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# 1

## Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema

Since the early 1990s, popular cinema has displayed a turn towards narrative complexity. In many cases, this complexity has taken the form of a database aesthetic, in which the narrative is divided into discrete segments and subjected to complex articulations. These films, which I am calling 'modular narratives', articulate a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation. They suggest both the pleasures and the threats offered by a modular conception of time. 'Modular narrative' and 'database narrative' are terms applicable to narratives that foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling. For Marsha Kinder, 'Database narrative refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories' (2002a, 6). This description, suggests Kinder, applies to interactive computer-based narratives as well as to the cinematic experimentation of European art cinema. In its cinematic form, database or modular narrative goes beyond the classical deployment of flashback, offering a series of disarticulated narrative pieces, often arranged in radically achronological ways via flashforwards, overt repetition or a destabilization of the relationship between present and past.

The resurgence of this type of formal experimentation became particularly prominent following the success of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). It coincided with the wide dispersal of the personal computer and digital consumer technologies throughout the 1990s, and with the rapid growth of the Internet as a cultural medium. While many of the films I discuss do not address such techno-cultural changes directly, digitality has arguably shaped the cultural landscape in which these films are produced and make meaning. As theorists such as Marsha Kinder (2002a) and Lev Manovich (2001b) have argued, the

conceptual structure of the digital database has profoundly influenced the way in which we think about narrative. I suggest that contemporary modular narratives, however indirectly, address the rise of the database as a cultural form, while also gesturing towards broader shifts in the conceptualization of time.

The trend towards narrative modularity has traversed mainstream Hollywood and independent and international cinemas, despite the clear differences among these industries. Yet these films do not constitute a new norm in narrative cinema. Rather, it would seem that the majority of both Hollywood and international films follow a narrative structure that is largely traditional and tends towards the chronological. However, the relative popularity of such modular narratives as *Pulp Fiction* and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) suggests that audiences are now acclimatized to achronological narrative structures. *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), for example, demonstrated that a non-linear, iterative structure could be used in the service of a romantic comedy, while the radically fragmented narrative of *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003) was granted the mainstream recognition of two Academy Award nominations in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

Although the pleasure of navigating the narrative structures of these films is undoubtedly central to their appeal, many modular narratives also evoke a mood of temporal crisis by formally enacting a breakdown in narrative order. This mood of crisis is not simply a response to the mediating role of digital technology in contemporary society, or to the rise of the database as a cultural model.<sup>2</sup> It also serves as one of the most recent extensions of a modern and postmodern discourse that continues to rethink the human experience of time in relation to science, technology and social and industrial organization.<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur describes the modernist novels of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann as 'tales about time', in the sense that they make time the subject of their diegetic and narrational configurations (1984–8, 2:101).<sup>4</sup> Contemporary modular narratives, by extension, are our own 'tales about time'.

Certain modular narratives connect database structures to a crisis of the past, in which both memory and history are refigured as archival materials, subject to easy access but also to erasure: examples include *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), *Ararat* (Atom Egoyan, 2002) and *Russian Ark* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002). Another group, including *21 Grams*, *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), uses modular narrative structures to highlight the roles of order and contingency in shaping narrative

futures. Others query narrative's ability to represent the simultaneous present: in such films as *Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, 2000) and *Time Code* (Mike Figgis, 2000), disjunctive temporal structure and the spatial segmentation of the screen, respectively, throw into question narrative's attempt to synthesize technologized and/or globalized urban spaces.

### Approaching modular narratives

A working definition of narrative might label it the *temporal arrangement of causally linked events*. Note that this definition, although broad, already depends upon the separation of past, present and future. Modular narratives place this separation into question by foregrounding temporal configuration, creating a play among duration, frequency and order. These formal games constitute a departure from 'classical' narrative norms. In particular, they focus attention upon the relationship between story and plot. Adapting the work of Russian formalist critics to a cinematic context, David Bordwell borrows the terms *syuzhet* and *fabula* to describe the construction of narrative. The *fabula* (or story) 'embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field' (Bordwell 1985, 49). The *fabula* is never materially present; rather, readers, viewers or auditors construct the *fabula* 'through assumptions and inferences' (49). The *syuzhet* (or plot), by contrast, refers to the way the story is presented in the telling; it 'is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film' (49).<sup>5</sup> The relationship between *syuzhet* and *fabula* is determined by three principles: narrative 'logic' (largely referring to causality), time and space. Bordwell notes that the *syuzhet* can arrange events (in terms of order, duration or frequency) so as to aid or impede the operations of narrative logic and the construction of *fabula* time (51).<sup>6</sup>

Theories of classical narrative have an important stake in the relationship between *syuzhet* and *fabula*, and place particular emphasis on its stability. The definition of a *classical* narrative can be built upon Aristotle's demands for a structure with a beginning, middle and end, a unified plot and character focus. For Aristotle, a 'well-constructed plot' may not 'begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point' (52). Only events relating to a central, unified plot should be included, and these must form a single progression from beginning to middle to end. Aristotle's injunctions still have currency today, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the world of Hollywood filmmaking.

