

“The Sonic Border of the Flashback in Contemporary Cinema”

In *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, Maureen Turim summarizes the history of the flashback in American cinema as follows:

“The earliest flashbacks of silent American films are...rich in suggestive images. Though they may appear more simple in form (a single shot tableau or a reprise of shots already seen) this inherent simplicity of imagery actually functions to create an expansion of meanings...The flashbacks of the Hollywood sound period present a different kind of semiotic complexity, for the sound/image relationships weave between different temporalities and focalizations. The most recent Hollywood flashbacks, conversely, are often less sophisticated than those found in films of earlier periods; they are redundant in their internal coding and serve primarily to deliver missing narrative exposition.¹”

If flashbacks in early cinema were simple, then is Turim’s characterization of flashbacks in more recent cinema as “redundant” and “less sophisticated” a valid criticism? The formal simplicity of flashbacks in early cinema was partly due to technical limitations, so this would imply that improvements in film technology over the past several decades have resulted in the creation of semantically simple flashback sequences. Could it be that technology has allowed flashbacks to become too obvious and too simple in their meaning? Has the flashback lost its potential for semantic multivalence? Rather than argue with Turim’s assertion directly, I have chosen to discuss particular technical aspects of contemporary flashbacks that may distinguish them not only from those of early cinema, but also suggest that they remain just as complex as those of classical Hollywood cinema.

¹ Turim, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 6-7

We typically characterize flashbacks as a primarily visual experience: it always incorporates images by definition, but requires them to portray the memory fully.² The realm of sound, by contrast, is not limited by these constraints: a visual "flashback" can exist independent of the sound track and vice versa. A close reading of flashback sound demonstrates that although many flashbacks in contemporary cinema "serve primarily to deliver missing narrative exposition", they are certainly not "redundant," unnecessary or simplistic. But what portion of the sound track is most relevant to a flashback's meaning? There are certainly obvious aural clichés designed to illustrate both the perspective and the temporal or psychological distance of the flashback; excessive reverb and low-pass filtering often indicate that the viewer-listener has entered the mind of a character whose recollection of events is particularly unclear. But such sound effects can only abstractly illustrate the subjectivity of a memory within a flashback itself; there are much more specific and concrete meanings that can be derived from a flashback's surrounding context. Most semantic information, as I will argue below, is contained in the point of transition between the diegetic sound contexts of two shots that are ordered non-linearly in time. These transitions can not only establish a flashback's subjectivity, but also can help order the flashback in narrative time. I will call this area between sound contexts the "flashback border" and the transition itself the "audio disjunction." First, however, an establishing discussion on flashback sound is in order.

Flashbacks and the "Sound Shot"

In a discussion on the evolution of recording practices in early cinema, Rick Altman notes that "[W]e often give lip service to the notion that cinema teaches us to see and to hear, that the

² As Turim concludes from a discussion of the word's etymology: "This combination of brief instances of light, of explosive power, and of the change in direction and quality of a glance, are appropriate antecedents to the term flashback in a cinematic sense." (*Flashbacks in Film*, 3)

media determine our very notion of reality. Yet we are rarely privileged to isolate the moment when and the process whereby our perception changes.³ Altman concludes that cinematic sound is both didactic and illustrative, but that there also exists an isolatable point at which the listener's perception of a given sound event changes. In the flashback, this moment of change can vary from a drawn-out transition or dissolve to the most abrupt jump cut. But it is not just the moment of change itself that matters; the sonic context on either side of these boundaries is also crucial. As James Lastra writes:

"The sonic differences to which we attribute significance are always contextually determined, hence no *single* context provides a reference point for theorizing all others. If the recognition of differences between a sound and its representation... were simply a matter of recognizing differences pure and simple, there would be no reason to order originals and representations hierarchically."⁴

Although Lastra refers here to the differences between two individuals' perception of a single sound event and the difference between an actual sound and its recorded representation, his contention that "differences pure and simple" cannot create significance is certainly applicable to flashback sound. Our ears require context in order to perceive the differences between the sound worlds on either side of a flashback border; without such context we would not be able to create a hierarchy of narrative time on purely sonic grounds. This hierarchy is analogous to the one Lastra describes between original sound and its representations; just as sound can express its own realness, so too can it express the temporality of a flashback sequence.

