abstract logic for understanding stories can be referred to indirectly and differentially by the achronological tale, the fantastic or the absurd story. If the logic of narrative is set up against the physical properties of the world as we know it, the play of narrative is as departure and deviation.

Many kinds of flashbacks are, in addition, hermeneutically determined. The hermeneutic code, or code of enigmas, is one way in which narrative organizes the exposition of events so as to keep interest invested in a posed question, the answer to which is delayed. Barthes sees it as the code most intimately entwined with the proairetic code; in his section called, "The Full Score," he develops an analogy to musical composition that implies a hierarchy of relations amongst the codes, with the proairetic and the hermeneutic forming a combined flow that sustains the more flashy and disjunct flourishes of the other three codes (pp. 28–30).

Some flashbacks directly involve a quest for the answer to an enigma posed in the beginning of a narrative through a return to the past. The frame-tale which opens with a consequence, such as murder, the erection of a monument, etc., and then flashes back to tell how or why this event came to be, is one example. Another is the narrative which employs a flashback just prior to the climatic revelation of the enigma, to provide a missing aspect of the enigma. Other narratives use a series of

flashbacks to develop an enigma and delay its resolution before reaching the final flashback of revelation, or conversely, revealing the solution to the enigma by other means.

Flashbacks can also be important sources of association of a character or place with certain connotations, a process Barthes calls the semic code. By suddenly presenting the past, flashbacks can abruptly offer new meanings connected to any person, place, or object. Flashbacks then gain a particularly rich dimension in the coding of the psychology of character, and because their evidence is the past, they immediately imply a psychoanalytic dimension of personality.

Flashbacks can be devoted to citing historical and scientific knowledge of the culture within fiction, Barthes's referential code. As we shall see in the course of the analyses of specific films, flashbacks sometimes are the primary sites for fixing referential meaning in texts which otherwise evade direct references to history. They become a means for developing an ideology of history that colors the "eternal" or "timeless" connotations evoked by certain types of stories. This is why I have chosen the phrase "subjectivizing of history" to explore the function of flashbacks in creating specific ideologies of history.

Every flashback draws an antithesis between past and present, but there are various ways this antithesis can be animated within what Barthes calls the symbolic coding of the narrative, the code that constructs the textual play of power and desire. Subjective truths and the emotional charge of memory are often values associated with flashbacks. These charged sequences are inserted into the less individuated, more "objective" present unfolding of events, often combating and overturning a certain view of the law. Knowledge of the past is often presented as a privilege afforded by the fiction, access to which is transformative, but temporary and didactic. Nostalgia is a figure ambiguously attached to the flashback; the past is an object of desire, due to its personal, intense, and even liberating attributes, but it is also dangerous and frightening. Flashbacks in most cases terminate at precisely the point at which they must be sealed off, in which the imperatives of fixing interpretations and reaching judgments in the present must be imposed. Made aware of the past, the spectator is freed to forget it once again. This symbolic order vacillates between knowing and forgetting, the shifts determined by the positioning of the spectator within the structured operations of narrative temporality. The psychoanalytic dimensions of these symbolic narrative operations are indeed rich, and one of the goals of my analysis of flashbacks is to highlight these unconscious and disguised operations of films.

The Deconstruction of Fiction

The question of the psychoanalytic dimensions of textuality brings us to the theoretical limits of the formalist and structuralist methodologies I've examined. Though they will prove extremely useful in developing a theory of the functioning of the flashback, they remain fixed on an analysis of how the structuration of a text

functions rather than the transformative implications of its process of structuring meanings. Another type of textual investigation termed "deconstruction," by Jacques Derrida (but practiced by others as well who do not necessarily employ this term), goes against the grain of the text's own weave of representation.[21] Rather than just analyzing elements or even the structures of a text, deconstruction allows us to see the structuring of the text as itself a configuration. In a sense, deconstruction follows from the structural perspective, but also follows through, beyond its points of departure and its goals, into the realm of an analysis of philosophical configurations.

For example, consider the way in which Barthes analyses in *S/Z* the "truth" of the fiction molded by hermeneutic code, the "truths" the text cites in its referential code, and the "natural" logic of the proairetic code. Deconstruction puts a sharper edge on these various ways of slicing through the truth values assigned by a text to itself and its implicit philosophical discourse. Deconstruction's debt in regard to the decentering of truth to the writings of Nietzsche is another reason why it is particularly useful for this study—specifically in chapter five—as Nietzsche's writings discuss the figures of repetition and fate that the flashback, particularly during the forties, presents.

