A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the “Tarantino Effect”

Charles Ramírez Berg

It’s not so much I don’t believe in it [linear storytelling], it’s not the fact that I’m on this big crusade against linear storytelling . . . but it’s not the only game in town. If I had written *Pulp Fiction* as a novel . . . you would never even remotely bring up the structure . . . A novel can do that [non-linear storytelling], no problem. Novelists have always had just a complete freedom to pretty much tell their story any way they saw fit. And that’s kind of what I’m trying to do. Now the thing is, for both novels and film, 75% of the stories you’re going to tell will work better on a dramatically engaging basis to be told from a linear way. But there is that 25% out there that can be more resonant by telling it this [non-linear] way. And I think in the case of both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, it gains a lot more resonance being told in this kinda, like, wild way.

--Quentin Tarantino,
on “The Charlie Rose Show”

Quentin Tarantino did not invent non-linear storytelling in film, of course, but his first two films, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), did make playing with narration cool and fun, and no doubt emboldened a host of filmmakers to experiment. In the past fifteen years, Tarantino’s “wild” techniques are probably the
most visible influence on unorthodox film narration, and to that extent we can speak broadly of a “Tarantino effect” to indicate the rising number of alternative narratives over that time. This is not to say that other filmmakers like Richard Linklater (Slacker [1991], Dazed and Confused [1993], SubUrbia [1996], Waking Life [2001]), and before him Robert Altman (Nashville [1975], Short Cuts [1993]) as well as Krzysztof Kieslowski (Przypadek [Blind Chance, 1981]) and Abbas Kiarostami (Nema-ye Nazdik [Close Up, 1990]), and before them, Orson Welles (Citizen Kane [1941]), Akira Kurosawa (Rashomon, 1951), and Stanley Kubrick (The Killing [1956]) all did not have an impact, just to credit Tarantino with leading the latest parade.

Outside of the world of film, many possible contributory factors might have helped shape this surging trend in unconventional narration: the fragmenting “postmodern condition” and its revolt against master narratives; the ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity, require various sorts of player strategies including role playing and team building, and repeatedly take players back to the same situations; the branched experience of surfing the net; and hypertext linking that allows users to create a personalized sequence of disparate types of artifacts that might include text, image, video, and sound. In the U.S., the rise of independent film and the need for product differentiation are surely important factors. But whatever the causes, even a cursory survey of films from the last decade and a half reveals that many tell their stories in some non-classical way.

The essays in this volume demonstrate that the trend is beginning to draw attention from scholarly critics. Four years ago, an issue of SubStance looked at one type of new film narrative, what authors of three essays called the “forking path” films. Journalistic reviewers have begun to note alternative narratives too. For example, Roger Ebert’s year-end round-up of his top ten films of 2005 included four, Syriana (2005), Crash (2004), Nine Lives (2005), and Me and You and Everybody We Know (2005), that typified a narrative variant that he called “the interlocking story motif” that was “the sort of film that came into its own this year” (n.p.). Just a month earlier, in November 2005, New York Times movie critic Stephen Farber had also spotted “a complex cinematic mosaic with multiple story lines” in many current films. “This type of fractured narrative,” he wrote, “has turned out to be a hallmark of this year’s thoughtful, independent-spirited films” (n.p.).
Recent narrative experimentation in fiction films is an interesting phenomenon on several levels. For one thing, my survey indicates that the number of alternative film narratives is increasing, showing modest but steady growth over the past few years. Of course experimenting with cinema narration is not new, dating back to the medium’s beginnings. But historically such films were relatively rare novelty pieces that stood out precisely because they deviated from the dominant narrative model that most films utilized: Hollywood’s chronologically linear, beginning-middle-end, three-act structure.