Aristotle's call for a unified plot is echoed in the popular screenwriting manuals of writers such as Robert McKee (1999) and Syd Field (1994), and in countless script development workshops and readers' reports. In these cases, the recipe for a successful script involves dramatic conflict, a protagonist with clearly defined goals and a narrative 'arc'. These unified elements are generally organized in a 'three-act structure', fulfilling Aristotle's requirement for a clear beginning, middle and end.

This model of unity and order is also described and canonized by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in their landmark formal and industrial study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, which focusses on Hollywood cinema until 1960. In describing the narrative patterning of Hollywood cinema, they emphasize, like Aristotle, chronology, clarity and forward movement. The spectator of a classical Hollywood film proceeds 'by casting expectations in the form of hypotheses which the text shapes' (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985, 40). This process is aided by a 'relatively close correspondence between story order and narrational order' (44), in other words between the fabula and the syuzhet. Where the narration departs from story order, it does so in order to integrate the present, past and future in a coherent way, allowing for the forging of causal connections, and thereby facilitating the 'search for meaning' (43). Leaps into the past are generally 'motivated through characters' memory' (30), while flashforwards are avoided altogether (374), as they cancel out narrative suspense: 'Classical narration admits itself to be spatially omnipresent, but it claims no comparable fluency in time. The narration will not move on its own into the past or the future' (30).<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary modular narratives do not adhere to this definition of classical narrative. Many of the films I will be discussing create their narrative effect by structuring the syuzhet in radically achronological, elliptical or repetitive ways. The characteristic structures of modular narratives can be created through temporal fragmentation, through the juxtaposition of conflicting versions of events or through the organization of narrative material by non-narrative principles. In these films, narrational order (presented by the syuzhet) may differ radically from story order (that of the fabula). These divergences may even impede audiences' efforts to establish causal, spatial and temporal relations within the story. In many cases, they offer 'flashforwards' (rare in classical cinema) or flashbacks that are not, strictly speaking, motivated by characters' memories. Arguably, non-narrative spatial and temporal systems are granted a role in structuring these films. In this respect, the term 'modular narrative' could be applied to digital media including computer games, hypertext narratives and the Internet, all of which

provide a more literal instance of modularity. It should be emphasized that the films are modular on a *conceptual* level. In a literal sense, they continue to display the linear form that has long been integral to narrative cinema. Nonetheless, these films present themselves as made up of discrete temporal or narrative units, arranged in ways that gesture towards non-linearity.

David Bordwell has argued that complex narratives in contemporary Hollywood cinema should be seen merely as a limited instance of innovation within a system of tradition. Pointing out that mainstream cinema has frequently been overlooked as a source of innovation, he connects these films to Hollywood's past formal movements. 'As with the experiments of the 1940s and 1960s', he comments, 'most storytelling innovations since the 1990s have kept one foot in classical tradition' (2006, 73). He is keen to point out, for example, the way that high levels of redundancy smooth over the narrative disruptions of *Run Lola Run* and *Memento*. Although these comparisons are certainly valid (I dwell on them at greater length in Chapter 2), Bordwell downplays the characteristics that distinguish contemporary examples from their earlier counterparts. Formally, modular narratives go further than the *films noirs* of the 1940s or the French New Wave-influenced Hollywood films of the late 1960s. These films aggressively foreground the relationship between time and narrative, making temporal codes and narrative rules into an important source of audience pleasure.

Furthermore, by focussing his attention more or less exclusively on Hollywood films, Bordwell glosses over a key feature of the contemporary complex narrative, namely its international reach. It is, of course, important to acknowledge the distinct national and industrial contexts in which these films emerge. However, there have been clear formal and thematic parallels among complex narratives produced in different countries. In subsequent chapters, for example, I look closely at modular narratives from France, Germany, Canada and South Korea.<sup>8</sup> Hollywood's modular narratives are closely related to these examples of 'art cinema'. Indeed, the Hollywood examples are both inside and outside mainstream cinema, which continues to produce, as a rule, traditionally conceived and executed stories. In this respect, then, I disagree with Bordwell's contention that 'offbeat storytelling' has become 'part of business as usual' in Hollywood (2006, 73). Finally, Bordwell ignores the way that such modular narratives address broader questions of time and mediation. In the following section, I go on to discuss the formal qualities of the contemporary modular narrative. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the thematics of time articulated through these formal operations.