The quotes surrounding the "true" and the "natural" are one way of granting a questioning force to the inscription of these terms that will not allow their use to conform with an ideal reality. Derrida substitutes another mark, that indicates an erasure that retains the trace, an X crossing out the representation of truth to indicate the double energy of a deconstructive mode that allows one never to fix on what is present nor on what is absent, but inscribes the conflict between the opposition present/absent in the realm of representation. This conflict is deeply embedded in the functioning of language itself. Psychoanalysis was able to indicate certain figures in dream representation and in parapraxis that presented a limited model for a deconstructive reading. Marxist analysis of ideology also contributed to an understanding of significant absences and figural representations within discourse.[22] However, both psychoanalysis and Marxism have their own borders through which they frame truths. Deconstruction attempts, in its shifting energies to show frames rather than to construct them, and in showing them to permeate these structures of thought.

Deconstruction, for this reason is complex and threatening. Some dismiss it, some simplify or deform it to their own ends; unfortunately its proposals can easily be downshifted to a return to absolute formalism, a mechanical description of the form of representational tropes. However, in the writings of the most vibrant deconstructive analysts, there is always more at stake. Form is not reinforced, but divided and multiplied in an investigation that allows this division and multiplication to affect the process of textual analysis.

For an investigation of the flashback, this has significant consequences: inherent in the flashback as trope is a certain assumption of temporality and order. The very term "chronological" implies an implicit clockwork logic to events. Our notion of duration is in this context something measurable and absolute. Yet, we know that it is also possible for events to cease to be discrete and for duration to be differentially

measured or entirely called into question. In these instances we begin to see how the notion of chronology is marked as a culturally determined means of representation. The camera and projector, like the printed pages of a book before it, imply a certain temporality, an unfolding that other representational apparati do not. Perhaps the film does so even more than the book, whose pages can more easily be turned in various orders against the flow of the printing; but this is more of a physical difference than a theoretical one, for all it takes is a multiple video display bank to project a film as the disordered sum of its temporal units. The point is that in traditional practice, we have a very fixed frame through which we read and watch films. All inversions of temporality that occur within their representations are framed by this assumed clockwork mechanism and measured against it. If structuralism maps the ordering of texts, deconstruction allows us to see the view of the world implicit in the design of the map itself.

The aim of this book is to perform both types of analysis in an interactive relation. From moment to moment, chapter to chapter, shifts of focus will necessarily occur. It is at these junctures that one can see the importance of several different types of analysis, as one perspective lays the groundwork for another or opens inquiries outside the frame of the other methods.

"Tense" of the Image and Cinematic Temporality

So far in developing a theory of the flashback, I have been reviewing relevant theories of narrative structuring whose reference is literature. Equally relevant is the concept of temporality as expressed in images and the way in which verbal commentary that may accompany them affects this image temporality.

Many theorists of photography have remarked on the evidential quality of photography, the manner in which it appears to bear witness to the scenes it depicts. The viewer often interprets a photo as documenting fragments of the real world. André Bazin, for one, championed this indexical aspect of the photographic sign, assigning an ontological status to photography's ability to imprint a mimetic image of a perceived reality. Bazin extended this ability to "mummify" the world, to capture and preserve it as "it really was" to the cinematic image.[23] Roland Barthes borrows from Bazin's phenomenological approach to the photograph, contending that photos provide evidence that what we see imaged within them once existed. Barthes says the photo implies the "having been there" of the scene or objects depicted; according to Barthes, its assumed tense is the past.[24]

Cinema's ability to display motion in time is seen by Bazin, as it was by many earlier film theorists, as in addition to the realist vocation of photography. This establishes film as an even more powerful medium of realism than photography. Bazin championed putting this realist capacity to the service of filmic fiction as a means of creating stories that closely described a perceived reality. According to Barthes, however, cinema partakes of a different implied temporality; on one level, the cinema implies the same past tense as the photograph, presenting "the having

been there" of the actors. However, the fictional functioning of film presents what Barthes calls another "pose," effacing this indication of the past existence of the referent in favor of a presence of a character within the ongoing present of the story, that is, the impression of an imaginary reality (pp. 122–26). Of course, the cinema that Barthes is considering is the fiction film rather than other types of film, such as archival documentary footage and home movies.

