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REEL RECOLLECTION

Notes on the cinematic depiction of memory

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REEL RECOLLECTION

**“Memories! You’re talking
about *memories!*”**

Rick Deckard, in *Blade Runner* (1978)

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The impact of troubling memories has always been a staple of movie melodrama, including a spate of contemporary films about adult survivors of child abuse who recover their mental health by retrieving past traumas in therapy. On a broader scale, genres diverse as the epic, western, comedy, war and weird movie have been pervaded by memories and the depiction of remembrance since the early silent era.

Reel recollection would seem a transparent enough business. Rick Blaine sits in his empty nightclub, plunged into boozy despair after encountering the supposedly faithless Ilsa Lund again. He commands Sam — “You played it for her...now, play it for me...”, and a dissolve magically sweeps the viewer back to Rick’s affair with Ilsa in pre-war Paris. In a model of compressed exposition, a self-contained, utterly plausible world is brought to vibrant life for a few minutes, against *Casablanca’s* (1943) larger canvas. The miniature melodrama concludes as Rick stands at the train station, desolated by his love’s inexplicable last letter. Rain blurs the page: Ilsa’s words seem to melt in a shower of falling tears as the scene fades. One is then whisked as effortlessly to the *Cafe Americain*, where “today’s” Ilsa stands in the doorway. A satisfying sense of closure — “And that’s the way it was...” attends the flashback’s return to the way it is.

The sequence goes down easy as oysters. Yet, upon reflection, could Rick’s retina actually have camcordered the flashback’s myriad sights and sounds? That he saw Ilsa wearing blue, heard the cannons pounding, one can easily imagine. But could he have taken in every detail of the elegant supper club seen by the viewer, or the panorama receding behind him and Ilsa as they tour through Paris, totally absorbed in each other’s company?

Was Rick’s original take on the flashback’s events so exquisitely framed and lighted? As he remembers Paris, does Rick actually hear the melody of “As Time Goes

By” play in his mind, taken up by Max Steiner’s lush score, its apt modulations smoothing the viewer’s path into and out of the flashback? Was there actually so little time between the successive announcements over the loudspeaker outside Frenchy’s bistro, between the mellifluous declaration of the enemy advance in unaccented English and the harsh German barking out the terms of occupation? Did the timbre of these voices so adroitly reflect and counterpoise urbane humanism against fascist repression?

Beneath the deceptively seamless surface of Rick’s remembrance lie a host of far from simple, even paradoxical technical effects, ideological assumptions, and aesthetic operations. Indeed, the very existence of cinema involves a primal paradox: *every* movie moment represents a memory uncertainly preserved, whether upon nitrate film stock or digitally encoded; a perennial “presence” in the midst of perpetual absence, rendered even more uncanny, more poignant if its participants have themselves vanished from the scene.

This paper proposes to overview and interrogate the salient aspects of screen memory — including the celluloid depiction of traumatic remembrance. A voluminous psychological literature on the clinical, neurobiological, and existential aspects of memory contains only a few passing references to its cinematic representation. Surprisingly, film scholarship also has had little to say on the subject before Maureen Turim’s *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*¹ — and little substantive afterwards.

Turim authoritatively demonstrates that flashbacks are central to the production and comprehension of screen memory. Her study is exemplary for its supple, undogmatic articulation of psychoanalysis with other paradigms — formalism, structuralism and post-structuralism, theories of culture and ideology, philosophy and science of memory. We will frequently recur to this seminal work, and use her formulations as a touchstone for further speculation.

Since Hugo Munsterberg’s landmark research at the beginning of the century,² psychologists and film scholars alike have frequently been tempted into drawing too convenient analogies between real and reel memory. A capacity for recollection serves complex purposes for individual and species. From a narrow Darwinian perspective, *homo sapiens* remembers in order to

survive. Memory permits construction of a coherent life narrative; an archive of past experience enhances the ability to make useful decisions about the future, whether one is trying to avoid an oncoming truck or chose a mate.³

By comparison the Hollywood film-making practice which still prevails puts memory at the service of facilitating narrative *sui generis* — efficiently telling the tale towards the consumer's better pleasure and the producer's larger profits. It is the survival of the industry, not of the species, at stake here.

Certainly cinema can instruct and enlighten — even profoundly so. Viewers may be helpfully or misguidedly tutored on every life issue imaginable. But the highest premium of most mainstream moviemakers remains the presentation of an uncluttered, compelling story line. In this context, considerable oversimplification and distortion of memory processes must necessarily occur.