## A typology of the cinematic modular narrative

Although the terms ‘modular narrative’ and ‘database narrative’ have been connected with contemporary cinema, most notably by Marsha Kinder (2002a) and Sean Cubitt (2004), attempts at a systematic classification of the formal variations among these films have been tentative at best.<sup>9</sup> Here, I propose a taxonomy of the cinematic modular narrative. Although all of these films can be designated as ‘tales about time’, it should be noted that the aspects of temporality dealt with by these films are not directly determined by formal factors. The thematics of time therefore cut across formal divisions. Cinematic modular narratives fall into a number of groups, generally taking one (or more) of the following forms: (1) anachronic (involving the use of flashbacks and/or flashforwards), (2) forking paths (invoking divergent or parallel narrative possibilities), (3) episodic (organized as an abstract series or narrative anthology) and (4) split-screen (dividing the narrative flow into parallel, spatially juxtaposed elements).

### Anachronic narratives

The most common type of modular narrative is the anachronic modular narrative. Anachronic modular narratives modify the flashback structure of classical Hollywood cinema, undermining the traditional hierarchy between primary and anterior narrative temporality. As narratologist Gérard Genette describes it, anachrony involves a departure from the ‘first’ temporality of the narrative, a departure that establishes the analepsis (flashback) or prolepsis (flashforward) as ‘subordinate’ to it (Genette 1980, 48). The first narrative, then, provides a temporal grounding for any secondary narratives. Only in the most extreme cases, such as the work of French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, is this hierarchy undermined (49). For example, in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* (originally published in French in 1957), a husband’s suspicions regarding his wife’s infidelity are conveyed through perspectives that conflate the present and the past, to the point where the reader is unsure whether to view a given scene as dream or reality.

However, recent modular-narrative films display temporal ordering that, while not achieving the disorienting effect of a Robbe-Grillet novel, creates a sense of uncertainty regarding the primacy of one narrative temporality in relation to another. These films destabilize the hierarchy of first narratives and second narratives, so that no one temporal thread is able to establish clear dominance. This distinguishes them from the classical cinema and its use of flashback; rather than

simply 'interven[ing] within the present flow of film narrative' (Turim 1989, 2), segments of the past may interrupt the ordering of chronological time, establishing themselves at the head of the hierarchy, or dispensing with it altogether. In some cases, this relationship between present and past is naturalized in mimetic terms (that is, it is coded as subjective, constituting a representation of memory), but this is not always the case. Although Genette acknowledges that complications often occur (an anachrony can become a first narrative in relation to another anachrony nested within it, for instance [1980, 49]), he does not fully account for this particular destabilization, referring only in passing to Robbe-Grillet's 'sabotage' of temporal reference (35). This may have something to do with the fact that he is addressing written narratives, which mark tense directly in the form of language. As Brian Henderson points out, 'Cinema has no built-in tense system' (1983, 6). Thus, anachrony in cinema has a potentially more drastic effect than it does in a literary context. This fact also explains its relative scarcity: while Genette remarks that anachrony is common in literature, Henderson points out that most films display chronological narrative order (1983, 5).

*Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) provides an example of anachronic modularity. In this film, we follow three stories that overlap in terms of characters, events and time. Each story is assigned a distinct part or 'chapter' within the overall structure. The third of these chapters (excluding the prologue) takes place, in diegetic terms, before the first and second. Thus, the character of Vincent, who is killed in the second chapter, is still alive in the final one. There is no obvious internal motivation for this achronological arrangement. As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson note, classical narrative justifies movements into the past in psychological terms, by presenting flashbacks as the memory of one (or sometimes more) characters (1985, 30). In the case of *Pulp Fiction*, no such justification is offered.