But is there, in fact, a way of perceptibly demarcating these sonic contexts on either side of a flashback border? Let's take a closer look at the border itself and ask whether a flashback border can even exist in the realm of sound. Michel Chion contends that there is no such thing as

³ Altman, Rick. "Sound Space" in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, Rick Altman, ed. New York: Routledge, 1992. 55

⁴ Lastra, James. "Reading, Writing and Representing Sound" in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, Rick Altman, ed. New York: Routledge, 1992. 70-71

a “sound shot,” or a piece of sound between points of editing in the same sense as an image shot. He asserts that a sound shot is not an identifiable unit, since “unlike visual cuts, sound splices neither jump to our ears nor permit us to demarcate identifiable units of sound montage.⁵” While it is possible to create nearly imperceptible splices when editing sound, it is also entirely possible to cause “sound splices to jump to our ears”. Cinematic flashbacks always involve the splicing of two image shots, which, since they are not contiguous in time or place, require a conspicuous visual transition. If each image in a flashback has its own diegetic sound, there must also be a splice connecting the two diegetic sound worlds on either side of the flashback. While this splice is often inconspicuous, it can also call attention to itself in numerous ways; one diegetic sound world can cut abruptly to another, or it can transition more slowly, employing technologically manipulated sound to call attention to the break in narrative time. A “sound shot” is therefore an entirely valid concept, especially if it is punctuated by these types of conspicuous splice points.

In order to properly analyze these flashback splice points, we must consider the diegetic sound worlds on either side of the flashback to be single units synthesized from all their component sounds – in other words, as two sound shots. Gilles Deleuze, in *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*, says the following of the soundtrack:

“...the correspondences between these [sound] elements, and especially their displacements [and] their cuts, [can be used] in such a way as to form the power of one and the same sound continuum. Rather than invoking the signifier and the signified, we might say that the sound components are separate only in the abstraction of their pure hearing.⁶”

The concept of the soundtrack as a “continuum” synthesized from its component sounds also permits us to consider the flashback border as a splicing of two diegetic sound shots. Deleuze’s contention that “the sound components are separate only in the abstraction of their pure hearing”

⁵ Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 41

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. 234-235

reinforces this conclusion; if individual sounds, even when heard as isolated events, are not actually separable from the soundtrack as a whole, then there must exist a continuum of diegetic sound that can be interrupted. But Deleuze focuses much of his discussion in this passage on how this sound continuum relates to the image continuum, noting that "If the continuum (or the sound component) does not have separable elements, it is nonetheless differentiated at each moment into two diverging directions which express its relation to the visual image..."⁷ Deleuze further emphasizes this separation as follows:

"What constitutes the audio-visual image is a disjunction, a dissociation of the visual and the sound, each heautonomous, but at the same time incommensurable or 'irrational' relation which connects them to each other, without forming a whole, without offering the least whole."⁸

If sound and image are fundamentally disjunct, then there are obvious issues of causality, necessity and synchronization in diegetic sound.

"...From the outset, the problem of sound was: how could sound...be used so that [it was] not simply an unnecessary addition to what was seen? This problem was not a denial that sound...[was] a component of the visual image; on the contrary: it was because it was a specific component that sound did not have to be unnecessary in relation to what was seen in the visual."⁹

An exhaustive discussion of the visual component of flashbacks and their relationship to sound is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note the relationship of this audio-visual disjunction to flashbacks. If the continuum of diegetic sound has a causal relationship with the image continuum, then there must be a disjunction in the realm of diegetic sound parallel to that of the image track. But nondiegetic sound is not bound by such a causal relationship, and therefore its use creates a very different kind of flashback.

⁷ Deleuze, 235.

⁸ Ibid, 256.

⁹ Ibid, 235.

Nondiegetic Sound

There are certainly examples of flashbacks where the soundtrack does not follow the image track to another location in time, thus making the soundtrack entirely nondiegetic to the flashback itself. The resulting audiovisual dissonance produces an entirely different set of meanings from those that I will discuss below. In many cases these flashbacks are very brief, and the very fact that the soundtrack remains constant through them reinforces an interpretation of these flashbacks as fleeting excursions that exist solely in the realm of the image. Hence I have chosen to discuss examples of diegetic flashback sound borders.

The Subjective Flashback and the Manipulated Audio Disjunction in *The Butterfly Effect*

I will begin with *The Butterfly Effect* (J. Mackeye Gruber & Eric Bress, 2004), which provides fine examples of the subjective flashback. Turim's discussion of post-WWII modernist cinema in *Flashbacks in Film* contains an important discussion of this type of flashback:

"The filmic experimentation of the twenties is a point of reference for some key post-war filmmakers...who reinscribe the temporal experiments of the past in new contexts. Time is once again treated as an element to be shaped and designed. Temporality is subjective and relative. It is linked to a conception of the functioning of the psyche...The modernist difference is that the mode of filmic narration seeks mimetically to represent mental processes, to show the memory flashes and brief disjointed or distorted images which come to a character's mind.¹⁰"