Precursors of screen memory

Oral and written equivalents of the flashback are encountered across time and culture in efforts diverse as Homer and Lady Murasaki's striking account of medieval Japanese court life, *The Tale of Genji*.⁴ As the Western novel evolved, its heroes and heroines were increasingly prone to vivid remembrance spurred by melodramatic circumstances in the fictive present.

Commencing in the late eighteenth century, explanatory or revelatory flashbacks came to pervade fiction high and low ranging from penny-dreadful Gothics and romances, to the infinitely more artful tales of Dickens, to the psychologically oriented novels of James and Conrad. As the movie cameras began to roll at the *fin-de-siecle*, Proust was writing his remarkable obsessive inventory of the past. In time, the cinematic flashback itself would influence the literary practice of Joyce, Dos Passos, and Hemingway, as well as the avant-garde plays of O'Neill and Rice.

The declaimed remembrance of past events by a participant, witness, or impersonal narrator has been a prominent feature of world theater for several millennia, from Attic tragedy to the Kabuki stage. Under

the sway of the novel's conventions, with sophisticated new stage technology such as gaslighting at hand, nineteenth-century theater evolved strategies for exhibiting internal mental processes — memories, fantasied wishes or impulses, dreams, hallucinations — which by all accounts resembled the modern flashback. John Fell's study of nineteenth century dramatic and related practice⁵ indicates that the line between fantasy and actual memory was often considerably blurred.

In the common theatrical "vision scene" of the period, a character's reveries or recollections were enacted upon a different part of the stage, frequently behind a scrim. The "second stage" was located well behind the site of the principal action, or upon a platform elevated above it. At the appropriate moments the gaslights were brought up on the vision scene, then down again. The primary scene was sometimes, but by no means always dimmed and brightened according to the subsidiary scene's appearance and disappearance.

Fell believes that vision scenes evolved earlier in the nineteenth century from another popular, quasi-theatrical entertainment — the lantern-slide show. At the appropriate moment of narrated fantasy or recollection, a relevant slide was projected by a second machine, so as to appear in the midst of the main action.⁶ It was usually inserted into a space contiguous to the character: the "vision" was commonly located to the right and slightly above the protagonist — a locution often encountered in the cartoon strip and comic book representation of reverie or memory.

Establishing the paradigm: constituents and elaborations

Many early filmmakers were knowledgeable about the stagecraft or lantern show techniques described above. They were quick to adapt these cinema-like theatrical strategies and extra-theatrical devices to the new medium. A viewer of today often finds it difficult to determine whether early cinematic analogues to the "vision scene" represent a dream, a fantasy, or an actual memory. It is moot whether audiences of the time experienced similar

confusion.

The sense of temporality is also occasionally obscure in portions of early film strips which seem to be depicting remembrance: it is uncertain whether one is watching a memory, or an action occurring elsewhere within the filmic "present".⁷ Such ambiguity disappeared as a cinematic vocabulary adequate to the task of inscribing memory was rapidly refined. By 1914, the essentials of flashback practice had been established in Hollywood productions, and thereafter quickly spread abroad or were developed elsewhere *de novo*.

The essential flashback emerges out of a protagonist's encounter with a psychologically overdetermined event, person, or object. Recollection may be conscious or spontaneous. Typical cues indicating a flashback is about to occur include a close-up of the protagonist's face evincing a thoughtful attitude, a "dreaminess" in the film score, and the beginning of voice-over narration.

A portal next opens into the past for a variable time, commonly spurred by a sight and/or sound connected to the engendering stimulus.⁸ The protagonist may or — less frequently — may not be seen in the flashback segment. The portal is then closed; one is returned to the filmic present and the character's reaction to the evoked memory through reflection and/or action. Standard flashback form and content were immediately subject to substantive experiments dictated by advances in technology, varying narrative demands of popular genres, and specific script requirements. Developments which were pleasurable to watch and made sound narrative sense were quickly incorporated into the rhetoric of mainstream cinema — a revisionary practice which still continues. Many major flashback elaborations were already securely in place by 1918.

The importance of narrative efficiency did not preclude aesthetic considerations from playing a crucial role in the flashback's evolution. Great pride was taken throughout the studio system in wedding art to commerce. The system allowed for a certain amount of experimentation for its own sake. Inevitably, however, the most radical revisions of standard flashback rhetoric would take place outside the system, in art and avant-garde cinema — of which more presently.

We now turn to the most significant flashback parameters, and their common elaborations.