In addition, it is difficult to determine whether the structure of the film is best described in terms of analepsis (flashback) or prolepsis (flashforward). The first major chapter involves Vincent's date with his employer's wife, Mia, and his attempt to deal with the aftermath of her heroin overdose. If we assume that this is the 'first' narrative of the film, then the third chapter can be described as analeptic. In the third chapter, Vincent and his partner Jules must clean up the mess after Vincent accidentally kills a young man they have been holding captive. This episode 'flashes back' to a confrontation Vincent and Jules had at the beginning of Chapter One, in which they kill some young men who

owe them money. Effectively, the third chapter fills in the gaps in the first one by showing us more detail regarding the confrontation (in which one young man tries and fails to shoot them), and showing the aftermath of the confrontation (the death of the captive and the subsequent clean-up). It also shows us Vincent and Jules defusing a hold-up at a diner. These events all take place between the two key episodes in Chapter One: the shoot-out and Mia's overdose. This filling in of previous gaps is dubbed 'internal analepsis' by Genette.

However, the temporal orientation of the film changes somewhat if we are prepared to view the film's opening sequence as establishing the primary narrative temporality. In this prologue scene, two British petty criminals hold up a diner. Effectively, this scene establishes the end of the movie (the Mexican stand-off between Jules and the British couple) at the beginning: the final scene is the continuation of the prologue. The opening scene, in story terms, also occurs *after* the confrontation between Vincent, Jules and the young men in the apartment (at the beginning of the first story). Thus, it potentially establishes the latter scene, in Chapter One, as a prolepsis (flashforward). Clearly, there is no way to resolve these temporal questions in a straightforward way. *Pulp Fiction* throws the very notions of analepsis and prolepsis into question through its complex non-linear structure.

*Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) also employs a non-classical anachronic structure. The film organizes a series of analepses in reverse chronological order, to tell the story of a man with short-term memory loss who is trying to track down his wife's murderer. In this case, the analepses are closer to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's definition of a classical flashback, because they are used to represent the main character's short-term memory disorder. Yet in a sense, they are the *inverse* of a classical flashback – rather than showing us what the character remembers, they progressively reveal what he is *unable* to remember. Interpolated between these 'flashbacks' are scenes presented in black and white. These appear to be in linear order, and we later discover that they lead up to the final scene of the film (in terms of the story, this is in fact the earliest of the scenes presented in colour). Yet for most of the film, it is unclear when these scenes are set, and how they relate to the other (colour) scenes. For these reasons, the black-and-white scenes cannot be considered a 'first' narrative. In fact, *Memento's* disorienting effect depends upon this temporal instability. A similar breakdown in narrative hierarchy is evident in other 'reversed' narratives such as *Irreversible* and *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 2000), as well as in the 'shuffled' narrative of *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003).

When departing from chronological order, cinema has largely done so in the form of flashbacks (or analepses, in Genette's terms); flashforwards (or prolepses) 'are relatively rare in the novel but they are even rarer in cinema' (Henderson 1983, 5). As Genette points out, prolepsis is at odds with the 'classical' narrative of the nineteenth-century novel, which is concerned with maintaining suspense (1980, 67). *21 Grams* is a cinematic example of narrative prolepsis. The opening of the film darts into the future to show us scenes from the very end of the story as well as from the middle and the beginning. We see the characters Cristina and Paul in bed together (from the latter part of the story), Cristina's husband and children (from the beginning), then Cristina in drug rehabilitation (from the very end of the story). This abrupt movement from past to present to future is a structural feature of the entire film. In terms of classical norms, the most notable aspect of this structure is that we are offered narrative information regarding the end of the film well before the events leading up to it have been established. The classical-era *film noir* *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), which begins by revealing the main character's death, provides an antecedent of sorts for this approach. However, *Sunset Boulevard's* brief excursion into the future is heavily regulated: the main character's (post-mortem) voiceover narration establishes the opening scene as a framing device, in relation to which the rest of the film is an explanatory flashback, and very little extra narrative information is communicated via this device. By contrast, the unmotivated, unregulated flashforward associated with European art cinema is, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson argue, 'unthinkable' in a classical Hollywood narrative (1985, 374). *21 Grams*, in its use of unmotivated flashforwards, departs from this classical model. Moreover, Genette's notion of a 'first' narrative is, in straightforward terms, unworkable here, because we seem to have equal access to a multitude of times. In practice, the narrative of *21 Grams* (as in the similarly structured *Bad Timing* (Nicolas Roeg, 1980) does not eschew suspense altogether, as it holds back a great deal of narrative information that links together the segments from the present, past and future. Nonetheless, it goes a long way towards undermining the temporal hierarchy of classical narrative.