The Butterfly Effect follows the attempts of Evan Treborn (Ashton Kutcher) to enter his own childhood memories and stop bad events from occurring. The son of a mentally ill father (who attempts to kill Evan during a supervised visit to the mental hospital he lives in), Evan begins experiencing blackouts at the age of seven. His doctor recommends that he start keeping daily journals in order to help maintain his memory; these journals later become the vehicles through which he can enter his own past. Evan first tries to fix the past later in life when he returns home

¹⁰ Turim, 190.

from college and reunites with his childhood friend and first love Kayleigh Miller (Amy Smart), only to hear the next day that she has committed suicide. After discovering his ability to change the past, he enters three different memories in his attempts to save Kayleigh from her fate: first, when Kayleigh's alcoholic pedophile father (Eric Stoltz) forces both seven-year-old Kayleigh and Evan to participate in child pornography; second, when thirteen-year-old Evan and Kayleigh watch as Kayleigh's brother Tommy (William Lee Scott) accidentally kills a woman and her baby by blowing up their mailbox; and third, when Tommy sadistically burns a neighborhood dog alive. The disastrous results of these interventions range from Kayleigh becoming a heroin-addicted prostitute to Evan losing his arms. In the end, Evan concludes that his very existence has caused all of these problems; in his final intervention he returns to his own birth and causes himself to be stillborn.¹¹

There are two types of flashback sequences in *The Butterfly Effect*, but both are essentially the same in their use of sound. Regardless of whether Evan is attempting to recover a lost memory or attempting to change the past, he uses the same method of entry: his journals. In addition, there are no differences of perspective; regardless of his action (or inaction) within the memory itself, Evan experiences them as himself rather than as an observer. In fact, he returns from lost memories with physical scars that serve as evidence that the memory actually took place. One such example of this is Evan's first attempt at memory retrieval, where he recovers his memory of the mailbox explosion (DVD 0:36:20 – 0:38:05), during which he accidentally burns himself with a cigarette (0:37:20).

¹¹ This is the bleaker ending of the director's cut; the theatrical version has Evan return to the day he first met Kayleigh at a neighborhood gathering, where he tells he hates her in order to prevent the two of them from ever knowing each other.

The process by which Evan enters his own memory does not change throughout the film; he begins by reading his journal entry out loud each time. The transition itself always begins several seconds after he begins reading, just as in this example (0:36:32-0:36:39). There are many important nondiegetic sounds in these transitions; here fluttering noises begin at 0:36:38 and a high pitched ringing enters at 0:36:42. The diegetic sound of Evan reading, however, is only manipulated with copious amounts of reverb as he finishes reading the entry (0:36:42). At this exact same point a rattling enters and objects in the room begin to vibrate. Although the images of shaking objects here are highly surreal, their synchronization with the rattling in the soundtrack and their coincidence with the reverb added to Evan's voice suggest that the rattling is also diegetic sound. More nondiegetic sounds enter at 0:36:47, but they do not overwhelm the diegetic rattling. A violent hiss appears at 0:36:51 and overwhelms the now complex texture, suddenly cutting to silence at 0:36:52 just as the face of 13-year-old Evan appears and the memory of the mailbox explosion begins. This abrupt disjunction in the sound track serves as the most important cue to the temporal break that occurs, but we must consider this entire 13-second transition as a flashback border, even though the actual break in narrative time happens nearly instantaneously.

There are important questions of realism in *The Butterfly Effect*. Evan's father is mentally ill, and Evan himself experiences brain hemorrhages and is eventually diagnosed with a brain tumor. Could all of Evan's time travels and alternate narratives be hallucinations? The complex nature of the soundtrack in this first example reflects this inherent ambivalence; the interaction and mixing of diegetic and nondiegetic sound suggest that the real and the imagined have merged. But does this surrealism cause the line between diegetic and nondiegetic sound to blur? The merging of the two actually causes what begins as nondiegetic sound to become diegetic; the

ringing and fluttering noises are actually "of" Evan's experience of entering his own memory and are therefore become part of the diegesis towards the end of the transition.

We can therefore interpret the culminating hiss (0:36:51-52) as a diegetic sound that signifies Evan's motion backwards in time; it completes the transition and abuts the flashback border itself. On the opposite side is a very subtle emergence of diegetic sound from the nondiegetic; we first hear a high violin cluster and some flute-like noises (0:36:52), but the diegesis is actually silent here, as Evan and his friends are waiting for the mailbox to explode. A passing car appears at 0:36:55, breaking this diegetic silence. Thus we have a diegetic sound shot on either side of the flashback border. But there are no adjustments or manipulations of the sound shots outside of this border area. This should make both sides of the flashback equally "real", thus reinforcing the idea that Evan's time travels may actually be real. But rather than definitively establish that they are real, this treatment of sound actually heightens the ambiguity surrounding their realism. Evan's subsequent entrances into his memories are similar to this first one, and they need not be exhaustively discussed here.