Flashback duration and the “Memory Effect”

The flashback’s depiction of the past collides with another fundamental paradox of cinema — its perennial present tense. Whether the movie is set today, in 1789 or 2001, viewers quickly settle into its time frame, experiencing the scene in an unquestioned here and now. A Coleridgian willing suspension of disbelief may persuade one about a fictional reality, if its crafting on page or stage is sufficiently convincing. Cinema possesses exceptionally impressive powers towards these ends.

It is far from clear how a movie is able to construct an abiding sense of “presentness” as it unrolls, so that one seems to equably inhabit both its time and one’s own. The effect is not merely dependent upon cinema’s vast technological and financial resources, for even a pedestrian cheapie can sometimes strongly assert its present register. The ability to promote a feeling of presentness seems to reside within what has been termed the cinematic apparatus, in some general property or working of the medium upon its audience.⁹

One such operation is the effacement of the apparatus’ artifices of operation. According to Daniel Dayan, the movie viewer is enfolded into the film’s net through “suturing” strategies like the shot/reverse shot,¹⁰ such that “one appears somehow to create the movie within one’s head as the projector unspools.”¹¹ Christian Metz implies that the overwhelming impression of cinematic here and nowness is related to the viewer’s consuming identification with the camera, in turn “*with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of the perceived, and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every there is...*”¹²

Arguing intricately from the perspective of Lacanian analytic theory, Metz asserts that the peculiar presence of the cinematic image within a viewer’s Imaginary is paradoxically linked to the previously-cited primal *absence* that informs the medium. In this context, the viewer supposedly then yearns towards the screen’s “lost” plenitude, as the child within once desired the false plenitude of its own misapprehended image.¹³

A flashback threatens to rupture cinema's intense present register, violating the medium's native thrust towards temporal homeostasis. Should a flashback last too long, the sense of having travelled from "now" to "then" — the "remembering effect", as it were — will begin to fade as its peculiar alterity is vitiated.

A longer flashback thus risks reconstituting the very impression of the present it displaces to become a new "present within the past". Operating with the intuitive pragmatism which has always informed developments in film rhetoric, mainstream filmmakers have countered this potential by making most of their flashbacks last no longer than approximately five minutes.

A sanctioned exception is the film which intentionally creates a "present within the past". Its nominal present comprises a brief introduction to a central narrative which unfolds as a single flashback, or through a series of prolonged flashbacks. Examples are found in popular genres such as the war movie (*A Walk In The Sun*, 1945, the western (*Fort Apache*, 1948), the historical/biblical epic (*The Man Who Would Be King*, 1975, film noir (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1944), the woman's picture (*Letter From An Unknown Woman*, 1948), as well as the occasional art film (*Maria Montez*, 1955).

Pictures such as these may conclude within the "second" past, or return to the present for a tidy resolution of loose plot ends, with the advancement of some psychological/ideological perspective upon the entire narrative. The viewer enjoys the double benefits of being firmly sutured into a history of prior events, then awakening into the closure satisfaction of the return.

Flashbacks shorter than the standard were rare throughout the silent era, and relatively uncommon during the studio period. Brevity was probably discouraged because filmmakers worried that the resultant fragmentation and sparseness of information would disrupt the sacrosanct flow of narrative for viewers.

Brief incisions into the past, for a few seconds — sometimes barely subliminal — to a minute, have been increasing in mainstream American cinema since the Sixties and Seventies. Their greater frequency reflects an incorporation of innovative rhetorical strategies drawn from art and foreign cinema, a phenomenon which will be addressed later.

Modes of entering and exiting the flashback

A classic flashback such as that cited from *Casablanca* begins on a dissolve. The filmic present is faded down, a past locale is simultaneously brought up with a few seconds of visual and (sometimes) sonic overlap. When action at the site of remembrance ends, the film returns to the present on a similar dissolve in reverse, typically re-entering the filmic present at the precise point the "remembering" began. Less often, a fade-in/fade-out technique is used, with no interpenetration of past and present.

The impression of effortless entry and exit is facilitated by cunning symmetrical linkages between the flashback's "now and then" and "then and now." The viewer's insertion is enhanced by artful match cuts made upon character, action, object, and sound common to present and past scenes. A particularly powerful bridge effect is created by "bleeding" a musical theme from the filmic present into the flashback and out again, e.g. the use of David Raksin's haunting eponymous theme for *Laura* (1944) throughout the film.

