

Genette on Film - Temporal Order and Tense in Non-chronological Cinema

James Parsons BA(Hons)
Sheffield Hallam University

Author's Note

BA (Hons) Film and Media Production, Faculty of ACES, Sheffield Hallam University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Email:
jamesparsons.mail@gmail.com or Email: D.Summers@shu.ac.uk.

Abstract

Referencing the work of Gérard Genette's 'Order in Narrative' (1997), this article explores his idea of Anachrony in relation to film. I will describe how the filmmaker has used the manipulation of narrative chronology to affect the audience and argue that instead of confusing or preventing us from discerning any temporal order within the film, the discerning viewer is still able to infer a form of chrono-logic inherent within the piece. To do so however, we must accept that, counter to popular assumption, film has no tense; be it past, present or future. Only then can we fully explore and appreciate the temporal possibilities that cinema has to offer.

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In his article 'Order in Narrative' (1997), the narratologist Gérard Genette aimed to explore the temporal relations between story and narrative; how although narrative order may deviate from that of the story, the story is still explicitly indicated or inferable from the narrative itself. Despite the article being written with specific reference to literature, writers such as Chatman (1978), Curie (1992), Henderson (1983) and Lothe (2000) have shown it still has use in film discourse. In reading their work however it becomes apparent that we cannot make a direct application of the theory due to Genette's assignment of the primary narrative and the complication of applying tense in cinema.

Through the following text I shall introduce and apply Genette's narratological approach of *anachrony* to film, explaining how his classification helps us describe the audiences' interpretation and reaction to the story through its narrative construction. Then argue that to fully apply his theories, we must not only adapt the concepts, specifically 'amplitude' and 'achrony' but also our own perception and understanding of tense in film.

The Filmmaker, Audience and Anachrony

It is important to first be clear of the distinction between the *story* and the *narrative*. The story (fabula or diegesis) is a world with its own set of laws, characters, events, objects and chronology. We do not see or hear the entire story-world, it is implied to us through the narrative (syuzhet or discourse); the written, spoken or visualised text. In film, it is the moving images and sounds of the cinema screen¹ and it is up to the filmmaker to judge how the story should be plotted on that screen; to emphasise or de-emphasise, withhold or reveal, distort or present wholly, make implicit or explicit, constructing their narrative accordingly. Narrative then is presented in a linear chronological flow, or in a distorted non-chronological manner. It is these chronological distortions that Genette terms 'Anachronies'² (1997), deviations from a linear chronological telling of the story, either backward or forward in time. Genette (1997) named these deviations from the *primary* narrative as 'analepses' and 'prolepses' respectively. The most well known use of this in cinema is the

1 Genette's work owes a direct debt to narrative pioneers such as the Russian Formalists, "who as early as around 1920 used the conceptual pair fabula/syuzhet in a way that pointed to a distinction between story and discourse" (Lothe, 2000:7).

2 To be able to make this distinction, Genette highlights the assumption of a kind of 'zero degree' of "temporal correspondence between narrative and the story" (Genette, 1997:92), which we might use as a base from which to launch a discussion of non-chronological narratives. However as Rimmon-Kenan stated:

"A hypothetical 'norm' of complete correspondence between the two is only rarely realised, and almost exclusively in very simple narratives. In practice, although the text always unfolds in a linear succession, this need not correspond to the chronological succession of events, and most often deviates from it, creating various kinds of discordances." (1996:45-46)

flash-back or the flash-forward. Furthermore, we might subdivide them into 'internal' and 'external' anachronies; either occurring within, or outside of, the beginning and end of the primary narrative (those external analepses whose *reach* extends up to and past the start of the primary narrative, Genette terms 'mixed').