A second intriguing aspect of this trend is that these experimental narratives are not restricted to art house cinema and may be found among all kinds of films. Not only have variations on classical linear plotting appeared in independent productions (for example, the meta-narration of *American Splendor* [2003], the over-lapping and repeated events in *Elephant* [2003], the absent causality in *Last Days* [2005], and the daisy-chain structure of *Slacker*) but also in more mainstream Hollywood fare (the repeated narrative in *Groundhog Day* [1993], the multi-protagonist plot of *Magnolia* [1999]) and films somewhere in between (the best example is *Go* [1999], with its hub-and-spoke structure, which began as an independent film but due to a series of buy-outs was released by Columbia; but there are also the subjective narrations of *Adaptation* [2002] and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004]). In fact, the same sort of branching narrative that splits time and doubles the protagonist in the unassuming U.S.-British co-production *Sliding Doors* (1997) also occurs at the climactic sequence of the Hollywood franchise blockbuster *Harry Potter: The Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). And a variant of the branching narrative is the basis for Woody Allen’s *Melinda and Melinda* (2004).

Third, as the case of *Sliding Doors* suggests, recent narrative experimentation is a worldwide development, not solely an American one. One has only to look at a list of contemporary international films to see that playing with movie narration has gone global. To list but a few, from Germany has come Tom Tykwer’s *Lola Rennt* (*Run, Lola, Run*, 1998) and the French-Romanian-German co-production of Michael Haneke’s *Code Inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages* (*Code Unknown*, 2000); from Mexico, Alejandro González Iñarritu’s *Amores Perros* (2000); from Hong Kong, Kar Wai Wong’s *Chong qing sen lin* (*Chucking Express*, 1994); from France, Agnès Jaoui’s *Le Goût des autres* (*The Taste of Others*, 2000), Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002),...
and François Ozon’s 5 x 2 (2004); from the United Kingdom, Michael Winterbottom’s Wonderland (1999), Jasmin Dizdar’s Beautiful People (1999), Mike Figgis’s Hotel (2001), which he made as a British-Italian co-production in Venice after completing the USA-made Time Code (2000), and Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter’s Lawless Heart (2001); from Ireland, John Crowley’s Intermission (2003); from Korea, Chang-dong Lee’s Bakha satang (Peppermint Candy, 2000); from Argentina, Lucrecia Martel’s La Ciénaga (2001).

Despite all this alternative narrative activity, however, no one has sought to classify the films by plot types, which is what I propose to do here. The best way to proceed, I believe, is with order and precision. The need for some sort of systematic approach became clear to me several years back, when I began making lists of as many alternatively plotted films as I could think of. As the list grew and the number of films approached 100, it was plain that umbrella terms like “new narratives” or “alternative plots” were not very helpful. Much more useful would be an arrangement of films based on how these narratives deviated from the dominant narrative paradigm. In addition, categorizing these plot formations will help us perceive and define precise narrative patterns, particularly those that may not be obvious at first glance. We will be able to note, for instance, the aforementioned identical narrative tropes in Sliding Doors and Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, or the structural and thematic affinities between Crash and Code Inconnu. To give another example: comparing Sliding Doors and Kieslowski’s Blind Chance reveals that despite their superficial situational resemblance—both have characters running after trains at a station—they are in fact two different sorts of narratives.

With a concise taxonomy in place, the scope of this narrative tendency becomes apparent, and we can begin addressing analytical questions. Do these films represent a movement, trend, cycle, or possibly something bigger, more profound, and potentially more significant? A new kind of film storytelling? A challenge to the hegemony of Hollywood’s dominant cinematic discourse? If there have been cinematic antecedents, what is that lineage? And, of course, why is new film narration emerging now? Classification, then, helps us understand the nature and degree of narrative innovation that is occurring.
ALTERNATIVE PLOT FORMATIONS

According to Charles Ramírez Berg, films can thus be divided into 12 categories, arranged into three main groups based on the ways they DEVIATE from the Hollywood paradigm, namely: plots based on the number of protagonist, plots with nonlinear temporality, and plots that violate classical rules of subjectivity, foregrounded narration, and the narrative triumvirate of goal-orientation, causality, and exposition.