Some documentary footage is understood by its spectators in much the same way as is archival photography, as a document of a reality that once existed at the moment the images were taken. However, when incorporated into a documentary film such archival footage can be introduced into a narration that incorporates a nearly fictional presentation, as it strives to transport the spectator to another scene, another time. The "nearly present" is an important mode for documentary films that chronicle current events, with the simultaneous broadcast capacity of television striving to make the image "live" and therefore a present reality. Home movies have much the same status as family photographs as regards this question of temporal reference; they offer an image of the past of the individuals and places depicted and are understood as records of this past in much the same way as the photo album has become the archive of the family. The response to such images can vary from one which understands their pastness, to one that relives the past as part of an ongoing present, positions marked respectively by such verbal responses as "there was X when he was a baby," and "there is X swimming."

If documentary modes of filmic representation can indicate a definitive past, even if in some instances they edge towards the present, what of the temporality of the image within the fiction film? Barthes's formulation of the different temporal understanding of photographic and cinematic images coincides with a certain widely held belief that cinema is understood in the present tense. One supporting argument for this belief, in fact, involves flashbacks. The argument claims that within a given flashback segment, the spectator experiences the film in exactly the same way that one experiences any other segment of a fiction film, as an ongoing series of events happening to the characters in their immediate temporal experience, that is their "present." As this type of statement is most often made in the context of a comparison of literary and filmic modes of narration, the contrast is drawn between the variety of tenses available to the writer of literature and the singularity of tense available in cinema. Literature can qualify its mode of narration, while cinema simply presents actions. This position holds that beyond the initial entrance into and exit from a flashback, the spectator has no temporal markings of anteriority for the events depicted, and should a spectator begin watching the film in the middle of the flashback, he or she would never know that the flashback segments were actually meant to depict the past.

Such arguments ignore the way a filmic text codes its temporality. First it does so as a product of its diachronic unfolding; segments are defined temporally in relation to what preceded or what will follow them. Secondly, the temporal reference of a filmic segment is defined by a complex combination of visual and auditory

indications, which can include: voice-over narration, filmic punctuations such as dissolves, changes in image qualities such as color to black and white, changes in elements of mise-en-scene such as costumes indicating an earlier time period or make-up differences that indicate younger periods in a character's life, and changes in non-diegetic music. This does not mean that the filmic image has the semantic fluidity and precision of verbal expression when it comes to articulating temporal references; language provides a subtle delineation of different modalities of temporal reference that are only available to film through the use of language either in the form of voice-over or written intertitles or subtitles. The history of the flashback in film, however, constitutes just this struggle to code a cinematic past.

Finally, a remark on the assumption that it is the equivalent of a present-tense narration that is created by filmic fictions as part of the impression of an imaginary reality; even films whose fiction creates an ongoing present for its characters are not necessarily received by its viewers entirely within this imaginary frame. Sometimes spectators maintain their distance and experience the narrative as a story that is being narrated, as a story from a past or from another scene to which they do not have an unmediated access. This distance may be encouraged by the film by internal distancing devices of several kinds, such as voice-over narration, stylized mise-en-scene, or the foregrounding of historical references. Some film narratives acquire through these means a sense of a past-tense narration which is somewhat analogous to the distancing modalities of the past-tense in literary discourse. Similarly, a "painterly" or "theatrical" mise-en-scene operates differently from images whose mise-en-scene is in a realistic mode. Bazin and Barthes tend to assume a style of photographic image that utilizes codes of analogy that have come to be phenomenologically invisible. It is for this reason that Barthes makes such a strong distinction between looking at a photograph and looking at a drawing, a distinction that is no longer appropriate for pictorial photography, for example, any more than it is appropriate for German expressionist film.

Fiction film, then, has many ways to develop temporalities through which the cinematic image can be understood. More complicated flashback structures tend to emphasize the means by which film presents its fiction. The imaginary entrance into a present reality is provided, but the spectator is made aware of the threshold and the process of transversing it. The spectator in this case is acutely aware of the filmic fiction as a story-being-told. Multiple flashbacks, embedded flashbacks, abrupt modernist flashbacks can make spectators more aware of the modalities of filmic fiction, of the processes of narrative itself. These manipulations of narrative temporality can serve to self-consciously expose the mechanisms of filmic narration, the artifice through which time becomes an expressive element of narrative form. However, various techniques simultaneously can be used to naturalize these temporal manipulations, such as locating them in the psyche or the storytelling capacity of a character within the fiction. A spectator then is suspended between two different ways of looking at temporal manipulations within filmic imagery, one that is aware

of the formal operations of narrative and one that forgets these elements due to naturalizing processes within th fiction.