An object which precipitates a flashback may re-appear unchanged in the past sequence, or may assist the segue's efficiency through metaphorical transformation. Thus, in *Citizen Kane* (1941), Orson Welles uses the whiteness of a page from banker Thatcher's memoirs (these are being read by the reporter in Thatcher's claustrophobic memorial vault) as a bridge into a winter scene from the hero's childhood. The page opens up into the exhilarating expanse of whiteness amidst which young Charlie romps gaily; simultaneously, inside a squalid cabin Mrs. Kane is delivering him to Thatcher's oppressive care over her husband's impotent protests. Images of freedom and confinement adroitly echo back and forth across the flashback, mediated by the originating page.

Revisions of formal devices for initiating and ending flashbacks may aim at disrupting the orderliness of the dissolve/redissolve schema towards a deliberately disquieting effect — as in cutting directly to and from the past without a dissolve to capture the abrupt intrusion of traumatic memories. Other strategies refuse the classic flashback's carefully designed

symmetry between present and past. Thus, the picaresque, playfully modernist quality of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) is enhanced by several flashbacks which do not return to the originating site, but resume instead at a completely different locale and a new present.

Subjective versus objective remembrance in the flashback

The development of the feature-length film during the silent era afforded filmmakers time to supplement an objective presentation of memory (objective according to the maker's notion of that objective reality) with memories saturated by internal perception. The viewer's impression of "what happened" could now be enriched by the character's account of "how I felt while it was happening."

One's awareness of a protagonist's subjective emotional state in a flashback is intimately bound up with the formal means of representing recall. When past events are enunciated in a fashion akin to the novel's third-person narration, memories appear to be occurring outside the protagonist's head. Thoughts and feelings must be then inferred from dialogue, as well as the actor's extra-verbal skills. The protagonist's psychological state during the flashback may also be clarified after the fact, through action and conversation after returning to the filmic present.

Autobiographical *voice-over narration* substantially enhances flashback subjectivity. The practice attained a high level of sophistication during the Forties, especially in *film noir* and *noir*-related genres (*vide infra*). An autobiographical voice-over is customarily granted substantive authority by the viewer to furnish an accurate description of the protagonist's inner life and external reality. Going against this grain, experimenters like Alfred Hitchcock and Akira Kurosawa have rendered the voice-over's supposedly reliable information suspect.

It is not unusual for an autobiographical, or another person's voice-over description of the past, whether of past emotions or occurrences, to be revealed as exaggerated, incomplete, or otherwise flawed later

in the film. Flashbacks containing a *conscious* fabrication by a supposedly reliable narrator are, however, rare.

A frequently-cited instance is *Stage Fright's* (1950) initial "lying" flashback, which provides an alibi to Hitchcock's charming villain for the murder which he is eventually shown to have committed. The viewer is lulled into believing him by the sequence's strong internal consistency, in turn due to its skillful means of enunciation, as well as its utterly plausible narration by an utterly treacherous psychopath.

Voice-overs of characters other than the chief protagonist frequently partake of the autobiographical voice-over's implicit authority. However, a different narrator may exhibit negative or positive bias towards the hero, or have faulty, incomplete knowledge of the past — a frequent device in the private eye and trial genres. A medley of voice-overs propels the narrative of *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954) with exceptional dramatic effectiveness: in extended flashbacks, the close friend, press agent, and husband of the murdered star, Maria Vargas, each offer tantalizing fragments about her ultimately enigmatic persona.

Analogous to the novel's third person narration, an anonymous voice-over flashback may only describe the external milieu, furnishing little or no information about a protagonist's intrapsychic life. On the other hand, it may provide an accurate, empathic account of the protagonist's emotions, or convey acute perceptions about the character's psyche from a distant, even glacial perspective (e.g., the somber third person narration of *Barry Lyndon* (1975)). Francois Truffaut's *oeuvre* is particularly hallmarked by voice-overs — anonymous or otherwise — which uniquely blend insight, compassion, and detached irony (in *Jules et Jim* (1961), *The Wild Child* (1969), *The Woman Next Door* (1981), so forth).

Subjective and objective flashbacks may be sharply differentiated, but the distinction is frequently blurred by the wealth of surrounding material insinuated into even the most subjective sequence. As noted, during Rick's intensely personal flashback to his love affair in pre-Occupation Paris, far more is going on around him than he would ever be capable of remembering. During extreme examples — Turim discovers these more often in silent than in sound features, notably in Griffith's films — flashback recollection seems to drift completely away from its source. Usually,

however, the drift is less spectacular — but it would still make for an uncanny, or glaringly inappropriate state of affairs were it not so artfully concealed.