Anachronic narratives may also repeat scenes, directly or via different perspectives. In cinematic modular narratives, repetition is used to show time elapsing, to allow audiences to establish the temporal order of events, or even to throw such temporal relations into doubt. Arguably, repetition is a building block of narrative: it is certainly an important structuring element in many fairytales, and relations of

repetition and variation contribute to most narratives, including filmic ones. Yet classical narrative is opposed to *excessively overt* displays of repetition, as it undermines the linear progression and unity of the story. Certain modular narratives foreground repetition, thereby drawing attention to repeated scenes or situations as discrete elements. These relations of frequency interact in turn with those of order and duration. In *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), the events leading up to a high school shooting are visited and revisited in a series of overlapping temporal segments. Thus, certain narrative events are presented from a number of perspectives. In this case, the temporal shifts are not directly motivated by character memory. Although the overall narrative progression moves from the beginning of the day towards the climactic shootings, the various segments are not organized hierarchically.

### **Forking-path narratives**

Some modular narratives create disjunctive leaps, not just between present, past and future, but between alternative temporalities. Commonly, these different versions are introduced via a 'forking paths' conceit. Forking-path narratives juxtapose alternative versions of a story, showing the possible outcomes that might result from small changes in a single event or group of events. Examples include *Groundhog Day* and *Run Lola Run*. Whereas anachronic narratives are modular at the level of the syuzhet (plot), forking-path narratives introduce modularity at the level of the fabula (story). Anachronic narratives generally allow audiences to reconstruct a linear story from the jumbled temporal order of the syuzhet. The forking-path narrative, on the other hand, introduces a number of plotlines that usually contradict one another. It is this type of film that appears to cleave most closely to Marsha Kinder's notion of 'database narrative', which emphasizes 'the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales' (2002a, 6). If the ordering of plot events can be designated the syntagm, then the paradigm refers to the list of narrative elements that may be selected for presentation in the plot. Whereas anachronic tales generally rearrange plot elements in syntagmatic terms, the multiple draft narrative 'projects' the paradigm 'onto the syntagmatic plane' (Kinder 2002a, 12). The paradigm is made manifest, so that various narrative possibilities are allowed to confront one another in the body of the text.



Figure 1.1 *Run Lola Run*. Sony Pictures Classics/The Kobal Collection/Bernd Spauke

Recent examples of forking-path narratives tend not to overlap with anachronic structures, although this is not impossible. Flashback has been combined with limited forking-path structure in classical Hollywood cinema (see the 'lying flashback' in Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* [1950]) and, in more emphatic fashion, in high modernist cinema: *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) offers a variety of conflicting narrative possibilities that are indistinguishable from the characters' memories of past events. Similar examples are rare in the present context, although David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006) all venture some way into this territory. Arguably, these and other recent films, including *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) create ontological uncertainty between 'subjective' and 'objective' narrative modes. In doing so, they introduce a limited degree of modularity, and blur the boundaries between anachronic and forking-path narratives: we are not always sure whether we are witnessing a memory, a hallucination or an alternative reality.

*Run Lola Run* combines a forking-path structure with some rapid flashforwards, but these do not play a major part in the core narrative. Nonetheless, anachronic and forking-path narratives share certain qualities. Just as the anachronic narrative invites reflection upon the organization and experience of time (by raising questions around the

notions of past, present and future), the forking-path narrative presents us with ways of thinking of time in terms of simultaneity and causal linkage. Rather than dispensing with the temporal, the forking-path narrative allows us to view time at once as linear (a progression from past to present to future), and as non-linear (a selection of parallel possibilities).

Contemporary forking-path narratives can be linked to Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (first published in English in 1958), which posits a mystery plot riven by multiple bifurcations, as well as to more mainstream fare such as the film *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), in which a man is given a chance to see how the people around him would be affected had he not been born. Forking-path narratives may adhere to the rules of classical narrative to varying degrees. David Bordwell claims that such stories generally limit the potential for audience disorientation by restricting their stories to 'a very, very few options and no ontological differences between the futures displayed' (2002, 91). This sense of order is maintained through the linearity of each narrative thread, the common elements among threads and the use of 'traditional cohesion devices' (95) such as appointments and deadlines that allow us to link scenes spatially, temporally and causally. Furthermore, such narratives offer a sense of closure by privileging the final iteration of the narrative over the earlier versions (100). Kristin Thompson makes a similar argument, suggesting that the looping story of *Groundhog Day* belies the fact that the film is a 'panegyric to linear causality' (1999, 140). However, while it is true that forking-path stories generally fulfil narrative requirements of coherence and causality, both Bordwell and Thompson neglect to address fully their temporal implications.

