

The voice-over and flashback as narrative devices in *Double Indemnity* and *Pulp Fiction*.

To claim that the voice-over is characteristic is to mark it as an instrument, as well as assume that it has become something which *noir* is reminiscent of. By identifying it as a narrative strategy of *noir*, Telotte is arguing that it is the foundation of, or at least contributes to the main storyline, along the way enhancing the strangeness, violence, and eroticism which is characteristic of the tone (Borde 1955: 17). Although the voice-over usually introduces and accompanies a flashback (Telotte 1985: 14), a flashback sequence may occur without a voice-over. By analysing the flashback as a narrative device, I will also attempt to question the boundaries of the voice-over and show how its purposes are closely intertwined with those of the flashback when it is present. The most obvious use of the flashback is to act as a segment of the narrative itself. Stripped of all intents, it can be seen as a mere puzzle piece in a greater picture, regardless of whether the picture is complete or not. Sequentially, a flashback represents a disruption in a linear timeline, however the nature of the flashback itself is still linear in nature; both a timeline within a timeline, and a timeline in itself. Hence, the flashback may be scrutinized as a standalone scene, as well as in relation to the overall plot. Two films which rely heavily on this device are *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) and *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), both utilizing it in stylistically different ways and showing its flexibility, thus enabling a more complex and extensive analysis.

In film, the flashback as a device may be considered an ambiguous focalisation, providing a “multiplicity of vantage points” both external and internal, used to express subjectivity to great effect (Deleyto 1991: 167-8). Superimposition, according to Deleyto, is an internal focalisation which is used to give the viewer access to a character’s thoughts and mindset (ibid.); a definition harmonious with Telotte’s argument that the voice-over technique gives “telling access” to the inner workings of a character’s mind, delving into areas where desire and repression battle each other in search of a resolution (1994: 15). In *Double Indemnity*, a ‘present time’ is the point from which the voice-over is provided. The main character Walter Neff narrates events in a sequential fashion, giving the impression of two alternating but sequential timelines. In this case, the voice-over is an introduction to a prior sequence of events, and also the thread which strings them together, running through them in order to provide an overall subjectivity from Neff’s point of view.

NEFF:

I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it. I don't like the

word confession. I just want to set you right about one thing you couldn't see, because it was smack up against your nose.

These lines in particular serve a variety of purposes. Accompanied by the portrayal of a man who seems to be critically injured, they provide a “frame” for past events which are already known to the narrator, lending tension to the mood (Telotte 1989: 40) and setting a *noir*-ish atmosphere of fatalism, paranoia and despair through the use of elliptical dialogue (Place 1996: 65). A dichotomy of desire and repression has been set up; the desire to set things “straight” while denying what the narration itself is in essence – a confession. The lines also lead up to the first of the flashbacks, driving the present timeline forward while ensuring a seamless transference in the subjectivity, the tone which has been established, and the themes of desire/repression due to the words having taken “possession” of all that is seen, assuming the viewer’s acceptance that all events it describes bears the influence of the narrator’s voice (Telotte 1989: 41).

The switches in timeline are not jarring in the least; the voice-over as an introduction prepares the viewer for the actual flashback, such that it becomes something that is anticipated rather than surprising. The eventual alternation in timelines may, on the surface, appear to fragment the narrative, but in actuality it is constructing an unbreakable bond between past and present, forming a coherence of action and consequence. In terms of the stream of consciousness, with Neff relating past incidents and also directly addressing Keyes, the alternation makes sense. Grainge mentions a possible approach to memory in film, positing that memory may serve as the locus of the narrative, while film is the site of it (Grainge 2003: 12). Lacan, according to Bruno, considers the experience of temporality an effect of language, causing temporal relativity to be subservient to a linguistic order (1987: 70). The true nature of the flashbacks in *Double Indemnity* are Walter Neff’s memory, and with the intended receiver (Keyes) as a cover, we are simply being given access to it, privileged information which he chooses to divulge at his own digression through means which are wholly digetic and verbal. Thus we are at its mercy and must submit to it. The flashbacks which occur contain breaks in the past timeline. Despite Neff’s supposed honesty, he is essentially a murderer, and the idea that there may be more than meets the eye (or ear) heightens his moral ambiguity, enhancing his characterization as the typical *noir* hero.

Pulp Fiction, in comparison, appears to utilise the flashback in a wholly different manner. Indeed, the extent to which the flashback has been utilized as a device is questionable. The film is composed of seven separate sections, all of them interconnected and some of them overlapping, in some cases containing the same scene but shot from a different point of view. Each segment is even

given its own title, as though inviting the viewer to consider and analyse them separately. Unlike in *Double Indemnity*, there is no obvious ‘present timeline’ from which an all-seeing narrator has situated himself, nor do any of the events presented occur in sequential order. Despite this, the effect on the narrative is similar: making it “circuitous and convoluted as the most devious *noir* liar” as Hirsch describes the typical *noir* narrative (Telotte 1989: 42). However, much more than convolution, the fragmentation seeks to emphasize a duality in certain characters, giving them more depth and allowing the viewer to feel sympathy for them when the antagonist becomes the victimized. Without the knowledge of how he acquired the watch, Butch would just seem irrationally obsessive; without Jules’ moments of self-reflection, he would just be yet another cold-hearted villain with a penchant for the dramatic. The placement of the scene of Vincent’s death prior to a scene in which he is still alive lends the air of an impending doom to the latter. The disorder of linearity is a manipulation of the viewer’s emotions, echoing the manipulative tendencies of the *noir femme fatale* and her command of allure, violence, and anxiety (Johnston 1980: 105).