Analepses are most often used to depict the events or actions leading up to the current narrative, filling out back-story or relating a cause *after* its effect. For instance, in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), as the main, primary narrative unfolds in the warehouse after the heist, the film makes several shifts backward into the story. First, we see and hear how the group escaped the heist through subjective, internal flashbacks, helping us arrange, or 'complete', our knowledge of the events that occurred during the narrative's temporal ellipsis between the opening scene and the warehouse. There are also three objective, external analepses detailing how Mr White, Mr Blonde and Mr Orange all became part of the heist and their own motivations. By structuring the film in such a way, we start by knowing as much about the characters as they themselves do about each other; only their given nicknames. Additionally, by making use of an *ellipsis*, Tarantino induces a kind of narrative amnesia; we started in the cafe and then moved forward to the warehouse where one character lays dying, others are arguing and in the middle is a police officer held hostage! By only inferring the event, Tarantino is able to keep all the focus and tension within the confined space of the warehouse. Unable to account for the intervening incidents, the audience is instinctively drawn into the film in an attempt to figure out what went wrong with the heist and how we ended up in this situation, just as the characters do.

The anachronies within *Reservoir Dogs* never “risk interfering with the first narrative, for their only function is to fill out the first narrative by enlightening the reader on one or another 'antecedent'” (Genette, 1997:P93). In contrast, many films use internal and external analepses to not only complete a knowledge of events but to remind or directly conflict with our original interpretation. The repetitive analepses in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988, Morris) of the murder of two police officers for instance. As each piece of evidence is consulted we see the murder again and again, each time altered in line with the new information. Producing the film in such a way allowed Morris to highlight the subjective nature of 'eyewitness' accounts and thus their unreliability, particularly in this murder case³.

In the case of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the film consistently exploits the use of prolepsis throughout its narrative to continually cue and remind the viewer of future events. It opens on the home of Norma Desmond with a murdered man floating in the pool. The body belongs to Joe Gillis, our narrator. This opening scene is a prolepsis, an explicit foreshadowing of events to come.

3 This is an interesting example since it highlights that even documentary, that supposedly factual representation of the world, is still a narrative construction. Occasionally utilising dramatic techniques of storytelling.

The narrative then shifts backward six months, motivated by our narrators words, and the rest of the story is told in typical chronological fashion. Our interest is driven by the need to know what leads to his death since we are always fully aware of where the story is going, nor does the film allow us to forget it.

Within the scene of Joe's first encounter with Norma there are several implicit prolepses at work, used to build tension and anticipation. Narrating his plans to leave California and return home (an external prolepsis of an imagined future event, we know, will never happen) Joe arrives at Norma's mansion, the scene of his murder, through some measure of unlucky fate. The reappearance of the house reminds us of our knowledge of Joe's impending death. Inside, Norma is dressed in black and grieving for her recently deceased pet Chimpanzee⁴, again foreshadowing Joe's death. These cue's and others build tension within the audience. At the same time we are wishing for Joe to leave that place and never return we are constantly reminded of what will happen. By structuring the film in this way Wilder is able to play upon a deeper emotion within the audience; the fear of their own death. For are we not all like Joe, walking in ignorant bliss towards Norma's home, our own certain mortality? It is an uncomfortable feeling and thought. One that Wilder is able to exploit expertly through the implicit and explicit use of prolepsis.

Prolepses are much rarer than analepses, both within literature and film. Though as Genette reasons, a first-person narrative has a higher potential for their use “by the very fact of its avowedly retrospective character, which authorises the narrator to allude to the future and in particular to his present situation” (1997:94). In films such as *Sunset Boulevard* this is certainly the case. However sometimes the analepsis or prolepsis cannot be directly attributed to a narrator, instead it may be conveyed through the memories, fears and hopes of a character (Rimmon-Kenan, 1996). Therefore these anachronies do not completely deviate from the linear chronology of the narrative, since the act of remembering, fearing or hoping is part of the linear sequence of events. “It is only the *content* of the memory, fear, or hope that constitutes a past, present or future” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1996:51). The narrative of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) largely occurs within the memories of the character Joel Barish, as they are being erased. Whilst his memories are of events already passed, the erasing of them occurs within the present. Were we to abstract the story from the narrative, the memories would occur twice, once as an event prior to the start of the narrative, and again as part of the narrative during the erasure of the memory of that event. Because of the multi textual form of film, its use of sound, language, props, camera movement, etc. It offers a greater potential for these kinds of split, or partial anachronies than literature.

Anachronies do not always operate as individually and simply as the above examples.

4 The Chimpanzee also indicates Joe's future relationship with Norma. A pet trapped in her house and solely reliant upon her. Although this cue will not be fully understood until later in the narrative when we have all the story information to draw upon.