Popular cinema's ubiquitous tendency to detach memory wholly or partially from its apparent agency raises crucial questions about the identity of a film's "rememberer", as well as the ends towards which remembrance is being shown (to an audience hungry for narrative and arguably not much concerned with such niceties). Who actually shapes a film's flashbacks and ideology? Is it the single controlling intelligence of a grand auteur, of an old studio mogul, contemporary producer, studio chief, or agent with maxi-clout? Or is it a creative team — the director, writer, photographer, editor, and others — inchoately incorporating, and expressing collective ideology? Or, finally, is it a unique conflation of creative and business personnel, each more or less influenced by the culture's collective mindset, exercising more or less influence over the product according to time, place, and film industry conditions?

Whoever the putative maker(s) behind screened memory may be, it is likely that subjective recall within a flashback is enriched with objective elements mainly to enhance the film's aesthetic pleasure and narrative effectiveness for the viewer. However, setting issues of craft aside, objective elements may also be used, intentionally or otherwise, to serve some ideological or political purpose — particularly in those films with an avowed mission to make "sense" of history to an audience, as discussed in the next section.

Personal and historical memory in the flashback

On screen as in life, personal history is intimately bound up with historical circumstance. The epic and costume melodrama as well as the "biopic" are specifically tasked to explicate the past entertainingly, usually by interweaving an individual's story with the history of a city, a nation, the world, religion, art, industry, or sport. The articulation between personal and larger history may less obviously inform the pleasures of other genres — e.g.,

“Brains do not work with *information* in the computer sense, but with *meaning*...”

the western and war film.

Flashbacks usually “remember” historical events or circumstances from the character’s recent past, less often from years earlier, rarely from centuries ago (a familiar trope of science-fiction and fantasy). Substantive difference of dress, design, and speech can highlight the chasm between current time and distant past, to create an intriguing sense of an epic or costume drama beheld in intense compression. (e.g., *Highlander*, 1986).

The protagonist is absent from one type of historical flashback. In epic or biblical dramas set entirely in the past, the revelation of weighty occasion has often been assigned to an anonymous, implicitly contemporary Olympian voiceover, an effect which none too subtly constructs a monolithic “past which cannot be argued.” For instance, *Casablanca* opens with a *March Of Time*-like announcer portentously describing the flight of European refugees, while columns of the dispossessed are seen trudging wearily forward, superimposed over a revolving globe. In a few deft strokes, the sequence establishes the background of fascist oppression against which Rick’s subsequent romantic and political conflicts will be played out.¹⁴

Impersonal flashbacks regularly occur in the same film with flashbacks which show characters intimately involved with historical events. The latter may be specific and momentous — the bombing of Hiroshima, JFK’s assassination. Usually, however, the protagonist occupies some corner of a less famous, but nevertheless important piece of the past. In either case, the personalized flashback partakes on a smaller scale in the narrative purpose of the entire film: to make history more intimate, more understandable; to document its immediate and long-term impact upon the characters, and by extension the society they embody, according to the film’s ideological or political agenda.

For instance, in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), a heroic airman, recently returned to the American heartland and out of work, visits an immense field of B-

17s being scrapped. He enters a plane, sits down in its ruined cockpit, begins to flash back to a mission, then is jarred out of his memories by the irritated voice of the salvage chief standing outside.

The protagonist's subjective experience is set off by strong objective elements — a rising angry roar of music fused with the sounds of real aircraft; anxious whip-pans from one ruined engine to the next; a dolly shot from behind the character, moving towards his back as if the camera itself were about to take off — all conveying the uncanny sense of an immensely powerful, dangerous machine brought to ground with its human counterpart. The sequence encapsulates the film's central concern, one which greatly preoccupied the collective mind of the time: whether the veteran could successfully reintegrate a warrior self into peacetime existence, or flounder in the attempt.

Flashback construction of this sort may be undertaken with avowed polemical purposes — right, left, or center. (*The Best Years of Our Lives* was intentionally aimed at calming anxiety over the World War II vet's adjustment.) However, the creators of popular cinema are more likely to be unconscious, or at best dimly aware that their work is addressing a host of concerns held in common by maker and viewer, whether to reify or contest them (usually the former). Indeed, this condition of unawareness often lends added potency to a film's ideological arguments.¹⁵

Incorporation of theories about memory and national influences into the flashback

Few mainstream filmmakers have intentionally set out to illustrate the latest hypothesis about memory as their work's *raison-d'être*. However, just as cinema has perceived other cultural preoccupations through its peculiar distorting lens, so from one time and locale to another changing philosophical and scientific theories about memory have been embodied — often idiosyncratically — upon the screen.