PLOT BASED ON THE NUMBER OF PROTAGONISTS

1) The Polyphonic or Ensemble Plot – multiple protagonists, single location
2) The Parallel Plot – multiple protagonists in different times and/or spaces
3) The Multiple Personality (Branched) Plot
4) The Daisy Chain Plot – no central protagonist, one character leads to the next

PLOT BASED ON RE-ORDERING OF TIME; NONLINEAR PLOTS

5) The Backwards Plot
6) The Repeated Action Plot – one character repeats action
7) The Repeated Event Plot – one action seen from multiple characters’ perspectives
8) The Hub and Spoke Plot – multiple characters’ story lines intersect decisively at one time and place
9) The Jumbled Plot – scrambled sequence of event motivated artistically, by filmmaker’s prerogative

PLOTS THAT DEVIATE FROM CLASSICAL RULES OF SUBJECTIVITY, CAUSALITY AND SELF-REFERENTIAL NARRATION

10) The Subjective Plot – a character’s internal (or “filtered”) perspective
11) The Existential Plot – minimal goal, causality, and exposition
12) The Metanarrative Plot – narration about the problem of movie narration
STEFANO QUANTUM-STORIES

by Alberto Angelini
“Stefano Quantestorie” (1993) can be considered as the third chapter/phase of a funny but refreshing (visual) meditation about the state of cinematic art that the Maurizio Nichetti developed between the end of the ‘80s and the beginning of the ‘90s, on the verge of the digital imagery deluge that was following the already astonishing proliferation of commercial TV channels and the subsequent con/fusion and more or less accidental mash-up of styles, discourses, tropes, stereotypes, moods.

Starting with “Ladri di saponette” (1989, a movie-within-a-movie where a pseudo-neorealist B&W film is transmitted on TV but gets somehow ‘infected’ by the multicoloured commercial breaks that interrupt it, up to the point that the director himself has to enter the cathod ray box in the desperate attempt to save ‘his child’), and following with “Volere Volare” (1991, some sort of Italian “Roger Rabbit” [although the idea/demo of a cartoons-humans cohabitation was already in Nichetti’s showreel since 1982], where a shy sound-effect man suddenly starts to metamorphose into a flamboyant thus difficult-to-manage animated alter-ego), with “Stefano Quantestorie” the reflection – and parallel audiovisual experimentation - is mostly about the narrative form, so that the “script becomes the ultimate and only special effect”.

The film, that we could provisionally classify as a ‘fantastic comedy’ spiced with some ‘magic realism’ and ‘whodunit’ nuances, has at the same time a very linear and fuzzy story-line: on a structural level we are presented with some classical forking-path moments (marrying or not a schoolmate / catching or not a train / passing or not a job examination), from which the problematic adolescence of a late ‘60s Italian only son splinter into six different life trajectories; on the narrative side, however, all of these ‘alternative’ Stefano versions are not only sharing the same fictional world since the very beginning of the movie, but they’re also somehow related and bound to intersect more and more as it proceeds to a public event (a disco Carnival party, where 5 of the possible Stefano will actually converge).

1 Marco Pistoia, Maurizio Nichetti, Il Castoro, 1997, p. 74
As spectators, we only come to decipher the plot little by little: first of all because every forking-path ‘station’ in the main character’s life is presented and investigated as mental speculations of his own mother and/or father\(^2\) (although these mind-games are taking place in a reality that’s already ‘infiltrated’ by their very actualized outcomes and personas), but also because the chronological order of events is scrambled since the very first speculation (taking place after the pivotal narrative ‘conclusion’ of the party). All of these features, combined with the playful and often metanarrative attitude of the mise-en-scène, makes “Stefano Quantestorie” a rather entertaining and puzzling filmic experience - but a very difficult one to categorize.

As the overarching Carnival setting suggests, this diegetical machine is “a true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal (...) hostile to all that is immortalized and completed”\(^3\): also after repeated and attentive visions, a lot of questions remain (maybe positively) unanswered, while the general boundaries between real and imagined (possible?) presents are definitely unclear. The film strongly refuses a closed reading/ending, and the final sequence - powerfully anticipating the interacting era of digital consumption - is in this sense emblematic: Stefano’s (Stefanos’?) parents are on the balcony of their house, searching with a telescope for one ‘version’ of their son while accidentally ‘browsing’ through the others; finally they abandon the optical device and start to look and wave directly towards the camera - always calling for “Stefano!”. The spectator is thus explicitly called to identify with the protagonist and/or asked to choose for/with him new combinations - an approach heavily encouraged and highlighted by the DVD release of the film\(^4\).