Sometimes, we might find that a scene doubles as an analepsis *and* prolepsis. The opening scene of *La Jetée* (1962, Marker) depicts a woman waiting for someone on the pier of a Paris airport, followed by the death of a man. Later, when the film enters its primary narrative, we realise this is an analepsis. At the same time though it is also a prolepsis for the end of the film, it being the *actual* last scene due to the time travelling nature of the narrative. Additionally, we might find an analepsis within a prolepsis, or vice versa, with an anachrony “assuming the role of first narrative with respect to another that it carries” (Genette, 1997:93). In *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* (2007, Schnabel), after Jean-do's wife visits him for the first time in hospital, he imagines her standing on the train platform in tears. He “knows that station well” his narration tells us. As we watch the prolepsis, he describes waiting for the train there as a boy, and then we see *him* also, as a child, playing next to his father on the platform opposite his wife. Paralysed and trapped inside his own body, Jean-do's only way of experiencing the world is through his imagination and memories. In this short sequence we begin to see this happen. Whilst his wife weeps, so too does the audience. Not only for her but for Jean-do, the happy child who runs around playfully. Yet whom we know will one day be trapped within that very same body he delights in.

Analepsis or Prolepsis?

All the above assumptions work on the principle of a first or primary narrative, a story-strand that contains within it a “temporal centre of gravity” from which all anachronies can be recognised and placed temporally (Henderson 1983:66). Any anachrony relating to it being a temporally 'secondary narrative'. However, how do we determine *what* that primary narrative *is*? Genette defines an anachrony's significance, and thus whether it is the primary narrative, by its 'amplitude' (Chatman, 1978:65). For him, amplitude refers to the narrative *duration* of the anachronous event, i.e. the amount of words or pages devoted to it. Translated directly to cinema this would be screen-time. However duration in cinema does not imply a greater significance, as more elements of importance may occur within a shorter time frame than that of a lengthier one with fewer. Here I do not simply refer to the number of story events but *any* details imparted by the film text as a whole, via sound design, shot composition, dialog, props and more. Curie suggests that the direction of anachronies, and therefore the location of the primary narrative, may be determined by whichever combination of sequences offers the least, most simplistic connection, of anachronies (1992:353). Though he later acknowledges that this approach rules out any influencing factors inherent to the narrative, such as a character experiencing a flashback (1992:354). It is clear then that such an empirical approach might restrict our ability to deduce an understandable chronology.

I suggest that in cinema we measure the *weight* of anachronies; their full textual content, of which screen-time is only a part. Once we have determined their weight, we are to able establish the

primary narrative as that which is heaviest in textual content, and may anchor to it those lighter, secondary, anachronic narratives, that might precede, overlap or follow. Additionally, by applying this method, we are able to measure the significance of anachronies along a more continuous scale of gradation, not only as pure, explicit flash-back or flash-forward (see the above discussion of *Sunset Boulevard* for example).

In some cases anachronies can become so complex or unrelated to the primary narrative that they become 'achronic'. Where "no inference from the content can help the analyst define the status of an anachrony deprived of every temporal connection, which is an event we must ultimately take to be dateless and ageless" (Genette, 1997:95). Films such as *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943, Deren) or *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961, Resnais) deliberately set out to undermine our expectations of traditional film narrative through the use of anachronies which we are unable to situate (Henderson, 1983:7). The more we attempt to locate the primary narrative and instil a traditional chrono-logic understanding of story and narrative onto them, the further lost we become. We must presume then that some films are "either random or based on principles of organisation appropriate to other kinds of text – spatial proximity, discursive logic, thematics or the like" (Chatman, 1978:65).

Herman disagrees with Genette's conclusion of achrony. For him "temporal indefiniteness should not be conflated with timelessness or achrony" (2004:219). What we have is not a narrative without a sequence or definite sequence, "but instead a kind of narration that exploits indefiniteness to pluralise and delinearise itself" (2004:219). We are offered a narrative with multiple, temporal sequencing possibilities. For Herman, this is better termed 'polychrony' in place of 'achrony'. To return to *Last Year at Marienbad*, as the film progresses we are never sure of where we are temporally; Are we watching the present or a prior event? Through repeated actions and conversations in different locations the film creates a dream like world. A world in which memory and presence seem to collide. So that in the end, events appear to have both *happened* but are also *happening*. Each sequence containing multiple temporally situating and connective possibilities as polychrony, until it appears that we are able to explore time and space itself, free of restraint.