Over centuries of Western dramatic practice, Aristotelian poetics has informed

notions about memory still alive and well at the Bijou — and not only at Western Bijous. According to the Aristotelian vision's tidy linearity, the past exists as an archive of seminal events, registered in pristine detail but inevitably subject to simple forgetfulness, tampering, or false report.

Ripeness is all: when the turning of fate assembles the designated characters at the appropriate time and place, the gates of the archive open, and the past is recuperated through public remembrance. Although initially doubted, the absolute truth emerges out of an accumulation of recollections towards tragic or comedic ends — Laius' death at the hands of his son, the slave's mistaken exchange at birth with his erstwhile master.

In this process of discovery that Aristotle termed *anagnorisis*, events from the recent and remote past are recalled at reasonable length, in reasonably logical order, to blazon forth the indelible imprint upon the present of what has come before. D.W. Griffith's cinema replaces verbal narration with an artfully-linked chain of visual flashbacks and a minimum of title cards. The weave of accumulated recollection through which *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) unfolds the entangled histories of its sister heroines is one of many classic *anagnorises* in Griffith's *oeuvre*. This dramatic, systematically-ordered disclosure through flashback, often placing the protagonist's situation within a larger historical context, quickly went on to become a staple in mainstream cinema's tactics of remembrance.

A rough-hewn version of Freudian psychology began appearing in American movies during the Thirties. Pop-Freudian assumptions about personality and the narrative strategies bred out of them influenced diverse film genres throughout the Forties and Fifties, remaining quiet givens in many mainstream films today.¹⁶

Hollywood's peculiar appropriation of psychoanalysis melded agreeably with its earlier assimilation of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*. The portentous determinism of much Tinseltown Freud sorts well with the fatalistic operation of Greek tragedy's "infernal machine". Instead of standing helpless before the inscrutable will of the Gods or the turning of fate, the protagonist of Forties *film noir*, the woman's melodrama, or the "therapeutic" picture stands helpless before the haunting of repressed traumas from the past, the coil of uncon-

scious motives, the eruption of disavowed and dangerous desire.

Like the camera lens, the Freudian-shaded character's eye sees all, then stores every dark secret it beholds in the unconscious, as a camera's images are imprinted upon film (the analogy between human and camera perception was frequently drawn in early pop-psychoanalytic discourse). With the proper stimulus to the protagonist's — and camera's — free association, the memory archive opens, buried truth is hailed into the light, and its impact upon the present is acknowledged with dire or liberating consequences (e.g., the *noir* anti-hero's hurtful flashback to the treacherous *femme fatale* he has sought to forget only reminds him of his hopeless love and accentuates his despair (*Criss Cross*, 1949); the traumatic recollection deliberately provoked by a therapist leads to his client's recovery (*The Snake Pit*, 1948). As in Greek drama and the standard Griffithian flashback, the *anagnorisis* of the classic Forties and Fifties Hollywood "psychological" flashback discloses its occulted truths through a clear narrative trajectory, with an orderly beginning, middle, and end (e.g., the hypnotically-induced central traumatic memory of *The Three Faces Of Eve* (1957) which shows Eve as a child being forced to kiss her dead grandmother at the latter's funeral (an explanation which would now be deemed grossly insufficient to explain her multiple personality disorder)).

The relentless linearity of the average American flashback, with its foursquare presentation of character and motivation — even when tintured by a subjective, psychologizing thrust — still dictates the prevailing depiction of memory in popular movies today. But Hollywood's influence has hardly been monolithic. Turim describes a continuous feedback between American and foreign flashback practice — although the former has ever been prone to incorporate the latter's alternate strategies towards its own entertaining ends.

By the 1920s, European art film directors and an increasing number of mainstream *auteurs* were using flashbacks in more subtle, complex fashion than Griffith and his successors. (Then as now, the affinity between "art" and popular movie-making was greater abroad than in Hollywood.) The foreign work was inflected by various philosophic/scientific theories about memory, as well as differences in national sensibility.

Turim notes that French flashback practice in the 1920s owed a debt to Bergson, Proust, and the Impressionist movement *inter alia*. Directors, critics, and intellectuals (especially in the “cine-clubs” of the day), were mutually involved in interrogating issues of cinematic temporality and the psychology of the image. The French filmmakers rejected positivist accounts of memory, whether mechanistic Freudian associationism or the facile linearity of Griffith.