These films articulate a modular sense of time that is distinct from that of the classical narrative. Significantly, recent forking-path narratives tend not to motivate their iterative structures from within the diegetic world. No guardian angel is deployed, for example, to explain the looping mechanisms of *Run Lola Run* or *Groundhog Day*. *Run Lola Run* follows three alternative paths, with the main character Lola trying in each case to acquire DM 100,000 by noon in order to save her boyfriend Manni. With each iteration of the narrative, a small difference in timing leads to a wildly different outcome: the death of Lola, the death of Manni and, with the final iteration, her success. The same characters and locations show up in each version, allowing us to compare the differences and similarities. Each 'fork' is presented as linear, and events are ordered temporally, spatially and causally. Yet although

the film restricts the potential for confusion by heavily regulating each bifurcation and by offering a single definitive ending, its forking-path structure gestures beyond the bounds of the narrative, implying a potentially infinite series of possibilities.

### Episodic narratives

Aristotle defined episodic plots as those 'in which the episodes follow one another in no probable or inevitable sequence', and declared these to be 'the worst' of all types of plot (1982, 55). For the purposes of this discussion, 'episodic' refers to structures that critically weaken or disable the causal connections of classical narrative. I propose dividing episodic modular narratives into two groups: abstract series and anthology.

#### *Abstract series*

This type of modular narrative is characterized by the operation of a non-narrative formal system which appears to dictate (or at least overlay) the organization of narrative elements. The conventional relationships of narrative time, space and causality may be disrupted by this type of structure, which acts independently or semi-independently of them. The clearest example of this tendency is perhaps the work of Peter Greenaway. In *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), the narrative follows two zoologically obsessed brothers, but is organized in relation to an alphabetical list of animals. *Drowning By Numbers* (1988) is also a narrative (it is to do with a woman who has a history of drowning her previous husbands), but the audience's attention is continually drawn to the presence of numbers within the frame, which progress from 1 to 100 throughout the film. In each case, an alphabetical or numerical progression implies a database structure that may not depend strictly upon narrative causality.

This type of structure is not common in mainstream cinema (or contemporary narrative cinema in general). However, there are recent films that gesture towards it. *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould* (Francois Girard, 1993) tells the life story of the Canadian pianist and recording pioneer Glenn Gould in linear fashion, but breaks up the unity of the narrative by structuring it as a series of 32 vignettes that differ radically in style and approach. In these cases, narrative has certainly not been abandoned. However, the use of a database structure foregrounds syntagm (the way the material is ordered) as well as paradigm (the choice of material), and suggests that the material could have been ordered and selected differently.

*Anthology*

The modular narrative, in its anthology form, consists of a series of shorter tales which are apparently disconnected but turn out to share the same diegetic space. In this case a very fine line separates the modular narrative from the portmanteau film, which simply consists of a collection of short films that are not diegetically connected. In a sense, this type of film marks the outer limit of the modular narrative.

For example, Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog* (1988–9) is a series of separate stories presented as discrete episodes (this series of ten episodes was originally shown on Polish television). Nonetheless, most of the characters live in or visit the same Warsaw apartment building, and at times characters appear, cameo-fashion, in stories that do not principally concern them. Similarly, in his *Three Colours* trilogy (1993–94), Kieślowski has most of his principal characters appear as survivors of a shipwreck, despite the fact that each of the three narratives is otherwise unconnected to the others. Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989) fits more easily within the category of modular narrative, as the three tales are presented within the context of a single feature-length film, and shows us a variety of characters who cross paths briefly in the same city. In *Night on Earth* (1991) Jarmusch offers us five stories based around five taxi rides in different cities around the world. He links these temporally by presenting us with a series of clocks showing the time in each city. These tenuous links between narratives invite us to think about them both as separate episodes and as a narrative whole.

In another form, this type of modular narrative takes on a forking structure, with each new narrative segment emerging from the last. However, unlike the forking-path narratives described above, this type of film does not linger over alternative versions. For example, in *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991), we follow a character for a few minutes before branching off to follow another. Although the emphasis is on temporal flow, in narrative terms the film is made up of a series of short, virtually self-contained segments. Similarly, *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar-wai, 1994) uses a forking-path device to connect two unconnected stories of lovelorn cops. The protagonist of the first episode walks past a young woman who will play an important role in the romantic plot of the second episode. Apart from this chance encounter, and certain similarities between the two plotlines, they are otherwise not linked. A similar structure is evident in the Iranian film *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi, 2000).