Ideologies of Narration, Temporality, and History

This split between knowledge and forgetfulness through which the flashback operates within filmic fiction is similar to the more general split belief system that operates in fiction's formulation of the "impression of reality" as it has been described by Christian Metz.[25] One knows that one is watching a film, but one believes, even so, that it is an imaginary reality. The difference I am pointing out here is that the flashback structure tends to override this split constituting the impression of reality with a second level rearticulating a similar conflict of beliefs. On this level, the spectator is again presented with a duality, and this time the balance often tilts towards a knowledge of structure, an awareness of the process of telling stories about the past. This may be a reason flashback structures are negatively received as too artificial and as slowing the action by many critics, some filmmakers, and undoubtedly other people as well.[26] They have a potential for disturbing a participatory viewing of a film and encouraging a greater intellectual distance, although, again, the countervailing forces that naturalize the flashbacks as personal memories can produce just the opposite effect—no emotional distance, extreme identification.

It is in this context that we can explore the ideological implications of the flashback as a framing device for stories and for representation of history within these stories. For if the flashback presents a narrative past, this past often refers to an historical past. The rendering of this historical past is colored by both the general processes of fictional transformation, and by the specific framing and focalization of this fictional version of the historical past as a flashback. In chapter four, I will explore this process of framing and focalization as it was used in Hollywood sound films through the mid-fifties, for this is a period in which several genres of American films specifically address history, the individual as a part of a social group, the relationships between historical periods and between biography and history. However, virtually all the films discussed in this book engage in framing and focalizing historical elements through the flashback, so that the manner in which the flashback subjectivates history will be a concern throughout.

One of the ideological implications of this narration of history through a subjective focalization is to create history as an essentially individual and emotional experience. Another is to establish a certain view of historical causality and linkage. By presenting the result before the cause, a logic of inevitability is implied; certain types of events are shown to have certain types of results without ever allowing for other outcomes than the one given in advance. Many flashback narrations contain an element of philosophical fatalism, coupled with a psychoanalytic fatalism I will discuss shortly. This fatalism presents a cynical view of history cyclical, guaranteed to repeat that which we have already seen; the release from the repetitions inherent

in history is then forged in a singular solution that serves a prevailing ideology, such as patriotic identification or a retreat into the "personal" as a microcosmic, idealized world. Further, the history narrated in flashback is often a didactic history, containing moral lessons. The lessons vary from one historical period or location to another, which is one of the reasons it is useful to organize this study in historical periods. Considering the nationality of production is another means of analyzing differences in the lessons about history that flashbacks try to teach.

However, it is possible in a more modernist and experimental reinscription of history in the flashback to call all these ideological implications into question. In these cases, changes in the form of the flashback and the voice-over narration can not only reorient the stated ideology but question the ideological processes of making and telling histories.

Psychoanalytic Implications of the Flashback

In psychoanalysis, the case history and the "cure" is a process through which the patient retells the past and deciphers dreams that are in many ways reworkings of this personal past history. The analyst hears the many versions and symbolic representations of this story and in a sense becomes an accomplice in determining the form of its unfolding.

Flashbacks in film often parallel this operation as they present a past, like a dream, waiting to be interpreted. Sometimes the psychoanalytic analogy is directly taken up by the fiction with the flashback narrative becoming the story of the patient in analysis, as is the case in the twenties with G.W. Pabst's *Secrets of the Soul* (1926) and in the forties with Curtis Bernhardt's *Possessed* (1947), two examples among others I will not discuss in this book. More often, the psychoanalytic analogy is indirect; there is no analyst within fiction listening to the flashback narration. Even so the spectator can "hear" the flashback from the position of the analyst, which includes the possibilty of identification with the narrator of the flashback. The flashback invites this analytic reception, as it is offered as an explanation from the past for the situation in the present. However, when the texts themselves indicate a Freudian reading of the flashback material, they often utilize a simplified and determinist version of psychoanalysis, for example, the "popularized Freud" that combines interpretations by both American psychoanalysts and the mass media. This version of Freud often manifests a dark, fatalistic view of the human psyche when given expression in fiction. In flashback film, as we shall see in chapter five, implicitly psychoanalytic character portraits abound in American films of the forties and fifties. The pseudo-scientific principles of popular Freudianism can serve this tendency in genres such as the form of melodrama known as the women's film and the *film noir* . Part of our concern will be with examining how psychoanalysis is inscribed in these flashback narratives both directly and implicitly.

We need to consider the psychoanalytic theory on another level as well in building