Instead, their work explored the impressionistic play of remembrance between present and past, the pervasive influence of subjective perception upon the supposedly received truth of memory. For *auteurs* such as Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Jean Vigo and like-minded directors outside France, the flashback did not provide a mirror-sharp image of the world-as-it-was, securely grounding the subject in a matrix of personal and national history in aid of justifying things-as-they-are. Consciously-retrieved memory was less privileged than Proust’s or Bergson’s powerful “surging forth” of recall, triggered by a perceptual flash and mediated through the liberal use of montage.

In the French silent cinema and early sound films, flashbacks became more detached from objective reality; more colored by the rememberer’s inner emotional world; more fragmentary, allusive — such that an equivocal status began to be conferred upon the past event as well as its impact upon the present.

Both in content and length, the cueing offered by images in French and other foreign flashbacks of the period also tended to provide less information about the past, so that viewers often had to work harder at decoding them.¹⁷ Flashbacks which summon up the most stimulating interpretative labor are found in early surrealist masterpieces like Luis Bunuel’s *The Andalusian Dog* (1928). Unfortunately, surrealist cinema was also capable of extolling subjectivity to the point of fashionable obscurantism.

Turim observes that each national cinema put a unique stamp upon the more adventurous flashback practice obtaining outside Hollywood during the Twenties and early Thirties. In the typical German art picture of the era, the memory of real events is peculiarly tinted by, and sometimes difficult to distinguish from the dreams, fantasies, or outright delusions of its troubled characters. Films like *The*

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) and *Secrets of the Soul* (1926) meld a lurid expressionist style with a no less febrile refraction of Freud. Synecdoches of the entire expressionist project, flashbacks display distortions in focus, canted camera angles, chiaroscuro lighting, and the like.

The Swedish silent flashback was notably imbricated with the fantastic, the preternatural or supernatural. In the films of directors like Mauritz Stiller (*The Treasure of Arne*, 1919) and Viktor Sjöström (*The Phantom Chariot*, 1920), the line between recollection, dream, and apparition is substantially blurred. Ingmar Bergman's remarkable flashbacks often derive from this tradition.

Few movies from the silent Japanese period survive; Teinosuke Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* (1926) has been cited for the striking similarity of its flashbacks to European work of the period, which the director had apparently never seen. The film's protagonist is a sailor who has become a janitor of an insane asylum in order to be with his psychotic wife. His recollections, bewilderingly interpolated with his fantasies, are exceptionally splintered, often difficult to place in time and "defocalized" — such that it is sometimes hard to determine that they are emanating from him.

Memory in *A Page of Madness* has become "the poetic province of subjective consciousness...ironic, haunting, almost another world into which characters are drawn..."¹⁸ The uncanny lyricism of the film's flashbacks owes more to the stages of Noh and Kabuki than the European screen, particularly to Noh's highly stylized intertwining of two separate streams in time. Noh would go on to be deliberately conflated with European traditions in the flashback construction of later Japanese cinema.

The initial wave of innovation in silent flashback practice was succeeded by an exceptionally inventive period of experimentation in American popular cinema which began in the late Thirties, and concluded approximately in the early Fifties. The signatures of the silent innovators are most evident in *noir* and *noir*-related pictures, but also spread to genres far removed from *noir* concerns, such as the Western (e.g., *Pursued*, 1947). American filmmakers adapted *noir* flashback strategies from the German expressionist rhetoric discussed above; or German emigres themselves applied their former work to

congenial mainstream genres such as the private eye film. In turn, many European filmmakers began applying *noir's* narrative and visual tropes to their flashbacks, in a characteristic recirculation of technique.

A third, arguably the most influential wave of flashback innovation commenced during the late Fifties and is still unfolding today. It pushes the bold work of the silent Twenties to the edge of the envelope and beyond regarding length, content, and style. "Third wave" flashback imagery is manipulated through slow or accelerated motion, extreme close-up, freeze framing. Recall is exceptionally saturated with and distorted by the character's subjectivity, by conscious bias and unconscious perception.

Remembering is no longer constructed as the retrieval of a unified, logical chain of events from the memory archive in pristine condition. The past may be revealed in fragmented flashes, disjunctive jumps suffused with intense affect. A third wave flashback often supplies exceptionally meager information; misleads or leads nowhere; summons multiple alternate plausible or fantastic pasts, or even intimates an actual or possible future outcome through flashing forward.