\(^2\) From this perspective, the whole movie can be read as some sort of grotesque family-driven bildungsroman, a bittersweet parody of the oppressive role parents can play in shaping a son’s career.

\(^3\) Mikhail Bachtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 10; see also the film’s poster, a collage of ‘Stefano policeman’ and two apparent criminals concealed in garish animal masks (the crocodile is ‘Stefano thief’).

\(^4\) Produced and curated by Maurizio Nichetti himself, the DVD of “Stefano Quantestorie” contains both the regular movie and a bifurcation-game version of it (in addition to a full-length commentary, an alternative ending and several other extras).
Borrowing from the extensive and challenging list provided by Charles Ramírez-Berg in an attempt to systematize recent films characterized by alternative plots (2006), it’s not a surprise that “Stefano Quantestorie” is bridging much more than one or two categories – a declaration of both freedom from compartments (the movie combines different genres, too) and multilayered complexity. Infact, although the story’s “multiple protagonists are the same person, or different versions of the same person” (p. 15), the movie doesn’t inherently (or simply) belong to “the multiple personality (branched) plot” slot, precisely because of the above-mentioned compresence and increasing convergence of these apparently fantasized and independent ‘versions’; in a bizarre universe where six hypotetical Stefano’s lives are simultaneously developing and intersecting (“parallel plot”?); we are presented both with a “repeated action [sub]plot” scheme (i.e., young Stefano at the station or at a party, building his future / our narrative present) and a “repeated event [sub]plot” one (i.e., a couple of crucial phone calls is presented twice, alternatively omitting one interlocutor), over the curse of a deliberately “jumbled plot” that culminates in the mutual disco party – some sort of absurdist, almost quantistic “hub” (classifiable under a special self-kaleidoscoping “polyphonic plot”?). Or maybe – as the already discussed final sequence may propose - everything is happening in the mind of Stefano’s mom (“subjective plot”), disappointed about her actual son: a 40-years-old policeman, single and childish, presented during the first 10 minutes of the movie (as well as in the poster) as its ‘fake’ main character.

Nonetheless, if we move our focus from the special effect (the script) to the general attitude of this unusual cinematic journey, the category that best suits it is probably the broader one proposed by Edward Branigan (2002) in response to a previous article of David Bordwell (2002), namely the “multiple-draft film”. Mixing cognitive science and narratology, Branigan asserts that “there exist other types of plotting not dependent on the ‘river of time’ metaphor, where the relationship among parallels and alternatives is neither flaunted nor buried, but is ambiguous or indeterminate, as if the parallels were seen in parallax” (p. 107); these (film) texts push the interpreter to visualize the process of narrative choice undergone by the creator, evaluating not only what is told as true but also and more impotantly what is (or was, or will, or could be) “nearly true”. Following
this description, we could see “Stefano Quantestorie” as a sui generis hyper-forking-path territory, something similar to an unfolding database or a minor borgesian expolosion of conterfactuals that pluralizes the “what if” scenario (“an ability central to human language and subjectivity”, note 10 on p. 113) to an extent that concretely excels the film limits - asking for a powerful interplay between the spectator and the filmmaker. Moreover, Stefano is not only each one of us, but is also acted by the very director (already an established ‘icon’ of Italian cinema and TV); so, by looking at Nichetti playing with his own complementary multiplicity, it’s even simpler and more fascinating to imagine his own proliferation during the creative process (writing, shooting, editing, dvd authoring). So, as “final arbiters” we’re free to play with Stefano’s quantum-stories in a unnumerable variety of ways: reflecting on our lives or on the future of cinema, using the DVD as a didactical or remix tool, choosing a different explanation for each new vision, and always keeping in mind that precious artefact like this are usually timeless (polysemy required).

References

Pistoia, Marco. 1997, Maurizio Nichetti, Il Castoro.