Past, Present or Future?

As early as 1916 Hugo Münsterberg was writing about film's unique ability among the arts to impart a sense of omnipresence upon the audience, how "a certain notion of time as succession is abolished so that the spectator feels as if he or she is in several places at once and a single action 'irradiates in all directions'" (Branigan, 1992:241, N6). If the idea of films multiple, temporal connectivity is not new then, why does the modern audience find these films challenging? How have their makers so easily managed to subvert us? Film, in the classical sense, unlike literature has evolved to mimic the ordinary flow of chronological time. It has made this seem the standard, natural

way of interpreting it. When we see a cut from one shot to another, we assume it continues chronologically unless otherwise marked. Thus it was presumed that any shift in tense must be explicitly identified⁵: “Classical cinema reacts to a tense shift as though to a cataclysm; the viewer must be warned at every level of cinematic expression, in sounds, in images, and in written language, lest he/she be disoriented” (Henderson, 1983:6).

The cause of this fear is cinema's lack of a built-in tense like that of language. In literature every sentence written reinforces the tense of the narrative. So that even one might subvert the whole if written in a different tense (Henderson, 1983:6). Since film has no such tense structure we cannot say that a shot is the past, the present or the future. Forcing us to rethink the applicability of Genette's ideas to film.

Many have said, theorists and practitioners alike, that cinema has only one tense, and that is the present (Currie, 1992:345-346, Sesonke 1980:419); a result of its apparent immediacy, that mimics our own, real world perception and thus understanding of the present. To say this though requires that we accept that cinema has no past or future whatsoever. “Hence the significant content of saying that movies have only a present tense must be to deny cinema any formal means of ordering events in action-time other than their order in screen-time. But that is obviously false” (Sesonke, 1980:423).

Currie also argues against the idea of cinema as the present but asserts that this does not prevent us from assigning a temporal order to the story. Citing McTaggart, he suggests that instead of thinking about story events in terms of past, present and future, we might think about events as “earlier than, contemporaneous with, or later than other events. ... In this schema, no event is privileged as present, and so no event can be called past or future.” (1992:350). Utilising this approach, we are still able to infer a *story* chronology that is internal to the work from the narrative without facing the complications of applying tense.

Whilst I do not make any claim to have produced an exhaustive list of the possible categories and subcategories of anachrony⁶, I have effectively proved their importance and potential in understanding film. From the retrospective and informative aspects of analepses, the fore-shadowing and resultant anticipation of prolepses to the timeless and multi temporal aspects of achrony, or as I have discussed, polychrony. Applying the article 'Order In Narrative' to cinema provides a useful insight and understanding into the temporal construction of a story world through film. By analysing the methods used by film makers to construct a narrative that exploits films multi-textuality, we are able to gain a new and deeper understanding of the relationship between story and narrative

Examining Genette's work with relation to the writings of Curie (1992), Henderson (1983)

5 With cross dissolves, titles, visual effects, camera movement, voiceover, dialogue, etc.

6 For a more exhaustive categorisation of anachronies see Chatman (1978), Fludernik (2009), Herman (2004) and Rimmon-Kenan (1996).

and Sesonke (1980), I have also described how we must adjust and expand upon it. In suggesting the use of anachronic weighting instead of Genette's amplitude, I hope to have provided a suitable schema for determining the primary narrative in film, and as a result, a point from which all anachronies can be determined. Furthermore, I have indicated how Genette's work forces us to adapt our view of the assumed 'presentness' of cinema. By accepting that film cannot be tensed like language (unless importing techniques from it, for example dialogue) we are able to think more freely about the temporal possibilities that each film has the potential to explore.

In future, it would be a useful exercise to explore these ideas further to determine what relations and possibilities these classification offer. Additionally it would be beneficial to broaden this discussion out to Genette's other categories of tense; duration and frequency. As well as his thoughts on mood and voice in narrative.

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