***21 Grams*, the Realistic Audio Disjunction and the Objective Flashback**

The flashbacks in *The Butterfly Effect* are obvious in their character-centered subjectivity. Indeed, the traditional concept of a flashback implies that the viewer-listener is viewing the action of remembering as seen or done by a particular character in the film. But would it be possible to create an objective flashback, where what we see is not actually in the memory of any of the characters on film but that of an unknown narrating agent? *21 Grams* (Alejandro Iñárritu, 2003) provides such an example. It creates a linear narrative from a complex series of short

scenes, whose ordering in real time only becomes clear as the film progresses. Christy Lemire of the Associated Press is quoted thus on the cover of the DVD of *21 Grams*:

"As pieces of the puzzle snap into place, it's impossible not to be sucked in!"

The narrative of *21 Grams* is indeed presented as a collection of puzzle pieces, many of which do not "snap into place" until well into the film. Many individual scenes, particularly those at the opening of the film that serve as character establishment, cannot be ordered linearly in time even after the viewer has been able to construct a complete picture of the film's plot. This plot is as follows: Cristina Peck (Naomi Watts), a young mother with a previous history of drug abuse, loses her husband Michael (Danny Huston) and two daughters to a hit-and-run car accident. Paul Rivers (Sean Penn) is a mathematics professor in need of a heart transplant. He receives Michael Peck's heart after Cristina agrees to donate Michael's organs. Paul hires a private investigator to track down the source of his heart, and he eventually locates and seduces Cristina, who has returned to drugs to cope with the loss of her family. Jack Jordan (Benicio del Toro) is the driver that kills Michael Peck and his two daughters. He is an ex-con whose born-again Christian faith has guided him away from his old life of crime and alcoholism, but he nonetheless struggles with the guilt of his actions. Paul eventually confesses to Cristina that he was the recipient of Michael's heart, and they decide that they must track down the man responsible for killing Cristina's family. This eventually leads to a final meeting of the three characters in a motel room, where a fight ensues. Paul is poised to shoot and kill Jack, but at the last moment he turns the gun on his (and Michael's) heart. He dies later in a hospital.

One of the most temporally disorienting moments of the film occurs near its beginning. At 0:13:24 Paul and his wife Mary (Charlotte Gainsbourg) argue over Paul's secret smoke breaks

and how they could result in his removal from a heart transplant list. At 0:13:57 we see Paul bleeding to death in a motel room with Cristina and Jack attempting to save him. Finally, at 0:14:30 we see Paul ringing Cristina's doorbell. The aural transitions between these scenes are the same as those of every cut in narrative time throughout the film; they are unadulterated cuts between the diegetic sound of one scene and that of another. What causes these cuts to be especially jarring, however, are the breaks in ambient environmental sound. The sudden motion from the quiet home of Paul and Mary to the claustrophobic motel room (0:13:57) best expresses the quantum leap in narrative time that occurs at that point; we have just vaulted from a character establishment scene to the very culmination of the film's narrative. The subsequent jump from the motel room to the pleasant street noise outside of Cristina's house (0:14:30) is made even more jarring by the image track, which starkly contrasts Paul's mortal wounds with his post-transplant health.

But does each cut in *21 Grams* provide a clue about its direction in the temporal order? In *The Butterfly Effect* we saw how the flashback border area contained such information. The flashback borders in *21 Grams*, however, are too small to convey sonic information. We cannot obtain narrative information from them, as a sudden disjunction between two sound environments cannot by itself signify motion backwards or forwards in time. We must therefore look outside of the flashback border for information on temporality in *21 Grams*. But does the unreadable nature of these flashback borders also withhold other information? The flashbacks in *The Butterfly Effect* contain information on process and perspective; the seconds-long transitions show Evan entering his own memory. The lack of transitions in *21 Grams* therefore also implies both a lack of process and perspective; if information is withheld on how we move in narrative time, we cannot possibly attach an agent to the motion. This lack of information renders all

temporal motion in *21 Grams* objective. But this objectivity is crucial to the success of the fragmentary structure of the film. It would without a doubt be confusing if the viewer-listener had to follow point-of-view memories from the three main characters simultaneously.

Conclusions

The flashbacks in *21 Grams* and *The Butterfly Effect* are certainly representative examples of temporal motion in contemporary cinema, and the multi-dimensional meanings I have outlined above should contradict Turim's assertion that flashbacks in modern cinema are unsophisticated. The tripartite view of flashback sound that I have outlined here – a border surrounded by two diegetic sound shots – should allow us to delve into the semantics of flashbacks in other films as well. *21 Grams* and *The Butterfly Effect* represent the two extremes of size and complexity of the flashback border area. The differences between a drawn-out and highly complex sound collage and a sonic null set could not be more stark, and the possibilities for analysis of other films are many.