Recollection can involve intricate feedback loops, so that recall itself influences the content of further recall. The reliability of the remembered event is everywhere rendered suspect; indeed, the very reliability of memory itself is held up to scrutiny. In the most demanding third wave efforts, a spectator cannot easily remain passive before the sheer number of flashbacks with their dense weave of possibility. More than ever before, the viewer must become an active participant in the creation of the memory text, or suffer the deprivation of its meaning.

The third wave renaissance in flashback practice again arose chiefly in France. Significant contributions also originated elsewhere on the European continent and in Japan. Important participants include French New Wave auteurs Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, and — most notably — Alain Resnais; the still active surrealists Luis Bunuel and Jean Cocteau; diverse foreign directors such as Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Andrez Wajda, Kenzo Mizoguchi, Nagisa Oshima, and Nicholas Roeg.

If any one of these directors must be singled out as most seminal it would be Resnais, supreme poet of post-traumatic

recollection whose characters, bruised by war or mere intimacy, often compulsively seek to recuperate a catastrophic time from which they instinctively recoil (*Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, 1959, *Last Year At Marienbad*, 1961).

Throughout his project Resnais has been contesting whether the reconstruction of a “real” narrative past can ever truly be accomplished, given the conflated factors of profound subjective distortion, innate resistance to recall, and difficulty mining truth from the vast storehouse of memory images. Experimenting with virtually every flashback parameter, the director has marshalled a panoply of elegant formal and technical means to propound compelling arguments on both sides of the debate, often in the same film.

Consciously or intuitively, third wave flashback innovators were tutored by the significant ideological and aesthetic forces of the day. Resnais found the fragmented anti-humanist subjectivity of the French *nouvelle roman* — notably the writing of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet — conducive to his interrogation of memory (Robbe-Grillet went on to script *Last Year at Marienbad* for him). As it had in the Twenties, Dada and surrealist practice continued to inform the flashbacks of Bunuel and Jean Cocteau, and contributed to the aleatory, ambiguous flashback quality of Resnais, Godard, as well other New Wave directors.¹⁹

Turim characterizes the sensibility behind the third phase of foreign flashback experimentation as essentially modernist. She notes, but does not perhaps sufficiently emphasize its strong post-modern component. As post-World War II optimism yielded to Cold War uncertainty, the concern of continental thinkers such as Levi-Strauss with illuminating the deep structures underpinning artistic, social and scientific discourse gradually gave way to the view that the text, the play of language, and by implication life itself were ruled by a pervasive slipperiness of signifiers and signification.

By the late Sixties, a condition of profound indeterminacy appeared *de rerum naturae* to the French avant-garde and other like-minded European intellectuals, as the conjoined evils of patriarchy and logocentrism were being debunked, the notion of an all-controlling subject was denounced, and the death of history was declaimed.

Intriguingly, films containing early third wave flashbacks seemed to meditate on such ideological issues prior to their conscious "thinking-through" in the projects of Derrida, Lacan, the later Barthes and Foucault. In 1961, for instance, *Last Year at Marienbad* glossed the pitfalls in positing a unified subject with unified memories, out of which a coherent, objectively accounted-for present could be constructed.

It is not as clear whether the third wave flashback was influenced by new scientific theorizing about memory and cognition, paralleling the impact of the post-structuralist, post-modern philosophical climate.²⁰ Turim particularly cites a crucial paradigm shift within scientific and cinematic practice occurring since the Sixties, away from metaphors of inscribing and recalling the past which implicitly posit a camera model, towards tropes about memory drawn from computer programming and information processing theory.

Instead of the brain simplistically recording a visual memory chain towards its wholesale regurgitation on cue, recent neurobiological research suggests that the cerebrum decodes and encodes "bits" of visual information along with bits from other senses dispersed throughout the frontal cortex. Upon requisite stimulus, the appropriate fragments are then recombined as memories in a complex dynamic involving short and long-term storage sites. Neuroscientist Steven Rose cautions against drawing naive, overly mechanistic computer analogies to this human cybernetic activity:

"Brains do not work with *information* in the computer sense, but with *meaning*... each time we remember, we in some senses do work on and transform our memories; they are not simply being called up from store and, once consulted, replaced unmodified. Our memories are recreated each time we remember."²¹

If adventurous filmmakers did not intentionally call upon contemporary neurobiological research in fabricating the third wave flashback, it can be argued that cinema and science have each constituted different sites for exploring the same inchoate notions about perception, consciousness and memory which arose synchronously in the collective mindset because the time was ripe. This mysterious parallelism has repeatedly occurred throughout the reach of history, notably during major technological transformations.