Recent years have seen a number of films deploying several main plotlines within the same film. Such films as *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) follow a large

number of loosely connected characters without privileging one narrative thread over the others. This type of structure might be considered a relatively recent departure for cinema, if one excludes such notable exceptions as *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932) and *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975). Yet one might also suggest that these narratives are consistent with the tradition of *literary* narrative unity. For example, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), perhaps the quintessential example of the realist novel, incorporates a large number of protagonists and plotlines. The key difference between *Middlemarch* and contemporary multiple-protagonist films is the looseness of the character and plot connections in the latter group. It is a long way, one must admit, from the small community of *Middlemarch* to the sprawling, disconnected Los Angeles of Altman's *Short Cuts*. Yet by interleaving the stories in fluid fashion, these films downplay modular form. In films such as *Night on Earth*, by contrast, the discrete nature of each episode places the disconnectedness of the fabula (story) on the level of the syuzhet (plot). For this reason, films such as *Magnolia* and *Short Cuts* should not be considered modular narratives, even though they bear some elements in common.

### Split-screen narratives

Split-screen narratives are distinct from the other types of modular narrative discussed here, because their modularity is articulated along spatial rather than temporal lines. These films divide the screen into two or more frames, juxtaposing concurrent or anterior events within the same visual field. Here, I am including films that pursue this formal path in a sustained fashion, as opposed to those films that display multiple frames briefly or sporadically, such as *Blow Out* (Brian de Palma, 1981) or *The Boston Strangler* (Richard Fleischer, 1968). Although experimental films have long made use of split-screen aesthetics, it is rare in narrative cinema. One conspicuous example is the film *Time Code* (Mike Figgis, 2000), which follows a number of characters simultaneously by splitting the screen into four quadrants. In this case, each quadrant consists largely of a single shot unbroken by edits of any kind. This durational aesthetic is far removed, in the formal sense, from the temporal segmentation of most modular narratives. Yet the spatial modularity of such split-screen narratives allows for an exploration of such temporal concerns as memory and simultaneity (*Time Code* is particularly concerned with the latter). As its title suggests, *Time Code* is, as much as any of the films discussed here, a tale about time. Other examples include *AKA* (Duncan Roy, 2002), which is designed to be projected on three screens

simultaneously, and *Pretend* (Julie Talen, 2003), which employs a shifting array of split-screen techniques in order to tell the story of two children who fake a disappearance in order to bring their parents back together.

### **Modular narratives as tales about time**

In pursuing the temporal thematics of the modular narrative, this study will cut at an angle across the formal designations detailed above. While some formal categories may lend themselves to certain themes (for example, anachronic narratives are particularly suited to the representation of memory), the correspondences are not direct or straightforward. This thematic exploration also produces intersections with the temporal discourse of modernism and postmodernism. I will be suggesting that modular narratives are a particular instance of narrative in the postmodern era, but that they display strong connections with the formal and thematic concerns of the modernists.<sup>10</sup> Here, the intention is not to argue for the emergence of a 'neo-modern' aesthetic, but to demonstrate the way that ostensibly 'modernist' concerns have persisted and developed within the postmodern. By extension, this argument challenges the notion of a distinct 'rupture' between the modern and postmodern. At the same time, these narratives are closely linked with the rise of digital media. In some cases, this connection surfaces explicitly within the diegesis; in others, digitality can be seen as part of the cultural backdrop that has endowed modular narratives with their cultural currency and legibility. Indeed, what is notable about these films is not so much that they mark a new departure in narrative aesthetics (in most cases, they are more formally conservative than their modernist predecessors), but that they signal the point at which these aesthetics have been accepted by popular culture at large.

Any study of narrative and temporality must confront the variety of theoretical approaches that have been applied in this area. In broad terms, this work is grounded in the structural analysis of narrative, but also reads beyond structure, showing the way that these films articulate complex ideas regarding time and narrative. Furthermore, my approach takes into account postmodernism and post-structuralism's interrogation of narrative, and the more recent efforts of new media theorists either to reject narrative in favour of other structural models, or to enshrine it as the goal of new media's aesthetic aspirations. In considering the implications of the modular narrative in relation to time and narrative, this book will also initiate encounters with theories of memory, identity, temporality and globalization.

This book's particular contribution is therefore based upon a combination of formal analysis with theoretical approaches to narrative, time, culture and technology. In this sense, formal and conceptual categories cut across each other at an angle, offering a perspective on the way that certain formal approaches may have distinct implications across a variety of conceptual zones. While other articles and books have dealt with aspects of these films, most have tended to focus on a relatively narrow area: addressing formal factors only, drawing easy causal links with new media or engaging with an isolated theoretical paradigm (Deleuzian theories spring to mind). By contrast, this work aims to create a broader set of connections among the formal, the technological and the theoretical, focussed around the question of temporal representation.