While analysing the flashback in *Pulp Fiction*, one must be sure that they are indeed flashbacks which are being viewed, and thus we turn to a clue which has been made subtle and given a disguise – the voice-over. On the surface, most scenes appear objective, encompassing multiple points of view from both characters and third-person while remaining steadfastly centred around the activities of one or two people. However, there are occasionally subtle shifts which introduce a superimposition in the form of music, accompanied by lyrics – words which may be seen to function as internal dialogue and provide insight to a character’s inner conflict. Comparing a film’s soundtrack to actual narration is not a stretch; both are elements which reside on an ‘aural track’, and are conveyed by the ‘image-maker’: the visual track (Kozloff 1988: 45). In the scene where Vincent waits for Mia in her living room, the song ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ by Dusty Springfield begins to play. Shots of both Vincent and Mia are intercut as the music plays:

Being good isn't always easy,
No matter how hard I tried,
When he started sweet talking to me,
he'd come tell me everything is alright,
he'd kiss and tell me everything is alright,
Can I get away again tonight?

Subjectivity has been introduced to the scene, with the lyrics of the song apparently paralleling Mia’s command over Vincent, more so because it is later revealed that the music has a place in the

diagetic world, existing as a record which Mia herself has chosen to play. The lyrics are a trigger, but the trigger is hidden further along the timeline when it becomes more obvious that Mia is trying to seduce Vincent, and this would cause a flashback to the current scene on the part of the viewer. The subjectivity provided by the introduction of the superimposed music remains even though we see things from various points of view. Regardless of who the intended receiver of this information is (Vincent, the viewers, or both), a character's hidden intentions and desires have been exposed by her own hand, equating the power of such an action with that of the delivery of a voice-over narration. More importantly, such a technique introduces the concept of self-reflectivity to the film, a concept rather characteristic of *noir*, and certainly present in *Double Indemnity* as well.

The definition of self-reflectivity is an introspection, a self-conscious contemplation of self which involves examining one's own thoughts and feelings ("Introspection"). As a concept, it is concerned with the "rhetoric" of the postmodern, a word used in this context to describe the reflective act which is the bridge between textual consciousness and influence (Baker 1990: 241). In *Pulp Fiction*, an example of the tendency towards self-reflection is seen in Jules' revision of the biblical passage he has memorized. In the final scene, he refers back to the first in which he recites the exact same passage, admitting that at that point in time, it was "just a cold-blooded thing to say" before killing someone. While not a voice-over per se, in this case, the biblical passage acts as a cue for us to recall that first scene. The passage is a verbal acknowledging that it has influence on the current scene, inviting the viewer to indulge in a 'flashback' of their own. With both a 'past' and a 'present', we are able to see how the mindset and motivations of a character have changed due to his questioning and realignment of self. For this pair of scenes, a thread which links them in terms of rhetoric exists. Hence, the scene in which the self-reflection occurs may be taken to be a vantage point, clearly marking the earlier one as a flashback as well as showing development in the narrative.

This method of drawing attention to a flashback is similar to the one used in *Double Indemnity*. As mentioned earlier, the experience of temporality is dependent on language (Bruno 1987: 70). The narrative structure of *Pulp Fiction* may not be linear in any sense, but it is the self-awareness of certain words which give them the sense of linearity, enabling the viewer to easily identify the alternations in various sets of incidents and be able to tell when one is marked as a flashback of another. Another example of this is Butch's rhetorical questioning of Fabian in the sequence aptly titled 'The Gold Watch'.

BUTCH:

You know what my father went through to get me that watch? ...I don't wanna get into it right now... but he went through a lot.

His words cause the viewer to recall the previous scene – his flashback to his childhood, when he was told about the history of the watch. Diagetically, Butch carries an awareness which is the fuel for his motivations. Non-diagetically, the viewers have been given an awareness of his awareness, allowing us to feel sympathy for him and share his anxiety when he realizes that it has been forgotten. It is this self-awareness of one's own motivations which drives the narrative that is characteristic of classical *noir* style: paradoxical and mindful of its own manipulations (Telotte 1989: 32).

‘Temporal cohesion’ in terms of computer science refers to parts of a module being grouped by the time at which they are processed, with the parts being processed at a particular time in the execution of a program. In other words, a trigger is required for the parts to be processed (“Cohesion”). Applying the definition to film, it would refer to scenes in a film being grouped by their temporal relations, grouped by their positions in a certain timeline, whichever one is applicable to the moment that it is needed. In this case, the ‘trigger’ is language itself, transporting us back and forth between different timelines. In films which contain numerous flashbacks, temporal cohesion plays an important part in ensuring that the narrative can be understood in a linear fashion despite being presented in a non-linear manner.

In both *Double Indemnity* and *Pulp Fiction*, the flashback’s effect on temporal cohesion is to force access to earlier events in a timeline to be given, and hand to the viewer insight into a character’s subjective reasoning in connection with the occurrence of ‘future’ events in the film. In a way, the effect of the flashback itself is the creation of a history, whether taking the form of a character’s memory, or existing as a self-contained narrative event centred on a single character. With this, the narrative is also able to “insert some significant information from the past or set up a context for present events”. Without the flashback, temporal cohesion would have no need for existence, as it would mean that all scenes or events have been ordered sequentially, eliminating the need to go back in time and experience a past which has already happened.

Filmography

Double Indemnity, Billy Wilder, 1944

Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino, 1994

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