In Chapter 2, I argue that modular narratives' overt play with narrative form offers audiences an analytic perspective on narrative that is also, in a number of films, figured as an analytic perspective on time itself. This perspective offers both a sense of pleasure and of crisis, and positions modular narratives within a formal and discursive history extending from the early twentieth century to the present day. I suggest that these modular narratives make the analytic perspective the object of both challenge and reconciliation. In doing so, they suggest a new, modular temporal mode that both overtakes and combines with the subjective and schismatic modes associated with modern and post-modern literature and cinema. The following chapters explore the implications of this analytic perspective for conceiving of the past, present and future.

Chapter 3 explores the way that such modular narratives as *21 Grams*, *Irreversible* and *Run Lola Run* address the possibility of conceiving of the future by raising questions of contingency and order. The narrative structures of these films invoke determinism by offering the ending of the story at the beginning, but also mimic the unpredictable, chaotic movements of contingency. Contingency in these films is associated both with the violent chance events that befall the characters, and with the open possibilities offered by chance encounters and free, unstructured time. These formal and thematic negotiations are related to the modernists' elevation of narrative contingency for its resistance to rationalized, industrialized time, and to postmodern explorations of chaos and order. Here, modular narrative becomes a vehicle for reconciling narrative order and meaning with the threat and promise of the chaotic.

Modular representations of memory are the main focus of Chapter 4. Drawing upon Andreas Huyssen's notion of 'temporal anchoring', I suggest that certain contemporary modular narratives are concerned with

memory's ability to orient the subject in time. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Memento*, memory is placed into crisis, in one case by a technologized erasure process, and in the other by physical injury. In both cases, the modular narrative structure attempts to represent the fracturing of memory experienced by the characters, but also sets up a formal game addressed towards the audience. This self-conscious attention to questions of representation establishes an interplay among narrative, memory and forgetting. *Eternal Sunshine* insists upon the necessity of temporal anchoring in the digital era, even as it displays an attraction to digital technology's ability to invoke temporal drift and romantic forgetting. *Memento*, by comparison, is concerned with *pragmatic* forgetting, which enables the main character to establish a modular subjectivity.

Chapter 5 builds upon the previous chapter's discussion of memory to examine the way that such films as *Russian Ark* and *Ararat* use modular structures to examine history's status as narrative. In doing so, they suggest that history, like memory, is unstable and mutable. Again, forgetting plays a dual role, both aiding with the establishment of narrative order, and working to disarticulate temporal relations. In these films, the dialectic between temporal anchoring and floating time is made manifest in the references to water and land, and to the image of the ark as archive. The ark/archive, as a repository for cultural and ethnic memory, raises questions regarding the narrative structure underpinning identity. These films affirm the notion of national or communal identity, while acknowledging in their very narrative structures the disjunctive processes that produce it.

Certain modular narratives, I argue in Chapter 6, utilize a modular aesthetic in order to represent coexisting spaces and narrative threads. Here, the modernist discourse regarding the relationship between simultaneity and succession is renovated for the era of globalization, digital technology and omnipresent surveillance. Focussing on the episodic narration of *Code Unknown* and the split-screen narration of *Time Code*, I show the way that both films combine long-take and modular aesthetics to explore the codes that structure temporal experience. At stake in both films, as indicated by the presence of the word 'code' in the title, is the notion of time as a communicable dimension. Exploring alternative (technological, linguistic and musical) modes of temporal mediation, *Code Unknown* and *Time Code* reach differing conclusions regarding narrative's suitability as a temporal code.

Finally, Chapter 7 addresses a number of new media works that directly address the representation of time by engaging with cinematic temporality. I argue that these multilinear structures do not simply

supersede 'linear' cinematic time, but enter into complex relations with it. Collectively, they touch upon many of the key concerns of cinematic modular narratives, including chaos and order, memory and history and simultaneity and succession. Ultimately, these works may suggest a ghostly afterlife for cinematic narrative time.

Contemporary cinematic modular narratives explore different aspects of the representation of time. In particular, they articulate anxieties regarding the relationships between present and past, present and future, and even between different versions of the present. In this respect, they constitute the most recent iteration of a fraught temporal discourse that established itself with the advent of the modern era and has developed throughout the postmodern. With the digital era comes a new set of possibilities and anxieties regarding temporal representation. Cinematic modular narratives, then, both reflect and respond to changes in our perspectives on time and space, and constitute a valuable tool for analysing the role of narrative in contemporary culture.

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